

Chapter 8

‘I Had a Grandfather Who Taught Me Everything’: Grandparents as Family Capital in Transition to School

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8.1 Introduction

Grandparents have always played an important role in family life, but over the last twenty years, many have had increased responsibility for their grandchildren due to changes and issues in families and society. The first major change is the provision of child care. Grandparents, mostly grandmothers, are the major providers of child care for preschool children, particularly for babies and toddlers, when both their parents are in the workforce. Grandparents also help parents with school-age children by picking them up from school, and by caring for them during school vacations. (Ochiltree 2006)

In many families, the contribution of grandparents is part of the overall family capital, an integral part of the ways in which families function (Horsfall and Dempsey 2011). Grandparents, tend to engage in “less formal” interactions with their grandchildren than do parents. Such interactions can provide ways of building up the family’s social capital, particularly around attachment and socialisation (Dunifon 2013). Such family capital can also help people bridge the numerous transitions within their lives and, in particular, within the lives of children and families during the process of starting school (Turunen and Dockett 2013). During this transition process, grandparents can support both the parents and their grandchildren by providing much-needed wisdom, guidance and support, and highlighting the importance of starting school. This has been emphasised by Statham (2011) who states that ‘[g]randparents continue to have a significant role in child care arrangements when children start school, particularly during holiday periods’ (p. 2).

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Previous studies have discussed grandparent-grandchild relationships from the grandparents' point of view (Breheny et al. 2013; Lou et al. 2013; Smorti et al. 2012). This chapter considers the role of grandparents as their grandchildren make the transition to school. We do this by first seeking the recalled memories of grandparents about their own starting school experiences, with particular emphasis on their memories of the role of their grandparents in these experiences. The possible impact of these experiences and/or memories on the roles they have played or will play when their grandchildren start school is then considered.

Even though this chapter examines the memories of past experiences, it will also contribute to the present through illuminating how family transition to school can be strengthened by grandparents. Hence, it will enhance understanding of how grandparents can both support and be supported through programs promoting effective transition to school for children and families.

Previous research has indicated that the educational experiences, such as transition to school, of past generations contribute to those of following generations (Barnett and Taylor 2009; Rätty 2003, 2011; Turunen and Dockett 2013). These studies have mostly concentrated on the impact of parents' experiences on their actions within their children's transition to school. This chapter contributes to this literature by highlighting the significance of grandparents and thus widening the understanding of the family context as children start school.

8.2 Grandparents as an Asset in Transition to School

Citing Horsfall and Dempsey (2011), Deblaquiere et al. (2012, p. 69) reported that 'around one-half of Australian grandparents spend time with their grandchildren at least once a week, and just under three-quarters spend time with them at least once a month'. Hence, many grandparents are a major part of a child's family microsystem (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006). If grandparents are available for much of the time, the relationships between grandparents and grandchildren will probably have some effect on the grandchildren's development. The heart of the Bronfenbrenner bioecological model are "proximal processes" or interactions which 'occur on a fairly regular basis over extended periods of time' (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006, p. 797). The relationships present in this kind of interaction require reciprocity. This requirement puts both grandparents and grandchildren into active roles through which each impacts the other.

Grandparents can play an important role in their grandchildren's transition to school. They can provide important developmental assets for the children who could benefit from diverse and intergenerational interactions with grandparents. These interactions may differ in nature and frequency from those with parents. The children's development may well be assisted by the extensive and complex relationships between the children and their grandparents (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006).

These relationships generate some of the proximal processes present when grandparents contribute to their grandchildren's transitions to school and the grandchildren contribute to the joy and trust felt by the grandparents as they are in touch with lives in younger generations. The contributions from the grandparents can be understood as family capital developed with their grandchildren and their families. In this case, family capital is a form of social capital that provides a social environment characterised by trustworthiness and joy, and where the children have access to intergenerational knowledge (Coleman 1988). Family capital is a resource embedded within family networks which affects the functioning of all family members (Belcher et al. 2011).

