

# It Takes a Village to Raise a Reader: Reflections on an Intergenerational Literacy Program

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## Abstract

Our research involved a community-school literacy initiative where seniors visit elementary schools to read with children. As we considered the residual data in our study, we were led to explore an emerging school-community relationship – a web of connection – being created by senior volunteers in the project. We discuss this aspect of our study in this article and consider the evolving role of senior volunteers in our society. We identify three characteristics of “elders” that emerge from several school literacy initiatives involving senior volunteers and consider how these are made evident in schools in our study. We also describe ways schools supported the project and suggest that these are important components of other school-community initiatives. We use the term “elders” rather than “seniors” to set our findings into the context of a long tradition of valued and valuable elder time.

Key Words: volunteers, seniors, senior citizens, literacy, caring, elders, wise, useful, schools, community, communities, connections, elementary children, students, reading, enjoyment, older adults, teachers, administrators, parents, intergenerational programs, Prince Edward Island, Canada

## Background

There is hardly an adult...within the community, who does not accept at first hand that each of us has to accept a personal responsibility for helping to educate young people. (Abbott & Ryan, 2000, p. 16)

This quote from Abbott and Ryan calls to mind the adage, “It takes a village to raise a child,” in which we understand all members of the community share some responsibility for raising children. In the context of this article, we would revise that adage to read “It takes a village to raise a reader” and present to you some reflections on the impact a volunteer literacy program had on many schools in our home province. Project L.O.V.E. (Let Older Volunteers Educate) is an intergenerational literacy program where senior volunteers from the community come into elementary schools and read with/to elementary students in a safe and social environment. Students practice their literacy and social skills while developing their confidence and understanding that reading is an important part of life. Our research showed that these volunteers make significant contributions to students’ literacy and social well-being, while engaging in meaningful work within their communities (Doiron & Lees, 2005). Project L.O.V.E., then, is not about teaching children *how* to read; this program is teaching children *about* reading – its value and importance.

Schools have a long tradition of involving community members/organizations in various mutually beneficial projects (Epstein, 1995; Epstein & Saunders, 2000). Many of these initiatives take an intergenerational focus when parents engage in variety of volunteer services that can enhance their children’s school experience while including community culture and values in the curriculum of the school. However, these initiatives are often limited to parents and their children and less frequently extend to programs built around the wider community and its senior members.

For over ten years, Project L.O.V.E. has brought together older volunteers and students in Canada’s smallest province, Prince Edward Island, for the purpose of reading books and enjoying a shared literacy experience. The organization exists to promote literacy “as a positive and important lifetime habit” (PEI Volunteers for Literacy, 2007, ¶ 1). Beyond this, its mission is: (1) to provide students and teachers with a positive role model of older persons, thus encouraging a change of attitudes towards aging; (2) to develop opportunities for older persons to do volunteer work with students in a meaningful way; and (3) to facilitate intergenerational activities. This intergenerational literacy program has grown to include over 230 elder volunteers working in 34 schools across the province, an indication that the original “great idea” has grown to be an established and valued intergenerational literacy program.

Project L.O.V.E. has a full-time executive director who matches schools with volunteers and ensures that volunteers undergo the police checks required of everyone working with young children. She is also responsible for offering volunteer workshops on topics such as reading materials, learning disabilities, and ADD. Schools respond to volunteers by setting up a schedule, including each

volunteer for one or two days a week, providing accommodation, and arranging volunteer-teacher communication. They may assign a teacher/organizer to the Project. Different teachers use volunteers differently. Some send every student in class, in rotation, throughout the semester. Others identify children who would benefit most and send them consistently to the volunteer.

The program was positively evaluated in two reports (Bell & Conohan, 1998; Wood, 2003). One of these was designed to identify barriers to participation; the other was a general overview. Our inquiry was commissioned to examine literacy and social benefits for students, tease out effects on students' attitudes towards older people, and consider the personal, social, and health benefits for older volunteers.

