



Role of Grandparents in Early Childhood Development: Analysing the Impact of Changing Family Structures on Intergenerational Learning and Socialization

Alan Yohannan¹, Muhammed Shafy², Ismail Thamarasseri³

^{1,2} MEd 2023-25 Batch Student, School of Pedagogical Sciences, Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam, Kerala, India.

³ Associate Professor, School of Distance & Online Education, Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam, Kerala, India.

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Abstract

The evolving role of grandparents in early childhood development has garnered significant attention in recent years, particularly as shifts in family structures continue to reshape the way children are raised. As the traditional multi-generational household gradually gives way to more nuclear family units, the dynamic between grandparents and grandchildren has undergone profound transformations. In the past, grandparents played a central role in child-rearing, offering emotional support, cultural continuity, and life lessons that shaped the development of the younger generation. However, the increasing prevalence of nuclear families, combined with rising geographic mobility and work-related pressures, has led to a reduction in intergenerational interactions, potentially affecting the social, emotional, and cognitive growth of children. This paper seeks to explore the multifaceted contributions of grandparents, particularly in fostering intergenerational learning, providing emotional stability, and facilitating socialization processes in early childhood. By addressing the advantages and potential drawbacks of grandparental involvement, the study highlights how these familial shifts have impacted the way children learn, develop resilience, and establish their identities. Through a comprehensive examination of both the positive and negative consequences of grandparental participation, this paper underscores the importance of nurturing intergenerational bonds for the holistic development of well-rounded, resilient individuals. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how family dynamics shape the early childhood development process in today's rapidly changing society.

Keywords: - Grandparents, Early childhood development, Intergenerational learning, Emotional development, Cognitive development, Socialization, Family structures, nuclear families, Cultural continuity, Resilience.

I. INTRODUCTION

In centuries past, the nurturing presence of grandparents was integral to the upbringing of children. Multi-generational households were commonplace, and grandparents often served as pillars of wisdom, emotional support, and cultural continuity (Smith, 2019). However, the tides of modernity have ushered in new family structures, with nuclear families becoming the norm, and the physical and emotional distance between grandparents and grandchildren widening (Lloyd & McBride, 2018). As mobility increases and the traditional family unit reconfigures, the once-strong ties between grandparents and grandchildren have become tenuous. This paper aims to investigate the profound effects of these changes on early childhood development, particularly focusing on the impact of grandparental involvement or the lack thereof on the intergenerational exchange of knowledge, socialization, and emotional growth (Choi & Lee, 2021).

The decline in frequent intergenerational interactions, coupled with the evolving family dynamics, has significant consequences for children's development, especially in terms of their social and emotional well-being. Grandparents traditionally play a crucial role in nurturing social competencies, such as empathy and resilience, by offering unique emotional support and life lessons (Berk, 2013). Additionally, they often serve as key agents in the transmission of cultural values and familial traditions, which further enrich the child's sense of identity and belonging (Bengtson, 2017). As grandparental involvement diminishes, children may face challenges in forming strong emotional bonds and acquiring the social skills that are essential for healthy interpersonal relationships (Choi & Lee, 2021). Thus, understanding the implications of reduced

grandparental participation is vital for addressing gaps in early childhood development, particularly in the context of today's rapidly changing family structures.

II. THEORETICAL OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

2.1 The Role of Grandparents in Early Childhood Development

The role of grandparents in early childhood development has garnered increasing attention as scholars recognize their influence on socialization, emotional development, and the transmission of cultural values. Traditionally, grandparents were seen as secondary caregivers who helped parents with childcare, especially in the absence of other familial resources. However, the dynamics of family structures have shifted over time, influencing the involvement of grandparents in their grandchildren's lives and their contributions to early childhood development.

