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**THE I2I INTERGENERATIONAL SOCIETY OF CANADA: THE
MEADOW SCHOOL PROJECT**

If young people never get to know old people, prejudice and discrimination against the elderly will continue. Growth and aging are both a part of life. To understand both and to see both happening are perhaps the fullest way to experience living...The aged who feel rejected by the young, seek to find acceptance only among other aged and thereby segregate themselves from the young, who in turn reject elders more because they have no close contact with them.¹ (Barrow & Smith 220)

The organization that I will describe in this paper is called i2i Intergenerational Society, and the acronym for i2i is ‘an invitation to intergenerational immersion.’² The i2i Intergenerational Society is a not-for-profit organization, and was created in 2008 by educators, health care workers, older adults, community, parents, and youths. The i2i objective is to promote intergenerational and learning programs that will help people from different demographics to develop rich and sustainable connections. I choose this organization because it is a good example of community development in practice.

In the documentary *Whose Grandma Are You?* The founder, Sharon MacKenzie explains the reason why an intergenerational “immersion” program is very important in our community. There are growing numbers of retirement communities and wall communities in Canada. The seniors in the wall communities have a sense of security from something-- youths, and children. The seniors were seeing an aspect of youths that were largely portrayed in the media, which was not fair to the youths. The media portrayed youths as gang members, murderers, and burglars; youths were never portrayed positively. The 21st century is classified into small groups, where all the workers,

¹ Qtd. in Spruston 38. See also Barrow G., and Smith, P. *Aging, Ageism, and Society*. West Publishing Co: St. Paul, MN, 1979.

² <http://www.intergenerational.ca/home.html>

children, and seniors are been isolated from each other. Sharon believed that “immersion” is the answer to reconnect communities together, and have a small shared community.³

Murray Ross, a Canadian community development specialist, defines community development as:

[A] process by which a community identifies its needs or objectives, orders (or ranks) these needs or objectives, develops the confidence and will to work at these needs or objectives, finds the resources (internal and/or external) to deal with these needs or objectives, takes action in respect to them, and in so doing extends and develops co-operative and collaborative attitudes and practices in the community.⁴

The i2i Intergenerational Society of Canada is a grassroots organization that started doing small projects, which influenced the lives of youths, older adults, educators, and the community. This organization is not a program or a proposed set of plans and outcomes, but is an orientation. The i2i provides resources, and tool kits that will assist educators, who are willing to embark on an intergenerational project. The i2i has enabled youths and educators to create projects with the goal of stopping stereotypes of older adults, and promoting the benefits of intergenerational “immersion” programs. The i2i Intergenerational Society helps generations to see eye to eye, and by so doing-- the community is reconnected.

Intergenerational “immersion” is defined as the process in which people from various age groups connect between generations.⁵ In so doing, children, youths and older adults enjoyed learning and participating with each other. One of the initiatives of the i2i

³ From the documentary *Whose Grandma Are You?*

⁴ Murray Ross, *Community Organization: Theory and Principles* (Harper and Row, New York, 1955), cited in James A., Christenson and Jerry W. Robinson, *Community Development in Perspective* (Iowa State University Press, Ames, Iowa, 1989). See also Murray Ross, *Community Organization: Theory and Principles* (Harper and Row, New York, 1967), especially pages 86–93.

⁵ What is Intergenerational Immersion? See, <http://www.intergenerational.ca/about-us/ig-immersion.html>

Intergenerational Society of Canada was the Meadow School Project (MSP). It is an intergenerational “immersion” project (created in 2000) that shows the “why” and “how” of intergenerational bridging. Through the Meadow School Project, Sharon showed that children, youths, and the elderly people could share their experiences for mutual benefits. The i2i Intergenerational Society’s website and the MSP provide great resources to educators and youths to start their own intergenerational projects.

Definition of IG Immersion

Intergenerational “immersion” is the process where by different generations intentionally come together to share each other’s’ living and working space. When a youth group decide to visit older adults at their residence and participate in some of their activities for a limited time—it is called intergenerational “immersion”. The intergenerational “immersion” projects are often made of large groups, with a limited level of inter-action. The effects of having the connection between generations, “allow opportunities for growth in understanding, empathy, and building hope for relationships in future communities.”⁶ However, the Meadow School Project is the only example of a full intergenerational “immersion” program. For instance, a class of pre-school aged children and youths do not just visits the older adults at their residence on a daily basis; instead, they move into the seniors’ facility for weeks. Beside the students’ regular mandatory school curriculum, the students also share social activities with the older adults and participate in community work.