## **Data Gathering and Two Themes**

Surveys about their experiences with Project L.O.V.E. were completed by 212 volunteers and 72 teachers. Focus groups were selected in each category to be representative of larger and smaller schools, urban and rural settings, and geographic distribution across the province. Teacher focus group participants and volunteer participants were drawn from different schools, assuring representatives with mixed experiences. Altogether, we organized six focus group sessions with 32 volunteers and five focus groups with 27 classroom teachers. We also talked with five student groups totalling more than 50 children from grades 1-6. Students were asked to respond orally to five open-ended questions and to make two drawings – one of themselves working with the volunteer and one of their volunteer doing something she or he enjoyed outside school.

We have gained a wealth of information about the literacy and social benefits of Project L.O.V.E., as well as clear evidence that students are developing positive attitudes towards seniors and their lives. The literacy and social benefits are reported in the final report of the study (Doiron & Lees, 2005). These results point to the positive impact the shared reading experiences have on students' enjoyment of reading, practice of their reading skills, and growth in understanding of the value of reading. Socially, students and teachers valued the interactions with an older volunteer as students engaged in many positive discussions about the books they were reading as well as about their personal lives and the lives of seniors.

Our study has also given rise to some intriguing, emergent themes and reflections. The major theme of this paper emerged in our residual data when we began to consider Project L.O.V.E.'s role in strengthening community-school relations. This led us to explore the existence of, and the school-community implications of, an increasing presence of seniors in North American schools and

to link this with our sociocultural conception of literacy. The second theme of the paper was an intentional component of our research: a consideration of the schools' role in facilitating or restricting the involvement of senior volunteers. We will begin with our main theme.

## **The Increasing Presence of Senior Volunteers**

Senior citizens are entering their local schools in increasing numbers and for a variety of reasons (Lipson, 1994; von Kreutzbruck, 2007). In Canada, they are recruited through organizations such as Volunteer Grandparents in British Columbia, United Grandparents in Ontario, and Project L.O.V.E. in Prince Edward Island. In the United States, in 1997, The Corporation for National Service called on members of the Foster Grandparent Program (FGP) and the Retired and Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP) to take part in a Seniors for Schools initiative, while a similar program, Generations Together was piloted in New York State in 1999. Different titles can reflect different purposes and organizational roots, but an examination of these various initiatives led to three major themes emerging around the role of senior volunteers: (1) portraying the image of "the caring grandparent;" (2) bringing the generations together in wise counsel; and (3) providing a direct, useful, and purposeful connection with schools. As we explore each theme, we will relate it to our research with Project L.O.V.E. and the work of Project L.O.V.E. volunteers.

### **The Caring Elder**

Children's need for a loving relationship with an elder is a theme that runs through many senior volunteer programs we examined. Stetzner (2001) describes an intergenerational mentoring program in which senior volunteers share their experiences and expertise with elementary students and writes that "schools can...provide students with the love and attention they might not get elsewhere by inviting retired senior citizens into their classrooms" (p. 1). Drawing from the success of the Experience Corps program, Delisio (2004) writes that "volunteers dispense grandparent-levels of love" (§ 5) and describes school children who delighted volunteers by asking, "Can I call you grandmother?" (§ 28). The mission of another program, Volunteer Grandparents, is to create feelings of self-worth and personal competence in children.

### **The Caring Elder at School**

Our strongest sense of Project L.O.V.E. volunteers was that they went into schools, and were accepted by schools, as caring adults. Their work was valuable, but we felt that it was unlike that of volunteers in the America Reads

project. Prince Edward Island schools were not expressing dismay at their inability to meet an urgent, nationally endorsed target of universal literacy. Educational goals were the same as those in U.S., but resources were thought to be adequate if not ideal. We were told that the school-related work of L.O.V.E. volunteers was useful because they were in a one-on-one situation, enlarged students' literacy experiences, and could reinforce the work of teachers. They made a significant contribution to students' literacy. Almost equally important, it seemed, was the volunteers' ability to create a comfortable out-of-classroom environment, enhance students' self-esteem by their praise and attentive listening, and give good readers a chance to show their skill.

