Building bridges rather than walls: research into an experiential model of interfaith education in secondary schools

Tim McCowan

To cite this article: Tim McCowan (2016): Building bridges rather than walls: research into an experiential model of interfaith education in secondary schools, British Journal of Religious Education, DOI: 10.1080/01416200.2015.1128387

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01416200.2015.1128387

Published online: 09 May 2016.
Building bridges rather than walls: research into an experiential model of interfaith education in secondary schools

Tim McCowan

Stirling Theological College, University of Divinity, Melbourne, Australia

ABSTRACT
This paper examines research findings from an experiential model of interfaith education called the Building Bridges through Interfaith Dialogue in Schools Programme (BBP). The BBP has been operating continuously in Melbourne, Australia since 2004. In the research, participating students were interviewed and surveyed to assess the effect of this experiential interfaith education programme on their knowledge, attitudes, perspectives and behaviour toward those from different religious and cultural backgrounds to them. Some of the data from those interviews are included in this article. The findings identify that the programme promoted religious literacy, (including improved knowledge, understanding and appreciation for different religious and cultural traditions and their practices), dismantled prejudice from ignorance and overly generalised stereotypes of others, and promoted social inclusion and cohesion.

KEYWORDS
Inter-religious education; experiential; interfaith; interpretive approach; dialogue; secondary education; social cohesion

Introduction

I think before Building Bridges, I went in thinking that my religion was the best and the only one. But now I've come out knowing that ... every other religion is just as good as mine, just as valid as mine, and I think I'm not as prejudiced towards other religions at all.

This was a reflection made by a female student, about her participation in an experiential interfaith education programme in Melbourne, Australia in 2010. While acknowledging her comment overlooks the claims of exclusivity by some religious traditions, it does reveal potential for greater social cohesion and religious inclusion and understanding when students personally engage with peers from different religious backgrounds. Further, such changes in the personal perceptions and understanding of religion and religious people are both critically important but also rare in the current Australian context.

Australia has been described as a largely tolerant, multicultural nation with core values of egalitarianism and a 'fair-go' (Department of Immigration & Citizenship 2007), however, there remains significant evidence of racial and religious ignorance and prejudice, Islamophobia, and religiously targeted physical and verbal abuse (Ata 2009; Hughes 2010; Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 2003). Muslims and Indians have been subject to negative stereotyping and demonisation in many forms of the media (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 2007). This situation perpetuates fear and attitudes of intolerance toward the religious other, threatening cohesion within the wider society (HREC 2003, 2007).
The non-partisan study of religions in schools has been recognised in the UK and Europe as an effective antidote to religious ignorance and prejudice, and as a means to promote social cohesion (Berger-Schmitt 2000; Knauth, Bertram-Troost, and Ipgrave 2008). A number of different models of education about religions are in school curricula (De Souza 2006; Knauth, Bertram-Troost, and Ipgrave 2008; McKenna, Ipgrave, and Jackson 2008; Weisse 2003). In Australia, this is not the case. Despite rhetoric from both national and state governments on the need for cultural and religious inclusion, there remains a strong reticence to explore alternative models of non-partisan study about religions in schools (Byrne 2011, 2014; Ministerial Council and on Education Employment Training & Youth Affairs 2008). Students within government schools are thereby left to choose either ‘Special Religious Education’ (an instructional learning into religion unit taught by a non-teacher trained religious volunteer for 30 min per week) or no study of religions at all (Bouma 2011; Byrne 2014). Students in independent, faith-based private and Catholic schools typically receive instruction in the religious tradition of their school, but not an impartial general discussion about other religions and ethical views (Engebretson 2012; Rossiter 2001). Consequently, the huge potential for promoting understanding and diminishing ignorance and prejudice of many toward Australia’s growing religious diversity through a general education about religion is lost (Halafoff 2011; Zwartz 2012).

