

Grandparents Raising Grandchildren: What Educators Should Know

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The number of grandparents raising grandchildren has increased dramatically in the last ten years. According to the 2000 Census, 5.8 million (or 3.6 percent of the 158.9 million people aged 30 and over living in households in the United States) were co-resident grandparents (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000). Co-resident grandparents are defined as living with grandchildren younger than 18. Among the co-resident grandparents, 2.4 million individuals were identified as grandparent caregivers, or people who had primary responsibility for their co resident grandchildren younger than 18. Among caregivers who are grandparents, 39 percent had cared for their grandchildren for five or more years.

Also continuing to increase in schools is the number of students who are culturally and linguistically diverse, while teachers overwhelmingly remain monolingual, European-Americans (Cushner, McClelland, & Stafford, 2006; Hodgkinson, 2002; August & Hakuta, 1997). English Language Learners (ELL) have increased by 104% between 1990 to 1999, making them the

fastest growing group of students in the United States (National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education, 1999). According to a report from the National Center for Educational Statistics (1997), only 30% of all teachers have received any professional development in teaching ELL students. A mismatch of cultural and academic expectations can exist when non-English-speaking grandparents are the primary caregivers, and teachers remain monolingual. Grandparents who do not speak English may have a different idea about the role of teachers and their grandchildren, what schools should and should not do, and communication expectations.

Teachers in schools today need to know who they are teaching, what to teach, and how to teach (Kea & Utley, 1998). Students who are ethnically and linguistically diverse need teachers who teach using pedagogy responsive to their unique backgrounds. Non-English speaking grandparents raising their grandchildren need teachers that show respect for the unique needs of their grandchildren, as well as the unique needs of the grandparents in the role of caregivers. In other words, teachers need to adapt curriculum, methodology, materials, and communication strategies to address the students' and grandparents' cultural norms. As students and their families become more diverse, a teacher's role in creating a positive learning environment becomes more challenging. Yet, the joy of learning about a different culture from a non-English speaking grandparent raising a grandchild can also be a direct benefit to a classroom community of learners.

The increase in life expectancy and information that grandparents are living healthier, more active lives may contribute

to an increase in the in the number of grandparents raising grandchildren. More grandparents than in earlier years are available and willing to assume child-rearing roles for longer periods of time. This is due, in part, to parents being unavailable or unable to be the primary caretakers. Although this trend is more likely among African American and Latino families, all ethnic groups and all social and economic levels are experiencing a raise in numbers of grandparents caring for grandchildren (Burnette, 1999; Haglund, 2000; Mader, 2001). Caring for grandchildren may become as natural an experience as caring for aging parents has been for middle-aged adults. According to Force, Botsfor, Pisano, and Holbert (2000), the grandmother appears to be the most prevalent caretaker, but a range of relatives (e.g., aunts and great grandparents) may fill the kinship caretaker role. Some grandparents are reported to be as young as 35 and others quite elderly.

Census 2000 asked for individuals to choose one or more races. The report is available on the Census 2000 web site at www.census.gov/population/www/cen2000/briefs.html. For respondents who indicated only one racial identity among the major categories (White, Black or African American, American Indian and Alaska Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian, Other Pacific Islander, and Other), the data suggests certain residential or cultural patterns. There is a large proportion of Asian and Hispanics living in multigenerational households. Asian and Hispanic grandparents were less likely to be responsible for their grandchildren and in some cases may have been dependent themselves. Of the 3.6 percent of all people aged 30 and over who lived with their grandchildren, only 2 percent of non-Hispanic

Whites did so. Higher proportions among other racial and ethnic groups were found: 6 percent of people who were Asian, 8 percent of people who were American Indian and Alaska Native, 8 percent of people who were Black, 8 percent of people who were Hispanic, and 10 percent of people who were Pacific Islanders (Census Bureau, 2000).

The reasons grandparents are raising their grandchildren are diverse. Contributing factors include drug abuse, unemployment, incarceration, child neglect and/or abuse, abandonment, mental health problems, poverty, mental health problems, and teenage pregnancy (Mader, 2001). Haglund (2000) conducted an ethnographic study that included six African American grandmothers parenting their grandchildren due to parental cocaine abuse. Haglund concluded that although parenting grandchildren is not easy and is not always desired by the grandparents, it is often the best alternative for the grandchildren, who can then remain in their own families.