The grandparent image was likely to appear in our conversations with teachers, volunteers, and students. It was always benign. Teachers spoke about children in small, nuclear families who had no grandparents or were far away from them. For these children, they said, Project L.O.V.E. volunteers filled an important gap. Volunteers told us about their own grandchildren and related these to students with whom they worked by comparing books being read, activities carried out, and attitudes. Sometimes, students filled a gap for volunteers whose grandchildren were far away, and students often said the volunteer was like a grandparent. In the small rural schools, it could be that one student's volunteer was actually another schoolmate's grandparent.

The importance of caring was evident from the high number of teachers whose students went to the L.O.V.E. volunteer in rotation. In these situations, a classroom teacher chose to send each student in the class, in turn, throughout the year rather than to follow the more typical method of identifying three or four children to send one at a time every week. We were given different reasons for this. Some teachers told us that it was to avoid singling out poor students and giving them a feeling of inadequacy. Others wanted all students to have the opportunity for individual attention from a caring adult. Some teachers believed that good readers needed to be able to "show off," to have their skills noticed and rewarded. The Project L.O.V.E. organization's practice of providing volunteers with stickers to give to students endorsed the reward and reinforcement aspect of volunteers' work, and stickers were mentioned with delight by every student focus group.

### **The Wise Elder**

The passing-on, and sometimes the exchange, of knowledge or wisdom is a theme in many senior volunteer initiatives that focus on the coming together of generations. The International Consortium for Intergenerational Programs defines these initiatives as "social vehicles that create purposeful and ongoing exchange of resources and learning among older and younger generations"

(Kaplan, 2001, p. 4). In a call for volunteers for Generations United, seniors are told that they can “teach children math or reading or work with them doing activities like fishing, cooking, music, or art” (p. 1), suggesting volunteers use their past skills and experiences to influence and support young learners.

The establishment of National Grandparents Day in the U.S. had to do with persuading grandchildren to “tap the wisdom and heritage their grandparents could provide” (National Grandparents Day Council, 2009, ¶ 1). Kornhaber (2004) supports his belief that grandparents are meant to act as spiritual guides by citing a grandmother who spoke about her concern for her grandchildren’s happiness and souls. By contrast, she told him, she was preoccupied with her children’s physical needs when she was primarily a mother.

### **The Wise Elder at School**

As we explored the background and work experience of the volunteers in Project L.O.V.E. through our survey, we discovered that they had retired from a variety of meaningful jobs. They had been teachers, nurses, civil servants, homemakers, service-sector employees, and workers in traditional resource-based industries such as farming and fishing. They were generally an educated group with a variety of academic qualifications and professional certifications. Throughout their working lives, volunteers had been active in their churches, developed many hobbies, traveled, and generally kept learning. They wished to continue to remain active in their community during their retirement, and more than 60% reported they volunteered in other programs as well as in Project L.O.V.E.

Almost all volunteers said they were active readers; they loved reading and wanted children to develop the love and need for reading in their lives. They were also storytellers, often swapping stories with the children and developing a relationship as each gained trust in, and knowledge of, the other. Volunteers and children might begin a session by asking one another how their dog was doing or how they enjoyed last night’s hockey game or if they watched a particular TV program. Volunteers might tell stories about the “old days” and how things had changed. Children might talk about their home and school experiences. These stories became a way of initiating the literacy session and provided a common bond and the foundation of a respectful relationship between child and volunteer. Teachers too commented on the value of having volunteers who provided an outlet for children to share their ideas and feelings.

