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An evaluation of TLN's Intergenerational Linking programme in Bradford, 2024-2025.
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“It Just Brings Joy”

Building Belonging and Connection Across Generations.
An evaluation of TLN’s Intergenerational Linking programme in Bradford.

Cameron, L., Shenton, M., Horn, C. & Sandhu, C. (2026)



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Intergenerational linking generated significant **emotional and social benefits**, including increased joy, engagement and a reduction in loneliness among residents.
- The programme facilitated **meaningful relationships across generations**, increasing understanding, connection and shared values.
- Care home staff saw improved emotional wellbeing, a renewed sense of purpose and identity, and opportunities for reminiscence and storytelling, **amongst residents.**
- **Children's developmental outcomes** included increased confidence, improved communication skills, enhanced empathy and greater social awareness, with particularly strong impacts for SEN and vulnerable children.
- The effectiveness of the programme was driven by **key mechanisms of connection**, including non-verbal communication, shared activities and repeated interactions that built familiarity and trust.
- The quality of outcomes was influenced by **relational engagement** ("*doing together*") than by the specific nature of activities.
- The **programme's success** depended on planning, skilled facilitation, participant preparation and strong collaboration between schools, care settings and linking organisations.
- A **supportive and well-prepared environment**, alongside pacing and activity design, was critical to enabling inclusive and meaningful participation.
- **Barriers and challenges** included logistical constraints (e.g. staffing, time, funding), communication difficulties and the need to manage emotional complexities sensitively.
- The programme had a wide social impact, influencing community cohesion, broadening perspectives and challenging stereotypes about both older people and children.
- Staff benefits included job satisfaction, emotional fulfilment and a sense of professional purpose through observing positive outcomes.
- Participants identified areas for improvement, including earlier planning, increased frequency and consistency of sessions, and additional opportunities (e.g. workshops) to sustain engagement.
- Overall, intergenerational linking is a highly effective approach for promoting wellbeing, inclusion and community connection when supported by robust planning and sustained delivery.





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BACKGROUND

The Linking Network (TLN) is a national charity based in Bradford that works to foster meaningful connections across social, cultural, and generational differences. Through its programmes, including Schools Linking and Intergenerational Linking, TLN supports schools and community settings in creating opportunities for sustained, positive social contact that promote empathy, understanding, and social cohesion.

TLN's work is grounded in evidence showing that meaningful contact between people from different backgrounds can reduce prejudice and stereotyping, increase empathy and trust, and improve wellbeing and social connectedness. By creating structured opportunities for relationship-building, TLN aims to support children and young people in developing confidence in connecting with others, while also addressing social isolation experienced by older adults.

Intergenerational Linking Programme

TLN's Intergenerational Linking programme brings together children and young people from schools with older adults living in care homes, independent living settings, or community groups. Through regular shared activities, participants are given opportunities to build relationships, learn from one another, and develop mutual understanding across generations.

The programme is informed by established principles of intergenerational practice, defined as purposeful and mutually beneficial activities that promote greater understanding, respect, and stronger community connections between generations. Activities are tailored to the interests and needs of participants, with the overarching aim of fostering meaningful relationships, reducing age-related stereotypes, and enhancing wellbeing for both younger and older participants.

A key feature of TLN's approach is its facilitated linking model, in which trained facilitators support schools and older people's settings in establishing and sustaining high-quality partnerships. Facilitators provide planning support, resources, and ongoing guidance to help links become embedded as long-term relationships rather than one-off visits.

Reach and Impact

TLN's Intergenerational Linking programme currently reaches approximately 1,350 pupils and 675 older adults across 45 active links in the Bradford district, involving nursery, primary, and secondary schools alongside care homes, independent living schemes, and community groups.

Previous evaluations of TLN's intergenerational work have identified a range of positive outcomes, including:

- improved attitudes towards older people among younger participants
- increased confidence in intergenerational communication
- enhanced wellbeing and reduced loneliness for older adults
- greater mutual understanding and reduced age-related stereotypes
- opportunities for skill development, empathy, and social connection across generations

Research has also highlighted the importance of structured facilitation, preparation, and participant-led activities in supporting successful and meaningful intergenerational relationships.

