Challenges, Changes, and Opportunities

DAVID FLEMING
PRESIDENT

The AERA conference in San Diego was certainly a success for the Association and even more so for the OST SIG. Our SIG membership has reached new heights as the interest in research outside of regular school time programs increases. In addition, an elevated level of collaboration with our members and other SIGs is being acknowledged. These are healthy signs of our organization and our profession.

Accomplishments often come tethered to increased responsibility, expectations, and challenges. Our previous leadership under the direction of Sara Hill and Brenda McLaughlin has elevated the profile of the OST SIG within the structure of AERA. The special sessions, youth group performances, awards, research discussions, and other unique features of our organization has rapidly developed with the eager involvement of the officers as well as active members. I truly look forward to participating in each session whether featuring an established researcher who has shaped the field, an up and coming star asking questions in new and different ways, or just a dialogue among the attendees. Maintaining this energy and diversity of thought and perspective is critical to the ongoing success of this SIG.

However, with the success of our organization and AERA as a whole, new changes have been implemented in an effort to maintain the quality and integrity of the conference. Beginning with the Denver conference in 2010, there will be a decrease in the total number of accepted proposals to 1000. The individual SIG allotment will be based upon the membership and the number of submitted proposals. While this may have a debilitating impact on some SIGs, our healthy membership and proposal submission history will enable us to continue to feature variety and selectivity among our conference offerings. However, you may notice a decrease in the total number of available sessions...in every SIG with which you may be a member. I should also note that there will be a moratorium placed on the development of new SIGs pending a review expected to be completed in December, 2010.

Another change includes increased expectations for the expertise of review panels. The elected officers will be discussing this process to ensure that the expertise within our membership is appropriately utilized while the importance of including graduate students in facets of our organization is maintained.

There will also be changes in the timing and process used for elections. All SIGs will be expected to conduct elections congruent with the timing of the AERA elections process. Although the terms of the office positions will remain the same (conference to conference) this change will move our...
process earlier than when it has been conducted in the past. In addition, each elective office must have two candidates. We will be counting on the membership to step up to this challenge and turn it into an opportunity for increased involvement within the OST SIG.

A copy of the changes established by AERA can be found here: http://www.aera.net/uploadedFiles/Publications/Journals/Educational_Researcher/3802/153-155_03EDR09.pdf. I would be very interested in hearing your feedback regarding these changes and I endeavor to be a mouthpiece for the OST SIG with AERA regarding these decisions. I would also like to hear from you regarding any suggestions to ensure that our organization continues to experience success. In other words, turning these changes and challenges into opportunities for us all.

David S. Fleming, Ph.D.
President, Out-of-School Time Special Interest Group (2009-2010)

Program Profile: Les Scientifines – “Tu Peux T’amuser!” - Science and Much More

Jrène Rahm, Université de Montréal

(I thank Marcela Cid, past program director; Valérie Bilodeau, current program director, staff, youth and my research team for their time and comments)

Les Scientifines is an afterschool science program for girls that began as an action-research project in 1987. The program was founded by four women, three of whom are now faculty at the Université de Montréal. The connection with a research institution has been crucial for the program’s growth and development and still is, according to the past program director.

The program was put in place to respond to the high levels of school dropout among girls in a community marked by a long history of poverty, yet also rich in diversity. Today, the program serves approximately 60 girls per week, with roots in 29 different countries, speaking many languages and coming primarily from two elementary schools in its vicinity (3rd – 6th grade level). As Marcela Cid, past director, emphasized, “Still today, we hold on to the mission of the program as it was stated at the beginning in that we use science as a tool to help the girls develop competencies such as curiosity, open mindedness, patience, and perseverance” - competencies that translate into academic success but that are also indispensable tools to break out of the vicious cycle of poverty.

Depending on afternoons, the girls engage with science through hands-on activities and experiments, the pursuit of science fair projects on topics that are aligned with the girls’ concerns, or through writing stories for the science journal – scientific activities after the snack and homework period, and followed by free play, with the computer lab and pet section being the favorite ones. As stated, the goal of the program always went beyond science literacy development, supporting the development of skills for life. Yet, it is clear that the program “helps break the crystal bubble in which science is embedded” in the words of the program director, “I think we break the barriers to science that the girls are used to and offer them the opportunity to play with science in ways they are comfortable with. They can come and go and engage in it in ways that are meaningful to them.”

That statement comes through well when examining the topics the girls pursued in their science fair projects. Take for instance Kusum and her friend, who wanted to understand how to make henna and in turn use it for painting tattoos, an art form that has become popular in the West. They researched the plant and learned that the dried leaves are used for making the paste. They experimented making the paste, and once the right consistency was identified, used it to paint a tattoo. Jamila and her friend tried to understand what makes some plants eat insects (carnivorous plants).

