

## **Grandparent Caregivers: Unsung Voices in Public Education**

**Bradley W. Carpenter**  
**Erica Young**  
**Marcia Carmichael-Murphy**  
*University of Louisville*  
*Kentucky, USA*

**ABSTRACT:** Although there is a significant body of research evaluating the potential effectiveness of parent involvement programs, little research has studied effective methods to reach non-traditional caregivers, specifically grandparents. The purpose of this study is to examine how grandparent caregivers in a particular setting consider the barriers to, and facilitators of, meaningful engagement at the school level. As the first stage in an iterative participatory action research project, the research team conducted a series of interviews to facilitate the co-definition of grandparent engagement issues at a middle and high school. The results offer initial insights as to the importance of listening to grandparent caregivers when seeking to determine the facilitators of, and barriers to, school involvement. These results will be used to further engage the grandparent and school communities in the development of context-specific strategies intended to inspire the meaningful engagement of grandparent caregivers.

### **Introduction**

Researchers have identified effective strategies for involving parents in their children's educational experiences (Williams & Chavkin, 1989; Benson & Martin, 2003; Young & Carpenter, 2008; Lopez, Scribner, & Mahitivanichcha, 2001; Warren, Hong, Rubin, & Uy, 2009) and have consistently demonstrated the positive impact of parent involvement on children's educational success (ESEA, 1964; Steinberg, Lamborn, Dornbusch, & Darling, 1992; Epstein, 1992; Hoover-Dempsey & Sanders, 1995; Desimone, 1999; Turner, 2000; Fan & Chen, 2001; Jeynes, 2003; McGee, 2004; Sturges, Cramer, Harry, & Klingner, 2005; Jeynes, 2007; Auerbach, 2009; Ferrera, 2009). For children growing up in low-income households, parents and their connections with school have an even greater influence on academic outcomes (Halle, Kurtz-Costes, & Mahoney, 1997; Reynolds, 1998; Lee & Bowen, 2006; Gutman & Midgely, 2000). However, while the importance of schools establishing meaningful connections with low-income parents is apparent, the growing population of grandparent caregivers in low-income

communities (Livingston, 2013; U.S. Census Bureau, 2012) raises questions about whether or not schools are equipped to engage these non-traditional caregivers. While research has begun to examine the changing roles of grandparents (Baydar & Brooks-Gunn, 1998; Dolbin-McNab, 2006; Kelch-Oliver, 2011), the literature does not inform educational practitioners as to how the meaningful involvement of grandparent caregivers may benefit schools and the children they are called to serve. In our review of the literature, several deficiencies indicated the need for more focused research in the following areas:

- How and why schools should systematically engage grandparents;
- effective strategies for grandparents seeking to positively impact student achievement;
- social services needed for grandparents of low SES to be actively involved;
- culturally competent involvement strategies for diverse grandparent caregiver populations; and,
- school-level strategies for educational leaders seeking to create and maintain a culture that is receptive to grandparents and other non-traditional caregivers.

Each of these deficiencies calls into question how, and if, educators are equipped with the knowledge necessary to create and implement programs that meet the needs of diverse student and caregiver populations. Although previous research supports the need for districts with academically at-risk populations to develop parent involvement programs to meet their students' educational needs (Kessler-Sklar & Baker, 2000), questions remain as to how programs can better engage non-traditional caregivers. Subsequently, the purpose of this study is to examine how grandparent caregivers and school staff in two low-income communities consider the barriers to, and facilitators of, meaningful engagement at the school level.

## **Review of Literature**

Research pertaining to parent involvement often centers on the passage of legislation mandating school enactment of parent involvement programs. Although legislation has clearly directed schools to require involvement-specific programs, enactment of such programs has been inconsistent and varied in structure. While large amounts of research exist on this topic, an emerging focus of discussion is examination of non-traditional caregivers. Within this sub-group, grandparent caregivers have emerged as a rapidly growing group. As a result, scholars must examine whether or not traditional parent involvement programs are able to meet the needs of a burgeoning grandparent caregiver population.

### **Legislated Involvement**

The pressure being placed on schools to actively engage parents continues to increase. While the legislative emphasis on engaging parents in their children's education is not an entirely new concept (ESEA, 1964), the focus being placed on the enactment of formal involvement programs has increased in recent years (Gonzalez-DeHass, Willems, & Holbein, 2005; Auerbach, 2007; 2009; 2010). In 2015, President Barack Obama signed into law a revised

version of ESEA (1964), titled the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015). The language in ESSA establishes a more expansive vision for caregiver involvement in public schools. Specifically, whereas No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) language narrowly defined engagement policies as pertaining to “parent involvement,” ESSA policies were written to recognize “parent and family engagement” (ESSA, 2015). This small shift in language expanded the definition of those considered to be supervising adults by including surrogate parents as “caregivers”. The addition of this new category, and the acknowledgement of the diverse and evolving definition of parenting and families, indicates a policy shift towards a more inclusive stance on stakeholder engagement policies. As it currently stands, parent and family engagement as defined under ESSA (2015) places a requirement on State Educational Agencies (SEA) and Local Educational Agencies (LEA) to “support the collection and dissemination of...effective parent and family engagement strategies” (p. 44).

