SEER 2008 SESSION II DISCUSSANT REMARKS

Balancing Evidence and Authenticity in Research on Experiential Education and Youth Development in Diverse Settings

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Even though these papers represent radically different types of research in different environments and with diverse populations, I think they are appropriately grouped under the theme of "experiential education and youth development in diverse settings." In their own way, each of them deals with the role of experiential education in mitigating the effects of social and historical forces on groups that have been marginalized within (or *by*) schooling. This is an understated feature of these projects that becomes pronounced when viewed side by side.

This shared feature has framed my interpretation of these papers. Individually, they demonstrate the results of experiential programs in different settings and with diverse populations. However, I think their contribution is greatest when considered together—not just in what they communicate about program outcomes, but what they capture about experiential education research in its current historical moment. This might be described as a tension between *evidence*, on the one hand, and *authenticity,* on the other. I'll elaborate on this first by addressing each individual paper, then by discussing their joint contribution to research on experiential education and youth development in diverse settings.

Shirilla: Adventure-Based Programming and Social Skills

Paul Shirilla studied the development of "social skills" in two different settings. He used a quasi-experimental design in one site and a

pre–post design in the other. From a design perspective, this project pushes a growth edge for our field as we respond to current policy mandates regarding "what works." Quasi-experimental designs will probably play a larger role in coming years and other researchers might learn from a project of this scope.

Shirilla's focus on the "social" aspect of adventure education seems highly promising, and, judging by the literature he reviewed, is an area that deserves more attention by researchers. By using a commercially available instrument, this project has attempted to deal with some of the measurement issues that have troubled other studies. This enabled the researcher to make sharper comparisons between "experiential" and other types of social skill programming. I also think his reporting of declines in scores should be commended, because it shows integrity and is genuinely useful. Now we can ask, "what does it *mean* that scores dropped following an adventure intervention?"

I think a couple areas could be developed further. First, it is difficult to know why scores declined. Of course, the programs simply might not have worked as intended. Or, the instruments might have focused on one definition of social skills while positive change happened in another area that wasn't measured. The interpretation Paul offered, that middle school children are in developmental transition, and that urban kids' lives are too consumed by poverty and violence to expect many advances in social skills, is also plausible and certainly deserves further attention.

Second, I had two questions about the concept of social skills: the first I'll talk about here, the second I'll discuss later. It might be fruitful to start looking beyond near-term outcomes and forge stronger conceptual and empirical links between adventure education, social skills, and long-term goals like school completion (cf. Linn & Welner, 2007). This will eventually help strengthen assessments of program effectiveness, and this study represents a step in that direction.

O'Connor: Northern Exposures

If Shirilla's quasi-experimental design is an example on the side of *evidence,* O'Connor's paper is a good example of *authenticity,* or the representation of a community's voice as faithfully as possible in the research project. It might even be a kind of *revolutionary authenticity,* since the project sought not only to represent the community's voice, but to amplify it—in this case, advocating for Indigenous claims to sovereignty, valid knowledge, and control over educational processes. (Also, the term "emancipatory research" explicitly situates it as a political project.) This stance permeated the entire project: the questions; the positioning of the researcher; the methods; and the interpretive framework. As such,

O'Connor's approach opens up interesting new possibilities not just for understanding the context of a program, but also for extending the radical potential of experiential education into the realm of research.

I was intrigued by O'Connor's comment that "experiential learning provides the Indigenous student with the task of being conscious about and taking responsibility for the reality of his/her own political and cultural awareness." This suggests that Indigenous students are subjects both of ancestral cultural traditions and a global economy. This led me to wonder if experiential education occupies a cultural middle ground, mediating between industrial-era schooling and Indigenous knowledge practices. I am only speculating here; since this study is a work in progress, its results were somewhat muted. I encourage O'Connor to maintain his intensity and energy as he formulates his conclusions, which, hopefully, will get a more thorough airing elsewhere.

Beightol et al.: The Effect of an "Anti-Bullying Initiative"

Like Shirilla's study, Beightol et al. used a pre- and posttest design to measure a socially desirable behavior and attitude following an adventure intervention. It added a qualitative component, which seems to have corroborated the quantitative findings. It also focused on self-reported attitudes that are believed to mediate desired, longer term changes. This is the role "internal" and "external" assets are thought to play. I think this research is the start of a promising trajectory and I hope the logic is carried further in future studies to examine if adventure programs change near-term variables in such a way so as to mediate positive long-term changes.