**The building bridges programme: a model of interfaith education**

One model for an inclusive, non-partisan study of religions that uses an experiential, interpretive educational approach (Dewey 1938, 1997; Jackson 2011) is the Building Bridges through Interfaith Dialogue in Schools Programme (BBP). This paper discusses some findings of a study into this extra-curricular programme over 2009–2012, and identifies several significant educational and social outcomes for students who participated.

The BBP brings secondary students from different cultural and religious backgrounds together for six sessions per year to share some of their life and faith experiences with each other. It was initiated and supported through the WellSpring Centre, an ecumenical Christian spirituality centre in Melbourne, focused on providing spaces for people to deepen their awareness of God in all of life (WellSpring Centre 2014). The BBP was established in 2004 with the aim of building trust, interfaith understanding, knowledge of religions and co-operation among students from different backgrounds and schools (McCowan 2006) when evidence of religious discrimination was increasing. The students self-select and participate voluntarily, meeting in five two-hour sessions (generally after school) and one full day session. All sessions are held at one of the participating schools in rotation. In 2014, about 250 students in years 10 and 11 were involved from 23 schools across Melbourne, Australia.

The programme is inclusive in that students of any background can participate, whether they are passionately religious, vehemently atheist, agnostic, or undecided. During sessions, students are invited to question and explore each other’s understandings and experiences of life and faith, religion, culture and spirituality as these are expressed in their everyday lives. The dialogues around faith and life occur in small, facilitated groups as well as more informally over meals and relationship-building activities.

Interfaith education in this paper, is an interactive, participatory process through which people learn about and learn from a diversity of religions and faiths (Engebretson 2009) including those of Indigenous peoples. The interfaith approach of the BBP corresponds with Herman’s ‘interreligious mode of religious education’, in that its intent is developing a religious self with understanding of different religious traditions through participation in dialogue between adherents of those diverse traditions (2003, 343–344). He distinguishes this mode from the mono-religious, that focuses on appropriation of just one religious perspective, and the multi-religious that studies cultural information about religious practices without appropriation of meaning of those practices (Hermans 2003). In this interreligious mode, pupils are encouraged to understand their own belief systems and values as well as that of others (Ziebertz 2005).

The BBP uses a ‘dialogical approach’ of learning about religions (Jackson 2004), that relies on the students as the key resources and actors in this learning, where such dialogue may occur between pupils,
between pupils and the study material and between students and their teacher. As Raasch explains, dialogue allows students to discover others’ beliefs and values, know oneself better, and acquire skills of empathy as a means toward a practical co-operation between faiths (Keast 2007, 91).

Although adolescents may not yet fully ‘own’ nor be well versed in the faith they espouse for themselves, and therefore cannot engage in ‘formal’ inter-religious dialogue (Engebretson 2012), a majority of teenagers still want to explore their belief systems independently of their parents (Hughes 2007; Mason, Singleton, and Webber 2007), and critically reflect upon their lived experiences in an ongoing dialogue with various religious or spiritual traditions, visions and stories (Bachand 2010). For this reason, young adult facilitators with knowledge of the differing religions are allocated to the small groups in the BBP, to support and stimulate the students’ learning.

Each two hour session involves interactive activities, a vegetarian or kosher meal, a brief presentation of the religions or cultures of the host school and significant time in small, stable, single-sex groups facilitated by a trained young adult leader.

The presentations provide students with learnings from the religion (or culture) of the host school, which complement their learning about religion in the small group dialogues (Grimmitt 1983). Presentations can involve a short PowerPoint presentation, a demonstration of prayer in the mosque, viewing the Torah at a Jewish school, explaining the Eucharist celebration or the founder’s charism in a Catholic school, experiencing a meditation in the Buddhist tradition or exploring something unique about a non-religious school.

The small groups are made as culturally and religiously diverse as possible. The facilitators, from a range of religious and non-religious backgrounds, aim to help students engage as respectfully as possible into the life experiences of each other through encouraging personal reflection and honest responses to several open-ended questions. These questions can range from: ‘Share an experience that has made a significant impact on your life’ to more explicit religious questions such as: ‘Do you pray or have some regular spiritual practice, and if so what form does it take?’ These questions provide ‘common categories’ for pupils to compare each other’s faith practice and empowers those from religious minority groups to contribute on an equal basis with those from dominant religions (Hermans 2003, 348, 366). Students can also ask their own questions of each other.

