

Building bridges to wellbeing and cultural diversity

Key evaluation findings – Phase Two of the Building Bridges program



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Building Bridges program*

Contents

Introduction	3
How was the Building Bridges program developed?	5
What did we learn from Building Bridges?	5
Impacts.....	5
Was the approach feasible and acceptable to participants?.....	8
Barriers and facilitators to the approach.....	9
Promising practices.....	10
Snapshot of the 5 projects selected for further development	11
The Anti-Racism Action Band (A.R.A.B)	11
Beaut Buddies	11
Cultural Games.....	12
Kar Kulture	12
Kitchen Culture	12
References	13

Introduction

Most new arrivals to Australia ultimately settle very successfully and do as well, if not better, than the Australian born on key indicators such as earnings and educational attainment (Jupp et al. 2007). However, new arrivals may be especially vulnerable to mental health problems in their early years in Australia (Porter & Haslam 2005). For people who have come to Australia as refugee and humanitarian entrants this may be partly due to experiences of war and trauma prior to arrival (Pedersen 2002). However, studies show that the most important influences on the mental health of migrants and refugees are their experiences *after* arrival. That is, in the process of settling into education and jobs, securing housing, adjusting to a new culture and systems and making new friends (Porter & Haslam 2005; Blanch 2008).

Many mental health experts agree that adverse social and economic conditions make a significant contribution to common mental health problems, such as anxiety and depression (VicHealth 2007). Two factors that particularly affect the mental health of new arrivals are exposure to race-based discrimination (Ferdinand et al. 2013) and limited connections to social networks and systems, eg schools, clubs and workplaces (Ager & Strang 2008). While it is important for new arrivals to link with 'like-ethnic' communities, connections with members of the wider community and mainstream organisations are also critical for mental health (Berry 1997). These connections between different groups are sometimes referred to as 'bridging capital' (Ager & Strang 2008). VicHealth's Building Bridges program was a pilot designed to improve mental health and wellbeing by addressing both these factors. That is, it aimed to reduce race-based prejudice and strengthen bridging capital.

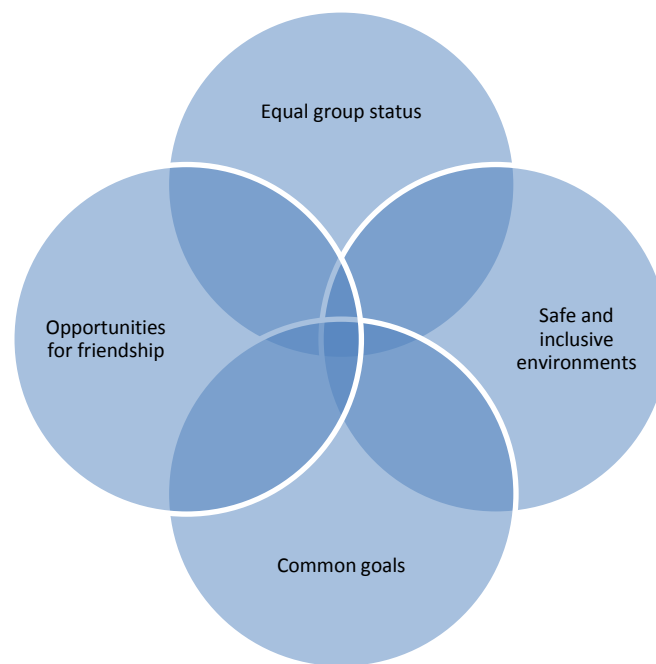
There is a long history in Victoria of bringing people from many different cultural backgrounds together through festivals, food and artistic and cultural pursuits. These activities are supported by communities across Victoria, often with assistance through government funding programs. They play an important role in Victoria's continuing success as a harmonious multicultural society. The Building Bridges program sought to build on these activities by supporting more sustained and deeper forms of contact. This was on the basis of a large international analysis of 203 projects, involving over 90,000 participants between them. This analysis showed that sustained forms of intercultural contact could be effective in reducing race-based prejudice, providing that contact took place under certain conditions (Pettigrew & Tropp 2006).