Notably, results differed by gender in the area of "goals and aspirations." This made me think of a recent book by Stanton Wortham (2005), who examined classroom interactions over the course of one year and reported the emergence of a pattern he called "promising girls" and "unpromising boys." Wortham argued that this gendered pattern locked minority boys into particular identities that were very difficult to shake and had negative consequences on their academic success. I thought of Wortham's work because many of the students in Beightol et al.'s study were Latino/a, and I wondered if the same pattern might apply here. Did the cultural pattern of "promising girls" and "unpromising boys" emerge with respect to their goals and aspirations? It isn't possible to tell, but additional interpretation of the gender differences might shed some light.

Balancing Evidence and Authenticity

In grouping these papers together, one can detect a tension that defines research today: a concern for both evidence and authenticity. Nowhere is this tension more acute than when we engage with historically

marginalized groups, which these projects did in one way or another; we want both to demonstrate to funders that we have made a difference *and* that we sincerely represent participants' interests.

Our current research environment makes this a difficult balance, however. New legislative mandates exert increased pressure to provide evidence of program effectiveness to match funding priorities. This policy ethos now requires us to produce unprecedented amounts and more specific types of outcome data, which is affecting (maybe narrowing) the questions and methods that are being pursued. Yet, since experiential educators have long valued self-determination, the quest for evidence, although necessary *politically*, is discomfiting since it requires us to position participants as "subjects" in our research in ways that potentially distances them from us, and, perhaps, even from their own voices and interests. So authenticity also must be important to us—ethically, of course, but also *methodologically*.

I want to return to the concept of social skills to illustrate my point. The quasi-experimental approach Paul used will probably become more commonplace and so is a good example of research designed to satisfy demands for evidence. However, there is a lesson about authenticity here as well.

In preparation for these comments, I went online to learn more about social skills. I found a curriculum being marketed by Pearson Assessment Group (the publisher of the SSRS) that targets social skills, and Paul sent me the SSRS questionnaire, which dovetails with the curriculum. According to the Pearson website, their program emphasizes seven domains:

> Communication
>
> Cooperation
>
> Assertion
>
> Responsibility
>
> Empathy
>
> Engagement
>
> Self-Control

These are still quite vague. Luckily, further details can be gleaned from the promotional materials for Pearson's curriculum, which lists 10 lessons as being "most important:"

> Listen to Others
>
> Follow the Steps
>
> Follow the Rules
>
> Pay Attention to Your Work
>
> Ask for Help

> Take Turns When You Talk
>
> Get Along With Others
>
> Stay Calm With Others
>
> Do the Right Thing
>
> Do Nice Things for Others (Pearson Assessment Group, n.d.)

The items on the SSRS measures progress in these areas, which is evident in the following sample of survey items (I have tried to be nonbiased in my selection of items):

> I make friends easily
>
> I tell others when I am upset with them
>
> I keep my desk clean and neat
>
> I do my homework on time
>
> I control my temper when people are angry with me
>
> I politely question rules that may be unfair
>
> I listen to the teacher when a lesson is being taught
>
> I accept people who are different

Arguably, some of these items reflect universal character traits that probably would constitute good social skills, at least in polite society. But some of them also lean sharply toward *compliance* as a central, if only implied, value, thus taking a fairly conventional model of schooling for granted in defining social skills. School-as-context is therefore implicitly embedded in many of the questions.

My point here is methodological, dealing with the tacit assumptions embedded in our research about "context" and its match with the identities and lived ecologies of our participants. Here, the phrase "developing social skills" seems to mean helping black youth behave more appropriately in school. To be clear, I'm not minimizing this; it is indeed an important concern, as indicated by the problem of puzzling and chronic minority underachievement, as well as the trade-offs black youth make between ethnic and academic identities (Aronson, Fried, & Good, 2002; Nasir & Saxe, 2003). But one cannot merely assume the salience of these "social skills" in their lives.

I am suggesting that without a sense of authenticity built into our research, concepts like "social skills" might be too universalizing—I'm not sure there are universal social skills any more than there are generic

participants. A commitment to evidence demands that we study the substantive ways our programs improve people's lives. A commitment to authenticity requires us to take seriously their—and our—identities, the type of activity we're promoting, their goals, and the details of the setting. I can only think this will also help clarify why posttest scores go up or down in a given population following an intervention, and thus actually *serve* the quest for evidence, rather than detracting from it. I also believe it can help keep us accountable not just to policymakers and funders, but to the communities with whom we work.

In conclusion, these papers heightened my sensitivity to how the *political context* of our research, *what* our concepts presuppose, and *whom* we study are all interconnected and articulated *methodologically* in our work. I believe these are defining issues of our time, to which these researchers have made strong contributions.

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