

Learning across generations: older volunteers in schools learning from children

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Abstract

Volunteering contributes to active and productive ageing and yet older people can be difficult to engage in voluntary work, and particularly in schools. This paper reports on research about a project in England, which supports older volunteers to go into primary and secondary schools. The volunteers spend time with pupils of all ages on a range of those activities that the schools think would be beneficial. Research on the experiences of those older volunteers has revealed that their activities provide a solid platform from which the older volunteers learn from pupils (in addition to their contributing to pupils' learning). Examples of the kinds of learning that have taken place include technical learning; socio-cultural learning and factual learning. In addition, some of the volunteers have grown in their understanding of themselves and the societal contributions they can make as elders. The reported experiences of the older volunteers, linked to the different activities, will be discussed in terms of the contributions that younger generations can make to active ageing.

Introduction

Volunteering by older people makes an important contribution to citizenship (Lie et al, 2009) as well as to active and positive ageing (Davis-Smith and Gay, 2005; Walker, 2002).

In the UK the self-reported levels of volunteering more than once in 12 months are the highest amongst the 60-79 age group (ONS, 2013). Across different European countries, 34% of older people volunteering do so with children's organisations and schools (Drever, 2010; Ehlers et al, 2011), whereas in the UK, recent research has suggested that people of 50+ are the least likely group to volunteer in educational settings and with young people's organisations (Cabinet Office, 2008).

Intergen was established in one authority in North West England in 1999, specifically to bring older and younger people together in schools through a supported volunteering process. The public vision and mission statement is as follows (<http://www.intergen.org.uk/>).

VISION: Intergen's vision is a society in which schools, and older people come together in local communities in a partnership for their mutual benefit, promoting community cohesion as well as learning opportunities for everyone.

MISSION: Intergen's mission is to make a positive difference to the lives of children, teachers and older people. We achieve this by creating and sustaining robust partnerships between schools and older people in local communities throughout the UK.

The original Intergen project included 9 schools in 2008 (Siddiquee et al., 1995): Intergen now works in 8 different authorities with 19 schools in addition to several more in the original

authority. By July 2012 77 volunteers had been supported by Intergen, ranging in age from 48 to 96 with an average age of 72. Over the academic year 2011-2012 they contributed 4977 hours to the schools.

How does Intergen work?

This project deploys older volunteers into schools to undertake a variety of different activities. A school based co-ordinator works in close liaison with community based volunteer co-ordinator (appointed by Intergen on an annual stipend) from the same locality. He or she, in turn, recruits and supports volunteers. One community co-ordinator will work with a clutch of (usually 3) schools - primary and secondary- in the locality. Volunteers in the schools take part in academic activities (hearing children read, helping with maths) as well as extracurricular activities (such as teaching new skills, running clubs, organising local history walks) and other things in school (such as taking a school assembly). The benefits are to the pupils, the schools, the volunteers, the teachers, the culture of the school and to the schools' public engagement targets. There are clear benefits in terms of increased social capital and wellbeing (Siddiquee et al., 2008; Kagan et al., 2012). Initial evaluations of Intergen also revealed benefits in terms of learning (Siddiquee et al., 2008; Raynes and Kagan, 2009). This paper summarises some of that learning.

Adult learning and Wellbeing

Our understanding of adult learning from everyday activities, is one that sees older people as self-motivated, active learners (see the androgogic approach to adult learning, outlined by Knowles (1990)), and that older people largely learn by doing. As volunteers with Intergen, they are 'doing' various things, and there is no limit to the to the variety of activities they take part in or initiate. Siddiquee et al. (2008) summarised the range of activities to include: baking, gardening, computing, library, literacy, maths, music, office work, photocopying, printing, puzzles, reading, sewing, life stories, craft work. Furthermore, volunteers' activities might vary over time. Thus the scope for learning is wide.

Adult learning, in the context of active and positive ageing, can also be considered a part of wellbeing, namely of eudemonic wellbeing.

Kilroy (2005:7) draws on Ryff and Singer's work (1998) to suggest that well-being is best described as the

"presence of wellness, it is what it means to flourish and is about having a sense of purpose and direction in life, good quality relationships with others and opportunities to realise ones potential".

Shah and Peck (2005:2) remind us:

.. people also want to be leading rich and fulfilling lives - developing their capabilities and fulfilling their potential.

In other words they want to continue to learn.

For Shah and Peck, eudemonic wellbeing (personal development and fulfilment) is as important as hedonic wellbeing (satisfaction and happiness). Indeed this two-dimensional approach to personal wellbeing forms the core of an influential wellbeing manifesto for a flourishing society (Shah and Marks, 2004).