Many grandparents find themselves faced with financial burdens, time and energy issues, a lack of acceptance in the new role by family members and friends, and the opportunity to make a difference in their grandchild's life, including at school. Educators need to support grandparents in locating and/or providing appropriate resources and services (Force, Botsfor, Pisano, & Holbert, 2000). According to Beltran (2002), schools should include relative caregivers in the process of developing Individual Education Plans (IEPs) and other activities that typically include parents. Support groups for grandparents are a useful forum for caregivers to share problems, joys, and information about

resources (Gabel & Kotsch, 1981; Meyer & Vadasy, 1986; Beltran, 2002).

This study examined various factors that grandparents identify as important to a successful school/home partnership. The purpose of this study was two-fold: First, to gather grandparents' perceptions on the positive aspects and concerns regarding raising their grandchildren. Second, to identify school roadblocks and ways the school can assist them in successfully educating their grandchildren.

Method

Participants

Twenty grandparents were recruited to participate in focus groups. Focus groups are carefully planned discussions that take place in a nonthreatening environment for the purpose of obtaining participants' perceptions on a defined area of interest (Krueger, 1988). The 20 grandparents were recruited from four schools (two elementary and two middle schools) in which principals expressed significant interest in the project. One of the elementary schools was located in a large urban school district and one was located in a suburban district. The two middle schools were located in two separate rural districts. All schools were located in the southwestern region of the United States.

The principal at each school served as the contact persons for recruiting grandparents in their respective buildings. Thus, grandparents were selected from a voluntary pool of grandparents who met the researchers' criteria for being the primary caretaker for his/her grandchild.

The participants' ages ranged from 46 to 78 ($M = 62$). Twelve participants were European American, four were African American, two were Latino American, and two were American Indian. The group was comprised of five men and 15 women. Grandparents were assigned focus group membership according to the geographical location of their grandchild's school. Focus groups ranged in size from three to nine.

Setting

Focus group meetings with grandparents were held during school hours in a vacant room in each of the participating schools. The grandparents and the researchers sat around a table.

Focus Group Questions

Four questions were prepared prior to the focus group meetings. Questions 1 and 2 related to the personal aspects of raising their grandchild. Questions 3 and 4 related to school issues associated with educating their grandchild. Specifically, Question 1 asked grandparents what they believed to be the positive aspects of raising a grandchild. After each question was posed, grandparents wrote their responses onto note cards. They were instructed to write one idea per card. After responses to Question 1 and Question 2 were collected and discussed, Question 3 and Question 4 were posed. Specifically, Question 3 asked grandparents to identify what school roadblocks they encountered while Question 4 asked them to list what the school could do to assist them. Once again, grandparents were asked to write one idea per card.

Measurement and Procedures

Measures. Two systems were used to record responses during the group meetings. Participants wrote statements representing their responses to a particular question on a 3" by 5" note card. Other verbal responses were transcribed by a note-taker.

During each focus group meeting, questions were posed one at a time by a researcher who served as moderator. After each question had been posed, participants wrote their responses onto note cards. Each grandparent could write as many responses (i.e., complete as many cards) as he or she chose. The note cards were collected by the moderator, and the response to each statement on the card was discussed by the group.

As they discussed the cards, the focus group members organized them into categories by topic. After all the cards had been discussed and categorized, each category was given a label by the group. For example, the responses, "Call me at once, I have a mobile and phone at home," "Make every effort to get fathers involved," and "Be willing to communicate" might receive the category label "Encourage Communication." The group moderator wrote a category label on a card and posted it next to the appropriate cluster of responses. Each member then voted on how important they believed each category to be with "1" being unimportant to "7" being very important. A note-taker transcribed the responses related to each category.

Procedures. Four focus groups of three to nine grandparents were formed from the pool of 20 volunteers. Each meeting lasted two hours. Three researchers were present, two sharing the role of moderator, and the other as note taker.

The standard protocol for the four meetings was the same. The first fifteen minutes consisted of a welcome by the moderator, the introduction of group members, an overview of the purpose of the study, and an explanation of the research procedures that included the ground rules for discussion. If an individual needed help to write ideas onto cards, one of the researchers sitting near the person would serve as a scribe.

The ground rules for discussion were based on the Metaplan procedures for focus group meetings (Schnelle & Stoltz, 1987; Vance, 1995). Using the Metaplan steps, a question is stated, participants write their thoughts and feelings onto cards with one idea per card and using seven words or less when possible. After the showing of responses, the moderator collects the card and displays them on the wall. The moderator, with the participants' help, organizes the note cards into clusters or categories with participants continuing to write more thoughts during this process. After a discussion of thoughts, feelings, and ideas regarding each category, participants vote on the category that best reflects how they feel. Figure 1 depicts an example of how to use the Metaplan steps.

