

**Building Bridges, Building
Trust:
A Model of Cultural
Congruence**

By Kathryn Richardson

**Background: Multiculturalism in
Australia**

2003-2006 Commonwealth Government
Agenda for Multicultural Australia

“...multiculturalism recognises, accepts,
respects and celebrates cultural diversity.”
(2003, p6)

Multiculturalism in Schools

Promotes:

- Understanding of difference
- Respect for diversity
- Often once-off focus on various festivals or units of work emphasising the different aspects of other countries

Problems:

- “Such a limited approach to the curriculum can actually serve to perpetuate stereotypes and trivialise the values and issues of importance to a particular culture” (Ukpokodu, 1999 p.300).
- How can focusing on difference help us to build relationships and trust?

The Individualism vs. Collectivism Dichotomy

Cross-cultural theory

Collectivist cultures value interdependence between humans, whereas individualist cultures emphasise independence from the group (Triandis, 2001)

Psychology and sociology

Psychologists and sociologists have recognised for decades that regardless of culture, group membership (the collective self) is a vitally important human trait. In psychological terms, group affiliation has been strongly linked with an individual's sense of well-being

Research Project: International Student Welfare in Secondary Schools

- Ten secondary schools (consisting of Catholic and private schools) from the Melbourne metropolitan regions participated.
- Four Stages:
 - Interviews were held with representatives from each school regarding their international student programs.
 - Questionnaires were disseminated to international students between the ages of thirteen to twenty one within the participating schools. (318 usable questionnaires)
 - Interviews and focus groups with international students who had volunteered to participate further.
 - Interviews with four representatives from different organisations involved in international student welfare (directly and indirectly).

Student Profiles

Figure 1. International Students: Regional Background

	Total cases
China (Mainland)	139 (43.7%)
China (Hong Kong)	36 (11.3%)
North East Asia	54 (17.0%)
South Asia	72 (22.6%)
Other	17 (5.3%)
Total	318 (100.0%)

Male respondents:

147 (46.2%)

Female respondents:

171 (53.8%)

Age of Respondents

13-15 years: 24 (7.5%)

16-18 years: 218 (68.6%)

19-21 years: 76 (23.9%)

International Students and Friendship Patterns

- Variables influencing friendship patterns of international students:
 - Gender
 - Country of Origin
 - Perceptions of communicative competence
- 89% of students responded that they wanted to make friends in Australia
- 76.9% of questionnaire respondents indicated that they had experienced at least some difficulties making friends with Australians

So, what were the *paradoxes*?

Assumptions: Common interests and topics of conversation

On one hand:

“You have no topics to talk to [the local students].”

On the other hand:

Interviewer: Where do you like to go and what do you like to do with your friends?

Dianna: Shopping!

Natasha: City! (General consensus)

General: Shopping and eating!

Natasha: Eating and Shopping!

Grace: Making friends!

Interviewer: What else do you like to do? Just shopping?

Grace: Yes! Just shopping!

Natasha: Crazy shopping!

Daisy: And eating!

Assumptions: behavioural expectations

“Yeah, I tried. I really tried, but it’s hard, because I’ve already got a great impression off some of the other Malaysian girls. They said to me, “They, like, just have different rule books, and you will be taught a complete different set of rules from the Aussie girls.”

Feeling misunderstood

“You have no idea what they’re thinking about and they have no idea what I’m thinking about.”

Stereotypes: misnomers about individualism

- “Every person [in Australia] is ... alone, because every person does things by themselves, not like having help from their parents.”
- “I wouldn’t want any Australian friends, because you can’t get along with them, because they have a different culture. They go to parties and enjoy their own life. Like, they go out for drinks and parties.”

Assumptions: Local students

“Actually one boy asked me, like, whether I could read a clock...I didn’t know he was being really serious, and I go, “Are you joking?” And he says, “No”. And I ask him is it my problem or is it his problem? Of course I can! A clock is the same everywhere! Everyone understands the clock!”

Social boundaries

- **Appearance**
“...you tend to make friends with black haired people instead of with blond people. You tend to get close to the other people who are familiar to you.”
- **Migrant Students**
“Even those who are born here, like Chinese girls born here...they don’t really be nice to you. And they think they are Aussies instead of the same people as you.”
- **Confusion about expectations**
“People think you are from the same country, and you are supposed to be united and supposed to be one group. But sometimes you are just like, “Oh, I don’t want to stay with them.” So it’s kind of hard to get away from people and get closer to people.”

Social boundaries

- **Pre-formed ingroups**

“[The local students] wouldn’t talk to you sometimes because they’ve got their friends also.”

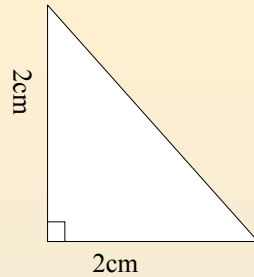
- **Homogenisation of the outgroup**

“One thing I don’t really like, just because I’m from Asia, [the local students] might just call you Asian, because they’re all from Australia.”

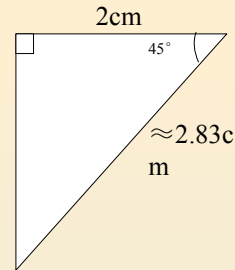
The Model of Cultural Congruence

1. The recognition and appreciation of sameness and affinity is of equal importance in cross-cultural relationships as the recognition and appreciation of diversity.
2. Relationships are built on an understanding of sameness, affinity and compatibility of personality.

Mathematical Congruence



$$\begin{aligned}A &= \frac{1}{2}bh \\b &= 2 \\h &= 2 \\A &= \frac{1}{2} \times 2 \times 2 \\A &= 1 \times 2 \\A &= 2\text{cm}^2\end{aligned}$$



$$\begin{aligned}A &= \frac{1}{2}bcsinA \\b &\approx 2.83 \\c &= 2 \\\sin A &= \sin 45^\circ \\A &= \frac{1}{2} \times 2.83 \times 2 \times \sin 45^\circ \\A &= \frac{1}{2} \times 2.83 \times 2 \times 0.7 \\A &= 2\text{cm}^2\end{aligned}$$

What needs to happen?

- **Teacher Education**

Teachers have a responsibility to understand that difference and sameness are not mutually exclusive. Teachers have the responsibility to help students to see beyond what is different in order to discover areas of mutual compatibility.

- **Student education – Local Students**

Local students need to be made aware of some of the issues that international students face. There needs to be encouragement and opportunity for the local students to work alongside overseas students both in in-school programs and in extracurricular programs.

What needs to happen?

- **International Students - Language Skills and Opportunity**

The overseas students need to also be given opportunities in non-threatening environments to engage in conversation with local students.

To Affinity and Beyond

- The purpose of the Model of Cultural Congruence is to assist with resetting social boundaries.
- Although aspects of their cultures are at times recognised by the schools, the current paradigm leaves overseas students feeling different, and at times isolated.
- Difference and sameness need to be seen as separate, yet juxtaposed constructs which are of equal value and importance.
- To do this, it is necessary to facilitate communications in terms of discovering affinities alongside learning to appreciate cultural differences.