

OST WORLD: RESEARCH CONNECTIONS

AMERICAN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH ASSOCIATION OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME SPECIAL INTEREST GROUP

Q&A: KEN ANTHONY

Next year marks AERA's 100th anniversary. What role has AERA played in advancing youth development research?

With its focus on improving the educational process by encouraging scholarly inquiry, AERA has sought to promote dissemination of high quality research and emphasize its practical application to those on the ground. With regard to youth development, and more specifically, the field of afterschool, AERA has helped to drive research that validates the common programmatic components in afterschool programs across the country. One such example is the research of Deborah Vandell, which illustrates the potential academic and social gains of children who participate in programs. This research, along with others, has helped to professionalize the field and enable it to take its place on a continuum of education.

Historically, research focused on youth development has morphed from single stream studies that addressed specific problems, such as reducing juvenile crime or transforming poor character in youth, to more inclusive prevention approaches (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 1998). It is this type of research and empirical evidence, supported by organizations like AERA, that have brought about a more comprehensive view of youth development. Increasingly, the cross-sector convergence of research has begun to aim at factors that help support youth development socially, emotionally, and academically. Through the work of Durlak and Weissberg (2007), practitioners have been able to use research to inform program design in the field to integrate these three areas.

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I believe that as AERA enters its next century, the whole child focus and approach in research will become more prevalent. In the past 100 years we have learned what factors, both internally and externally, affect development. AERA provides a venue for the sharing of these ideas that further the understanding of the interplay between skills needed in and outside of the classroom to support student success in school and life.

The 2016 AERA theme is Public Scholarship to Educate Diverse Democracies. How does your research support the theme?

Consistent with the 2016 AERA theme, my research sought to illustrate potential connections that can be made between school and afterschool personnel to align rigor and relevance to engage students. The pedagogy of afterschool and expanded learning demands that curriculum be developed across grade levels, place, and time. In order to create meaningful partnerships and effective linkages to the school day requires the leadership and line staff of school and afterschool communities to build the capacity for collaboration. While much research and work has been done around building collaborative systems that support this notion, there is much work left to do in the field.

It is imperative that research be useful not only to leadership, but for the practical application on the ground. One of the primary components of my research was to illustrate the current landscape that often has school and afterschool programs running on two parallel tracks. Using the findings from my own and the research of others, I have sought to engage policy makers at the district level in conversations around the

use of research in informing practice. In the district in which my research was conducted, this is gaining traction. Several of the recommendations I will discuss later are being implemented throughout their afterschool and summer learning systems citywide.

As education researchers, we have the responsibility to engage in public discourse to disseminate evidence that can help strengthen the connections between schools, families, and communities. Increasingly, school systems are overwhelmed by accountability measures and mandates with one size fits all models. While this approach worked in the early 20th century, youth are learning beyond the school walls. My research addresses this notion by proposing methods to help the education and youth development sectors come together to form communities of practice to address the inequities students face. Together, education and youth development professionals can develop systems that engage and personalize their learning experiences. Furthermore, my research supports the AERA theme in highlighting the interplay between research, policy, and practice and has allowed for robust conversations, public meetings, and presentations to help shape a collective vision for afterschool and summer learning partnerships within the community of study. Additionally, sharing the findings, methodology, and additional questions raised may lead to collaborative research with communities and educators to discern best practices to shape communication structures and foster meaningful partnerships between school and community-based personnel. This research challenges communities to look beyond student outcomes, and examine the adult-to-adult relationships at the core of public scholarship that helps to educate diverse democracies such as the one we live and work in. At the center of this is the identification of common threads that run between in-school and out-of-school research that ultimately lead to more substantial alignment of a common vision for the holistic development of

students. The goal ultimately is to inform civic participation, engagement, and action.

You direct professional development for the Connecticut After School Network. What are some key lessons the out-of-school time field can draw from how Connecticut builds capacity of youth-serving professionals?

