

“Are you going to come and see us again soon?”

An intergenerational event between stroke survivors and school-children

Abstract

Purpose

A one-hour intergenerational event held at an infant school in Norfolk, England, aimed to increase the citizenship experience of young children and their awareness of what it means to live with stroke, and to address social isolation or self-confidence in communicating among stroke survivors with aphasia. It also intended to gauge whether this activity might provide a basis for future research.

Design/Methodology/Approach

Four community-dwelling stroke survivors with aphasia were recruited. Twelve pupils aged 6 and 7 were selected by their Year 2 teacher and head-teacher. At the event, participants sat in groups of one adult and three pupils and engaged in writing, hand-tracing and talking about pictures. The author circulated among the groups to facilitate engagement.

Findings

All participants enjoyed interacting together in the activities. The pupils gained insights into the stroke survivors' lived experience and wanted them to return to "see us again soon"; the adults valued being in the "real world" and practising their conversation in activities different from their usual routines. Feedback indicated the value of the engagement and that participants welcomed similar intergenerational opportunities. The author will develop a research application exploring enablers, barriers and benefits of this type of engagement.

Originality/Value

The event gave a rare opportunity for stroke survivors with aphasia to participate in intergenerational activities and for children to engage with vulnerable older adults. It demonstrated the value of interactions in which learning and insights are obtained on both sides. It also provided evidence that pursuing research in this field is feasible.

Introduction

Meaningful opportunities for intergenerational interactions for older adults from vulnerable or excluded groups are not plentiful. This is especially true for adult stroke survivors who live with language and communication difficulties known as aphasia (Hare *et al.* 2006). On the other hand, in today's society children may have few occasions to meet or engage with older, non-familial adults from excluded groups (Skropeta *et al.*, 2014; Park, 2015).

Research has demonstrated the benefits of intergenerational programmes on participants (Oberge, 2007; Reisig and Fees, 2007). Such programmes vary greatly, from school groups and adults involved in a multimedia project at an older people's resource centre (London Borough of Camden, 2009) to intergenerational playgroups in residential care for older people (Lee *et al.*, 2007; Skropeta *et al.*, 2014). In a clinical setting, a case study has been published on successful interaction between a 4-year old and an older woman with aphasia which improved her engagement in aphasia therapy (Mantie-Kozlowski and Smythe, 2014).

This paper reports an intergenerational event which brought together school-children and community-dwelling stroke survivors for the purpose of fostering positive engagement

between them in order to gauge the suitability of such interactions for formal research. The event focused on communication that promotes enjoyment in sharing activities between children and older adults and conversation opportunities for adults with mild aphasia following a stroke. Through sharing activities together, the event aimed to increase children's awareness of what it means to live with stroke and to address social isolation or a lack of confidence in speaking among stroke survivors. The author is unaware of this type of intergenerational engagement being undertaken elsewhere, so this small scoping study might be quite novel.

An infant school in Norfolk with a tradition of community outreach, attested by a thriving lunch-club and reading group, was approached and, upon learning about the proposed event, offered to host it. The head-teacher stated that the event matched the school's ethos and that it would enrich the educational and citizenship experience of Year 2 pupils. The author anticipated recruiting four or five stroke survivors and suggested each might be teamed with three pupils, a combination which the head considered viable. Funding was secured from the Paul Bassham Charitable Trust. Owing to a change in head-teacher, the event was postponed during the headship transition. In spring 2016, following the author's discussion with the new head-teacher, he confirmed it fitted the school's community outlook and recommended it be held in early July 2016.

Design and Methods

The event was scheduled in a one-hour slot after the lunch break. Activities were organised to last no longer than 40 minutes to respect the attention and energy levels of the children and adults. Prior to the event, the author sought the input of a collaborating stroke survivor on the activities she was designing around simple drawings and sharing pictures. The stroke survivor felt that the project addressed issues of self-confidence among people with aphasia and offered them the chance to develop positive relationships with children in activities different from the adults' usual routines.

