



# A VERY PRACTICAL APPROACH TO PEACE

## THE CASE FOR INTERNATIONAL EXCHANGE

*By David Bachner, former Director of the YFU International Secretariat and former YFU USA Board chairman*

For at least 3,000 years, students have been crossing cultural and national borders for educational purposes. Their numbers have been and remain considerable: Recently, more than one million students worldwide were estimated to be studying outside their home countries.

As impressive as its magnitude is the range of enduring, positive effects attributed to exchange. Exchange has been credited with helping individual participants to realize an enhanced international perspective, greater knowledge of the world, increased personal maturity, greater interpersonal and technical skills, higher foreign language proficiency, and to demonstrate an overall reluctance to perpetuate inaccurate stereotypes and distortions of other cultures. For societies and nations, exchange has been credited with contributing to political and economic development, foreign policy goal formulation, and greater governmental sensitivity to other nations' interest.

With so many people involved in exchange, the multiple and positive changes they seem to experience during their time abroad, and the benefits from their exchanges that seem to affect the host and home societies, we could expect that exchange students constitute an important force for increased understanding, friendship, and cooperation among cultures and nations.

Is this expectation justified? Does exchange produce impacts that reduce conflict and promote prospects for a better, more peaceful world? While there is a shortage of direct scientific evidence to say that it does, nonetheless there are substantial amounts of data which lend indirect by persuasive support to the notion that exchange may indeed contribute to conflict reduction, especially in inter-ethnic and inter-cultural settings. Moreover, there is every reason to believe that this contribution would be much greater if exchange programs were purposely conceived and structured to achieve such results.

The evidence for exchange's contribution to conflict reduction falls into five general areas, namely: its role in promoting positive cross-cultural contact and interaction; in improving cross-cultural attitudes, reducing prejudice, and modifying inaccurate stereotypes; in enhancing liking and respect for other cultures; in developing participants' cross-cultural skills; and in developing leadership and international involvement on the part of participants. Let's take a look at each one of these areas and see what evidence supports the varying roles exchange would seem to play.

### PROPOSITION 1: EXCHANGE PROMOTES POSITIVE CROSS-CULTURAL CONTACT

History has repeatedly demonstrated that mere contact between cultures is not automatically constructive. Under the wrong conditions—for example, when relationships are superficial or unsatisfying, when stereotypes are uninformed and negative, when goals and philosophies are incompatible, when people have unequal status, when there is an absence of respect for each other's culture—contact will only increase the likelihood of misunderstanding, mistrust, antipathy, or even violence.

To be favorable, conditions of positive exposure must accompany the interaction from the beginning. While contact through exchange does not always lead to greater understanding and cooperation, it does in the majority of instances. Moreover, in contrast to many other forms of cross-cultural interaction, exchange has an advantage: it can be structured to achieve outcomes which enhance cross-cultural relations. Such outcomes depend on the extent to which:

- participants are selected who have an initially favorable motivation vis-a-vis the host country;
- participants are prepared, or oriented, to demonstrate respect for and willingness to accept local ways and viewpoints;



- participants have the opportunity to immerse themselves and participate in the host culture for long periods of time (the longer the better, since research indicates that program duration is positively related to exchange effects); and
- participants have the opportunity to develop friendships and relationships that go beyond superficial levels, particularly through such effective settings as the home stay.

In sum, when structured and conducted responsibly to emphasize intimacy, cooperation, respect, and common goals, it is likely that contact through exchange will promote greater understanding and less conflict between cultures.

### **PROPOSITION 2: EXCHANGE IMPROVES CROSS-CULTURAL ATTITUDES, REDUCES PREJUDICE, AND CORRECTS STEREOTYPES**

Categorizations and stereotypes about other cultural groups cannot be avoided; they are the natural way in which we all process information. The key is to distinguish between stereotypes and prejudicial stereotypes and to reduce the latter, especially when they are hostile, since negative attitudes and stereotypes contribute to the creation, maintenance, and aggravation of conflict between cultures.

