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## 4-H Teen Russian/American International Leadership (T.R.A.I.L.): The Use of Youth/Adult Partnerships in Global Education and Leadership Development

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## 4-H Teen Russian/American International Leadership (T.R.A.I.L.): The Use of Youth/Adult Partnerships in Global Education and Leadership Development

### Abstract

A youth/adult partnership model in the Teen Russian/American International Leadership program has had profound effects on American youths' global perspectives and leadership skills. Because of the healthy youth/adult partnership component of this program, American youth participants reported an increase in learning teamwork, problem solving, planning, communication, organization, and critical thinking skills. American youth felt their thoughts, ideas, and suggestions were taken seriously. Youth returned with a better understanding of problems and issues that affect people throughout the world, are more confident, are more willing to try new things, and see their own problems in a broader, more realistic context.

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## Background

With the demise of the Soviet Union in the early 1990's, Russia in all her vastness and splendor became part of the free world. Out of step with the Western world, but not without her resources, Russia is a proud and ancient country looking to take her place in the global community. In a drastic change of position from the cold war Soviet era, the Russian Federation states that "relations with the United States are one of the priorities . . . seen as an important factor of international stability. The objective . . . is to enhance areas of correlating interests and to narrow down the areas of disputes through compromise and respect for mutual interests" (2002).

Hence, the Russian schools that teach English are inundated with requests from middle class Russians eager to have their children learn English as a way to provide them with quickly developing advantages in new Russia. As a result, English summer camps are popping up all over Moscow to meet the demands. Language camp programs in Russia are eager to host American educators for Russian youth to learn English from native speakers during their 2-week programs. Meanwhile, in the rest of the world, 4-H and related programs exist in over 80 countries worldwide, according to National 4-H Headquarters (2006). However, there is currently no 4-H or related program in existence in the former Soviet Union.

Encouraged by the Russian government's openness to the United States and the desire of Russian citizens to learn English, the 4-H Teen Russian International Leadership program (T.R.A.I.L.) was formed by American teens and adults to address this issue. This unique program combines global education and leadership development skills for Russian and American youth, which gives this international program a clearly defined focus and avoids one of the key barriers to participation in international programming that Etling (1993) found in a study that identified a "lack of a clearly defined project" as a barrier.

In fact, the program has a very succinct project focus: to establish 4-H clubs in Russia that meet the needs of Russian youth, while increasing the leadership skills of Russian and American teens. Other goals that are met through this program include: increasing awareness and understanding of the two cultures and societies, developing lasting relationships among American and Russian youth, and creating an opportunity for Russian youth to visit the U.S. and American youth to visit

Russia.

In 2003, the author was contracted to teach English to Russian youth in a camp setting for 10 days of a 14-day trip outside of Moscow. In 2004, the first American teen members of the TRAIL program traveled to the town of Bijsk, Siberia. Both Russian host agencies recruited Russian youth participants, secured the camp location, organized and trained Russian camp counselors, and provided room and board for American educators.

In both years, American educators provided the hands-on cooperative learning activities that encourage Russian youth to communicate *panGliski* (in English). In addition to these adventure-programming activities, lessons in American culture, 4-H, and American traditions were offered. Baseball and Capture the Flag are popular activities. In-depth descriptions of activities used are beyond the scope of this article; however, derivations of many of the activities used are found in Karl Rohnke's books, *Cow Tails & Cobras II*, *Quick Silver*, and *Silver Bullets*, as well as *Activities that Teach* by Tom Jackson. These resources assist American teen and adult educators in building a solid foundation of activities Russian youth enjoy.

During the camp, Russian youth are divided by age into 4-H clubs, where they select a club name democratically. Clubs then make banners that are displayed throughout the 2-week camp. Americans are responsible for teaching two 2-hour lessons a day. Russian counselors are responsible for youth during the evenings, nights, at meals, and between lessons as well as act as interpreters for youth with limited English speaking skills.

To prepare for the TRAIL program experience, American youth are trained in the ages and stages of youth development, Russian culture, 4-H 101, and teambuilding/leadership adventure activities.

## **Program Outcomes and Impacts**

In 2004, five American teens were trained for the TRAIL program. Four of the five teens were selected to travel to Russia. Upon return to the U.S., all five teens trained in the U.S. were surveyed about their youth/adult partnership experience with TRAIL, whether they traveled to Russia or not. Regarding their youth-adult partnership experience:

- 100% of youth stated they learned teamwork, problem solving, planning, communication, organization, and critical thinking skills.
- 100% of youth "often" or "almost always" felt their thoughts, ideas, and suggestions were taken seriously by the other team members.
- 100% felt their thoughts, ideas, and suggestions were "almost always" listened to.
- 80% of youth stated they were "almost always" given the chance to share feelings and ideas about things that mattered.
- 80% felt youth "often" or "almost always" had an equal voice in the decision-making process.
- 80% felt that since joining the team, they had established a strong positive relationship with an adult on the team.
- 80% felt a sense of personal fulfillment in working to improve the community and that they learned new skills.
- 100% of the youth felt that the project is "definitely!" working.

In addition to the youth/adult partnership survey, the four teens who traveled to Russia responded to a survey 8 months after their Russian teaching experience. 100% of the teens:

- Have a better understanding of problems and issues that affect people throughout the world.
- Are more willing to put themselves in someone else's place when making judgment.
- Are more willing to try new things.
- Are more confident when meeting new people.
- Are able to maintain their sense of humor in difficult situations.
- Know more about another culture.
- Have a great interest in traveling to other international destinations.

75% of the American teens reported:

- They are more responsible.
- They have a greater willingness to face problems and try to solve them.

- They have a greater respect and appreciation for their own family.
- They are able to learn about people and situations by listening and observing.
- They feel more confident about the decisions they make.
- They understand more fully their own strengths and weaknesses.
- They can see their own problems in a broader, more realistic context.
- They have a better understanding of the values and lifestyles of their own community.

102 Russian youth were surveyed using the Rutgers Cooperative Extension Older Youth Evaluation forms translated into Russian. As a result of the 4-H programming offered in 2003 and 2004:

- 81% of teens and younger youth are more interested in learning about American culture.
- 91% of teens and 75% of younger youth stated that they would change their eating habits after learning about healthy eating using the food pyramid.
- 82% of all teens and younger youth planned to share what they learned from the Resolving Differences Democratically Session.
- 75% of younger youth stated they would change the way they think, act, or feel after participating in the Cooperative Trust Session.
- 89% of teens participating in the Goal Setting Workshop stated they planned to use or share what they learned.
- 92% of teens stated that the information given at the Resisting Negative Peer Pressure Session was useful, and 75% said they planned to use or share what they learned.

## Conclusion

Because of Russia's newly opened society, American 4-H has an opportunity to share democratic leadership styles with Russian youth. In addition, a global education and leadership development project such as TRAIL promotes profound changes in American teens. Research has shown that a lack of a clearly defined project becomes as barrier for international programming, and the TRAIL program's structure breaks through this barrier.

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