

# OST WORLD: RESEARCH CONNECTIONS

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

## Q&A: DALE A. BLYTH

The AERA 2015 theme is, *Toward Justice: Culture, Language, and Heritage in Education Research and Praxis*. How does your work address justice?

My work over the years has been focused on how we understand, improve, and support the development of ALL of our young people – building their internal and external assets and ensuring access to and engagement in high-quality community learning opportunities beyond the classroom. Unfortunately in the U.S. this means recognizing and addressing the injustice that exist in these areas. The inequalities in learning opportunities before youth come to school and their access to expanded learning opportunities during the summer and academic year are, in my view, far more significant and problematic than inequality in schooling per se. They are also major factors in causing the achievement gap and our failures to close the gaps.

I have studied the opportunity gap here in Minnesota (see [Exploring the Supply and Demand for Community Learning Opportunities in Minnesota](#), 2009) as it relates to accessing expanded learning opportunities. Overall, what I found in a statewide random sample of parents and youth is that there were very few differences across race, income or immigration status in the youth or parents' desire to engage in opportunities. One exception were youth of color, new immigrants, and youth from low

income families, who wanted more education value from expanded learning opportunities, compared to other demographic groups.

In sharp contrast to these similarities were the major differences in perceived ease of access to and the affordability of high quality programs that were age and culturally appropriate. Here, differences by race, immigrant status, family income, and geography were quite large. In summary, I found that the problem is not primarily inequalities in the demand for opportunities but rather inequity in the supply of them for particular groups and locations (especially urban centers and rural areas). Where you are born and to whom makes far too much difference in how you will learn, develop, and succeed. That is an injustice of epic proportions.

Much of my career I have battled with the issue of whether we use a targeting approach to address these types of inequities or an ALL youth approach. Scarce resources and many policy perspectives tend to drive us to the first, while comprehensive and integrated youth policy and what we know about human development and the influence of families, schools, and communities would suggest the latter.

You have written about the importance of shifting from proving impact to improving impact. What do you see are trends in the field to align different types of data and

## accountability systems to improve impact of youth programs?

The first major trend I see, along with the need to accelerate it, is the shift from primarily what I call a “prove it or lose it” approach to accountability to an “improve it to move it” approach to practice. The first uses science to prove whether something works and then tries to replicate that in getting to scale. It is driven in part by a lack of trust in practitioners and our organizations, so we say, “prove you are making a difference or you will lose funding.” The problem is, much of the research on evidence-based programs (which I strongly value doing) also shows that the major factors affecting effectiveness are too often ignored – and that goes beyond simple fidelity to the program. Implementation science and experience with real practitioners is revealing the types of factors that must be addressed to help

practitioners improve what they do – becoming more intentional in understanding why and how they can do it better. In short, the

trend is gradually moving away from a belief that just finding an evidence-based program or letting someone else select one for programs will really make the biggest difference. Instead, we need to focus more energy, research, policy, and resources on improving the ways we implement access, improve quality, and understand outcomes. The first approach may lead to a thousand points of light, but still leaves too many of our youth in a sea of darkness without quality opportunities.

In the field of out-of-school time, we still too often focus on the great variety of programs and trying to innovate our way to closing opportunity gaps. This suggests a second important trend in the OST field – the rise of and need for stronger system building efforts that include data and the use of evidence to

drive improvement and more effective collective impact. In particular, we need system building efforts that help us: 1) better understand who is participating and at what levels and where, 2) improve the quality of the opportunities we offer, and 3) provide evidence of outcomes that can be used to both adjust what we do in practice and improve the case we can make for investing in such opportunities. The field is still struggling too much with the first (participation and engagement), has made significant progress in many areas on the second (quality), but is too often almost opposed to the third – saying what we do is not measurable or can result in many different outcomes and not a predefined set. In the quality area we have begun to learn just how motivating data can be when there is a clear framework, measurement of what it looks like, and an ability to influence it with our daily actions.

**“We need to focus more energy, research, policy, and resources on improving the ways we implement access, improve quality, and understand outcomes.”**

A related trend is the shift from a focus on programs and their particular outcomes to a broader understanding of and support for multi-layered community approaches. The latter does not eliminate programs but rather supports them and enriches them with the types of training, technical assistance, and collecting and use of data that will make a bigger difference in the long term. The rise of and increasing success of intermediaries is critical here.

A fourth trend is the shift from focusing on reducing the burden of data to increasing the benefits of wise use of data. Our field too often has a bad ratio of burden to benefit in our thinking and actions. On the other hand, when one can increase the beneficial use of data for improvement to make a difference, the burden that exist is seen as less problematic. This is especially true in schools where the level of burden has risen disproportionately to the beneficial use of the data to improve things that matter. This is

further complicated when the “burdensome data” is too often used as a weapon to destroy rather than a tool to improve.