Hedonic and eudemonic well being of people who live in both urban and rural areas are inseparable from historical factors as well as people's economic positions, the environmental conditions in which they live and the political and ideological messages that define their life stages whilst enjoining them to break free and be active in their own lives. For both older people and young people, social responsibilities are closely linked to relevant social institutions (schools, pensions, public services etc). In other words, well-being in and of communities can be viewed as an activity *system* , not just as individual responses to circumstances.

This paper aims to explore the experiences of older volunteers in schools, contribute to our understanding of (i) how volunteering in schools for older adults contributes to their informal learning and eudemonic wellbeing, and (2) the nature of school based volunteering for older people as an 'activity system', contributing to later life development.

Method

The Intergen Board has established an action research process (Kagan et al., 2008) , whereby information is collected from different stakeholders in the project on a regular basis. This information is collated and reviewed by the Board of Trustees and informs changes to be made at strategic and operational levels within the organisation.

On an annual basis, volunteers with Intergen were asked for feedback of the impact of their involvement with the project. This feedback could be written or verbal (given at a national annual gathering of Intergen volunteers). In addition, as part of the evaluation of an earlier stage of Intergen (Siddiquee et al ,2008), volunteers were interviewed about their experiences. Anonymity was offered to all respondents, and although some volunteers were not concerned about their anonymity, it was decided to preserve anonymity for volunteers, teachers and schools in reporting of data. For the purposes of this paper, only those data relating to the learning that volunteers had undergone has been mined.

Findings

Intergen volunteers reported different kinds of learning arising from their experiences in schools, including technical learning, factual learning, socio-cultural learning and learning about themselves and the contribution they can make as elders in society.

Technical learning

They might be on the computer and they'll come to me and say 'I can't get to this' or something similar. I'm actually always interested to go and see what they're doing and see what they've got up to. They've got to log in and get to a programme, so it's really, really interesting to me to find out how

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.

I've learnt an awful lot how to teach children numeracy. I did A'level maths but I couldn't ever remember how I first learnt any number work which changed anyway. So now I know lots of different ways of helping and teaching children.

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.

[from the children] I am improving my spelling.

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.

We had a little Asian boy in at 3, and he said 'I can count up to 100', and by jolly he could! He showed me on the bead thing and I learnt how to do it.

I go to a multicultural school. Children make me understand more about the background they come from.

When we were 5 or 6 we weren't learning about science or nature. And they do a whole vast curriculum. ...I can see the work that's happening around the classroom, how they are with computers. I think it's absolutely brilliant

You gain insight into what it's like to be a child again, and what it's like being a child now

I think I've learnt a little bit about how to handle children in some respects. ... It's the different personalities, the different needs, the different attentions

There's this little lad who's ten and you listen. He's bad on his reading and he says 'I'm getting a new mother' – his mother has left them and he's really bitter against the world. You get to see what their lives are like.

My first time with this child and the first thing she told me about was about her Dad having an ASBO (anti social behaviour order) and then she said something about stabbing, ! And the shock! I had to learn not to show it and it's like all the different dads and uncles and 'I don't like this one'. And you just have to keep a straight face and not get involved. You've got to, in a way, take a step back inside yourself from some of the things that are happening.

Learning about self and the contribution older people can make

You get satisfaction and so much change. I've come out even after an hour or half and hour and I've come out and I've been a different person than when I went in. Its

almost sort of a bit of a challenge really. Because we get old and cynical, you do change.

We forget the child that's inside us sometimes. You know the honesty and the innocence and the straightforwardness and that sort of point of view.

I think my teacher quite respects the fact that I'm useful and doing what she needs to be done.

I have learned a great deal from the children, like I am not very good at maths!

You're giving something. Voluntary work is free and giving is free. Where people volunteer, it's a benefit to somebody else.

It makes you feel useful . One thing about retiring is that you lose that little bit of being useful at doing something, [with volunteering] you are doing it

I want to carry on because it's a new challenge that makes a real contribution to the community – the help I give to the school.

Helping out in the art classes in the school has prompted me to join an art class at the adult education to try and improve my own work.

Wellbeing grounded in elders learning from youth

It is clear that the older volunteers working with Intergen have learnt a lot from the work with Intergen. They do not always talk of their experiences in terms of learning, but sometimes they do. This learning has been factual (elders now know things they did not before); technical (elders now know how to do things they did not know before); and socio-cultural (elders have developed their attitudes and understandings of other social groups with which they were not familiar and they now know things about the world in which they live. This aspect of intergenerational learning is relatively invisible, in contrast to the learning that younger people derive from elders (e.g. Newman and Hatton-Yeo, 2008). It is somewhat surprising how little attention this aspect of intergenerational practice has received, particularly in the context of discussion about active and positive ageing.

