



Beth Johnson
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Understanding the Experience of Older Volunteers

In

Intergenerational School-based Projects

by

Gillian Granville

Understanding the Experience of Older Volunteers In Intergenerational School-based Projects

*“It is like a pebble going in the water, and it goes out bigger and bigger, and you get contact with more people. And that’s as I say, from one child”.
(a volunteer)*

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BACKGROUND

Introduction

The purpose of this research report is to develop our understanding of the experience of older volunteers, who work in intergenerational school-based activities giving support to a young person's learning. It is not intended as an evaluation of the effectiveness of such work, as there are examples of such evaluation elsewhere (see Ellis 1998, 1999, Ivers 1999, Newman et al. 1995). Instead, it focuses on the older person's perspective of volunteering in projects which specifically bring the old and young generations together.

Over the last three to four years, developments in public policy such as the better government for older people initiative and the formation of the inter-ministerial group for older people, have turned more attention to the demographic changes that are occurring in the UK and elsewhere. Alongside these, other developments within the home office such as the social exclusion unit and the active community unit have acknowledge the value of volunteering and community involvement as a means of creating more cohesive communities. This report aims to contribute to that debate and inform our thinking by considering the way that involving older people in intergenerational projects can be a means of developing active communities, and can address some of the issues of social exclusion. In particular, the report seeks to answer three questions:

- What are the benefits to older people's health and well being of being involved in volunteering that supports young people?
- What is the impact of such schemes in creating positive images of older people?
- What are the wider benefits to the local community of intergenerational-linked volunteering?

This study has sought to ensure that the voices of older people have been central to the process. A reference group of older volunteers was convened to advise on the work at key stages, and a focus group informed the structure of the interview schedule. The information was collected through 45 individual, semi-structured interviews with people over 50 years, in three intergenerational school-based projects in England.

The report begins with a consideration of the current position of older volunteers, and an overview of the literature on the topic, including two small pilot reports of intergenerational activities in the UK. It draws links with the contemporary policy debates on social exclusion and active community involvement. The research framework is then presented which includes the characteristics of the participating volunteers and their experience of community involvement. The research findings from the body of the report, and draw out a number of themes in relation to both the individual older person and the volunteers' experiences. It concludes with a number of issues

raised by the findings about intergenerational volunteering, and recommendations are made for future policy and research agendas.

What We Know Already About Older volunteers

There is already a body of evidence, which gives us an insight into the characteristics of older volunteers, and what motivates them to become involved in their communities. We know for example that more retired people are taking part in formal volunteering than 6 years ago, in contrast to a decline among younger people (Davis Smith 1998). However, the figures suggest that there are still less older people 40% between 55-64, who come forward to volunteer, compared with people aged 35- 44, where the figure is 52% (Davis Smith 1998). A study carried out into volunteering in the third age (Davis Smith 1992) found that although older people may not volunteer as frequently as younger people, they did give more time to the activity, 5 hours per week compared to 3 hours, and tended to stay for longer.

This study also offered support to the theory that volunteering was an activity which was carried through the lifecourse, and that the factors, which influence whether people volunteer, such as socio-economic, educational achievement and income, remain the same. Davis Smith suggests " according to continuity theory third age volunteers grown old" (1992: 48). However, the research carried out by Jane Forster (1997) into volunteering activity by people aged over 50 years, found that 52% of the volunteers took up volunteering for the first time after the age of 50 years.

A strong correlation is shown between participation in formal volunteering and socio-economic group, with those in the highest groups almost twice as likely to take part in formal volunteering (Davis Smith 1998). This was less marked in formal volunteering, and Forster (1997) found that organisations that were involved in social welfare, such as visiting schemes and befriending, were more successful in involving people from working class backgrounds

Seema Bhasin reported that "black volunteers are severely under-represented in mainstream voluntary organisations" (1997:15), and that progress is slow in ensuring equal opportunity policies are carried forward. She also highlights the lack of research into black volunteering, and the way that black and minority ethnic populations have been under-represented in surveys. The history of black communities in Britain demonstrates the importance of self-help and informal volunteering, which Bhasin suggests has been developed out of necessity, in order to meet unmet needs. Her report indicates that mainstream organisations could learn from the black voluntary sector, in the way that volunteering is seen as part of a wider ethic or responsibility in community involvement.

Older women are slightly more likely to volunteer than older men, according to the third age volunteering survey (Davis Smith 1992), and this was in line with higher participation rates by women across all age groups. However, later research found that women were three times more likely than men to volunteer in school (Davis Smith 1998). A national profile of age concern volunteers (Tovey 1999) showed that three quarters of their volunteers were women; Forster found 60% of the older volunteers were women, and confirmed that men were more likely to do "male-type tasks" (1997:24).

