INTERNATIONAL FFA SCHOOL TO SCHOOL LINKAGE PROGRAM: CASE STUDY OF TWO FAMILIES

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Abstract

The National FFA Organization has been facilitating international experiences for its members for a number of years. One of these programs is the International FFA School to School Linkage Program (SSLP), in which selected American agricultural education programs are linked with specialized secondary agricultural lyceums located in one of the countries of the former Soviet Union (FSU). The program’s main mission is for American students and teachers to share ideas with their FSU counterparts about the initiation and maintenance of small-scale agricultural entrepreneurship based on the United States’ agricultural education Supervised Agricultural Experience Program (SAEP) model as well as exposing them to FFA leadership activities. During the 1997-98 school term, six agricultural education students and two adults from Prairie High School located in Prairie, Louisiana (pseudonyms), participated in the SSLP, linking with the Zolatoya Agricultural Lyceum in Zolatoya, Platnaya Region (pseudonyms), Russia. The families of the participants were highly involved in the entire experience. This qualitative study investigated “How have the lives of two Prairie High School, Louisiana graduates and their immediate families been affected by their participation in the 1997-98 International FFA School to School Linkage Program?” The major themes identified were: A) Intellectual Development/Career Guidance Choices, B) Developing International Perspective, C) Change in Perception of Host Country/International Representatives, D) Personal/Family Development, and E) Heightened Sense of Community. Developing an International Perspective, Personal/Family Development, and Heightened Sense of Community had the highest frequencies of reference. Overall, all participants found this to be a worthwhile and life-changing experience.
Introduction

There are a number of organizations and governmental agencies found across the globe which have come into existence over the last several years whose mission includes serving the people of post-communist societies in their efforts in the areas of self-determination and self-sufficiency. Throughout this time, questions are constantly being raised about U.S. trade practices, historical trade barriers between countries, advances in technology (or the lack thereof) to feed and clothe people, cultural differences, freedom of speech and trade, etc.

These questions seem to be perplexing to most people around the world, not excluding Americans. This certainly includes students found in classrooms and laboratories across the United States and its several territories. McCracken and Magisos (1989) concur with the notion of a shrinking world and go further to express that students of agriculture need to develop a willingness to compete and cooperate internationally, thus requiring a respect for political, social, and cultural differences among countries. They also feel that students who understand these relationships will be able to function better in the many roles that have an international dimension. Thus, the necessity of quality international exchanges comes into play.

Purpose of Study

The National FFA Organization is an agriculturally-based youth organization in the United States which has been facilitating international experiences for its members for a number of years. One of these programs is the International FFA School to School Linkage Program (SSLP) in which selected American schools with agricultural education/FFA programs are linked with specialized secondary agricultural lyceums located in one of the countries of the former Soviet Union (FSU). The program’s main mission is for the American students and teachers to share ideas with their FSU counterparts about the initiation and maintenance of small-scale agricultural entrepreneurship based on the United States’ agricultural education Supervised Agricultural Experience Program (SAEP) model. Students and teachers are also exposed to FFA leadership activities. This type of experience benefits not only the individuals from the FSU but also the Americans as they learn to increase their own skills in leadership development and personal growth. The relationship begins with initial contact between the schools via telephone facsimile/e-mail/surface mail/SSLP facilitators to begin exchange of basic information about participants, the schools and their agricultural programs, and the communities in which the schools are located. Next, one school visits the partner school with a delegation of six students and two adults for a period of three weeks. The other school then reciprocates for another three week period during the same school term with the same number of participants.

During the 1997-98 school term, six agricultural education students and two adults (the lead author of this study and a local school administrator) from Prairie High School located in Prairie, Louisiana (pseudonyms), participated in the SSLP as one of six schools in the United States selected. Prairie High School was linked with the Zolatoya Agricultural Lyceum in Zolatoya, Platnaya Region, Russia (pseudonyms). The families of the participants were highly involved in the entire experience, from initial planning to fundraising to hosting the FSU students to living with their own children upon their return,
This qualitative study sought to investigate the long-term influence that this experience has had on the students who participated and their families. Therefore, the essential question of this research study is, “How have the lives of two Prairie High School, Louisiana graduates and their immediate families been affected by their participation in the 1997-98 International FFA School to School Linkage Program?” This was done, in collaboration with the participants, by identifying themes and significant features.