[You have engaged in ongoing work in Finland. What can we learn about Finland's approach to youth development, particularly as it pertains to the OST field?](#)

Finland is interesting from a number of perspectives as one looks at what it takes to help all young people succeed in school, college, work, and life. The biggest difference I noted in my recent visit is the importance of a solid floor for all versus a safety net approach like we use in the U.S. By providing a solid floor of early child care, youth centers, and free higher education, any issues you confront are less likely to be a web of highly intertwined problems that are less solvable.

When we visited a multi-cultural youth center in Finland for Somali youth, it was in a mixed income area, with a sense of trust and welcoming that was impressive. This is not to say that there is not discrimination, but rather

to note that when poverty is not concentrated, when supports are present in multiple forms, and when the community as a whole owns the problem, it is harder to justify discrimination and easier to enable integrated supports.

In a similar way, Finland's approach to youth engagement and disengagement is not primarily just about engaging youth in programs (what they referred to as “organized youth” and which they support in a lot of ways), but to “unorganized youth” and how to help them find a hobby and develop a passion they can use to make a contribution.

The city of Helsinki has created an effort called [Ruuti](#) (translated as gunpowder) to systematically seek out views of all kinds of

youth, turn them into actionable ideas, enable a vote on these ideas by ALL youth through schools, and the eventual investment in making the winning ideas into realities – from public art to new use of parks. This effort is grounded in the European Union's acceptance of the UN convention on the rights of children, especially, the right of youth to participate, as well as the Finnish Youth Act.

Finally, with respect to accountability and the use of data, Finland stands out for its lack of narrow accountability systems and testing. Instead, it relies on: 1) a strong common sense of community accountability for its young people and citizens; 2) clear statements of direction in policies that encourage comprehensive and integrated approaches; 3) investments in capacity building and expertise so professionals can do their job well; and 4) an improvement approach that starts with an underlying belief in and value placed on equity.

For example, the City of Helsinki sets aside a portion of its budgets in each department to specifically address inequities. In the youth department that allows for the extra allocation of youth workers to particular parts of the city to support access to youth opportunities.

[What do you think is the most pressing issue/opportunity in the OST field and why?](#)

I have come to believe that selecting, defining, measuring, and getting intentional about implementing practices that will support a specific set of youth outcomes is critical to our field. In particular, outcomes that we can own, not just contribute toward (like academic achievement, reduced delinquency, or prevention of drug use). Outcomes that are valued and visible to our communities and viable for OST programs to impact. For me,



these outcomes are likely to be social and emotional skills, attitudes, and behaviors.

Why these? Because they are close to our youth development philosophy and approach but are also measurable outcomes. Because they do predict the other outcomes people want to invest in, from achievement to college and career readiness and success. And because 21<sup>st</sup> Century skills are in high demand in the workforce.

The issue for the OST field is how to embrace these outcomes and use an approach to measuring and improving our practices that makes sense to practitioners, researchers, policy makers, and funders. It involves bringing together data on participation and engagement with data on quality to look at how these work together with

intentional practice to improve these outcomes in demonstrable ways.

The world has started to move toward youth development by seeing the value of and the need for developing social and emotional along with other 21<sup>st</sup> Century skills. The challenge for the field is to position itself as committed to making a demonstrated difference in these areas.

**Dr. Helen Janc Malone**  
(OST SIG Chair)

**Dr. Valerie Futch**  
(Program Chair)

**Dr. Myriam Baker**  
(Secretary/Treasurer)

**Dr. Corey Bower**  
(Newsletter Editor)

**Dr. Tom Akiva**  
(Website Editor)

Dear members,

We welcome you to an exciting new series by the OST SIG, 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. Dale Blyth is Extension Professor in the College of Education and Human Development, the Howland Endowed Chair in Youth Development Leadership, and a Senior Research Fellow with the Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement at the University of Minnesota. Previously he served as the Associate Dean for Youth Development directing the Center for Youth Development, a catalyst, resource, and advocate to ensure access to quality community opportunities for all young people to learn, lead, and contribute. Prior to joining the University of Minnesota, Dr. Blyth was the Director of Research and Evaluation at Search Institute and on the faculty of Cornell University and Ohio State University. He co-developed the Center for Adolescent Health at the American Medical Association, and was a Research Scientist at the Boys Town Center for Youth Development. Dr. Blyth has co-authored a book, written many chapters, dozens of articles, and given numerous presentations. His research focuses on access to, participation in, the quality of, and outcomes from non-formal learning opportunities in communities as well as the use of evidence in policy and practice.