A recent study in Hackney (Hutchison 1999) looked at the reasons why so few older people in this London Borough came forward to take part in formal volunteering, and one of the conclusions was that the benefits of volunteering needed to be promoted. There was a recognition too, that organisations, if they are serious about involving older volunteers "need to concentrate on respect for their contribution and on outreach backed up by appropriate publicity and practical support" (1999:75). Forster (1997) had identified that a third of the volunteers wished to have better opportunities to use their skills. This brief review of the literature is useful in developing our knowledge of what lies behind older volunteering, but due to a paucity of research, we know much less about older people's involvement in intergenerational activities (Granville, forthcoming). Two recent UK studies evaluated intergenerational school-based programmes and included the views of the volunteers. IVERS (1999) study of three Age Concern TransAge Action projects, showed that the volunteer's experience of working with children was fulfilling, because they could use their lifetime skills. They also reported satisfaction in terms of their emotional and physical well-being. Ellis's (1998, 1999) evaluation of school-based intergenerational mentoring showed that the mentors felt better about themselves, had increased interaction with others and more confidence (Granville & Ellis 1999).

Before going on to report the findings from this research, it's worth considering the current policy initiatives that are developing in the areas of volunteering and community involvement.

The Policy Context

The prime minister, Tony Blair, at the active community convention held in London on March 2nd 2000, spoke of the need of people to become more involved in their communities, in order to develop a more cohesive society that embraced diversity. He suggested three ways this could happen: by encouraging employers to free up time by their employees to do voluntary work, for the public services to have volunteer managers and increase the numbers of volunteers, and thirdly to use the skills and experiences of older people. He said: "I want to challenge Britain's older citizens to become involved. I can announce today that we will support an 'experience corps' in communities across the country that will support and mobilise opportunities for people over 50 to get involved" (Tony Blair 2000).

This announcement follows on from other initiatives that the current government has undertaken, which promotes the picture of active communities that work together for the benefit of all their members. The recent report from the active community unit, at the home office (1999a), considers the term 'Active Community' as:

“the positive idea of restoring a sense of community that has been lost in some places and which for some groups of people was never there in the first place. It will be important to bring together the strands of volunteering, community self-help and citizenship in a single strategy. The group has interpreted community involvement, as meaning time and energy form the benefit of the wider community, the environment, or individuals out side one’s immediate family, with this commitment undertaken freely, by choice and without concern for financial gain”(1999a: 9)

The cornerstone of the government’s policy to mobilise community comes from their social exclusion agenda. The social exclusion unit was created in 1997 with the purpose of examining the issues surrounding social exclusion, and it work with all government departments in finding solutions to over come it. Social commentators have suggested that: “ Recognition that social exclusion is an serious social problem in 1990s Britain was a welcome development for those who had seen the misery and desperation faced by people at the bottom of an increasingly unequal society”(A lock, 1998).

An intensive programme of policy development is now in place, with 18 policy Action Teams based around five themes, which include getting people back to work, access to services and making government work more efficiently. Alongside this is the drive for citizenship to be a statutory requirement, taught in schools a cross the curriculum, by 2002 (QCA 1998).

Schemes, which particularly focus on older people, include the Active community unit’s older volunteer’s initiative, which aims to improve the quality and quantity of opportunities for older people to volunteer. It has provided grants to a number of organisations, and an evaluation is to be carried out, to capture the key features of each project, in order that the other organisations can learn from it. Are source pack has also been prepared (1999b), in collaboration with two other organisations that are involved with older volunteering REACH (Retired Executives Clearing House) and RSVP (Retired and senior volunteer Programme), for use with groups hoping to bring in older volunteers.

It’s against this policy context of social exclusion, citizenship and active communities that this current report is set.

THE RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

The research took place over a six-month period between October 1999 to April 2000, and was carried out by the Beth Johnson foundation. It involved volunteers working in three projects in England in greater Manchester, London and Staffordshire, all of which were located in very different organisations (appendix A). The aim of the research was to develop an understanding of intergenerational volunteering from the perspective of older people, consequently it was considered important to ensure that the research process was well grounded in the voices of older people.

Semi-structured one to one interviews were considered the most appropriate method to engage with the older volunteers, and to listen to their experiences. At the beginning of the fieldwork process, a focus group of actively involved volunteers met with the research to discuss the broad areas of the study, and from this meeting the interview schedule was devised (appendix B). It proved a useful way of learning how to phrase questions, and to understand the issues that were important to older people.

A part of the research was to consider the improvements to health and well-being of the older people. It was not thought appropriate to introduce quantifiable measures to test for health and well-being, because of the style of the interviews. Instead it would seek the older person's own perception of their health status. Recent research (Coleman 1996) has indicated the importance of subjective experience in measuring people's well-being:

“This is justified by the consistent body of evidence, including longitudinal research findings, which show that elders' perception and evaluation of situations are more relevant for determining behaviour and feelings, such as well-being and satisfaction, than objective situations. One cannot judge quality of life on the basis of externally assessed health and environmental parameters without taking into account people's own individual evaluation, which in turn reflect their goals, commitments and meaning systems” (1996:93)

A reference group of four older people (appendix C), who are, or had been involved with intergenerational mentoring, worked with the researcher to comment on and pilot the interview schedule. They were not involved directly with the data collection, but after the information had been collected, they met again to advise and comment on the emerging themes from the analysis.

