

## A Funny Feeling

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"When you walk by the sweet and kind seniors, you get a funny feeling in your stomach. Do you know what that is? It is love!!"

Female student grade 6 Meadows School Project

Sharon MacKenzie grew up depending upon and learning with her elders. She also learned very well how to play the school game, cramming for tests, getting As and then forgetting a lot of what she had studied. She felt frustrated by the lack of real connecting of learning to experience. So when Sharon became a classroom teacher 27 years ago, she felt it was very important to have her students interact with elders as well as have meaningful and memorable learning experiences in community. To provide these intergenerational experiences for her students, once or twice a year Sharon would take her class to a local elder care facility to do a puppet show or do interviews or some other activity. Then she started having her students visit a care facility regularly and the children would connect with the elders through music and games. Sharon was still unsatisfied as she noticed that the children behaved well primarily because they didn't want to get in trouble rather than out of a deep respect for the elders. She longed for the students to develop relationships with the elders that were sustaining and meaningful. In addition to these visits to the elder care facility, she had the students out of the classroom and in the community about 50% of the time, learning from a wide variety of community experts such as car mechanics and university professors. Seeing the quality of the learning, the multiplication of adult attention given to children and the variety and quality of resources available to her students by going out into the community, she began to ask herself, "what would happen if I just put my classroom somewhere else?" For traditional education, this was a huge conceptual jump.

In 2000, Sharon's neighbour purchased an Assisted Living Facility in her community. Sharon approached her neighbour to ask if she could set up her classroom in the facility. The neighbour said yes, and so was born the Meadows School Project. A makeshift classroom for thirty students ages 9-12 was set up in the Assisted Living Facility, which housed 50 elders. The students were bussed from their regular school in School District #22 in Vernon, to their new classroom every day for five weeks in the autumn and three weeks in the spring. They also visited two or three times per month in between these immersion sessions. The student's timetable was interwoven with the elders who volunteered to participate in the project.

There were three aspects to the project. The first aspect was covering the provincially mandated curriculum. Sharon looks at the whole year of curriculum and finds what goals can be met by learning alongside the elders. One example is covering grade 5 curriculum for body science by studying developmental stages and aging. The second aspect of the Meadows School Project was service. The children each spent 90-minutes per week giving back to the elder care facility by doing such things as cleaning, filling bird feeders, and setting the dining room table as well as keeping their own classroom clean. The third aspect of the program was designated one-on-one, two-on-one, small group or large group connection between the elders and the children. There

were two opportunities every day –one in the morning and one in the afternoon. Additionally, each child became an ‘Earth Angel’ for one of the elders. The Earth Angel’s job was to connect face to face with their elder and say hello and to send a card on birthdays and other special occasions.

The results of this project have been amazing. The health and well being of the elders improved. The students learned about so many things from their elders. Sharon said, “I was choked up getting off the school bus at the end of each day. The kids were talking constantly about their experiences, sharing all of the little things that happened with each other. When we said goodbye at the end of each day, seniors were waving and touching the children’s hands.” Sharon had found the sustaining and meaningful relationships for her students she had been longing for and in the process addressed loneliness and isolation of both generations.

This idea of having a classroom somewhere other than a school Sharon now refers to as “Community Embedded Praxis ©” which can also be described as community immersion education. When I interviewed Sharon we spoke at length about the segregation of our children and our elders from the rest of society as a source of sadness for both of us. We spoke of how wonderful it is during Spring Break when we see children with their parents in stores and at the bank. How did this come about that we decided it was a good idea to keep children separate from every one else?

In the industrial model, school came out of a need to keep children occupied while parents worked in the factories and to prepare children to work in those same factories. In this model the teacher taught the child and the emphasis was on memorizing and regurgitating what was taught. In the 1970’s, when Sharon began teaching, educators were seeing that experiential learning was valuable and so the idea of field trips and hands-on learning was introduced into schools. There became an understanding that the village teaches the children, however children were and are currently still isolated from the rest of the village most of the time.

Up until the time when the school model was introduced, children were integrated into the community itself interacting with people of all ages and learning from a variety of elders who served as mentors. The elders provided care for the children giving them a very important role in community. The Meadows School Project brings us full circle to these times. “Yet it also marks an evolution happening in education into a model where the village and the children learn together in meaningful ways,” Sharon emphasized. She says, “we have to get back to connecting people in a very real, authentic, way. We have to empower and activate people to become authentic contributors, to have meaning. We need to reflect and reconceptualize educating”

We spoke of the emphasis in schools today on literacy as being very focused on reading with less focus on spoken communication. Sharon noticed that after participating in the Meadows School Project, “every single student could carry on a conversation talking with anybody from five weeks to 100 years old. [The children] had a sense of empowerment when they could speak to

people of any generation with appropriate language.” It’s true that when children spend much of their time interacting primarily with other children of the same age, they can come off as having poor manners and being disrespectful when speaking to adults. Children typically don’t have many meaningful opportunities to develop respectful communication skills. In the Meadows School Project the children develop impeccable manners, respect and care in their interactions with the elders from an authentic desire to be in a harmonious relationship with them.

In 2008, great interest in the Meadows School Project started to happen. “People are seeing [with the Meadows Schools Project] something tangible and they get really excited to see a solution to a problem they’ve seen [the disconnect between kids and seniors],” Sharon said. She went on to say that, “good things should not be kept a secret.” So Sharon has created the i2i Intergenerational Society, “to promote intergenerational learning opportunities, and to assist in developing rich and sustainable connections between generations.” Additionally, a documentary film was made about the project called, “Whose Grandma are you?” by Jim Elderton, a Vernon-based filmmaker.

So far this year things continue to expand and grow. There is significant growing interest in initiating Intergenerational projects all over Canada, including British Columbia (Delta, Abbotsford, Campbell River, Vernon, Salmon Arm, Fort St. John, Langley, Surrey and Vancouver), Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba and Ontario. Sharon was asked to develop an Intergenerational Toolkit to support educators and service providers with tools to promote age-friendly communities. This collaborative toolkit (BC Ministry of Healthy Living and Sport, BC Care Providers) is available as a free download on the i2i website [www.intergenerational.ca](http://www.intergenerational.ca). Additionally, this spring Sharon was awarded the 2009 BC Premier’s Award for Teaching Excellence. And to keep up with the interest and enthusiasm for these kinds of projects, Sharon is now recruiting retired educators and health care workers as volunteers to spearhead Intergenerational Immersion projects in more communities.

At the end of the day getting on the school bus with the children leaving the elder care facility, Sharon thought, “90 people today are happier all because they came together! What was the effort? I didn’t try to make people happy. We did very simple things and it brought great happiness.”

For more information about Sharon MacKenzie’s amazing work, please visit her comprehensive website at [www.intergenerational.ca](http://www.intergenerational.ca). There is lots of information about how you can get involved. Also, on June 18<sup>th</sup>, i2i Intergenerational Society will be presenting at the BC Ministry of Healthy Living and Sport Active Aging Symposium in Vancouver ([www.bcactiveaging.ca](http://www.bcactiveaging.ca))

*Darcy invites you to email her to share about inspiring learning experiences that honour the integrity of children as whole human beings; express the innate goodness of young people; demonstrate the natural desire of young people to contribute, innovate, create, heal and play; exemplify that learning is natural for all people; prove that success is measured by how*

*effectively we live in harmony with other beings and with nature; and reflect back to us that all people have the ability to overcome hardship if given the support and love we need.*

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