Positive Ageing Through Place Based Intergenerational Activity

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Abstract

Purpose: This paper explores a community psychological intervention to enable older people to contribute to their local communities through volunteering in schools

Background: Loneliness in older age is increasingly recognised is a growing problem. One way of enabling older people to remain connected, locally, as well as use their knowledge and skills is via volunteering. Volunteering contributes to active and productive ageing and yet older people can be difficult to engage in voluntary work, and particularly in schools. Furthermore older people often report a perceived fear of local young people and opportunities for them to mix across generations can sometimes be limited.

Methods: The project works in a unique way to link older people with cluster of schools within a neighbourhood, thus building and maximising resources available within those neighbourhoods, and utilising the knowledge and experience of older people. Qualitative accounts have been collected from older people, children, and the schools and will be discussed in terms of the contribution that young people make to active ageing and place based social capital.

Conclusions: Active ageing through intergenerational activity in some neighbourhoods requires active support. Within the current policy context it is difficult for schools to commit the small but necessary resource to enable older volunteers to feel valued and able to contribute. When the model works, there are clear benefits not just to the older people and children, but also to age friendly and inclusive neighbourhoods

Introduction

The prevalence of loneliness amongst older people has led to the formation of the Campaign to End Loneliness, launched in 2011[1] . Loneliness, for the campaign, is defined as : *a subjective, unwelcome feeling of lack or loss of companionship. It happens when we have a mismatch between the quantity and quality of social relationships that we have, and those that we want.*

> *Two types of loneliness are distinguished:*

- Emotional loneliness is felt when we miss the companionship of one particular person; often a spouse, sibling or best friend.
- Social loneliness is experienced when we lack a wider social network or group of friends.

Some of the social facts underpinning the Campaign to End Loneliness are as follows:

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[1] See www.campaigntoendloneliness.org

- 17% of older people are in contact with family, friends and neighbours less than once a week and 11% are in contact less than once a month (Victor et al, 2003)
- Over half (51%) of all people aged 75 and over live alone (ONS, 2010)
- Two fifths all older people (about 3.9 million) say the television is their main company (Age UK, 2014)
- 63% of adults aged 52 or over who have been widowed, and 51% of the same group who are separated or divorced report, feeling lonely some of the time or often (Beaumont, 2013)
- 59% of adults aged over 52 who report poor health say they feel lonely some of the time or often, compared to 21% who say they are in excellent health (Beaumont, 2013)
- A higher percentage of women than men report feeling lonely some of the time or often (Beaumont, 2013)

Whilst there are a number of risk factors for loneliness, social isolation is an important one. More and more older people are living alone and in danger of social isolation. Social isolation in turn can lead to low self esteem, lack of confidence, possibly depression all of which lead to further withdrawal and greater isolation.

As Courtin and Knapp (2015:1) explain, this is of concern because

> social isolation has been identified as a risk factor for poor health and reduced wellbeing, including mortality, depression and cognitive decline.

Social isolation might come about because of reduced mobility, death of a spouse or friends, distance from family or a general narrowing of social networks. Volunteering has been found to be one vehicle by which older people get out of the house, meet people and make new friends (Low et al., 2007; Cabinet Office, 2015).

Community psychological perspective

Whilst isolation is defined above in terms of contact with others and the meaning that little contact has for people, another dimension of isolation is the reduced opportunity to use experiences and talents in making a contribution to others and/or the community. Indeed, one of the features of active ageing that protects against the risk of isolation is being able to make a continued and valued contribution to the local community.

Some, but not all, approaches to wellbeing, recognise the importance of having a role and making a contribution. One of the most widely adopted frameworks for understanding and promoting wellbeing is the New Economic Foundation's Five Ways to Wellbeing (Aked et al., 2008). The fifth route to wellbeing they describe is 'Give'. Give can be summarised as:

> Do something nice for a friend, or a stranger. Thank someone. Smile. Volunteer your time. Join a community group. Look out, as well as in. Seeing yourself, and your happiness, linked to the wider community can be incredibly rewarding and creates connections with the people around you. (Aked and Thompson, 2011:8).