In recognition of the growing human, economic and community costs associated with mental ill health, VicHealth identified mental health as a priority in 1999 and established a program for the development of activity relevant to the promotion of mental wellbeing. Improving mental wellbeing remains a strategic imperative of the organisation. We continue to work to build the right foundations for mental wellbeing – long before illness – in our homes, communities and workplaces.

These were when:

- contact took place around a collaborative activity where all participants were working towards a common goal
- there were specific opportunities for friendships to be built between people from different groups
- participants were engaged on equal terms
- contact was supported by relevant authorities, and the contact environment was safe and inclusive.

Figure 1: The four key conditions required for effective intercultural contact



These are often referred to as the Allport conditions, after the psychologist who first proposed the value of sustained contact to reduce prejudice. VicHealth was interested in this approach because it also had the potential to support new arrivals to make friendships, learn about cultural practices and systems in Australia, and build their connections to schools and other important organisations.

How was the Building Bridges program developed?

The Building Bridges program was developed in 2006 and implemented in two phases. In the first phase, community organisations, schools and workplaces across Victoria were invited to submit funding applications for up to \$20,000 for projects that supported contact between cultural groups under the conditions described above. Forty projects were funded for between six and 18 months.

At the completion of these projects, five promising projects were selected for further development and funded for an additional three years (see page 11). These projects focused on children and young people. Participating organisations were offered professional development and support from VicHealth.

Evaluation was undertaken in both phases to assess:

- whether the approach could be implemented
- if it was acceptable to organisations, communities and individual participants
- to identify barriers, facilitators and promising practices.

In Phase Two, the projects were also assessed to see if they were effective in supporting health promoting organisational environments, and ultimately in reducing prejudice and improving the mental health and wellbeing of participants.

What did we learn from Building Bridges?

Impacts

There was improvement in the mental health of participants in the Phase Two projects, particularly the mental health of new arrivals. The improvement in new arrival mental health came from the emphasis on collaborative activity – which helped to improve participant’s feelings of autonomy – and the opportunities projects provided for participants to form social connections and for new arrivals to learn English.

I found it easier to talk to people when we were cooking, if we were cooking the same thing. It was easy to talk with them and keep talking and cooking, keep talking and cooking. [laughter] Yeah it’s very good. Something in common – not sitting there listening to someone like a teacher or talking or it’s boring.

- Kitchen Culture, participant

It’s become a project that’s equally about self-esteem and aspiration and trying to shift that very low self-image that they [young people] have, even if there’s a lot of bravado that says the opposite. It’s as much about that as it is about dry discussions on racism.

- A.R.A.B, project staff

However, there were mixed findings on the effectiveness of the projects in reducing prejudice. Participants were surveyed at the beginning and end of the projects on three measures (see Table 1).

- At both points, responses indicated a high level of acceptance of, and comfort with cultural diversity among both Anglo-European participants and those identifying another birthplace or ethnicity.
- Over the course of the projects, there was an increase in the proportion of respondents in both groups who strongly agreed that: “I think it is good for Australia to be made up of people from different nationalities”.
- For the statement: “I am comfortable around people of other nationalities”, there was an increase in strong agreement by people identifying as ‘other’ but a decline by those identifying as Australian.
- There was also a decline in the proportion of both groups who strongly agreed with the statement: “I think it is good for people of different nationalities to be friends”. This was despite an assessment showing that the projects were successful in meeting the Allport conditions.

Table 1: Acceptance of diversity among participants before and after the projects

Variables		% strongly agree	
		Before the projects	After the projects
I am comfortable around people of other nationalities ¹	Australian	76.3	65.8
	Other	59.9	63.4
I think it is good for people of different nationalities to be friends ²	Australian	93.1	72.5
	Other	80.0	76.4
I think it is good for Australia to be made up of people from different nationalities ³	Australian	80.9	83.9
	Other	70.6	81.7

1. Result not statistically significant. 2. Result is statistically significant ≤ 0.01 . 3. Result is statistically significant ≤ 0.053 .

The decline in the measures may have been because of problems with the measures themselves or to factors occurring outside of the projects, eg: media coverage of diversity issues, parents’ responses.

Also, the analysis undertaken to evaluate effectiveness required participants to be allocated into either the “in” group (in this study people identifying as having Anglo-European heritage) or the “out” group (all others). However, in a complex multicultural environment like Australia, members of the “out” group may also be mixing with people from another ethnic background for the first time

(eg, in several projects there were recent arrivals from Africa, as well as participants from the more established Vietnamese community).