Views of a number of professionals who had different areas of expertise concerning the research topic (appendix C), were also sought by the researcher and helped to inform the planning process.

The researcher carried out 45 individual, face to face interviews and during the process, as themes began to emerge, the schedule was adjusted to take account of these. This ensured that the method was developmental, rather than rigid and that the issues discussed as the research progressed, were those of concern to the older volunteers and not simply those identified by the researcher (Harding 1999). It is worth noting that out of 45 interviews carried out over a period of time and at three different sites, there was only one cancellation due to ill health, all the other interviews ran smoothly, with all the volunteers participating as planned. This is perhaps an indication of the commitment of older people who volunteer, as well as to the value they placed on the work. The only allocated time, because of the range and extent of the discussions.

The next part looks at the characteristics of the volunteers and reflects the diversity of the older people that take part in intergenerational school-based schemes.

The Diversity of Experience

There is still a tendency for older people to be considered a homogenous group and for their individual life experiences to be ignored. Recent research (for example, Hutchinson 1999, Haydon et al., 1999) has sought to include a range of older people drawn from a list of criteria that are considered to reflect diversity. However, there is often a failure to understand how individual biographies may impact on the way people respond and involve themselves in society and the communities in which they live. This study wished to be sensitive to individual experiences, as well as recognising the common themes that select people from pre-determined categories, but instead to analyse the characteristics of people who come forward to volunteer in intergenerational school-based activities, in order to help our understanding of the motivation behind it.

There was no evidence to suggest that intergenerational volunteering is confined to the younger, more active older people. The age range covered four decades from mid fifties to late eighties with half the group being between sixty and seventy and another quarter between seventy and eighty. They did however feel the need to be more physically able in order to manage the school environment and although this would not have to apply to all intergenerational volunteering, it was an important factor to those who were working in schools.

It was no surprise to find that three quarters of the volunteers were women because of previous research with older volunteers (Davis Smith 1998). However, it was discussed with the volunteers why they thought men did not often come forward for intergenerational volunteering and whether this may change with future generations. The outcomes from these discussions can be found in the report under issues raised by the research.

The vast majority of the volunteers were of Caucasian origin, in spite of the fact that there was a varied black and minority ethnic mix in the project locations. A number of the volunteers were working alongside children from Asia and the Indian sub-continent, but recruitment of older people from these communities was unrepresentative, as shown in the findings from other studies (see Bhasin 1997).

The range of diversity amongst older volunteers who come forward to work alongside young people in school-based projects was reflected in their varied and differing experiences of work and the majority of the volunteers had been in paid employment throughout their adult lives. There were examples of men and women who had worked in a variety of administration and secretarial positions within local authorities, business or public services; there were local authority officers and those who had managed their own businesses in the retail trade. There were people who worked in the service industries and the caring professions, ex-miners and workers in the pottery industry, cleaners and cooks, a postman, a pharmacist, social workers and a nurse. There were engineers and men who had worked in the construction industry. Two head-teachers, a deputy head, one teacher and women who had worked as administration support in schools were interviewed but they were not over represented in the sample.

The same diversity was shown in the volunteer's experience of education. This varied between people who had had the opportunity to further study and obtained professional and academic qualifications, to those who had left school at an early age with no formal qualifications. However, the continuity that ran throughout their accounts, which is enlarged upon in the findings, was that in spite of this wide range of educational attainment, all the volunteers believed strongly in the importance of learning.

Whilst not suggesting that there are limits to the extent of diversity in people's lives, the last theme that is drawn attention to here before considering the volunteering experience, is the range of caring relationships. Some had children and grandchildren, with a total of 121 grandchildren spread amongst the 45 volunteers; but there were others who had none. There were volunteers who had never married, or were now widowed or divorced and there were two volunteers who had had a child who had died. Some cared for their extended family. Many of the group and the women in particular had or were supporting elderly relatives in a variety of different ways. Once again, in spite of the differing personal involvement with children, all the volunteers showed a universal concern and interest in the welfare of young people, a theme that is developed later in the report.

Experience of Volunteering as Part of an Active Community Life

Some of the older had been or were involved with a range of volunteering or charity work, although there was less evidence to show formal or more traditionally associated volunteer activity. Some were linked with volunteering as part of church-based activities, such as the Girls Brigade, Girl Guides, visiting schemes, youth Groups and Sunday Schools. A few were part of communities or 'Friends' supporting local 'art' institutions and this was similar to other research findings on types of volunteering work (Davies Smith 1998)

However there were many examples of this group of older people being active in their communities, in ways that they and others did not formally recognise as volunteering. There were schools governors, members of Police Consultative Committees, Trade Union Work, Residents Associations, committees of local organisations, councillors and those involved with the churches in its wider role of supporting and helping the community.

Recent research (CSV Occasional Paper, January 2000) has highlighted the extent of the 'hidden' volunteering that takes place in communities and this was found to be the case in this study.

