

## Exploring the Role of Grandparents in the Lives of Teenage Learners

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**ABSTRACT** Historically, grandparents have often served as an alternative when birth parents were unable to care for their children. The number of grandparents who are taking care of grandchildren, in this case teenage learners, in South Africa is an issue that is unlikely to go away. With the prevalence of diseases such as HIV/AIDS, unplanned/teenage pregnancies and parental negligence, it is likely that the trend seen in the past decade will continue, with an increasing number of grandparents parenting their grandchildren. It is often difficult for grandparents to take care of smaller grandchildren with basic needs. It is, however, even more difficult to parent teenage learners who require emotional guidance during this transitional stage in their lives. Their demands are often overwhelming, as they need support with school work, coping with life challenges and finding direction. A study was undertaken to determine the challenges faced by grandparents who take on the surrogate parental role for teenage learners. A small-scale survey consisted of ten grandparents was conducted in Mpumalanga Province, South Africa. The findings show that the participants were often stressed by the school demands, lack of support from the government agencies, and severe limitations on their bodies due to health and age. These challenges impact on their parenting role as they are progressively unable to adequately provide for the teenage learners in their care. Therefore, this study aims at exploring these challenges with a view to making recommendation on intervention strategies. These intervention strategies are essential and may help to reduce negative effects, provide information and coping skills not only to grandparents but also to teenage learners and school personnel.

### I. INTRODUCTION

The goal of having relatives as caregivers is to achieve positive outcomes for children and limit intrusive government intervention into family life. Most grandparents who care for teenage learners are outside the child welfare system, and many want to stay that way. It is noted that there are also intangible benefits for children, such as a sense of belonging and an ability to maintain sibling relationships (Hayslip and Kaminski 2008). Kinship care also reduces racial disparities because relatives are more likely to respect cultural traditions (Chambless and Jack 2007). However, most of the grandparents did not plan on taking responsibility for the teenage learners in their care, but agreed to it when asked. Some of them were not even asked or given an option to choose, but had to do it for the sake of these teenage learners because they belong to the same family. As a result, many custodial grandparents, who took over the parental role because of their own children's negligence, experience disappointment, resentment and feelings of being taken advantage of by their sons or daughters (Mlamla 2008).

Furthermore, these grandparents do not seek legal guardianship or adoption because it might cause hostility within the family, especially in cases where issues over financial child support arise. This makes it difficult for these grandparents to apply for the financial assistance they are eligible for. In cases where they do apply, they often experience considerable delay, red tape, and other difficulties (Mudavanhu 2008). Although the academic achievement of learners can never be influenced by a single factor, some of the factors do emanate from the home in which they are raised. It should be stressed that most of these factors are tied in fundamental ways to the continued problem of poor academic achievement of teenagers in our schools, which itself remains a significant vulnerability factor for grandparents and teenage learners (Theo 2007).

Very little research has been done on grandparents who are rearing teenage learners in South Africa. Most of the studies focus on grandparents who are raising orphaned children, especially those orphaned by HIV/AIDS (Tamasane n.d.; Hlabyago and Ogunbanjo 2009). Notwithstanding the need to focus on orphaned children,

teenage learners' school performance and their emotional, physical and financial stability also pose a threat to education and need to be addressed. These can only be addressed if there is an understanding of the challenges that are facing grandparents who are taking care of teenage learners. As a result, this article discusses the theoretical framework that underpins this study and outlines the hardships of caring for teenage learners. Furthermore, this article attempts to recommend intervention strategies with the aim of providing guide, support and information to grandparents, teenage learners and school personnel.