Background of the i2i Intergenerational Society:

The i2i Intergenerational Society of Canada, is based out of British Columbia, and was established in 2008 to help Canadians reduce the gap between generations. Sharon

⁶ See what is the difference between intergenerational immersion and full intergenerational immersion?

MacKenzie, the founder of the i2i Intergenerational Society (IG) has worked for over 30 years as an educator. Her objective is to connect school aged children and older adults within their communities. The initiative of building bridges between generations saw the creation of the Meadow School Project. The IG found its source and power through the MSP “immersion” program. When Sharon started the MSP, it was a grassroots project that was to bring school age children and youths to participate together with older adults in an assisted living residence-- housing older people. As a result of the i2i Intergenerational Society, Sharon’s role shifted to that of “promotion [promoting] and sharing with the rest of Canada the ‘Why?’ and the ‘How?’ of INTERGENERATIONAL bridging.”⁷

The i2i Intergenerational Society is not just preaching about the inclusion of all generations, but is also practicing intergenerational “immersion”. The i2i working board of directors’ demographics is from 21 years of age to 95 years. Every member of the board of directors shares the IG experience and also encourages others to create new partnerships between all ages. The i2i motto is about “doing things differently, not doing different things.”⁸ The organization believes that creating a connection between generations will help to reconnect people from various age groups within their communities.

Goals of the i2i Intergenerational Society:

The i2i helps Canadian Communities to see how they can reconnect members of their communities, and enrich their current activities by using an intergenerational perspective. IG is an orientation that encourages and assists people to connect between generations.

⁷ <http://www.intergenerational.ca/about-us/history.html>

⁸ Ibid.

This is thanks to the i2i website, resources, presentations, workshops, and other intergenerational projects. The i2i believes that every step towards successful bridging between generations rest in four qualities:

1. Start small
2. Connect interested individuals
3. Ensure clear communication between all generations
4. Celebrate and sustain by sharing with others.⁹

These four qualities help the i2i Intergenerational Society to continue to bridge generations and to be involved in our diverse society. This organization is well structured and organized, to ensure that its downfall does not come from changing personnel, loss of funding and relocation.

Goals of the IG “Immersion”:

June Callwood, the Project Mentor for the MSP said:

“The Meadows School Project is a miracle that keeps unfolding and it gives me hope for the world. This project has such a strong ethical base, and so much compassion. It will, it WILL spread everywhere. It is the great idea whose time has come.”¹⁰

The goal of each intergenerational project differs in its time and the level of involvement of each participant. The MSP findings over the last couple of years have showed that there are hidden benefits when older adults, youths and school aged children connect together while sharing knowledge. The seven hidden benefits identified through the intergenerational “immersion” programs are:

⁹ <http://www.intergenerational.ca/about-us/our-goals.html>

¹⁰ The Goals of IG “immersion.” <http://www.intergenerational.ca/about-us/goals.html>

1. Reducing the level of stereotypical thinking of both generations (older adults, youths and school aged children) that will eventually lead to mutual respect and care.
2. Improve the mental, physical, and social health of all participants
3. Having students share their knowledge of ‘modern culture’ especially new technology. In so doing, it will lead to tolerance and understanding of the ‘modern culture.’
4. Having elders share their wisdom with youths and children
5. Giving children and youths the opportunity to participate in community work, by caring for elders and volunteering at the house residence for older adults
6. Having youths and children involved in personal and social responsibilities, so that they will have the opportunity to develop interest in pursuing caregiving careers
7. Having youths and school aged children spread what they have learnt from the seniors’ home back to their schools and communities (giving back to the community).¹¹

Similar to the Meadow School Project, the authors, William and Nussbaum write on the stereotypes held by youths and children about the elderly, and the stereotypes held by the elderly about youths and children. In their (William and Nussbaum) book *Intergenerational Communication Across the Lifespan* supports the need for intergenerational programs that will suppress the negative believes about the elderly in

¹¹ <http://www.intergenerational.ca/about-us/goals.html>

Canada, and the minimal connections between generations outside the family (qtd. in Spruston 8).

