

Grandparent-Headed Families' Influence on the Academic Performance of Secondary School Learners

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Abstract

This exploratory study investigated the influence of grandparent-headed families on the academic performance of secondary school learners. Using semi-structured open-ended interviews, the study was conducted in five secondary schools in Port Elizabeth, South Africa. The findings reveal that learners who live in a grandparent-headed household face challenges which may hamper their academic achievement. Accordingly, this study argues that the grandparent-headed family is a very important family unit – one that needs to be supported in order to function well. Proper backing enables such families to provide better parental support and guidance and helps affected learners to achieve well academically. The study also recommends intervention strategies to help both grandparents and learners in grandparent-headed families to cope with the situation in which they find themselves.

Keywords: Second-time parent, surrogate, kinship

1. Introduction

There appears to be a gradual paradigm shift under way, from the nuclear family acting as primary caregivers to the extended family taking on this role. This may be due to many factors, such as the high divorce rate, HIV/AIDS-related deaths, the high mortality rate, financial constraints, incarceration and other limitations and restraints which prevent parents from raising their children. These factors mean that many a nuclear family requires an intervention and this usually translates to an increased supportive role for grandparent. Such interventions on the part of grandparents – the taking on of the role of supplementary or second-time parents are often unplanned. This results in many grandparents feeling isolated and taking on a role for which they are not fully prepared (Horner, Downie, Hay and Wichmann, 2007). It is easy for grandparents thrown into this new and unexpected role as parents to feel overwhelmed and incompetent (Cox, 2007).

Due to one or other crisis, such grandparents are required, willingly or unwillingly, to fulfil the role of the parents to their grandchildren. This results in the grandparents becoming the first and most important teachers and mentors in their grandchildren's lives. It becomes the grandparents' task to become actively involved in the education of their grandchildren. Although they may sometimes lack readiness to tackle this task, they need to understand that their involvement in every level of their grandchildren's schooling, education and development will, in future, be reflected in these grandchildren's physical and mental well-being as well as in their academic performance (Mmotlane, Winnaar and wa Kivilu, 2009). It is for these reasons that this paper aims at exploring the influence that grandparent-headed families have on the academic performance of the learners in their care and at exploring the barriers that prevent these grandparents from providing educational support to their grandchildren. Furthermore, this article attempts to explore literature on educational challenges that grandparent-headed families face. It also discusses the findings of the study and recommends intervention strategies with the aim of providing guidance, support and information to grandparents as well as to learners.

2. Educational Challenges and Support

One of the fundamental functions of parents is to care for and protect their children. Unfortunately, many parents are unable to fulfil this paramount purpose. This leads to intervention by extended family, most often grandparents. This shift

means that grandparents have to be surrogate parents to their grandchildren because the natural parents are unable to fulfil their parental role (Leticq, Bailey and Kurtz, 2007). They are often unprepared for their new role and thus face considerable challenges, especially when dealing with grandchildren who are learners attending school. They become second-time parents which also compels them to be primary educators. Some of them, however, are not able to fulfil the educational needs of the learners now in their care. Ultimately, all these challenges affect the academic performance of the learners (Cox, 2007).

When an older caregiver takes on kinship care, he or she is instantly placed in an unfamiliar new world of agencies, schools, legal systems and policies and procedures. Although these systems are critical to the care of the child, they could add additional stress to affected grandparents in their role as second-time parents (Gutman, Sameroff and Eccles, 2002). Parental involvement is a critical factor in learners' school achievement at all grade levels. Despite the critical role that these grandparents need to play, they may feel intimidated when dealing with the personnel and the school system. This is because they lack the necessary skills for dealing with the evolution of the educational system as well as for assisting the modern-day learner (Cox, 2007). Understanding the technological epoch of their grandchildren could be overwhelming for these grandparents. Many are likely to have raised their own children in an age where technology was not as advanced as it is today. Some of them may view the new forms of communication as unnecessary and time consuming. Such grandparents may not even be aware of such phenomena as cyber bullying and unsavoury chat rooms that are detrimental to their grandchildren. These issues serve only as examples as to how daunting it is for any parent faced with raising a teenaged learner. To better understand teenagers means understanding what they consider important and what could possibly harm them in their life world (Gutman, Sameroff and Eccles, 2002).

Families provide the social, cultural and emotional support that enables learners to function well at school (Deplanty, Coulter-Kern and Duchane, 2007). Although grandparents may not have legal custody over their grandchildren, it is still expected that grandchildren in their care receive holistic parenting. Where learners are in their adolescence it should be understood that this stage encompasses not only rapid physiological changes associated with puberty, but also social transformations that follow the transition to secondary school (Gutman, Sameroff and Eccles, 2002). Due to illiteracy or limited schooling, grandparents may not be in a position to assist their grandchildren because they are not aware of the transitional stage they are in and are equally unaware of the changes that have occurred in education.