## II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

There is considerable public debate today over what structures make up a family and what they need to do in order to qualify. Are the grandparents conforming to the requirements of a family? This question matters not only because of public acceptance but also because many government programs and privileges are connected to how the term family is defined. Basically, this issue is evaluated through the lens of structural functionalism theory, as this theory had a tremendous impact on family studies during the 1950's (Lee 1982). Structural functionalism theory has been successful in providing us with an understanding of different family forms and why they work at various times and in various places. This theory suggests that all social institutions, including family, exist to feel a need in society as grandparents are there to feel a need in time of crisis. It encourages us to look to larger societal forces to explain changes in the family as it adapts to other changes - paradigms that are valuable for the study of grandparents who are rearing teenage learners in a non-conventional families. Unlike many conventional family theories, this theory does not demand that all families need to be nuclear, with the husband, wife and children reflected in triadic relationship (Kingsbury and Scanzoni 2009). There are contemporary scholars, such as Wallerstein and Blakeslee (1989) and Popenoe (1996), who argue that the intact nuclear family is still an important component in healthy child rearing. Notwithstanding the importance of the nuclear family in bringing stability in the child's world, the structural functionalism theory looks at stability but does not necessarily value it as superior to

other possible forms (Kingsbury and Scanzoni 2009).

More modern interpretations of the structural functionalism theory have attempted to integrate conflict and change into the paradigm. This theory recognizes that as times and circumstances change, other structures or functions may prove to be more useful - as grandparents proved to be more useful during the time of crisis. It brings forth an acknowledgement that equilibrium can change and therefore be understood as dynamic. It is basically labeled as a theory of social survival. Its key idea is that families, despite classification, perform the critical functions of procreation and socializing of children so that they will fit into the overall society (Kingsbury and Scanzoni 2009). This theory brings us to an understanding why grandparents who are rearing teenage learners should be given support and recognized as a valuable form of the family that brings solution in times of crisis.

Grandparent-headed households, where grandparents take on the surrogate parental role for teenage learners without a parent present, have emerged as one of the fastest growing family constellations in South Africa. In many of these grand-families, grandparents are rearing teenage learners not by choice or tradition but as the result of family crises that necessitate grandparent intervention. These family crises may have resulted from teenage pregnancy, abandonment, parental death, military deployment, deportation, parental neglect or abuse, or some other situation requiring kinship care (Hayslip and Kaminski 2008; Cox 2000). On the other hand, increasing frequencies of divorce and single parenting, rising rates of substance abuse, poverty, homelessness and the parent living with or marrying someone else are major factors responsible for the rise in intergenerational households headed by grandparents (Mudavanhu 2008). Chronic emotional, physical or mental illness or other disability of the parent are also reasons why children end up being cared for by grandparents (Karim and Karim 2005). Dramatic increases in the number of incarcerated parents, the HIV/AIDS epidemic and other public health problems, are other growing contributors to the phenomenon of grandparent caregiving (Conway 2004; Hayslip and Kaminski 2008).

Grandparents are mostly elderly persons from a low socio-economic background who enter into kinship care unexpectedly due to familial respon-

sibility, with their ages ranging from 60 to 90 (Geen n.d.; Mudavanhu 2008). Most of these grandparents are illiterate, have emotional problems and are not doing well physically. Their health is increasingly at risk as they advance in years. They reach a time when they confront the realisation of severe limitations on their bodies creeping in subtly and gradually as they find themselves increasingly unable to attend events outside their homes (Edwards and Ray 2010). In a study conducted among grandparents in Botswana, Alpaslan and Mabutho (2005) found that elderly surrogate parents all reported having health problems either from old age or from the stress caused by caregiving. They are often plagued by poor sight and/or hearing, backache, high blood pressure, and chest and side pains. All these physical problems, combined with other multiple losses experienced, may impede their ability to provide adequate care to teenage learners.

Caring for teenage learners on a full-time basis is not expected by most grandparents, and in most cases they are not afforded the time to adjust to this transition. Often the time and circumstances do not allow them to deal with their own emotions prior to assuming the role of caregivers. Sometimes there is little or no support from the government, and societal responses to the needs of grandparent-caregivers have been desperately inadequate (Cox 2000). This might also be complicated by the teenage learner's temporary or permanent loss of a parent(s). No matter what the circumstances of the parents' absence, children will be bereaved, requiring more emotional resources from grandparents. This results in grandparents being confronted with the situation of dealing with difficult children who display unacceptably bad behavioural problems. The situation is aggravated by the fact that grandparents are not equipped to deal with issues such as discipline, emotional support, educational and moral development of the children in their care (Hayslip and Kaminski 2005).

