People and Lessons from India

This past winter I was fortunate to take part in a Food Security Model Research Thesis Project, at the NGO Food for Life in Vrindavan, Uttar Pradesh, India, under the direction of Amy Joy Nichols and with teammates from BYU Hawaii, BYU Idaho, Australia National University, Tamil Nadu University, and Cornell University. This project was multi-disciplinary, focusing on the areas of nutrient deficiency analysis, nutrition education, square-foot gardening, 4-H, and soil health analysis. This model was designed to eliminate neophobia, the fear of something new or unusual, of vegetables. The majority of the students do not get the proper nutrients from their food at home so the NGO does their best to provide nutritious meals to the students when they are at school. However, the students are picking out the vegetables from their meals because they don’t like them, have never had them before, and don’t know what they are.

I was assigned as the 4-H Team Manager and I also took over of the nutrition education team when their Team Manager left early. Tyson, the manager of the nutrition education team, and I designed the nutrition lessons because the new FAO nutrition curriculum did not come out in time for us to use it. The outline of the nutrition lessons is included at the end of the paper. I was also able to put my input into the square-foot gardening lessons because I was fairly familiar with square-foot gardening and had taught gardening lesson to the elementary students via my agricultural classes that were offered at my high school.
The previously mentioned responsibilities were extremely appropriate and relevant to me because I am double majoring in IARD and Agricultural Education and I work for 4-H, at Tompkins County Cornell Corporative Extension, during the school year. My passion for agriculture has propelled me in this direction and the accumulation of my experiences, networks, and passion allowed me to offer helpful and useful resources to the project.

Food for Life is a school for the “poorest of the poor” in Vrindavan. In other words, in order to attend this school you have to be under a certain poverty line. Here are some statistics: 75% have parents with income less then US $1 per day, 35% live in huts made of plastic sheets and mud, 49% have illiterate parents, 82% were illiterate despite being school age, 90% have parents who cannot afford to buy them milk, 60% have parents who cannot afford vegetables and clothes, and 12% have lost either a mother or a father.

The team I worked with was diverse and a joy to work with. I learned a few things from the team as a whole. Firstly, expectations are extremely important and these expectations need to be both written and verbalized so ensure that everyone is on the same page. Secondly, make sure you and your teammates are listening and respecting the individuals in charge. Even though it is often times easy to question authority, all team members are accountable for each other’s actions and making sure everyone acts accordingly. Thirdly, (which is mostly for me) just because you are the youngest doesn’t mean you have less to offer. I was the only one with a agriculture background previous to university and it took me a while to realize that I was also a valuable part of the team.
The main purpose of this trip was to observe the quality and effectiveness of this food security model at Food for Life Vrindavan. Even though this was main purpose of the trip, I learned more from the people in Vrindavan than I did in the research I did prior to the project and the work I did during the project. That is why I want to now take time to identify these priceless people and document what lessons they taught me. No matter how big or small, young or old, level of intelligence, or length of time I had with them – they each had a timeless impact on me, on my education, and on my future career that I will forever cherish.

“Who is wise? He that learns from everyone.” ~ Benjamin Franklin

Radha

I decided to talk about Radha first because she will be the one I remember forever. The remainder of the people in this list goes in no particular order. By putting Radha first is my very small gesture to recognize the extraordinary person she is.

Radha was a 9th grade student and therefore was taking part in the Nutrition/Square Foot Gardening pilot project. I knew who she was because of the project but hardly anything more than that at first because she was just so shy. One day she offered to get me a plate for lunch and from there it is history. We started sitting next to each other everyday at lunch and once we finished our lunch we would go sit in the sun and talk until she had to go to classes. Most days we talked about each other’s everyday lives and our life history: like things we did growing up, schooling, hobbies, and friends. Some days we would even discuss the future and give advice to each other to where our lives are going to go. These
topics may seem simple from an outsiders perspective but Radha and I were able sense each other's concern for one another; we could feel that the other wanted the best for the other. Radha was incredibly sweet and shy. She always was taking care of the people around her but when she was not needed she would just watch on the sidelines. By talking to her I learned an immense amount about India, the school, and most importantly her. Words can’t describe the connection we had. Whatever it was, was more than a student/mentor relationship. Due to the fact we were only 2-3 years apart, our close proximity in age helped us form a strong bond during my stay in India.

