

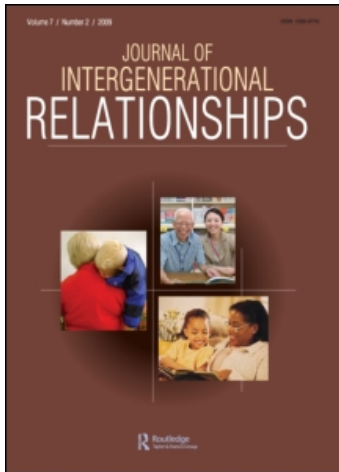
This article was downloaded by: [MacKenzie, Sharon]

On: 31 May 2011

Access details: Access Details: [subscription number 938218142]

Publisher Routledge

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## Journal of Intergenerational Relationships

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t792306900>

### The Meadows School Project: A Unique Intergenerational “Immersion” Program

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Online publication date: 31 May 2011

**To cite this Article** MacKenzie, Sharon L. , Carson, Arlene J. and Kuehne, Valerie S.(2011) 'The Meadows School Project: A Unique Intergenerational “Immersion” Program', Journal of Intergenerational Relationships, 9: 2, 207 – 212

**To link to this Article:** DOI: 10.1080/15350770.2011.568343

**URL:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15350770.2011.568343>

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## FROM THE FIELD

### Program Profile

# The Meadows School Project: A Unique Intergenerational “Immersion” Program

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## THE MEADOWS SCHOOL PROJECT: BACKGROUND, RATIONALE AND GOALS

The Meadows School Project™ (MSP) started in 2000 in the rural community of Coldstream in south-central British Columbia (BC), Canada. This unique intergenerational “immersion” project is the brainchild of a long-tenured public-school teacher for whom community-based learning is a guiding philosophy. After many years of taking her students for brief visits with older adults in the community, this teacher was discouraged. Communication between the generations seemed restrained and lacking in empathy. The potential for generations to learn from one another was rarely realized in these occasional, short, and contrived visits. She wished to bring students and older adults into more purposeful and meaningful contact.

Working with administrative staff from BC School District 22 and the Coldstream Meadows Retirement Community residential care facility, this teacher gained approval to relocate her upper-level elementary class to a

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We express our gratitude to all participants and organizations involved with the Meadows School Project for their contributions to its success and their unwavering support. Thank you to Melanie Tousignant for the great photo. We also acknowledge funding for the research study of the Meadows School Project from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research.

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**FIGURE 1** Meadows School Project participants share their love for music. Photo credit: Melanie Tousignant (Color figure available online).

makeshift classroom in this assisted living facility for multiple week blocks, first in the fall term (five weeks over October–November) and later (starting in the 2003–04 year) in both the fall term and for an additional three weeks in May. Reciprocal visits were made between care home and school every few weeks during the balance of the school year. During their tenure at the facility, students followed their mandated school curriculum while interlocking their daily calendar with that of the residents, meeting with interested older adults twice each day in a small group or two-students-to-one-resident format. The project goals were to: (a) break down stereotypical thinking of both generations about the other; (b) improve the mental, physical, and social health of all parties, including staff and families; (c) build understanding of the “modern culture” through students sharing with older adults; (d) give opportunities for young people to develop interest in pursuing careers that involve working with older adults; (e) give students authentic opportunities to develop personal and social responsibility through daily involvement with older adults and public service at the seniors’ residence; and (f) have older adults share knowledge with students.

#### UNIQUE “IMMERSION” ASPECT OF THE MSP

The MSP is termed an “immersion” model of intergenerational programming. “Immersion” is the process of being absorbed or involved deeply in

an activity. “Intergenerational immersion” refers to the degree of intensity of intergenerational connections over time. A major goal of much intergenerational programming is to develop attitudes and understandings during activities that are deep enough to last throughout participants’ lives. The philosophy of the MSP is that this goal may be more easily achieved through intergenerational immersion, which allows intensification in the degree of interaction, in both quantity and quality, between youth and older adults. Time spent together sharing regular, daily routines provides ongoing opportunities for both planned as well as unstaged, more authentic interaction that permits each group to “get to know” the other through naturally occurring events and activities. Metaphorically speaking, it may be compared to the difference between visiting a country on a bus tour and living in the country for a longer time.

In Canada, “immersion” is a familiar concept in public education because many students in predominantly English-speaking communities nationwide are enrolled in popular “French immersion” programs where students receive instruction almost entirely in French rather than in English. The MSP is, however, the only example of intergenerational “immersion” we are aware of in Canada or abroad. It may be considered a unique form of shared site programming, one that relocated rather than co-located students. In the MSP, students from one class (approximately 30 in number each year from either a grade 5, 6, 5/6 or 6/7 split class) traveled an eight-minute school bus ride daily from their school (following school announcements) to the Coldstream Meadows Retirement Community facility and back each week of the program. One afternoon a week was spent back in their “regular” classroom to maintain ties with their home school.

## ACTIVITIES

The MSP engaged these students and residents of the Coldstream Meadows Retirement Community (ranging in number from 10 to 30 residents directly participating) in a variety of group activities, sharing armchair fitness classes, craft projects geared to the season (such as Halloween pumpkin carving and spring bonnet making), sing-a-longs and special celebrations including an annual reunion in June to bring together former students and residents involved with the MSP. The students’ curriculum across subjects adapted well to an intergenerational context, incorporating history studies (including immigration), the study of the body’s growth and aging, literature studies, music, art, poetry memory work, spelling bees, and science fairs. A service-learning component was also included whereby students helped set lunch tables, serve tea, sand and paint picnic tables, pick apples, unload groceries, rake leaves, clean gardens and plant, put up decorations and take them down, sort recycling and more. Motivated residents also helped to plan and lead some of the activities. A noteworthy initiative has seen a 93-year-old

resident fulfill her lifelong dream of having her writings published. Students illustrated several of the children's books she has written; these have been sold as a fundraiser for a grade 12 scholarship for students of the MSP who have continued to work with older adults.

