4-H as a Catalyst for Enhancing “Global Literacy” in American Youth

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Abstract

The 4-H organization is one of the oldest and largest experiential education programs for youth in the United States of America. For more than 100 years 4-H has helped American youth become responsible and capable citizens regardless of home and family life and socio-economic background. This paper examines the role 4-H can play to infuse global awareness and understanding among youth and children. Based on extensive review of literature and experience of authors, strategies for involving in 4-H in global literacy are discussed. 4-H has tremendous potential and opportunity to be a lead youth organization to infuse global literacy. Extension specialists and other international agricultural and extension educators should collaborate together to develop projects that focus on global awareness and understanding. For example, specialists and faculty can develop curricula relative to geography, major agricultural products in the world, trade relationships, foreign affairs, religion, language and culture, food habits, family structure and relationships, infrastructure, etc. All these topics could be developed into mini 4-H projects. For example, a project on origin of food and culture associated with food would be a great project for youth to explore. 4-H should take advantage of these opportunities to design and develop a project using technology. Using a game format, children can explore the origin of food and food habits of people around the world. Such an exploration helps children not only understand the food and food habits but also aids in the learning of geography, climatic conditions and horticulture concepts.
Introduction

For many Americans the word 4-H evokes the image of an organization that has, for more than 100 years helped American youth become responsible citizens and potential future leaders. The mission of 4-H is to assist youth in acquiring knowledge, developing life skills, and forming attitudes which will enable them to become self-directing, productive, and contributing members of society (Cantrell, Heinsohn, & Doebler, 1989). It is argued that a youth organization that is successful in reaching its goal has worth (or value) in preparing youth to be contributing members of society, providing family support and satisfying developmental needs of youth (Sarver, Johnson and Verma, 2000).

According to Astroth (2003), 4-H experiences actively engage youth as partners and help them acquire the life skills necessary to meet the challenges of adolescence and adulthood through voluntary participation in planned experiential, research-based education.

Floyd and McKenna (2003) in their study on contributions of national youth organizations in the United States reported that national youth development organizations such as 4-H, Big Brothers and Big Sisters of America, Boy Scouts of America, Boys and Girls Clubs of America, Future Farmers of America, Girl Scouts of the USA, National Crime Prevention Council, Save the Children USA and Communities in Schools have a long and storied history of promoting positive development of America’s youth.

According to Floyd and McKenna (2003), 4-H stands as a leader in the sphere of youth-serving organizations. The following statistics provide a testimony for their claim. 4-H movement touches the lives of over 6.8 million youth and is enriched by the selfless commitment of nearly 500,000 volunteer adult leaders and over 116,000 volunteer youth leaders. 4-H is also supported by the experience of thousands of dedicated professional youth development workers. There are over 340,000 club units divided into organized clubs (103,603), special-interest programs (90,244), overnight camping programs (9,905), school enrichment programs (131,912), and school-aged child care programs (5,206). (p.17).

Many studies show that there is limited awareness and understanding of international concepts among children, youth and teenagers (Radhakrishna and Dominguez, 1999; Bikson, 1996; Holmes, 1995; and the International Council, 1994). Several researchers have also provided evidence and justification for emphasizing global awareness in schools, colleges and universities (Etling & Barbuto, 2002; Elliot and Yanik, 2002; and Carey and Bruening, 2002). In recent years, incorporating international concepts within high school curricula has gained importance (Elliot and Yanik, 2002).

Several studies have documented the importance of participation in international activities in enhancing global awareness and understanding (Carey and Bruening, 2002; Tritz and Martin, 1997 and Opper, Teichler and Carlson, 1990). Findings from these studies suggest that participation in international activities such as study abroad programs, travel, including intercultural field trip, foreign language skills, hosting foreign exchange students, international foreign youth exchange, courses in international agriculture, etc.,
enhance cultural awareness, improves communication skills, and exposes participants to different people and different cultures. Carey and Bruening (2002) indicated that enrollment in an international agricultural course and an intercultural field-trip have provided students with tools needed for international development work and prepared them to perform effectively in a culturally diverse society. Tritz and Martin (1997) suggested that exposure to a country, its people and its culture, will all have an amazing effect on anyone who has studied abroad. Similarly, Opper, Teichler and Carlson (1990) indicated that an international experience provides cultural awareness, improves communication abilities, and increases foreign language skills.