Radha taught me that wherever you go there will be one person you grow close to. Superficially these people are wonderful tools to use in order to learn about the culture. Most importantly, these connections are created as a constant reminder, even as two people go separate ways, that relationships are vital in the development of us as individuals. These forever lasting relationships are extremely impactful and serve as great reminders that relationships can be built in a short period of time and still be forever impactful.

Reekha

Reekha was part of the project, because she was in 9th grade, but I got to know her outside of class. She was a very outgoing and sharp young lady. Reekha was extremely confident around men, boasted about her boyfriend, and told the funniest jokes and had some pretty great “comebacks” when she talked in English. Her English was very impressive even though she often didn’t go to school. I loved how her wits and the giggles she created brought life to the people around her.
Reekha taught me that by creating a foundation, you can have basically anything you want; you just have to ask for it. For example, at the New Year’s Eve Recital she came up to me and asked if she could use my camera. I said yes, gave it to her, and then she disappeared for the next hour. When she came back she showed me all of the pictures of the girls getting ready backstage for the recital. Asking one simple question can get you what you want, you just have to ask.

**Rani**

Rani was too young to be involved in the project but I got to know her when we danced together at the morning programs. At first she was shy and hardly talked, but once I got her to warm up I was then speechless. This child was only in about 3rd grade, and had only been at the school 2 years, but still spoke beautiful English. Every time I talked to this young lady I was just in awe with all of the talent and skill she had. Not only was she a great conversationalist but also the things she said were beyond intellectual for her age. She was a critical thinker and gathered knowledge from her observations. Most of the time she would “hang out” with the 9th and 10th graders just because she was incredibly mature. Rani understood that you grow the most when you are not the smartest person in the room, and naturally lived by this understanding.

Rani taught me that there is infinite potential in every single one of us. The challenge is finding the perfect balance of elements in your environment to unlock that potential. Rani is an example of someone who’s environment was ideal for them so that they could flourish. As an aspiring educator I hope to continue to learn what makes a learning environment
ideal and how to create just as a magical environment for my students as Rani created for herself.

**Carmen**

Carmen was a volunteer, and a professional surfer from Australia, with Food for Life. In the mornings he would clean out the cows’ stalls and after lunch he was an English tutor. I met Carmen one day when I went to the cows’ pasture as we were waiting for a cab to take us back to the city. As I was talking to Carmen I learned that he was a very different type of person. He was loud, quite obnoxious, and distracted. Carmen would crack jokes about Cornell and about our project (because we weren’t farmers). At first I thought Carmen was serious and I was very intimidated by him. However, as I got to know him I found out that he was an extremely curious individual. Every time he saw us doing work in the gardens he would come over and follow us around just to soak in information.

It is interesting how someone so far removed from agriculture was so immersed in it when given a chance. This is what Carmen taught me. By becoming a part of our group he taught me that people really do want to know where there food comes from, how their food grows, and what they need to know to make informed decisions as a consumer. However, they won’t just go looking for this information because they don’t realize they want to know it. Opportunities have to be available to all people to learn about agriculture because most likely they will take advantage of it.

**Lila**

Lila was the school’s Doctor. Before coming to Vrindavan, Lila was a brain surgeon (from, I believe, Brazil). This woman was a brilliant and blunt individual, and she knew it. She was
skeptical of our project at first because she is skeptical of all of the volunteers that come to Food for Life, for the reason that she believes volunteers do more harm than good because they don’t know what’s going on. As we got to know Lila and started to work with her, for the nutrient deficiency analysis, we started gaining her trust and in turn she provided us deeper and deeper details about Food for Life. She told us that Food for Life isn’t “a land full of sugar and honey” and it has many faults, and told us about these faults and how they came about. Food for Life does a fantastic job at making their organization visible, but as a volunteer coming in it is helpful to come in with an open mind.

Lila taught me that everything has it weaknesses and dark sides. It is important as volunteers, and people wanting to work in International Development, to keep this in mind. A combination of being observant and getting to know people who will inform you about the organization will help you get to know the organization as a whole. Once you understand all aspects, both good and bad, of an organization is when you are truly in a position to guide improvement.