Method of the Study/Theoretical Base

The research was comprised of a case study which involved interviewing and collecting data on two selected families during the Fall of 2003 and Spring of 2004. Yin (1994) feels that case studies indeed have their rightful place in evaluation research since they have the ability to “explain the causal links in real-life interventions that are too complex for the survey or experimental strategies” (p. 15). Yin also stresses that “the form of the question provides an important clue regarding the appropriate research strategy to be used” (p. 8). It is clear that the type of question being asked is “how” with no control over behavioral events and with a focus on contemporary events (p. 6). Thus, the case study was the most appropriate method to employ for this situation of interest. It employed the triangulation process, utilizing appropriate techniques of observation, interviews, and obtaining and analyzing pertinent archival information. A total of five interviews were conducted which were audio-taped and later transcribed for analysis. Copies of these transcripts were given to the informants for cross-checking. A case study database was then organized which included case study notes (handwritten, typed, and audiotapes), case study documents (organized in an annotated bibliography), and narratives of interviews. Data analysis was conducted as suggested by Guba and Lincoln (1985): unitizing, 2) categorizing, 3) filling in patterns, and 4) member checks.

Of the six families who originally participated in the program, two were chosen (the Boudreaux and Landry families) based on availability and maximum variation (Patton, 2002). The Boudreaux family is an intact family (husband and wife live together with children still at home). Their son/brother, Al, who was part of the SSLP, also reported in a preliminary interview in 2001 that he had an overall very positive experience with his Russian counterpart in the six weeks that they were together in 1998, both as a host in the United States and a guest in Russia. He still lives at home and is a recent graduate of a nearby university. They have, since the 1997-98 experience, also hosted a Ukrainian student during the 2000-2001 school term through another related program. Al was interviewed separately from his family.

The Landry family has several differences from the Boudreaux family. First, the parents in this family are divorced and had been separated even prior to the 1997-98 SSLP experience. However, Jill’s father did play a role in the SSLP and was included in the study. (All three people were interviewed separately.) The student participant, Jill, lived with her mother in 1997-98. She has two older brothers, both of whom have not lived with their parents for a number of years prior to 1997-98 and have their own families. During her preliminary interview conducted in 2001, although she reported an overall very positive experience with SSLP, she did, as opposed to Al, experience some challenges with her Russian counterpart during her hosting experience in the United States as well as during the
reciprocal exchange in Russia. She is a recent masters degree graduate at a state university and has recently completed an out-of-state professional internship.

**Results/Findings**

The major themes identified in this research are a reflection of the major points of the information found in the review of literature for this research and the content of the interview responses relative to the effects of international experiences of students, namely: 1) Intellectual Development/Career Choices, 2) Developing an International Perspective, 3) Changes in Perception of Host Country/International Representatives, 4) Personal/Family Development, and 5) Heightened Sense of Community. Numerous sub-themes were also identified during the research.

**Analysis of Interviews – Boudreaux Family Members**

Upon analysis of the data gleaned from their interviews, the association of responses from the Boudreaux family as a whole overwhelmingly clustered under two main themes: Developing an International Perspective and Personal/Family Development.

**Developing an International Perspective:** Their information was heavily accented with positive references to their understanding and appreciation of the SSLP and similar programs. When discussing the issue of their expectations of SSLP and their ultimate judgment of it, all family members said without hesitation that it was a very positive experience, even to the point of helping them with their decision to another exchange student two years later. A deepened understanding and tolerance of and appreciation for cultural differences were also evident during the interviews. As well as the recognition of the many common traits that cut across the human race.

> I know they are learning a lot. They are learning about the way we live. We learn about the way they live. Just differences, difference between us and them, in which it’s, say, material things . . . but just our cultures and our foods and our clothes - stuff like that is different . . . They are all still kids, they are all still the same . . . (Boudreaux Family interview, p. 24).

The father also found other lifestyle similarities between his family and that of their Russian student, such as raising livestock. He also came to the conclusion that both cultures are basically the same, all must work hard to survive, and that people of all nations must build constructive relationships and learn about the other. Being reared during the Cold War era, he was keenly aware of the prevailing attitude that Americans had toward Russians (and vice-versa) for so many decades and the strained relations between the two countries. Thus, he also appreciates the value of SSLP.