Still another team wanted to understand how a fish breathes. To understand the respiratory system, they got to dissect a fish (see picture 1). They documented the dissection on a poster board with pictures and at the same time identified the parts involved in respiration. Another illustration comes from Sue who explored with her peer how glue is made (see picture 2), experimenting with making it as well as presenting different versions of the final product to the public. The journal writing activity also lends itself to writing on topics the girls care about. Take for instance a special journal issue on the theme of nature and diversity. Sumita, with roots in Bangladesh, wrote a very moving text about a magical flower. In it were interwoven scientific facts about flowers with images of war, loss and hope for...
Understanding Complex Ecologies in a Changing World and the Importance of Out-of-School Time Research

By Bettina Dalh Soendergaard
Program Chair/President-Elect

The Annual Meeting in San Diego this spring was a huge success for our SIG. Many members attended and actively participated in our Special Symposium and Reception, the Business Meeting, and our seven sessions. SIG President Sara Hill and Program Chair David Fleming are to be commended for having put together such a high quality and engaging program.

Now we start looking forward to and plan the 2010 Annual Meeting in Denver, Colorado, April 30 – May 4. The theme for this Annual Meeting is “Understanding Complex Ecologies in a Changing World.” The intention of AERA is that the Annual Meeting should address the conceptual, methodological, and practical challenges and opportunities central to enhance our understanding of the teaching and learning process. This purpose rests on the understanding of educational research as a complex process that draws on a variety of studies and methodologies ranging from a focus on the individual cognitive and affective level, to the social organization of settings, curricula, assessments, policy, historical, and other factors that in combination have an impact on people’s learning. As the AERA website states: “Opportunities to learn within and across both formal and informal settings occur in the complex ecologies of peoples’ lives, not isolated in a single setting such as a school or family.”

Here our SIG – Out-of-School Time – becomes quite essential. Our SIG is a forum for research on how children and youth spend their time and learn during out-of-school hours, and this in combination with research on inside-school time and many other settings done by other SIGs, units, etc., becomes an essential element in understanding the whole ecology of learning.

The process of reviewing the proposals submitted to our SIG took place between August 15 and September 15. This year the process of reviewing was different from the previous years. In the past, each SIG assigned proposals for review to individual volunteers. Starting this year, the Program Chair of each SIG has established expert Review Panels, consisting of people who either volunteered or accepted an invitation to become reviewer. Each proposal gets three reviews. In addition, a graduate student can review proposals, but their review cannot count towards the three reviews. Serving on a review panel is seen as a way for the graduate student to learn how to review. Our SIG is very disappointed that graduate students are no longer allowed to serve as “real reviewers.” We believe that to assign someone as a reviewer is always an individual judgment and in the past graduate students have been indispensable, and highly valuable contributors as reviewers as well as SIG officers.

AERA suggests that each member of a Review Panel should review between 10-20 proposals. In our SIG we have limited the number to around six per reviewer to avoid that potential reviewers become hesitant to accept being on a Review Panel, hence damaging the quality of the reviews. In the future, the process of assigning reviewers will begin in January for the following year’s Annual Meeting. I will therefore encourage SIG members to already now consider volunteering to serve on a Review Panel for the future years.

Being a member of a Review Panel is an honor and members will be publicly acknowledged by the AERA. This is also meant to add to the transparency and accountability of the review process. I look forward to telling you more about the result of the present review process in the next newsletter where we will also give an overview of the OST SIG sessions selected for the Annual Meeting in 2010 – all sessions that will contribute to “Understanding Complex Ecologies in a Changing World.”
Interview with an Expert: Dr. Nancy Deutsch

The recipient of the first OST SIG Emerging Scholar Award, Nancy Deutsch is an Assistant Professor of Educational Leadership and Foundations at the University of Virginia’s Curry School of Education. Her research interests include adolescent development; identity development; after-school programs for at-risk youth; gender, race, class (construction of and as developmental contexts); qualitative research methods; and program evaluation.

An interview with Sara Hill.

Sara: I noticed that the title of your book is There are Birds in the Projects: The Construction of Self in an Urban Youth Organization. The beginning of the title is intriguing. Can you talk about what the book is about?

Nancy: The title changed to “Pride in the Projects: Teens building Identities in Urban Contexts.” The first chapter is still called “There Are Birds in the Projects.” The book is essentially about how a group of teenagers growing up in a low income neighborhood use a Boys and Girls club as a space to construct their sense of self. I’m particularly interested in how their relationships with other people inform their identities.