Ethical approval was obtained in May 2016 from the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences at the University of East Anglia. In addition to approving the event, the school head-teacher contacted the pupils' parents to inform them of the event and give them the choice to exclude their children (no child was excluded). The head-teacher also was informed of any particular needs of the participating stroke survivors in order to conduct a risk assessment.

The author approached five adult stroke survivors with whom she has liaised in the context of healthcare learning. Through this professional link, the author was already aware that these community-dwelling adults live with mild to moderate aphasia and are skilled in a range of communication methods. They were told the one-hour event consisted of

activities with the children lasting 40 minutes based around talking, a small amount of drawing and sharing pictures. Four adults, two men and two women from age 50 to 70, agreed to participate. Three had mild aphasia; one had more impaired spoken language, by comparison, but was highly proficient in communicating, including verbal, non-verbal and gestural skills. Twelve 6- and 7-year old pupils, nine girls and three boys, were identified by the classroom teacher in conjunction with the school head. This allowed sixteen participants to divide into four groups of four, one adult and three pupils. The collaborating stroke survivor agreed that working in small groups would not over-burden the stroke survivors while they engaged with the children. Given the potential of the intergenerational engagement leading to research, the author planned to ask what the participants found positive about the interactions as well as ways they felt it could be made more meaningful or relevant to them. This reflects anticipation of developing research areas that are feasible to participants (Ritchie *et al.*, 2014, 49) and collecting data that is “acceptable and meaningful” to them (Agee, 2009, 434).

One week before the event, the author visited the school to meet the pupils in the company of their classroom teacher. Her half-hour visit also allowed the children to gain some familiarity with her. During the visit she briefly explained a stroke and asked if they knew anyone who had had one. She answered their questions about strokes, adding that the adults coming the following week would talk to them about stroke if they were asked. The pupils were told that the adults lead lives not unlike theirs (for example, they watch television and go shopping) and make adjustments depending on the stroke’s impact on their energy or how they walk or speak. The pupils were invited to bring a picture, perhaps of an animal, to show to the adults, and were told that the adults had similarly been invited to show a picture to the children. During the chat, the pupils remained excited about the event and repeated that they looked forward to it.

Findings from the intergenerational event

Activities were held in an open area leading off the pupils’ classroom. The author, as facilitator, welcomed the participants, asked them to choose a table, on which coloured pencils and plain paper were provided, and rolled out each activity. Throughout the event, she circulated among the groups to observe the interactions and to offer assistance or support engagement, if needed.

Participants engaged in three activities in their small groups:

- (1) Writing their name on a self-adhesive label and reading out their name before putting it on their clothing.
- (2) Tracing their hand on paper and writing inside it the name of everyone else at their table.
- (3) Showing the picture they had brought (or choosing from a supply brought by the facilitator), describing what they liked about it or telling a story about it.

The facilitator sought to support the event, which remained her priority, while also making occasional note of its interactions. Because she was carrying a supply of spare pictures and plain paper for the activities, she could scribble down a few words discreetly while moving among the tables and talking with participants. Afterwards she incorporated these points in extensive notes, which combined with feedback to form the basis of her interpretation of the engagement.

The event's aims of enjoyment, insights and benefits seemed to be met, typically with spontaneity, throughout the activities. Starting from the first, the children set about the name-label activity with gusto. In one group, an adult and pupil compared the colouring of their names, which turned into a chat among the four about favourite colours. The activity also made several children aware of the impact of stroke on hand-writing. In one group the adult asked the children to hold the label, saying that keeping the label still while printing her name was a challenge for her weak hand. At another table, where pupils were busily colouring their name-labels, the facilitator prompted them to ask the stroke survivor if he had written out his name. When he replied to them, "no", and indicated his affected hand resting on his lap, the pupils were asked who wanted to offer to write his label for him. Immediately all three asked him if they could do this, two of them recommending he choose "my colour" pencil. Through activities that generated their interest, the pupils realised that one challenge faced by the adult stroke survivor did not restrict his overall participation.