We also explored how the school was tapping volunteers’ background knowledge and life experiences in ways other than Project L.O.V.E. For example, were volunteers ever asked to be guest speakers on topics about which they were knowledgeable, or were they included in other aspects of the school

program? Did they participate as the “wise elder” who could share past experience in ways that would guide, inform, and educate the future generation? We found that volunteers were rarely invited to provide their expertise to the school. Only very occasionally were they asked to judge a school’s Science Fair, speak on Veterans’ Day, or demonstrate a handcraft. In fact, when interviewed, teachers were generally surprised by the idea and somewhat dismayed. They had never really thought of the volunteers beyond their work with Project L.O.V.E. The only situation in which there was recognition of volunteers’ past experience was when the classroom teacher knew the volunteer was a retired teacher. Retired teachers were often welcomed because they were expected to understand how reading programs worked. However, we also noticed tensions. Some former teachers wanted to “teach” literacy – to focus on isolated skill practice rather than shared reading – and this is not the literacy method or perspective of today’s classroom programs.

### The Useful Elder

A third theme is the contribution that seniors can make to the educational system. Delisio (2004) articulates this when describing the Experience Corps in which “schools get free, reliable, dedicated assistance at a time when pressure to boost low-achieving students’ performance is growing, and shrinking budgets are resulting in fewer classroom aides” (§ 5). In an introductory letter to *Generations Together*, Charles Bohlen explains that senior volunteers encourage children to develop skills necessary for school success (New York State Rural Education Advisory Committee, 1999). As part of a national initiative, members of the FGP and RSVP programs in the U.S. were urged to volunteer in classrooms when the America Reads Challenge was issued in 1996. They were asked to help schools to reach nationally determined literacy goals for children.

Such intergenerational programs recognize the growing senior population as an untapped resource for cash-strapped schools which are struggling to meet ever-increasing demands. There is increasing realization that seniors constitute a new, rich reservoir of talent. In the *Generations Together* manual, for example, increasing life expectancy is linked to the use of older volunteers who are described as “a growing resource that can help schools and children achieve educational success” (p. 8). As pressure continues to build, it is likely we will see more schools facing the fact they are underfunded and need help. Increasingly, seniors are perceived as people who maintain an interest in contributing to their community and are able to give their time. They are potential “teaching assistants” who can supplement what teachers are doing. In other words, they can provide an essential service with little cost.

This phenomenon is often tied to literacy initiatives as evidenced in programs like Experience Corps and Generations Together, and it may be connected to differing viewpoints on what literacy is and how to best achieve it in schools. A literacy perspective focused on developing an isolated discreet set of skills requires more direct lessons, practice of individual skills, and drill exercises. In this view, seniors are potential monitors of skill practice who will keep the students on-task and focused on their skill development.

### **The Useful Elder at School**

In the context of Project L.O.V.E., this pressure to view the elder in a utilitarian role was less evident. The volunteers were certainly seen as useful, but in ways that reinforced and enhanced what the classroom teacher was doing. They provided the rich, natural environment where literacy developed socially using oral language and personal meaning-making as the focus of their sessions with children. Teachers wanted their students to celebrate their literacy skills as they had developed to that point and to help emerging or struggling readers feel confident and grow in self-esteem. Vocabulary and decoding skills were developed incidentally to the whole reading event, rather than in preparation for, or in lieu of, an enjoyable reading experience with a caring adult.

### **A Web Crafted by Elders**

While we found it useful and informative to examine the work of senior volunteers in Project L.O.V.E. through the lens of how intergenerational programs might see the senior as a caring, wise, and useful elder, we were also struck by how the relationship among the school, the community, and the volunteer was interconnected and intricately woven. Our analysis returned to the professional literature on how children develop their literacy, how schools teach literacy, and, from our survey and focus group data, how seniors in the Project L.O.V.E. program were woven into the picture. These caring, wise, and useful elders were helping to connect and interweave a community-school connection that contributed to children's literacy development.