**Koosh the Farmer**

Koosh was the Head Farmer at the “country side” Food for Life school called Kiki Nagala. We worked with Koosh for many days doing the soil analysis tests and starting an organic composting system to partner with their current vermiculture composting system. Koosh and his co-workers were more than willing to accompany us when we were taking samples and observing their fields. Even with the language barrier we were able to communicate with them fairly will when a translator couldn’t accompany us. He would always show us the largest of each crop and would make sure that we noted that those crops were so big
that they had to be held up by stakes. Koosh would show us everything. He would show us the strong and weak parts of the fields, show us the pests and diseased plants, and show us the practices they used in the fields. The fact that he showed us everything, I believe, helped us in the long run. Instead of listening to Rupa’s, the head of Food for Life, ideas to what was wrong with the fields or having gaps in things being translated we were able to see what was actually going on in the fields and had Koosh there to show us exactly what we needed to see. Koosh also was extremely eager to learn. He would watch what we did, ask for clarification, and was extremely attentive when we were showing him how to do the pH soil test.

Koosh taught me that the people you are trying to help are often more than willing to learn. It is important that you communicate with them specifically and not people who are higher than them. In other words, go to and work directly with the source. They appreciate it greatly and you yourself will learn a great amount more from them. If you do it correctly you learn just as much, or even more, from them than you teach them.

**The Farmer’s Wife**

The Farmer’s Wife was one of my favorite people I met in India. She was one of the most warm and welcoming people I have ever met. The first time I met her she ran up to me, kissed me, gave me one of the biggest hugs of my life, and then held hand for the remainder of the afternoon. I looked forward to seeing her everyday after that. She learned that we found the carrots that they grew to be huge and delicious, so she made sure we each had one to take home every day. It was so incredibly sad to say goodbye to her because the day that we were leaving her beaming smile was much dimmer. This just broke my heart
because I wasn’t able to say what I wanted to say to her before I left. For some reason I felt this pull to her and it wasn’t until after I left when I figured out why I appreciated her so much.

The Farmer’s Wife taught me that the hospitality and love that a farmer’s wife gives is universal. Growing up in an agricultural community and traveling around the country and the world for the past five years visiting farms, I have met many farmers’ wives. It comforts me to know wherever I go in the world with agriculture I will be able to feel at home.

**Nitin**

Nitin was another student, from 9th grade, that I worked with in the project. He was a very bright kid and it was easy to spot him as a natural leader. He would get his peers excited about the lessons. Nitin would also make sure everyone was paying attention when we, or the teacher, was talking. Every day after the lesson he would come up to us, thank us, and ask us further questions about that days lesson. Nitin was also curious to how we got to where we are. You could just tell he was hungry for success and was using every resource he could to see how he could have it. Not only was he eager to be successful but he wanted to see the people around him succeed as well. This is why he would pull his peers in to talk to us or volunteer during the lessons. Nitin was conscious of the people around him and was a terrific ambassador for us to the students.

Nitin taught me that it is valuable to identify leaders in projects you are working on and use them to your advantage. In other words, have them convince their peers that whatever you
are doing is a good idea, not you. By doing this they feel that the material or idea you are trying to convey to them is their own idea and not yours.

**Shyama**

Shyama was the owner of the Internet Café that our team used quite religiously. We were a friendly crew and introduced ourselves, told Shyama why we were in Vrindavan, and made small talk with him. Almost every day we would be in the Internet Café for an hour or two and got to know Shyama very well. He showed us pictures of his wife and was proud to show us pictures of his newborn son. Eventually we had many inside jokes with Shyama and the trip to the Internet Café became one of the parts of the day we were always looking forward to. He also started to not charge us as much because we were in there all of the time. His business also did copying, so when it came time to do the surveys we asked him how the accurate the translators were with our documents. Shyama graciously proofread the surveys and found a few mistakes. With this he made corrections to the document and wouldn’t take any money for helping us out.

Shyama taught me that it is essential to make solid personal relationships wherever you go for two reasons. One, it is important to make these relationships because it makes the people who live there feel like you are not taking advantage of them. Two, it is equally important to make these relationships because you never know what that person will be able to help you with in the long run.

**Crazy Man**

I do realize that this is not the proper terminology to address someone as but the naked man that lived on the corner of the street to our Ashram was named as “Crazy Man”.
Supposedly he has not moved from that street corner in fifteen years and only used a blanket for warmth during the winter. This man kicked one of the girls in our group and was always talking to himself. One person in our group thought I was a good idea to give him a “peace offering” of some rice, and it turned out to be a bad idea. He shouted at my teammate and threw the rice at him. Towards the end of our stay it started to get very cold at night and the same teammate thought it was a good idea to give the Crazy Man one of our extra sleeping bags, and this time it was a good idea. The man accepted the gift and we saw him wrapped in the sleeping bag in the morning as we left.