This in part encompasses the idea of 'making a contribution', but is very individually focused (which is not surprising as the NEF work had its foundation in the Foresight project on Mental Capital and

Wellbeing). From a community psychological perspective, 'making a contribution' is part of what it means to be social and have a sense of social belonging – the antithesis of loneliness. In this sense, loneliness is not just about subjective feelings of loss, or quality or quantity of contacts, but about an existential stance: the perception of making contribution to wider social purpose.

The core value of stewardship in community psychology is what guides us to endeavour to ensure that people are enabled to make a contribution, to have a role and a sense of social purpose (Kagan e t al., 2011).   McDowell (2009), adapting Nazroo (2005)'s framework does include having a role as one of the five essential elements of wellbeing which are:

• resilience
• independence
• health
• income and wealth
• having a role and having time.

This way of thinking about wellbeing, as opposed to the NEF's five ways, acknowledges the social context of people's lives, one part of which is their local geographical community. It is this way of thinking of older people as embedded in a local social system, that recognises the assets of their characters, resources, experiences and their capabilities, that underlies the Intergen project.

Intergenerational experience

One of the features of older people's isolation is a reduction in or loss of contact with younger people. And yet, as Pain (2005) points out, intergenerationality is an important part of social identity. However, she argues that "Intergenerational differences and relations are not 'natural', but are produced by a complex range of factors at individual, family, community and societal levels. (Pain 2005:13). Pain is one of the few commentators who recognise that age and intergenerational relations are important aspects of social cohesion and the sites for possible schisms. (see also Kagan et al., 2013). So intergenerational activity extends beyond individual benefit to benefit for the wider community.

In terms of loneliness and the wellbeing of older people, the importance of intergenerational relationships for wellbeing was summed up by Age UK in their summary of evidence about social isolation and its mitigation. They suggested that:

> *Intergenerational contact is probably more effective in combating loneliness than contact with one's own age group, although both have proven successful (Age UK, nd:3)*

Intergenerational projects seek to bring older and younger people together in some activity to mutual benefit. There are many different kinds of intergenerational projects, involving different groups of older and younger people. The benefits of intergenerational activities have included increased understanding of each other's age group; increased confidence; the development of new skills. Furthermore, older people report a reduction in isolation, sense of satisfaction and pride when acknowledged by young people in the local community, and increased opportunities for involvement

in other activities. In addition intergenerational activities have also been seen to improve community cohesion. (Martin et al., 2010).

Some intergenerational activities have taken place in schools, and here too mutual benefits to children, older people and schools have been reported (see for example Granville, 2000). Older people bring to schools and to the enhancement of children's learning, the benefit of their experiences, a non-judgemental approach, and, as Granville suggested, derive a sense of purpose from their time with children:

> *It was clear that the volunteers restored meaning to their lives through their belief that they could make a difference to a young person's future.* (Granville, 2000: 38)

Volunteering as a means of making a contribution

Volunteering is one way in which older people can have a valued role and make a contribution to their communities. Volunteering by older people has been seen as an important component of active and positive ageing, and to retaining an active citizenship role. (Lie et al, 2009).

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), but still lower than in other European countries. 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)[2]. Informal volunteering (helping out neighbours or family members) exceeds formal volunteering (through an organisation) (Drever, 2010).

The Intergen project seeks to enhance the contribution that older people can make to their local communities through volunteering in schools. In so doing it helps to mitigate loneliness and enable older people to retain or reform intergenerational relationships. It local focus supports ageing in place and indeed, it is its local focus that makes it unique amongst older-people-volunteering-in-schools projects (Siddiqquee et al. 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.*

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[2] The UK Government keeps changing the statistics it keeps on levels and nature of volunteering and it is difficult to find more recent information about the levels of volunteering with children's organisations amongst older people. We do know from more recent surveys that formal volunteering across all age groups is most common an a few types of activity: The most common activities carried out by regular formal volunteers were 'organising or helping to run an activity or event' (59%) and 'raising or handling money/taking part in sponsored events' (52%). Thirty-six per cent of regular formal volunteers led a group or were part of a committee. Other activities undertaken by around a quarter of formal volunteers were 'providing transport/driving' (26%), 'giving information/advice/counselling' (25%) and 'visiting people' (23%) (Drever, 2010)