Abbott and Ryan's (2000) opinion paper, "Community as the Web of Learning," advocates such school-community collaboration in support of children's learning. They describe initiatives in Princeton, New Jersey and Letchworth, England where educators recognize the "personal responsibility" all members of the community play in "helping to educate young people" (p. 16). Again, this triggered for us the notion that home, school, and community play an interconnected and vital role in helping all children learn to read, which we echo in the revised adage "It takes a village to raise a reader." Abbott and Ryan provided



us with a useful metaphor as we listened to participants' stories about the flow of seniors between community and school. We thought that these senior community members were weaving threads of connection that strengthened the school-community bond and might, in time, create a supportive web for children. First of all, volunteers increased their knowledge about the life of their schools and almost always expressed great admiration for teachers. Second, volunteers demonstrated their belief that community members have a role in and some responsibility for supporting children's education and well-being. Third, volunteers were teaching students about the pleasure of reading and its value and importance within the wider community and throughout their lives.

### **The Thread of Shared Knowledge**

One thread is spun out of seniors' increasing knowledge about ways in which today's schools operate. We were told about "interaction with other people, especially children, making me more aware of trends and issues in education today." The changing nature of schools and the hard work of teachers were themes of discussion in every volunteer focus group. One volunteer, for example, told us that "working with Project L.O.V.E. has helped me realize what a difficult job teachers have in the classroom today." We heard that children seemed to have "so many things to cope with" and that this [volunteering] "gives us a greater respect for teachers and how they cope." In the words of yet another volunteer, "my eyes were opened to the many needs of young students and the tasks the teachers have to deal with, the many problems, both academic and social."

Their new knowledge gives volunteers an unusual perspective to share in other areas of their life in the community, and it "keeps them in touch with the school and community." In focus groups and interviews, volunteers spoke about encouraging friends to volunteer: "I have mentioned it to many people." They described conversations about their work with Project L.O.V.E., sometimes initiated by a child who "wants her Mum to come and meet you and then leaves you with a big hug." Many volunteers told us about hearing a shout from a child in the street or grocery store. Then a parent was brought to meet "my volunteer," to encounter their child's school in a different way, and to talk about reading. A comment that "she loves to read about puppies," for example, creates an occasion when the conversation is rooted in literacy as a positive and meaningful part of daily life.

Often, volunteers have retired from regular work. As they go out and about in the community during the day and talk about their work in school, their insights and experiences become part of the community's daily, ordinary exchange of news, giving literacy and schooling a new human face and fresh relevance.

## The Thread of Community Responsibility

A second thread is that senior volunteers are conveying a belief about the community's role in supporting children's education and well-being. One volunteer articulated sentiments that were commonly heard in focus group sessions regarding motivations for participating: "a feeling of contributing to the community in which we live, a giving back for what we have obtained, having a small part in helping children feel better about themselves, keeping in touch with the younger generation." As seniors, these volunteers may have a special part to play. Shipman (1999), for example, writes that, "The intergenerational movement may be a conscious, planned effort to establish extended family relationships because of the gradual demise of the extended family structure" (p. 33). For Kerka (2003), children's relationships with elders strengthen social capital: the tangible and intangible resources – norms, networks, values, and trust – to which community members have access. She cites M. P. Some's belief that "the young child cannot feel secure if there is no elder whose silent presence gives him or her hope in life" (Kerka, 2003, p. 1).