Another possible explanation is that the projects by their nature took positive steps to include new arrivals and this may have been the cause of some resentment among Australian-born participants. There is, however, very little evidence of this in the qualitative data.

You're saying, 'Come on, let's do it together.' So even if there's conflict or competition, it still brings them together. I think they really respond, because they are interested in turning up after school. But there's also unexpected connections and that's what's fantastic. The kids have embraced the kids from the specialist schools a lot more than we had thought.

- A.R.A.B, project staff

We got involved because we wanted our kids to mix with mainstream school kids – kids that they wouldn't usually associate with. To have that experience on an equal sort of footing so they're doing something enjoyable together (...) just to give them the opportunity to be more confident.

- Cultural Games, school staff

A final possibility is that negative changes in views are part of the process of learning about the reality of cultural difference. This process involves people learning about themselves as individuals with a cultural identity and, for those of Anglo-European heritage, as having some privilege as a consequence of their ethnic background. This explanation is supported by other research that suggests that intercultural contact may initially result in discomfort, anxiety and even guilt (Branscombe et al. 2007; Lowrey et al. 2007). However, in the longer term this ultimately leads to greater consideration of out-group members and a deeper engagement with multiculturalism (Fehr & Sassenberg 2010; Case 2007; Monteith et al. 2010). This explanation is supported by the fact that the decline occurred on measures concerned with personal comfort with diversity, but not on the one measure assessing the more abstract concept of the ethnic makeup of society as a whole.

A similar decline was found in another Australian study (Pedersen 2010). The findings of both this study and the Building Bridges evaluation must be seen in the context of the international analysis (referred to above) that drew on over 200 studies and found that the overall impact of sustained intercultural contact was positive (Pettigrew & Tropp 2006). That is, it is possible that the findings from the Building Bridges evaluation and the study reported by Pedersen are exceptions. However, on balance the Building Bridges evaluation findings suggest that some caution needs to be exercised in consciously promoting sustained contact where it does not currently exist solely for the purposes of reducing prejudice. In some circumstances, more transient forms of contact may be a more appropriate starting point.

However, the approach does have positive mental health benefits, especially for new arrivals. These appear to be due in large part to the Allport conditions, ie: the emphasis on collaborative activity, forming friendships and building an inclusive environment.

Moreover, in a society such as Australia in which cultural diversity is a fact of life, intercultural contact is a natural feature of many day-to-day environments such as schools, workplaces and

community venues. The international evidence on which the Building Bridges program was based provides guidance on the steps that can be taken to ensure that this contact occurs in the best possible conditions. These include maximising the opportunities for people from different groups to come together on equal terms, providing opportunities for them to collaborate and form friendships with one another, and ensuring that environments are welcoming and inclusive. The evaluation of the Building Bridges program suggests that there is a need in such situations to anticipate and be prepared for possible changes in sentiment toward intercultural relations.

Was the approach feasible and acceptable to participants?

The evaluation shows that conscious, careful effort and time are required to meet the Allport conditions. Although many of the Phase One projects were successful in meeting some of the conditions, others struggled to meet all of them. In particular, many used more transitory forms of contact, and some found it difficult to secure participation of both longer-term Australians and new arrivals. The conditions were successfully established in the Phase Two projects, suggesting that with time, planning and commitment the approach is feasible.

The participants and agencies found the approach very acceptable. Many agencies felt that participating in the Building Bridges program enabled them to develop a direction they were already committed to. For participants, the Allport conditions appeared to be the things that made activities attractive. They identified getting the chance to choose things they liked doing, working collaboratively and making new friends as the main things they liked about the projects. While there was some initial resistance from parents in some of the projects, this resolved over time. Many parents welcomed the projects. They had been concerned about the distance between cultural groups in their communities and appreciated the opportunities offered to children and young people to develop skills in communicating across cultures.

What I notice is that there's a bit of a divide between Anglo parents or Syrian parents and African parents on the playground. I see that quite obviously. I think there's different reasons why that is, why conversations don't come so naturally with the parents. It does with the children, but not with the parents, and that comes from our own experience. It comes from what another parent said about English being a major factor. I've had this myself, where I haven't felt confident about how to initiate a conversation. Am I trying just because they're from another country? What if their English isn't any good? I don't want to embarrass them or offend them.

