

Dandelions Are Flowers Too, You Know

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I encourage you (Meadows School Project) to continue your efforts to break down the solitudes and bring generations of Canadians together. These are real, concrete and lasting contributions.

- Governor General Michaëlle Jean

Good Afternoon everyone. It is an honour and a pleasure to be invited here to speak at your conference so appropriately titled, 'Innovation, Shared Wisdom, Positive Outcomes'. I am particularly happy that you have use the word 'innovation' rather than invention, in your conference title.

What I am going to talk to you about, is nothing new. It's not an invention, but rather is simply a new re-looking at something that we have done before, which in its innovation, is having amazing, positive outcomes. In the work that I have been involved with, the Seniors' Residence becomes a bountiful jewelry box. There are no nose rings, no glow in the dark necklaces, no new inventions in the 'bling' world. Instead, each day when the lid of the jewelry box is opened, faded treasures are polished and tenderly held by young hands, to reveal qualities that previously were unnoticed. Senior attitudes and emotional health visibly improve with the inclusion of the young participants. Human relationships blossom, and are dusted with the magic of time spent. Children and seniors, living and working through the day together; not an invention, my friends, merely an innovation that has led to positive outcomes beyond all that project developers dreamed.

Meadows School is an intergenerational immersion project going into its eighth year in Vernon, British Columbia. Thirty students, nine to thirteen years of age, from Kidston Elementary School move their classroom to the nearby independent supportive living site at Coldstream Meadows Retirement Community for two full months, 9 to 2:30, Monday to Friday. Students participate within the activity calendar of the seniors, while studying government mandated curriculum, and building community through public service.

The project was initiated as an attempt to break down stereotyping between the two generations, with the goal of building authentic and lasting relationships between youth and elders. The teacher and senior care activities director had both been part of single visitations, where the intergenerational activities were

well planned, though brief, and often irregular in their scheduling. Both the school and the seniors' centre had their own busy timetables that frequently took precedence, dropping the intergenerational visits down the priority list. The degree of success of such interfaces did not seem to match the extra effort that was necessary to facilitate them. After a boisterous beginning, interest generally waned, and the sustainability of the connections was questionable.

Feeling that the initial goal was a critically important one in light of rapidly declining community connectedness, the teacher developed an alternate proposal. With the consent of the Coldstream Meadows Retirement Community, senior residents, staff, the school district administration, students, and parents, an immersion pilot was launched in the fall of 2001. The students moved into a simplified makeshift classroom, an unused chapel, for the month of October with bi-monthly morning visits continuing on until June, 2002. From November to the end of the year, seniors were invited to school events such as concerts and class presentations, and alternate to that, the students returned to the Retirement Community to share their talents, have ice cream parties, and visit their elder friends.

The pilot by mid-year was a resounding success, but in the spring of the year upon returning for the morning visit to the centre, a student voiced his anxiety about going back to see the seniors. He said that he did not really know them any longer, and felt awkward and reserved. He was not alone in his newly budding self-consciousness. It became clear that the students were growing up and facing new perceptions of themselves as individuals. The fragile and intimate 'grandpartner'-child connection that had been built during the month of immersion in October, was being eroded by the changing social nature of the class. The goal of the project now took on a more complex aspect, which was soon to be one of the most exciting discoveries of all in this intergenerational journey.

The following year it was agreed that the project had to have a greater degree of commitment to the immersion factor, so the month in autumn was extended to five weeks with an additional immersion for three weeks in May. The project took wings.

It became apparent that we were reaching far more goals than we had initially set. Our revised goals list included:

1. breaking down of stereotypical thinking of both generations through engendering respect and caring
2. improving mental, physical, and social health of all parties, including staff and families
3. building tolerance and understanding of the "modern culture" as students share with seniors
4. sharing senior wisdom with students
5. giving students authentic opportunities to develop personal and social responsibility through caring for seniors, and volunteering at the seniors'

residence

6. giving opportunities for young people to develop interest in pursuing careers in care-giving

7. spreading of good will from the seniors' home and from the school, out into the community

The project plan requires that students spend roughly one third of their time studying in the basic subject areas of the Ministry mandated curriculum, one third in direct contact with seniors participating in activities that are adapted to the mandated curriculum, and one third participating in community service activities at the centre. Curriculum is creatively adapted to have relevance at the seniors' residence. For example, the 1927 Eaton's catalogue provides the information for worksheets in math, interviews with the seniors provide mapping and historical reference material for Social Studies. In time spent with seniors, areas of the Language Arts curriculum may be the lesson for the day. Children may write and read information to the seniors, share oral story reading, or present memory work in poetry. They may invite seniors to participate in a Science project using simple machines to invent a device to assist an elderly person in an everyday task, have seniors oversee a handwriting assignment, or partner in a spelling bee. Public service ranges from a small team setting the dinner tables in the dining hall every day, to weeding gardens, or filling bird feeders. Hands are rarely idle, but all that the child does is in the context of the seniors' home.