In this modern society, there is a negative perception about aging, and many stereotypes towards older men and women. Ageism is practiced from elementary schools to even our workplaces. Angus and Reeve argue that the Western society is defined by its productivity and independence, which brings discriminations towards older men and women. These values of productivity and independence bring about unconscious stereotypes in the lives of older adults. Angus and Reeve state that:

Ageist assumptions become ingrained in social structures such as the workplace, bureaucracy, public institutions, and the health care system. Ageism can manifest itself in the form of individual acts of discrimination and can have an impact on a wider scale by influencing scientific research, policies, program, and legislation that affect older people. The implications of ageist attitudes toward older people touch all of us and demand remedial responses from all of us.¹² (qtd. in Spruston 9)

Intergenerational “Immersion” Orientation:

There are three possible orientations to intergenerational opportunities: the Baby steps, the Mama steps, and the Giant steps.

The Baby steps “immersion” is aimed at intentionally bringing generations together once or twice a year. It is characterized by simple facilitation, and it is a very important stage. The Baby steps have limited inter-action because the participants meet once or twice a year. Because the Baby steps are characterized by its large groups, it (the

¹² See Angus, J and Reeve, P. “Ageism: A threat to ‘Aging Well’ in the 21st century.” *Journal of applied Gerontology*, 25.5 (2006): 137.

Baby steps) lacks small group contact opportunity that will ease the experience in connecting between generations. The Baby steps “immersion” could be: a large group of people meeting at a senior’s residence lounge, a class doing a choir presentation at the seniors’ home, and an older adult invited at a pre-school class to read a story. The Baby steps also involves grandparents or older adults sharing activities and events such as Christmas, Easter, Thanksgiving, and Halloween with their grandchildren or youths, and preschool children.¹³

The Mama steps brings generations together with the aim of meeting on a regular basis like weekly or monthly. In the Mama steps, the participants are more committed to planning, energy and implementation of the program. The participants are consistent in attendance, with a one-on-one connection between participants. This steps (mama steps) entry level involves: regular weekly visits of one to two hours, the weekly ‘Grandpartnering Club’ (where participants play a board game, and or go for a walk during or after school), weekly contacts between individual elders and students with fine arts as the focus. These intergenerational pairs may create tiles and connecting all the tiles together to form a community mural.¹⁴

The Giant step is also known as the full “immersion” of participants and it is characterized by the following: The first organizational work will be about developing awareness between generations, and introducing a full intergenerational “immersion”

¹³ See other examples of baby steps immersion program,
http://www.intergenerational.ca/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=31:baby-steps&catid=25:baby-steps&Itemid=24

¹⁴ See link for or a list of all what a mama step could look like,
http://www.intergenerational.ca/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=30:mama-steps&catid=24:mama-steps&Itemid=23

program. At this stage, students and educators will meet and live with older adults at their homes on a daily basis for a period of time (five to eight weeks). The educators, elders, and program facilitator are flexible to accommodate the needs of the students. Although, the students are away from their classroom for about five weeks or more, they have a creative and adaptive mandatory curriculum to follow every day. The deeper relations between the children, youths, and older adults could lead to more “sustainable attitudinal changes.” The full intergenerational “immersion” program will give students a good understanding of senior care homes, and the care giving occupations may influence their career choice in the future. The full “immersion” program could take place throughout the entire school year, or a school term, with the same school class living at the seniors’ residence. Also, during school vacations, pre-school children meet with older adults on a daily basis at the senior’ residence or recreational facilities to share various activities: storytelling, crafts work, lunch, and visiting.¹⁵

The Meadow School Project:

The Meadow School Project (MSP) was initiated in 2000, by Sharon Mackenzie in the rural community of Coldstream in south-central British Columbia, in Canada. This full intergenerational “immersion” program is the hard work of a public school teacher, who believes that community-based learning is one of the best philosophical approaches to learning. Sharon had made it a practice to bring her students to visit older adults’ residence, but these visits were briefs and did not allow both children and elderly adults to interact. Because of the short-lived visits, the children and older adults kept to

¹⁵ To view pictures and activities of full immersion programs follow link, http://www.intergenerational.ca/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=29:full-immersion&catid=23:immersion-project&Itemid=22

themselves, rather than communicate with each other. There was a lack of empathy from both participants because of the large groups and brief visits. Sharon's goal of bringing her students to visit the seniors was for them (children and seniors) to share knowledge, but it was unsuccessful. This is because the students had limited time to interact with the older adults, and vice versa (the older adults not able to interact because of the brief visits and large groups).