The parent involvement policies embedded within reauthorizations of ESEA (1964) have contributed to a tremendously broad array of programs, both in scope and structure, as individual districts and schools have taken advantage of loose oversight by tailoring policies to meet contextually specific needs and demands. Though school-based parental involvement policies were designed to significantly enhance relations between a child's home and the school, implementation efforts rarely led to sustainable and comprehensive parent involvement programs (Sturges et al., 2005). Most recently, ESSA (2015) requires SEAs and LEAs to create and implement parent and family engagement structures that are collaboratively created by stakeholders, evaluated for effectiveness, and use any evaluations to address and rectify barriers to program implementation or stakeholder access. Such parent-involvement mandates associated with ESSA task districts and schools with instituting collaborative efforts that reach beyond the traditionally validated methods such as annual school-wide parent events. Subsequently, school leaders today are expected to devise parent involvement plans that offer a range of multileveled parent activities (Auerbach, 2007; 2010; Epstein, 2005; Flood Lapp, Tinajero, & Nagel, 1995; Warren et al., 2009). ESSA (2015) requires districts and schools to utilize at least one of the following strategies to engage parents and caregivers: (a) supporting schools and educational non-profits in developing professional development focused on parent and caregiver school and academic engagement; (b) supporting parent and caregiver outreach in homes, communities, and at school; (c) sharing information on best practices focused on parent and family engagement, utilizing research-based best practices for increasing the engagement of traditionally marginalized parents and family members; (d) collaborating and/or providing funds for schools and community organizations to collaborate to increase parent and caregiver engagement; and (e) participating in any other activities as determined by the LEA to increase parent and family engagement.

Consequently, parent involvement programs in the public school system remain inconsistent. In many cases, levels of participation on the part of parents and schools are low as both communities struggle to determine the most effective way to engage, support, and sustain meaningful parent involvement (Turner, 2000). As a primary example, teachers and administrators often struggle with how to effectively engage parents who, while aware of their children's educational experiences, appear to be limited in their involvement (Flood et al., 1995; Lopez et al., 2001). At times, schools offer programming for parents, yet parents do not attend involvement-specific events; citing a variety of reasons ranging from being too busy to existent language barriers (Flood et al., 1995). Furthermore, factors such as cultural misunderstandings,

school bureaucracy, and time contribute substantially to low parent involvement (Flood et al., 1995; Lopez et. al., 2001; Mayer, 2002; Tuner, 2000).

Reauthorized versions of ESEA (1964) sought to engage parents and schools in a partnership as a way to share responsibility in academic achievement. However, the absence of an engaged relationship between parents and schools often hinders a schools' ability to involve all parties in sustainable, meaningful collaboration (Sturges et al., 2005; Ferrera, 2009). While the ESSA (2015) established a general framework for implementing parent involvement programs, it is the responsibility of school leaders and district personnel to work collaboratively with caregivers in the design of programs that better meet the needs of diverse stakeholder populations.

The need for parent involvement in schools is rarely questioned; however, the structure and intentionality of parent involvement programs differ greatly. Variances in school and district populations make a universal solution for increased family involvement difficult. Dissimilarities among student and parent populations, neighborhood structures, and socio-economic resources tasks schools with creating customized frameworks that foster interaction among a diverse range of stakeholders. Innovative approaches able to successfully meet the needs of school-specific demands and home-based needs may contribute to the development of positive environments for involvement and promote higher achievement for all students (Young & Carpenter, 2008). It is prudent to utilize components of successful parent involvement programs as the foundation for the development of new outreach strategies. With increasing diversification of family structures, it is critical for educational leaders to reach out to all non-traditional caregivers, not simply to those traditionally defined as parents. Specifically, leaders must acknowledge how the structure of the family has changed dramatically over the last 50 years. Due to a number of social, cultural, and economic shifts there is an increasing frequency of non-traditional family constructions (Roberts, 2008), with one of the larger segments of this population being grandparents.

### **Grandparents as Caregivers**

Increasingly, grandparents are occupying the role of caregivers within economically depressed communities. In 2010, 2.7 million grandparents were considered the primary caregivers of school-age children (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). In 2011, approximately 7 million children in the United States were living with a grandparent, and approximately 3 million children were receiving their primary care from grandparents (Livingston, 2013; U.S. Census Bureau, 2012).

**Research.** Little empirical research exists that identifies effective strategies for engaging grandparent caregivers in their grandchildren's educational experience. A number of small-scale studies have identified recommendations for interventions (Dolbin-McNab, 2006; Goodman & Silverstein, 2005; Kelch-Oliver, 2011; King & Elder, 1998; Mayer, 2002); however, additional research is needed to determine grandparent caregivers' perspectives on how schools can best partner with grandparents regarding their students' educational goals.