The Crazy Man taught me a valuable lesson. Sometimes people don’t want your help and that is OKAY. You are the one who is coming in to their territory and you have to play by their rules. But it is your job to be there when they are ready to accept help and when they are, give graciously.

**Teacher**

The head teacher for 9th grade was another key player in the success of this project. He was an eager gentleman who was very passionate about agriculture. Every time I talked with him he would tell me about the garden he had back home and asked how he could improve it. Because this teacher was on board with the project, he got the other teachers to buy into the project as well. Seeing this, I used him as the main communicator between the team and the teachers. I could tell he was very pleased with the role he was granted and I also could tell he wanted to do a good job in that role.
The teacher taught me that it is important to use people’s skills and interests to your advantage. When they are able to thrive in what they already feel comfortable doing is when they can truly help you. Once again it is important for natives to approve of what you are trying to help with and get other natives to also contribute.

**Laxmi**

Laxmi was in 10th grade and was a student involved in the project. She is a very shy girl with the biggest smile, if you are able to catch it. I got to know Laxmi, not from the project, but because of her talent. There are two “tracks” that the school offers, math and science or art and home making. Laxmi was on the art and home making track at first because they found that she had dyslexia. Then they discovered that she had a true talent in the arts. She now does henna or “mahindi” for weddings, celebrations, and just for volunteers who want it done. I had it done twice by her and I’d have to say she is brilliant. She works so quickly and gracefully to make these stunning masterpieces on skin. When she does this work she gets paid and the NGO puts the money she makes aside so it is hers, and not her family’s, when she graduates. We asked Laxmi where she got this amazing talent from; she replied “Krishna gave it to me”. It was beautiful to see how humble she was and grateful she was for this talent. She truly treasured this talent because it gave her a chance to succeed in a place where success is sometimes hard to find. One of the staff said that they are currently trying to get her into an art university when she is finished with school.

Laxmi taught me that guide your life through your passions you are able to find so many things. You are able to find happiness, success, fulfillment, and you feel that you have a purpose in this crazy world of ours.
Clothing Store

I met the manager of the clothing store my second day in India when we went to get traditional clothing in order to attempt to fit in at the school. We made a little small talk, talked about the project, and that was basically it. I thought that would be my only interaction with him, but I was wrong. We went to the store about five times total and every time we went he was even more excited to see us. Each time he gave us a larger and larger discount on our purchases. The second to last time we were there I even got to play with his daughter for a few hours. Even though he did not play a direct role in our project I feel we both left a positive imprint on each other’s lives.

This experience taught me how valuable first impressions are. Without the strong first impression I made I don’t feel our connection that we ended up with would’ve been so strong.

Sri Radhika

Sri Radhika was in charge of organizing all of the volunteers that come to Food for Life and was one of the most helpful individuals we had contributing to our project. It was imperative to the success of the project that we had her involved. Sri Radhika had much more to offer than just her job title, she had a beautiful personality and a spectacular connection with Krishna. After school hours we spent many hours with Sri Radhika talking about religion, about the meaning of life, about boys, and showing us the best restaurants and religious sites in Vrindavan. She was not only a key player in our project but she was a monumental in our experience as a whole. It was my pleasure getting to know the woman Sri Radhika and not just the worker.
Sri Radhika showed me that the experience is not all about the success of the project you are working on. She instead showed me that the relationships you make will be the pieces you forever treasure.

**Rupa**

Rupa is the founder and head of Food for Life Vrindavan. I only got to talk with and see Rupa a handful of times because most of his time is spent traveling and gathering funds for the NGO. Even though he wasn’t present for the majority of our trip doesn’t mean he didn’t have an impact on the NGO or the project. Firstly, everything that the NGO did had to get “okay-ed” by Rupa. It was vital that we had his support and that he vocalized his support for the project to his staff. Because he did this so well he and his staff were willing to do anything for us that needed to be done both for the success of the project and for the comfort of our team. Secondly, Rupa played a key role in how we wanted to present our research because he told the others what to do instead of letting them use their expertise. For example, he made all the calls for how the farm operated and the head farmer had to go by these calls. In our research we found that these “calls” were actually hurting the production of the farm. This was mostly because Rupa thought there was problems with the farm that weren’t actually major problems and made Koosh address those non-existent problems instead of the problems that Koosh actually saw himself. Also, Lila said the hospital that Rupa had made built wasn’t designed correctly to function successfully as a hospital and he didn’t listen to her input when designing the hospital.
These two stories taught me that experts need to have the final say to what they need, not the people who are in charge; especially when the people in charge are far removed from, and rarely see, that aspect of the organization. It is wonderful that Rupa wants to be involved in all parts of the NGO. However, it is vital for people who know what they are doing to have a voice to ensure stability in the organization, as well as success.