As the second activity started, children at two tables thought the adult might have difficulty tracing their hand and offered to help. Again, an insight into the adults' capacities was gained. Both adults placed their stroke-affected hand on the paper and used their other hand to trace around it. One joked to the children about the "messy lines" he had drawn, which seemed to make them comfortable about smiling back in agreement. Separately, a stroke survivor completed her hand-tracing then showed the pupils her hands. She compared the straightness of her left hand with the slight bend of her right hand caused by the stroke. "I can do the tracing," she said cheerfully, "but it works just a bit differently for me." As these examples indicate, the composure and good-natured responses of the stroke survivors seemed to foster the learning gleaned by the pupils, as well as normalising what it meant to live with disability.

During the third activity, most children talked enthusiastically about the pictures they had brought and were curious to see the adults' reactions. Many had drawn pictures themselves; one boy had sketched his favourite toy, a polar bear, and told his table companions about Arctic polar bears. A girl who had brought her favourite book because she liked its pictures became animated when the adult asked her about the story behind some of them, illustrating the benefit of mutual engagement by adults with the children. One pupil who had forgotten his picture did not initially show much enthusiasm. When the

facilitator offered him her supply to choose from, he declined and asked if he could draw his own, which he undertook happily. Both female stroke survivors showed several pictures to the pupils, including holiday photos. One shared examples of her own paintings, which delighted the children, especially those of animals. The male stroke survivors came without pictures so they chose a few from the facilitator. One of them picked an image of a car from the 1920s and described to the girls at his table its numerous old features, including the hand-crank for starting the engine, to which they listened intently.

The event was characterised by a friendly hubbub of activity among the children and adults. Participants seemed relaxed, eager to ask questions and laugh together. The facilitator noticed slightly less chatter at one table during the hand-tracing activity compared with other groups, though none of the participants appeared ill at ease. Another point of distinction was that one stroke survivor sat in a wheelchair. The pupils interacting with him seemed interested in it and asked how often he used it and where he took it. The three other adults used a walking stick, which seemed to be unremarkable to the children as the facilitator was unaware of questions being asked about it.

When activities came to a close, the facilitator thanked the whole group for taking part and asked for an example of what they had learned or enjoyed. Responses seemed to provide further evidence of both enjoyment and benefit. Many children held up their drawings as they called out, "I liked it". Examples given by the children of what they had learned included the old car, using a wheelchair and how one of the adults wrote; stroke survivors mentioned the children's love of pictures and the interesting questions the children had asked. Each participant was given a souvenir booklet with copies of the facilitator's pictures; the booklet allowed other sheets of paper to be inserted, including the hand-tracing and drawings by the pupils. As final goodbyes were said, three children grouped around the facilitator and one stroke survivor and chatted that they had "really liked" being together. One girl then asked brightly: "are you going to come and see us again soon?"

Feedback from the school and stroke survivors

The author spoke informally after the event with the Year 2 teacher (within a few days) and the stroke survivors (within 2-6 weeks) in order to obtain their reflections. It was hoped their responses would indicate if the aims of the event had been met and if pursuing research is warranted.

According to the feedback received, the intergenerational engagement between Year 2 pupils and adult stroke survivors with aphasia set a marker for researching the nature of the engagement, its benefits and challenges. For example, while feedback endorsed the enjoyment participants obtained together, the specific quality and nature of interactions could be investigated in research. The enriching experience reported by the adults merits fuller understanding in terms of the type of involvement and the conversational

opportunities for stroke survivors with aphasia. The school expressed an interest in incorporating the event into the curriculum for the whole Year 2 class; what impact this might entail for the children's learning and citizenship experience would need to be ascertained.

The teacher's comments on the event were wholly positive. She stated that "the children loved it" and "really engaged with it". In her view, the pupils were good listeners, talkative and respectful and the event had been a very good learning experience for them about stroke. She remarked that because the next-door school supports pupils with physical and sensory needs "the children do not blink seeing someone in a wheelchair". What was novel for the children, she explained, was seeing an *adult* in a wheelchair and talking to adults with stroke. When given a scenario of potential research in which her Year 2 class, in group rotation over one half-term, interacted with stroke survivors, the teacher was enthusiastic. She felt that pupils of all abilities would benefit and it would increase their citizenship and respect for adult groups.