There is an important interrelationship between the school and the home in which most of these teenage learners are raised. Most of the challenges start at home before escalating and affecting the school achievement of these teenage learners. Firstly, since many grandparents take over the parental role during family crises, they are often unprepared for their new role. Some custodial grandparents are challenged by shifting

from the grandparent role to the parent role, and coping with their adult children's problems as well as the struggles of teenage learners. Grandparents as caregivers may experience further constraints as their age affects their level of physical activity. Low levels of energy and lack of knowledge about current childrearing practices are commonly experienced problems associated with the wide age difference between the grandparents and teenage learners in their care (Letiecq et al. 2007).

The guardianship places even more economic pressure on grandparents who, in many cases, depend primarily on state-funded old-age pensions. Grandparents are often overwhelmed by the numerous logistical and physical demands placed on them. They not only struggle to keep up with the school, social and physical demands of teenage learners, but also have to bear the financial cost and cope with accessing services and financial assistance programs to meet the needs of teenage learners (Smit 2007). Hayslip and Kaminski (2005) confirmed that financial strains related to childrearing occur in more than half of grandparent-headed households. Grandparents with a low income simply do not possess the financial resources to cover the increased financial demands. The aforementioned challenges have a huge impact on teenage learners who rely on their grandparents' sound behaviour, financial stability and mentoring.

Access to adequate and affordable housing is a major concern for many grandparents who are raising teenage learners. Low-income caregivers in particular may be severely limited in their ability to purchase adequate housing, and state-level public housing authorities lack policies that address the special needs of such families. Even grandparents who do have a house often report that space is an issue, particularly with regard to an adequate number of bedrooms (Jordan Institute for Families 2004). Teenagers are at a stage in their lives where they need privacy and a space of their own. Besides the lack of housing, they also face more socioeconomic risks that can affect their development than other children. This includes a greater risk of falling into poverty, living with a caretaker without a high school qualification (Hayslip and Kaminski 2008).

The responsibilities of parenting, meeting the myriad needs of the teenage learners for example, helping with homework, being at home during the afternoon, transporting to and from school, and

weekend activities mean that many grandparents must put their own lives on hold. Although they frequently prefer informal caregiving, this too is problematic, as grandparents without legal sanction may face difficulties in their dealings with schools, health facilities and other agencies that may require proof of legal authority as a condition of providing services (Cox 2007).

Mention has been made that in many instances these teenage learners are placed with grandparents as a result of tragic circumstances and are thus in need of remedial intervention. Their grief may be hidden, as the children resist expressing their feelings sometimes out of fear of upsetting the grandparent. These feelings may, however, be displayed in behavioural problems, which can further stress the grandparents (Shaffer 2009). Grandparents are often unaware that the source of these problems is unresolved grief. Without confronting these difficult feelings, resolution is difficult to achieve. Sometimes these teenage learners come from situations where they had been exposed to various forms of child abuse and neglect, loss or trauma (Bamba 2005; Mader 2009).

It can be surmised that many grandparents are compelled by the circumstances to care for teenage learners who have been emotionally or socially damaged by their circumstances. They are expected to care for these traumatised teenage learners independently, with little professional assistance. The academic achievement of these teenage learners may be affected as a result of their grandparents being unable to deal with their circumstances due to lack of awareness programs, training and professional assistance (Hayslip and Kaminski 2005).

Due to the complexity of the system, most grandparents acting as primary caregivers for teenage learners in South Africa do not receive government assistance. There is a significant difference between the resources available to relative caregivers and those available to licensed foster parents (South African Child Gauge 2007/2008). If relative caregivers choose not to become registered, and refrain from obtaining an affidavit from the South African Police Services proving that they are the child's custodians, they can expect far less assistance from various public services (Chambless and Jack 2007). The resources needed by grandparents in order to provide adequate care and support to teenage learners are not easily accessible.

There are two types of grants that can be paid out to relative caregivers in South Africa: the Child Support Grant, and the Foster Care Subsidy. These grants are administered by the South African Social Security Agency (SASSA). Grandparents do not need to have legal custody or guardianship of the child to receive this grant, but they must document that the child lives with them and the parent does not. They must also provide documentation such as a birth certificate to prove that they are a blood relative of the child. As already mentioned, the complexity of the system and the bureaucracy that surrounds it make it difficult for many grandparents to understand and navigate the systems of public assistance. Lack of training and commitment of officials who administer these services can also lead to some grandparents being turned away or being given less than they qualify for. Some of the grandparents are not even aware that these grants can cover children up to the age of 18 (Chambless and Jack 2007; SASSA 2010).