Overall, TLN's Intergenerational Linking programme provides a structured framework for building sustained, positive connections between generations, contributing to individual wellbeing, stronger communities, and greater social cohesion.



METHODOLOGY

PARTICIPANTS

Fifteen individuals were interviewed, with 40% (6/15) working in care homes and 60% (9/15) in schools. Participants had an average of 14.26 years of professional experience (SD = 7.72), ranging from 2 to 27 years. The average age was 43.67 years (SD = 9.02), with a range of 26 to 60 years. Most interviewees identified as White (86.7%), with 13.3% identifying as Asian backgrounds. The sample was predominantly female (93.3%), with one male participant (6.7%).

RECRUITMENT AND CONTEXT

Participants were recruited through The Linking Network. Potential participants were contacted and interviewed by an independent researcher who was not involved in programme delivery. Individuals were invited to participate voluntarily and provided informed consent prior to taking part.

Interviewees represented a range of intergenerational links involving primary schools, secondary schools and Pupil Referral Units, care homes and retirement living settings. All interviewees had been involved in organising and/or running an intergenerational link, as per The Linking Networks programme. Activities varied across settings and included arts-based workshops, music, theatre, games, reading, crafts, gardening and social visits. Some links also participated in the Bradford 2025 Intergenerational Play project, which involved six facilitated sessions led by creative practitioners. This variety provided insight into a broad range of intergenerational experiences and approaches to programme delivery.

PROCEDURE

Semi-structured interviews were conducted online via Microsoft Teams at times convenient for participants. Interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes. This format enabled consistency across interviews while allowing flexibility to explore individual experiences in greater depth through follow-up questions and prompts. Interviews focused on participants' experiences of intergenerational linking, including perceived impact, challenges and recommendations for future development. All interviews were recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

DATA ANALYSIS

Interview transcripts were analysed using deductive and inductive thematic analysis. Analysis began with repeated reading of the transcripts to develop familiarity with the data. Recurring patterns, ideas and meaningful points of similarity across participants' accounts were identified and coded. These codes were then grouped into broader themes that captured shared experiences and perspectives relating to intergenerational linking. Themes were reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately reflected the dataset and addressed the aims of the study.

EMOTIONAL AND SOCIAL ENRICHMENT

Intergenerational Linking generated strong emotional and social benefits for both residents and children, improving wellbeing, fostering connection, and creating a sense of shared value. Interactions were described as positive, producing immediate improvements in mood and lasting emotional impacts. The programme also reduced loneliness and fostered meaningful relationships through shared experiences and familiarity. Although some respondents noted mixed emotions in residents or children, these connections remained valued, highlighting the importance of regular contact in promoting emotional enrichment.

POSITIVE EMOTIONAL IMPACT

Immediate positive emotional responses were highlighted, including joy, happiness and overall uplift in mood among residents and children.

"It just bring joy doesn't it? Everybody likes that"

GEN25014, care home worker

"Overwhelmingly positive. Everybody got something out of it"

GEN25011, teacher

REDUCTION IN LONELINESS

Interactions helped to alleviate feelings of loneliness and social isolation among residents, contributing to longer-term emotional well-being.

"I've seen the loneliness that elderly people go through ... I am aware of the difference it makes in the long run for their mental and emotional well-being"

GEN25016, care home worker

SOCIAL CONNECTION

Meaningful integenerational relationships developed through bonding, familiarity and shared experiences.

"Our children ran in and mixed with the residents like old friends meeting ... it was a testament to how relationships had built over time"

GEN25011, teacher

"It's about making connections with somebody of a different generation ... sharing stories and showing they have really interesting stories to tell"

GEN25012, teacher

COMPLEX EMOTIONAL RESPONSES

Residents experienced mixed emotions, with enjoyment during interactions with children alongside reminders of missing family, yet the experiences remained valued overall.