The original Intergen project included 9 schools in one authority in 2008 (Siddiquee et al., 1995): Intergen now works in 8 different authorities with 21 schools in addition to several more in the original authority. In July 2015, 78 volunteers were supported by Intergen , ranging in age from 55 to 102 with an average age of 72. To give a sense of the scale of volunteering, Intergen volunteers going into the three schools of one cluster in the year ending July 2015 contributed 2124 hours of activity to the schools.

How does Intergen work?

Once clusters of schools (ideally 1 secondary and two primaries, but in practice sometimes three primaries) want to join Intergen, an in-school coordinator is identified, and local older people are recruited to be the cluster coordinators.   Local coordinators are paid a stipend, and in turn recruit older volunteers to go into the schools. Volunteers go into schools to undertake a variety of different activities, according to the needs and wishes of the schools and the talents and experiences of the volunteers. Volunteers in the schools have taken 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, working in the library, going on trips).

The benefits are to the pupils, the schools, the volunteers, the teachers, the culture of the school and to the schools' community cohesion targets[3]. Half of the clusters are in areas well below the average in England for multiple sources of deprivation. There are clear benefits in terms of increased social capital and wellbeing (Siddiquee et al., 2008; Kagan et al., 2012). Evaluations of Intergen also revealed benefits in terms of learning, both for younger and older people (Siddiquee et al., 2008; Raynes and Kagan, 2009; Kagan and Raynes, 2013). This paper explores the impact of the intergenerational work in schools on place based social capital and considers the interface of this with actual or potential loneliness.

Impact of Intergen

Community cohesion

Contact with the older volunteers led some pupils to adjust their stereoptypes of ageing.

A secondary school pupil said of older people in general:

> *I think they're neglected in society because they're old and they can't do…There's nothing out there for them... there are no activities for disabled or the elderly.*

In contrast, the Intergen volunteer who they had met was different:

> *She was quite healthy and had a really good personality. She was cheerful and positive and took pride in her job.*

A primary school pupil reflected the views of her peers:

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[3] Ofsted inspections include how well leaders and governors promote all forms of equality with those protected characteristics under the 2010 Equality Act, the first of which is age. (see https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-inspection-handbook-from-september-2015)

> *Most old people I know are grumpy.*
>
> ***Is she like that*** ?
>
> *No, she's like a child but older. She's still got a lot of energy in her to come in and do it for us. She helps you when you get stuck as well.*

Two other primary aged pupils reflected on how they had changed their views of older people:

> *I changed my mind because I normally see, I used to normally see old people very old so I actually didn't think of old people as Mrs – and Mrs ---. But when I saw them I changed my mind.*
>
> *I changed my mind because when I came to school and I saw them I thought that if they're nice every old person could be nice and I changed my mind about.*

Volunteering with Intergen is a relational activity. Place based volunteering has led to relationships that extend beyond the school gates. The activities help build social capital, which would not be possible with a non-place based scheme.

Links and connections.

Children have commented on the positive value of seeing their Intetrgen volunteers out and about.

> *I've seen her like walking. I've seen her in the swimming pool a couple of times and I always wave at her and I think its just nice that we know her and its nice that we're waving to her.*
>
> *I think it gives her a warm feeling inside when we see her outside of school.*
>
> *I was walking to school and I saw her and I waved to her and she smiled.*

The long term impact on children is summed up by this story.

> *A 10 year old girl heard that the Intergen volunteer who came to her school and with whom she had spent a lot of time when she was 7/9 was very ill. She wrote him a letter saying she was sorry he was ill but that she wanted him to know he had changed her life. She had the leading role in Matilda and she remembered all he had told her about his life as an actor, how to stand, how to deal with being nervous and how to make sure everyone could hear her. She wanted to be an actress now and it was due to him. She hoped he would get better soon.*

The worlds of older and younger people are linked.