However, it is clear from the evidence of research within Intergen that adults volunteering in schools do indeed continue to learn, which in turn will contribute to their levels of eudemonic wellbeing. This is good news for the wellbeing and active ageing agenda, as 'keep learning' is one of the five ways to wellbeing (Thompson and Aked, 2011) which are being widely adopted as a way to frame public health and community policies in the UK. (The other four of the five ways are Connect; Keep Active; Take Notice; and Give. Intergen volunteering addresses all five of the ways to wellbeing.)

However, it is not enough to demonstrate that elders volunteering in schools contributes to wellbeing, it is also necessary to try to understand how the volunteering activities, the things done by elders with children, lead to learning and development. One way of making sense of this is to see the intergenerational activities as part of a wider system.

School based intergenerational practice as an Activity system

The intergenerational learning experienced by volunteers through Intergen, has as its foundation the relationship between school pupils and the older volunteers. In order to understand the links between the activities (which as we have seen, are varied) and the interpersonal relationships that all occur within a school setting, we turn to the socio-cultural and activity theory perspective of Vygotsky (1978). Van Vlaenderen (2004:136) summarises the advantages of the activity theory perspective:

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. P.136

To develop new practice (in this case elders' learning through intergenerational activity in schools) requires alignment with three types of local factors:

Social – largely relationships..., eg, power, support .Local Intergen projects could not succeed without the support of the co-ordinators – the local Intergen volunteer coordinator, who recruits and supports volunteers; and the in-school Intergen Co-ordinator, who stimulates interest in Intergen within the schools and ensures volunteers are usefully deployed.

Cultural – ways things happen, what they mean...eg, whether or volunteers should participate in schools given the cuts in funding for paid staff, the multi-cultural nature of school classrooms and the cultural bases of the volunteers ; the (lack of) understanding of intergenerational proactive

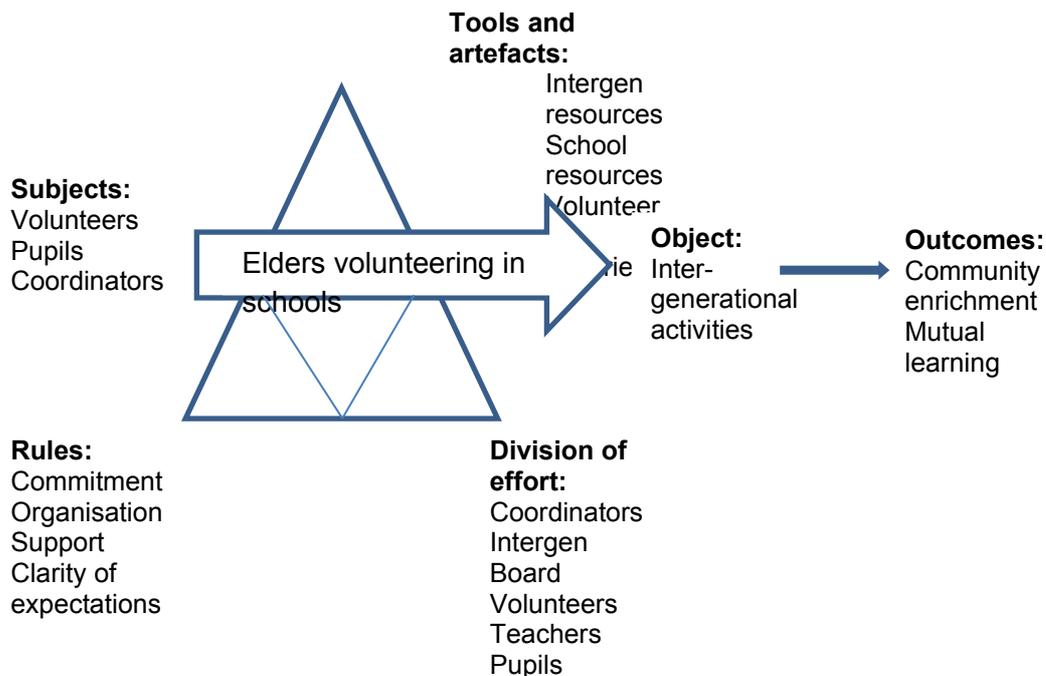
Historical – current context, arrangements...eg, hard resources within both Intergen and schools to support and continue with Intergen; infrastructure support for and given by the host organisation Intergen, and the resources needed to sustain the organisation; general context of cuts in public spending with a focus on small scale ,entrepreneurial activity (such as Intergen!)

Figure 1 illustrates the entire activity system that enables elders' learning.

Conclusion

Evidence from a schools based volunteering programme for elders (Intergen) has demonstrated its value in terms of continued learning for elders, particularly from the pupils. This learning was in terms of technical, factual, socio-cultural learning and learning about self and the contributions that elders can and do make to society. As such volunteering with Intergen has contributed to volunteers' eudemonic 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.

Figure 1: Schools based Intergenerational activity system



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