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Personal and Life Skill Development Through Participation in the 4-H Japanese Exchange Program

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Abstract

This article presents results of a national evaluation of the 4-H Japanese exchange program. The evaluation looked at the impact of participation in the program on personal and life skill development in youth who travel to Japan or serve as a host to an international youth visiting the United States. The results indicate that participation in the program has significant impact on personal and life skill development in youth, whether they travel to Japan or serve as host. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed few significant differences in development between youth who travel to Japan and youth who serve as host.

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Introduction

The 4-H Japanese Exchange Program has been an important part of many state 4-H programs for over 30 years. The program traditionally includes two components, a program for 4-H youth traveling to Japan and a host family program where Japanese and/or Korean students stay with 4-H families in the United States. Each component of the program provides unique opportunities for life skill and personal development, as well as intercultural awareness. Despite the program's long history, research on the impact of the 4-H Japanese Exchange, and similar international homestay programs, on youth development remains limited (Sakamoto, 2003).

Studies conducted on the impact of youth participation in international homestay programs indicate that youth develop important life and personal skills through program participation. For example, Sakamoto (2003) reports language development, cross cultural understanding, cultural sensitivity, a global perspective, and increased tolerance as outcomes of international homestay programs. Stitsworth (1988) found that U. S. youth participating in the 4-H Japanese exchange were more flexible, independent, sociable, and responsible. Likewise, Crealock (1993) found that language development, cross-cultural understanding, and personal development were some of the main outcomes for Japanese youth participating in a Canadian homestay program. The development of these skills is consistent with the program goals for the 4-H program, which focus on the development of life and personal skills.

Hendricks (1996) presents a comprehensive model of the life skills developed through 4-H. Each "H" in the 4-H model (Head, Heart, Hands, and Health) provides a category for different types of life skill development. For example, life skills such as communication, social skills, accepting differences, and concern for others are skills developed in the "Heart" part of 4-H. The development of problem-solving and decision-making skills is included in the "Head" section. Self-esteem, character, and healthy lifestyle choices are developed in the "Health" part of the program.

Personal development is the broader goal of all positive youth development programs, including 4-H. Beyond specific life skills, effective youth development programs provide support and opportunities for youth to become confident, connected, competent, and caring young people of good character (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). These outcomes are the result of ongoing developmental opportunities across adolescence, culminating in a youth who is ready for "positive adulthood" (Lerner, 2004). The 4-H Japanese Exchange program provides real intercultural

experiences in which personal development can take place.

The intent of the study discussed here was threefold. First, the study looked at the impact of the program on life skill development of youth participants. Second, the study explored the importance of various program experiences on personal development. Finally, the study compared the difference in life skill and personal development between outbound and host youth.

Methods and Procedures

Subjects

Participants for the study were drawn from the 70 youth from across the United States who traveled to Japan in the summer of 2003 (outbound group) and a random sample of 577 youth, stratified by state, who served as hosts to a Japanese or Korean student, also in the summer of 2003 (host group). Thirty of the outbound youth, 21 girls and 9 boys, ages 13-18, completed both the pre- and post-tests (43% of the original sample of 70). The outbound youth came from 13 states. Pre- and post-tests were returned from 185 host youth, 110 girls and 75 boys, ages 10-18 (32% of the original sample). The host youth represented 28 states and Alberta, Canada.

Instruments

Pre- and post-tests instruments to measure life skill and personal development were developed for use in this study. Three 4-H youth development specialists independently chose life skills on which the outcomes for the program are based from the Targeting Life Skills Model (Hendricks, 1996). Following independent selection, the skills were narrowed down to a set of 12 life skills that all three specialists agreed upon. Youth were asked to rate how much participating in the program helped them develop each life skill. Ratings were made on a scale of 1-5, with "1" indicating the program "did not help at all" and "5" indicating the program was extremely helpful to the development of the skill. Internal reliability of the life skills scales for both the outbound and the host groups was determined using Cronbach's Alpha (.95 and .94, respectively).

Three youth development specialists familiar with the program identified program experiences that could affect the personal development of program participants. Initial ideas were refined by the researcher, and a final list of 17 experiences was agreed upon. The lists had 13 items in common and 4 items that reflected the travel and living situations that were different for each group. Participants were asked to rate how experiences related to the program contributed to their personal development by rating each experience on a 1-5 scale. A rating of "1" indicated the experience "didn't contribute at all," and a rating of "5" indicated the experience contributed "a lot!" Internal reliability of the program experience items for both the outbound and the host groups was determined using Cronbach's Alpha (.89 and .90 respectively).