Kelch-Oliver (2011) conducted an exploratory study, interviewing six custodial grandparents and fourteen grandchildren. Based on these interviews, Kelch-Oliver (2011) recommends applying strengths-based approaches, looking at students' experiences and challenges in the context of parental loss, and expressive therapies for school personnel supporting grandchildren and custodial grandparents. Mayer (2002) reviewed U.S. Census data in her descriptive study of grandparent caregivers. She identifies the importance of informing

grandparent caregivers of relevant community resources, providing parenting classes, allowing extra time for conferences for grandparents, and connecting grandparents with lawyers to support them in custody arrangements (Mayer, 2002). Dolbin-MacNab (2006) interviewed 40 custodial grandmothers and proposed interventions for grandparent caregivers that included information on current parenting practices and child development, strategies and resources related to aging, balancing the role of grandparent and parent, and creating opportunities for discussion and support with other grandparent caregivers.

**Grandparent Value.** To find literature on the direct and indirect benefits that involved grandparents offer students and schools, the fields of gerontology, social work, and nursing must be consulted. Consequently, scholars in the field of educational leadership and school practitioners have been provided with a dearth of researched information as to the ways in which grandparents may contribute to a fruitful home/school partnership. Many grandparents bring great wisdom and experience to their second life as a full-time parent. Specifically, grandparents may have more time and attention to spend on their grandchildren, allowing them to engage in the child-rearing process in ways they were simply unable to with their own children (Dolbin-MacNab, 2006). Grandparents may also enjoy the emotional/psychological benefits of rearing children (Pruchno & McKenney, 2002), thus providing the healthy home atmosphere needed to facilitate increased levels of academic achievement. Additionally, grandparent caregivers may benefit from increased levels of social support (Szinovacz, DeViney & Atkinson, 1999), providing children an intricately networked support system. Finally, Baydar & Brooks-Gunn (1998) found that 38% of grandmothers held social and civic roles. This civic presence may allow grandparents to engage in community activities, and thus provide grandparents with an opportunity to introduce schools to important entities within the broader community.

**Challenges of Grandparents as Guardians.** Beyond a number of issues related to age and health—in 2012, 690,000 of grandparent caregivers were considered to be physically disabled (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012)—lack of adequate finances are the primary challenge facing today’s grandparent caregiver population. Approximately 580,000 grandparent caregivers lived below the poverty line in 2010 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Children cared for by grandparents are more likely to be living below the poverty line (28% versus 17%) and are more likely to have lower median household income (\$36,000 versus \$48,000) than children not being cared for by grandparents (Livingston, 2013).

Representing close to 45% of grandparent caregivers (Okazawa-Rey, 1998), grandparents of color are uniquely challenged with issues pertaining to finance. When compared to their white counterparts, grandparent caregivers of color are more likely to have experienced poverty, worked in low-paying jobs, received public assistance, and are more likely to care for more than one grandchild for an extended period of time without adequate resources (Poindexter & Linsk, 1999; Simpson & Lawrence-Webb, 2009; Whitley, Kelley, & Campos, 2011). Due to the important connection between parent involvement and the academic achievement of students, and the growing population of grandparent caregivers, further examination of grandparent engagement is imperative for school and district personnel seeking to support the diverse needs of students and their non-traditional families.

Raising grandchildren presents a unique set of challenges, especially for those facing physical or financial hardships. While many grandparents must work through issues of health, disability, and issues pertaining to living on a fixed income, they often possess strengths that

support their ability to provide invaluable resources to their student-grandchildren. Years of childrearing and post-childrearing reflection provide grandparents with a unique perspective on their roles as a primary caregiver. They often have more free time to devote to their grandchildren and can be much more engaged in the community than they were as parents. Both the challenges and strengths warrant deeper study of the unique issues confronting grandparent caregivers, as the field of educational leadership needs to develop a more nuanced understanding of how grandparents perceive the barriers to, and facilitators of, meaningful involvement in the schooling experiences of their grandchildren.

### **Conceptual Framework**

In this study, we apply community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005), an adaptation on Bourdieu's (2011) social and cultural capital that places greater value on the strengths of communities of color. Community cultural wealth was developed through a Critical Race Theory perspective on cultural and social capital, expanding from the traditionally accepted notions that often view people of color in a deficit-based mindset to a more culturally inclusive understanding of capital. In the analysis of data, we identify both the existence and absence of Yosso's (2005) six types of capital, community cultural wealth.