The phrase "intergenerational capacity" is used in a document from the Office of Senior Victorians in Australia (2004). Volunteers' actions may be categorized as manifestations of social capital or intergenerational capacity, but essentially, the in-school presence of senior volunteers expresses a belief about community responsibility. Volunteers need not be related to students they meet. Most of them are not, and have not been, professional educators. They are, simply, members of the school's wider community who have been accepted into its classrooms with the task of modeling and celebrating the literacy act. The boundary between school and community becomes more permeable both because of volunteers' interest in children's learning and schools' acceptance of their support and because of children's awareness of the extended community interests of volunteers. Figures 1, 2, and 3 illustrate some of the pictures children made when they were asked to draw pictures of their volunteers in activities outside school. There were scenes of volunteers gardening, reading, walking their dogs, making cookies, or watching TV. In some pictures, volunteers continued to give their time to benefit others. They donated blood, picked up litter, worked at other schools, and voted by computer for an animal shelter. Many volunteers were thought to enjoy life. They skipped with a rope, danced, got married, and took holidays in tropical places like Hawaii. The volunteers were part of the school life of the children, and the children saw them actively taking part in a wide range of activities in the community. As senior volunteers move between school and community, a second, strong thread is being woven, connecting community with school and school with community.

Figure 1: Grade 3 student drawing in response to prompt: Show what your volunteer likes to do outside school. "She's going to church."

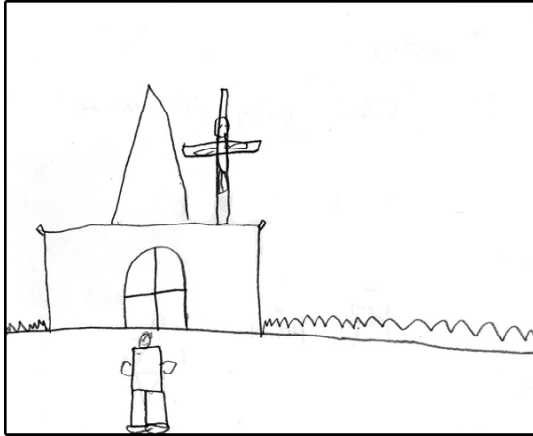
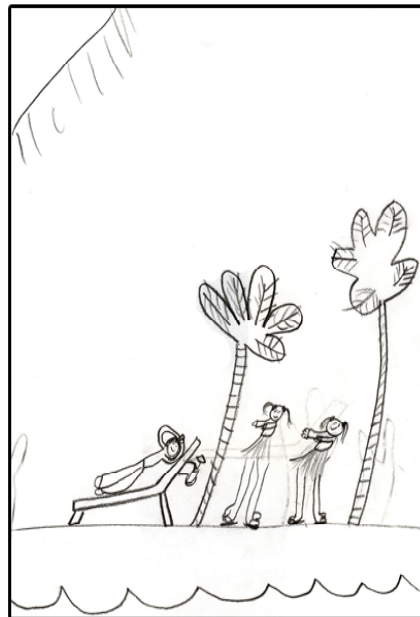


Figure 2: Grade 4 student drawing in response to the prompt: Show you and your volunteer reading.



Figure 3: Grade 5 student drawing in response to prompt: Show what your volunteer likes to do outside of school. "She's on a trip to Hawaii."



### **The Thread of Literacy Outreach**

A third thread is formed because of the central place of literacy in volunteers' work and in community perceptions of that work. A "literacy as social practices" perspective (Gregory & Williams, 2000; Lonsdale & McCurry, 2004) informed the Project L.O.V.E. study, and it played an important part in our reflections about school and community. In this perspective, our understanding of literacy is expanded beyond its traditional view as an individual attribute made up of a discreet set of linguistic skills towards a broader and more holistic perspective where the focus is on the social contexts in which literacy practices take place. Literacy achievement is regarded as the result of many complex and dynamic factors which cannot be reduced to simple/discreet measures of reading comprehension, vocabulary development, phonic skills, and other traditional skill-based tests. It is developed in a variety of sociocultural contexts that vary for individuals and must be nurtured constantly through modeling, scaffolding, and a growing personal identity as a reader/writer. One valuable literacy experience common to this holistic and social perspective is the book-sharing event. Shared reading provides very strong support for young learners (Cooper, 2004). As an adult and a child gather to read a book (or when an adult and a class of children gather to read a book), the experience is one which models literacy as a meaningful and enjoyable part of life, while nurturing and supporting students' literacy development.

