

Towards a New Pedagogy of Grandparenting: Proposing a Participatory Project

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Abstract

Grandparents often influence their grandchildren's lives, with opportunities for mutual learning. Despite interdisciplinary research *on* grandparenting, little research is undertaken with grandparents. Inspired by relational pedagogy, participatory research and transformative learning, we propose an arts-based project *with* grandparents as co-researchers. Grandparents may engage in two forms of Working Group: in a drama learning space and/or in visual and language-based activities. In these Working Groups, grandparents will reflect upon their roles. A Research Group of grandparents will work with researchers to analyse data from the workshops and disseminate findings. We anticipate co-creation of new understandings of contemporary grandparenting.

Keywords: grandparenting, participatory research, arts, transformative learning, relational pedagogy.

Abstract

I nonni spesso influenzano la vita dei nipoti, con occasioni di apprendimento reciproco. La ricerca interdisciplinare *sui* nonni è proliferata, mentre solo una piccola parte viene intrapresa *con* i nonni. Ispirate dalla pedagogia relazionale, dalla ricerca partecipativa e dall'apprendimento trasformativo, proponiamo un progetto coinvolgendo i nonni come co-ricercatori, che parteciperanno, riflettendo sul proprio ruolo, in due forme di Gruppo di Lavoro: in uno spazio di apprendimento attraverso il teatro *e/o* in attività visive e linguistiche. Un Gruppo di Ricerca di nonni lavorerà con i ricercatori sull'analisi dei dati

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e la divulgazione dei risultati. Il progetto prevede la co-creazione di nuove interpretazioni sull'essere nonni nel mondo contemporaneo.

Parole chiave: nonni, ricerca partecipativa, arti, apprendimento trasformativo, pedagogia relazionale.

Introduction

In recent decades, there has been a growth in interest, world-wide, in researching grandparenthood and the role of grandparents in diverse family contexts. Increased life expectancy improves the chance for grandchildren to have living grandparents, and even great grandparents. This provides opportunities and raises challenges for intergenerational learning, family relations and the health and well-being of grandparents themselves and of family members.

The importance of grandparents in contemporary family life is pivotal, especially for emotional, practical and financial support, including their role as childcare providers. Factors such as cuts in public services and the increased involvement of mothers in the labour market make grandparents a key (yet sometimes taken for granted) resource for the care of children (Kanji, 2018). Meanwhile, family structures and commitments are changing and intergenerational relationships and assistance within families cannot be relied upon.

The interdisciplinary literature includes typologies of grandparenting (Cherlin, Furstenberg, 1985; Neugarten, Weinstein, 1964; Szaban, Trzop, 2021) and highlights several mutual benefits of grandparenting, for both grandparents and grandchildren, as well as drawing attention to problems. There is, however, a dearth of studies undertaken by grandparents themselves into the role that grandparents play within the family environment and their recognition within society.

In response to demand for new studies about grandparenting that include grandparents as researchers (Weil, Mendoza 2019), this paper presents the aims and the design of a proposed participatory research project involving grandparents as co-researchers in exploring the meanings of grandparenting. Definitions, project aims and the approach to literature on grandparenting, are outlined. This is followed by a description and justification of the intended participatory research principles and techniques, and an explanation of the use of drama as a pedagogical tool for meaning making, in the light of adult transformative learning theory.

1. *Definitions to guide the study*

Grandparents in this study are mainly those who are related to the parent of a grandchild, as the parent's parent. They might be co-resident with the parent and grandchild, live close by, or reside at a distance. Grandparents will self-identify for this study, giving scope for inclusion if their own child is a step-parent of the grandchild or if they are step-grandparent to a partner's grandchild, and also including "fictive" grandchildren, whereby an adult has a grandparent-like relationship with a child who is not related (Hank *et al.*, 2017). We recognise that some grandparents take on primary or custodial care responsibility for grandchildren (Hayslip *et al.*, 2017) and, whilst this is not the focus of the current research, the study is also open to these grandparents.