Each session of the programme has a theme that builds developmentally on the learning of the previous one, and relates to the metaphor of building a bridge. From establishing ground rules for engagement in session one, through active listening skills, addressing issues on which students disagree with each other, to exploring ideas for ongoing involvement in interfaith education. The final session, encourages students to reflect creatively on what they’ve learnt in the BBP, through art or music or cooking or working on a joint project for the benefit of the wider community.

Investigation into the building bridges programme

The author conducted a qualitative investigation into the effectiveness of the BBP in promoting educational outcomes and social inclusion between 2009 and 2012 (McCowan 2013). The key questions for that investigation were:

1. How effective was the BBP at promoting intercultural and interreligious understanding, personal and social capability, creative and critical thinking and ethical behaviour among the participants?

2. How effectively did the BBP educate participants about religion and ‘faith’, where faith is understood as an orientation toward the whole of life that affects how one perceives, experiences and makes meaning of their experiences (Fowler [1981] 1995)?

To gain a qualitative assessment of the effect of the BBP on the students’ world, social constructivism was chosen as the epistemology (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Neimeyer 1993; Schwandt 1999), because it appreciates the influence of students’ wider social communities on how they construct meaning.
from their experiences. The theoretical perspective used was phenomenological hermeneutics as it recognizes students' preunderstandings of the other and concepts such as 'religion' in any interpretation of their experiences, and views understanding as participative, conversational and dialogic (Gadamer 1975, 1976; Schwandt 2000).

Grounded Theory was chosen as the most suitable methodology for a qualitative assessment of the effectiveness of the programme from data provided by the participants themselves, (Charmaz 2006; Corbin and Strauss 2008; Glaser and Strauss 1967) rather than programme evaluation. ‘The central focus of grounded theory is the development of theory through constant comparative analysis of data gained through theoretical sampling’ (Glaser 1998, 3). The methods used for collecting the data were semi-structured interviews, and an anonymous survey questionnaire from a purposeful selective sample (Charmaz 2000; Coyne 1997; Sandelowski 1995) of schools.

In this investigation, Grounded Theory involved: identifying the sample of schools from those participating that could provide the greatest variation of perspective; inviting respondents; initial interviews and identifying broad-brush categories from the data; bringing these categories into constant comparison with new data from the second and third rounds of interviews; rating the categories according to frequency of use; and finally articulating theories that were emerging from the data. The process was therefore similar to an inductive thematic analysis, where themes arose directly from explicit statements by the students (Braun and Clarke 2006).

The sample involved 16 out of the 25 schools involved in the programme at the time. Eighty-four students from the sample self-nominated to be interviewed. The students were composed of 16 females and 12 males from 5 Catholic schools, 11 females and 10 males from 3 Protestant schools, 17 females and 5 males from 4 Islamic schools, 8 females and 1 male from 3 Jewish schools, and 2 females and 2 males from the sole government school. This reflects the difficulty of attracting government schools in Australia to participate in any programme or learning about 'religion' (Byrne 2014). The students were not explicitly asked to identify their religious affiliation, although many self-identified.

The kinds of questions asked of the students were: Why did you join the programme? What part of the programme affected you most and why? What did you learn about yourself through your involvement? What did you learn about others and their experiences of a religious tradition or faith? How comfortable do you feel mixing with those from a different religious or cultural background from yourself? How is your life different because of your participation? As well, students were also given a written survey to fill in anonymously. Nineteen teachers and 15 facilitators involved in the programme were interviewed. This paper examines only the research obtained from the students' interviews.