Project L.O.V.E. volunteers are seen, then, as making an effective and important contribution to literacy development as they read to children or listen to them read. When they meet parents for casual chat, talk to friends about the books they are reading in school, and tell stories about children's interest in reading, their modeling of literacy as both meaningful and enjoyable moves into the world outside school. Beyond this, their own willingness to donate time and effort to the school is a tacit affirmation of their belief in the central importance of children's literacy development. This suggested to us that these three threads of volunteer knowledge, community responsibility, and literacy outreach have the potential to create a supportive web for the work of schools while strengthening school and community interconnections.

### **Effective Implementation: Facilitating School-Community Initiatives**

Our experience with Project L.O.V.E. has been a rich source of ideas around the challenge of using community-based projects in ways that support and help existing school programs without adding to the already demanding life

of educators. All of our participants (teachers, volunteers, and students) agreed that a project in which seniors read with children in one-to-one, weekly sessions is a positive and worthwhile initiative. It has clear benefits in promoting and supporting students' literacy growth, plus it provides a nurturing and enjoyable social benefit when students share their ideas and feelings with a caring elder. As seniors connect their experiences and knowledge with the emerging future generation, they also benefit. More than 82% of volunteer respondents to our survey agreed with the phrase, "I feel that I am doing something useful in the world." Volunteers spoke about "feeling appreciated," "feeling good," and "feeling you are doing something worthwhile." Many describe their sense of satisfaction "in doing something useful" and say that they gain more than they give.

Principals, teachers, and volunteers were asked about positive and negative features of their Project L.O.V.E. experiences. Literacy and social benefits to children were primary elements of successful programs. However, smooth-running administration, easy communication, regular volunteer attendance, and, for volunteers, a sense of welcome and appreciation were all significant in ensuring success because these, in turn, had an impact on the reliability and quality of the students' experience. In summary, it's important for school leaders to: (1) focus on making the volunteers feel part of the school culture; (2) provide adequate in-house structure/organization for the operation of the program; and (3) build in mechanisms for teacher-volunteer communication.

### **School Culture**

When asked how schools could make their work more satisfying, more than 80% of volunteers checked two prepared statements: "the principal knows my name" and "an event is held to recognize volunteers." In our focus groups, volunteers told stories of how the children came to know them and looked forward to their visits. They were welcomed at the school door, greeted when they showed up at the classroom door, and recognized in the hallways. Volunteers were known throughout the school even by teachers who did not work with them; many came to the staff room at recess and noon to socialize with teachers and each other; they had an assigned place to work and, sometimes, they wore a special smock or name tag that identified their role in the school. All of these things gave the volunteer an inclusive feeling. If they were missing, volunteers could feel in the way and a "bit of a nuisance." It is part of the school's responsibility to take this aspect of the program seriously. These seniors were not demanding, nor did they have high expectations, but they did hope to be included and made to feel welcome.

All schools held some recognition event for the senior volunteers. This took the form of special school assemblies, a Volunteer Tea in the spring, or the individual recognition of volunteers at school closing events. The rewards were simple certificates and perhaps a small lunch, but their significance lay simply in the existence of events that publicly signaled the value of having seniors from the community working in the school.

### **In-School Organization**

As part of building a successful Project L.O.V.E. program, the principal requested that a staff member take on the role of coordinator. This person acted as chief contact in the school for individual volunteers and for the director of the Project L.O.V.E. organization. He or she also connected volunteers with teachers who wanted a volunteer, managed procedures for getting permission for students to take part in the program, held orientation events to welcome new volunteers and show them the routines for that school, and made sure that volunteers were included in social events and closing events for the year.