"They're quite happy when the kids are here, but a bit dissappointed when they go ... they still look forward to the next time, asking when they're coming again"

GEN25007, care home worker



DEVELOPMENTAL BENEFITS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

Intergenerational Linking supported children's development in confidence, communication and empathy. Teachers noted increased self-assurance and engagement over time, including among initially shy children. Interactions encouraged perspective-taking and social awareness, fostering pride, belonging and responsibility. The programme was particularly beneficial for SEN and vulnerable children, supporting improvements in behaviour and emotional regulation in an inclusive environment that nurtured social and emotional growth.

CONFIDENCE GROWTH

Children seemed became more confident and self-assured and more willing to engage over time.

"To see them come out of their shells and see their confidence build week after week"

GEN25004, teacher

EMPATHY AND PERSPECTIVE TAKING

Children became more aware of others' needs, demonstrating care and consideration towards residents.

"What I did see as time went on was more and more empathy ... they really cared and realised they were part of something bigger"

GEN25011, teacher



COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Children became more confident communicators, particularly those who were initially quieter or less willing to engage.

"I think it really brought out their communication skills ... especially some of our children who were a little bit quieter"

GEN25001, teacher

SOCIAL AWARENESS AND SENSE OF IMPACT

Children became more socially aware, recognising their ability to make a positive difference to others.

"They understand they are doing something for somebody that is making a difference ... it gives them a sense of worth, pride and belonging"

GEN25005, teacher

BENEFITS FOR SEN/VULNERABLE CHILDREN

SEN and vulnerable children became more enagaged and confident, with improvements in behaviour and emotional regulation in a supportive environment.

"There's a couple [children] on the autistic spectrum who would hold back, but by the end they were smiling and having fun"

GEN25020, teacher

"[One child] struggles in other education settings ... she probably opened up and became more confident in the hour and a half we were there than we saw all year"

GEN25016, teacher

BENEFITS FOR RESIDENTS

Residents experienced enhanced wellbeing, renewed purpose and opportunities for self-expression through intergenerational contact. While specific memories of activities sometimes faded, positive emotions endured. Care home staff observed that interactions enabled residents to reconnect with their identities through storytelling and reminiscence, while also boosting confidence, communication and imagination. Feeling valued and listened to reinforced dignity and belonging, demonstrating that benefits extended beyond activities to deeper emotional and psychological impact.

EMOTIONAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELLBEING

Residents experienced improved emotional wellbeing through increased enjoyment, reduced loneliness and calming effects from interactions with the children.

"If they've had a good morning seeing the children ... they might not remember what they've done but that feeling stays with them for longer"

GEN25006, care home worker

"It just brings a smile to their faces. Their confidence comes through, their speech can improve, their imagination sparks"

GEN25014, care home worker



SENSE OF PURPOSE AND IDENTITY

A renewed sense of purpose and identity emerged through meaningful engagement, with residents feeling valued and recognised during interactions.

"It's nice to see them as who they were before they were older ... parents, teachers, doctors ... relaxed and in the moment"

GEN25014, care home worker

"He felt really important ... they were listening to his hobby"

GEN25008. care home worker

REMINISCING AND STORYTELLING

Residents reflected on past experiences and memories through reminiscing and storytelling with the children.

"They can shut their eyes and take themselves back to a place they remember ... the magic happens when they're together, we don't have to prompt it"

GEN25014, care home worker

"They've got somebody who's listening to them with interest ... It's an eye opener on both sides"

GEN25008, care home worker



MECHANISMS OF CONNECTION

Intergenerational relationships developed through non-verbal communication, activities and repeated interactions. Eye contact, laughter and empathy enabled connection beyond words, while collaboration fostered engagement and memory-building. Familiarity strengthened trust and affection. Findings show that meaningful relationships can emerge through embodied, relational communication and shared presence.

EMOTIONAL AND NON-VERBAL CONNECTION

Connections often developed through emotional understanding and non-verbal communication, with shared laughter, eye contact and intuitive interaction helping residents and children connect beyond words.