The founding teacher, planned to bring older adults and children to intentionally participate together and enjoy communicating and learning from each other. She does not want to force the seniors or the children to connect between generations; rather she wants it to be a purposeful connection. This teacher (Sharon MacKenzie) received approval from the BC school district 22 and the Coldstream Meadow Retirement Community Residential care facility to move her upper-level elementary class to the Coldstream Meadow Retirement home for a period of five to eight weeks.¹⁶ While the students were at the seniors' residence, they still followed their school curriculum, and merged their daily schedule with the activities of older adults who were interested in the program. The MSP goals are similar to the intergenerational "immersion" goals listed above in this paper.¹⁷

The MSP is a unique example of an intergenerational "immersion" program. The term "immersion" refers to the act of being fully involved in an activity, while "Intergenerational Immersion" refers to "the degree of intensity of intergenerational

¹⁶ The MSP was for five weeks in the fall term and three weeks in the spring term.

¹⁷ You may also read the MSP goal in, MacKenzie, Sharon, L., Carson, Arlene J., and Kuehne, Valerie. "The Meadow School Project: A unique Intergenerational 'Immersion' program." *Journal of Intergenerational Relationship*, 9.2 (2011): 208.

connections overtime” (MacKenzie et al. 209). The success of an intergenerational program is to create activities that will develop the attitude and understanding of participants, which will help them throughout their lifetime. The students and older adults are bonding because of their level of interaction when sharing regular activities together.

In Canada, people are more familiar with the term “immersion” in public education because children from families with an English speaking background will be enrolled into “French immersion” programs, where students are thought almost entirely in French. However, the MSP is the only example of intergenerational “immersion” program that is familiar to people in Canada and abroad. It is a unique example of shared site programming because it involves having “relocated rather than co-located students” (MacKenzie et al. 209). In the MSP, students from one class (upper elementary class) travelled by bus from their school to the Coldstream Meadow residence and back each week of the program (It was an 8 minute bus commute). Once a week, the students returned back to their traditional classroom to connect with their school.

The MSP Activities:

The MSP ensured that students and older adults from the Coldstream residence participated in group activities such as sharing fitness activities, craft works that reflected a particular season (example, Halloween pumpkin carving), singing, and special celebrations like annual reunion of former students and residents who also participated in the MSP. The student’s mandatory school curriculum was creative and adaptive to the intergenerational program. The MSP program was integrated because it comprised of “history studies (including immigration), the study of the body’s growth, and aging,

literature studies, music, art, poetry, memory work, spelling bees, and science fair” (Mackenzie et al. 2009). The program also had an aspect of community service, which was a requirement in the students’ curriculum. The students were fully involved in the MSP, and were given the responsibility to set the tables for lunch, serve tea, upload groceries, clean, organize, recycle, decorate, and more. The residents also helped the students in doing the community services, so that the students should have fun while working.

The Successes of the MSP:

There are several factors that contributed to the MSP, and thanks to the good planning skills of the founder, Sharon, and the supportive staff who secured a partnership with the owner of the care facility. The Coldstream Meadow facility was an ideal location to initiate the MSP; its large geographical setting provided enough play space for the children during recess time. The facility also had a small unused chapel that was transformed into the students’ classroom, where they continued to study their mandatory curriculum. Kuehne and Kaplan state that the “chapel classroom also provided an ‘escape space’ for students, an environmental feature of shared site intergenerational program design that warrants greater attention” (qtd. in MacKenzie et al. 210).