2.2 Theoretical Foundations

2.2.1 Attachment Theory and Emotional Development

Attachment theory, pioneered by (Bowlby, 1969), asserts that early emotional bonds significantly shape a child's psychological and emotional development. While parents typically serve as the primary attachment figures, grandparents can also act as secure attachment figures, particularly when parents are absent due to work or other reasons. Grandparents provide emotional stability and safety, which promotes positive outcomes in children's emotional regulation and resilience (Berk, 2013). Research indicates that children with strong relationships with their grandparents display higher levels of self-esteem and emotional security (Silverstein & Bengtson, 1997).

Grandparents also serve as role models for emotional support, providing children with additional social and emotional resources. The presence of a grandparent figure can mitigate the effects of parental stress or absence, fostering emotional resilience and well-being (Dunn, 1993). Consequently, grandparents contribute to developing a secure base for children to explore the world, laying the foundation for future relationships.

2.2.2 Socialization Theory and Cultural Transmission

Vygotsky's Social Development Theory (Vygotsky, 1978) emphasizes the importance of social interaction and cultural context in shaping cognitive development. Grandparents contribute to this process by acting as agents of socialization, facilitating the transmission of cultural norms, values, and traditions across generations. By engaging in storytelling, sharing family history, and teaching traditional customs, grandparents promote a child's understanding of their identity and place within a broader social and cultural framework (Dykstra & Fokkema, 2007).

Grandparents offer valuable intergenerational learning opportunities that help children navigate complex social dynamics. For example, children often benefit from the wisdom and patience of grandparents, which contrasts with the often more hurried and task-oriented approach of parents (Luscher & Pillemer, 1998). This intergenerational exchange helps children develop social competence, empathy, and a broader perspective on family and community life.

2.3 Changing Family Structures and Grandparents' Roles

Over the past few decades, changing family structures such as increased divorce rates, the rise of single-parent households, and higher rates of maternal employment have altered the traditional roles within families. In many cases, grandparents have stepped into caregiving roles that were once primarily filled by parents (Szinovacz & Davey, 2008). The increasing involvement of grandparents is seen particularly in cases of parental absence due to work commitments or health issues (Hokenson, 2006). This shift has redefined the role of grandparents in child-rearing, creating opportunities for them to become more directly involved in nurturing and educational activities.

Grandparents may also act as mediators or caregivers in situations where parents face economic, emotional, or social challenges. Their involvement can provide a source of stability and continuity for children in these contexts. However, the role of grandparents has not remained static. Family mobility and changing societal expectations have introduced complexities in grandparent-grandchild relationships, particularly in families that live geographically distanced from one another (Daly, 2001).

2.4 Challenges and Limitations

Despite the numerous benefits of grandparent involvement, there are challenges related to changing family structures. For example, grandparents may experience difficulties due to geographic distance from their grandchildren, limiting their ability to engage in daily care or interactions (Luscher & Pillemer, 1998). Additionally, the increasing reliance on grandparents for childcare may place emotional and physical strain on elderly caregivers, especially when they are not equipped to handle the demands of active caregiving (Szinovacz & Davey, 2008).

The Role of grandparents in child-rearing can be influenced by complex family dynamics, such as strained relationships between parents and grandparents. In these cases, tensions may arise regarding the degree of involvement grandparents should have in caregiving and decision-making processes, potentially leading to conflicts that impact the quality of the intergenerational relationship.

III. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Scholarly research has consistently underscored the pivotal role that grandparents play in the early childhood development of their grandchildren. This involvement extends beyond mere caregiving to include the transmission of emotional support, cultural heritage, and life lessons that significantly influence children's social and cognitive growth. The

contributions of grandparents are particularly vital in modern family structures where parents may face time constraints or challenges that limit their engagement in child-rearing (Lloyd & McBride, 2018).