Nutrition Lesson Plans (Outline During Teaching)

Day 1: Vegetable Familiarity
Show raw/unprepared vegetables normally served

Identify vegetables and foods to students
Cut open and identify parts
Have them draw each one

Day 2: Kitchen Visit and Food Preparation
Visit Kitchen
See how food is prepared
Talk about hygiene in food preparation
-Washing hands
-Washing food
-Washing kitchenware

Day 3: Uncooked Food Recognition
Have students identify different uncooked ingredients of meals

Day 4: Cooked Food Recognition
Have students identify different cooked foods that make up meals

Day 5: How to eat
Explain good eating habits
Chewing 10 times
Being aware of cultural eating habits

Play “Peanut Butter and Jelly Game”
- Students instruct teacher on how to eat properly using new skills learned

Day 6: Food Pyramid
Explain servings and food types

Go over chart
- Quiz on how much we need per day (after explaining)

Matching game (For younger class): Place cut-outs of food on a blank pyramid, explain that this represents portion size percentages

Translating activity (For older class): have students translate English food pyramid into a new Hindi food pyramid

Day 7: Nutrients and Vitamins
Explain what nutrients and vitamins do.

Demonstrate what foods have what nutrients and vitamins
- Grains: Carbohydrates (give energy)
- Beans: Protein (builds muscles, repairs body)
- Vegetables: Vitamins and Minerals (strong and healthy)
- Fruits: Vitamins and Minerals (strong and healthy)
- Dairy: Calcium (strong bones and healthy teeth)

Activity: As we explain what each nutrient does we do a gesture for it
Example:
- Grains: Class gets up and does jumping jacks
- Beans: Flex and grimaces
- Vegetables/Fruits: Jog in place
- Dairy: Karate chop arm

Day 8: Serving Size
Importance of regular meals: serving size (circle model) look at old nutritional pyramid. “balanced plate”.

Variety: they give you what you need so you need to make sure you eat all what they give you.

Pin the tail on the donkey: “balance the plate” each kids get a plate to balance
(three things to put on the plate) whoever gets closest to balancing the plate wins!

Day 9: Food Classification
Identify foods that give energy, vitality (veggies), protein (redo actions previously learned)

Matching foods to “zones of the room”
- Kids helping classmates out by directing a student to place a food item in the proper zone marked with a nutrient

Day 10: How food keeps us healthy
Functions of food for health (physical, mental)

Importance of eating every meal (esp. breakfast)
- Energy throughout the day, recharge (gets your body going), play, helps you think better in school

Hidden hunger: need to be healthy and strong, think more clearly (stronger brain). Happy body!

Importance of a balance in diet
- Variety: they give you what you need so you need to make sure you eat all what they give you.

Draw body outline of volunteer and fill in what foods make up what part of the body. Smiley face for head. (i.e. Add in digestive system.) See what fills you up to make you happy.

Day 11: Hydration
Students Name off important components of food, explain how water is essential nutrient
  - Allows body to function

Hydration (weight (kg)=water (mL))

Drink more water when it is hot outside: water is the body’s cooling system

Bring in bottle of water to show that amount

Water carries nutrients to different parts of the body and waste away from cells, explain how this is like a train

Day 12: Negative effects of malnutrition
Diet-related health risks and diseases
  - Weakens body’s ability to fight diseases, get sick more
Dental

- Teeth not as healthy (bacteria that can make you sick clings to plaque)
- Brush teeth as much as possible, about twice a day, when you wake up & when you go to sleep

Brittle Bones

- Ask someone to share an experience of breaking a bone (obviously negative)

Calorie Intake

- Not be underweight. More activity = more caloric intake. (finish everything on their plate)

Day 13: DARE
Understand the dangers of drinking alcohol, cigarettes, tobacco DARE like lesson

Draw a healthy body and an unhealthy body (unhealthy body may have a cigarette in one hand and bottle of alcohol in the other)
- Compare and contrast the bodies

Day 14: Hero Drawing
Ask students to draw their hero or someone they look up to with that student enjoying their favorite vegetable and/or other favorite healthy food(s)