> *I don't see many young people in the general run of things, and I miss that. Going into schools makes me feel young myself, and it is truly wonderful when I meet some of 'my' children when I go shopping. It is the children I recognise and through them I get to meet their parents. It has widened my horizons.*

These links reflect the 'strength of weak ties' (Granovetter, 1973), and are important in maintaining a sense of community and belonging.

Sense of purpose

Volunteers have told us that being involved with Intergen gives them a sense of purpose, of being needed and of seeing how their activities benefit children.

> I used to be stuck in the house – never went out anywhere. Intergen was the best thing to happen to me. It gave me my confidence back. Intergen gave me my life back. I've now got a new part time job in a vet's. I got this through the volunteering, making the effort and I love doing the work.

> I am working in the gardens which is great as I don't have my own as I am in a first floor flat. It is the only time I go out. I didn't realise I could still be needed

> 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

Learning and continued personal development

Not only do volunteers contribute to childrens' learning and the enrichment of this learning, they also learn from their time in schools (Kagan and Raynes, 2009; 2013). They learn about new ways of doing things, about themselves but also about the society in which they live, that is socio-cultural learning. This enabled them to remain in touch with current events and to have a greater understanding of others. Some of the things they say include:

> 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.

> You gain insight into what it's like to be a child again, and what it's like being a child now – and it is different.

> One boy said to me 'I wish guns had flowers coming out them instead of bullets'. He just said that in passing and it made me think about what it must have been like to have come from a war.

Benefits of being local

In addition to forming new relationships and increasing bonding capital, the advantages of being local have contributed to the continuity of volunteers and the stability of their relationships with schools and pupils. The fact that 90% of volunteers stayed volunteering in the schools for over three years aids the development of social capital and continuity within neighbourhoods. In this way the project is an important source of bridging capital. This does not happen by accident and has to be supported. Some volunteers work in primary and secondary schools and have been a point of recognition when primary pupils move on to secondary

Discussion

Intergen works to create what community psychologists call new social settings (Kagan et al., 2011), bringing people together in new ways, outside the existing social order. This is particularly important

in the context of loneliness, as the existing social order means people are often isolated, feel a reduced sense of purpose and in the case of older people, cut off from younger people. The new social setting allows older people to regain or retain a sense of purpose, forge new relationships, to have a role and to 'give'.

These new social settings support local connections and the growth and maintenance of both bonding and social capital. Community connections sometimes happen naturally, but often only happen with some kinds of support. Indeed, as Taylor (2015:5) suggests:

> .. *Effective communitarian public policy requires planning, careful engagement with people, the weaving and brokering of social networks, and ongoing support*

This is what Intergen delivers. Furthermore, by bridging and bringing people together across the generations, it contributes to community cohesion, and the formation of positive attitudes of both ageing and youth – enhancing understanding of the 'other'. Its local focus means that is contributes to the sustainability of neighbourhoods within which all who live and work can flourish.

When we have thought about how bringing older and younger people in schools together makes its impact, and contributes to sustainable communities, we are drawn to concepts from ecology, in particular, the ideas of complex systems, fields and edges (Burton and Kagan, 2015). An ecosystem is both a system and a field of interacting activities. As a field we are considering a terrain that has a boundary and within which interactions happen. Interactions within any field of activity have a structure and complexity that cannot simply be reduced to the sum of those interactions. Furthermore, fields do not have fixed boundaries, they interact with and influence adjacent fields or ecosystems. The area where two ecosystems meet is called the 'ecotone' or ecological 'edge', and contains elements of both contributing fields. As the 'edge' has characteristics of both ecosystems, it results in a richness of natural resources.

Intergen works across boundaries and pooled the resources of both the Intergen, its coordinators and volunteers and schools, including pupils, teachers, in-school coordinators. We have created an ecological 'edge'. Working to create an ecological edge is an efficient way to generate and use resources and is a more sustainable way of working than working within, rather than across boundaries. 'Edge' is also arguably an ethical principle – looking to work with and to maximise 'edge' between social groups facilitates contact, interaction, learning and respect between them, and this is what we see in Intergen.