Among the challenges such grandparents may encounter might be their inability to attend parent-teacher consultations. Grandparents sometimes avoid contact or communication with their grandchildren's educators because they feel that they are being summoned to learn how they are failing their grandchildren. In addition, some of them may be the oldest parents at these meetings and may therefore feel uncomfortable (Weaver, 2007). Many are unable to assist their grandchildren with their homework because they are illiterate (Mudavanhu, Segalo and Fourie, 2008). Understanding the amount of homework given, as well as the projects and tasks that their grandchildren must be able to do could be very confusing to them if they do not have an understanding of the educational system (Mansfield, 2009). Some grandparents may find their grandchildren's school environment antagonistic and hence view meetings more as interrogations than as consultations with educators. These attitudes of being self-conscious or distrustful could be due to previous negative experiences they have had with schools (Weaver, 2007). The level of education the grandparents have, or their degree of literacy, may also directly impact on their grandchildren. If the grandparents are educated, they may be able to assist their grandchildren with projects and homework. On the other hand, if they are illiterate or never completed schooling, both the grandparent and grandchild may end up frustrated because no assistance with homework can or will be given. Some grandchildren may be embarrassed by their grandparents' lack of education and may not inform them of teacher-parent consultations. Some grandparents might not realise the importance of education because they have not received any formal education themselves (Mansfield, 2009).

School systems have changed over the years. Many grandparents may not be familiar with the changes that have taken place or with the terminology that is used - that may also still view the educator as solely responsible for the academic development of learners. The grandparents' lack of education, socio-economic status and occupation could prove to be barriers when dealing with schools (Mansfield, 2009). In addition, the language of learning and teaching at school may pose a challenge to illiterate grandparents (Gasa, 2012). It sometimes happens that taking on the responsibility as second-time parent drastically changes their lives. Many of them may not have wanted the responsibility of raising children again, but out of a sense of duty are coerced into taking on the new role. Their feelings may manifest as impatience, a shifting of their responsibilities onto educators or as showing no interest in their grandchildren's schooling. Older grandparents may also be prone to problems with their physical health. This becomes another challenge that hinders them in physically supporting their grandchildren with their schooling needs (Hayslip and Kaminski, 2008;

Moyi, Pong and Frick, 2004).

Learners living in grandparent-headed households may have experienced traumatic loss, having lost or been taken away from their parents (Wood and Goba, 2011). These learners could be living in a grandparent-headed household which could differ from the households of their peers. As teenagers they are undergoing physical and emotional changes and at the same time have to deal with the demands of education. Schools are not only where learners receive an education, but also where they interact with their educators and peers. However, schooling may in some instances also be a disheartening experience to learners from grandparent-headed families because they may feel isolated, that they lack a proper identity due to coming from a home that is not recognised by their peers or by school personnel (Gutman, Sameroff and Eccles, 2002). These factors can be stressful to these learners and may negatively influence their behaviour as well as their relationships with their family, their educators and the community. As a result of loss and separation they may not be able to form relationships of trust. It may be true that they have been abused physically or emotionally by people they trusted. Consequently they could become loners or attention seekers – or become promiscuous or adopt a devil-may-care attitude because of trauma they have experienced (Gasa, 2012). The inability of these learners to fit in with their peer groups may lead to antisocial behaviour. Even though they need more support and motivation to perform in a positive manner, their grandparents may be unable to assist them due to a lack of knowledge, to a lack of proper skills and to financial constraints. The inability to remedy the situation may have a negative impact on learners' scholastic achievement (Conway, 2004).

Low income grandparents often have limited financial resources to cover the financial demands of child rearing (Thomas, Sperry and Yarbrough, 2000). Many grandparents have to provide for their grandchildren on a fixed income (Letiecq, Bailey and Kurtz, 2008). In many grandparent-headed households the sole income is the grandparents' monthly pension. Caring for themselves and their grandchildren means that they live in poverty or below the poverty line. Grandparents may need additional financial assistance in order to care for their grandchildren holistically. Education, school fees, books, uniforms, lunches and, if required, transport to and from school must be provided out of their inadequate incomes. Many grandparents in grandparent-headed households may choose not to ask for assistance from other family members, government institutions or non-government institutions because they fear that their grandchildren may be taken away from them (Szolnoki and Cahn, 2002). Many of these learners may not even have a single decent meal a day and this may negatively affect their schooling. For a majority of affected grandparents and learners, counselling and support are limited or non-existent. There are organisations that provide a variety of support services, including information and support classes, family counselling, and assistance with applying for benefits, but grandparent-headed families are sometimes overlooked (Gasa, 2012).