Classroom teachers took differing initiatives in directing the work of volunteers. In highly successful programs, the teachers were very specific about what they wanted volunteers to do each week. They chose a book for the reading time, assigned a small activity for the volunteer to lead, and provided a way for the volunteer to record what they did and to write in any comments they wanted to make about the session. Some schools had a volunteer book bag in which books, activities, and recording sheets were kept for the volunteers to pick up when they arrived. In other cases, teachers did little to provide direction for the volunteers or to communicate directly with them and often reported they even “forgot they were coming,” suggesting they liked the idea of the program, but they needed some school-based support to make the most effective use of the volunteers.

### **Teacher-Volunteer Communication**

It is not surprising that the successful implementation of an intergenerational literacy initiative like Project L.O.V.E. would depend on good communication. We found several indications that schools where communication was regular and intentional were more satisfied with the program. The need for communication was evident in two ways: teacher-volunteer communication and volunteer-volunteer interaction.

There were not many opportunities for teachers and volunteers to meet and talk about the children and volunteers’ work with them. Meetings happened most often in the hallway, at a recess break, or for a few minutes outside the classroom door. Volunteers felt the need to share with teachers some of the

social issues that arose in sessions, for example, when the child seemed upset that day or troubled by something. They also wanted to share with teachers the positive things that were happening, perhaps not after every session, but at least periodically while they were working with the students. Classroom teachers seemed to put work into meeting with volunteers at the start of each year, but otherwise they relied on volunteers to seek them out or use a tracking tool to communicate details about individual students in individual sessions. Tracking tools took several forms: a single sheet with separate categories for response, a scribbler to record anecdotal comments, or tracking sheets designed by the Project L.O.V.E. director. These were essential tools for ongoing communication between teachers and volunteers. It was also important for the school-based coordinator to call one or two meetings during the year when teachers and volunteers could meet to discuss children and what was happening in the sessions.

An interesting aspect of our focus groups with volunteers was how participants found the focus group session itself enjoyable and valuable. Many said they rarely had time to discuss their sessions with other volunteers and that it was reassuring to know “they were doing okay” in their work with students. It was clear that volunteers would benefit if they were enabled to meet with their fellow volunteers and discuss “how it was going” in their school and with their children. They could share their knowledge about reading and helping children enjoy it, learn from others, and perhaps feel more confident in what they were accomplishing. We suggest that organizations such as Project L.O.V.E. consider arranging informal occasions for volunteers to meet and talk about their work.

### **The Uniqueness of Prince Edward Island**

Prince Edward Island is the smallest province in Canada and it has a large number of close-knit rural communities. Many small communities were involved in Project L.O.V.E., so that the likelihood of casual volunteer-student encounters was unusually high. Literacy and social benefits for students, however, have nothing to do with community size, while the advocacy role of volunteers and their more intimate knowledge of schools are also elements that would transfer to larger, more dispersed communities. One other consideration for us as educators is that the population of healthy, active, and articulate seniors is growing in every part of Canada. We would be wise to enlist these elders in the service of building our children’s literacy and social confidence and to foster wider knowledge of the daily lives and issues of people in our schools. If we do not, we will lose a tremendous potential resource and a strong source of advocacy.

## A Closing Thought

An exciting part of qualitative research is the way in which researchers are able to remain open to emerging themes and ideas that enhance or extend their exploration of the original research questions. In our inquiry, we noticed that schools integrated the Project L.O.V.E. program in ways that reflected their own culture and philosophy. Each school was different, but in every school, teachers expressed an overwhelming respect for senior volunteers and their willingness to spend time reading with children. We began to realize that the apparently simple activity of reading a book to/with a child was a powerful and meaningful way for seniors from the community to become part of the school culture. As we talked to volunteers, teachers, and children, we also recognized that senior volunteers were extending the school culture back out into the community. Senior volunteers exemplified the idea that “it takes a village to raise a reader.” They demonstrated their belief in the community’s responsibility for children’s education by their practice, and they created webs of connection to motivate and engage others. Jenks (2000) gives powerful expression to our emergent ideas:

This elder time becomes a stage in life revered and honoured by others and used powerfully in service and to help people do what is right for the benefit of future generations. (¶ 8)

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