

Ireland - Aishling's story

The impact Intergenerational work had on an Early Years Educator

I am an owner/manager of a sessional preschool located in a rural setting in Ireland. Part of our curriculum includes introducing the children to their wider community. In this setting we believe in offering high quality care and we do this by reflecting on our current practice. I sat down with my staff and we reviewed our process of connecting children with the community, we felt we could do more. One aspect we felt we were lacking was helping children to develop relationships with members of the wider community.

I was contacted by the leaders of the Toy Project in Ireland who explained Intergenerational work and the benefits to be gained from it. I studied the Toy Project website and realised that this was exactly what I had been looking for, a way to develop relationships with the wider community. I planned, organised and carried out a number of small intergenerational projects in collaboration with children, parents, staff of my setting and staff, management and clients of the day care centre and the Nursing home.

Intergenerational work made an impact on my leadership and management skills. The work challenged me, but I enjoy challenges, it keeps the job interesting and extends my learning. It improved my organisational and communication skills.

I saw the joy the children's interactions brought to the older members of our community and how this, in turn, had a very positive impact on the staff in each of the settings. When children entered the room it was like a cloud lifted and the sun shone brightly on so many faces. It made me realise how we underestimate the simple pleasures in life and how children bring these pleasures to the elderly with ease. The element of 'time' also impacted on me, children and the elderly are two sections of our society that are not interested in time, they have as far as they are concerned they have all the time in the world and will not and should not be rushed. It made me consider how we rush our children constantly, Intergenerational worked slowed us all down and it was lovely. It was something I have held on to, taking time and appreciating the little things in life. Intergenerational work brought back a real sense of community to me, it is more than going to visit a place or have someone visit us. Intergenerational work taught me that community is about establishing relationships with all sectors of our community, stopping the segregation and beginning the integration.

This is a sample of the feedback we got. I always get tearful when I read these quotes as they make me realise how much we were missing out on before we started Intergenerational work.

'It reminded me of when I was young and how family gatherings included, Grannies, Grandas, Uncles and Aunts, nieces and nephews and would often end up with spontaneous music and dance' Parent

'If I could bottle the laughter of children and sell it as a medicine here I would be a millionaire' Nurse, Moorehall Nursing Home

"My Granny lives far away, I only see her sometimes" preschool child

Aishling Silke
January 2015

Italy – a child's story from TOY

57 children attended the Intergenerational Summer Centre hosted in "Hotel Adda". M. was one of them. Aged only 3 years old, he is a special child, affected by learning disabilities. M. has some difficulties in speaking and relating with people – as his mother explained when she decided to fill in the registration form and let M. participate with the support of his "special educator".

At the beginning M's mother didn't really know how his son would feel or behave in an intergenerational setting. He has grandparents and likes them, but he is not as sociable as children, especially in unfamiliar environments and he was often scared when he came in contact with the two old ladies living in the neighbourhood. M's mum decided to let her son attend the centre – at least have a one-week try. How did it go? M. attended the centre for 6 weeks and surprisingly seemed to feel at ease from the very beginning. But the greatest surprise was his encounter with 'Grandpa G.'

G. is a senior attending the residential home for older people "Hotel Adda", where the intergenerational centre was hosted. G. is a tall, fat 67 year old who suffers loneliness, because he has no grandchildren to visit him like the other older people in the centre.

M. and G. met each other during a painting session. They were coincidentally sitting next to each other, and spontaneously started doing their painting with tempera together. G. was happy to help M. when he wasn't able to do something, and M. was happy to follow G.'s instructions. Since then, they haven't stopped doing activities together. They looked for each other and always sat close to each other during lunch or afternoon breaks. It was so touching to see G. taking care of M. So much so that M's educator chose to step back and let G. spoon-feed M. or put cheese on his pasta. M. seemed to feel at ease with G. as he had never felt with any other strange adult. G. was reborn when he could spend time with his new little friend.

After some weeks M's Mum came to the centre and asked me about "grandpa G." as her son always named him after attending the centre. A few days later, when the centre was about to close, she came again and asked to Mr. G.: "Would you mind if M. come to visit sometimes?" The big, old man was so astonished and

happy and couldn't say anything but "yes, of course" while some tears poured from his eyes.

Three months have passed. M. and his mother come to the centre sometimes and – as Christmas is getting closer – G. is building a toy truck as a present for M. He's getting crazy to find all materials he needs for that gift ... but now he feels active and alive again.

S., facilitator
January 2015

Italy - Franca's story

Franca is a retired 74 year old widow. She has always lived in her birthplace, a small village in the Calabria countryside. Her daughter left home at 24 to go to work in Rome, 600 kms from her mother, and Franca, already widowed, was left alone. She couldn't manage to leave with her daughter: "At 60, how I could change everything?"