Seniors have the option to participate at several levels from one-on-one daily contact for an hour or more, to occasional participation as a observer, or audience. Some seniors chose to opt out completely, and the educator and students are respectful of those who would prefer to have their living environment free of the congestion of younger people. At any time, seniors may chose to participate or not, and the children have that option too, though they rarely exercise it. The senior calendar is followed for the most part with little disruption to their normal schedule. Seniors are always welcome to stop by the classroom to share, sit by a student, or just observe.

All of this does not just happen, but is the result of a few strategically designed and presented lessons or discussions. Once into the project, teacher and health care participant(s) have brief meetings to coordinate schedules, participant partners, and regular and special activities. Above all, a respectful demeanor must override in all that is planned, and facilitated. That initial goal of respectful bridge building is key, and touches at the very core of success of this endeavour.

Over the past seven years, the Meadows School Project has caught the notice of several of Canada's most recognized citizens, and has been honoured by heartfelt comments of support from participants, and the local community. Children from grade one to ten have chosen to have on-going involvement with the senior community, and comments from the seniors and their families speak of renewed interest in life, energizing experiences, stimulation of age old memories,

and a new found sense of purpose in relationships with the younger generation. The overall benefits regarding improved mental, physical, and social health are evident to even the casual observer.

Requiring no additional financial support, it is possible to coordinate the reorganization of time and activities for the full immersion intergenerational project. This provides immediate accessibility to a rich field of interpersonal connections. The project fulfils many goals both from an education and health point of view, is fun, and engenders a depth of lasting love and goodness that is difficult to duplicate. Very recently, our project has made some astounding leaps. Thanks to important people dedicated to the mental, physical, emotional, and social wellness of others, we are being enabled to bring awareness of innovative practice in intergenerational bridging.

Jim Elderton, a Vernon filmmaker, has made a one hour documentary called "Whose Grandma Are You?" (available at jim@jimelderton.com). You will be seeing the short version this afternoon, and it too is available from Jim. The B.C. Ministry of Health has selected the Meadows School Project to be showcased in their Case Studies of Community Actions in Active Aging report. This report will be shared with municipalities, health authorities, seniors' organizations, and other agencies involved with older people in British Columbia. Introduction of the project will take place at a Ministry of Health Symposium to be held in Vancouver, June 5th, 2008. Registration for that is on line at <http://www.bcactiveaging.ca/>. Although pre-registration is mandatory, there is no registration fee for the Symposium showcasing Meadows School Project and other successful intergenerational activities in British Columbia.

In addition, building on the Meadows School Project, the Ministry has partnered with the British Columbia Care Providers Association to assist me in developing a toolkit for educators and service providers to use, in order to promote age-friendly communities through intergenerational connections. The purpose of this toolkit is to assist care homes and schools in the step by step building of strong and sustainable intergenerational programmes. It is our invitation to you, care providers and health personnel, to participate in one of life's oldest activities, the bringing together of community.

Our project is best summed up by the words of the late June Callwood, who was my mentor in this project up until her death a year ago.

I wish this project was happening in Ontario. Well, I wish it was happening everywhere... Something this good should be imbedded in the school system. (2004)

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. (2006)

The Meadows School Project is a miracle that keeps unfolding and it gives me hope for the world. (January, 2007)

And now, as seniors and children come together, they walk across the intergenerational bridge to a field of dandelions. The children pick the flowers and spend the afternoon making necklaces and bracelets. Watching the children, the seniors anticipate the outcome. These dandelion chains are placed lovingly around the necks of the senior friends, and these necklaces of flowers become the innovations placed in the jewelry box by the senior hands who cherish them deeply. They know that they are not an invention, not merely connections of flowers to flowers, but rather are an expression of connections of people to people. And the chain of wellness and love goes on.

Thank you.