> . . . it is giving the kids more things to learn about . . . [not about] material things but in people’s lives, you know; learning about them: what is their style of life and stuff like that, what they think about the Americans and what we think about Russia. It’s more like a big history thing that is improved a lot. People trying to get along with
each other, different bunch of other things, you know; I think it is just real great that
different countries could swap their kids around and learn about each other - things
that we didn’t know when we were younger, and then doing it at so much of a young
age - gives them a better outlook on life and this world will become something better
in the future (Boudreaux Family interview, pp. 24-25).

The concept of promoting world peace through positive international relations
permeated much of the father’s underlying thoughts, stressing the importance of developing
constructive, respectful relationships between cultures.

One most important thing I think about it: anybody could live with anybody - don’t
matter where he is from, what color he is - I think anybody can get along with
anybody . . . the world really needs to open its eyes and realize that we are all
humans. I think it would be a lot better if it was just all peace (Boudreaux Family
interview, p. 18).

He also strongly felt that there was much mutual benefit between nations through this
type of program. The entire family was aware of the fact that the interest of many
community members and those of the surrounding area was stimulated during the entire
SSLP experience, particularly when the Russian visitors were present, even to the point of
other local families perhaps desiring to host international students themselves in the
future. As a whole, the family stressed without hesitation that they would be willing to
participate in this type of program again because of its value. One of Al’s younger brothers
expressed a strong desire to have the opportunity to travel to Russia just as his older brother
did so that he could have the same type of experiences. Al was also very appreciative of the
fact that students played a major role in the whole SSLP experience because it afforded them,
as future leaders, great career-development experiences.

Al’s interview also revealed a heightened understanding of the agricultural,
economic, and governmental situations and the challenges that they face in Russia through
tours, interviews, and observations. This included learning about the curriculum taught at the
Agricultural Lyceum. All of these challenges were cause of great concern for Al, prompting
his desire to try to make a difference by lending assistance. He was hopeful that the exposure
that they had to United States agricultural production, business, and education techniques
would be beneficial to his Russian counterparts.

Boudreaux family members also commented on the value of programs such as the
SSLP for both Americans and international students. The father was particularly eloquent in
his assessment of their effectiveness in the improvement of international relations, personal
development, and educational/career opportunities:

I would say support them one hundred percent. To me, what it is doing for the kids is
educating them and it’s getting them interested in their lives - their lifestyles. It’s
also teaching the world to be smarter and teaching them a lot of different cultures -
what is going on around the world . . . It’s opening up doors for them and it’s making
their lives better than what we had when we were younger . . . Don’t hold back,
‘cause that’s the future for our world. Make these kids real smart and bright and that
way when the future does come, this world is going to be better. Always I figure if
you educate the children the world is going to come to be a better place to live (Boudreaux Family interview, p. 33).

**Personal/Family Development:** This major theme had the highest number of associations of all the themes for the Boudreaux family. Much of the parents’ responses were associated with parent-type issues, with the issue of the anxiety being one of their highest associations of responses. It mainly centered around his safety during the journey, his well-being while in a foreign country, and the trust that they had in the adults in charge of the group. In spite of all of the anxiety that they felt, Bill and Sally always indicated that they were in full support of Al’s decision to participate (as did Al’s siblings) and were pleased with the effect that it has had on his life and that of their entire family. This also focused on the sub-theme of parental life transitions, coming at a time when they were beginning to realize that Al was at a time in his life when he wished to make more of his own decisions.

Al indicated that he felt some degree of anxiety when it came to safety issues and the ability to communicate while in Russia, although he related that he “was more anxious than scared” to travel (Al Boudreaux interview, p. 4). The bulk of his anxiety was prior to and during the time of his family hosting the Russian student. He had many initial concerns about the language barrier and his ability to provide his guest with a proper experience of the American lifestyle and American agriculture. However, he did indicate that he was satisfied with his performance and his feelings of anxiety were alleviated.