3.1 Grandparents as Caregivers and Emotional Anchors

In recent decades, grandparents have increasingly assumed the role of primary or secondary caregivers in family settings, especially in situations involving single-parent households, parental divorce, or the demands of dual-income families. According to (Bengtson, 2017), grandparents frequently fill critical gaps in child-rearing, offering both practical assistance and emotional comfort. This is particularly evident in families where parents are overburdened with work responsibilities or are geographically distant. In such contexts, grandparents often provide a stable and nurturing presence, offering children a sense of security and continuity that can be pivotal to their emotional well-being. (Lloyd & McBride, 2018) further emphasize the significance of the emotional bonds that grandparents establish with their grandchildren, noting that these relationships often serve as a buffer against stressors that children may encounter, such as parental separation or economic hardship. This emotional support plays a crucial role in promoting positive psychological outcomes in children, such as increased self-esteem and resilience.

3.2 The Impact of Societal Changes on Grandparent-Grandchild Interaction

Societal shifts have influenced the frequency and quality of interactions between grandparents and grandchildren. (Hagestad, 2020) highlights how the rise of nuclear families, combined with increased geographic mobility, has led to a decline in face-to-face intergenerational interactions. This shift is particularly evident in urbanized societies where families are dispersed over long distances, making it difficult for grandparents to maintain regular contact with their grandchildren. As a result, many children lose out on valuable opportunities to engage in meaningful relationships with their grandparents, which can contribute to feelings of disconnection and alienation from their familial roots. The loss of these intergenerational connections has far-reaching consequences, as grandparents are traditionally seen as cultural carriers who transmit family history, cultural values, and life lessons to the younger generation. (Bengtson, 2017) asserts that the reduced interaction between grandparents and grandchildren in contemporary society may lead to a weakening of familial bonds, leaving children with limited access to the wisdom and experience that grandparents traditionally offer.

3.3 The Role of Grandparents in Socialization and Moral Development

Grandparents also play an indispensable role in shaping a child's social and emotional competence. According to (Choi & Lee, 2021), grandparents often serve as important role models, teaching children's key social skills such as empathy, resilience, and cooperation. These lessons are frequently conveyed through shared activities, storytelling, and the emotional narratives grandparents provide. By recounting personal experiences, grandparents not only teach children moral values but also help them understand societal norms and navigate social complexities. In this sense, the relationship between grandparents and grandchildren becomes an important medium for the socialization process, enriching the child's emotional development and moral understanding.

Studies have shown that grandparent-grandchild interactions often involve the sharing of knowledge and wisdom, which fosters a child's intellectual growth. Grandparents may teach children practical life skills such as cooking, gardening, or crafting, which can enhance their problem-solving abilities and stimulate creativity. As (Choi & Lee, 2021) suggest, the intergenerational learning that occurs in these contexts is essential for the child's cognitive development, as it encourages curiosity and critical thinking.

The Absence of grandparental involvement can have detrimental effects on a child's social and emotional development. (Smith, 2019) argues that without the guidance and support of grandparents, children may face challenges in forming meaningful relationships and understanding social expectations. The absence of intergenerational connections can impede children's ability to navigate complex social situations, leading to difficulties in communication, empathy, and conflict resolution. Additionally, the lack of exposure to grandparents' life experiences may hinder children from gaining a broader perspective on family values, traditions, and societal roles, which can affect their identity formation.

3.4 The Influence of Grandparents on Cultural Transmission

Beyond socialization, grandparents are crucial in preserving and transmitting cultural heritage. In many cultures, grandparents serve as the primary custodians of family traditions, folklore, and historical narratives. This intergenerational transfer of cultural knowledge strengthens the child's sense of identity and belonging. By engaging in activities such as cooking family recipes, participating in cultural rituals, or simply sharing stories from the past, grandparents provide children with a deeper connection to their ancestral roots. As (Bengtson, 2017) points out, this cultural transmission plays a vital role in fostering a child's understanding of their heritage and helping them develop a sense of continuity across generations.