**Research findings**

The interviews yielded data around several key themes that repeatedly arose in students' responses. These themes were: It was very significant to talk with religious peers (110 references); I learnt new knowledge about other religions (97 references); I discovered that the other is more like me than expected (85 references); It challenged my stereotypes of the other (81 references); I'm more comfortable mixing with different religious people than before (75 references); I've become more accepting of different others (63 references); I made friends with someone from a different religious tradition (58 references); I've become more confident engaging with those from different backgrounds (57 references); It changed my attitude to my own faith tradition (40 references); I am more empathetic towards those from different backgrounds (40 references); I am more interested in other religions (36 references); I want to tell others of the value of interfaith engagement (36 references).

To engage with peers with a religious affiliation or interest proved the most appealing and transformative component of the programme, as it provided opportunities for students to inquire and explore issues of interest to them, and learn about the religion from one who practises it. The following theories on the effectiveness of the programme were extracted from the students' data:
1. Increased my knowledge of different religions

A majority of the students interviewed said they grew significantly in their knowledge and cognitive understanding of different religions, both their own and others. This learning involved discovering many broad similarities and differences to their own belief systems or spirituality, the wide diversity of practices within religions, as well as more specific details such as rituals, clothing or food requirements.

Learning about the Jewish Sabbath, one Anglican girl saw it as ‘a healthy way of living, to have a day a week where you actually rest and you spend time with your family, especially in a society where everything is so busy all the time’. A boy from a Catholic school recalled, ‘There’s a lot of variance … There’s not just one Muslim way, one Jewish way, as there isn’t just the one Catholic way’.

Most of the students commented that the programme gave them a broader view of people’s religious perspectives. One boy, who self-identified as an ‘atheist’ from the Government school, said the programme opened his eyes to appreciate the significance of religion for many of his Muslim neighbours.

A boy at a Catholic school said the programme put his faith into a wider perspective:

I’m now thinking I have my pathway, they have their own pathway, and that my faith is just a pathway, its not the pathway.

Several students, such as this Hindu girl at a Catholic school hold a similar vision: ‘we’re all kind of searching for the same thing, though coming from different directions.’

These findings correlate with Jackson’s interpretive approach of studying religion that combine the knowledge and experience of students and teachers in an interactive form of learning (Jackson 2004). Through this peer exchange, the students learn ‘representation’, discovering the complexity and internal diversity within religions, and engage with the actual, local expressions of religion they find in their neighbourhoods (Jackson 1997) rather than abstract concepts and general knowledge.

2. Religion is more relevant to teenagers when it has a human face

Students repeatedly spoke positively of the value of learning about diverse religions through talking with peers who practise those faiths. They said to share such things with someone their own age made their education more engaging, interesting and relevant. One girl from a Baptist school commented:

In Christian education class, we have been learning about other faiths such as Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and Judaism, but I feel as though I have learned so much more about these faiths and the amazing people who are a part of these faiths, through those who’ve shared with me in Building Bridges than I could’ve ever learned merely by reading or hearing about them. I think that by creating relationships like this we learn what the religions and people are actually like.

Some mentioned how it ‘humanised religion’, giving a human face and name and a practical real-life expression to something often discussed theoretically. For instance, a girl from a Jewish school said ‘being able to put a face to the faith makes it more personal and significant’. For many, being able to ask their own questions of peers from different religions, promoted a more empathetic understanding of them, such as this girl from a Protestant school:

I think not only learning about the facts of their religion, but actually learning about how they apply them to their lives and imagining yourself in their situation and how different it is, but also just how similar they are as a person was great.

The BBP draws upon Dewey’s educational philosophy, that argues that fruitful experiential learning involves continuity and interaction between a learner and what is learned, in ways that promote growth and creativity in their subsequent experiences (Dewey 1938, 1997). Since it is driven by students’ exploration of their own questions, values and belief systems it has ‘students actively engaged in exploring questions they find relevant and meaningful, and has them trusting that feeling, as well as thinking, can lead to knowledge’ (Chapman, McPhee, and Proudman 2008, 8). As Dewey and Goleman have revealed (Dewey 1938, 1997; Goleman 2005, 2006), learning from a practitioner within an experiential approach offers a rich learning environment, since it draws on multiple forms of intelligence and styles of learning (Kolb 1984). However, since the knowledge gained about the different religions is dependent upon their peers’ understandings and experience of their own traditions, the theoretical knowledge
impacted is quite limited, and at times superficial. Students’ learning about religions in the BBP would be more significant if combined with classroom study about religions, as demonstrated in Boys and Lee (1996). This would contribute toward Jackson’s ‘interpretive’ mode of learning about religions, that uncovers meaning through comparing and contrasting differences with one’s own equivalent concepts (1997, 2004).