Procedures

The pre-test was mailed to the participants' homes approximately 1 month before the outbound group left for Japan and to the host group 1 month before the Japanese or Korean students arrived in the United States. A reminder post card was sent to those who had not returned the survey within 2 weeks. The post-test survey was sent immediately following the outbound participant's return home to those who completed the pre-test. Likewise, a post-test survey was sent immediately after the Japanese or Korean student had returned home to host youth who had completed the pre-test. Reminder post cards were sent to those who had not returned the post-test within 2 weeks.

Results

Both the outbound and host groups reported that participation in the program contributed to the development of important life skills, with mean ratings ranging from 3.70 to 4.43 (Table 1).

Table 1.
Outbound and Host Group Ratings of Life Skill Development

Outbound					
Life Skill	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. Dev.
Appreciating another culture	30	2	5	4.43	0.82
Making friends with new people	30	2	5	4.40	0.89

Commonality with other cultures	30	2	5	4.37	0.85
Sharing experiences with others	30	2	5	4.27	0.91
Being comfortable in new situations	30	2	5	4.20	0.81
Caring about people who are different	30	2	5	4.13	0.97
Being responsible	30	1	5	4.13	1.20
Being resourceful	30	2	5	4.03	1.03
Having self confidence	30	1	5	3.93	1.31
Cooperating with others	29	2	5	3.93	0.92
Accepting differences	30	2	5	3.90	0.92
Positive sense of self	30	1	5	3.87	1.17

Host

Life Skill	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. Dev.
Appreciating another culture	30	1	5	3.95	1.03
Making friends with new people	30	1	5	3.84	1.26
Commonality with other cultures	30	1	5	4.01	1.06
Sharing experiences with others	30	1	5	3.93	1.02
Being comfortable in new situations	30	1	5	3.76	1.03
Caring about people who are different	30	1	5	4.01	1.03
Being responsible	30	1	5	3.63	1.19
Being resourceful	30	1	5	3.79	1.19

Having self confidence	30	1	5	3.77	1.14
Cooperating with others	29	1	5	3.74	1.08
Accepting differences	30	1	5	3.70	1.06
Positive sense of self	30	1	5	3.70	1.13

An analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to test for significant mean differences between the host and outbound groups. Significant differences between the groups were found for: 1) making new friends; 2) being comfortable in new situations; 3) being responsible; and 4) accepting differences (Table 2).

Table 2.
Analysis of Variance for Life

Between Groups				
Source	DF	F	N	P
Appreciating other cultures	1	.902	204	.343
Making new friends	1	5.87	205	.016*
Finding commonality with others	1	.401	204	.527
Sharing experiences with others	1	3.03	205	.083
Comfortable in new situations	1	4.67	205	.032*
Caring about others	1	.821	203	.366
Being responsible	1	4.19	204	.028*
Being resourceful	1	.537	203	.465*
Having self-confidence	1	1.24	205	.267
Cooperating with others	1	.413	206	.521
Accepting differences	1	6.04	203	.015*
Developing a positive sense of self	1	2.95	205	.087
*significant difference (p <.05)				

Members of both groups reported that the experiences they had in the program contributed to their personal development. Table 3 shows the mean ratings for the experiences that were common to both groups, revealing mean scores ranging from 3.27 to 4.63.

Table 3.
Outbound and Host Group Ratings of Common Experiences Leading to Personal Development

Outbound					
Experience	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. Dev.
Making new friends	30	2	5	4.57	0.77
Learning Japanese culture and customs from my host family	30	2	5	4.37	0.76
Learning to be tolerant of differences	30	2	5	4.27	0.87
Understanding the value of global/international relationships	30	2	5	4.23	0.90
Learning to communicate with others from a different culture	30	2	5	4.17	0.83
Having opportunities to try new foods	30	2	5	4.13	0.94
Learning to work through differences with my host family	30	3	5	4.10	0.80
Being a good representative of the United States	30	2	5	4.10	0.88
Learning more about myself	30	1	5	4.07	1.17
Being a good representative of 4-H	30	1	5	3.93	1.11
Learning and practicing the Japanese language	30	2	5	3.87	0.94
Learning more about international events	30	2	5	3.83	0.99
Teaching others about the United States	30	1	5	3.67	1.15
Host					
Experience	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. Dev.
Making new friends	176	1	5	4.28	1.01

Learning to communicate with a different culture	177	1	5	4.18	0.95
Being a good representative of my country	173	1	5	4.13	0.98
Learning my student's culture and customs	176	1	5	3.88	1.08
Learning to be tolerant of differences	176	1	5	3.88	1.05
Understanding the value of global/international relationships	176	1	5	3.85	1.18
Having opportunities to teach another about my country	174	1	5	3.82	1.04
Being a good representative of 4-H	173	1	5	3.80	1.22
Learning to work through differences with my student	176	1	5	3.78	1.15
Having opportunities to try new foods	176	1	5	3.57	1.15
Learning more about myself	174	1	5	3.55	1.20
Learning and practicing the Japanese / Korean language	175	1	5	3.50	1.29
Learning more about international events	176	1	5	3.27	1.24

Table 4 shows the results of the ANOVA to test for significant differences between groups for experiences common to both groups. Significant differences between outbound and host groups were found for: 1) learning more about oneself, 2) trying new foods, and 3) learning about international events.

