Using senior citizen volunteers in public schools

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Abstract
A generation ago, the term school volunteer meant "parent" volunteer, and the roles of these volunteers were limited. Most elementary schools welcomed parents as chaperons for field trips, room mothers, and to assist with endless housekeeping and clerical tasks that freed the teacher to teach. They welcomed them at school to shelve and process books, collect money for photographs, and weigh and measure children. School volunteers were virtually non-existent in junior and senior high schools (NSVP, 1978). School volunteers today come from many sources and provide a wide range of services for many schools, even at the secondary level (Purcell, 1981). These volunteers are also directly involved in the very process of education itself - as visiting lecturers, kindergarten assistants, story tellers, readers of English themes, and, most of all, as tutors (Carter, 1974).
USING SENIOR CITIZEN VOLUNTEERS IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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A generation ago, the term school volunteer meant "parent" volunteer, and the roles of these volunteers were limited. Most elementary schools welcomed parents as chaperons for field trips, room mothers, and to assist with endless housekeeping and clerical tasks that freed the teacher to teach. They welcomed them at school to shelve and process books, collect money for photographs, and weigh and measure children. School volunteers were virtually non-existent in junior and senior high schools (NSVP, 1978).

School volunteers today come from many sources and provide a wide range of services for many schools, even at the secondary level (Purcell, 1981). These volunteers are also directly involved in the very process of education itself - as visiting lecturers, kindergarten assistants, story tellers, readers of English themes, and, most of all, as tutors (Carter, 1974).

There are many reasons for the increased interest in utilizing volunteers. Educators are increasingly concerned about providing more individualization of instruction, yet class sizes remain large enough to make individualization difficult. Gradually, the public is accepting the premise that ALL children, including those who are handicapped or gifted, should be educated to the limits of their capabilities, and legislation is mandating provision of
services for them, including smaller class sizes and the inclusion of parents in planning for each child's education (Cramer, 1971). In addition, the nation is concerned about declining test scores, about students' lack of basic skills and ability to function in society, about youth unemployment and delinquency.

While the need for school volunteers has become greater, the traditional supply of parent volunteers has shrunk (Miller, 1975). Mothers, the major source of traditional school volunteers, are increasingly taking jobs outside the home.

Many teachers and administrators have sought to individualize instruction through peer and cross-age tutoring -- children tutoring children (Janowitz, 1968; Carter, 1974; Hedges, 1973). Some have looked to the community -- to high school and college students who earn academic credit for tutoring (Santos, 1982). Some have sought help from businesses -- through released time for employees to assist in nearby schools, through technical help with management and funding, and in some cases through business firms "adopting schools" (Plantic, 1977).

But there is a growing realization that the largest untapped source of talent to assist in schools is our growing number of senior citizens. The United States today has more
healthy, well-educated, financially independent older adults than all the rest of the world, and this "boundless resource" grows each year (Powers, Weinrich, 1982). With the rising costs of public education, and the many demands placed on educators, there can be little doubt that the subject of senior citizen volunteers in public education is current, significant, and merits examination.

Senior Citizens - Untapped Resource

Longevity and declining birth rates will speed up the aging of the American population through the next century. In the year 2000, the 60-plus population will reach about 42 million. It is projected that one out of every six Americans will then be over the age of 65; by the year 2020, the ratio will be one out of every five (Santos, 1982). The 60-plus population will surge to about 71 million in 2035, as children born during the 1946-64 baby boom reach and pass the age of 60. People over 60 then will constitute about one-quarter of the whole American population, instead of one-sixth at present and one-sixteenth in 1900. For each person 60-plus there will then be just 2.2 persons between the ages of 18 and 60, instead of today's ratio of 3.6 to 1.

Thus, unless society develops ways of enabling and encouraging those over age 60 to participate in greater numbers in the work force than at present, responsibility for
support of a dependent older population will fall on a significantly smaller proportion of the population than it does today (U.S.D.H.H.S., 1984). Our nation can no longer ignore or minimize either the needs or the contributing potential of older adults (Riley & Blume, 1983).