Sara: You mean their relationships with staff?

Nancy: Yes, the staff, but also their relationships with peers. The relationships with adult staff were very important. But one thing I found interesting was that a lot of the teenagers began to see themselves as role models for younger youth. I called it “tripartite role modeling.” They had adults who were role models for them, and these adults gave them responsibilities and roles with younger kids.

Sara: Were these formal roles?

Nancy: Sometime they were formal, like a coach in a sports team. Sometimes they were junior staff, where they staffed the front desk, and other times they were more informal. What was great about this was that it makes perfect sense, what they needed developmentally, that they had contributing roles. To me, there aren’t a lot of places in kids’ lives these days where they’re in heterogeneous age groups. When they go to school they’re in classrooms with kids the same age. Afterschool programs provide them with a unique setting where they can receive adult support while also serving as role models to younger kids. I don’t think they get this in a lot of other contexts. My favorite quote from one of the teenage boys was “I never thought someone would look up to me.”

Sara: Going back to the title of the chapter of your book, what was the reference to birds?

Nancy: I’m interested in how kids see themselves. One of the projects I did at the research site was a photography project. I gave kids cameras and then I interviewed them about the photos they took. One girl had a photo of a bird that was flying in the sky. I asked her about the bird, and she said, “Well, people don’t ever think that there would be anything nice in the projects, and I took this to show people that there are nice things in the projects.” To me, it was a comment about how these teenagers recognize themselves as being defined by other people. They talked about being seen as “project kids” by adults in other places in their lives, not at the Boys and Girls Club. And so, to me, the image of the bird in the project was about this girl challenging people, to say, “hey, there are great things here, and you can’t define people by your stereotype of a housing project.”

Sara: Looking at your past work, the notion of post-structural identity development, the notion of identities and selves in the plural appears key in your thinking about youth development.

Can you talk about how this notion is something that is aligned with or appropriate for research in the work of youth organizations?

Nancy: One of the strengths of youth organizations is that they can offer adolescents opportunities to explore and try out new identities. For example, the boy who said that he didn’t think people would ever look up to him was struggling in school. There weren’t a lot of opportunities for him to feel validated and have a strong school identity. But at the Boys and Girls Club, he was highly valued for his ability to work with younger kids. He really worked that into his sense of self, and to see himself as a positive leader. To have this positive adult role. And I think that youth organizations offer that opportunity to have a more diverse set of positive and acceptable identities.

Youth felt that they were respected at the Club by staff as a whole person, and not stereotyped as a project kid. The other half of that is that staff also recognized...
peace. The movie “Blood Diamond” had inspired Sumita’s writing, as she paralleled the pink diamond in the film and the magical flower in her story. She was also very passionate about flowers and had created her own website with images of flowers. Another student, Sabah, wove together her take on youth culture and the culture of romance with science. She wrote a poem about a pearl that eventually “beautifies the neck of a beautiful lady.” She chose the well-known painting by Johannes Vermeer “The girl with a pearl earring” as a visual illustration, given her passion for art. She talked at great length about her dream of going to Paris and visiting the Louvre. Initially, her poem was primarily about romance. Yet, through some coaching by the staff, she integrated how saltwater pearls are made into the poem and transformed its genre, demonstrating her ability to interweave science with her world in ways that was meaningful to her.

The fact that the program serves girls gives it a particular color that is appreciated by the female instructors and also participants. Monica, one of the instructors, argued, “when we look at women in the world, the poverty, even here in Canada, in Montreal, the women are very affected by poverty, immigrant women even more so. I think ...it’s not about intervention, it’s about prevention, and we are at the base of that, it’s really about preventing that.” Monica added, “there is also the help with home work, and I think that’s very important too since so many girls come from non-French speaking families and struggle doing their homework with their parents (yet are requested to attend French schools by law), so that’s an important piece too.”

Serving girls struggling with issues associated with poverty, diversity and immigration, and instilling in them a sense of a bright future is clearly at the heart of the program and makes it a unique and safe space for the participating girls. Take Samira, who participated in Les Scientifines for three consecutive years: “I love science, and biology, and all that, and at the same time it makes me learn things useful for high school and for my profession later on.”

The staffing of afterschool programs like Les Scientifines is far from trivial. Finding instructors with a scientific background, yet also experience with youth and working with them from an assets perspective grounded further in an expertise in intervention or social work poses a continuous challenge.

Yet, despite such struggles, the program has made a difference in the lives of many youth and has become a model program, receiving the Michael Smith award for the Promotion of Science in 2001 by the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, as well as a recent grant from the Canadian Women’s Foundation to further develop journal writing activities.

(Continued next column)