Another aspect of planning included preparing the students and educators both physically and mentally about the present state of some elder adults at the Coldstream Meadow residence. Students learnt about aging, older adults who had hearing impairment, information about chronic diseases especially when aging, social manners for respectful interaction. The teacher met with the activity director to discuss the program activities, and expectations of the students’ behaviour (MSP) before they came to the facility. The activity director also had a meeting with the facility’s staff and the

resident to brief them about the program, the changes in the older adults' daily activities and their behaviour towards the students. There were some concerns been brought up, for example the housekeeper felt the need to keep the resident facility clean, when the students arrived. This concern was remedied, by installing a "boot box" at the entrance designed for students, so that they do not enter the building with dirt (Mackenzie et al. 110).

All the staff members in the facility were fully involved in the program; even the gardener, kitchen and maintenance staffs. The kitchen staff asked to know how they will assign the students to help them in important duties. The intergenerational program also included community services, and the students were assigned 90 minutes of community work each week under light supervision of the teachers and staff members. The inclusion of a community service was beneficial for both parties (the students, staff and the older adults). The idea of having students volunteer in various social task of the facility gave them a sense of belonging in the program, and also reduced the work of the staff members. The students' interest in doing 90 minutes of community work in the residence changed the older adults' perspectives on youths. This is because the "residents were also impressed with the students' display of solid work ethic, which bolstered their positive opinions of today's youth" (MacKenzie et al. 211). Because of intergenerational "immersion" programs such as the MSP; older adults are able to purposefully connect with the students, and learn to appreciate one another.

Another factor that contributed to the success of the program is open communication to parents or caregivers. The teacher and supportive staffs organized meetings with parents and caregivers to discuss and update them about the program. The

parents and caregivers were also encouraged to become volunteers in the program, so that they can better understand the concept of intergenerational “immersion” from their own perspective.

In order to reduce the cost of spending; the MSP has been sharing space, equipment, supplies, and even snacks between the school and the residence facility. As a result of the MSP’s concept of sharing; the level of funding required for the project was small. The main cost for supplies has been under \$500, but has been shared between the school district and the retirement facility. MacKenzie et al. write that, the “In kind support has been crucial, including the use of the facility and bus, and volunteer hours from parents and guest speakers” (211).

Benefits of the MSP:

Sharon, the founding teacher documented and assessed the program for over seven years. Students were asked to write daily journals of their activities, and participants were surveyed in regards to their perception of the program.¹⁸ The relationship between the students and the older adults became stronger because each participant learned much about the other -- through interaction. The students’ interaction with the older elders gave them the opportunity to learn about aging -- through observations and shared activities. The students and elders were able to bond together and that helped the group in building strong friendship. The seniors shared past memories with the students, which was helpful for their history class. Many people observed that through the MSP; the children, older adults, and staff were able to create a sense of community development and wellness in each other’s lives. Prior to the program,

¹⁸ To read the full coverage of the students, older adults, parents, and staff members testimonials about the MSP, follow the link: <http://www.intergenerational.ca/about-us/testimonials.html>

residents were not interested in sharing activities with the children, and preferred to be isolated. But eventually, some residents became fully involved in the program, and even rescheduled their appointments. This was because some interested older adults did not want to miss any activity with the children.

As a result of the MSP, the stereotypes that existed between both parties disappeared because they had the opportunity to learn about taking care of older adults from the staff members and family of the elder adults. At the end of the first part of the program, the student gained a level of understanding about aging, caretaking, and respect during their interaction with the elder adults. When the students returned back to the Coldstream Meadow residence for the remaining three weeks in spring; they had adopted a sense of empathy in their interaction with the older adults. The intergenerational relationships created a stronger friendship between the participants.

The cost in facilitating the program demanded minimal funding because the catering work, planning, and organization of the MSP activities was done by the students, older adults, staffs, parents, and educators. The success of the MSP influenced the rural community because the parents and caretakers of the students invited and transported the residents to their homes for tea (MacKenzie et al. 212).

In 2008, university researchers received a grant from the Canadian Institute of Health (Institute of aging) to conduct a case study on the MSP, and collect data information from present and past participants in the program. There were 76 participants in this qualitative research, and a total of 82 one-on-one interviews that looked at the outcomes the MSP had on the health and wellbeing of older adults. They also explored

the learning and developing impact the program had in the lives of the students or children. The finding of the research confirmed that:

...this intergenerational “immersion” program led to the establishment of important social connection between the youth/ students and older adult residents involved. These social connections, in turned, resulted in improved health, social, educational and developmental outcomes for both youth/students and the older residents involved in the program. (MacKenzie et al. 212).