- Cultural Games, parent

It gives me a lot of confidence to deal with different kinds of parents and I'm not scared to approach anyone now. I'm more approachable now. And I've gained the ability to meet different parents. And it gives me a positive mother, a positive parent.

- Cultural Games, parent facilitator

Although the projects were clearly valued by new arrivals as a means of mixing with other Australians, the projects seeking to increase contact between minority ethnic groups were less successful.

The main concern expressed about Building Bridges was the risk of new arrival participants feeling pressures to conform to the dominant culture in the contact setting. This may be problematic as the ability to maintain and feel proud of one's ethnic identity is important for mental health and wellbeing (Berry 1997). This suggests that it is vital to create an environment in the contact setting in which cultural diversity is valued.

There will also be occasions when promoting intercultural contact is not the best strategy. This might include circumstances when:

- New-arrival communities have basic unmet needs that are better met through more direct support (eg, help to access services)
- English-language skills are not developed enough to enable interaction
- the wider new arrival community is not in a position to provide support to buffer participants from racism and intolerance should this occur in the contact setting because they are still forming their structures and networks
- there is substantial tension between groups. In these circumstances bringing groups together may not be the best first strategy. Other approaches such as awareness raising or conflict resolution may be required as a first step.

Barriers and facilitators to the approach

- It is important to keep a balance of participants from different groups so that there are good prospects of people coming together on equal terms. Most existing agencies have particular expertise in working with either longer-term Australians or new arrivals. As a consequence, many of the projects experienced difficulties in engaging with both groups. This means that partnerships between agencies are critical to making intercultural contact projects work.
- It is important to take steps to ensure that the activity has wider community and organisational support, as improvements in relationships and attitudes in the contact setting may be compromised by insensitivity or antipathy in these wider contexts.
- Additional worker time will be required. Even if the contact activity takes place in an existing setting, additional effort is involved in supporting participants and ensuring a safe and welcoming environment.
- In some environments such as schools it is very difficult to run 'stand-alone' activities to promote intercultural contact. Therefore it is better to identify opportunities for contact within the day-to-day activities of a setting. In a school this might involve building contact into existing curricula or parent activities. Some of the activities used in the projects are highlighted in Table 2 (see next page).

We managed to get young people with African and Asian backgrounds but our challenge was getting young people with the Anglo background that we were hoping for. Sometimes people sign up and are not quite sure, and they then withdraw in the end.

- Kitchen Culture, project staff

Table 2: Activities used in the Building Bridges projects to support intercultural contact

SCHOOL SETTING	COMMUNITY SETTING
Students <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interactive training sessions • Lunchtime social activities • Welcoming programs, orientation programs and activities and morning teas for new students • Getting-to-know you games • Fun activities eg, circus skills • Dancing and music • Cooking and food preparation • Camps • Community gardens – planting and harvesting activities • Digital story telling • School holiday programs 	Youth <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Field trips • Community orientation • Performance workshops • Planning workshops • Public speaking workshops • Camps • Outdoor adventure activities
Parents <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Paired-up paid facilitators of children’s group activities • Interactive training sessions • Childcare (provides ICC opportunities for parents and children) • Excursions with children • Community gardens – planting and harvesting activities • Parent volunteers in school-based program activities 	Adults <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Steering committee participation • Workshops and planning sessions • Planning and delivery of activities, eg: women’s market, women’s radio program • Skills development workshops • Rural homestays • Weekend visit to regional resettlement area • Environmental activities, eg: tree planting • Community gardens – planting and harvesting activities • Welcome and farewell events (project landmark celebrations) • Community singing • Soccer • Cooking and food preparation • Shared food and conversation

Promising practices

- Take a **gradual approach** to planning the activity so that ownership of it is built gradually across the contact setting.
- Build in **ice-breaking activities** to promote interaction between participants so that they get to know one another and build relationships. Simply bringing people together may not be enough as people often remain unconnected or connected only with people from their like-ethnic community.
- There can also be **informal opportunities** for people to get to know one another, such as encouraging participants to travel to and from activities together.
- Where appropriate, conduct activity to raise awareness, address stereotypes and promote the benefits of diversity **before or during the contact activity**. In some contexts it may not be appropriate to do this formally, but it is important to **have a sound plan for dealing with issues** should they arise.