Figure 1. Metaplan steps as a process to record responses during the group meetings.

METAPLAN STEPS

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| Step 1 | The question is stated. |
| Step 2 | Participants write <u>thoughts and feelings</u> on note cards. |

- Step 3 Participants write clearly and neatly. Misspellings are okay.
- Step 4 Write one idea per card.
- Step 5 Use 7 words or less, if possible.
- Step 6 Moderator collects and reads note cards aloud and displays them on the wall.
- Step 7 Moderator, with participants help, organizes the note cards into clusters or categories of thought, feelings, and opinions.
- Step 8 Participants may continue writing their thoughts during this process.
- Step 9 The moderator and participants discuss their thoughts, feelings, and ideas.
- Step 10 The participants conclude the process by rating the categories according to how they feel about the importance of each category.

Results

The researchers examined the categories of focus group responses by each geographical group of grandparents. The written responses were coded for each research question. For Question 1 (What are the positive aspects of raising a grandchild?), eight categories of responses emerged as shown in Table 1 (see Table 1). The responses indicated that grandparents value the opportunity to give guidance and provide stability. They also feel

a sense of pride and satisfaction relating to making a difference in their grandchild's life. In addition, grandparents indicated the positive nature of having a second chance at parenting while watching their grandchildren grow into productive citizens.

Table 1

Mean Ratings on Categories of Responses by Grandparents on the Positive Aspects of Raising a Grandchild (N = 20)

Category	N	M	Sample Comments
Giving Guidance	6	7.0	"I teach him to do what is right."
Providing Stability	5	7.0	"Knowing that they are safe."
Feeling Pride/Satisfaction	5	7.0	"Know we made a difference in their
Giving Love	17	6.8	lives."
Learning From Them	14	6.5	"To let them know love and they are
Watching Them Grow	18	6.5	not thrown away."
Having a Second/Third			"I've become a softer person, more
Chance	11	6.3	understanding."
Receiving Love	9	5.4	"Seeing them grown into productive
			citizens."
			"I love being a mom again!"
			"The unconditional love he gives me"

N = number of responses written by grandparents

M = mean rating of importance (1 is low importance and 7 is high importance)

Table 2

Mean Ratings on Categories of Responses by Grandparents on Concerns of Raising a Grandchild (N = 20)

Category	N	M	Sample Comments
Dealing with Future			"Proper way to direct them in life"
Concerns	7	6.9	"Living long enough to finish the job"
Dealing with Life Span			"Trying to keep up with their young
Issues	13	6.8	activities"
Supporting education			"Teaching them how to handle hurt"
issues	4	6.8	"No time for self"

Dealing with emotional issues	25	6.8	"Legal ramifications if not adopted or full guardianship"
Time	17	6.2	"Having adequate financial resources"
Feeling a lack of control	23	6.2	
Resolving financial issues	3	6.1	

N = number of responses written by grandparents

M = mean rating of importance (1 is low importance and 7 is high importance)

For Question 2 (What concerns do you have raising a grandchild?), seven categories of responses emerged as shown in Table 2 (see Table 2 above). The responses indicated that grandparents were concerned about the future, including lifespan issues as in living long enough to raise their grandchild. They also expressed that it was sometimes difficult to keep up with activities designed for younger children and adults. One grandmother reported her grandchild typically wanted to go to McDonalds after a school game with the other students, but that the grandmother wanted to go home and not join the other families. Grandparents reported they needed support dealing with emotional issues for their grandchildren, and were concerned with teasing. In addition, grandparents responded that time was a concern, as in having time for self or for friends that did not have grandchildren in their homes. Legal and financial issues were also discussed, as the plans that were made during retirement years had changed. Grandparents expressed concerns of signing for a grandchild at school, having medical support, and guardianship for protection of the grandchild.