In South Africa there is no provision for the one-time expenses associated with children grandparents are responsible for. This type of grant can help to purchase school uniform, a bed or new clothes. It can also be a good supplement to the two aforementioned grants that do not cover many of the needs of beneficiaries (Chambless and Jack 2007).

The counselling and support available for grandparents are limited or non-existent in the case of the majority of grandparents. 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 (Chambless and Jack 2007; Hawaii State Department of Health 2009).

In other countries the government encourages kin families to pursue foster care licensure. To become licensed, they are required to attend mandatory training. Topics covered in the training include, as examples, foster care licensure rules, symptoms of abuse and neglect, dealing with attachment disorder, and techniques for applying effective discipline. The non-relative foster families must receive the training *prior to* caring for children in their home. Yet kin families receive the training *at the time* that they are caring for children. The reason for this is because they are thrust into the caregiving role usually without

advanced warning and sometimes the situation needs urgent attention (Chambless and Jack 2007). In South Africa, there is no training given to kin caregivers, especially grandparents. It is assumed that grandparents will use their own experience and raise their grandchildren, in this case teenage learners, in the same way that they raised their own children. The changes that are happening in the country are overlooked and not regarded as having an impact on the lives of grandparents and the teenage learners in their care (Geen 2004; Chambless and Jack 2007).

### III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research approach has been applied through focus group interviews for data collection and analysis. Focus group interviews were chosen because data is collected from grandparents and some of them cannot read and write. In most cases focus group interviews do not discriminate against people who cannot read or write and can also encourage participation from people reluctant to be interviewed on their own or who feel they have nothing to say (Anderson 2009). Ten grandparents who are caregivers of teenage learners were selected through purposive sampling, which enabled the inclusion of participants who could richly contribute and yield information that was relevant and important to the investigation. These grandparents were selected through teenage learners who are raised by grandparents from two schools in Mpumalanga Province, South Africa. The date for the focus group interview was scheduled in such a way that it corresponds with the day where most of the grandparents get their 'old age grant'. This made it easy for all the grandparents identified to be present. The researcher was granted a permission to use the backroom of the hall as a research site. The group discussions were tape recorded and transcribed. As a backup, notes were also taken and the participants were involved in helping the researcher to record key issues on a flip chart.

After understanding, summarising and devising categories for the collected data, the process of coding commenced. Recurring themes or phrases that appeared to be noteworthy were put together. This process is called coding (Wiersma and Jurs 2009). The coded data was interpreted and the presentation was tabulated in order to present a more detailed and understandable version.

### IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The research effort found that most participants experienced health and emotional problems which make it difficult for them to provide adequate care to teenage learners. They have emotional needs and carry a burden which is not easily shared with the teenage learners. They want to appear as strong and in control of the situation *"even when you are sick you need to wake up and do house chores, if you don't they'll use that as an advantage and do as they like"*.

Participants also expressed the view that it is problematic to take care of teenage learners as they are illiterate. They pointed out that the schools are demanding more from them *"they say we must help with homework, come to the meetings, check school books, how...I can't even write my name"*. Raised school fees were the main problem. Most participants had no other means of obtaining funds because they were tired of going to the Department of Social Welfare. They hinted that they would spend days visiting these offices but in vain, only to be told to bring more documents, or the file is missing, or that the forms were incorrectly filled *"you come today they send you back to obtain more documents, you come again they say documents are wrong, you just give up because there is no money for transport everyday"*. Because of the difficulties experienced in gaining access to funds, some participants reveal that they become reluctant to seek assistance. Some of the participants were not even aware that children older than five years of age qualify for grants. This made it clear that grandparents lack information that will help them to ease their burden. Smit (2007) expressed similar sentiments by noting that the grandparents do not only struggle to keep up with the school, social and physical demands of teenage learners, but also have to bear the financial cost and cope with accessing services and financial assistance programs to meet the needs of teenage learners in their care. This does not only heighten grandparents' stress level but have a huge impact on teenage learners who rely on their grandparents' sound behaviour, financial stability and mentoring (Hayslip and Kaminski 2005).