"Sometimes it wasn't even verbal. It was just eye contact and giggling ... if you're laughing and smiling, you don't need words"

GEN25011, teacher

"Even though they don't make sense conversation wise, they seem to just understand eachother ... it brings out almost paternal and maternal instincts in my residents"

GEN25017, care home worker



SHARED ACTIVITIES AND IMAGINATION

Shared activities and imaginative play created opportunities for interaction, helping residents and children connect through common interests, creativity and collaboration.

"Those sessions are better when they're making something together ... it's like a little memento ... it keeps refreshing the memory"

GEN25007, care home worker

"A little girl who was quite shy told me her daddy was a pilot, so a resident made an airplane with her out of stickle bricks, she felt really comfortable then and she goes back to that resident when she visits"

GEN25014, care home worker

FAMILIARITY OVER TIME

Repeated interactions built familiarity over time, helping residents and children feel more comfortable, recognise one another and develop stronger relationships.

"As the weeks went on, relationships started growing ... they start by learning their names, then next week they go and sit on their knee or have a little cuddle"

GEN25011, teacher

"The first few times, the children were shy, but now they come in and they look forward to it ... they'll pick up where they left off"

GEN25014, care home worker

CONDITIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL INTERACTIONS

Intergenerational linking relied on careful planning, structured delivery and strong collaboration. Skilled facilitation, clear guidance and preparation helped ensure accessibility and confidence for participants. Factors such as pacing, group composition and session frequency influenced sustainability and impact. Coordinated working between organisations and practical supports reduced anxiety, highlighting the importance of a well-designed, collaborative framework for meaningful and consistent engagement.

SKILLED FACILITATION AND ACTIVITY PREPARATION

Successful interactions were supported by effective facilitation, clear communication and practical preparation, ensuring activities were well-organised, accessible and engaging for both residents and children.

"Whenever we got there it was set up ready for our activity ... they would provide drinks and snacks which they children loved"

GEN25004, teacher

"The coordinator helped a lot ... sometimes it becomes too much for one person to do, but when they got on board, there were more people to help out"

GEN25008, care home worker

PARTICIPANT PREPARATION

Preparation, including practical supports such as name tags and notice boards, alongside setting clear expectations, helped reduce uncertainty and anxiety about the visits, while building children's understanding of ageing, dementia and appropriate interaction.

"We talked about how to approach residents ... not rushing up, introducing themselves and understanding memory and speech difficulties"

GEN25005, teacher

"The arts professional went to the care home first and had some time with the residents to prep them, I wouldn't have had time to do that"

GEN25004, teacher

DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION

Effective implementation relied on structure, consistency and timing, with group size and session frequency shaping engagement and sustainability.

"I think it should be an entire year group ... otherwise you regret choosing some children over others"

GEN25004, teacher

"It's worth making time once a fortnight or once every three weeks, any more than that is too full on"

GEN25023, care home worker

SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT AND STRUCTURE

A calm, flexible and well-prepared environment supported smoother interactions, reduced disruption and enabled meaningful engagement between residents and children.

"It's better when we arrive and the elderly residents are already sat and we can slot in around them to do crafts"

GEN 25021, teacher

"We always managed to nip any issues in the bud first and say we need to go back to school, the residents appreciated that and were very flexible"

GEN25003, teacher from a special school

ACTIVITY DESIGN AND ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES

Meaningful engagement was best supported by shared, interactive activities that encouraged collaboration and reflected residents' interests, experiences and familiarity.

"I don't think it's about the activity, it's about the doing together"

GEN25012, teacher

"Music undoubtedly brings people together ... we really tried to tap into the musical interests of the elderly, because we thought that's a way in"

GEN25011, teacher

"I took my set of traditional tales ... the residents lapped that up because of course, they know that"

GEN25005, teacher



SUPPORT FROM THE LINKING NETWORK

The Linking Network played a key role in facilitating partnerships, providing ideas, maintaining communication and actively supporting sessions.