The researchers also found that the social relationship of both participants was as a result of the planned (program activities), and spontaneous (mentorship) interactions.

The Challenges of the MSP:

Sharon, the i2i Executive Director, was a guest speaker in a 30 minute-in-call interview with British Columbia Almanac, from the CBC radio. The most amazing thing that Sharon found during the MSP initiative was the commonality that both participants found in each other. During the interview, Sharon discloses the challenges that she encountered when initiating the MSP.

One of the social barriers to intergenerational programs is the lack of experience of crossing over. There are many students who do not have a close relationship with their grandparents because their grandparents live in another part of the country. Also, with the high rate of immigration now in Canada, there are many children born in Canada whose grandparents live in another country. As result, children and youths lack the experience of grandchild and grandparent relationship that affects their perspective of older adults.

Some parents often advice their children not to speak to strangers, and quite often the number of people at groceries stores during the day are old people. As such, children cannot speak to strangers or older adults in groceries stores because they have been advised by their parents.

Also the issue of stereotyping and ageism is right across Canada, and around the world, where people have preconceived ideas about seniors and children. This is the biggest barrier where older adults are perceived as worn out and scary and young people have very strange behaviour. The youths and older people are prejudged before even getting the chance to know them—that is because of lack of experience (CBC Radio, B.C Almanac Jan. 17th 2011).

The Future of the i2i IG and the MSP:

The success of the MSP has generated a lot of interest from “care facilities, school districts, the Canadian government, and provincial ministries of education, health and human resources” (MacKenzie et al. 212). The MSP will serve as a pilot program for other future intergenerational “immersion” projects. There are several provinces, including five additional areas in British Columbia who are planning to create intergenerational “immersion” programs. The MSP has received several media coverage, and an accredited one hour documentary, produced by the filmmaker Jim Elderton in 2007-- *Whose Grandma Are You?* This documentary captures the picture of the MSP “immersion” program, and shows the benefits of a full intergenerational program in the lives of youths and older adults. Through Elderton’s film, one can conclude that “a picture is worth a thousand words...and a few tears.”¹⁹

The MSP model is now in its eleventh year, and Sharon, the founding teacher’s dream is to have the MSP model adopted in other schools across Canada, so that the benefits could be shared with other students and seniors. The founding teacher has always been working to promote the benefits of the MSP, and its expansion across Canada.

¹⁹ Jim Elderton, a filmmaker. He approached MacKenzie, and suggested making a documentary of the MSP after watching an amateur video of MSP. <http://www.intergenerational.ca/resources/documentary.html>

There is a great need for further research in the intergenerational “immersion” programs, especially the MSP that serves as a pilot example for future intergenerational programs. It is high time people, specifically educators create intergenerational connection programs that will change the way society perceive older men and women, and isolate children from connecting with older adults (Spruston 38).

It is very important that people from different age group connect with each other. The absence of intergenerational programs will affect the lives of youths because they will not have the opportunity to share the wisdom and knowledge of older adults. The i2i Intergenerational society, and its website have rich resources that will assist other educators to embark in the same journey as the founding teacher—Sharon Mackenzie. It is the goal of i2i to encourage, and orientate other educators to create full intergenerational programs that will bring youths and children to intentionally connect with older adults (Spruston 38). In so doing, the intergenerational programs will help youths, children, and older adults to reconnect within their communities.

The i2i Intergenerational Society is an orientation that tries to enrich existing communities by using the intergenerational “immersion” approach to strengthen, and develop their communities. The intergenerational program gives the opportunity to students, children and older adults to feel productive in this modern society, and to understand the importance of sharing activities together.

The IG website has a bulletin board, where people can share their intergenerational projects to the public. In this bulletin board, people can view all the posted intergenerational projects.²⁰ These IG projects provide a good learning experience,

²⁰ To view all of the IG projects follow this link: <http://www.intergenerational.ca/bulletin-board/projects.htm>

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health, and wellbeing for both participants. The students and older adults have a lot of fun interacting with each other—all thanks to the IG programs.

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