In the 26 years since the inception of the Connecticut After School Network (formerly the Connecticut School-Age Care Alliance), we have been able to ascertain the needs of the field through connecting with membership, facilitating roundtable discussions, and developing a tiered training system that strives to meet the needs of the field. We have been able to collect data to meet the needs indicated by programs.

Being able to deliver on-site, customized trainings to programs has helped to build the capacity of front line staff statewide. Where a typical conference may serve smaller groups of staff from a specific program, the on-site training model allows all staff to be exposed to content that will help to shape program delivery and enhance content offered to the children and youth. We have also developed specific professional development offerings targeted at the program director level. Many of these have relied on the growing research base to underpin the content of the workshop or session. Some examples have included aligning common core standards with programming, developing supportive social-emotional learning environments, and identifying key program components that are needed to bring programs to a higher level of quality.

In addition to being offered at on-site trainings, the Network also offers an annual fall conference that brings people from the out-of-school time and formal education sectors. To this end, we have been able to begin to tailor our workshop content to these audiences and focus our efforts around central themes related to our work for that given year. This November we will be

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focusing on social-emotional development and hope to begin to spark conversations that will encourage participants to look at the whole-child. In an effort to compliment this larger training, the Network started offering mini-conferences last year that contain three focused workshop sessions in which all participants rotate through. These have proven to be successful and are developed based on survey feedback we receive from the field.

Finally, in addition to monthly webinars, we have developed an intensive 12-month coaching model called CLASP (Coaching and Learning for Afterschool Professionals). In our 2014 inaugural year, 13 participants from across the state came together for four sessions on intentional program design. The Expanding Minds and Opportunities Compendium served as the primary textbook along with supplemental materials that added depth to the session discussions and activities. Additionally, the cohort included school staff as well as community-based program directors. This helped to foster discussions that elevated the conversation around alignment practices and allowed the capacity of those involved to be increased.

In all of these things, the one common factor that is a lesson for the OST field is to be targeted in the delivery of professional development offerings. Identifying what the field needs, basing trainings on research, and finding ways to bring multiple viewpoints together has helped us to start systemic discussions here in Connecticut. There is still much work to do, but together we are making a road map to support the capacity building of staff.

[You recently completed your dissertation. Tell us about your research and findings.](#)

As a program director, I consistently made attempts to align the programming my staff provided with academic content and standards that could compliment and reinforce learning in afterschool. Making meaningful connections

between school and afterschool personnel was something I was passionate about and have continued to work on throughout my career in the out-of-school time space. When it was time to write my research proposal, this was the area I chose to focus on. The purpose of my research was to examine the reports of school and afterschool personnel regarding partnership, communication, and sharing of academic resources. These factors represent multiple facets of relationships that occur between school and community partners, often targeted at increasing student success. This research built on the work of Tracy Bennett (2015) which showed that when these factors are aligned, meaning, the school and afterschool personnel reported the same level of alignment, children and youth had positive gains on their standardized test scores. Conversely, when these factors were misaligned, standardized test scores indicated negative gains. While the Bennett study was strictly quantitative, my study took a qualitative approach to tease out what factors were present in the reports of school and afterschool personnel that impacted these three areas of connection.

The study was conducted in one district in southern New England and included three sites which has varying degrees of connection between the school and community-based afterschool providers. Eighteen interviews were conducted that included school principals (3), classroom teachers (6), afterschool program directors (3), and afterschool staff (6) using an interview guide developed for the study. Participants were only eligible to take part in this study provided they had a role in the instructional design and planning of the school or afterschool program or curriculum. Interview times varied among the four groups of respondents, and further diverged within groups by the length of respondent experience with afterschool programs, and were dependent on a connection to an afterschool program currently or formerly. This was true for all four groups (afterschool directors, afterschool staff, school principals, and school teachers).