"They really help with bringing the school and the care home together. They provide ideas and attend visits regularly ... they're not just in the background"

GEN25002, teacher

"They're very good at keeping in touch ... they've been very proactive in trying to keep the previous link going"

GEN25003, teacher



BARRIERS AND CHALLENGES

Despite positive outcomes, challenges included staffing pressures, funding constraints and logistical issues, which disrupted consistency. Emotional complexities arose when children encountered illness or absence among residents, requiring sensitive support. Differences in communication abilities and confidence sometimes hindered interaction, and poorly matched activities reduced engagement. These findings emphasise the need for flexibility, preparation and thoughtful design to sustain effective intergenerational programmes.

LOGISTICAL AND PRACTICAL ISSUES

Practical barriers included staffing pressures, transport costs, time demands and communication difficulties which affected the organisation and consistency of the visits.

"My Christmas ideas were sorted in October ... I don't think the integrated link always think far enough ahead"

GEN25023, care home worker

"We only managed to get up once. I've had a very tricky group behaviour and staffing wise ... we're now struggling with money to go anywhere"

GEN25020, teacher

EMOTIONAL CHALLENGES

Interactions sometimes brought emotional challenges, particularly when children had to navigate residents' absence, requiring sensitive support and ongoing discussion.

"The second time we went, somebody was missing. We had that conversation again ... it's sad but they weren't very well that week"

GEN25001, teacher

INTERACTIONAL AND COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES

Differences in confidence, communication ability and cognitive capacity sometimes made interactions more difficult, particularly when children were uncertain or residents had limited communication.

"A lot of very shy children do not want to talk ... and we've got residents who zone out completely"

GEN25007, care home worker

ACTIVITY MISMATCH

Not all activities were equally effective; engagement declined when activities were poorly matched to residents' interests, abilities or the goals of meaningful interaction.

"They were making slime which the residents were not keen on because they didn't want to get their fingers messy"

GEN25007, care home worker

"When we were doing drawing or writing, some can't participate much ... when it comes to singing and music, they got involved because even if you're partially sighted you can still sing"

GEN25008, teacher

WIDER SOCIAL IMPACT

Intergenerational linking produced broader social benefits by strengthening community cohesion and challenging age-related stereotypes. Children developed greater understanding of ageing, while residents reported more positive views of young people. These interactions replaced assumptions with relational understanding and shared experiences. The programme fostered a sense of belonging and mutual contribution, demonstrating its value in promoting social inclusion and reducing stigma across generations.

EXPANDING HORIZONS

Interactions broadened children's social awareness, exposing them to different life experiences, relationships and perspectives beyong their usual environments.

"It sets you up for life and teaches you understanding of other people who have different needs to you"

GEN25021, teacher

"It's really important they see there's more to life, there is a community, people they can help who will help them too"

GEN25004, teacher

COMMUNITY CONNECTION

Intergenerational linking strengthened community connection by building relationships across local generations and encouraging a sense of belonging, contribution and shared identity.

"It's good to reach out to the local community and build those links and relationships further than just your school. Children don't often have those opportunities"

GEN25004, teacher

CHALLENGING STIGMA ABOUT THE ELDERLY

Interactions challenged stereotypical views of ageing, helping children see older adults as individuals with personalities, interests and meaningful life experiences.

"It gave them more of an insight that they're not just an old person sat in a chair"

GEN25023, care home worker

"It made them realise that, yes, these people are older, but I can still have a conversation with them ... they're laughing and we're having fun"

GEN25001, teacher

CHALLENGING STIGMA ABOUT CHILDREN

Interactions also challenged the residents' assumptions about children, replacing negative stereotypes with more positive perceptions of young people as caring, respectful and engaged.

"Sometimes elderly people have this stigma that all children are naughty ... I think their views changed on that side as well"

GEN25008, care home worker

BENEFITS FOR STAFF

Staff experienced increased emotional fulfilment and professional purpose through facilitating intergenerational interactions. Observing positive impacts on residents and children enhanced motivation, pride and engagement. The experience was often described as rewarding and meaningful, contributing to a more positive organisational culture. Benefits extended beyond participants, improving staff morale and reinforcing the value of their roles.