3. It dismantled many of their stereotypes of the religious other
A majority of students said their former perceptions and stereotypes of those from other religious traditions were significantly dismantled by engaging with them in the programme. Prior to their participation they were aware of only being exposed to the generalisations and predominantly negative stereotypes of religious people put out by others and the media. A Catholic girl shared:

I’ve been surrounded by Catholicism and I had no contact with anyone that was Muslim or was of another religion. I was so sheltered and so I came in with this prejudice … Now when I see someone with a headscarf I just think, cool, because they remind me of Building Bridges and I feel positive towards them.

Many were surprised that they had so much in common across their religions and faiths, such as this Muslim girl:

After you get to know each other, you see that really the only difference between us and say, Catholics, is that we have different beliefs but we live very similar lives and have the same moral compass.

Others noted similar hopes, values, tastes in music and sport, which precipitated many new friendships that were then maintained through social media and events for many years after the programme.

Students exhibited a strong tendency in the interviews to emphasise the commonalities they discovered over the differences of religion, as evidenced in other research (Ipgrave 2003; Knauth, Bertram-Troost, and Ipgrave 2008). While this probably reflects an adolescent desire for connection and belonging with their peers, it highlights the need for education to address the many real differences between religions (Prothero 2007, 2010).

Many students indicated that they were less willing to blindly accept what they had been taught about those from other religions, and appreciated learning who were the recipients of negative stereotyping. This evoked a sense of mutual understanding and sympathy. Students emphasised the need to talk with the other person before making an assessment of them. For instance, one boy from a Jewish school said:

I’m not so quick to judge anymore; I see the person … now, because of the program, I feel I want to get to know that person and their story rather than be blinded by what I’ve heard on the news.

Many explained they would defend the religious other against the widespread generalisations and negative stereotypes made about them by the media and word of mouth. For instance a male Buddhist student said:

Before if someone would tell a racist, like a xenophobic joke or something, I wouldn’t say anything, but now if someone is insulting people of other religions, because I have friend of another religion now, it hurts me a lot more than it used to and I don’t stand for it anymore.

Such significant outcomes correlate with research done elsewhere that found improving students’ knowledge about other religions, raised their levels of passive tolerance or their willingness to refrain from discrimination, and their active tolerance or their willingness to act to counter discrimination (Lester and Roberts 2009).

4. Evoked greater interest in their own religious tradition
Several students commented how questions and dialogue with those from other religions enriched their faith, such as this Catholic girl:

Participating in the BBP was a really good opportunity to explain my own faith journey and to delve deeper in my own faith … I also feel my knowledge in my faith has increased greatly because I have been able to verbalise what my beliefs are.
One student said the dialogues around faith had helped her feel more at peace with herself and her values, even though she had no religious affiliation. For another girl, she found her attempts to explain her faith to others made them less convincing than before. In some cases, questions from their peers challenged students to gain a better integration of their faith into their life, such as with this female student:

I personally became stronger in my religion after doing the program. We did religion in school and stuff, but they never make you sit down and kind of discuss the things that we discussed. And so I asked: where am I right now in my life with my religion? And because you listen to all these other girls, I definitely came out more, like, positive towards my own religion, and wanting to get more involved.

Questions from outside one's religious community is known to often bring a person back to the essential core of their faith and life, as other interfaith dialogue programmes have discovered (Knitter 1995; Swearer 1977; Swidler, Duran, and Firestone 2007). Others spoke of greater confidence to reveal their religious backgrounds, such as this Jewish boy: ‘I no longer have this fear of revealing my roots, because I witnessed the [other students’] reactions as welcoming and interested.’