3. Research Design and Methodology

This paper employs a qualitative research which was conducted at five secondary schools within the northern areas of Port Elizabeth. We used purposive sampling to collect the data. This method is useful for small-scale studies in which the researcher knows exactly what kind of sample is required and how it can be accessed (Bisit, 2010). The participants in the study were learners and their grandparents. The learners chosen for this research were Grade 10 learners taking Life Orientation as a school subject. We obtained a list of all learners in Grade 10 at the selected schools and living in grandparent-headed households. From these class lists three learners were randomly selected from each school. The grandparents of these learners also became participants in the chosen sample.

We conducted semi-structured interviews with the participants and recorded them on audio tape. The learners were interviewed at school after obtaining a written consent from them, their grandparents and the school. The grandparents were interviewed in their homes and anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed to all the participants. The raw data obtained from the interviews was tabulated into hard copies and grouped into themes by using codes. This process allowed us to present a more detailed and understandable data analysis.

4. Research Findings and Discussion

There are a number of themes that emerged in this research from both grandparent and learner interviews. The themes that emerged from the grandparent interviews were living conditions, health conditions, educational barriers, financial constraints and lack of support. The themes that emerged from learner interviews were grandparents' capabilities, grandparents' involvement in learners' school activities, the overall relationship between grandparents and child, and support.

The findings drawn from the participants interviewed revealed the living conditions in some of the homes of the participants to be atrocious. The households were characterised by poverty, as one of the participants stated: *"There is no money...I try to give her what she asks... I don't have money but if she needs something I try to give it to her..."* This is confirmed by Hayslip and Kaminski (2008) who state that many grandparent-headed families are in the grip of poverty. A few of the grandmothers had had to seek employment after becoming second-time parents. In the words of one: *"At first it was hard, you know, cause I was not working, I'm a domestic worker... but I make sure that everything she wants she get it."* Some grandparents would rather seek employment to care for their families than ask for assistance from social workers in obtaining social grants that they are entitled to (Hayslip and Kaminski, 2008).

The issue of health conditions dominated the interviews as the participants shared how their physical pains obstructed them from caring for their grandchildren. Some participants echoed that: *"I have arthritis...my arms pain when I do laundry...I can't do housework because of my asthma...when my leg is too painful I ask them to help..."*. Conway (2007) concurs with this statement when elaborating that many grandparents are not able to perform tasks as well as when they were younger because they are no longer physically capable due to illnesses and age-related diseases. In addition, Hayslip and Kaminski (2008) state that grandparents raising their grandchildren have more health problems.

The lack of affordable housing is an issue for many South Africans. However, grandparents and other relatives face certain unique barriers related to their particular circumstances, varied ages, and the usually unexpected experiences which led to their family arrangement. Many of these grandparent-headed families live on fixed incomes and often in small, subsidised housing which may not be suitable for children. It was a shock to discover that some of these grandparent-headed families make use of a communal tap and do not have running water in their homes. As some of them said: *"We don't have any running water... we fetch water from a tap in the yard."* This shows that these grandparents face a range of challenges related to securing basic services and provisions for the children in their care. Furthermore, they have difficulty in accessing health care, obtaining legal services, enrolling children in schools and finding appropriate housing in order to provide for the diverse needs of the learners in their care.

The research efforts also reveal that there are numerous educational barriers grandparents face daily when it comes to the scholastic performance of their grandchildren. One of the barriers some grandparents reported: *"ek verstaan nie skoolwerk (I don't understand the schoolwork)... I am not educated...I can't read properly...if I went to school I would have been able to help him..."*. Cox (2007) agrees that if a parent is illiterate it becomes a major barrier for the learner to get the required support and for the grandparent to give guidance on how to complete school tasks. These grandparents are expected to attend parent-teacher consultations or school events, but for most of them these occasions become a barrier. As some of the participants stated: *"I don't have transport to take me to the school... the meetings are at night I can't get there..."*. None of the participants had their own transport and were dependent on either extended family or on public transport. Some of the grandparents indicated that they were employed as domestic workers and that their working hours made it impossible for them to visit the schools: *"I leave home early, I'm a domestic worker. It becomes a challenge for these grandparents to adjust their working hours in order to attend school events. They are aware that they have to compromise on something because the schools expect them to provide financially for the learners. They end up compromising on attending school events rather than by not taking the financial responsibility of raising these learners (Coall and Hertwig, 2010).*

The language of learning and teaching in most South African schools is English, although this language is not spoken in most homes. This causes obstacles in the event where such learners may require assistance from their grandparents, as was recorded during these interviews: *"it was a bit difficult for me in English..."* We have mentioned that some of these grandparents cannot read and write which means that they are not exposed to any language other than their home language. The illiteracy and lack of the necessary skills frustrate and overwhelm them and make it difficult for them to be involved in the education of these learners (Cox, 2007; Mudavanhu, et al, 2008).