At 66 she received the good news: Franca's daughter was about to give birth. "I was so excited, but depressed at the same time. I don't like travel and I couldn't be there as my heart was telling me". Giulia, her granddaughter, was meeting her grandmother only during holidays, three times a year.

Franca felt responsible, but tried to be present somehow: sending presents to Giulia, learning to use the internet for video-calls... but something was clearly missing: "She was growing, and I didn't know anything about her real life, so I started to feel alien from her."

Last September Franca received a telephone call, Giulia had a proposal for her: "Granny, you know what? My school is organising a holiday, and I need you! There will be us and the grandparents, living and doing things in the woods, together". Franca was shocked. It was the first time Giulia had asked so candidly for her grandma's help. But she felt unprepared. The travel, my cats... the pupils and their grandparents! She answered "Dearest, I really cannot".

The day after Giulia's mum called Franca, updating her: the girl was very truly sad. It was a hard day. She had to decide whether to face down her fears or to

accept her granddaughter feeling abandoned. Then she called Giulia back: “Dear, I found out how to manage all the thing, I will join you!”

“It was the best experience of my life. I got to know my granddaughter, living in her real community: her classmates, her teachers. I was there for her, and I finally felt like a real grandmother. A surprise was the other grandparents! They were simply amazing, and now I have new good friends. I joined them and we together organised games and activities for our grandchildren. I was there, and succeeded to feel useful also for other kids. I discovered myself to be fun. Thanks to Giulia, I now feel more self-confident and I will for sure go to Rome, pick up Giulia from school and to go out with my new friends!”

Franca
December 2014

Poland - Maria's story

We would like to share with you a story about Ms Maria (fictional name). She was a senior participant in one of our TOY Pilot Actions. Very tragic family events changed her life. Her husband has passed away and her son committed a suicide, she was left alone. Ms Maria felt depressed, she wasn't seeing anyone, and as she didn't want to leave her house her depression deepened. Ms Maria lives in a small rural community, so everyone knew her situation, but she wouldn't accept any help.

Then the TOY Pilot Action started. Local facilitator thought that this would be a perfect opportunity to motivate Ms Maria. A facilitator came to her house once, twice, but she always refused to participate. After some seniors actively took part in intergenerational meetings and reached out to Ms Maria to encourage her to join the project she finally agreed, but only for one meeting. When the day of her first intergenerational meeting came she got dressed, she did her hair and make-up and came to the community center. She wanted to read the children a story, she sat down in a small chair and opened one of the books. In a split second a group of children gathered on the floor around Ms Maria's chair and quietly waited for her to start a story. Ms Maria started to read, at first quietly, calmly, but as she noticed the children's fascination she got more engaged. She imitated the voices and made long pauses dramatizing the story. The children were very excited. When she finished the story and closed the book the children asked "Pleaseeeeee, can you read as another story". Ms Maria was very surprised that the children enjoyed her reading so much. She gladly opened another book and started to read. At the end of the intergenerational meeting Ms Maria felt that her life was going to change. Ms Maria said "I needed the children and the children needed me."

She felt motivated, appreciated and now she had a whole bunch of children who were looking forward to see her again and spend some quality time together reading, playing, and painting. Since the Pilot Actions meetings with children Ms Maria started to smile, she gets out of her house and she started to meet people again. You can see a sparkle in her eye, just like the old days.

Portugal's – TOY Stories

This is the story of 92 year old, António Bartolomeu, from Centro Paroquial São Pedros de Aradas

António is the most active senior in his a care home for older people. He arrives every day on his bicycle and rides it as easily as a young boy. He is the engine of this place; motivating and positively influencing the others to take part in activities. The activities with the children are the 'cherry on the cake' for him. He taught the children colours, the names of animals and numbers, all the while having fun and playing the games. He told the practitioners that the moments he spent with the children were a joy and when they are about to arrive, he started to convince all other seniors to participate. You can see, and the pictures confirm, how his eyes shine with happiness. He gets deeply involved while playing and telling stories to the children.

As told to Inês, facilitator, 28 years old

The stories of the two sisters, Rosa and Cândida

"We are sisters, Cândida, 58 and Rosa 65 years old, living in the community, where we always accept the invitations to participate in the activities organised by the institution, Centro Social de Azurva. We love to be in contact with children and, since my (Cândida) grandchildren are abroad living in France, this feeling is stronger. When I made the pancakes it is like if I was doing it to my own grandchildren; whenever I go to France, my grandchildren ask me to make them pancakes. Then, they tell me that I do the best pancakes ever and I feel happy to know it. My oldest sister, Rosa, will cook the traditional sweet called 'Aletria'. She does it just like our mother use to do. It is like the family recipe! For her it is also a very joyful moment. We like to be surrounded by children because we don't have this opportunity in our daily lives. Beside, we feel grateful for the chance to contribute to the activities developed by this institution."