The role of grandparents in their grandchildren's transition to school, can also be understood through the concept of life course in which the interdependent lives of family members can regulate and shape the transition experiences of the children and other members of the family (Elder and Shanahan 2006). Practices and values, informed by the experiences of previous generations and family stories, can be transferred across generations (Turunen and Dockett 2013). The relationships between generations form important mediators in linking the lives of all the participants (Elder and Shanahan 2006).

8.3 Research Design

People tend to remember things that are important to them (Abrams 2010; Yow 2005). Memories of these important things are significant in constructing an autobiographical narrative (Blagov and Singer 2004; Conway and Pleydell-Pearce 2000). As part of a larger study, data were gathered during autobiographical interviews where interviewees were asked to recall their memories about starting school. Altogether, 89 autobiographical interviews were recorded in Australia. The interviewees ranged in age from 20 to 89 years. The interviews started with an open-ended, generative statement which aimed to encourage the participants to share their personal experiences in the form of a narrative presentation (Riemann 2006). After participants had finished their narratives, defining questions were asked as needed. The interview protocol did not contain any questions specifically related to grandparents but in 45 of the interviews, grandparents were mentioned. That is, in the interviews grandparents were mentioned unprompted, signifying the importance of these recollections. These interviews provided the starting point for the analysis discussed in this chapter.

The data analysis was assisted by NVivo software (QSR International 2015). Firstly, the software was used to identify the interviews where grandparents were mentioned. Of the 45 interviewees who talked about grandparents, many recalled that they did not play a significant role in the interviewee's transition to school. Rather, grandparents were briefly mentioned as part of everyday life in quotes like: 'My grandparents lived upstairs and my parents lived downstairs. That's what

houses in [] were like.’ These kind of vague references to grandparents were omitted from closer analysis in the study reported in this chapter.

After this first sorting, the quotes containing recollections of grandparents were analysed within the frame of Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006) to identify those with significance for transition to school. Next, the quotes referring to proximal processes and close relationships between grandparents and children were identified. Finally, a thematic analysis was executed. The following results section is organised using the three major themes identified during the analysis:

1. close relationships;
2. support provided by grandparents; and
3. inherited intergenerational assets.

It is notable that, in this study, recollections related to grandparents are more present in older participants’ stories. In the interviews with younger participants, grandparents are mentioned occasionally, but stories of close relationships are missing. This might partly be a consequence of changes in society. Previously, it was more common to have many generations living either in the same household or very close to each other. Many present-day families tend to live far away from relatives, and grandparents in particular, and this might impact on relationships between grandparents and grandchildren. This may vary from family to family with some evidence that societal crisis such as economic uncertainty brings grandparents closer to their grandchildren (Dunifon 2013). As well, the development of early childhood services for families might have reduced the support needed from grandparents. Besides these societal changes, the bias in the results may be explained by the phenomenon of life review, highlighting elderly people’s tendency to look back and make sense of their past experiences through the present (Abrams 2010; Scott and Alwin 1998). By the time of the interviews, many participants were grandparents themselves and spoke about their grandchildren. Perhaps, this is an indication of the research evidence that older people are better in telling stories than younger ones (Yow 2005).

8.4 Results

8.4.1 *Close Relationships*

Some interviewees had very special and extensive recollections of their grandparents. Certain experiences shared with their grandparents were remembered vividly and told with warmth. Stories described ongoing relationships illustrating many of the features of proximal processes. For example:

My first memories are associated with coming home from school, funnily enough. That was in the house where my mother’s father and mother were living with us. My Opa [grandfather]

was a keen gardener ... So he had lots of chooks and a big veggie garden and it was always good to come home and fossick in the garden with him. (Started school 1957)

This recollection of gardening with his grandfather came early in the interview with this participant. It was clearly a significant recollection and was the first memory he had, during the conversation, of starting school. The positioning of ideas in collections of memories can often indicate the relative level of significance of these ideas (Yow 2005). The interviewee continued:

I can remember coming home from school and my Oma [grandmother] would have something basically on the stove for us and what we liked the most and what I have the strongest memory of is in the winter time is she used to have the small potatoes, the Australians call them chats. Opa used to grow his own potatoes ... So Oma used to boil the chats up and they would always be nearly cooked when we got home and then it was a matter of sitting down and eating chats with a little dab of butter on them. (Started school 1957)

This interviewee was from an immigrant background and it would appear that his grandparents represented the family homeland and culture to him. He kept mentioning his cultural heritage throughout the interview, underlining its importance to him. Indeed, he also offered German biscuits with coffee during the interview.

Another interviewee had spent her childhood with her aunt and grandparents, although the particular circumstances resulting in this arrangement were not disclosed in her conversation. Fond memories of a playful childhood were related to starting school.

We were really outdoor kids. I always came home with one plait hanging out. I could never, ever manage to sort of keep them all together. I always looked a wreck. But I was brought up by my aunt and grandparents and they never growled at me for things like that. They weren't important which was a really nice way to have a childhood. (Started school 1946)

When asked about the most significant memory related to starting school, this interviewee referred to the fact that she was a skillful child and knew the alphabet and numbers by the time she started school. Her grandfather taught her these things and many others.

So yes, my grandfather was just always the support. He taught me how to ride my pushbike and taught me how to stand on my head in the backyard, all that sort of thing ... and I can remember the teacher holding letter cards and saying 'You know them all. I don't know why I'm holding these up'. I had a grandfather who taught me everything and that helped. (Started school 1946)

Some of the participants were quite proud of the "secrets" that their grandparents shared with them. Sometimes, these were almost "open" secrets but, on other occasions, they were even a little subversive. Even 70 years ago, grandparents had an advantage over parents in terms of the overall responsibility they felt for the child's upbringing. For example:

But I read everything I could get my hands on, particularly my grandfather's dreadful western stories. You know those awful westerns? Oh they were terrible. And he'd hide them from me. And my grandmother would wait till he was asleep, having a nap or something and she would say 'Here's another one', and she would give it to me 'But don't tell grandfather'. So that was rather nice. (Started school 1943)

Close relationships with their grandparents provided nurture, care and company for many of the interviewees when they were young and when their parents were not available. One of the younger participants in the project recalled the importance of his Nan (grandmother).

Because Mum obviously had to work to provide everything we needed as kids or what we wanted, Nan was always there. Nan was the cook; Nan always made sure there was food and everything, and that dinner was ready. And Nan was always there, if Mum wasn't there. (Started school 1988)

Grandparents' relationships with their grandchildren tend to be somewhat different from parents' relationships with their children. As well, the roles and ongoing responsibilities of parents are quite different from those of grandparents. As Ochiltree (2006, p. 2) suggests

Contact with grandparents can be mutually satisfying for both generations. Grandparents are usually not so caught up with the daily routines and issues of living with the grandchildren and have more time to listen, observe and attend to small things than busy parents. Grandparents can reflect and pass on to their grandchildren cultural knowledge as well as family and community traditions.

According to one interviewee, this difference was an important aspect of his relationship with his grandparents:

It was very nice having my grandparents there because they didn't actually "teach me" that much, but I think they teach you lots of things. I remember my grandparents very fondly. (Started school 1943)

For the participants in this study, grandparents had a great influence on their transitions to school. Grandparents provided intergenerational and multicultural experiences, reinforced skills that were useful at school and beyond, and provided social and cultural resources to their grandchildren. The relationships between grandchildren and grandparents were balanced between the personal needs of grandchildren and the resources to meet these needs that were held by grandparents. Following Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998), this personal and contextual match strengthened the relationships and supported transitions to school.

8.4.2 Support Provided by Grandparents

In the memories of many of the study participants, grandparents played numerous roles throughout their schooling and, in particular, when they started school. Not all of these involved the close personal relationships described in the previous section, but all fit within the realm of proximal processes – both with their grandchildren, but also through the provision of support to parents. As previously discussed, food was an important conduit for many of these roles.