In a study of high school students, Radhakrishna, Leite, and Domer (2003) reported that high school juniors and seniors participated in a variety of international activities. Examples of participation included work experience abroad (13%), international youth exchange (19%), reading National Geographic (34%), watching international news on TV (70%), and knowing and interacting with other foreign students in school (66%). Further, they found statistically significant relationships at the 0.05 level between international knowledge assessment and participation in international activities. Students who participated in International Foreign Youth Exchange (4-H) program (r=.32), scholars who watched news on CNN (r=.34) and students who had known other foreign students in school (r=.34), had higher scores in agricultural policy, products, people and culture and world geography. Similarly, significant relationships were also found between gender (r=.33), graduating class size (r=.26) and people and culture sections. Finally, Radhakrishna, Leite, and Domer, called for developing a vision for infusing global literacy (see Figure 1). They suggested development of a framework and a research agenda to address issues relative to global literacy. Such agenda, they said, should focus on content (curricula) to be taught, who should teach it, and when and at what grade levels and where (schools, clubs, and others).

Recent review of 4-H enrollment trends and projects in Pennsylvania revealed limited number of 4-H projects and project books relative to global awareness (Radhakrishna, Leite, and Hoy, 2003). The first global awareness curriculum project
book and leadership guide “And My World” was developed in 1984 and subsequently revised in 2002. These revisions reflect the changes that are occurring in a global society. The introduction part of the curriculum says that “4-H youths live in a world in which accepting and living with diversity, understanding the individual’s impact on the well-being of others and sharing the human dream of a better future are not only desirable but essential.”

The “And My World” curriculum provides information about the current world challenges and interdependence (Etling and Powell, 2002). The curriculum focuses on areas such as environment, economics, hunger, and health. In addition, it focuses on culture, interdependence, and political issues. The complete curriculum has 29 lessons on aforesaid foci. Each lesson is designed in such a way that it provides opportunities for youth learn and understand skills and issues relative to global interdependence. The curriculum also has a Leader’s Guide to help leaders and volunteers to work with youth, grades 3-12. This curriculum is a very useful tool in infusing global awareness to children and youth. Now, time has come to revitalize and reorganize the curricula keeping in view the current technological and demographic changes that are taking place in the United States and around the world. The best way to approach this is to view/use 4-H as a catalyst to infuse global literacy among children and youth.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this developmental/concept paper is twofold. First, the paper attempts to provide a framework for exploring the potential of 4-H youth programs in infusing global awareness and understanding. Second, suggest strategies (need, process, delivery mechanisms, and outcomes) to integrate global awareness and understanding concepts into 4-H youth programs.

Methodology

Review of literature and personal experience of the authors were the data sources for the study. A number of publications, including journals, books, conference proceedings, and government documents were reviewed to explore needs, processes, and strategies to infuse global awareness and understanding in 4-H youth programs. Additionally, informal discussions and interviews with faculty and graduate students were also documented as data source for this study.

Results

Nationally, there are almost seven million youth involved in 4-H. Of these seven million, 10% live on farms, 35% live in towns under 10,000 and open country, and 55% live in cities, suburbs, and large cities (USDA, 2003). A variety of projects are offered to youth to develop knowledge, skills, and experiences. These projects could range from rearing animals, to keeping record books, to participation in community activities, to
sewing and cooking, etc. The National 4-H Cooperative Curriculum System at the national level provides additional insights into the range of 4-H projects offered in the United States.

The 4-H program has the potential to reach a large number of youth ages 6 to 18 years. As indicated above, a 4-H project relative to global awareness and understanding would serve as a curriculum. Extension specialists and other international agricultural and extension educators can collaborate together to develop projects that focus on global awareness and understanding. For example, specialists and faculty can develop curriculum relative to geography, major agricultural products in the world, trade relationships, foreign affairs, religion, language and culture, food habits, family structure and relationships, infrastructure, etc. All these topics could be developed into mini 4-H projects. For example, a project on origin of food and culture associated with food would be a great project for youth to explore. During summer time, a number of higher educational institutions and communities organize an international festival where food, culture, dress and other activities are exhibited and shared. 4-H should take advantage of these opportunities to design and develop a project using technology. Using a game format, children can explore the origin of food and food habits of people around the world. Such an exploration helps children not only understand the food and food habits but also aids in the learning of geography, climatic conditions and horticulture concepts. For extension educators and 4-H specialists, this approach offers opportunities for collaboration and interdisciplinary programming.

