

Great School Framework Case Study: Hands across the Generations

Focus area

The intergenerational project ***Hands across the Generations*** has seen twelve identified Reception children build friendships with residents of the Abbeyfield House care home in Stevenage.

Aims/rationale

The project aimed to:

For children:

- close the **attainment** gap between disadvantaged children and their peers.
- improve language use and acquisition.
- provide a companion for children who do not have a grandparent or regular contact with grandparents, creating the conditions and opportunity to develop friendships.

For the elderly:

- overcome the issue of loneliness and isolation for elderly members of the community.

For both groups:

- improve social interaction and empathy.
- promote positive mental health and emotional well-being.
- develop lasting intergenerational friendships and positive attitudes toward the elderly.

Educators saw the opportunity for a fresh curriculum approach, providing lasting memories, where children would spend time with the elderly, both at the residents' homes and in the school environment. It is evidenced that when generations work together, it can break down stereotypes, change attitudes and lives, foster mutual empathy and develop community cohesion.

Background context

A significant number of children enter our school with poor language skills, including limited vocabulary. Over several years introducing Quality First Teaching, creative based approaches to the curriculum delivery and innovative targeted provision strategies, we had raised the attainment, progress and EYFs outcomes for our most vulnerable children. However, despite our efforts, analysis of school data showed that there remained a gap in the progress of our disadvantaged children when compared with their peers. Further precise analysis highlighted that the disadvantaged children experienced difficulties with their *Communication and Language* skills, creating a barrier to achieving Age Related Expectations in *PSED*. Furthermore, this impacted on making progress in all other areas of learning.

The school has a long-standing tradition of regular support of grandparent and elderly volunteers. This support has been in place for over twelve years, and has included on-going weekly singing sessions on piano; on-going weekly sewing and crafting support and regular support from a number of volunteer 'Reading Friends'.

We recognise the older generation has a wealth of knowledge and experience that is relevant to the lives of our children. We noticed how their nurturing manner, with quality interactions, has benefitted our young learners, leading to positive outcomes: increasing vocabulary, increasing confidence, resilience to develop new skills, improved mental health and well-being. Whilst we value their support, the number of volunteers is small, which leads to difficulties in reaching a wider group of children.

Within the current Reception and Nursery cohorts we identified a greater number of Pupil Premium children in comparison with previous years. Building on our effective intergeneration practice, we looked beyond our school to the local community for support.

Acting on research on the benefits of intergenerational contact, and taking inspiration from the Channel 4 documentary, *Old People's Home for 4 Year Olds*, which successfully demonstrated the positive impact that younger children have on the older generation, we sought a willing, local care home to emulate the project in our setting.

This coincided with the timing to renew the HfL Early Years Quality Standard Gold Award for the third time. This project would become the focus of our 'Making a Difference' project to meet the criteria.

Research

- **OUP Report 2018 – 'Why Closing the Word Gap Matters'**
 - Research in educational establishments to challenge disadvantage by prioritising vocabulary development and that being 'word rich' impacts throughout children's lives.
- **'Old Peoples Home for 4 Year Olds' Channel 4 documentary**
 - Research to find out if it is possible to halt or reduce some of the physical and mental decline than can be associated with older people.
- www.theguardian.com/society/2019/jan/05/children-elderly-intergenerational-care-advantages *United for All Ages report 2017.*
- *"Children who regularly mix with older people see improvements to their language development, reading and social skills. By playing and reading with children, the elderly are less likely to suffer loneliness, while the children get more opportunities for one-to-one reading and play."* www.ageukmobility.co.uk/mobility-news/article/intergenerational-care
- In 2013 a [study, by BMC Geriatrics](#) in Japan, found that elderly people who were part of an intergenerational care scheme were not only engaging with the toddlers, but they were engaging with each other and smiling more as a result of the children's visits. The scheme made the residents more comfortable with conversation and gave them something new to talk about.
- Parents who engage with their child's learning from an early age can boost progress by five months according to evidence summarised in the [Early Years Toolkit](#), a new resource launched by the [Education Endowment Foundation \(EEF\)](#).
www.educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/news/new-evaluation-reports-catch-up-programme-boosts-young-childrens-language-s/

The story

The first phase of the project was to build up the relationships between the residents and the identified children. This took three visits.