Times of transition in the lifecourse

The reason why the older people came forward now to volunteer in a formal sense was linked, in the majority of people, to a significant change or transition in their lives. The most common was retirement from paid work, for both men and women or bereavement following the death of a spouse. A few of the volunteers who had been involved in caring for elderly relatives now had changed circumstances which gave them more time to get involved.

The majority had not been involved in a long history of volunteering earlier in their lives, which supported the research of Forster (1997) and dispelled the myth that people have continuity of volunteering activity throughout their lives. It was evident that one of the reasons that they came to volunteering now was because of more freedom from employment and caring situations.

But why intergenerational volunteering?

The point of interest for this piece of research was, why, with a number of volunteering opportunities to choose from did the older people come forward to work with children and young people? This was discussed in more detail in the findings section but what was overwhelmingly clear was the passionate commitment that the older volunteers had towards young people and a concern to support their growth and development. The majority of them chose to work in schools that were known to be socially disadvantaged because they considered that was where there was the greatest need.

THE MAIN FINDINGS

The picture emerged of a very diverse group of people, each with a unique history and a wide range of life chances and opportunities. However there were themes running through their accounts, which cut across these differences and demonstrated a number of common factors that they shared and these will now be discussed in more detail.

The Experience of Age

The research was particularly interested to understand if being an older person was significant in the support offered to the young person, or whether a young adult would have obtained similar results. The question was asked as to what the volunteers thought they brought to the work and overwhelmingly they felt it was their life experience. A number of qualities emerged, which demonstrated the value of this life experience and can help to understand why being older may particularly benefit young people.

Non-judgemental

The volunteers were very clear that they did not make judgements or assumptions about the lives of the younger people. They felt less pedantic than they had been at a younger age, more tolerant and had, and as one woman had said: “a mellowing of ideas”. This was due to having seen and been through a number of different circumstances and recognising that it was not appropriate to pass judgements about other people’s lives. They felt able to stand back and reflect on circumstances and not to make hasty assumptions. Comments included: “You are prepared to accept things as they are, rather than as you like them” and being “not so blinkered now”. Some volunteers recognised that they had been fortunate in their lives to have these advantages they had and did not apportion blame for the circumstances that young people sometimes find themselves in. This was an interesting finding because it challenges a stereotype of older people as being fixed in their thinking and out of touch with contemporary life.

Seeing priorities

Linked to this was a perspective gained through a lifetime of events, of seeing what were actually the important issues in life and which were less significant. They were clearer about the priorities, which had been more difficult earlier in the lifecourse because of the concerns of jobs and families. The older people presented a rounded view of life, an ability to see the bigger picture, which enabled a balanced and considered position to be taken. One volunteer said that being involved in the intergenerational project, had “*proved which things I thought were important are important*”. Another admitted that she: “*see life differently....more relaxed because there are less pressures*”.

Having initiative

It was also evident that people were able to draw on past experiences that enabled them to confidently use their initiative in a variety of different ways. There was an element of 'been there, done that' which clearly was useful in supporting the young person. They could draw on a variety of coping strategies, with which to further the relationship. For example, some of the volunteers explained that they had "learned how to handle situations". Another comment was "you've seen things happen...you bring your knowledge with you". They felt they had accumulated knowledge over a period of time, which they could draw on when necessary.

Commitment to Children And Young People

The second major finding which has already been mentioned was the overwhelming commitment to young people. This was demonstrated in three ways.

Continuity of Experience

The vast majority of the older people had placed children and young people as a central feature throughout their lives. This was in a variety of different ways through employment, volunteering activity, community involvement or their own families. The small number who, through life events, had not been able to involve themselves directly in young people's lives, had always valued and considered them important and now welcomed the opportunity to be connected with a young person. Many gave as their reason for volunteering on the school-based project as a "wish to be with children".

They all wished to support younger people to believe in themselves and increase their self-esteem. They wanted the children to feel important and as one woman said, "to be on their side". Some considered themselves as a bridge between the generations, others spoke of young people as part of the future and were interested in the actions of a new generation. Also by being involved, they felt able to understand about the issues and the problems of young people without making false judgements. The older people spoke of their respect for young people, the talents they possessed and the way they coped with the modern stresses and pressures that were placed on them.

Belief in the Younger Generation

The older volunteers had a strong belief in the younger generation and an intense desire to support and help them through, what the volunteers perceived as a harsh and changing world, which alienated children and adolescents. The root of this concern appeared to come from their own value systems, which they considered had been eroded to the detriment of everyone in society, but especially children. Strong feelings were evoked and there was talk of the 'emotional poverty' of many young people today, but also they took a responsibility to change what some saw as "paying for the consequences of our actions, as an earlier generation". They recognised they had been part of the

changing values in a selfish, individualist society and wished now to be involved with recreating a better future.

It is perhaps important to note that there was not a wish to return to the 'good old days' or to suggest that everything in the past had been better. It was a genuine belief that there had been a loss of traditional human values, which was having serious consequences on younger people's lives. There was concern that there were young people who may have material advantages, but were deprived of basic human contact. It was clear that the older volunteers feared for the future if these values were not recaptured and people did not start to care and nurture each other.

