



# The Birth of a Field

An Interview with Michelle Seligson, Founder of NIOST

Michelle (Micki) Seligson has been nationally recognized as a leader in afterschool and in childcare policy and practice. In 1978, she founded the School-Age Childcare Project, which became the National Institute on Out-of-School Time (NIOST) at Wellesley College.

To commemorate NIOST's 40th anniversary, she sat down with Georgia Hall, director and senior research scientist at NIOST, to talk about how observation of exemplary practices became guidance for an emerging field.

**Georgia:** Tell us about your journey 41 years ago to start the School-Age Childcare Project, now known as NIOST.

**Micki:** My whole involvement in childcare was about my feminism as a mother. I was back at school, and I had children. I knew I needed to get my education finished. Five of us started a children's center in Brookline, Massa-

chusetts, for our little kids. Then we needed afterschool, so I went to the school department to figure that out.

It was perfectly serendipitous that I met Jim Levine, who was writing a book called *Day Care and the Public Schools*. At that point, he was working as a foundation officer. He found me through my work for the 4-C Committee [Community Coordinated Child Care] in Brookline. Some cities had set up these committees in anticipation of federal childcare legislation that Nixon vetoed. Brookline and some other cities used federal money to fund childcare resources and referral for parents for a while.

The 4-C Committee was crucial in developing childcare programs, including extended day programs in the schools. It was real systemic change in attitude, driven by feminism and the needs of working moms. My seven years with the 4-C Committee saw the development of parent-run afterschool programs in every school in Brookline, along with the beginnings of middle school initiatives.

**Georgia:** How did you get from the Brookline position to Wellesley College?

**Micki:** What happened was, *Ladies Home Journal* and *McCall's* published pieces on school-age childcare, with

tips and ideas for parents. In response, there were 2,000 letters from parents. We used those 2,000 letters as the first data to show the deep need. We convinced the Ford Foundation to give us a \$10,000 grant, which enabled the start of the School-Age Childcare Project at Wellesley. We became the place to come for information, resources, and technical assistance. Later, we got funding from the Reader's Digest-DeWitt Wallace Foundation for an early version of the MOST (Making the Most of Out-of-School Time) initiative in three cities.

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**Georgia:** NIOST has celebrated its 40th year in service. Your landmark book *School-Age Child Care: An Action Manual* was published in 1982, so it will soon be 40 years old. At the time, you wrote, "This book will help you design, develop, implement, and operate a program for the school-age child." I'm just wondering about the role that you think this action manual has played in the expansion and development of the afterschool program field.

**Micki:** I think it was very innovative, because what we did was, we interviewed leaders of what we called "exemplary programs." Based on our research in the interviews, we developed the book. What was different about this process was that these were grassroots efforts at organizing and providing afterschool programming; these were parents, community groups, women's groups, citizen groups who knew that there had to be something in the afternoons for kids. We deconstructed what they did. We outlined and documented everything told to us, from needs assessment to implementation and everything in between. Nobody had ever written anything like that before about afterschool programs. We quickly sold 10,000 copies.

**Georgia:** That early work in what later became NIOST had policy implications, too.

**Micki:** Yes, we helped to bring about several federal policy initiatives. There was dependent care childcare legislation that included afterschool. The IRS changed its definition of "education" to include childcare. We partnered with Mathematica on a national study funded by the US Department of Education on before- and afterschool programs. This was a huge sea change in the field's develop-

ment. We published *School-Age Childcare: A Policy Report* as a companion to the practitioner action manual.

**Georgia:** The Afterschool Alliance estimates that 10.2 million children are enrolled in afterschool programs, and that for every child in a program there are two who are waiting to get in. Are you surprised, 40 years later, at the size of both the professional field and the utilization of afterschool programs?

**Micki:** I'm not surprised, and it's thrilling. It's thrilling to know that we helped start something.

**Georgia:** Where did the work in the afterschool program field take you? And what was your sense of the value of the field?

**Micki:** I'm now a Jungian analyst. I did that training because I felt compelled to understand at a deeper level what kids were really experiencing in their lives, and why we are who we are, including adults. It really came out of my work in the afterschool field. I saw the programs as the *only* place some kids

had in their lives for connection, for the feeling of being respected. Afterschool program time is this in-between place where all the big stuff happens, where your feelings are coming up, where somebody there takes the time to say, "So what's happening?"

**Georgia:** So, when you think about the early work that you accomplished, in calling attention to the issue of afterschool programming and care, what are the accomplishments that you're most proud of?

**Micki:** I'm proudest of the initiative we took. Our policy report articulated something that hadn't been articulated yet. Everything came out of our own personal experience organizing and managing afterschool programming. We said, "What is it like to have these programs? What are the best ones?" I remember one of our exemplary programs in El Paso, Texas. The afterschool director was so wonderful with the kids. And that was it. Other than that, the program was a closet full of balls—it was in a recreation center; there wasn't a real space. But it was the relationship this leader had with these kids that made us realize what the potential was for quality afterschool programs.

So we took that position going forward: that relationship building is key to healthy and positive development for kids. The afterschool program worker may be the only person in a child's life who sees them, who relates to them and connects to them.

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