

## Outreach

# 'They've been in the world a lot longer than we have'

Pupils grow in confidence thanks to the help of retired volunteers in the classroom

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YOU'VE SEEN the TV programmes, you've read the articles – it's fairly common these days for schoolchildren to visit the residences of older people. Depending on the visitors' age, the two generations might bond over nursery rhymes or tea and a slice of cake, for an hour or two.

But what if the older people turned the tables and visited classrooms to share decades of accumulated knowledge and experience? Not only that, but these visitors would come back week after week, bonding with and imparting wisdom to dozens of pupils.

That is what one school has decided to do with a programme that is believed to be unique in Scotland. At the Community School of Auchterarder in Perth and Kinross, 13 people aged between their mid-sixties and mid-seventies have been spending a combined 30 hours per week helping nursery- to secondary-aged pupils with basic literacy and numeracy.

Headteacher Stuart Clyde says the project, which started in January after several weeks of training for the "community volunteers", has already had a "significant impact" on pupils' confidence. The older people, too, report feeling "more valued and appreciated", as well as a greater sense of involvement in the community. "It is impacting on both sides of the school fence," Clyde says. Interest was generated by adverts in the local paper and at

locations ranging from a bowls club to a church group to a Soroptimist meeting. Twenty applicants were willing to commit at least two hours per week, and no professional background in education or specific qualifications were required. As Clyde says, the volunteers are "not surrogate teachers", neither are they classroom assistants. And he stresses that their involvement will not affect recruitment into such paid posts.

Of the 13 people selected, some had barely stepped inside a school for half a century. What they found was much changed: noisier and with children having more of a say in their learning. "They were surprised that it's not quite as traditional as it was, and the kids have got more of a free rein," says Clyde. "They remember school being a quiet place and everyone sitting in rows, breathing in time."

### 'Magical moments'

The volunteers work one-to-one or with groups of three or four. Clyde sees a role for them to share the more traditional approaches to learning they experienced in their youth. "I want the kids to learn their times tables the way [the volunteers] used to," he says.

Clyde stresses, however, that while literacy and numeracy are the focus of their involvement, this is not exclusive; if a volunteer has other talents or a captivating life story, they



are encouraged to share them. "We're not going to say, 'This is about literacy and numeracy – take your wonderful skills away,'" says Clyde.

Confidence levels are already "much higher" among the pupils involved, he says, adding: "We're confident it's going to have a significant impact on attainment."

In the first term, the volunteers saw some big improvements among pupils. One Polish boy, now in S2, arrived in P7 with little English. He was nervous about even going near books, but a one-to-one session with one woman volunteering at the school had a profound effect. "The next day, the principal teacher of English said, 'What on Earth has happened?'" recalls Clyde, who jokes that you now have to almost drag the boy away from books.

But there was also a "magical moment" when the volunteer said she had benefited herself from the session. "The older adults have to be getting something out of this," says Clyde. Such has been the impact on the volunteers that Clyde says there has already been interest from the NHS and GPs, who think that

### 'Now, it's not driven by fear'

Ian Cowan, a pharmacist, has been volunteering at the Community School of Auchterarder, helping S1s with maths.

He sees his role as being different to that of a teacher or classroom assistant.

"You're not disciplining them or telling them they're wrong – that's not your job," he says. Cowan, 74, tells pupils:

"Whatever you ask me or say, it won't go any further."

Rather than "just doing algebra", he wants to instil "the confidence to fail, to be wrong...they can ask me the questions they don't ask anyone else". He recalls one pupil asking him what a marrow was, knowing there was no risk of humiliation in front of the class.

School has changed a lot since Cowan's youth, when he says it was "like a military system". He adds that teachers now are still respected by pupils, "but it's not driven by fear".

He sees deeper learning going on than in his own school days, when "you had to learn something, but you didn't really understand it".

**13**

The number of older volunteers at the Community School of Auchterarder

**30**

Hours per week they spend helping children aged 2-14

**70**

The number of pupils they are working with regularly (the school roll is about 1,000)

**£18,000**

Pupil Equity Funding for an 'inter-generational development officer' to work two days per week at the school

**150+**

Number of classes per month attended by 17 volunteers across the Community School of Auchterarder and Perth Grammar



**GENERATION GAMES:** Older volunteers are helping to bring extra fun to learning for pupils at the Community School of Auchterarder

prescribing such a programme may be of benefit to certain older patients.

The project, which is also running in Perth Grammar School, had sprung from conversations between Clyde and his wife, who works for Generations Working Together, an organisation that encourages people of different ages to team up "to create a better and fairer country for all".

While schools had previously worked with the organisation, their involvement tended to be ad hoc. Bridging generational divides in a more sustained way could lead to big gains for everyone, the school decided.

The project has been driven by Pupil Equity Funding (PEF), money given to schools by the Scottish government to help close the attainment gap between rich and poor. While this funding programme has had its critics – last month Conservative leader Ruth Davidson said PEF money was being used for staff bonuses and artificial sports pitches – the Auchterarder project is more in line with the innovative projects education secretary John Swinney had hoped the fund would inspire.

At Auchterarder, PEF money pays for an "inter-generational development officer" to work two days a week with the school, recruiting and training volunteers, and liaising with them and staff.

"I am 'Granny'," says Pat Cowan, 70, a former nurse who is now working with some of youngest primary pupils, who are finishing off a measuring task when *Tes Scotland* visits. As with her grandchildren, she gently encourages them in fun games and nudges their learning in the right direction, leaving teachers – like parents – to do any telling off.

P1-2 teacher Sean Dowling says: "They don't see her as a teacher, they see her as 'the lady who comes in to do stories with us'." He adds that her presence prompts the children to ask lots of questions.

Another volunteer, Aideen O'Malley, 63, worked as a teacher before having a family. Working with P4-5s, she moves around the tables – "I never have to raise my voice" – alert to anyone who may be "a bit lost", and chips in with "little things the teacher might do if she had time". Pupil Lewis Green says:

"Sometimes you ask her different things that you would feel a bit silly asking the teacher."

To class teacher Nicola Marshall, Aideen is both "another pair of hands" and "a very nurturing relationship" for pupils.

At Perth Grammar, depute head Michael Farrell says four volunteers have helped with schemes such as a "reading recovery" programme for selected S1s that led to a Robert Burns-themed "poetry slam", and S2 pupils' construction of a "reflective garden space".

There are "innumerable positive spin-offs", most notably the boost to pupils' confidence, says Farrell. One volunteer is even looking for a learning assistant post at the school.

Back at Auchterarder, S1 pupil Ryan Tamburrino says that working with volunteer Ian Cowan (see box, left) has given him confidence to ask questions. "Before, I would have just given up and refused to do it," he says. Ryan has also learned not to underestimate older generations: "I've realised that they've been in the world a lot longer than we have – and that they know a lot more and can do a lot more." ●