I can remember the first time I opened my lunch box it was ... I had a white damask serviette with wax paper around my sandwich and around my cakes. My grandmother was a pretty crack cook so I had lots of cake and fruit. (Started school 1946)

Material support was often remembered in terms of the supply of school uniforms, often in times of shortage:

I think I can remember my first days at school was it a skirt and a jumper my grandmother made me I would imagine, I think from memory that I would have worn, yes. (Started school 1938)

This kind of material support was recognized and appreciated by many of the interviewees. For example, school uniforms were very important to young children starting school in Australia, and still are (Simos 2013). Uniforms are seen within individual schools to be opportunities for “levelling the playing field” for many children as competition around wearing the latest designer clothes is removed. As well, they are seen to assist children “belong” to their school and, consequently, feel that they are an important part of the overall enterprise. The input of grandmothers was much appreciated by some of the interviewees.

In Australia, it is not the norm for school lunches to be supplied by the school. Children tend to bring their own lunches or, if they can afford to do so, buy them at school canteens. School lunch time is a very important social occasion, especially for young children, and is also a good time for children to show the quality of support they have from home. Grandmothers and mothers who are good cooks can be very important attributes to have, as has been illustrated by a number of memories for the study participants. Memories of “the wonderful food” supplied by grandmother may be about the food itself but are also likely to be about how the young child felt when he/she could show-off, and even share, the marvelous school lunches that helped them “shine” at lunch time.

Transition to school involves a change of role for the child (Dockett and Perry 2007) and new school-related things such clothes, school bag and school accessories are external signs of this new role as a school student (Peters 2014). By participating in these preparations for their grandchild’s transition to school, the grandparents supported the transition process and strengthened their grandchild’s new role in the new environment.

Some interviewees recalled their grandparents’ participation in school activities, often substituting for parents, sometimes in their own right. Many schools have a practice where young children take turns to present important items from their lives to their class. This practice is often called “show and tell”. One interviewee recalled that he brought his grandparents to school for “show and tell”.

I remember I brought my grandparents as show and tell. My grandad ... was Irish so everyone was fairly intrigued by him... I just remember being very proud of my grandad, probably simply because he was Irish and it was fairly different to most other people. (Started school 1990).

The interviewee suggested that this memory as one of his strongest related to starting school, although we cannot be sure about how far the experience was from the first day of school. His grandparents did not live near to the family, but were ready to be part of their grandchild’s school life by visiting the school.

One interviewee used an artifact – a photograph – to recall her grandmother participating in a school fete.

I know that we had a fete because I've got a photo here of myself riding a Shetland pony. My grandmother must have brought her three Shetland ponies along for people to ride around a track at the fete. (Started school 1954)

The involvement of grandparents in the interviewees' schooling was not always seen as positive. Sometimes, tensions between parents and grandparents were recalled.

Now, my mother was going through a hard time with my granny because she [mother] was a Catholic. And so if Granny could get me and hide me when Mum was going to mass on Sunday morning she would hide me. Anything to cause disruption. (Started school 1934)

Recognition of grandparents' diverse roles resonates with previous studies reviewed by Dunifon (2013) which show that grandparental involvement can have negative influence if they interfere with or subvert the practices of the parents. In most cases though, grandparents' emotional and material help supported parents, decreased their stress and promoted overall well-being (Dunifon 2013).

8.4.3 *Inherited Intergenerational Assets*

In their stories, interviewees highlighted what impact they saw the characteristics and habits of their older relatives, including their grandparents, had on their own development. Many of them noted their apparent inheritance of these intergenerational assets.