For example, projects can include a web-based and/or interactive component. In addition, use of CD-ROM and other interactive materials can also help. Projects and programs can be designed in such a way that 4-H participants can locate a country or continent on the globe. 4-H should use some of the documentary and self-help interactive technologies that we see in museums, and arts and geographic exhibits.

Another opportunity for international agricultural and extension educators is to develop 4-H project books relative to people and culture, geography, origins of food, trade and infrastructure. This is particularly important if one looks at the changes that are occurring in the demographic and cultural landscape of America. Ingram and Radhakrishna (2002) provide a glimpse of such changes.

The cultural landscape of American society has been changing dramatically in the last 25 years and will continue to change. By mid-century no racial/ethnic group in the U.S. will be in the majority. The African American, Hispanic/Latino, and Asian American populations in this country are increasing at rates faster than the Caucasian population (Population Reference Bureau, 2001).

The changes in the diversity of our society extend beyond race and culture. The elderly will continue to comprise a larger segment of our population: people 85 years and older are the fastest growing age group in the nation (Brock, 2001). Single-parent families, blended families and other alternative family structures are becoming commonplace; about 50% of all children born in the U.S. will spend at least part of their childhood with only one
parent (Lamb, 1999). Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people are choosing to be open in their communities and work places. People with physical and mental disabilities are more actively seeking to be contributing members of society. The fastest growing religion in this country is Islam (Arnett, 1998). And an increasing number of people are speaking languages other than English in public settings.

The challenge for the extension professionals and international agricultural and extension educators is how to use the already available educational resources that helps develop knowledge, attitudes, skills and behaviors that will allow us to work effectively across differences.

The 4-H program offers a unique opportunity for development, marketing and implementation of a global literacy curriculum. Depending on the age of 4-H members and the scope of the global awareness and understanding topics to be covered, global literacy curriculum can be offered through 4-H clubs, school enrichment 4-H programs, and after school programs. These venues have the potential for reaching a large number of youth. As can be seen from the national 4-H enrollment data, 4-H has the capacity to reach a large number of youth and children.

Programs/projects currently offered to this group (8-12 years) should be examined and age and developmental appropriate program/projects relative to global literacy should be developed. As indicated in the literature, 8-12 years is a critical age period, where several changes occur in the lives of 4-H members. Extension educators, including specialists, and program leaders should take note of these changes in developing global literacy curricula.

Program delivery method is crucial to the effectiveness of 4-H programs. National enrollment data indicates 4-H school enrichment program is the predominant method used to deliver 4-H programs, followed by organized club activities and 4-H special interest or short term programs. It appears that schools are a natural choice for reaching youth. Extension educators and specialists should identify the best delivery method to infuse global literacy. Effectiveness of 4-H programs, especially global literacy programs, is dependent on the delivery methods. Further research is needed to examine the appropriateness of delivery methods for 4-H programs/projects completed by 4-H members. In a time when documenting outcomes of 4-H programs are emphasized, the effectiveness of delivery method becomes important.

Conclusions and Educational Importance

4-H provides a great opportunity for all international agricultural and extension educators and serves as a spring board to address the issue of “global literacy.” Addressing the issue of global literacy becomes even critical as demographics of America are changing (Ingram and Radhakrishna, 2002). As a first step, AIAEE should serve as a forum for dialogue and discussion on this important issue facing our schools, colleges and universities. Finally, we must strengthen efforts and increase opportunities for youth in our schools, colleges and universities, and other settings to enhance global literacy so that
youth understand, respect, value, and appreciate cultural diversity, global interdependence, and mutual respect.

Findings of this study have several implications for further research. Literature on global awareness and understanding has revealed that American youth possess limited awareness of global concepts. What is the answer to the crisis of global illiteracy? The answer is more education and opportunities. That is, issues and topics relative to geography, major agricultural products in the world, trade relationships, foreign affairs, religion, language and culture, food habits, family structure and relationships, infrastructure, etc., should be developed and/or integrated into 4-H curricula. Second, 4-H should take a lead role in providing opportunities for youth to involve in global awareness activities. Third, appropriateness of delivery methods to infuse global literacy concepts should be explored. Finally, Cooperative Extension should partner/collaborate with schools, colleges, and universities to chart a plan to reduce “global illiteracy” among youth and children in America.

References