SENSE OF PURPOSE AND JOB MEANING

Staff described a stronger sense of purpose and meaning in their roles through facilitating positive experiences and seeing the impact on residents and children

"It makes a big difference for the staff as well ... they like to see the residents happy because they care so much ... it makes a big difference to them if they make a difference to someone's day"

GEN25006, care home worker

"To see the children in a different light, being positive members of the community ... what a privilege. I think everybody should be a part of that"

GEN25004, teacher



EMOTIONAL FULFILMENT

Staff found the interactions emotionally rewarding, often describing being moved by the connections formed and the visible impact on children and residents.

"In over 25 years of teaching, these visits have probably been some of the most magical things I have ever done"

GEN25005, teacher

"It's a whole home effort now, they really enjoy it, not just the residents but the staff as well"

GEN25017, care home worker

"I've been moved every single time ... we can see the impact it's having on the elderly residents"

GEN25005, teacher



FUTURE SUGGESTIONS

Teachers, facilitators and care home staff recommend improving planning, consistency and session frequency to enhance programme sustainability. Earlier organisation and better scheduling would reduce logistical pressures, while regular interactions would strengthen relationships and maintain benefits. Supplementary workshops were suggested to support engagement when direct contact is limited. These insights highlight the importance of structured, well-resourced and continuous delivery to maximise long-term impact.

ADVANCED ORGANISATION

Earlier planning and clearer scheduling were seen as important for managing staffing, paperwork and practical arrangements more effectively.

"To arrange it more in advance and spread it out, I think that'd be better"

GEN25008, care home worker

"There's risk assessments, there's paperwork, I can't do it with a week's notice"

GEN25016, care home worker



WORKSHOPS

Additional workshops were suggested as a way to maintain engagement, build understanding and support participation when direct links were not possible.

"If they could have done workshops on community, that might have been something we could have done whilst we were trying to get a link"

GEN25003, teacher

MORE FREQUENT/ CONSISTENT EVENTS

The importance of regular, consistent interactions was highlighted in order to maintain relationships and sustain the benefits for residents and children.

"If they'd done these events a bit more frequently, that would be good"

GEN25002, teacher

"It's about making sure it continues ... I would hate for this intiative to stop because it really is helping the residents"

GEN25017, care home worker



CONCLUSION

Overall, the findings demonstrate that intergenerational linking delivers significant and wide-ranging benefits across emotional, developmental and community domains, while also highlighting key conditions required for success.

Strong Emotional and Social Benefits for Both Groups

Intergenerational interactions consistently generated positive emotional outcomes, including joy, improved mood and meaningful social connection. They also contributed to a reduction in loneliness among residents, while fostering a sense of mutual value between generations.

Clear Developmental Gains for Young People

Children benefited through increased confidence, improved communication skills, and greater empathy and social awareness. Notably, the programme had a particularly strong impact on SEN and more vulnerable pupils, supporting engagement, emotional regulation and a sense of belonging.

Enhanced Wellbeing and Sense of Purpose for Residents

Residents experienced improvements in emotional wellbeing, alongside a renewed sense of identity, purpose and self-worth. Opportunities for reminiscence and storytelling were especially valuable, supporting both cognitive and emotional engagement.

Relationship Building is Driven by Repetition, Shared Activities and Non-Verbal Connection

Successful connections were built through consistent, repeated interactions, shared activities, and emotional or non-verbal communication. Familiarity over time was key to deepening relationships and enabling meaningful engagement.

Success Depends on Planning, Support and Appropriate Design

The effectiveness of intergenerational programmes relies heavily on careful planning, structured activities, skilled facilitation and ongoing collaboration. Barriers such as logistical challenges, communication differences and poorly matched activities highlight the need for flexibility, preparation and sustained support.

Overall Summary Statement

Intergenerational linking is a highly valuable intervention with demonstrable emotional, developmental and social impact, but its success depends on thoughtful implementation, consistency and strong partnership working.