The six types of capital in community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) include *aspirational capital*, *linguistic capital*, *familial capital*, *social capital*, *navigational capital*, and *resistant capital* (Yosso, 2005). *Aspirational capital* involves the ability to maintain hope in spite of past failures and significant failures. Those who have strong aspirational capital believe in a "culture of possibility" (Yosso, 2005, p. 78). *Linguistic capital* focuses on intellectual and social skills including forms of expression and communication: storytelling, oral history, visual art, music and poetry. *Familial capital* includes community history and kinship networks such as family, teams, groups, and religious and community centers. *Social capital* involves networks of people and community resources and how people unite together to resist racism. *Navigational capital* demonstrates the way people of color maneuver through social institutions (e.g., schools, discipline systems) that were not originally designed with people of color in mind. People with navigational capital show individual agency and self-advocacy. Finally, *resistant capital* (also transformative capital) focuses on the cultural wealth within an individual, family or community that is used to change oppressive structures. Resistant capital is the way people assert a different viewpoint against the frequently racist master narrative (Yosso, 2005). By applying the conceptual framework of community cultural wealth to the interview data we collected from grandparent caregivers, we can more fully understand the strengths and challenges of grandparent caregivers across a multitude of areas that educators might not typically consider. With this culturally inclusive approach to identifying strengths in the presence of certain types of capital, as well as the absence of some types of capital, educators can gain insights as to the ways in which school communities can better serve the students in their care, and thus promote an understanding of the barriers to, and facilitators of, meaningful involvement at the school level.

### **Methods**

This analysis is structured as an exploratory study, constructed as the first stage of a more in-depth participatory action research (PAR) project focused on addressing the wide range of complexities associated with schools attempting to audit their current involvement practices. Specifically, in the spirit of a participatory project where hierarchies are removed and multiple

stakeholders collaboratively define the issues of local concern, the long-term goals of this study are focused on helping schools to increase meaningful engagement with a more diverse range of stakeholders (James, Milenkiewicz, & Bucknam, 2008). The purpose of this particular collaborative effort is to develop and evaluate a set of contextually specific school involvement activities for a growing population of low-income grandparent caregivers at the middle and high school levels. The first stage of this study is based upon the iterative analysis of data gathered through thirteen semi-structured interviews, six middle and high school personnel and seven middle and high school grandparent caregivers.

The initial interview questions asked participants to reflect on the facilitators and barriers associated with meaningful involvement for grandparent caregivers at two focus schools: Monroe Middle School and Sharp High School (pseudonyms). Again, seeking to honor the principles of PAR, the goal of our initial interviews with grandparents was to help participants uncover how they might define solutions to the issues surrounding school engagement. With this as an initial goal, we asked grandparent caregivers and school employees to reflect on the perceived level of receptivity extended toward grandparent caregivers. Our interactions with grandparent caregivers and school faculty challenged participants to intentionally consider the ways in which involvement activities at each school were structured to encourage meaningful grandparent involvement.

As an exploratory study, our initial interactions with interviewees allowed us to collaboratively participate in the first stage of a PAR study. Specifically, we began an iterative set of interactions allowing us to develop contextually relevant and culturally competent involvement strategies by working alongside grandparent caregivers and school staff. These interactions allowed us to collaboratively develop questions focused on a particular set of issues. For this study, the focus includes the obstacles and facilitators of grandparent caregiver involvement at a middle and high school located within in a low-income and predominately Black community. This process provided us with an opportunity to co-examine a critical involvement issue in our own community, thus redefining the view that our university was the “exclusive space for thinking and theorizing” (McIntyre, 2008; p. 8). By participating in collaborative sense making (listening and reflecting) with grandparent caregivers and school stakeholders, we were able to co-define a number of relevant issues contributing to the current state of grandparent caregiver involvement in each of these two school communities.

### **The Research Team**

The research team consists of five doctoral students from a local university and one of their advising professors. All five doctoral students are employees of the school district in which the studied schools are located. Two members of the student research team are teachers, two serve in administrative roles, and one serves as a school social worker. Three of the student researchers are employed at the middle, and two of the student researchers are currently employed at the high school. All of the doctoral student researchers identify as middle class. Two of the researchers identify as White, one identifies as Black, and two members of the student researcher team identify as biracial. The professor leading this research team identifies as a middle class, White male.

As a research team we met regularly to discuss reviewed literature, establishing areas of interest to be explored with grandparent caregivers and school personnel. The research team worked collaboratively to conduct interviews with participants and code each interview transcription. The five doctoral students met twice a week for coursework throughout the

duration of this study, as they are members of a three-year executive doctorate cohort focused on educational leadership in the urban context. All aspects of the research process for this study were supervised by the university professor and collectively reviewed and monitored by the group.

### Site Selection

Two schools were selected for this study, Monroe Middle School and Sharp High School. Both of the schools share geographic, historic, economic, and racial contexts. Student populations from the middle school matriculate to the high school as both schools draw from the same two geographic areas, the Smithtown and Sharp neighborhoods.

**Monroe Middle School.** Monroe Middle School (MMS) is one of three Math, Science, and Technology (MST) middle school magnets located within the Johnstown School District (JSD). Located in the Smithtown neighborhood, MMS is embedded within an integrated working-class neighborhood in the southeast United States. As of 2010, 63 percent of residents in the primary Smithtown ZIP code identify themselves as Black or African American, while 33 percent identify themselves as White (U.S. Census, 2010). The primary Smithtown ZIP code has the lowest average family income (\$17,415 per year) of all Johnstown County ZIP codes (Johnstown School Databook, 2014). Monroe Middle School is in the heart of Smithtown and is surrounded geographically by several recently demolished public housing structures. Currently, 47 percent of Monroe students receive free or reduced-price meals. Monroe is the fifth largest middle school in JSD with 1143 students. The racial makeup of Monroe is approximately 32 percent Black/African American, 46 percent White, and 21 percent other (Johnstown School Databook, 2014).