Table 4.
Analysis of Variance for Personal Development

Between Groups				
Source	DF	F	N	P
Communicating with another culture	1	0.05	205	.823
Learning another language	1	2.11	203	.148
Teaching others about the United States	1	0.91	202	.340

Learning culture and customs	1	4.70	204	.030
Representing the United States	1	0.13	202	.722
Learning more about self	1	4.67	203	.032*
Trying new foods	1	5.44	205	.021*
Learning about international events	1	5.26	205	.023*
Working through differences	1	2.71	205	.101
Making new friends	1	1.87	205	.173
Developing tolerance for differences	1	3.05	205	.082
Valuing global relationships	1	2.31	205	.130
Representing 4-H	1	0.15	202	.704
**significant difference (p <.05)				

Table 5 shows the mean ratings of personal development through experiences that were unique to each group.

Table 5.
Outbound and Host Group Ratings of Unique Experiences Leading to Personal Development

Outbound					
Experience	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. Dev.
Living with a host family	30	4	5	4.63	0.49
Living in a different culture	30	3	5	4.47	0.63
Traveling and site seeing in Japan	30	2	5	4.40	0.81
Being away from my family for an extended time	30	1	5	3.83	1.23
Host					
Experience	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. Dev.
Site seeing with student in my state and country	176	1	5	4.12	0.93

Having someone from a different culture live with me	177	1	5	4.11	0.96
Sharing how my family lives with	177	1	5	3.94	0.95
Caring for someone who is away from home	175	1	5	3.93	1.10

Conclusion

The study discussed here shows that youth who travel to Japan and youth who serve as hosts to international students develop important life skills, with both groups giving fairly high ratings of the impact of program participation on the development of particular life skills. Overall, the outbound group rated life skill development slightly higher than the host group, but these differences were statistically significant for only 4 items:

1. Making new friends,
2. Being comfortable in new situations,
3. Being responsible, and
4. Accepting differences.

In light of the radically different living situations the outbound and host groups have, these differences make sense. For example, a youth traveling to Japan is put in a situation where making friends, learning to be comfortable, dealing with differences in daily life, and being responsible while away from home are skills that are put to immediate use. Host youths who remain in the familiarity of their own homes and cultures are not as pressed in these areas.

It is interesting to note the number of life skills for which no difference can be found between groups. These include appreciating another culture, finding commonalities with others, sharing experiences, caring about others, being resourceful, having self-confidence, cooperating with others, and developing a positive sense of self.

Likewise, both groups reported that the experiences they had in the program contributed to their personal growth and development. In the experiences common to both groups, significant differences were found for only 3 items:

1. Learning more about oneself,
2. Trying new foods, and
3. Learning about international events.

Again, these group differences are not surprising given the situational difference between groups. It makes sense that a youth visiting Japan could become more aware of his or her self as a result of change in daily routine and expectations. Youth who travel to Japan also have a different exposure to food and international events than those who remain in the United States. Even so, it is interesting to note those experiences leading to personal growth that did not differ between groups, further supporting the idea that many benefits of international youth exchange programs can be gained through participation as a host, without ever leaving home.

These results have important programming implications given that over 10 times as many youth serve as hosts than travel to Japan in any given year. Clearly, the opportunity to travel abroad and the cultural immersion that occurs provide youth with opportunities that can't be experienced as a host youth. Nonetheless, the results of this study show that through participation in the 4-H Japanese Exchange program, host youth can also gain important skills related to international understanding without having to travel to another country.

While the results of this study provide interesting insight into the benefit of the 4-H Japanese Exchange program, appropriate caution must be used when generalizing these results to other international exchange programs. The response rate for this study was relatively low (43% for the outbound group and 32% for the host group). Even though these returns fall within the expected rates for mail surveys with a postcard follow-up (Salant & Dillman, 1994) and return rates were carefully calculated and reported (Wiseman, 2003), there is still a very viable chance for non-response error. While a number of strategies have been proposed for addressing non-response error (Lindner & Wingenbach, 2002) the author did not attempt to address the error due to study

limitations. Given this, it is important that the results of this study be viewed as preliminary in nature.

Despite the potential for non-response error, there is a dearth of program research in this area, and the study discussed here makes a significant contribution to program research investigating the benefits of participation in youth international homestay exchange programs. The 4-H program has long recognized the benefit of developing life and personal skills through hands-on learning opportunities in real world situations. The study shows that "bringing the world" to youth has many of the same benefits of sending youth "out to the world."

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