Table 3 *Mean Ratings on Categories of Responses by Grandparents on School Roadblocks Grandparents Encounter (N = 20)*

<i>Category</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>Sample Comments</i>
Knowing Grandchild's			"Knowing peers' family"
Friends and Family	8	7.0	"Not being able to sign for the grandchildren"
School System	7	7.0	
Schoolwork Concerns	12	6.9	"Staying knowledgeable about subject areas"
Increasing Communication	10	6.8	
Building Respectful			"Lack of understanding from teachers"
Partnerships	27	6.5	"Keeping family matters private"

N = number of responses written by grandparents

M = mean rating of importance (1 is low importance and 7 is high importance)

For Question 3 (What school roadblocks do grandparents encounter?), seven categories of responses emerged as shown in Table 3 (see Table 3 above). The responses indicated that grandparents were concerned about knowing their grandchild's friends and the friends' families. Grandparents wanted teachers to have understanding about the grandchild's situation, but to keep the information private. Building respectful partnerships was a key area. Grandparents related incidents where they did not feel valued as a caregiver, and expressed a frustration at the perceived lack of respect that was given by teachers. For example, one grandparent reported, "The school doesn't know what to do with us." Another grandparent reported, "The teacher disliked my granddaughter because of her mother." Grandparents also expressed that it was difficult to support the grandchildren with homework. One grandparent suggested, "The teacher should make sure he knows how to do the homework."

Table 4

Mean Ratings on Categories of Responses by Grandparents on How the School Can Assist Grandparents (N = 20)

<i>Category</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>Sample Comments</i>
Providing Tutoring	7	7.0	"Provide after school help, homework, etc."
Using Quality Instruction	10	6.9	"Work on comprehension issues"
Offering Counseling Support	3	6.9	"Provide counseling support for grandchild"
Increasing Teacher Awareness	16	6.9	"Teachers need to know the background of children"
Encouraging Communication	22	6.7	"Confidentiality – Keep our business private but be willing to communicate"
Supporting the Grandchild	7	6.4	"Be sensitive to grandchild's situation."
Offering Support Groups	4	6.4	"Support groups/reaffirming parenting skills"

N = number of responses written by grandparents

M = mean rating of importance (1 is low importance and 7 is high importance)

For Question 4 (How can the school assist you?), seven categories of responses emerged as shown in Table 4 (see Table 4 above). The responses indicated that grandparents want quality instruction. They were interested in support through tutoring opportunities. Counseling of the grandchild in the school, learning about the unique needs (including special education needs), and attending support groups for grandparents raising their grandchild were all suggested by grandparents. The category of ongoing communication was important. Again, grandparents expressed the need to "Keep our business private." One grandparent reported there was often a story as to why the grandparents were raising

their grandchild, and that should not be discussed in the teacher's lounge.

Discussion

Many of the grandparents interviewed were raising a second family without any extended family or community supports. Schools can create additional, often unintended obstacles for grandparents. Helping with homework can be daunting and difficult for grandparents and the students. One grandparent reported, "But grandpa, that isn't the way we do it in school." The grandfather answered, "Well, 2 plus 2 is always 4." Another grandparent wrote: "Homework. I went to school 50 years ago. I forgot all that." One grandparent requested "more information on the assignment sheet." Another grandparent reported, "Homework can take from right after school to 9:00 p.m. to get it done. It is important that teachers send homework home that is at the independent level of instruction for the student, with clear directions and a keen awareness of the time it will take to complete the homework assignment."

Sending notes home addressed to parents, for some reflected a lack of respect of the role of the grandparent. "When they make family assignments, remember we are grands." "When sending notes home, it is for Mom/Dad activities." The responses highlight the importance of increasing respectful communication between the school and the home.

Grandparents also referred to respect with communication: "Respect me as a parent." "Listen to my input. I know this child." "Admit that we know a little about what the kids are about."

"Learn to listen." The grandparents' responses indicated a need for educators to review communication between home and school and monitor communication so ensure it is positive with grandparents, as well as all caregivers of students in the classroom.

"We want her to know our culture" was the response of one grandparent. She reported it was natural in their community, and the grandchild can listen to the stories of the family and learn. This grandparent described the grandchild as having the chance to garden with the grandparents, with the grandfather digging the hole for the plant and the granddaughter covering it up. This grandparent reported raising a grandchild was "My way to help get through it (problems with her parents)."

Grandparents that participated in the focus groups appeared to appreciate the opportunity to provide information to the researchers on ways schools could support grandparents raising their grandchildren. It is important in any school community to identify the grandparents raising their grandchildren, and to offer supports such as tutoring, support groups, and respectful communication. An activity as the Metaplan could be used by educators to identify the unique needs of grandparents in their school community.

Summary and implications for practice

As this research indicates, listening to grandparents' voices is an important source of information to guide educators interested in reform issues associated with the call for more parent/family involvement in today's schools. For example, the grandparents stated that they had knowledge about their grandchild and desired

to be seen and heard as a valuable member in the educational process. Teacher educators should be aware that grandparents have unique skills and needs and fill an important role as caregiver and supporter for the students. Teachers should continue to investigate communication strategies aimed at building better partnerships.