*I’m glad the programs that we had for them, the tours and everything. I think, you know, beings it was the first time we did it, we couldn’t have done it any better. They told us at the end thank you . . . . We did everything we could for them when they were down here . . . I think that’s why Sasha’s family was so nice to me when we went, ’cause I’m sure he went back and told everything (Al Boudreaux interview, p. 9).*

The father was particularly pleased with the opportunity that this afforded his son to experience other cultures and lifestyles and to build his self-esteem, self-confidence, and level of maturity.

The sub-themes of relationship-building within the family and development of parenting skills were the overwhelming responses of the parents. There were frequent references, for example, to the positive relationship that they quickly built with their Russian guest and how he quickly became a member of the family. All family members felt a sense of responsibility for the general care and well-being of their guest. There was overall anxiety exhibited by the family when their Russian guest departed:

*Mother: You know, we got to meet him, just got to know him, understand him and that, and then we lost him. . . . In them three weeks we got attached. We got to know him. You could tell he had a big heart - you could tell his personality. Even though he didn’t know very much English, you could feel something about a person. When he left we all cried. It was hard. We wanted him to stay longer, but he couldn’t . . . (Boudreaux Family interview, p. 29).*

Along with building a relationship with their Russian guest, there were clear
associations with the theme of strengthening existing family ties, since family members indicated that this type of experience brings families closer together, especially since all must pull their resources together, cooperate, and exhibit special care to family members.

Mother: To me it helped. We have always had a close family . . . but this helped us - kinda bring us closer, even, together. . . . We were always trying to make this kid feel welcomed . . . . We don’t have much . . . . but we had each other . . . . it made our family stronger. Even though a stranger came into our home . . . we still love each other even more - and we could love somebody else too . . . . (Boudreaux Family interview, p. 36).

It was also clear from the interview that the mother’s social skills were positively affected in her ability to better deal with strangers. Al indicated a strong sense of care and concern for his Russian counterparts and his willingness to “make a difference” in the agricultural/international scene. He felt a very strong sense of mission of helping others even as a student in his SSLP participation. He also expressed his desire to one day have the ability and resources to conduct international exchanges with this region of Russia and other places in need. This care and concern also exemplified itself with a strong sense of empathy that he felt for his Russian counterparts with the same areas of concern that he had, such as communication barriers, safety, and homesickness.

With this notion of making a difference come the sub-themes of maturity and an increased sense of responsibility. He realized that this SSLP experience placed him in challenging situations which required him to make sometimes difficult decisions, make certain sacrifices, and witnessing difficult situations in a developing country, lessons which are guiding him along his career development path. He had a strong sense that his Russian peers and their adult leaders were pleased that we were interested in assisting them to improve their own situation. Al, as well as his family, sensed such a growth within himself.

Al: It just changed me. It matured me a lot, too. . . . It made me understand that I’m not just in FFA, I’m in agriculture; and that if I want to do something with this field, I need to buckle down. It made me also want to learn a lot more about my field and give some specific concentrations . . . . It’s matured me a lot, made me more open-minded (Al Boudreaux interview, p. 7).

Analysis of Interviews – Landry Family Members

Upon analysis of the data gleaned from their interviews, the association of responses from the Landry family, as with the Boudreaux family, as a whole overwhelmingly clustered under two main themes: Developing an International Perspective and Personal/Family Development.

Developing an International Perspective: All members of the Landry family appreciated the value of the SSLP and similar programs and their satisfaction in having the opportunity to participate. The mother, “Sue”, related that she was very excited and proud of her daughter when she was selected to participate since she was such an active FFA member and good overall student.
It’s got to be for the good . . . how if we’re going to have world peace and if we’re going to have understanding, it’s going to have to start with the youth - and the youth of today. We can’t wait for the future . . . I think it’s helping because these are our leaders of tomorrow . . . You don’t know how many times I’ve just prayed for whatever group . . . I mean, it’s so strange, because I would have never prayed for that group from Ireland or that group from whatever that you would see on the news that’s in our area much less our own. I think that it’s going to have to help. I don’t know that it will solve all the problems of the world, but I know it’s impacted our kids and it’s impacted their kids surely, so if each little group can do some good, maybe, we have hope . . . Our community prospered in a lot of ways by this experience . . .