The only other thing I remember there was I was so pleased with myself because I think in second class I learnt to spell 'disappeared, disappointed' and I can't remember the other one, but three very big words. That made my day. I loved reading. I don't know at what age I learnt to read but it was quite an early age. Mum was a reader and my aunt and grandmother were readers so there were always books around. We read. (Started school 1958)

Used to love woodwork, metal work, all that sort of thing. As I said, my father was a chippie [carpenter]. My grandfather was a chippie, my great grandfather was an engineer. Pretty good with their hands. (Started school 1947)

In the first of these two quotes, the interviewee recalls her success at school work and links this with the family habit of reading. In the second quote the handicraft aptitude is connected with the skills of previous generations. However, the intergenerational assets were not only related to skills and aptitudes. In the following extract, the interviewee interprets her personal characteristics through an intergenerational lens.

You know really probably they were a big influence on our lives because of my grandmother was a very cultured woman and so we had lovely music and poetry and singing. She sewed beautifully also but she was quite a lady and she discussed politics with men when it really wasn't quite the done thing to do. So we came from a line of very strong women and very much quieter men. (Started school 1937)

The interviewees had reproduced family practices (Lüscher 2002). The extracts above illustrate how personal skills, aptitudes and characteristics are reviewed within the life course and through linked lives as heritage has passed across generations. This demonstrates how stories of transition to school are not only part of personal narratives, but also represent shared family narratives. While what has been presented here are individual autobiographical narratives they have been constructed, sometimes over many years, in interaction with families and other influences within an intergenerational framework. Such ongoing stories in families represent continuity in transition experiences across generations. Family stories are interpreted in the context of the tellers' lives and as illustrated in the previous extract, they can impact upon identity-building processes and the constitution of the tellers (McKeough and Malcolm 2011).

8.5 Conclusion

Grandparents have great potential to support their grandchildren when they start school and the grandchildren have great potential to remember this support. This potential is enabled if grandparents can participate actively in their grandchildren's everyday life and create a positive reciprocal relationship with them. These proximal processes support the children and parents and can help promote successful transitions (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006). By their support and presence, grandparents can also provide assistance to families and highlight the importance of new phase of life, schooldays. They promote children's positive identities within school contexts and support children's and their parents' agency (Dockett 2014). Our previous research (Turunen and Perry 2013) has illuminated how even young children starting school are able to act as active and proactive individuals and thus cope well in the new situation and unfamiliar environment. For their part, grandparents can be a critical component of this support for successful transitions to school.

Grandparents can also strengthen family capital at the time of their grandchildren's transition to school. The family's role in building up social capital can be understood via financial capital, human capital and social capital (Coleman 1988). The interviewees recalled all these aspects. Financial capital was provided by food, clothes and school accessories and human capital in the form of inherited aptitudes and skills. Social capital was especially evident in close relationships between grandparents and grandchildren. Family capital was used by interviewees to manage transition, review it and construct it as part of their life course (Belcher et al. 2011).

The recollections of transition to school provide evidence that grandparents can be an important part of a successful transition to school. In the study reported here, grandparents were not part of every recollection. Quite the contrary, the majority of participants did not talk about their grandparents. Many did not have grandparents available when they were starting school. Those who were able to build up a

supportive relationship with their grandparents remembered them as an important and supportive part of their transition to school experiences.

Stories reviewed in this chapter covered several decades from the 1930s to the 1980s and the majority of them referred to experiences from some 50 years ago. On one hand, they represent oral history, narrative accounts of the past (Abrams 2010), and reveal historical incidents and ways of life in Australia. On the other hand, they tell powerful stories about relationships that were so meaningful that they could be recalled decades later, often in a detailed manner. This suggests that also today grandparents can be significant for their grandchildren. Societies have changed and families often live far from their extended family members and three-generational households are not as common as they used to be (Pilkauskas and Martinson 2014). But, as Dunifon (2013) has reported, grandparents' involvement has increased, at least in the United States and this maybe the case in other countries as well. In Australia, nearly all children under school-age are in touch with their grandparents (Gray et al. 2005). The care and support provided by grandparents during their grandchildren's transition to school deserves to be recognised by parents, school principals and teachers. As well, the transition capital built throughout the lives of children as they recall the role of their grandparents in starting school can be of some importance in the way they interact with their own grandchildren. There is much further research to be completed regarding the role of grandparents in their grandchildren's transition to school.