**Sharp High School.** Sharp High School (SHS) is located in the Sharp neighborhood in JSD. From the 1800s until the housing integration movement of the 1950s, this neighborhood was a White middle-class to upper middle-class suburb of the city. The integration movement induced White flight, as many White families moved to other neighborhoods, allowing both working and middle-class White and Black families to move in. Per the JSD school districting guidelines, SHS currently serves JSD as a non-resident school, meaning it accepts and enrolls students from any ZIP code. Yet, for the 2013-2014 school year, 61 percent of the pupil population were drawn from the primary SHS ZIP code. Sharp High School attracts relatively few students from other parts of Johnstown County for its magnet programs focused on engineering and technology. Currently, 87 percent of students receive free or reduced-price meals. Sharp High School enrollment has declined for the last few years and had the lowest enrollment of any high school in JSD during the 2013-2014 school year, with only 559 students. The racial makeup of the Sharp High School is approximately 50 percent Black/African American and 50 percent White/Other (Johnstown School Databook, 2014). Since 2008, Sharp High School has been ranked in the first percentile for student achievement in the state.

### Sample Population

The research team employed a convenience sample (Patton, 1990) of grandparent caregivers, recruiting participants by analyzing school data available on the district database for the two schools selected. Potential participants were identified through contact information listings of students enrolled at each of the two schools during the time of the data collection.



## Grandparent Caregivers

After seeking appropriate district and principal approval, eligible caregivers were identified through a search tool allowing the identification of grandparents listed as official guardians. We invited grandparent caregivers to participate in the study by mail and phone. The research team recruited three grandparent caregivers at each school for participation in the exploratory study, with a total of seven participants (including one couple). The grandparents interviewed represented a variety of races and income levels.

Researchers chose to interview grandparents, providing them with an opportunity to embrace their own sense of agency by sharing their stories and lived histories (Freire, 1996) as it pertained to the challenges associated with meaningful involvement. Although interview processes may increase bias in responses due to researcher presence (Creswell, 2008), our research team reflexively considered our own personal biographies (McIntyre, 2008) as we collectively listened to, and made sense of, the rich data made available through personal stories and perspectives of participants.

The research team conducted six individual interviews of grandparent caregivers for analysis. For the purposes of the pilot study, the team targeted a small representation of the grandparent caregiver population at the two schools. Interviews were scheduled at locations chosen by the participants (home, school, work, other community location) and a date and time most convenient for participants. Standard interview protocols were used amongst the research team to increase reliability from one interview to another (Creswell, 2008). The interview guide consisted of questions seeking to engage the grandparent in reflection about their perceived experiences regarding their student's education and school.

Initial conversations with grandparent caregivers sought to better understand the unique positionality of grandparents and their perceptual understanding of involvement with their grandchild's school experience. Additionally, we wanted to provide grandparents with an opportunity to share their opinions on how efforts by each of the school communities engaged them as partners and how school leaders might seek to strengthen collaboration with grandparent caregivers. The interview questions were developed based on grandparent caregiving and parental involvement research (Reynolds, 1998; Halle et al., 1997; Warren et al., 2009; U.S. Census Bureau, 2012; Kelch-Oliver, 2011).

The three grandparent interviews at Monroe Middle School included Debbie, Jane, Roger, and Linda. Debbie is a Black woman in her fifties responsible for five of her many grandchildren. While living on a limited fixed income, Debbie took custody of her grandchildren after the untimely death of her own daughter. Jane, a White female, is a grandmother in her fifties and is responsible for two of her grandchildren (7 years old and 13 years old). She works at Monroe Middle School as support staff. Roger and Linda, a white male and female, were interviewed together. Both in their fifties, Roger and Linda are currently raising one of their grandchildren. The wife works as a nurse full-time, and the husband is retired.

The three grandparent interviews at Sharp High school included Betty, Ruth and Denise. Betty, a 53-year-old Black woman, cares for her 15-year-old granddaughter whose mother died when she was an infant. Betty previously worked in the healthcare field, but now receives disability due to health issues. Ruth, a 61-year-old White woman, looks after her 17-year-old grandson. She did not share the circumstances of her caregiving role, but informed us that she has held custody of her grandson since he was 12 years old. She has held an administrative assistant position in a law office for over ten years. Denise, a 52-year-old Black woman, cares for her two grandsons with additional support from her own mother. She works as an administrative support staff at another school in Johnstown School District.

## Data Analysis

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and a qualitative codebook was created for the analysis of the transcripts. The codebook contains indicators driven by the literature review and emic themes derived from the data analysis process. All codes were organized under broader categories, or families, that revealed a general sense of the information, and the researchers reflected on what was gathered.