(Sue Landry interview, pp. 10-11)

Jill felt that SSLP and similar programs have great value since they may be the only vehicle available for providing the opportunity for people in her community to be exposed to different cultures, either at home or abroad. She did express concern, in fact, about if indeed the experience abroad was long enough to make a difference in the lives of the Russian participants, wanting more time to develop deeper relationships and to share more knowledge. Her father also shared the same sentiments. Jill felt very strongly that most people from her area are not able or willing to take this valuable opportunity either because of economic constraints, poor attitudes, or lack of understanding. In other words, she expressed desire for more people, especially from her community, to take advantage of such as experience.

While this major theme was one with a high overall number of associations, there was a markedly strong emphasis by this family in one of the sub-themes, that of Awareness/Understanding of Cultural Differences. They were all immediately struck by the difference in the styles of dress, personal hygiene habits, musical tastes, food preferences, the reactions that their visitor had to some American conveniences and technology, and her own lack of personal resources. Likewise, based on the spoken word from Jill and the pictures from the overseas trip, her parents were able to acquire a better understanding of the Russian situation. This included styles of dress, lack of private modes of transportation, inefficient energy systems, lack of personal telephones, personal hygiene habits, a crumbling national infrastructure, social mores, and diet. The issue of basic freedoms was also discussed, with the realization that Russia and all countries of the former Soviet Union are undergoing a painful transition and that the American concept of freedom is not widely understood or appreciated in those countries. In particular, Jill was aware that the Platnaya Region was still highly of a Communist bent, reflected in their styles of government, economy, and education. Yet, she was still disappointed and perplexed with her Russian peers’ and their adult leaders’ seeming lack of understanding of basic leadership skills and economic principles as presented by us throughout the entire SSLP experience.

. . . and I guess I was hoping that they would have caught on real fast when we got there and be more receptive of the organization because I know they wanted to start a similar program to ours, but they were in more awe and amazement about just some small things about the organization and that kind of caught them off-guard . . . such as when we talked to them about electing officers or talking in front of a group . . .
they just couldn’t understand or even imagine themselves doing the same thing at the same age . . . even their adults didn’t even really understand that, either. We just kind of kept talking about it and talking about it, just kind of hoping that they caught on to it . . .(Jill Landry interview, pp. 3-4).

She did concede the fact, though, that they lived a more difficult life and that her Russian counterparts did impart a higher level of maturity than the American youths. She also related an understanding of the differences between the Russian educational system versus the American system, including grade levels, career tracks, and eligibility and choices for post-secondary education.

Jill admitted that she had a difficult time adjusting to the cultural and societal differences upon arrival in Russia and moving into her host home. She did manage, however, to settle in after a few days and gradually accept the differences in her host country and to deepen her interest in the country’s agricultural and educational systems as well as the country’s historical and cultural aspects. As a recommendation for program improvement, Jill suggested that more pre-program preparation be provided in Russian history and culture to participants to perhaps soften some of the culture shock one might experience upon arrival in the country.

Personal/Family Development: The overall associations made by the Landry family within this major theme were relatively high in frequency. This also included the sub-themes of parental anxiety and development of parenting skills and support of their child. As previously stated, the parents had undergone a marital separation prior to the SSLP experience, coupled with the fact that Jill was the youngest child of the family and the last preparing to leave home and make other important life decisions such as where to attend college and what to study. Thus, it was a period of challenging transition for this family. This was especially a stark reality for the mother who realized that she was soon to be totally alone in her own home for the first time in her life. This was correspondingly reflected in her relatively high number of associations within this sub-theme. There was obviously much stress and uncertainty in their lives.

. . . we just assumed everybody had telephones . . . not being able to hear from her every day . . . and that was my only concern; and if you would have seen the way us mothers burned up our phone lines in between the times that y’all were gone . . . That was really my concern. I never feared for her safety, per se, because I knew . . . that you would give your life to save her or one of those other kids. It was just the distance . . . and not being able to communicate; I mean, my child had never left any length of time that I couldn’t communicate with her (Sue Landry interview, p. 3).