The lack of support and financial constraints also dominated the interviews. Grandparent-headed families need support from the school, community and government agencies. The national government has skirted the issue and has generally failed to recognise grandparent-headed care families as permanent families, leaving them in limbo and without support. Some of the participants confirmed this, indicating that: *"no support is given from the community."* Szolnoki and Cahn (2008) emphasise the fact that grandparents need support in their role as second-time parents. If these grandparents received individual counselling they would be in a better position to guide their grandchildren (Hayslip and Kaminski, 2008). Financially, most of these grandparents are unable to provide adequately for their grandchildren. Some grandparents depend on an old-age grant which is not enough to provide for the needs of these learners. This is captured in a statement common to some of the participants: *"I do get a grant, so I use most of the time..."*. These second-time parents face the challenge of raising their grandchildren on a fixed monthly income which limits their ability

to provide proper care (Hayslip and Kaminski, 2008).

A number of themes emerged with respect to experiences of learners raised in grandparent-headed families. These included grandparents' capabilities, grandparents' involvement in school activities, the overall relationship between grandparents and child, and support.

When it came to their grandparents' capabilities some learners mentioned the financial constraints in their homes. *"Money is a barrier... sometimes I don't get what I need for school"*. Grandparents, as second-time parents, may not always have sufficient finances to raise their grandchildren. These families' limited finances directly influence their ability to meet their grandchildren's schooling needs. Many of the learners who participated in this study were being raised by grandparents who were either pensioner, unemployed or domestic workers. Due to these financial constraints the majority of these learners are raised in low-income households (Cross and Day, 2008). Some of the participants also mentioned that their grandparents were not able to provide them with suitable housing and hence that they had to do their schoolwork in the living room where there was noise: *"...to do my homework... I have to do it in the living room when everybody is watching TV..."*. The biographical details of grandparents also show that they have low educational levels and that most of them are unemployed and are advanced in age. These may be additional reasons that make them incapable of giving the learners the necessary support. Weaver (2007) agrees that grandparents are sometimes incapable of fulfilling their duties as second-time parents due to ill-health or ailments associated with old age.

When it came to grandparents' involvement in their school activities, most of the learners interviewed revealed that their grandparents were supportive because they encouraged them to do their homework. However, they could not get involved practically because of health problems and their lack of understanding of the curriculum. One learner summarised this by saying: *"... grandmother doesn't help me with my education... she has a problem reading... because of her eyes"*. Another learner pointed out that the grandparent *"does not understand the syllabus because the syllabus changes..."* This is supported by Moyi, Pong and Frick (2004), who highlight that the grandparents' lack of involvement in learners' schoolwork may be caused by their lack of education, age and health related issues. Cox (2007) echoes these sentiments saying that grandparents lack the necessary skills on how to deal with the evolution of the educational system as well as how to assist the modern-day learner. In addition, Mansfield (2009) feels that it is very difficult for the grandparents to cope with the amount of homework, projects and tasks because of their educational level.

The themes of the overall relationship between learners and their grandparents and of support also emerged. The relationship between learners and their grandparents was portrayed by most of the participants as positive. This was captured in a statement by one of the participants: *"she is supportive...she is always there for me..."*. Another participant said: *"I feel safer in my grandmother's house..."*, while another learner positively expressed that: *"when I'm sad I don't feel like walking away..."*. The above statements by the participants show that grandparents do play a significant role in the lives of their grandchildren as second-time parents (Hayslip and Kaminski, 2008). This research also found that some grandparents are willing to do anything in their power to ensure that these learners get the necessary support. Some learners reported that: *"I know I can ask her for anything... they buy me anything I want..."*. This shows that these grandparents maintain a good relationship with their grandchildren and make sure that they give them the necessary support where possible.