Pedagogy is perhaps an unusual word to choose when exploring the roles of grandparents, especially in the UK context where pedagogy is strongly associated with learning and teaching in formal educational contexts; for example, it is defined as the practice (or the art, the science, or the craft) of education including provision of learning environments for play and exploration and some element of instruction (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2002). Papatheodorou (2009) reminds us of the etymological origins of the concept of pedagogy as "child" and "lead" (or, more accurately, "guide"), and evokes the metaphor of two or more people walking hand-in-hand on a journey together.

Relationality is at the core of this concept of pedagogy, with a focus on shared learning experiences, characterised by reciprocity, dialogues, wisdom and trust.

Ethics of care are also central to an articulation of contemporary pedagogy (Luff, Kanyal, 2015) thus recognising the potential of intergenerational relationships for enrichment of the lives of children and adults alike, and as a contribution to a socially sustainable future (Oropilla, Ødegaard, 2021; Taggart, 2022).

2. *Aims of the project*

The aims of the collaborative research are threefold: firstly, for grandparents themselves to develop definitions of grandparenting; secondly, to study grandparents' lived experiences of being with grandchildren; and, thirdly, to contribute to development of a pedagogy of 21st century grandparenting. These are provisional aims, drafted by the research

team. The aims are open for discussion with the grandparent co-researchers, who will be recruited for the study, and may be refined and developed. In the sections that follow, the draft aims are clarified as the approaches to the research are explained and justified.

3. *The complex interdisciplinary topic of grandparenting*

Research about grandparents is drawn from a variety of academic disciplines. These range from evolutionary biology and anthropology, which give clues about the usefulness of adults surviving beyond their main reproductive years (Hawkes, 1997) and offer insights about the value of allo-parenting - the shared care of babies, and children in different human cultural groups (Hrdy, 2011); to historical accounts of grandparenting in various times and places (Gourdan, 1999), including visual images of grandparents (Gottlieb, 2021); and biographical and fictional accounts of grandparenting in literature (Beland, Mills, 2001). Further, the several social scientific accounts of grandparenting from human geographers, population scientists, gerontologists and public health experts, social policy specialists, sociologists and psychologists, investigate and analyse aspects of this specific feature of human family life during middle and later age from slightly different perspectives and with varying interests and agendas (e.g., see Danielsbacka *et al.*, 2022; Duflos, Giraudeau, 2022; Szinovacz, 1998; Hayslip, Fruhauf, 2019; Vermote *et al.*, 2021).

In our own field, of early childhood education and care, grandparents are rarely mentioned, despite their importance in the lives of children and families. There are some studies capturing inter-generational social learning (Phillips, 2011) and specific projects to support grandparents and young grandchildren, such as the Eden Project (2021) “Deep Roots, New Shoots” initiative, in the UK. Within the specific context of inclusion, there is evidence of the significance of grandparents’ involvement and support in families where grandchildren are diagnosed with special educational needs and disabilities of different kinds (Hastings, 2006; Lee, Gardner, 2010; Novak-Pavlic *et al.*, 2021).

For the proposed study, a scoping review of articles from education and social sciences will be conducted using ProQuest and EBSCO databases, with the keywords grandparent, grandparents, grandparenting, grandmother and/or grandfather. The results will be filtered for relevance to grandparents’ roles and relationships with grandchildren, and

family education with grandchildren. The selected papers will be summarised as a reader-friendly annotated bibliography to share with grandparent co-researchers. During final data analysis and report, writing this bibliography will form a point of reference to bring project findings into dialogue with existing research.

4. Principles informing the project

Participatory Research recognises respectful, non-dominant and mutual capacity building amongst all participants (Kastner, Motschilnig, 2021). The primary aim of this participatory project is to produce knowledge in collaboration between researchers and research participants. Grandparents will share control of the research not only within the inquiry but in a joint process of knowledge-production that leads to new insights for researchers and participants. This collaborative approach is guided by four fundamental principles of participatory research:

1) Firstly, Bergold and Thomas (2012) propose “democracy” as a precondition for participation. The democratic participation of grandparents and the social commitment of the researchers are only possible where there is a context that allows it. Democracy as a precondition may have consequences on the extent of grandparents’ participation, the selection of research questions and aims, and the nature and dissemination of research findings. The initial context of research is Italy, a democratic republic, with traditions of participatory pedagogy and research. A well-known example of this is the Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education developed in cooperation between children, teachers, pedagogues, parents and the wider community, and supported by networks of academics, artists and other stakeholders (Lazzari, 2012; Malaguzzi, 1993).

