

Learning across generations: older volunteers in schools learning from children

Authors: Carolyn Kagan and Norma Raynes, INTERGEN

Background:

Volunteering contributes to active ageing, but supporting older volunteers, especially in working with children is challenging. Learning contributes to wellbeing, an important feature of flourishing in older age. Intergen was developed to recruit and support older volunteers working in schools in their local neighbourhood. We asked 'Do older volunteers learn from the experience, and if so how is this learning produced?'

What is Intergen?

Creates learning opportunities for older and younger people in their own neighbourhoods.

- Partnerships
- Supported volunteers via a coordinated infrastructure of local and school based coordinators
- Recognition
- Evidence based

What do volunteers learn from children?

Technical Learning

I'm learning a lot, especially in the numeracy lessons (I think my brain nearly packed in during the grams and kilograms session) but I came through the problem solving involving times tables rather better.

Factual Learning

Do you know what a Wii is? Well, I didn't know what it was. So a couple of months ago they're sat round and they're talking about getting this Wii. And I said 'A wee?'. So I was told what it was. So I said 'a wee is when you want to go to the loo!'. I mean, I know what it is now, but of course this is where I was instructed.

Socio-cultural Learning

There are things I didn't know [about their cultural background]— So, they're bringing something to me, I didn't know that, but they're telling me something and they're quite relaxed telling me 'of we don't do this and that'. It was when we were doing baking, we had to look at the contents very carefully for everything for beef extract.

Learning about Self & Society

You get satisfaction and so much change. I've come out even after an hour or half an hour and I've come out and I've been a different person than when I went in. It's almost sort of a bit of a challenge really. Because we get old and cynical, you do change. It makes you feel useful.

Evaluation via action research

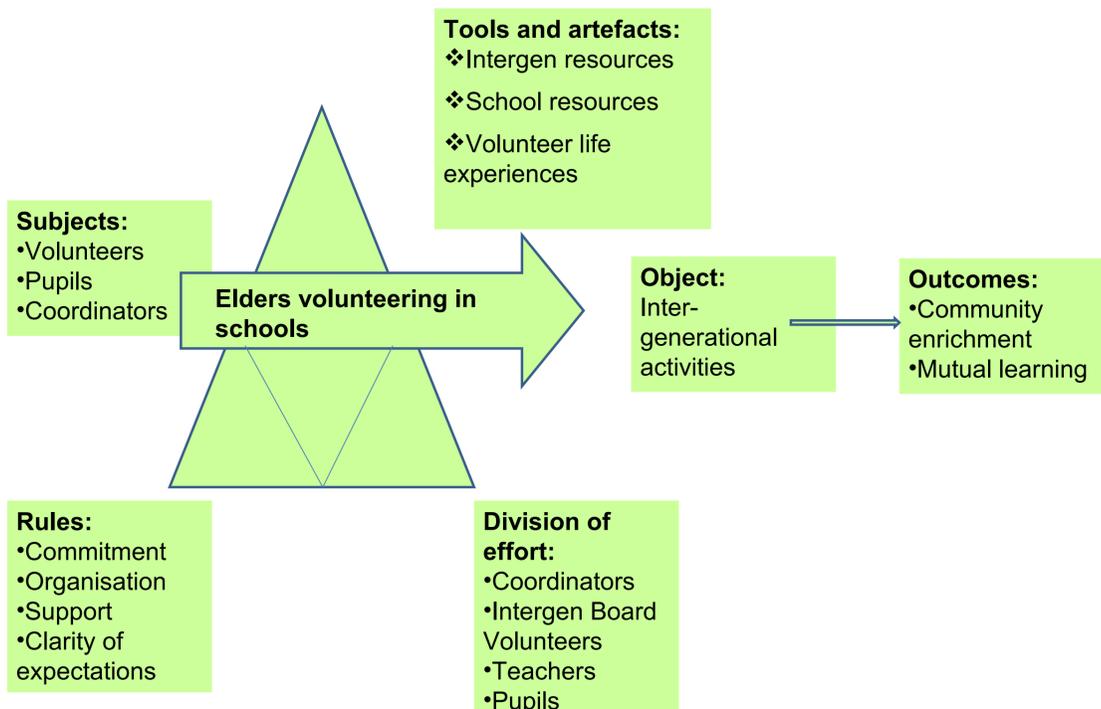
Feedback used for continual improvement.

Feedback gained via the organised collection of:

- Stories;
- interviews;
- discussions;
- questionnaires;
- stakeholder meetings;
- School inspections

The wellbeing of the elders is grounded in their learning from children. This can only occur within the supported system. We can see the production of elders learning from children as part of an **activity system**:

Activity theorists argue that in order to understand the nature of the interaction between people, one needs to focus on the joint activity in which they are involved. Human behaviour is seen as socially and culturally mediated towards a purpose, obtaining meaning within a social context. Van Vlaenderen (2004:136)



Conclusion

Intergen has demonstrated its value in terms of continued learning for elders, particularly from the pupils and this has contributed to their wellbeing. However, to fully understand the mechanisms by which this learning takes place, it is necessary to look at how the whole project is organised as well as the contemporary policy and attitudinal social context of older people's volunteering, especially in schools.