Once relationships were established, planned activities were adapted to accommodate and address the limitations of some residents, for example fine motor control and mobility. Educators adapted plans to capitalise on identified strengths and areas of expertise of the residents. To ensure the project would be successful, educators held detailed weekly planning meetings to devise meaningful activities aimed at developing planned intentional interaction in a variety of ways, both indoors and outdoors to foster communication, conversation, cooperation and discovery. Preparation tasks were assigned to each educator. Adequate time was protected each week for a member of the team to document the journey. The documentation allowed an opportunity to reflect on the children’s experiences and our practice, plan next steps and sharing the new learning and insights that arose through the interactions between the children and elderly residents.

The children and residents met for two hours each fortnight over a period of five months. Whilst most contact took place at the care home, some interactions took place at school which allowed the children to reciprocate the hospitality they had received.

Parents and carers were involved and invited into school in order to meet the children’s new friends and begin to forge their own relationships with the elderly.

At the end of each half-term, parents and carers participated in a joint activity alongside the children and residents, for example, *‘Tea-time and Valentine’s biscuits.’* This included baking cookies together with residents and sharing them over a cup of tea.

At Christmas time, the residents enjoyed a festive lunch with the children. This was followed by entertainment for all Reception children, a puppet show and then singing, led by one of the residents.

Impact

The outcomes from the project were positive:

For children

Based on spring term data, the attainment gap between disadvantaged children and their peers was narrowed. Improvement was evident in the children’s Specific Areas of Learning of *Communication and Language* and *Personal, Social and Emotional Development*, as well as in their Prime Areas of Learning.

Spring term data shows that all children involved in the project made at least two steps progress in Literacy and PSED since starting Reception in the Autumn Term.

- ✓ Improvements in language development
- ✓ Greater confidence, self-esteem and empathy
- ✓ Improved social skills

Three year trend data - percentage of disadvantaged children achieving GLD

2018 GLD	2019 GLD	2020 GLD
60%	66%	*72%

*2020 outcomes are based on Teacher Assessment and most likely prediction, due to COVID-19.

One child (K) entered Nursery lacking confidence, not talking and with low level independence skills. Despite daily targeted provision (e.g. *Wellcomm*), K made little progress. The parent had reservations at first about K taking part in the '*Hands Across the Generations*' project because his grandparent had recently died. However, through the project K healed and blossomed. Furthermore, the parent benefitted from spending time with the residents of Abbeyfield House. The parent commented,

"K has become more chatty and tells me more about school. I lost my Mum last year, so it was emotional for me, but I really enjoyed meeting the elderly residents."

We saw 100% engagement from our parents. The team works tirelessly in partnership with parents to help them feel included and valued in our Woolenwick family. Parents fully engaged despite their own circumstances and challenges, including negative experiences of their own education.

For residents from Abbeyfield House

Residents said they looked forward to the visits and the activities they did with the children, helping them to overcome a sense of loneliness and giving them a sense of purpose.

"I love seeing the children having fun and we have fun too." - Merle, resident.

"My favourite part was getting to know the children." - Eric, resident.

"I think I gained a more open mind. They teach us and we teach them."

- Jackie, resident.

"I look forward to seeing the children and I really enjoyed everyone singing together." - Tommy, resident.

"My favourite part was hearing the children's laughter and seeing the residents smiling. The residents are rejuvenated by visits from the children." - Patricia, Manager of Abbeyfield House.

Both for children and the residents from Abbeyfield House

The project:

- ✓ promoted positive mental health and well-being
- ✓ promoted community cohesion and age diversity
- ✓ developed intergenerational friendships.

The bonds made have demonstrated that the elderly residents made a significant difference in the children's lives.