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Five key themes were identified across interview questions. These included misalignment, informal structures and opportunities, administrative support, program elements, and barriers. Afterschool directors and staff reported substantial connections to school administration, knowledge of academic content, and school district level support. School principals and teachers reported little to no knowledge regarding the afterschool program, unless a prior or current connection existed. From these findings, five conclusions and six recommendations were developed to help facilitate connections not only between school and afterschool personnel, but also encourage collaboration between community-based organizations with the goal of creating systemic change within a community. School District and citywide collaboration are essential to provide infrastructure supporting ongoing communication and sharing among all parties involved. These conversations need to be founded on trust, not speculation or notions of inability. We owe our students innovative educational experiences not bound by the walls of the school, but the limit of our creativity in the delivery of that experience.

Next year, 2016, marks the Out-of-School Time SIG's 10th anniversary. What have been some key trends that have shaped the OST field over the past decade? What should be one key element on the OST research agenda in the next decade?

Throughout the past decade the impact of the wealth of research conducted has resulted in collective efforts to create systems that link school and community partners. What were once seen as "nice to have," afterschool programs are now seen as an integral part of supporting a child's holistic development. Since the Durlak and Weissberg (2007) meta-analysis, much attention has focused on being more intentional in developing programs for this critical "third space of learning" (Chen, 2013). This has

manifested itself in the creation of complimentary learning environments that support the cognitive focus of the school day, while at the same time offering real-world connections that are relevant to students' lives. It is not uncommon to find youth provided with opportunities to connect with mentors and others in their community who offer social support and provide guidance on college and career choices and opportunities. Likewise, the proliferation of measurement tools related to quality and youth outcomes have provided benchmarks and illustrate best practices that further professionalize and systemize the field.

Additionally, with the investment of the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, Statewide Afterschool Networks have expanded from six or seven networks to 48 currently. This investment in infrastructural supports has helped to provide professional development focused on program quality, coordinate advocacy efforts to maintain and increase state and federal funding, and promote sustainability within the field. These Networks have been able to provide state level data that illustrate programmatic foci, funding streams, and youth outcomes. The establishment of intermediaries has been a trend that has helped to connect stakeholders on the ground with policy and decision makers by creating forums in which afterschool is a voice at the table.

One key element in need of further research is examining best practice and outcomes in developing meaningful community-wide partnerships and systems. What work needs to be done to take the hierarchical nature of the formal education system and the open nature of youth development programs and align the best thinking around supporting student success? What constitutes meaningful partnerships and what is the role of research to bring about collaboration that impacts communities with the aim of holistic development? Over the past decade, we have come to know what factors

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impact the quality of programs. We have come to know the impacts of early education on reading and life success. We have an understanding of how to engage students in an outside of the classroom. The remaining question is how do we align these systems and support not just the students, but also those working in the education system to foster sharing of ideas, establishing communication structures beyond attendance and behavior issues, and develop lasting partnerships that are the bedrock of a child's educational experience in and outside of the classroom.

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Dear members,

We welcome you to the second year of the OST SIG e-newsletter series, designed to connect you to each other and to the emerging and groundbreaking scholarship in the out-of-school time field. We hope the series will introduce you to new ideas, concepts, and spark a connection in your work.

With warm regards,
The officers of the OST SIG

Dr. Ken Anthony is the Director of Professional Development and Research for the Connecticut After School Network. Being in the field for the past 22 years, he has worked from a front line staff, site supervisor, program director, district coordinator, to his current position for the past seven years. He has also worked across sectors to start the annual Childhood Conversations Conference, now in its 10th year. He holds a Bachelor's degree in Psychology with a concentration in Child Development from Southern Connecticut State University; a Master's degree in Human Services with a concentration in Organizational Management & Leadership from Springfield College, and a Doctorate in Educational Leadership from the University of Hartford. He was also a part of the inaugural class of White-Riley-Peterson Policy Fellows and remains connected as Faculty in the annual institute at Furman University. His research interests focus on partnerships and expanded learning practices that build sustainable relationships, foster leadership, and improve communication between school and afterschool personnel.