The second round of data coding incorporated specific consideration of Yosso's (2005) six forms of community cultural wealth. The researchers then thoroughly reread the interview transcripts to correctly code the data for the etic code families using the process of winnowing. Finally, the research team examined the data coded with the selective codes in order to build additional layers of complex analysis (Creswell, 2008).

## Findings

Through a number of reflective conversations with grandparent caregivers, the research team drew significant insights as to how grandparent caregivers view the facilitators and barriers to meaningful engagement within the framework of community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005). Each grandparent caregiver highlighted his or her own strengths in linguistic capital (communication), familial capital (kinship networks), and navigational capital (agency and advocacy). More than half of the grandparent caregivers shared perspectives related to strengths in the other three areas of community cultural wealth: aspirational capital, social capital, and resistant capital. The areas identified by grandparent caregivers as barriers primarily focused on issues connected with social capital and navigational capital. Each of these identified themes will be further explored through the analysis of voice and related salient quotes. Although we interviewed school staff, the data we collected from grandparent caregivers emerged as most pertinent to the purposes of this study and thus focused our research findings on highlighting their voices.

## Linguistic Capital

Yosso's (2005) framework focuses on the many different forms of expression people use, such as oral history, music, and art. In this study, linguistic capital emerged as basic conversations. For the grandparents interviewed, issues pertaining to linguistic capital focused on communication with the school and issues related to grandparent caregivers and the youth in their care. Grandparent caregivers emphasized the importance of openness across contexts. Each grandparent caregiver stressed the value of receiving frequent communications from the school staff. Additionally, grandparents frequently spoke about their efforts to attend school events such as open house, parent-teacher conferences, and their child's extracurricular activities. Denise, grandmother to a high school student, shared, "I would say that...I feel very connected even though I am not there because they communicate. Man, that school he is at now, they communicate superbly." She described the school efforts to connect with caregivers through email, texts, and phone calls to promote events. The same grandparent spoke to how such efforts—reminders and persistence in communicating—helped her feel more encouraged, and even obligated, to attend events she probably would not have attended otherwise.

While grandparents were somewhat pleased with their school's communication strategy, they also expressed interest in more proactive communication from the school: "My thing would be please contact me when my child is below C average or if my child is not being successful."

Denise spoke about her desire for the school to notify her on a more regular basis about her child's academic progress. Several grandparents recommended that school staff be more intentional about reaching out to grandparent caregivers through home visits to learn more about the family's individual situation and potential communicative challenges.

Grandparents also spoke about the strength in communication between themselves and the youth in their care. Four of the six caregivers highlighted the importance they see in maintaining open communication with their grandchild. Betty, a grandmother of a high school student, stated, "But when Jasmine (pseudonym) wants to sit and talk, and Jasmine can talk (laughter), I just sit back and say okay...I'm listening and I have to give her something back coming from me...I just say, 'What's on your mind?'...anything...everything..." Betty prioritizes listening to her granddaughter and her experiences, creating an open line of communication that ultimately serves as a support for her granddaughter to learn, process, and strengthen her own communication skills.

### **Familial Capital**

Kinship networks emerged as an important strength for all of the grandparent caregivers interviewed. Although Yosso (2005) extends the concept of familial capital beyond kin to teams, community, and religion, the grandparents interviewed focused on the natural family relationships that they draw on for support for themselves and their grandchildren. They all took responsibility for their grandchildren due to the child's mother and/or father no longer being involved, in some cases due to death or substance use. Betty described her role by saying, "That child has to be raised, parent or the grandparent, they have to be raised." Grandparents felt strongly that they needed to fill the role of the absent parent and be there for the children. Each person we visited with spoke sincerely about the joys of taking on this additional responsibility for their grandchild(ren). In addition, grandparents also emphasized the importance of students having access to an extended network of other grandparents, aunts, uncles and siblings. Debbie, whose grandchildren's mother died, described the way children came together in their grief, "They cling to each other, they talk to each other, and they grow with each other." For these youth, the loss of their mother brought them closer together and strengthened their bonds as siblings. The strength of family holds even greater importance for youth in the care of their grandparents, and grandparents wanted school staff to be more closely attuned to the unique circumstances of their grandchild.

### **Navigational Capital**

Each of the grandparents interviewed described their own areas of strength in relation to maneuvering through the school system. The public education system represents a social institution not originally designed with people of color in mind and that Yosso (2005) identifies as an area where people demonstrate navigational capital. With exception of one grandparent, each participant emphasized areas in which they, or the school staff, could improve in navigating the school system and related resources. The strengths identified in navigating school-related processes included knowing who to contact at school, how to contact important persons, and being able to access Internet technology so they could stay engaged in their child's education by monitoring progress online. Linda stated, "I am...very active as far as parent portal and emailing the teachers and all that new technology that, you know, that we can press on to still be a part of and you know still feel like you are there." Grandparent caregivers appreciated being able to access online portals to check student grades and communicate with teachers. However, Jane

shared that she often struggles with accessing technology and would like the school to offer more information and guidance in how to use these systems. She restated her granddaughter's comment about using technology, " 'Nanny, you don't know how to do anything' and she's right to a degree." Jane expressed interest in more support for caregivers in understanding the technologies used to monitor student progress.