Feedback obtained individually from three stroke survivors (the fourth was unavailable) was positive. They enjoyed interacting with the children, found the event worthwhile and would join a similar event again. They welcomed the children's curiosity and questions. Two adults described the children as "very polite", one stating that they "were very keen to understand his stroke". Another adult said her speech sometimes was a "puzzle" to the children but she never found this inhibited the children communicating with her. Two stroke survivors attached deeper significance to participating. One valued it because "it's always good to do something different, to get involved". Another welcomed talking "in the real world" because "we don't get much chance to do that". He added: "it's very easy for someone with stroke to go into themselves and think no one is interested in what we're doing", so he was "very glad it worked" linking with the children.

Two adults suggested changes for the future. Because pupils concentrated more on drawing than conversation in one activity at his table, a stroke survivor suggested a second facilitator might help increase interactions. He would also follow the small-group engagement with a whole-group activity. Another adult suggested that stroke survivors be briefed beforehand in greater detail about what language to use to describe stroke, as he had worried about saying something "over the top of the heads of young children". He added this was "a minor thing" because the children were intelligent and receptive and he welcomed another opportunity for this type of activity.

Conclusion

The event has endorsed the suitability of intergenerational interactions for formal research. While participants mentioned their enjoyment of each other's company, more importantly

their feedback also suggested that research could explore the nature, benefits and challenges of stroke survivors with aphasia engaging with young school-children.

Outcomes confirmed that the event met its principal aims: increasing the citizenship experience of young children and their awareness of what it means to live with stroke, and addressing social isolation or self-confidence in communication among stroke survivors with aphasia. An open, comfortable atmosphere developed from the start, evidenced in the many questions the children raised, such as how one adult used his wheelchair and why another liked painting. The appropriateness of the activities was acceptable to both children and adults, a significant point in determining successful engagement (Lee *et al.* 2007). This also validates the input of the collaborating stroke survivor in the design of the event. Furthermore, children demonstrated new insights into what it means to live with stroke and learned that the adults' different capacities, whether in speaking or hand-writing, did not prevent their meaningful interaction. The stroke survivors enjoyed being out in what one called the "real world" and valued communicating with young school-children in completely new circumstances. The intergenerational engagement also demonstrated to them that the pupils did not avoid or exhibit negative attitudes to them, unlike situations they sometimes encounter as stroke survivors.

The path for a future research bid has been laid. Based on the outcomes and lessons gained here, the author will develop a research proposal for intergenerational activities between stroke survivors with aphasia and children at infant-school level. It will be kept in mind that much credit for the success of the one-off event resides in the school's inclusive culture, as revealed in the teacher's observation about pupils' familiarity with disability. The success is also due to the stroke survivors, who are skilled communicators and show composure in describing or responding to questions about what it means to live with their stroke.

Full involvement of one or two stroke service users will be sought from the outset in the planning, design and facilitation of the study. The scope of potential research springing from this one-off event is likely to incorporate gerontology, education and communication. To that end, the author hopes to be joined by researchers from education and from speech and language therapy, in addition to the stroke service users. Research will explore the specific enablers, barriers and benefits in bringing these groups together in intergenerational activities. It will also enquire into possible impact on neighbourhood cohesion (Clark *et al.*, 2011) and the nature and depth of engagement for children and stroke survivors with aphasia (Kaplan, 2002).

The goal of fostering positive engagement between older stroke survivors with aphasia and young school-children was achieved as they interacted together. New insights were gained by the children and the adults enjoyed practising their conversation in stimulating new activities. Both implicitly and explicitly, they welcomed taking part in more such activities

and were keen that they would “see [each other] again soon”, an aspiration the author hopes will be met through future intergenerational research.

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