Exchange plays a role in conflict reduction because it frequently modifies stereotypes in the direction of improved attitudes towards the host country. It accomplishes this in part by generating more sophisticated, differentiated, personalized, and concrete knowledge about the host country on the part of the exchangee. This “knowledge” must be distinguished from “information.” Information comes from secondary sources (for example, the media) and has less impact on attitudes than does primary knowledge of another group based on contact. Exchange knowledge is primary. It increases the accuracy of perceptions about the host country. Typically, as knowledge increases, anxiety, negative stereotypes, and hostility are reduced.

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Prejudice is basically a failure to differentiate, characterized by rigid, categorical, and dogmatic thinking about another group of people. In these regards, there is some indication that exchange nurtures the capacity to differentiate. This ability works cumulatively over time towards increasingly positive and cooperative attitudes, not only in relation to the host country but to other countries in general.

### **PROPOSITION 3: EXCHANGE DEVELOPS PERSONAL TRAITS WHICH ENHANCE LIKING AND RESPECT FOR OTHER CULTURES**

In a number of published studies, the effects of exchange’s impact on personal development have been seen to include increased self-confidence, self-esteem, empathy, and tolerance.

Insecurity has been identified as an indispensable element in the tendencies to discriminate against and persecute other groups. Self-confidence and self- esteem, on the other hand, incline one towards magnanimity, benevolence, and reduced hostility towards other groups. Enhanced self-confidence and self-esteem both have been attributed to exchange.

Since it offers the opportunity to become an “insider” in another culture, exchange also has been found to develop one’s empathetic capacity via genuine participation in the host country. As a result, it enhances appreciation of the common needs and concerns of people of different cultures and fosters changes in the concept of one’s own culture. Upon returning home, students generally demonstrate a willingness and ability to reach out to foreigners and assist them, as well as to convey to other home country individuals a respect and appreciation for the former host culture.





Tolerance is typically understood as a positive personality trait involving the ability to learn and change, patience in dealing with others, comfort with ambiguous situations, a willingness to examine one's own stereotypes, broadmindedness in thinking about an issue, and a hesitancy to impose one's own values. In cross-cultural settings, tolerance is an important asset and has been specifically associated with more successful diplomacy. In confrontational settings, where flexibility might be expected to decrease, the involvement of tolerant individuals with the ability to suspend judgment is useful in promoting information seeking, negotiation, and the generation of alternatives. Exchange is promising in these regards, since its effects contribute to increased tolerance and decreased authoritarianism. This is especially true for adolescent exchangees, whose points of view are generally still being formed and are more malleable, or subject to influence.

#### **PROPOSITION 4: CROSS-CULTURAL SKILLS**

Two skills developed in many cases during exchange have special relevancy to conflict reduction: foreign language proficiency and cultural mediation.

The more that the exchange allows for acquisition of the host country language, the more likely it becomes that other effects contributing to positive cross-cultural relations will follow. For example, favorable contact between the exchangee and host culture individuals is enhanced; one's sense of affiliation increases; stereotypes become more accurate, since language enables deeper relations and more differentiated knowledge; one can gain access to a wider diversity of perspectives on major issues; the accuracy of predictions and explanations regarding host country behavior increases; negative attitudes decrease; one's sense of security increases; and one is more likely to adopt cross-cultural adjustment strategies appropriate to the host country. Knowledge of another language provides the basics for an alternative, more empathetic way of experiencing which brings one closer to the other culture's perspective and concerns. Generally, the ability to communicate will enhance the possibility for resolving differences, and exchange seems to further the ability to communicate.

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In theory, exchangees should make excellent mediators. They can be expected to enhance mutual knowledge, understanding, friendliness, and acceptance between cultures; facilitate contact, communication, and cooperation; become multicultural by gaining a perspective on their own culture from afar, finding constructive opportunities to build cultural ties in different situations, and adapt to new cultural settings; demonstrate a respect and altruistic concern for other societies; help prevent cross-cultural interactions based on suspicion, mistrust, or misunderstanding by translating, synthesizing, and correcting assumptions; and assume a nonpartisan intermediary role based on the credibility gained through intimate knowledge of other cultures. In order for exchangees to fulfill these theoretical roles and become successful mediators or bridges between their own and other cultures, several conditions must first be met, including:

- holding positive attitudes towards the host culture in relation to one's own culture;
- responding openly, factually, and positively to comments and questions based on incorrect views of the host country;
- establishing relationships with members of the host country while retaining close ties with home country compatriots; and
- internalizing and acting upon the notion that one should play a mediating role.