**Cândida, senior participant
December 2014**

Spain's TOY Stories

Marta story

My name is Marta. I am a Masters student in the "Health research" and I had the opportunity to make my Final work of Master (TFM) collaborating with TOY project.

The truth is that I am very glad for this experience. I am a nurse in a maternity hospital in Barcelona and I have been able to follow the diverse experiences of volunteers in the areas of health and education. In order to learn, I think that this project is making my thoughts about the older generations clearer.

The preparatory meetings with the stakeholders of the Municipality of Lleida and also the Senior Program of the University of Lleida have helped me to understand the importance of intergenerational relations. Also I have read several books on active ageing and participation of seniors in society.

I am very interested in the mutual relationship between elders and youth. The TOY project has helped me a lot to understand qualitative methodology, especially in the action research.

I do not rule out continuing my research as a nurse, studying the relationships between children, youth, adults and senior people in relation to health and education.

Spain, Carmen's story

My name is Carmen, I'm 77 years old and a retired from teaching for some time. Since I retired I have tried to stay active and keep learning taking courses to maintain and exercise my mind.

In recent years I have been quite ill and have been less active than usual but in the last years I've attended to some courses organised by the Municipality of Lleida. It was at one of these courses where Blanca (one of the facilitators of the project) came to explain the TOY Project and encouraged us to participate.

I immediately liked the idea because I had always worked with children and I missed contact with them. It's important that society values us, the retired elderly, because even though we are no longer active we have so much to explain and transmit. I'm not referring to knowledge and contents we learn from books and nowadays are easily found on the internet, I'm referring to the values and experiences that seniors have because we've lived through another time. I

spent my childhood in a small town and lived during the war, a fact that made me cognizant of the true value of things and support among people we live in the same community.

I went first to meetings and training Toy workshops where professionals from the Municipality of Lleida explained us the project, its aims and objectives. There we analyzed our personal characteristics and valued the possibility to participate in. Later I was part of the design team of different pilot proposals and actively participated in the proposed of Balafia Playcentre: "A time warp: the games before and now".

This experience has been very rewarding for me. I felt very involved, loved by the children and also I have noticed a significant improvement in my well-being and personal mood. At the same time, in the implementation that we did in the Balafia's Play centre, I could meet other seniors with whom we have established links have concluded today in a huge friendship. I've known a service such as the Municipal Play centres of Lleida that I didn't know before, and I also sense a member of a team with which I still linked nowadays to continue conducting intergenerational activities like this.

TOY Conference - Reflections

Ana del Barrio Saiz is a trainer, coach and advisor in early childhood education. Originally from Spain, Ana has been living and working in the Netherlands for over 25 years. www.anadelbarrio.nl

Ana was a delegate to the TOY International Conference, which took place in the Child Rights Home, the Netherlands on 28 October 2014.

“I was really glad to hear the message that intergenerational contact between young children and older people should be considered as an ordinary experience. For me it is a way to value diversity and to improve quality in institutions. It confirms my conviction that by working on inclusion everyone, the whole community, can benefit not just the few”.

In her daily work as an early childhood educator Ana has come across some examples of older people being involved in activities with young children. However, she noted

“what made the TOY project interesting is that it promoted a way of working, which gives value to both the contribution of young children and older people in a structural way.”

In fact Ana remarked,

“intergenerational work between young and old has the potential to ‘heal’ communities. It can give a sense of dignity to older people, as Tatjana Vonta (Educational Research Institute, DRCPI, Slovenia) pointed out in her workshop, which can be healing. The presentations, videos, photos showed images of the competent child, and the competent older person, both citizens. I really appreciate this – the notion of competency for every age group, not just early and middle adulthood, which our society seems to give supremacy to, as Professor Elena Luppi noted in her keynote address”.

Ana also valued the attention paid to other ways of communicating, beyond verbal communication in the TOY Pilot Actions.

“In the field of early childhood education, we often refer to this as being important – but what I saw in the Pilot Actions from different countries were

concrete examples of many forms of interaction; observing, dancing, singing, art projects... We even saw in the Dutch Pilot Action, children and older people using film and pictures apart from each other, to become curious about the other age groups, before meeting. The conference organisers really made an effort to include all voices."

"I really appreciated the use of multi-media and multiple forms of expression in the various parts of the Conference Programme: photos, discussion, film material, active listening to different perspectives. It was a truly inspirational and interactive conference!"

Ana del Barrio Saiz
January 2015