The opportunity for students to discover more of their own values, beliefs and practices through engagement with those from different backgrounds corresponds with Sterkens's (2001) research that found students acquired more knowledge and more positive attitudes toward their own faith in a multi-religious learning situation than in a mono-religious learning situation. This theme demonstrates many students also learn Jackson's 'reflexivity' in his interpretive model (Jackson 1997) through reflecting upon their learning, critiquing their own understandings as well as some of the methods employed in classroom learning about religions (Jackson 2011, 1–5). The students’ learning from the BBP would be enhanced however, if more opportunities for students to critique each other’s understandings and of the wider tradition could be incorporated into their learning.

5. Promoted social and religious inclusion and cohesion

A majority of those students interviewed said they felt significantly more comfortable mixing with those from different backgrounds than prior to the BBP. This included feeling more confident to initiate and engage in conversations with them, and a greater respect and acceptance for their religious views and practices, such as this girl at a Christian school:

I think now, I am very open towards people of other religions. Before Building Bridges I would always have targeted people that look like [me] … but now definitely I wouldn’t be afraid of walking up to a girl with a head-dress and anything and making friends with her.

Students were asked to scale their level of comfort in mixing with different others on a continuum from one to ten. A low score meant they felt quite scared whilst a high score indicated feeling comfortable mixing with strangers. One Catholic girl acknowledged that before participation, she was pretty afraid of mixing with those who are different, giving herself a four. Then through the programme, she realised she felt more confident and graded herself ‘definitely nine or ten’.

A Jewish female student found the programme broadened her respect for others’ cultures and gave her ‘a greater appreciation for multiculturalism.’

Several students said they learnt to view the other simply as a human being, rather than a member of a faith community. A Muslim girl commented:

My attitude is open and welcoming; so if I’m talking to a Christian or talking to a Jew, it’s the same as if I’m talking to a Muslim or if I’m talking to an atheist or a Buddhist.

And a student at a non-denominational Christian school found the skills learnt did translate into her everyday world:

You still have to take every relationship as it comes and accept every person as an individual, but in terms of having the skills to approach someone or form a relationship with someone that’s different from myself, I think I feel a lot more comfortable with that.

Such findings correlate with studies undertaken in Europe, that found that while religion does not play an outstanding role in the lifeworld of adolescents, they considered an education that offers both
information about different religions and encounters with them of great importance, ‘in order to overcome ignorance and prejudices through forms of learning together, through an experience-oriented exchange, and through encouraging and fostering the peaceful coexistence of people of different religious and ideological backgrounds’ (Knauth, Bertram-Troost, and Ipgrave 2008, 242; Ziebertz and Kay [2006] 2009).

Conclusion

This article has discussed findings from student responses into an experiential model of interfaith education called the Building Bridges Programme. It has identified that providing students with the opportunity to learn about different religions and faiths from peers of mixed religious backgrounds significantly improved their knowledge and understanding of those religions, increased their interest and awareness of their own and other religions and belief systems, dismantled their negative perceptions and stereotypes of others, reduced discrimination of others with either passive or active tolerance towards those who are different, promoted social and religious inclusion and religious understanding. It has therefore demonstrated the transformative potential of experiential interfaith education when students engage with peers who actually practise those faiths. The findings also reveal a need to complement the students’ learning about religions with more formal reflection and critique of their own and others’ understandings of religion and study of these different traditions.

This investigation has demonstrated the value of such experiential, interfaith education, that is critically needed to address widespread ignorance, religious prejudice and the absence of any required non-partisan general study of religion in Australian secondary schools.

Note

1. These are four of the ‘General capabilities’ listed in the Australian curriculum, produced by the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (2012).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Tim McCowan is a senior lecturer in Spirituality at Stirling Theological College, University of Divinity, Melbourne. He is also Director of Building Bridges and Reconciliation, WellSpring Centre, Melbourne, Australia.

References


Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority. 2012. General Capabilities. Sydney: ACARA.