What problems have emerged?

Intergen is a social enterprise and as such has suffered from the economic climate wherein it is difficult to secure grant funds and schools are strapped for money to pay for services. Like many third sector organisations, it is this constantly under strain, and the time and effort of the Board is directed at finding funding.

There are conceptual problems with any intergenerational project or thinking about intergenerational justice. The most obvious is the tendency for intergenerational practice to suggest homogeneity amongst generational groups. Not only are generations difficult to define, with greatly overlapping age ranges in a generation, but generations are heterogeneous. Older –people, for example are greatly differentiated (Pain, 2005) with many different ways of understanding the

composition of 'elders', beyond that of age. Indeed age is no predictor of health, wellbeing, employment, community involvement, or, indeed loneliness (although prevalence of loneliness does tend to increase with age in Western societies for all sorts of structural reasons).

Intergenerational conflict and its assessment is often the foundation of intergenerational practice, and Pain (2005) recommends that careful place based analysis is made of the conflicts underpinining intergenerational solutions.. What if, instead of seeing young people or older people as problems and their relationships to be the solution to conflict, young and older people were seen as assets, which when combined enrich experience? Through intergenerational activities come learning and enhances wellbeing. Such an approach leads to more strongly networked and connected communities, enhancing human flourishing and being more sustainable in the long term. What if we saw older and younger people as people with knowledge, expertise, experience and skills to share, bringing them together in the formation of an ecological 'edge', maximising resources for human flourishing. We do not choose localities where there are clear intergenerational conflicts, or high levels of loneliness, so we do not know the extent to which the changed attitudes and experiences of young and older people working together have on wider issues of social cohesion and loneliness. Is the project really reaching the places where the needs are greatest? We know, as above, that some of our volunteers have found the experience re-energising, with social and health benefits. We think that others are well connected from the start: which is not to say that the project does not play a preventative role – it is just difficult to demonstrate this. Ours is a preventative approach, which is not to wait until there are intergenerational conflicts or high levels of loneliness, but to pre-empt these by building activities bring the two generations together so that positive attitudes of the 'other' are forged, and mutual learning takes place.

Intergen, with its local focus, contributes to the sustainability of neighbourhoods. In addition to building place based capital, what Intergen illustrates is a new way of learning, one that shows the values of reciprocal, mutual, place based learning. Learning for pupils and for elders is does not just take place through the instruction from the teachers. Life experience is a valuable learning tool. As Fagan (2009:203) says of future educational for sustainable communities:

> Educational institutions....will reach far into the hinterland of local and national communities and into the minds of learners everywhere. The days when education could be separated from the vast majority of citizenry are disappearing. Its knowledge banks, so often the inaccessible domain of just the few, will continue to be drilled deeply but, and at the same time, will apply the learning gained so that it flows widely and usefully into the communities it serves.

Conclusion

In terms of community psychological understanding of the work, there are a number of concepts that are relevant.

(I) intergenerational activity is an activity system and greater understanding of just how this operates would be useful

(2) In creating these intergenerational opportunities we are creating new social settings – new ways of people coming together at micro and meso levels to form new relationships and engage in new activities

(3) Bringing together older retired people and school pupils is creating an ecological edge, in which resources are maximised and new activities possible.

This last idea reflects the value of stewardship which I have argued elsewhere(Burton and Kagan, 2015) is a core value of community psychology. It embraces the preservation of natural and human resources. Enabling older people to continue to make a contribution, makes good use of their human resources and contributes not only to active ageing in place but also to sustainable communities.

Intergenerational relationship are part of our social identities and have material effects on the quality of life of older and younger people in particular settings with important implications for community cohesion and the sustainability o communities. Without strong intergenerational networks in localities, the possibilities are strong for social schisms, two-way ageism and social breakdown. Drawing an analogy with the new trend for intercultural working in the context of ethnicity and racism (Cantle, 2012), seeking intergenerational working stands to prevent the prejudice, bigotry, conflict that threaten the sustainability of communities.

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