Among the increasingly longer lived and more vigorous older population, interest in contributing energy, skills, and the time to voluntary services appears to be rising. A 1975 Harris survey reported that 22 percent of persons 65 years of age and upward indicated that they did volunteer work through an organized program. An additional 10 percent reported that they would welcome the opportunity (Harris, 1975).

The voluntary service role was especially appealing to those whose parental and work roles were tapering off or were completed. Challenging voluntary activity yielded personal satisfaction from knowing that one was helping to improve community life and the environment, preserved a positive self-image as other societal expectation and responsibilities faded, and afforded opportunities for continuing social involvement. There seemed to be virtually no field of service that did not offer opportunity for voluntary participation or in which older people were not engaged (McTavish, 1981).

The vast majority of older persons carried out their volunteer services in such community-based institutions as the
school, neighborhood, church/synagogue, and civic associations. Government had increasingly utilized volunteers to expand the work of civil servants. A number of federal programs encouraged, and indeed, insisted on the use of older volunteers. Of particular significance for their focus on involving older people were: the programs funded through the Older Americans Act which mandated utilization of older people in social service, nutrition, and senior center projects and as nursing home ombudsmen; ACTION's Foster Grandparents Program, the Retired Senior Volunteer Program, and the Senior Companion, VISTA, and Peace Corps programs; the Legal Service Corporation's use of older adults as paralegals; the Small Business Administration's Senior Corps of Retired Executives; and the long-standing utilization of older adult volunteers by the Veterans Administration in its hospitals and domiciliary facilities (Lowy, 1979).

Numerous organizations at national, state, and community levels have been created to promote volunteerism, elevate the dignity of volunteer work, stimulate training, and urge recognition of worker performance and contribution (U.S. National Report, 1982). One of the organizations cited was the National Volunteer School Program which was established due to the widespread utilization of older adults as teacher aides. Another was The National Center for Voluntary Action
which gave particular attention to the capacities of older adults for volunteer service.

Federally supported volunteer programs, such as those identified above, led to the appearance of a new category of workers: reimbursed or paid volunteers. Payment at the minimum wage for part-time volunteer work, reimbursement for out-of-pocket expenditures, and other forms of compensation were designed to encourage the participation of low-income senior citizens.

The future is likely to bring further recognition to the work of the volunteers. Concern was expressed over whether communities will be able to afford the expansion of services, including the major expansion already resulting from the rapidly growing numbers of upper-aged persons. The need for volunteers will be increased still further as public funds for a variety of social and health services decline (U.S.D.H.H.S., 1981).

The majority of men and women who retired in their 60's were still healthy and vigorous. They were relieved of family responsibilities and were keenly interested in staying active in their communities. They had followed the work ethic all their lives, and thus found an endless routine of card playing, golf, or television unsatisfying and demeaning upon retirement (W. H. Council on Aging, 1981).
These people had talents, energy and time -- skills, accumulated knowledge, compassion and years of experience in human relations. Together they brought to the classroom first-hand experiences in a myriad of careers. They had time to listen to children who were troubled or shy and time to relate to those who did not have adequate opportunity to interact with adults.

A study for the National Council on the Aging by Louis Harris and Associates found that most older people "have the desire and the potential to be productive, contributing members of our society. They did not want to be 'put on the shelf' and excluded from social and economic activities" (Harris, 1975). Seventy-five percent of people over 65 indicated that they preferred to spend their time with all age groups. Twenty-two percent of this age group reported voluntary activity. Among those in this age group who did volunteer work, 9 percent were involved in education (about 40,000). The study suggested that many more older volunteers could be recruited to help in schools, IF THEY WERE ASKED.

Intergenerational Programs: Beneficial to All

Several studies have reported that the societal trend of the separation between generations today has resulted in a decline of life satisfaction on the part of older persons, and an increase in negative stereotypes toward the aged on the
part of younger persons (Hickey, 1968; Seefeldt, 1977; Marks, 1981; Newman, 1982). To counteract this trend, intergenerational programs were developed nationwide that provided for frequent and meaningful contact between young and old. Anecdotal reports from these programs suggested that relationships were being developed between children and older volunteers which seemed to affect children's learning as well as their attitudes toward older people, and older persons' feelings of self-worth.