Love of Learning

There was a real concern at low literacy rates in young people and the disadvantages that would cause them if they could not read. Many of the volunteers, when they were made aware of the problems during recruitment initiatives, gave this as their prime reason to volunteer. The significant point was that the volunteers varied between those who considered they had had an advantage in life with educational achievements and opportunities and wanted to pass that onto young people, to those who recognised they had not for a variety of reasons, had access to a good education. Some had really bad experiences of schooling, which they understood had caused them to be disadvantaged in life and they did not want to see their mistakes repeated in the current cohort of young people.

They also shared a love of reading and the immense enjoyment that came from books. There were examples of the pleasure the volunteers felt when they demonstrated a variety of imaginative ways to stimulate interest. One story involved a young man who loved a particular football team, but did not see much value in reading. The volunteer in her own time searched for an autobiography of one of the players and the boy realised there was more to books than fiction. The volunteer expressed immense satisfaction when she was later told that his parents had bought him the book for a birthday present, in a household that did not have many books. Another volunteer had been able to show a young man how reading could assist him in his passion for motor bikes by looking at motor bike manuals and another expressed delight when the young person he had been mentoring went to join the local library.

Engagement With Life

This commitment to young people appeared to be linked to the older people seeing it as a means of keeping in touch with the mainstream activities of society. This was in contrast to spending all their time with their peers, which they feared could lead to narrow, inward looking perspective and being left behind as other generations advanced. They spoke of older people's 'ghettos' and the lack of stimulation that resulted if they were only around other older people. They did spend time with friends and enjoyed a range of hobbies and activities but there was a strong feeling that they needed also to engage with the younger generation.

The volunteers were not trying to act as younger people, but wanted to be near to their experiences, in order to be involved with change and keep in touch. One woman said she now had “a fresh look on life that the young ones give you”. There was a sense that it enabled people who were feeling outside the mainstream activities of society because of their age, to review their own lives and to see where they now fitted in. Those who had been involved with younger people at earlier stages of their lives had missed their ideas and found that intergenerational volunteering gave them a changed view on life. Some said they were now “out where it is going on” and many of the older people thought they would be able to communicate better with their own grandchildren.

Finding Meaning

In spite of the group of volunteers being involved with their families or with a range of interests, they claimed that being a volunteer in a project which offered support to a young person’s learning, gave a meaning to their lives. They demonstrated the effects of an ageist society that does not place a value on older people and many had felt a loss of purpose after retirement, or from a lessening of their family commitments. There was a genuine belief that they still had something to offer and were seeking a direction, which restored their sense of self worth. The volunteers explained how their involvement gave them “something to get up in the morning for”, “feeling needed because you can’t let the young person down”, “feeling worthwhile”. To some it gave them a sense of status, which they had lost and they wanted to feel they still had a role to play in society. Some of the volunteers had been worried that they were not ‘clever enough’, but wanted to try the scheme. They were delighted when they recognised that they did have something to offer, through their ability to support and encourage a young person who was having difficulties at school.

It was clear that they found that meaning in their lives because they believed they could make a difference to a young person’s future. Every volunteer recognised that even in very difficult circumstances, they could enhance that child’s chances through their support and non-judgemental attitude. They could introduce a young person to different experiences, but fundamentally, through a trusting relationship, they saw changes even when they had not expected to. Children’s reading improved, many showed an interest in books, others showed the beginnings of self-worth and a growing confidence in themselves, by the way they interacted with other people.

A Mutual Relationship

An interesting aspect of the research was the modesty with which people talked about their involvement with young people. It was clear that, although they recognised they were making a difference to young people who were in need of help, they did not connect it to altruism. They were anxious not to be thought of as 'do-gooders', or philanthropists doing things to others but instead wished to emphasise how much it was a mutual experience. They stressed the benefits they gained from being with young people and knowing they were needed. They talked about developments in their own learning, in particular subjects taught in school and technology advances as well as learning about other cultures from children with different ethnic backgrounds. But also they recognised a growth and understanding of themselves, sometimes this was confirming their beliefs in certain qualities, such as being able to relate to young people. At other times it was discovering things about themselves, which were unexpected, such as learning tolerance and accepting different lifestyles from their own, or as one man said "becoming streetwise".

Many volunteers talked about the equality of the relationship they had with the young people and how they were 'side-by-side'. There was reference to being on the same level and the mutual trust that developed in the partnership and this lent support to intergenerational activities being of equal benefit to both generations, even when it may appear that one generation is 'giving' to the other.

A Benefit to Health and Well-Being

Finally, as discussed in the research framework, it was decided to ask the older volunteers to give a subjective evaluation of their status of health and well-being. The older people overwhelmingly felt it had benefited their health through being involved in intergenerational volunteering, which they linked particularly to improvement in their mental health. The responses included: "have stopped dwelling on things", "feel better in the winter", "stops me worrying", "have to look after yourself because you can't let the children down". One woman had taken up intergenerational volunteering following the unexpected death of her husband and a period of deep grieving, she was very clear that because she recognised she was able to make a difference to a young person, her sense of self worth was beginning to return. Another woman linked her involvement in the work with a growth in her spiritual health and there were many comments about keeping active.