In light of these diverse roles, it is clear that grandparents are instrumental in the broader process of early childhood development. Their involvement not only supports children's emotional, social, and cognitive growth but also ensures the continuation of familial and cultural legacies. However, as family structures continue to evolve and societal trends such as mobility and individualism gain prominence, it becomes increasingly important to understand and preserve the value of grandparent-grandchild relationships. The absence of this intergenerational bond may lead to a loss of valuable cultural knowledge, emotional stability, and social competence for children, ultimately impacting their overall development.

IV. NEED AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

In an era marked by rapid societal transformation, it has become increasingly essential to critically examine the evolving role of grandparents in the early childhood development of their grandchildren. While much scholarly attention has been

devoted to the importance of parental involvement in child-rearing, the contributions of extended family members, particularly grandparents, have often been overlooked or underappreciated in contemporary research. As family structures continue to evolve due to factors such as increased mobility, changing economic conditions, and shifting societal expectations, the traditional roles of grandparents have undergone significant changes, making it crucial to explore their continued importance in the developmental trajectory of children.

Grandparents were seen as pivotal figures in the familial structure, often taking on caregiving roles and providing wisdom that was passed down through generations. They were integral in nurturing children's emotional, social, and cognitive growth, not only by providing direct care but also by fostering intergenerational learning and the transmission of cultural values (Berk, 2013). However, the rapid societal shifts of recent decades particularly the rise of nuclear families, the increasing geographical mobility of families, and the growing prevalence of dual-income households have altered the dynamics of family life (Hagestad, 2020). As a result, the regular involvement of grandparents in the lives of their grandchildren has diminished. This shift has raised important questions about the potential long-term consequences of reduced grandparental engagement on child development, as well as the loss of vital cultural transmission between generations (Bengtson, 2017).

The need for this study stems from the recognition that, while research on parental involvement in child-rearing is well-established, there is a noticeable gap in literature when it comes to understanding the specific contributions of grandparents. The absence of intergenerational interaction has been linked to feelings of disconnection and alienation in children, particularly in terms of their relationship to cultural heritage and familial identity (Bengtson, 2017). Furthermore, it is increasingly evident that the loss of grandparental involvement may also affect emotional development and social competencies, as grandparents often serve as key figures in shaping a child's social skills and emotional resilience (Choi & Lee, 2021). These observations underscore the need for a more nuanced exploration of the role of grandparents as both nurturers and educators.

By highlighting the multifaceted impact of grandparental involvement on emotional, cognitive, and social development, the study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of how intergenerational learning influences the development of children (Lloyd & McBride, 2018). The long-term significance of this research lies in its potential to inform policies and practices that promote the inclusion of grandparents in child-rearing, thus enhancing the overall development of children in today's changing family structures.

The findings of this study will provide insights into the broader implications of the grandparent-grandchild relationship, not only for individual families but also for society at large. Given that societal values such as empathy, cooperation, and resilience are often cultivated through family interactions, particularly with older generations, the findings of this study may have far-reaching consequences for how families approach child-rearing. A deeper understanding of the role of grandparents could inform social services, education systems, and family support programs, thereby facilitating a more holistic approach to child development that acknowledges the contributions of extended family members (Hagestad, 2020).

This Study is significant because it seeks to illuminate the often-overlooked contributions of grandparents to early childhood development. As family structures continue to evolve, it is vital to understand how these changes impact intergenerational learning and the long-term development of children. By exploring the specific roles that grandparents play as nurturers and teachers, this research will fill a critical gap in the literature and provide valuable insights that can guide future studies, policies, and practices aimed at supporting child development in a rapidly changing societal context (Bengtson, 2017; Choi & Lee, 2021).

V. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

As societal norms shift and nuclear family structures become more prevalent, the physical distance and emotional disconnect between grandparents and grandchildren have increased. This separation has led to a reduction in the critical role grandparents once played in early childhood development, particularly in providing support, cultural transmission, and socialization. The central problem this study addresses is understanding how these changes in familial dynamics affect children's growth, especially in the realms of emotional resilience, social skills, and cognitive development.