While the research is far from conclusive about the degree to which exchangees play mediating roles, it does appear that many exchangees meet one or more of the conditions just listed.



## PROPOSITION 5: EXCHANGE DEVELOPS LEADERSHIP AND INTERNATIONAL INVOLVEMENT

The reduction of conflict at societal and national levels depends greatly on those in power. If their propensity for violence is high, the incidence of strife, revolt, and war will increase. In as much as exchange has been shown to increase cooperative attitudes, those former exchangees who assume leadership positions would presumably have less inclination to value and use violence as a means for resolving conflict. The extent to which exchangees become leaders has rarely been examined systematically. Still, as stated in an unpublished report I recently read, “Especially at this time it is clear that solutions to most of the world’s problems can come only from collaborative approaches by leaders and experts who feel comfortable with each other and appreciate the opportunities and constraints that are present in other nations. True empathy and understanding can come only from rich and complex interactions that mature over time,” interactions to which exchange makes a major contribution.

This contribution is reinforced in significant ways at individual and grassroots levels as well as official levels. Many exchangees maintain ties with the former host country. These ties serve to strengthen the cross-national web of relationships, facilitate the transfer of cross-cultural understanding to the home country, encourage multicultural individuals (i.e., former exchangees) to help mono-cultural individuals communicate with their counterparts in other countries, and provide the motivation and opportunities to remain involved in international activities.

On balance, research and informed opinion support the notion that exchange generally enhances relations between cultures. Exchange offers a form of cross-cultural contact

with which it is easy to agree, whose objectives are benign, and whose results are promising for friendlier and more cooperative relations. Serious exchange – certainly YFU exchange – offers the added feature of being amenable to programs which are designed to improve prospects for constructive outcomes.

Fulfilling exchange’s considerable potential for contributing to conflict reduction, however, will require greater efforts in theory, research, and programming. With respect to theory,

the possible relationship between exchange and

conflict reduction must be more clearly explained and then established as an area of special study. Researchers need to conduct studies that focus on specific instances in which exchangees may have played a role in resolving conflict.

Also, proactive programming is required. Rarely are the positive outcomes of exchange channeled into intentional efforts to reduce conflict. Conflict reduction, when it occurs, is inadvertent rather than planned. Exchange programs should

formally incorporate the expectation that participants develop cultural mediation, or bridging skills and apply what they learn to potential areas of conflict appropriate to individual participants’ capacities. This expectation should be reinforced and preparation for such a role provided for in orientation programs.

To conclude, research does confirm that vast numbers of individuals have benefited from exchange. Now, as cross-cultural conflict looms more ominously over all of us as a source of violence and war, it is a matter of accelerating urgency that exchangees, with their friendlier attitudes, more cooperative behaviors, and mediating skills, be channeled more directly towards the vision of a more peaceful world.

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*David Bachner, former Vice President and Director of the International Secretariat at Youth For Understanding (YFU) International Exchange and former Board Chairman of YFU USA, was invited to contribute a chapter entitled “The Role of International Education Exchange in Conflict Reduction” to the 1993 edition of The Annual Review of Conflict Knowledge and Conflict Resolution (New York: Garland). The Annual is a social science publication for peace and conflict resolution studies. The full text includes an extensive survey and synthesis or professional writing on exchange and conflict resolution. The author has summarized the main points of the chapter in the belief that they testify to the relevance and significance of YFU. Mr. Bachner is currently a Scholar in Residence at American University and is the author of Developing Program Standards for International Educational Exchange– NAFSA Working Paper No. 25.*

*Youth For Understanding is for learners of all ages who want a life-changing cultural exchange experience. As a staff and volunteer-supported network of more than 70 international partners, YFU helps participants broaden their perspective through immersive experiences that share a culture from the inside out, promoting the understanding that we are all citizens of one world.*