2) Second, Bergold and Thomas (2012) emphasise the need for a “safe space” in participatory research. During the process of data collection, participants may disclose their personal views and their own opinions and experiences. Participatory researchers must seek these views, including dissenting views, as they may be essential for processes of knowledge production, and enable discovery of new aspects of a topic. Our research aims to facilitate openness by creating a trusting space where grandparents can be at ease and confident about sharing their views. Grandparents will be assured that they will not suffer any disadvantages if they express critical perspectives. The goal will not be

to restrict participation to conflict-free conversations but rather encourage a joint discussion, with an aim to either resolve conflicts or accept the different positions that are held.

3) The third fundamental principle is about who participates and how. Participatory research is generally conducted directly with the immediately affected persons who, in this case, are grandparents. A primary aim of participatory research is the reconstruction of knowledge with people's involvement. In most cases, co-researchers are from marginalised groups whose views are seldom sought. Research with grandparents, however, is on the rise but mostly in health studies or social work research. The characteristics of their roles have mostly been defined by others, with limited participation from grandparents. Our research, therefore, seeks to work with grandparents who can themselves define their roles, describe their experiences, and contribute to the creation of a pedagogy of grandparenting for the XXI century.

Weil and Mendoza (2019) highlight the need for transparency about sample size and selection of participants in qualitative research with grandparents. Our research will adopt purposive sampling, recruiting via local organisations and social media (library, places of worship, local newspapers, and community Facebook pages) with openness to work with grandmothers and grandfathers from diverse backgrounds and social groups. The initial phase of the project is privately funded and will take place in a town in the south of Italy.

4) Last, but not least, is the fourth principle of different degrees of participation. We acknowledge that not all grandparents may wish to participate fully in all aspects of the project and therefore propose differing opportunities for participation.

Grandparents will be made aware of the structure of the project and the available activities at each stage of the research. They will be given the option to participate voluntarily in either the Working Group(s) (WG) or Research Group (RG), or both (Kanyal, 2014). Grandparents' level of participation will be decided by the participants themselves. All kinds of participation, ranging from quiet observation to full involvement, will be respected. Grandparents may either continue their participation in the project via the RG or exit after participation in one, or both, of the WGs. The RG will analyse the data and share findings with other members of the WGs for discussion and agreement. The RG will co-create content for the project report, identify dissemination opportunities within the community and inform future directions for the research.

The varying possible degrees of participation, via the three distinct WG and RG workshops, are summarised in Tab. 1.

Working Group (WG) Workshop 1	A group of grandparent co-researchers will be recruited to participate in workshops to investigate grandparenting using a Drama Learning Space (DLS) research technique. This technique, drawn from processes of theatrical improvisation, is designed to bring together grandparents of different ages, from a range of backgrounds, to investigate and define their roles, relationships, and requirements. Workshop 1 will use the DLS with grandparents to explore experiences of being a grandparent and draw upon their memories to define the role(s) and definitions of grandparenthood.
Working Group (WG) Workshop 2	Workshop 2 has two parts. The first part of the workshop invites grandparents to participate in mutual decision making on a range of data collection methods. They will co-produce approaches and techniques for capturing and reflecting upon lived experiences with grandchildren. Examples include, but are not restricted to: visual methods, e.g., photo stories, videos, concept maps, timelines or drawings; written accounts, e.g., diaries, narrative or poetry; and/or capturing their conversations and group discussions. Grandparents will experiment with ideas and decide upon the methods of data collection that they feel most comfortable to utilise. The second part of the workshop is for data sharing, in which all evidence will carry the same value. Grandparents will bring and share data within the group and reflect upon their experiences.
Research Group (RG) Workshop 3	The RG will consist of grandparents who wish to continue their participation after the WG. Workshop 3 involves grandparents in analysing diverse lived experiences, utilising thematic content analysis and narrative analyses of data, and using these insights to contribute to a pedagogy of grandparenting. The RG will also identify content for research reports and future dissemination opportunities.