- Consider activities that **foster respectful group norms**. In some of the Building Bridges groups there was a formal process for engaging participants in setting rules, such as no swearing, no racism and only speaking in the shared language of English.
- Keep the **groups small**, as subgroups tend to form within a larger group and these can often be along ethnic lines, working against intercultural contact.
- If possible, conduct activity on **ground that is neutral** to all participants.
- When promoting the project **make the activity the focus**, not the fact that it provides intercultural contact.
- Where possible, **engage workers from different cultural backgrounds** in the program. As well as helping to attract participants, this demonstrates in a very tangible way that diversity is valued.

Snapshot of the 5 projects selected for further development

The Anti-Racism Action Band (A.R.A.B)

A.R.A.B was a community-based youth performing and visual arts program in Melbourne's northern suburbs based within the Victorian Arabic Social Services (VASS). It was initially established as a creative outlet for Arabic young people who were experiencing racial vilification following the attacks in the USA on 11 September 2001.

A.R.A.B performances combined traditional dance and street dance with theatre, spoken word, original music and video. Participants came from a wide variety of social, economic, racial and ethnic backgrounds to create artistic pieces that reflected the lived experiences and identities of young people in Melbourne's northern suburbs.

A.R.A.B incorporated training and employment pathways for young people through its 'Tawasal' gigging platform. In addition to its major annual performance, A.R.A.B participants have performed in hundreds of public and community events, including the Melbourne International Arts Festival.

Beaut Buddies

The Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture (Foundation House) implemented Beaut Buddies through its *School's In for Refugees* program.

The program aimed to: improve the process for young people from refugee backgrounds transitioning from English Language Schools (ELS) to mainstream schools; improve intercultural contact between students, their families and the schools; and produce a resource guide and professional development program to enable Beaut Buddies to be replicated in other locations.

Within the mainstream schools, a group of 'buddies' (students settled within the mainstream system) were partnered with students transitioning from ELS to mainstream school. Emphasis was placed on supporting the group to work together to develop their own activities, including welcoming packs, orientation and general support.

Through Beaut Buddies, Foundation House also offered schools the opportunity to engage in professional development to provide skills needed to adequately support refugee background students.

Cultural Games

Cultural Games was implemented through Maribryong City Council. Each Cultural Games round lasted for approximately 10 weeks and brought together students from two local primary schools to make and play games from around the world. The project focused on similarities between games found in different parts of the world.

Cultural Games also invited migrant and Aboriginal speakers, included excursions to the Immigration Museum and invited participants to visit each other's schools. An effort was made to pair schools with a high proportion of people with Australian ethnicity with schools that had a culturally and linguistically diverse population.

Cultural Games was unique among the Building Bridges projects in that it was the only project to incorporate parent engagement as a key strategy. Parents from the community were employed to facilitate and support the groups of students through the activities.

Kar Kulture

Kar Kulture was based within the South Eastern Migrant Resource Centre (SEMRC) in partnership with Victoria Police, Chisholm Technical and Further Education (TAFE), Handbrake Turn, Adult Migrant English Service (AMES) and Mission Australia. During each one-year round, participants came together weekly to work collaboratively and with volunteers from Victoria Police to repair and restore a second-hand car. The restored vehicle was then used to provide road safety workshops and driving practice lessons for participants.

Kitchen Culture

Kitchen Culture was implemented through Melbourne City Mission's Youth Enterprise Hub in Melbourne's western suburbs. Participants came together to turn a wide variety of foods into entrees, mains and desserts.

The large group would then split into smaller groups (two or three people) to work on individual recipes. At the end of each session, the smaller groups presented the dishes they had made and then the whole group had dinner together. Sessions were held once a week during the seven-week rounds or daily during the week-long intensive rounds. Family and friends were invited to join the participants for a community dinner during the last session.

Kitchen Culture worked in partnership with Western Young People's Independent Network (WYPIN), WestNet and Victoria University to provide training and certificates in food handling and coffee making.

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