Similarly to the findings by Cox (2000) and Letiecq et al. (2007), this investigation found that the challenges and struggles that grandparents face are extensive and often point to the little or no support from the government, inadequate

societal responses to their needs, lack of knowledge about current childrearing practices and lack of help from the school. They often blame the school for bringing more stress than solution. Consistent with Hayslip and Kaminski's (2005) findings, this investigation also established that the participants were not equipped to deal with issues such as discipline, emotional support, educational and moral development of the teenage learners in their care. They often revealed their own emotional instability in a form of shame, guilty, anger, self doubt, and dissatisfaction with their parental role.

A growing concern raised by participants was how to meet the educational, financial and emotional needs of these teenage learners in their care. They pointed out that they would love to get emotional support themselves as it has never happen before. This is confirmed by Chambless and Jack (2007) when saying the counselling and support available for the majority of grandparents are limited or non-existent.

## V. CONCLUSION

There are many positive reasons documented for grandparent placements, but there are also drawbacks. On the positive side, it is noted that grandparent placements offer more stability, permanency support to teenage learners. At a time of crisis, the teenage learner receives familiar network of support that can be relied on in various situations. Because the members of this network of support are familiar to the teenage learner, they lessen the trauma associated with separation. The continuity of relationships between siblings and the support they receive from one another protect these teenage learners from feeling that the family has disintegrated totally and allows them to have a greater sense that they will not be easily abandoned. Therefore, grandparent placements should be encouraged, enhanced and strengthened by means of the programs mentioned under recommendations.

Although grandparents raising grandchildren experience many rewards, the challenges and difficulties they face should not be underestimated. Firstly, grandparent placements do not receive adequate professional services for the screening and monitoring of the quality of care that the teenage learners receive. Many grandparents lack the resources to refer teenage learners in their care to specialised treatment and

sadly, they seem to be left on their own to just get on with the responsibility of caring for these teenage learners. Furthermore, they are not expected to undergo training before these teenage learners come into their care, which is mostly the case with non-relative or licensed carers. There are many role shifts to be made and new responsibilities to honour. These changes place new demands on all concerned. The demands often create considerable strain and may have a negative impact on the academic achievement of these teenage learners.

The findings of the investigation also revealed that most grandparents are at a stressful situation as they find it difficult to meet the educational, physical, emotional and financial needs of teenage learners in their care. It is therefore recommended that support to both grandparents and the teenage learners should be a priority. There should be growing recognition of the important role that this often neglected care-giving population play in the lives of these teenage learners.

## VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

Parenting a grandchild, especially a school going teenager, is obviously not easy. It affects both the grandparent and the teenage learner, emotionally, financially and physically. This instability may be displayed in the academic achievement of these teenage learners. Intervention programs in order to bridge the gap are necessary. For easy access, these programs may be implemented by seeking the help of the schools where these teenage learners spend most of their productive time. Of course some of these programs are not always regarded as the responsibility of the schools, but involving them in the programs could reduce the stress levels of teenage learners and their grandparents. After all, the school is regarded as the immediate community of the learners. The grandparents and teenage learners might feel more comfortable if these programs are channelled through the schools rather than through the government or non-governmental agency.

There is an assumption that if learners know that the school personnel are aware of their needs, they perform better academically. Therefore, school intervention by means of these programs is necessary. These programs can act as a platform of open communication and mutual under-

standing amongst all stakeholders, for example the school, teachers, grandparents and teenage learners. Details on these programs are provided below.

### **Advocacy Services**

Advocating for grandparents may mean assisting them to navigate through bureaucratic requirements and obstacles that otherwise prevent them from receiving services or benefits. This involves dealing with specific staff as well as assisting grandparents to follow through in their demands for fair hearings and case reviews. Given the many responsibilities of these grandparents, they may easily be worn out by insensitive and unwieldy demands that make pursuit of their rights even more difficult. Examples of areas in which advocacy may be particularly effective include guardianship arrangements, custody issues, foster care requirements, housing priorities, medical care consents, and navigation of school systems. Holding meetings and forums, using the media, drafting proposals, and contacting legislators are powerful advocacy tools that school volunteers can use in providing leadership in resolving issues affecting grandparents (Whittington 2010; Cox 2007).