Different views emanated from this study regarding the availability of support groups or counselling in the schools. We discovered that some schools have professional experts that these learners are referred to. Other schools, however, are not so privileged to have these experts available. Some participants revealed that there are no professional experts in their schools and it becomes the role of educators to provide support: *"...the help usually comes from the educators...they give support..."*. It is possible that learners living in grandparent-headed households might have experienced the traumatic loss of their parents. Some of them may have been abused physically or emotionally by people who are close to them. They may feel isolated at school because they come from homes that are, sometimes, not recognized by their peers or school personnel. These feelings are often aggravated by their teenage stage which is characterized by physical and emotional changes. The factors mentioned above can be stressful to these learners and may negatively influence their relationships with their family, educators and community. Such cases require professional intervention and can become a major challenge if schools cannot acquire the immediate intervention of professional experts (Gutman, Sameroff and Eccles, 2002).

Providing these grandparent-headed families with support is essential. A grandparent-headed family needs to be uplifted and strengthened. We discovered that the grandparents in this study did not receive any support from their respective communities. Grandparent-headed families are a reality and society should be made aware that these families need their support. During the interviews, most of the participants revealed that support programmes were not available in their schools or in the community at large. This is revealed in the words of some participants: *"no support groups are*

available...". Communities must be able to provide support for all the members living in a grandparent-headed household. This support could be in the form of support groups or counselling from professional experts. The schools should also give immediate support to these families. Schools should be the centre where grandparent-headed families can receive information on alternative support groups and counselling. Partnerships between the school, the community and professional experts are encouraged in order to maximise availability of the interventions or support that these grandparents need (Christenson, 2004).

5. Recommendations

Voluntary grandparenting is usually an informal arrangement reached by family members due to a crisis. The crises that typically necessitate these grandparents' taking responsibility for the care of their grandchildren have been broadly mentioned in this study. The findings also revealed that most grandparents do not know how to go about obtaining legal custody of their grandchildren – even though such custody may help them to apply for government child support grants for the children they are raising. Some are afraid that when they apply their applications will be denied because of their health, financial status and age. They believe that this may result in these learners being removed from their care and possibly placed in foster-care. Because of their lack of education, as well as their health and economic status, such grandparents need support and counselling from social workers, health workers, pastoral leaders, other second-time parents, educators and society to assist them in being more effective second-time parents. It is, therefore, recommended that counselling and support groups should be established in order to help these grandparents and learners.

5.1 *Counselling and support groups for grandparents*

Counselling from educational specialists would help these grandparents to better understand the school procedures and processes and thus assist them in meeting these learners' educational needs. Counselling and assistance from social workers would help grandparent-headed families to deal with matters such as the requirements for receiving social grants. Grandparent-headed families also need support from those members of their extended families who are able to help with basic needs such as food and clothes. By confiding in health workers about their ailments these grandparents could receive the medical attention they require. They could benefit when they communicate with other grandparents who are also second-time parents. Schools could be of assistance as well. Educators could identify which learners live with their grandparents. They could assist grandparents living within the same areas to form support groups. Support from their own peer-group – from other people who have the same responsibilities as second-time parents – would allow these grandparents to form a forum where they could ask for assistance, share their frustrations and feel a sense of belonging. Once society comprehends the reasons why grandparents become second-time parents, these family units will be able to seek the assistance they require without fearing disparagement.

5.2 *Counselling and support groups for learners*

Intervention in the form of counselling should be established in order to empower the learners from grandparent-headed households with coping mechanisms. Support groups under the guidance of a counsellor or an educator are recommended. Forming school-based support groups consisting of learners being raised in grandparent-headed families may help these learners to know that there are other learners at their school who are also being raised in similar situations. Peer support may be more effective because these learners would be able to share their home circumstances with others in similar circumstances without the fear of being marginalised. Such peer groups would enable them to cope better with their home situations and school environment.

Professional counselling received from social workers would assist these learners in dealing with the additional obstacles presented by living in a grandparent-headed family. These learners have older caregivers who are unable to assist them with their schooling and who suffer from health conditions associated with age. They live in households where they have been placed because their parents are unable to care for them. These factors influence their behaviour within the classroom and the family. Such cases require professional intervention. It is also important that educators should know the living conditions of their learners so that they are able to assist (or find assistance for) these learners when they are unable to cope. Such learners are vulnerable and need assistance and counselling to become more productive and to have a better understanding of how to deal with their family lives and how to be assets to society.

6. Conclusion

This study has highlighted those cases in the South African context where the nuclear family of a secondary school learner may be non-existent or may not be able to function well. In such cases, the first intervention in South African society tends to be by the extended family with grandparents usually being the default choice due to societal expectations. As a result of a sudden change or crisis, grandparents are required, willingly or unwillingly, to fulfil the role of parents to their grandchildren. This brings a whole new world of responsibilities to both the grandparents and to the learners themselves. The literature and research effort in this study have pointed out that numerous challenges face this family unit. Accordingly, recommendations have been made to help those in this situation to cope.

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