Some of the volunteers had been told by family and friends that they looked better, but overall the improvement in their feelings of well-being came from having a sense of purpose and direction in their maturing years. This subjective view links to other evidence that appears to support the benefit to holistic health of being engaged in meaningful activities.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF COMMUNITY

“ It’s like a pebble going in the water and it goes out bigger and bigger and you get contact with more people and that’s as I say, from one child” (a volunteer).

The research highlighted that the influence of intergenerational school-based programmes went far beyond the one-to-one relationship between old and young. As the quote above from one of the volunteers illustrates, the effects were felt by many different networks within the community. This section looks at three aspects that demonstrated the impact of the schemes. These are: acting as ‘champions’, being a good citizen and challenging stereotypes of old age. This is particularly in the context of the local neighbourhood and the community of the school.

Acting as ‘Champions’

One of the outcomes of older people going into schools was that they became ‘champions’ for other groups in the community. Who are often misrepresented and suffer criticism from the wider society.

First and foremost, they became ‘champions’ for young people. Repeatedly, the volunteers said how they now understood much more clearly, the pressures and difficulties experienced by young people today. They believed that it was more difficult for the younger generation than it had been for them, because of the changes in values that they observed. They spoke about the material deprivation and poverty of their own youth, but considered that high expectations to succeed and lack of support given to young people today, as greater barriers to happiness and self-belief.

Many volunteers spoke of occasions with family, friends or acquaintances when they spoke up and defended young people. They disliked hearing stereotypical images of young people being perpetuated and felt able to challenge these remarks because of their direct involvement. They were able to offer positive examples from young people’s lives and to demonstrate their achievements, often against very difficult circumstances.

The second group that the volunteers ‘championed’ was the teaching staff. Repeatedly, the older people talked of their admiration for teachers and the hard work that they did. They themselves had not realised how schools had changed and the challenges that teachers faced and once again they spoke up on teacher’s behalf whenever they heard criticism of them outside the school environment.

The older volunteers were also more sympathetic to parents and less likely to blame them for the lack of support and direction they observed in some young people. They were more able, through their experiences in intergenerational work, to appreciate the wider pressures placed on parents and the way changing family structures and societal values had contributed to a lack of support for many of them.

Being a Good Citizen

In spite of the modesty with which they carried out their work and the benefits they gained for themselves, it was clear that the volunteers felt a responsibility to be an active participant in their local community. They wanted to make a contribution which would impact on the lives of others and many of them spoke of wishing to “give something back”, “it’s pay back time” or “having a responsibility as a human being to give back”

The majority carried out the volunteering activity at their local school. The reasons they gave were because either they or their children had attended the school, or they were aware that the school served some large estates with poor reputations and they felt that it was where their support was most needed. They recognised the importance of obtaining a good start in life through education and were committed to helping the younger generation to obtain it.

Furthermore, they demonstrated how citizenship can help social inclusion through taking responsibility and developing networks with other groups in the community, as well as enabling themselves to have healthier lives, amore active older age and an opportunity for lifelong learning.

Challenging the Stereotypes

As part of their citizenship role, intergenerational volunteers also played a part in breaking down the stereotypes of old age. They made connections with groups outside their traditional spheres, through being actively involved in schools. They became known by the young people’s friends and were well regarded figures around the school, in their role of supporting young people. They had contact with the teaching and other school staff, as well as the parents of the young people. The volunteers told many stories of being greeted in the neighbourhood by pupils from the school and the parents wanting either to choose for issues of privacy to work outside their direct neighbourhood or there was no school near them, they still found they made contact with the school children in community venues such as the shopping centre, petrol stations, supermarkets, libraries or local restaurants.

They became more visible as active members of the community and this challenged the image of old age being lonely and selfish. It also demonstrated how two sections of the community who have been portrayed as at odds with each other, were now able to engage with each other and enjoy a relationship. There were indications that the older people were less fearful of crime and vandalism, which they had previously associated with young people. One volunteer told a story that demonstrated this change in attitude very vividly:

Doris lived opposite the local High School and had had her car frequently vandalised by some young people who went past her home. She had been anxious about approaching the young people and was unhappy about going out at night. However, due to a change in her life and in the search to find something worthwhile to do, she volunteered on the mentoring programme at the school.

One year later, she was greeting young people around the neighbourhood on a regular basis and one day three boys were sliding down the grassy bank by her house and narrowly missing her car. Doris went outside and politely pointed out to the boys that they may damage her car and would they mind moving along a little. The boys cheerfully agreed, to which Doris thanked them and offered them some ice cream.

This small case study showed how through a greater understanding and respect for each other, it was possible to change negative stereotypes and to develop safer communities.