VI. DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS

- Grandparenting: The multifaceted involvement of grandparents in their grandchildren's lives, whether through caregiving, mentorship, or cultural transmission.
- Early Childhood Development: The developmental phase from birth to age eight, encompassing physical, cognitive, emotional, and social growth.
- Intergenerational Learning: The process through which knowledge, values, and traditions are passed down from older to younger generations, fostering a sense of continuity and identity.
- Socialization: The process by which children acquire the norms, values, and behaviours essential to functioning within society.

VII. OBJECTIVES

- To explore the impact of shifting family structures on grandparental involvement in early childhood development.
- To investigate the role of intergenerational learning and socialization in fostering emotional, cognitive, and social development in children.
- To assess the effects of limited grandparental interaction on the holistic development of children.
- To provide recommendations on how families and communities can foster intergenerational relationships in an increasingly mobile and fragmented society.

VIII. METHODOLOGY

This research employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews. Surveys will be distributed to a diverse sample of parents and grandparents to measure the frequency and quality of their interactions. Additionally, semi-structured interviews with child development experts and sociologists will offer deeper insights into the effects of grandparental involvement on various aspects of child development. Data will be analysed to identify correlations between grandparental engagement and key indicators of emotional and social well-being, such as empathy, resilience, and peer relationships.

IX. MAJOR FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

Following are the major findings:

- **Impact of Shifting Family Structures on Grandparental Involvement:** Changing family structures, such as nuclear families and geographic mobility, have reduced grandparental involvement, leading to fewer opportunities for intergenerational bonding and caregiving .
- **Role of Intergenerational Learning in Child Development:** Children with active grandparental involvement show stronger emotional security, improved social skills, and a better understanding of cultural traditions. Grandparents play a key role in imparting life lessons and moral values, which are crucial for emotional and social development.
- **Effects of Limited Grandparental Interaction:** Limited interaction with grandparents can lead to emotional distress, reduced social competence, and a weakened connection to family heritage, impacting a child's resilience and identity.
- **Recommendations for Fostering Intergenerational Relationships:** To overcome challenges of distance and mobility, families and communities should create opportunities for virtual engagement, intergenerational programs, and policies that support grandparental involvement.

X. EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

Some of the educational implications are mentioned here:

- The findings emphasize the importance of integrating intergenerational learning into educational systems.
- Schools and community organizations should develop programs to facilitate grandparent involvement, fostering stronger familial ties.
- These programmes would ensure that children benefit from the wisdom and mentorship of older generations.
- Teachers should be encouraged to incorporate lessons that highlight the value of multi-generational perspectives.
- Such lessons would help children develop a broader understanding of their familial and cultural history.

XI. RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Promote Family-Centred Initiatives:** Develop community programs that encourage interaction between grandparents and grandchildren, even in families where physical distance is a challenge. Virtual platforms and local events could serve as avenues for maintaining these vital bonds.
- **Policy Recommendations:** Advocate for policies that allow for more flexible work arrangements, enabling parents and grandparents to spend quality time with children and nurture the grandparent-grandchild relationship.
- **Foster Intergenerational Activities:** Encourage schools to organize activities where grandparents can participate in the educational process, thereby enriching the learning environment with diverse perspectives and experiences.

XII. CONCLUSION

As family structures continue to evolve, the role of grandparents in early childhood development remains a cornerstone of emotional, cognitive, and social growth. Despite the challenges posed by modern family dynamics, it is crucial to recognize and nurture the bonds between grandparents and grandchildren. By fostering these intergenerational connections, society can ensure that future generations are equipped with the wisdom, resilience, and cultural continuity that are essential for navigating an ever-changing world (Hagestad, 2020).

By fostering and strengthening grandparental involvement, society can help bridge these gaps, ensuring that future generations inherit not only practical knowledge but also the emotional resilience and sense of identity needed to thrive in an ever-changing world. Recognizing the importance of these relationships and facilitating the continued involvement of grandparents is essential for the well-being of children and the preservation of cultural continuity.

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