Some grandparents were frustrated with a lack of understanding from teachers and expressed a desire to build respectful partnerships. Confidentiality was a high concern, with one grandparent reporting that she did not want the reason she was raising her grandchild discussed in the teacher's lounge. Teachers need to be sensitive to the histories of families and express a willingness to maintain confidentiality of family matters and treat everyone with respect.

Grandparents also reported when teachers provided quality instruction, ongoing communication, and tutoring opportunities, their grandchildren benefited. In addition, grandparents expressed interest in teachers being aware that their grandchild was being raised by grandparents. Teachers should consider support groups for grandparents that provide opportunities to share their expertise, identify resources, and provide fellowship.

Suggestions for educators who have non-English-speaking grandparents raising their grandchildren include the following:

- Establish methods of communication that support non-English-speaking grandparents and their grandchildren.
- Identify interpreters from the educational community and community-at-large, and have an interpreter available for informal as well as formal meetings. Written

communication should be in the primary language of the grandparent, as well as in English.

- If possible, make a home visit. Make arrangements prior to the home visit with the grandparents, grandchildren, and interpreter.
- Be aware of spoken and written language needs and respond to unique communication requirements. In one community, most families had a VCR, but no telephone. Teachers had videotapes available for check out by the students, so families could observe activities in the classroom and the child could describe activities and learning experiences in the classroom and school to their non-English-speaking grandparents.
- Identify non-English-speaking grandparents' perceptions of school and communicate clearly expectations and available supports.
- Communicate the importance of involvement by families in American education.
- Be welcoming in actions and environment. From the entry to the school, to help in finding the location of the grandchild's classroom, to a comfortable chair for adults in the classroom, teachers should create an inviting classroom and school environment.
- Communicate expectations of the school by addressing an issue directly and offering support. One non-English-speaking grandparent was hesitant to get her grandchild up in the morning, insisting that sleep was important. After the teacher explained the importance of beginning the school day with the rest of the students, and providing the

grandchild with a strategy to wake up (alarm clock) in the morning, the tardy issue was resolved.

- Make it as convenient as possible for non-English-speaking grandparents to participate in meetings and activities.
- Arrange transportation. Often non-English-speaking grandparents do not communicate that they need transportation. Arrange for transportation prior to scheduled time. One grandparent lived within walking distance of the school, but was caring for an infant in the home and needed a stroller to be able to go to the school.
- Be aware of child care issues with the family. Some grandparents are raising grandchildren with a wide age range, and may be also caring for other members of the family.
- Schedule meetings at convenient times for grandparents.
- Make sure meetings meet the needs of the student and grandparent by providing an agenda and information about who will be attending, and explaining what non-English-speaking grandparents can expect during the meeting.
- Refrain from making generalizations about members of ethnic, cultural, or linguistic groups that may not address each individual in the group.
- Identify your own stereotypes and recognize that your assumptions could change your own behavior. For example, a teacher might not invite a non-English-speaking grandparent to go on a field trip or to bring snacks, not wanting to add to the responsibilities of the grandparent. In fact, the grandparent may want to be involved in the

classroom and the invitation to join the group would be welcome.

- Remember that families are not homogeneous, and grandparents raising grandchildren are not a homogenous group either.
- Know that courts often appoint grandparents as legal guardians of their grandchildren, and support grandparents' willingness to provide care.
- Value the contributions and experiences non-English-speaking grandparents offer their grandchildren and the educational community. One school administrator reported she had to work at thinking of grandparents raising grandchildren as more than temporary volunteers.
- Offer resources to grandparents ranging from workshops on legal issues to signing for their grandchildren in school.
- Work in a positive, encouraging manner with grandchildren and their non-English-speaking grandparents.
- Demonstrate respect at all levels. If appropriate, ask the grandchild for suggestions to support the non-English-speaking grandparents. Often the grandchild has an insight into ways educators can positively include their family members in meetings and activities.
- Recognize the unique strengths of the non-English-speaking grandparents offer, and celebrate the diversity in today's schools by working together with all members of the school community.

A number of resources are available on the web. AARP Grandparent Information Center (GIC), which provides information about services and programs to help improve the lives

of grandparent-headed households at gic@aarp.org; Generations United, which focuses solely on promoting intergenerational strategies, programs, and policies at www.gu.org; Grandparent Again, which offers information about education, legal support, support groups, and other organizations for grandparents raising grandchildren at www.grandparentagain.com; and GrandsPlace, which offers support to grandparents and other relatives raising others' children at www.grandplace.org.

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