ISSUES RAISED BY THE RESEARCH

The findings from the research identified a number of issues which have been drawn together as part of a discussion and which merit further consideration.

Why the Need for Meaning?

One question that arises is why should this resourceful and committed group of people have such strong need to find meaning in their lives? As has already discussed, the volunteers had a range of different interests, but particularly after retirement from the labour market, or a lessening of their parental role, they spoke of wanting a purpose to their lives and to feel they were still of use. One suggestion could be that our society fails to recognise the value of older people's continuing contribution and that this loss of identity results in feelings of low self esteem and self worth. Research has demonstrated a correlation between negative attitudes to ageing and low self esteem (Coleman 1996) and that the language used in everyday speech restricts and inhibits older people and promotes their decline (Giles 1991). The negative assumptions of an ageist society can lead to older people stereotyping themselves and taking on the characteristics they believe to be typical of their social group. As the population structure changes and whole generations age, it is necessary for our culture to address ageism more purposefully and to create opportunities, which enable older people to fully participate in a variety of ways that value their qualities of experience. This will be essential if the health and well being of people as they progress through different stages of the life course is to be maintained.

Is it Different to Being a Grandparent?

Another issue that has been demonstrated in this study has been the differentiation between grand-parenting and non-biological intergenerational connections. The older volunteers were very clear that their role in supporting young people in their communities was not as a substitute grandparent. The assumption that because they were perceived as being in the same generation as the young people's grandparents and therefore must relate to each other in a similar way, was unfounded. They spoke of a mutual and respectful relationship with the young people, but one, which held a different emotional investment than towards the future generation and less to do with the individual. It demonstrates how the intergenerational relationship can be a supportive one between individuals but is also concerned about a stake in the future of society to the benefit of all.

What about the Hugs?

The research highlighted a concern among the older generation of the changing relationships between children and adults. They were aware that they were not allowed to touch or give hugs to the children and young people they worked alongside, and whilst understanding the reasoning behind those instructions, they expressed concern at the artificial barriers it created in their relationship with the young people. They worried about the lack of human contact, especially between the young and old, and many expressed the view that children were missing out on the basic human need for touch. The majority felt that society had swung too far in its protection of children, preventing a spontaneous human response that comforts a child or young person with a hug. It was clear that the volunteers worked within the guidelines they were given, but felt those guidelines needed to be questioned.

Where are the Men?

Three quarters of the volunteers interviewed across the three projects were women, which was in line with other research findings (Davis Smith 1998) on volunteering. The differences in the demographic proportions of older men and women does not really become significant until after the age of 75 years, when two thirds of people are women, and therefore this would not account for the lower uptake of older men in volunteering activity. This is of particular concern in intergenerational work, when recent evidence (Buchanan et al.,1999) demonstrates the value that young men gain from a relationship with a supportive male figure. All the older people were asked why they thought that men did not come forward for the school based work, and if they thought this may change in the future. Many thought that women were more involved in their local communities, and that throughout their lives, they took more responsibility in helping and supporting others. Both men and women expressed the view that men appeared less confident about their ability to help a young person, and that some classed it as 'women's work'.

The current generation of older men had experiences more stable work patterns and retirement had often been planned and taken place at the expected time. The volunteers thought that often, men at retirement felt that they had earned their leisure time and were not prepared to get involved in this way. It was uncertain whether the situation would alter with future generation, even with the changing expectations of fatherhood and less rigid and unpredictable retirement time

The final issue that was raised regarding the uptake of men in school volunteering was their very real concerns about child protection, and how they may be perceived by society if they chose to work alongside a young person. They were very conscious of the publicity and the suspicion surrounding men and the abuse of children, and some of the volunteers said this was a reason why some men felt unable to come forward.

CONCLUSION

This research has sought to contribute to our understanding of what it is like to be an older person in intergenerational volunteering that supports a young person in the school setting. It has demonstrated the wide diversity of the people who came forward, although they shared a number of similarities. The most obvious was their commitment to young people and the future of the younger generation, which they demonstrated in a non-judgemental and modest way. The other strong theme that ran through the volunteers' experience was their belief in the importance of learning as the basis of opportunities in life. This theme was evident both with volunteers who felt they had had positive experiences of education, as well as those who have recognised the disadvantages they had suffered because of poor educational attainment.

The benefits to the health and well-being of the older volunteers was demonstrated by their feelings of being engaged with life and the meaning it gave them. All the volunteers felt, through the support they offered, that they were responsible for making a difference to a young person's life chances.

The benefits to the wider community have been demonstrated in the way that older people were visibly supporting other generations in their neighbourhoods, through acting as 'champions'. This was not only in their relationship and support of young people but also in their increased understanding of the pressures and issues surrounding other generations and in particular to teachers and parents. They forged connections in the community through informal interaction and in this way challenged many of the negative stereotypes that surround older people.

The research raised a number of issues for consideration. It highlighted the effects of an ageist society that does not value its older members. It also demonstrated the difference between a grand-parenting relationship as a one-to-one emotional experience and intergenerational volunteering, which was concerned principally with young people as a generation and the transfer of values. It has re-emphasised the importance of men in intergenerational work. Most significantly, it indicated the potential of such intergenerational approaches to contribute positively to the life experiences of all participants and the need for further demonstration programmes and research to develop this area of practice further.