In addition to support related to technology, grandparents expressed the need for additional information about the ways in which the school system and society has changed since they raised their children. Denise suggested the school give more guidance on "how their day runs," and others expressed a need for more explicit communication about the policies and procedures around absences, automated attendance calls, the school calendar, and finding resources online to support their grandchild's learning.

### **Aspirational Capital**

Although the grandparents interviewed did not initially plan to care for their grandchildren during the middle or high school years, they embraced the opportunity and entered the experience with a sense of reflective perspective on their past child-rearing efforts. The grandparents we spoke to maintained hope despite less-than-desirable outcomes they endured with some of their own children, which could be seen as past failures, representing Yosso's (2005) conceptualization of aspirational capital. Linda described her role as trying to create better opportunities and a better situation for her grandchild, "Because there are things no matter how good you try and make it or better you try and make it for the child than what they had it before, there is just baggage there." Linda recognizes she has entered an extremely challenging situation as the caregiver for a young person with an absent parent(s). Yet, she chooses to focus her energies on what she can do to support the child, looking for ways she can contribute due to the fact that the child's parent is not present. She maintains hope despite significant barriers and perseveres in this relationship knowing that, while she cannot fix each of the problems facing her grandchild, she can make a positive difference.

Grandparents also reflected on their desire to improve upon their caregiving so they could create better outcomes for their grandchildren than their children experienced. Jane explained her views on family patterns of behavior and how she tries to encourage her granddaughter to break the cycle:

I also try and give her the long term. You know, where do you see yourself, you know, what do you see yourself doing, you know. That kind of stuff. We've also talked about, you know, her mom, because her mom is my daughter and she had her young and everything, and I explained to her and everything to look at the pattern and you know. Children having children out of wedlock...tried to make her aware of what her future could be....I have made some mistakes...but I've done some good things, too...I'm a little bit stronger, a little bit wiser, and I see what bad choices can do for your children.

Jane views her opportunity to raise her granddaughter as a second chance in some respects. She has the chance, the second time around, to support her granddaughter in being more successful than her own mother. Jane has also recognized her own role in the outcomes of her daughter and wants to use learning from her past experiences to provide better opportunities for her granddaughter.

### **Social Capital**

Yosso (2005) defines social capital as networks of people who unite together against racism. Although this study included grandparents of color in a primarily Black community, several of the participants were White. None of the grandparents reported specific experiences with racism or efforts to address racism. However, participants in four out of six interviews described their application of, and lack of, social capital in regards to networks of people and community resources. The strengths of grandparent caregivers in this area included involvement in the Parent Teacher Association and other volunteer work, which allowed them to access resources such as counseling, extracurricular activities, and provided them opportunities to spend quality time with their children and children's friends. In contrast, within the realm of social capital, the areas of need for grandparent caregivers include a lack of: resources and transportation, supports specific to grandparent caregivers, time, and friends with shared experiences.

Grandparent caregivers viewed time as both a resource and a need. Two grandparent caregivers identified as members of the PTA. However, Roger and Linda expressed they did not have the time to be as involved as they would like, "As far as actively being involved here, we are members of the PTA, and we try and support the fundraisers.... As far as physically being at the school, we don't get to do that because I work full time out of the home." While they both valued the opportunity to be involved, they have employment responsibilities and cannot commit the time they would like to in being physically present at the school for activities and functions. Jane did not identify herself as a PTA member, but she emphasized the time she contributes more informally to volunteering with her grandchild's athletics team, "I'm asked to volunteer, the basketball and volleyball team and travel...I volunteer anyway, sell tickets at the volleyball game, at the concession stand, always driving kids somewhere...." She provides invaluable support to the team and coaches by choosing to spend her time volunteering. In an even more informal arrangement, Betty discussed her use of free time to spend more time with her granddaughter and her friends:

Makes me feel good, doing something right. Because her little friends now, they'll come to me. They'll call me gram. They say can we talk about girls session...they got they parents but they ask me to do their hair. But it feels good. I love that. I don't mind it. I'd rather them come to me than anybody in the street who really don't know them. And I got to know them. Like my own basically. Now I got to the point where I tell Jasmine where your friends at... Well, I could say I got more time really to spend with them. I'm not saying they [their parents] don't have time but I'm not working, their parents are working...I'm willing to listen to 'em... I say anything on your mind, you know maybe some crazy words and I'm listening....

Betty serves as a social resource for her granddaughter, her granddaughter's friends, and their families. Betty no longer has work commitments, so is able to spend time with the teenagers, listen to them, give advice, keep an eye on them and follow up when they are not meeting her expectations.

Although the population of grandparent caregivers has grown significantly in recent years, the extent to which grandparent caregivers have opportunities to connect with one another remains limited. Jane shared, "a support group would be really good." Betty expressed, "So far, of all my friends, I'm the only grandparent raising a grandchild in my circle." The lack of

opportunity to share experiences through informal or formal networks further isolates grandparent caregivers and limits their ability to learn from, encourage, and support one another. Due to the lack of networks, grandparent caregivers hold limited potential to successfully counter situations where they or their grandchildren are marginalized.