Grandparents themselves can be extremely powerful advocates for change. School volunteers can assist grandparents to frame issues, develop agendas, and identify and contact persons in power. Advocacy should also include empowering grandparents so that they can effectively navigate and deal with systems themselves. Empowerment training can assist grandparents in becoming agents of change as they learn to take more active roles in the community (Cox 2007).

### **Strengths-based Perspective**

An approach to counselling that can be particularly important in work with grandparents is the strengths-based perspective. This approach to social work practice focuses on the resources and capacities of the person and the environment rather than problems and pathologies. It can be placed on the hands of school volunteers who may be required to assist grandparents to develop and build on their innate strengths so that functioning is improved and obstacles are overcome (Chambless and Jack 2007).

The school volunteer may be expected to be a facilitator in this process rather than an expert, because it is impossible to be an expert in another's life. This perspective is particularly appropriate to grandparents who have assumed responsibility for raising teenage learners and have thus demonstrated strengths and abilities that need to be supported and enhanced. Using this approach, the grandparent, rather than the school volunteer, is the expert with the knowledge and ability to decide on goals and the plans for achieving them (Rangan and Sekar 2006).

The school volunteer acts as a collaborator or facilitator in developing this plan, always reinforcing the grandparents' abilities. He or she must be able to provide critical information and resources that can assist the grandparent in making decisions and help clarify issues without undermining the capability and autonomy of the grandparent. The emphasis is on grandparents' talents, resources, and capabilities as they are helped to work toward new ways of reconciling the competing demands. By helping grandparents build on their own experiences, they are able to reframe problems into challenges. Thus, persons may be helped to overcome feelings of guilt as they recognise the struggles they encountered and overcame and the positive role that they have accepted in the life of teenage learners. Helping grandparents to ventilate, clarify, and reflect on their feelings and experiences is a means of fostering further growth (Hammond 2005).

### **Support Groups**

Support groups for grandparents have become important sources of assistance because they combat a sense of isolation, offer a means of socialisation, and can also help in educating grandparents on parenting issues as well as services. Empowerment groups are specific types of support groups that have proven effective in developing the parenting skills, coping abilities, and community involvement of grandparent caregivers (Watson 2002). Empowerment programs generally follow a specific curriculum that focuses on select issues. One program, developed by Cox (2007), includes curricula on areas such as self-esteem, grief and loss, behavioural problems, and navigating services. Particular attention is given to advocacy because it is an important part of empowerment. Through training, participants

learn to become important advocates for policy and service changes.

### Schools and Grandparents

It is noted that schools are a major system in the lives of grandparent-headed families. Unfortunately, most South African schools do not have an in-house or residential psychologist, social worker or professional counsellor. As a result, Life Orientation teachers are entrusted with some of these roles. These teachers can work towards educating and sensitising all stakeholders to the specific needs of grandparent-headed families. Simultaneously, they can offer referrals for special services to the families and take the lead in developing programs and services for them. Many grandparents, particularly those who have been out of school for many years, feel intimidated by the personnel. Their dealing with the school systems is problematic. If grandparents are unfamiliar with the programs, they can feel threatened by teachers who talk in a special jargon that they do not understand as well as by discussions of the new curriculum. If grandparents do not have legal custody, schools may not recognise them as legitimate caretakers of these teenage learners, further excluding their involvement (Cox 2007).

Life Orientation teachers can act as important liaisons between grandparents and the system to ensure that they are recognised and accepted. These teachers can work towards addressing policy and procedural changes that can facilitate grandparents' involvement and support. In doing so, they must be comfortable in joining forces with child welfare advocates, because their common goal is the strengthening of the family. They can also offer direct interventions for grandparents. A time-limited solutions-based group can be adopted by Life Orientation teachers. The group can work on solving specific problems that the grandparents' experience and can identify their strengths and build on them. Through the group, grandparents may identify what they have learned from their past life experiences and how they may use these experiences to improve their present lives (Cox 2007; Smith 2005).

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