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APPENDIX A

PROFILES OF THE PARTICIPATING ORGANISATIONS

“Generations in Action”, Salford

This programme is based in Salford, Greater Manchester and is part of Salford Business Education Partnership. Business Education Partnerships are charities, found in most centres of population in the UK, and their main focus is to work with local schools. Salford B.E.P. was chosen by the UK government 8 to 9 years ago, to pilot mentoring programmes in schools, and it introduced intergenerational mentoring into its activities in 1996.

The City of Salford is an industrial area with a number of small to medium sized concerns, and is undergoing a process of regeneration. It has a population of 220,463 (1991 census) of which 20% are over pensionable age. The percentage of people from black and ethnic communities is very small. 48% school leavers (1998) went forward into further education.

Currently, “Generations in Action” has 50 volunteers supported by a project co-ordinator that recruits and supports the older volunteers, and a mentoring co-ordinator that links with the school. The volunteers work in Primary and High schools, and the setting allow for the older people to support the development of literacy skills and/or to act as mentors.

“TransAgeAction”, Enfield

TransAge Action is an intergenerational project, based within the Activ Age unit of Age Concern Enfield in North London. The intergenerational project was developed 4 years ago, and was originally one of three pilot sites for the National Age Concern England’s TransAge Action Programme.

Enfield is a London borough with a total population of 263,900, of which 13.8% are of pensionable age. There are significant pockets of social deprivation, with low educational attainment levels. 21% of the population are from black and ethnic minority communities (1996), many of who speak little or no English. In addition, there are large Greek and Turkish communities.

The project currently has 44 volunteers, of which 10 are from black or ethnic minority groups. They are supported by a project co-ordinator, and work in a variety of settings including schools, family centres and refugee centres. The volunteers support learning in the classroom, focusing on literacy, numeracy, play and project work, and especially on reading either as one-to-one or in small groups. They work mainly with poor performers who have not been statemented and do not receive any extra statutory support. Six of the volunteers work in a more affluent area of the borough where the children’s needs are different.

“Mentoring Project”, Staffordshire

The mentoring project is managed by the Beth Johnson Foundation, a charitable trust based in Stoke-on-Trent. The Foundation aims to improve the quality of life for people over 50 years of age, through the development of innovative action research projects. The intergenerational mentoring project has been running since 1995 and in 1999 it has expanded to develop intergenerational mentoring in all High Schools in the Local Educational Authority. The project is funded from the National Health Action Zone Innovation award and focuses exclusively on young people in their first year of High School.

The City of Stoke-on-Trent has a population of 252,000 (1998 figures) with 16% over pensionable age. The minority ethnic community makes up between 4 to 5% of the local population. It is predominantly a working class area, with ceramics and coal mining having been the traditional industrial base. It has one of the lowest rates, 65%, for 16 year olds going forward into further education and the area is characterised by low achievements and aspirations.

There are 20 volunteers aged over 50, currently involved in the work and supported by a project co-ordinator. Presently there are no volunteers from black and minority ethnic background. Mentors are all classroom based and partnered with a young person in year 7, who is identified by the school as needing support in the school environment.

APPENDIX B

The Benefits to Older Volunteers and the Community of being School Based Mentors

Questionnaire

(to be administered by researcher, approximately half an hour)

Profile

Age Group 40 – 50, 50 – 60, 60 – 70, 70 – 80, 80 – 90,

Gender

Background experience of work

Volunteering experience

Any significant changes in lifestyle recently

Family/Grandchildren – how much contact

Contact with non-related children, past or present

Where is the school in relation to home

Volunteering

Why did you come forward to volunteer with this intergenerational project?
How long have you been in it?

What do you gain from your involvement? Please give three reasons

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

What are the down sides?

What are the benefits or detriments to your well-being, of volunteering?

Why do you think more women volunteer than men? Do you think this may change in the future?

Name three attributes that you bring to the scheme

1.

2.

3.

How do you think the young person would describe you? Please give six words

How would you describe your relationship with the individual child you work alongside?

What have you learnt whilst being a volunteer mentor with a young person?

1.

2.

3.

Community

Who else knows about your volunteering in schools? [friends and family] What do they say about it?

Can you describe any ways that your volunteering has influenced other people?

If someone is criticising young people, what do you do? Is it different now?

Are you perceived differently now, because of your school volunteering? In what ways?

APPENDIX C

Older People's Reference Group

Olga Johnson
Freda Moffat
Cyril Stazaker
Philip Whittaker

Professional Advice Group

Dr Frank Glendenning, Honorary Senior Research Fellow, Centre for Social Gerontology, Keele University, UK

Dr Sally Newman, Executive Director of Generations Together, University of Pittsburgh, USA

Andrew Papadopoulos, Clinical Psychologist, Birmingham Mental Health Trust, UK