### **Resistant Capital**

Overall, the grandparent caregivers interviewed believed strongly in their responsibility to advocate for their grandchildren by speaking up, taking initiative, and being proactive. Aligned with Yosso's (2005) description of resistant capital, the grandparents interviewed asserted their varied viewpoints to contest the master narratives that poor children cannot learn and low income caregivers do not care about education. Four of the grandparent caregivers explicitly mentioned these areas as of strength. The other two grandparent caregivers did not mention anything representing a strength or need relating to resistant capital. Debbie spoke most emphatically about self-advocacy and independence:

You can't wait with your mouth shut, you have to seek out....Don't rely on nobody to take care of you. You should learn to take care of yourself...I tell [my grandchildren] to open your mouth...when they get it wrong they think they should have known this. But I have to say you're not going to know everything.

Debbie leads by example in encouraging her grandchildren to use their voices, to be outspoken, and to take risks. She explains the importance of self-sufficiency and vocalizing one's opinions. However, her comments only begin to explore the complexity of resistant capital. This is an area in which many grandparents may feel marginalized, disempowered, or simply overwhelmed by the responsibilities they have taken on while raising their grandchildren.

### **Discussion**

Throughout our interviews with participants, evidence of reflection for future practice was evident. The grandparent narratives we encountered were often aligned with the literature describing the unique experiences of grandparent caregivers and often highlighted what the literature claims is the important task of engaging grandparents in specific and thoughtful ways. While the grandparents we visited with possessed strengths across all six areas of community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005), the strengths most frequently surfacing were in the areas of linguistic, familial, and aspirational capital. Our findings also reinforce literature speaking to the importance of building on identified strengths in grandparent caregivers and the ways in which school leaders should better address the barriers to, and facilitators of, meaningful school involvement for grandparent caregivers (Baydar & Brooks-Gunn, 1998; Dolbin-MacNab, 2006; Kelch-Oliver, 2011; Pruchno & McKenney, 2002).

Study findings support the potential benefits of grandparent caregivers as identified in the literature, including time to better communicate (Dolbin-MacNab, 2006); enhanced ability to reflect on, and enjoy, their child-rearing role (Pruchno & McKenney, 2002); and a commitment to civic involvement (Baydar & Brooks-Gunn 1998). Our findings also highlight the strong familial bonds present within grandparent caregiver families, including extended kinship networks and siblings who grew closer in times of distress. We also identified the benefit grandparent caregivers provide as role models for the friends of their grandchildren. This role

was often realized due to the fact that grandparents had more time to spend with their grandchildren's peers than the youths' own parents. In addition to the reflective insights that are provided through raising children a second time, grandparents expressed aspirational capital as they exhibited high levels of motivation to improve on the practices they enacted when raising their own children. Finally, our research emphasizes the importance grandparents attributed to the open communication they were able to establish with their grandchildren, using the additional time they were gifted as grandparents to deeply connect with their grandchildren.

Regarding the challenges of grandparent caregivers, our research mirrors the literature in many ways, but several new recommendations emerged. As stated in existing research, participants reported a need for additional information on community resources, extended time to connect with school professionals, and parenting classes (Mayer, 2002). Our findings also identify the difficulties grandparents face in navigating a school system that has changed significantly since they raised children as a tremendous barrier to grandparent involvement. Specifically, grandparents struggle to fully understand how to navigate schools due to the increased use of technology and the presence of new policies and procedures. Although some of the grandparent caregivers identified challenges with technology, others reported confidence in their ability to access and monitor student progress online.

In summary, school leaders should consider the following recommendations when seeking to improve the involvement of grandparent caregivers. Regarding communication, school leaders should continue using multiple modes of communication when reaching out to families. School staff should consistently review the school data on the types of caregivers they serve. Better identification of caregiver populations will allow schools to provide grandparent stakeholders with more frequent and appropriately targeted information. This type of communication was often requested by participants in our study and is emphasized in the research literature (Eliason, 2014). This type of purposeful outreach builds on the already existing relationships many grandparent caregivers have established with their grandchildren. Frequent communication with grandparents may better encourage a more open dialogue between grandparents and grandchildren, thus increasing school-related conversations specific to recent changes in the school system, social issues affecting youth, school schedules, policies and procedures (especially related to attendance), and available online and community resources.

Schools should also increase proactive communication as it pertains to progress reporting and outreach efforts. By doing so, schools may be able to better embrace the extended kinship networks with other family members and thus broaden the support network of the student within the school context. School professionals should also acknowledge and affirm the hope and resilience possessed by grandparent caregivers and the youth in their care. To more fully engage grandparent caregivers, schools may consider holding support groups for grandparent caregivers to meet others in similar situations. By viewing them as vital social and community resources within and outside of the school walls, schools may be able to build stronger partnerships with this often overlooked and unsung caregiver population.

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