Whatever Jill felt she could do, she was going to be all right. As a mom, you really worry about those things. I think that was the high point: just seeing her reaction, knowing that we had helped to get her to this stage in her life, because I knew this girl was going to fly and Mom has got to let go anyway (Sue Landry interview, p. 12)!
Sue recommended that, for future trips abroad, a better means of communication could be established so that the students could contact their parents more easily and on a more regular basis. 

Jill also experienced her own challenges with her exchange student, causing a certain degree of anxiety besides mentioned in earlier lines. She explained that her Russian visitor and several of the other female Russian students, were very uninterested and unmotivated about the mission of the SSLP experience (including her unwillingness to practice her English skills, which made communication difficult), and lacked proper social skills. It came as no surprise, then, that there was very little development of friendship or bonding while the Russian delegation was in the United States. This caused further distress within Jill as the American delegation traveled to Russia with her knowledge that her counterpart’s attitude had probably not changed. She was to be correct in her assumption. Thus, she and her father recommend that, for future SSLP experiences, that there be a more stringent process for selecting the Russian participants, especially concentrating on their attitudes and motivation, knowledge of agriculture, and English language proficiency. However, she reported that she did develop some positive relationships with most of the other Russian students. She also developed friendships with friends and outside family of her host family and that of the other host families. 

In spite of their feelings of anxiety, all indicated that they were quite satisfied and grateful that Jill participated in the SSLP experience. Among other things, they felt that the experience gave her more direction and focus in life, exhibiting greater maturity, spiritual growth, and a deeper appreciation for family. Both Sue and Joe felt that this experience was a major factor in her choice of college major and career choice of agriculture and her desire to work with youth. 

Recommendations and Contributions of Study

The information gained from this qualitative study of two families has contributed to a greater body of knowledge in the fields of social sciences and agriculture in addition to the themes gleaned from the review of literature. Next, it must be said that there was a high degree of intrinsic motivation on the part of the major author, since much first-hand effort and resources went into the planning and execution of this program. Curtis Stutzman (2001), SSLP coordinator, indicates that there has never been any formal study done on the effects of this specific program on its American participants and their families, and the main author wished to discover how the program affected his students and their families. Further, in light of increasing demands made by legislators and various administrators of agricultural and educational programs for accountability of the effectiveness and feasibility of these types of programs, the lead author felt that a study was necessary to begin building a case for the continuation of such programs, especially under the auspices of the National FFA Organization (which has facilitated many similar programs over most of its history). As of late, due to different reasons, the National FFA’s direct involvement with international exchanges has decreased, preferring rather to play indirect roles in exposing students to international experiences. It is strongly recommended that their direct involvement should be increased to its former levels, and that the results from this study are a first step in building a case for this cause. As well, in light of the national wave of the demand for increased overall academic accountability in schools, an increasing number of educational administrators are
questioning the value of any type of non-academic/non-traditional methods of education, with international exchanges being one of them. Again, this study was a good starting point, and further studies of this type and other methodologies which prove the value of such experiences would be in proper order to expand on this body of knowledge. In reference to this study’s proposition of and ultimate finding that this experience was a positive one for participants, further quantitative studies could include hypothesis testing in this same area. Not only should they, for instance, study the effect that these programs have on a student’s academic ability, but also the development of important skills such as social and communication skills, leadership abilities, attitudes toward learning, work ethic, and their ability to build community. This information must also be shared with legislators and other government officials who formulate budgets and laws which affect the ultimate existence of such programs.

This study also reveals that several of the original participants still have a high level of interest in continuing their participation in such experiences as well. In addition, the informants in this study revealed that there are issues on the domestic side which need to be addressed before proceeding with this type of activity in the future, such as challenges with language, dealing with cultural differences, duration of stay, follow-ups and reliable means of communication with international colleagues upon return to home, and anxiety. Thus, participants recommended that there be some type of basic Russian language preparation and support, better Russian history and culture preparation, a longer time period to be allotted for the experience abroad, a better system of selecting the Russian participants, a better means and more regular opportunities of communicating with the American students while they are abroad. It was also recommended that arrangements for follow-up with their Russian counterparts should be standard procedure so as to have the ability to monitor their progress, be available for assistance, and to maintain relationships. Of course, the knowledge gained from this study will be of great assistance to the authors and others for improvement in planning and execution of future programs.

References