Through this intergeneration project, it is evident that bonds made do not need to be biological.

Bob (resident): *"This is good exercise. I'm stretching my arms."*

K (child): *"It will make you big and strong if you do your exercises."*

E (child): *"I was shy and then I wasn't. Tommy (resident) knows how to sing and he kept singing the reindeer has a purple nose! It made me laugh!"*

For parents/carers

Feedback from parents/carers was overwhelmingly positive.

"I will take E myself, to see her friends at Abbeyfield."

"C not only liked the walk there but also enjoyed the stories and the games and making the residents happy. The cooking session was messy but lots of fun!"

"I had a good chat with some of the residents and really enjoyed getting to know them. K has loved getting to know them all and she has become more confident. She points out Abbeyfield when we go past on the bus."

"W looks forward to visiting his friends at Abbeyfield and I think this has helped build his confidence."

Reflections/evaluation

It took longer than anticipated for the children to feel comfortable enough to have conversations with the residents and to have the patience to listen to the residents. They were shy at first, in the new setting and were not familiar with talking to the elderly in many cases.

The initial plan for weekly visits became harder to manage with the logistics of maintaining appropriate educator to child ratios back in the classroom. Therefore, visits were adapted to take place fortnightly. This worked well and the residents all said they looked forward to the visits.

Mobility difficulties proved challenging when transporting residents to and from school. Educators assisted the residents with their own cars.

The project was deliberately designed for parents to actively participate. With greater engagement from families who would traditionally be 'hard to reach,' we observed a positive impact on the children's mental health and emotional well-being. Parents reported feeling a greater sense of belonging to the community, leading to lasting friendships, as well as developing the skills and confidence needed to support their children's learning at home through play and everyday activities.

The lockdown, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, changed the format of communication between the children and residents.

Unable to visit the residents in person, children, parents and educators remained in touch with residents via emails, cards, texts and telephone calls with the manager.

W (child) decided to make and post an Easter card. He told his mum: *"I am really worried about my friends."*

Some sessions have been postponed until the lockdown is lifted. These include sessions led by a Yoga teacher, Para Dance leaders, Sports Leader and Mindfulness Practitioner.

It had been planned that the children and residents would paint pebbles together to exchange with each other to place in the school and residents' gardens. As this was no longer possible, the keyworker children painted 'keepsake' pebbles which were delivered to their elderly friends.

The keyworker children and staff continue to make regular doorstep visits to the residents to sing songs accompanied by the guitar.

On another occasion, children made a socially-distanced communi-TEA visit, spreading positivity: the children decorated paper bags with flowers and rainbows to hold an individually wrapped cake, biscuit and sealed teabag which they delivered to each of their Abbeyfield friends, as well as other elderly friends of the school.

The residents were gifted a copy of the installation *Arc of Hope*. Some of our key worker children had the residents in mind when they came up with the idea of the *Arc of Hope*, a symbol of hope, standing together as a community, circumventing isolation during the lockdown, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. (see GSF case study under the 'outward looking collaboration mindset' lens)

Next steps

Plans to continue the project remain. As soon as it is safe to do so, the visits will resume.

The project will become part of our standard practice and become integral to our children's curriculum experience.

Parental involvement will allow the potential for families to continue to visit the residents beyond the project end.

Planned visits for identified Nursery children have been postponed.

The project was shared virtually at the Stevenage Early Years Local Offer 'Showcase Event' in May 2020, ahead of the HfL Early Years Quality Standard celebration event in July 2020. This is our third renewal of the Gold Award, 'Making a Difference' project.

Quotes:

"Somehow we have to get older people back close to growing children if we are to restore a sense of community, knowledge of the past, and a sense of the future."

- Margaret Mead, Cultural Anthropologist

"Wherever there are beginners and experts, old and young, there is some kind of learning going on, some kind of teaching. We are all pupils and we are all teachers."

- Gilbert Highet

"We don't stop playing because we grow old; we grow old because we stop playing."

- George Bernard Shaw