8.6 Epilogue

We conclude this chapter with an extended example of the impact of grandparents on children's transition to school. The story teller recalls her own transition to school and the role her grandmother played in her early years of school. By the time of the interview, the story teller was herself a grandmother and one of her grandchildren had just started school. The interactions with her grandchild and their relationship to her own experiences of starting school reinforce the key points of the chapter:

- the importance of intergenerational interactions as children start school;
- the potential for grandparents and grandchildren to contribute to each others' lives;
- ways in which family capital can be developed through access to intergenerational knowledge;
- the potential to regulate and shape transitions to school through life course experiences contributing to the independent lives of members of extended families; and
- the continuing role of grandparents in the transition to school experiences of their grandchildren.

Lucy started school in rural South Australia in 1956. She was the eldest child in a farming family. Her two siblings were a lot younger than she, so Lucy had a childhood that did not involve many other children. As a result 'I was a very shy child when it came time to start school'. Even though she was eligible to start school when she was 5 years old, in 1955, her parents decided that she would not start until the following year. Lucy has very fond memories of her grandmother, whom she called "Nana". In fact, during the year before Lucy started school, she stayed during the week with Nana in town, about 15 km from home. This enabled Lucy to access preschool as there was no public transport for her to use from the farm. Her memories of Nana are filled with 'love, security and no tension. Nana was very important to me'.

When it came time for Lucy to start school, there was still no bus from the farm, so she again stayed on weekdays at Nana's house. This lasted for just one term, after which the required bus route was instigated and Lucy could stay at home and access the "local" school. So, Lucy started school in town and, after one term, moved to the rural school nearer her home. Her memories of her first day at school are that both Mum and Nana, and her younger siblings, accompanied her to the school gate, where they all said 'goodbye' and left her. She remembers that she went into her classroom, knowing no-one, and it was dark and very big and 'I was very small'. Her other memories of this school are that there was a large group of children and the teacher was very kind, although the children were made 'to sit on the floor and undertake endless repetitions of the alphabet'. Lucy does not have particular memories of Nana's role in her transition to school, except the enduring image of being driven to and from school in 'Nana's shiny, black Austin A40'.

In 2015, Lucy is a highly educated, successful, retired early childhood educator living in a state capital in Australia. She is also a grandmother of two girls, the elder of whom started school in 2015. Lucy describes herself as 'a loving, supportive Nana who is both professionally and personally interested in transition to school'. She has much interaction with her granddaughters and has talked with both about starting school. Rosie, the elder granddaughter, has had a somewhat difficult start to school, partly because, in Lucy's words 'she is shy and finds making friends difficult'.

While Lucy's informal support for Rosie continues through her first year of school, Lucy provides two more structured supports. One day per week Nana and Pop collect Rosie from school and take her to their home. This provides the opportunity for Rosie and Lucy to talk about school. As well,

I go as a volunteer one morning per week to support the school and teacher by hearing children read but also to be a support to Rosie. ... A downside of this is that I have some concerns about the program at the school but, because of my past employment, I have to be very, very, very cautious and controlled about my reactions to the things that Rosie has been exposed to. ... I feel that I am returning to transition to school. I loved school but parts like the alphabet cards were tedious. I can see myself in the current *Jolly Phonics* program through Rosie who does not seem to be looking or concentrating much of the time.

Lucy's memories of her Nana and her current involvement with Rosie's transition to school provide a salient link between memories of important people in children's

transition to school and, generations on, the impact on their grandchildren as they start school. We would do well to remember that all family members, including grandparents, can play a role children's starting school and that their involvement will often grow from their own experiences with their grandparents. Lucy is but one example of the growing number of grandparents – especially grandmothers – who impact on their grandchildren's transition to school by bringing their experiences and expertise to bear on this important process.

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