The historical validity of these intergenerational experiences was founded in the extended family which provided the context in which social learning, support, and nurturance passed from olders to youngers and from youngers to olders in an unending cycle. This unending cycle evolved within the expanded family in which there was frequent and continuing interaction between the generations (Snyder, 1981).

Within the last several decades there has been a significant trend away from the extended family toward an age-segregated society. Opportunities for frequent interaction between young and old have diminished. This trend which has resulted in fewer connections between the generations has had a great impact on attitudes of youth toward aging and on older persons' feelings of life satisfaction. To offset the decreasing opportunities for
youth and older persons to interact, the public schools developed programs to bring the two generations together.

Reviewed literature regarding intergenerational programs in the nation's schools indicated a community's young and old sharing experiences that yielded mutual trust, learning, and understanding. The programs involved approximately 100,000 older persons and several million children (Newman, 1982). They were in evidence in urban, suburban, and rural schools, and involved a community's senior citizens as volunteers supporting the social, emotional, and academic growth of the young. Older persons served as non-judgmental, non-evaluative resource persons performing an array of tasks that enhanced the growth of the young and brought a unique enrichment to the school environment. As tutors to reinforce basic skills, as role models demonstrating unique interests or hobbies, as confidants to help young people solve personal problems, or as initiators of special enrichment activities, older volunteers motivated learning and enhanced children's growth while developing meaningful friendships (Marks, 1981).

The Senior Citizen School Volunteer Program, which began in 1978, was one of the programs reviewed. Its collective data included information each year on the program's impact on its volunteers. The 1980-81 summary from questionnaires answered by sixty-five senior citizen volunteers described how
the experiences affected them. Of those reporting, 97% believed participation in the program improved their feelings of self-worth, 20% reported improved health that seemed to be related to their program involvement, and 25% said that they learned new skills in the process of becoming effective resource persons to children. Finally, 90% of the senior citizen volunteers reported that the experience in school was a productive and rewarding use of their free time. This data from the 1980-81 logs and questionnaires was typical of that received for each year of the program's existence (Baum, 1982).

Another study done in Western Pennsylvania in 1979 (September, 1979 - June 1980) discussed children's attitudes about becoming old, and tested the effect of consistent social contact with elderly persons on children's attitudes toward old age. Before contact with the elderly persons, the children felt that growing older was very undesirable and they actually felt quite sorry for senior citizens because of their advanced ages. After interaction, it was concluded that students with one or two years of contact with elderly persons in their classrooms demonstrated a more positive increase in their attitudes toward the elderly than the pupils without this contact (Serock, 1980).
Project LOVE (Let Older Volunteers Educate) is an intergenerational learning experience in which 'grandpersons' volunteered their time and talents at a local elementary school. Begun in November, 1981, Project LOVE was sponsored by the Irmo-Chapin Recreation Commission Aging Program and Lexington County (South Carolina) School District Five with funding from the Older Americans Act.

The project was started during the 1981-82 school year to provide a positive interactional experience between the young and the old. The 'Grandpersons' involved in Project LOVE lived in Chapin, South Carolina, a growing rural town adjacent to a lake. The 'Grandpersons' volunteered their time and talents on a weekly basis to students at Chapin Elementary School. They performed a variety of tasks, from individual tutoring to "just listening to the children talk", thus, providing children with special attention that a busy school staff often had not had time to give (Powers, 1982).

The reviewed literature frequently mentioned Foster Grandparent Programs in our nation's schools. (There were seven Foster Grandparent Programs in effect in Iowa.) These 'Grandparents' worked in many educational settings with children with special needs. They were 'Grandparents' in every sense; each volunteer was a caring, stable presence in the child's world (ACTION, 1985).
Programs like Project LOVE and Foster Grandparents are important because children today frequently have little or no contact with older adults (Mead, 1976; Jantz, 1976; F.G.P., 1985). Many children viewed the elderly in a negative, stereotyped way and feared the aging process (Snyder, 1981; Stoney, 1977; Jantz, 1976). In addition, utilization of older workers in a meaningful school learning situation was a relatively rare phenomenon in our society.