Tab. 1 – *Research Design*

Participatory workshops, in the form of both Working Groups and Research Group, should allow the grandparents to build findings based upon their own experiences rather than derived from any external assumptions (Dahya, Jenson, 2015). The authors of this paper will facilitate the workshops, based upon their experience and expertise. The distinction between the facilitators and grandparents is blurred, for example, by Paulette's boundary-crossing role as a lead member of the project team and grandmother to two young granddaughters.

5. The drama learning space model

Arts-based, creative methods are increasingly used within participatory research to capture the complexities of lived experience, allow for diverse means of expression of ideas, and reduce hierarchies amongst participants and between participants and researchers (Foster, 2007; Kara 2015; Mannay 2015; Lopez et al., 2018). In our project the Drama Learning Space (DLS) model is underpinned by the concept of "process drama" (O'Neill, 1995), meaning that the performance itself is not the goal but rather the learning journeys that participants individually go through in a group learning context. It also refers to an educational drama theory called "Who I am" (Oliva, 1999), according to which, people in a drama workshop explore ways of knowing about, being and acting and communicating with their "whole selves". The DLS is based upon key drama elements (theatrical headlines), such as the role of the character, the tensions that might arise within specific times, places and situations. It also focuses on the use of symbols, movement, and the body as a tool for communication.

Questions that the DLS session will focus on are, for example: who is the character? What is she/he doing? What is happening? Where? When? With whom? What is the grandparent actor trying to communicate?

The DLS allows participants to explore their roles as grandparents, focusing on the "here and now" (in terms of time, place, situation, environment and mood). It uses symbols, sounds and verbal/non-verbal languages through the body and the voice, and for identity enactments. It is thus a flexible learning space for acting, rehearsal and dialogue among grandparents, trying to explore altogether the role that grandparents play in grandchildren's lives, in their family, and more widely in society.

Participants engaged in a drama learning space are involved in

groupwork, connecting emotionally, playing physically, listening intently to themselves and to the others, and responding/enacting creatively as protagonists of their own performances. This means that they will be engaged as grandparents in confronting themselves with possible “disorienting dilemmas” (Mezirow, 2009) that the complexity of grandparenting may bring about. While seeking epistemological and ontological meanings through being on stage, reflection, communication, relationships, and dialogue with others are key means for interpreting the performances and the grandparenting role. This occurs through the elaboration of one’s own experience and sharing with the group after the engagement of the whole self in drama exercises.

The dialectic interdependence and interrelationship among the emotional, affective, cognitive, social, spiritual and physical spheres of the person is a key aspect of the DLS, in initiating transformative learning processes, via “disorienting dilemmas” and questioning of ones’ own frames of reference, ways of thinking, of feeling about things and of acting (Cranton, 2016; Dirkx, 2006; Mangione, 2014; Mezirow, 2009).

The DLS offers a powerful pedagogical means for exploring grandparenting worlds and for developing a pedagogy of grandparenting.

Conclusions

In summary, we propose an arts-based participatory project in which grandparents collaborate as co-researchers to define and describe their roles. A “Working Group” of grandparent researchers will use drama, and other methods of their choice, to explore their lived experiences of grandparenting and reflect upon times spent with their grandchild(ren). A “Research Group”, drawn from members of the Working Group of grandparents, will work as co-researchers to analyse the resulting qualitative data and to utilise co-constructed findings to report on grandparents’ ideas and experiences of their grandparent roles, and to propose a pedagogy of contemporary grandparenting.

In their research into adult basic education, Kastner and Motschilnig (2021) bring together educational practice, participatory research and transformative learning theory as three complementary elements for the establishment of democratic and hopeful education and research. Similarly, this proposed project will combine the following rich ingredients: relational pedagogy, participatory approaches to research with and for grandparents, and the transformative potential of the drama learning

space; further, it will use them as means to co-create new understandings of grandparenting in the XXI century.

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