### CAREFUL PLANNING LEADS TO SUCCESS

Several factors have led to the success of the MSP. Careful planning by the founding teacher and supportive staff included securing a committed partnership with the care facility whose owners were long-time, trusted acquaintances of the teacher. The Coldstream Meadows facility's natural, rural setting was ideally suited for intergenerational programming; its spacious grounds provided students ample area to play during recess, with chickens and rabbits on-site to care for and entertain the students. An unused small chapel near the residents' lodge was converted into the students' classroom where core curriculum was studied each day and books and other materials and belongings were housed. The chapel classroom also provided an "escape space" for students, an environmental feature of shared site intergenerational program design that warrants greater attention (Kuehne & Kaplan, 2001).

Planning also included student and staff training. As part of their pre-program training, the students learned about aging, such as information about common chronic conditions, strategies to better communicate with older adults who have hearing or speech impairments, and social skills for respectful interaction. Prior to the students' arrival, the teacher met with the activity director of the facility to discuss the project in detail: how a typical day might unfold in terms of activities, scheduling, movement patterns, and shared use of space; and the "rules of engagement,"— the expectations of student behavior, limits of where they could go, and what they could use and protocol to address any concerns. The activity director, in turn, met with her staff members and the residents. Troubleshooting was addressed collaboratively. For example, the housekeeper was worried that students would track dirt into the facility. This concern was resolved by installing a "boot box" at one entry designated for student use.

Staff members of all levels were involved in the program, including gardener, kitchen staff, and maintenance staff. They were also asked how they might engage the students to meaningfully assist them in necessary tasks. As noted, each child helped for 90 minutes each week under the supervision of the teacher and a staff member. The inclusion of this service-learning aspect was a win-win for all involved; volunteering enhanced a sense of belonging for students and the help was much appreciated by staff members who benefited from having an extra 40 hours of supervised help per week. The residents were also impressed with the students' display

of a solid work ethic, which bolstered their positive opinions of today's youth.

Ongoing open communication was another key factor in program success. This included preprogram information meetings with parents and ongoing updates provided to parents/caregivers over the course of the program. Parents were encouraged to become involved as volunteer helpers.

Another strength of the MSP has been the sharing (space, equipment, supplies, even cookies) between the school and the care facility, resulting in minimal funding required to facilitate the project. Direct costs have been under \$500 per year for supplies, shared between the school district and the facility. In kind support has been crucial, including the use of the facility and bus and volunteer hours from parents and guest speakers.

## BENEFITS

Over the first seven years of the MSP, the founding teacher diligently documented and informally assessed the program. Participants were surveyed and students completed daily journals of reflections about their experiences while in the program. Relationships between individual residents and students clearly blossomed as each learned more about the other during formal and spontaneous interaction. The students learned about aging through observations and activities with the older adults while both groups built friendships based on shared memories and shared projects. Many observed how a sense of community and wellness visibly permeated the older adults, children, and staff. Residents became more active and animated, often rescheduling other appointments so as not to miss time with the children. Not only were stereotypes being dispelled on all sides, students learned about caretaking from the staff and families of the older adults. As the young people matured between fall and spring terms, they brought a new empathetic energy to their interactions with residents when they returned to the immersion environment in the spring. Friendships were strongly renewed, building longevity into these intergenerational relationships. The benefits to all parties when respectfully and purposefully connected in a lived situation were outstanding. The "cost" was in reconceptualizing, especially from an educational stance, what was already being done. The work was a partnership of caring: older adults, children, educators, and care home staff all planned and implemented joint activities with collective goals. Broader community impact was also noted; for example, students' families invited and transported residents to their homes for tea.

In 2008, assisted by a grant from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (Institute of Aging), university researchers undertook a rigorous case study of the MSP, tracking the 2008 school year and collecting data retrospectively from participants and others involved with prior years of the

program. A total of 76 respondents participated in this qualitative research for a total of 82 one-on-one interviews that explored the effects the program has had on the health and well-being of the older adult participants and student learning and developmental outcomes. Research findings confirmed informal findings that this intergenerational “immersion” program led to the establishment of important social connections between the youth/students and older adult residents involved. These social connections, in turn, resulted in improved health, social, educational and developmental outcomes for both youth/students and the older adult residents involved in the program. Another key research finding was that social connections were both an antecedent and an outcome/consequence of both planned interactions (e.g., program activities) and spontaneous (e.g., mentorship) interactions between youth/students and older adults. These findings have been submitted in more detail to an upcoming special issue of this journal devoted to shared site programs.

### NEXT STEPS

The MSP has generated great interest from care facilities, school districts, the Canadian government, and provincial ministries of education, health, and human resources. While other intergenerational “immersion” programs have yet to spring from the MSP, pilot programs informed by the MSP are underway in several provinces, including five additional sites in British Columbia. Media coverage of the MSP has included numerous print articles, radio interviews, and an acclaimed hour-long documentary film (Elderton, 2007).

For more information about the Meadows School Project and related intergenerational initiatives in Canada, visit the i2i website: [www.intergenerational.ca](http://www.intergenerational.ca).

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