Many countries have moved ahead of the United States in formulating policies that recognize the need for children and older adults to interact with each other (Bronfenbrenner, 1980; Seefeldt, 1977). Foster Grandparent Programs and other intergenerational learning programs could serve as one solution to the separation of old and young.

Intergenerational programs that have been implemented have had good results (Tice, 1978; Serock, 1977; Seefeldt, 1977; ACTION, 1985). These programs have proven beneficial to all participants; specifically, the students and the older volunteers, as well.

In a study by Mary Tom Riley and Libby Balter Blume in 1983, the benefits to children were listed as follows:
- learning of skills and increased knowledge.
- learning positive aspects of aging process.
- a better historical and cultural awareness.
companionship and friendship.
- an enhanced self-image.

Intergenerational program benefits to the older persons included:
- opportunity to share accumulated wisdom, skill, knowledge and experience.
- opportunity to be needed, useful and productive.
- respect, recognition, and understanding.
- chances to empathize with struggles of youth.
- vitalized curiosity and growth.
- interaction with larger community.
- companionship and friendship (Riley; Blume, 1983).

Other studies reviewed supported the premise that these intergenerational programs were beneficial to both students and senior citizen volunteers. The benefits to children included: (1) increased motivation in learning academic skills, (2) enhanced meaning of history and cultural traditions, (3) improvement of the child's self-concept and feelings of self-worth, and (4) an opportunity to gain a perception of aging as a natural part of the life process (Tice, 1978; Grambs, 1980; Brahce, 19809; Seefeldt, 1977).

Benefits to the older person included: (1) an improved perception of health, (2) a feeling of being socially useful, (3) developing of new interests, and (4) improved
relationships to their neighborhoods (Seefeldt, 1977; Brahce, 1980; Harty, 1984). In addition, many people believed that formulation of policies related to the care and treatment of the elderly will be positively influenced because of policy makers' previous experiences as children with older people (Snyder, 1981; Jantz, 1976).

It can be anticipated that, through intergenerational programs, the development of new relationships between the generations can be established, there will be a decline of negative myths and stereotypes about aging and the elderly, and about youth, and schools can create experiences that testify to the continuity of life by providing connections between the young and the old.

Summary

Selected literature was reviewed to describe the importance of utilizing Senior Citizens as volunteers in the public schools. Statistics suggested that the percentage of population that is elderly in the United States will continue to grow through the next century. This growth will be due, largely, to declining birth rates and great advances in health care which improve and increase longevity. Among the increasingly longer lived and more vigorous older population, interest in contributing energy, skill, and the time to voluntary services appeared to be rising. Researchers have
determined that Senior Citizens can play an important role in a child's education socially, as well as academically. Educators have become increasingly aware of the valuable resource of human potential that exists in this group of persons, and they have found new ways to 'tap' it.

Many intergenerational programs have been established across the nation in an attempt to utilize Senior Citizen Volunteers in public education. These programs fostered cooperation, understanding, and friendship between the generations and have strived to offset the effects of the breakdown in the extended family and age-segregated society. The benefits to both students and Senior Citizens in these programs were overwhelming; no negative results were identified in any of the research reviewed.

It was concluded that the negative stereotypes that children had regarding the aging process and the elderly were positively altered after working with Senior Citizen volunteers. The Senior Citizens reported an improved life satisfaction after volunteering, and their attitudes toward "Today's Kids" likewise improved. It was determined that intergenerational programs promoted the establishment of new relationships and connections between the generations which were beneficial to all involved in the programs. Senior
Citizen Volunteers have played and will continue to play an important and valuable role in education.

A need for continued study of Senior Citizen Volunteer Programs in public education exists. As the public demands even more from the public school systems, yet the supporting monies continue to dwindle, volunteer programs will be forced to provide more support services. Not only should programs be developed as a consequence of fiscal constraints, but also because of the proven positive social contributions and the enhancement of the quality of the learning environment that these programs provide. As Senior Citizen Volunteer Programs adjust themselves to the changing needs of students and local communities, they provide an arena for further educational research.
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