Black Women as Learners: Adult Education and Family Literacy Program Participation among Primary Caregiving Grandmothers

Mattyna L. Stephens
Texas A&M University

Mary Alfred
Texas A&M University

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Mattyna L. Stephens, Texas A&M University
Dr. Mary Alfred, Texas A&M University

Abstract: The purpose of this study was to examine how Black grandmothers who are the primary caregivers promote literacy for themselves and for the grandchild or grandchildren in their care. The findings were situated into a three category model (author developed). Implications for research and practice are also provided.

Introduction

Historically, Black grandparents, and particularly grandmothers, would assume roles as the primary caregivers of their grandchild or grandchildren as a way to stabilize the family during times of slavery when the family was separated, and periods of migration when the biological parents would move to northern states for economic sustainability (Ruiz, 2008). Since the eighties, there has been a resurgence of the phenomenon of grandmothers becoming mothers for the second time or primary caregivers of their grandchildren (Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families, Region IV (DOHHSACFRIV), 2007). With respect to race and ethnicity, Black children are the largest populations of children whose grandparents are the primary caregivers representing 51.7 percent of this group, with White children following at 41.6 percent, and Hispanic children at 34.7 percent (Simmons & Dye, 2003). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine how Black grandmothers who are the primary caregivers promote literacy for themselves and for the grandchildren in their care. Established as a result of the growing phenomenon of grandparents as primary caregivers, the research question was twofold: (a) what skill sets do Black primary caregiving grandmothers acquire by participating in family literacy or adult education programs? And (b) how do they transfer literacy practices to their grandchildren for their development?

Conceptual Framework

The framework was drawn from the concepts of intergenerational theory and "kinkeeping", intergenerational learning as it relates to family literacy, and multiple literacies. Intergenerational theory critically assesses the emergent phenomenon of grandparents assuming the role as primary caregiver of their grandchild in more recent times (Gibson, 2005). Kinship care, gained its roots from the term "kinkeeping". "Kinkeeping" specifically describes the durability of Black families in earlier times, as Black grandparents assumed the role of primary caregiver (Burton & Dilworth-Anderson, 1991). In their research, scholars like Gadsden and Hall (1996) referenced the concept "intergenerational learning" when describing family literacy programs where learning stretches beyond the traditional family to include parents, and other primary caretakers like grandparents.

Research Design

The application of a basic qualitative study (Merriam, 2009) along with life history research (Cole & Knowles, 2001) helped to explore the life experiences of Black grandmothers who serve as the primary caregivers of their grandchildren. In order to be selected to participate in the study, the

grandmothers were required to have participated or currently participating in an adult education or family literacy program. Of the eight participants selected for the study, at least six of them were obtained through the Black church. The remaining participants were acquired through a snowball sampling technique (Merriam). The research instrument utilized to garner the lived experiences of the participants was a semi-structured interview protocol. Once the data was collected, it was transcribed verbatim. Next, I conducted line-by-line or open coding where concepts or phrases were identified to describe each unit of analysis. Following this, I searched for patterns or regularities among the data in order to identify themes that would help answer the research questions.

Findings and Discussion

The findings indicated the ways in which these grandmothers promoted literacy for themselves and for the grandchildren in their care were situated within a three category model that included: Category I, Self-Promotion of Literacy; Category II, Self-Promotion of Literacy Aside from Program Participation; and Category III, Methods for Transferring Literacy to the Grandchild or Grandchildren in their Care (See Table 1).

Table 1: *Three Category Model for Promoting Literacy*

Category 1 Self-Promotion of Literacy	Category 2 Self-Promotion of Literacy Aside from Program Participation	Category 3 Methods for Transferring Literacy to the Grandchild or Grandchildren

Themes
Program Participation
• Post-secondary, adult education and family literacy program participation
Strategies that Helped Facilitate Learning
Subthemes
• Scaffolding
• Culturally Relevant Teaching
• Behavioral Modeling
	Themes
	Political Literacy
	• Advocacy
	Civic Literacy
	• PTA
	Faith Literacy
	• Four facets of faith
	  • scripture reading
	  • Sunday school/vacation bible school
	  • daily Prayer
	  • participation in church related activities
		Themes
		Developing Oral and Written Language Skills
		• Reading and counting aloud
		• Side by side teaching and modeling for spelling and writing
		• Sight words
		• Retelling the story
		• Intervention (speech therapy)
		• Academic coaches
		• Transition programs
		Developing Visual Literacy Skills
		• DVD and cable television
		• Traveling and field trips
		• Flashcards
		Developing Numeracy Skills
		• Modeling
		• Paid tutoring
		• On-line resources
		• Joining a math group

The chart provides a visual of the themes and subthemes within each category. In Category I, there were two themes and three subthemes identified as most occurring in the findings. For Category II, there were three dominate themes that emerged. Regarding Category III, the strategies were categorized under three thematic headings. These headings were: (a) developing oral and written language skills, (b) developing visual literacy skills, and (c) developing numeracy skills. The themes and subthemes of each category are outlined.

Category I: Self Promotion of Literacy

   Regarding Category I, the overarching themes were: adult and family literacy program participation; and the strategies employed to help facilitate the learning while participating in these programs. Regarding the theme of adult and family literacy program participation, given the demographics of the primary caregivers in this study, at least half of them had earned either an Associates or Bachelor's degree, or had attended college for a period of time. Some of the grandmothers had participated in multiple forms of adult education programming. Under the theme of strategies employed to help facilitate learning, there were some subthemes that were most noticeable in the findings which included: scaffolding, culturally relevant teaching, and behavioral modeling.

   Scaffolding. For these participants, scaffolding was used to describe the ways in which these grandmothers grasped concepts, retained information, and problem solved in their learning environment. The responses from the grandmothers when describing their scaffolding experiences were "teaching in chunks" (Violet), "step-by-step process" (Pansy), and "you learn and then you add something new and then you go back to the old thing and learn something again" (Violet). Paying close attention to retention

strategies, in relation to scaffolding, some of the grandmothers used terms like "saying it back to them", "read and have us say it back to them" (Henrietta), "say something and point at the students and have us say the answer back to them" (Violet) as a way to describe the retention strategies employed in their learning environment. Some of the grandmother's mentioned ability to talk through processes or learning the jargon of the subject matter were strategies that helped them to problem solve (Dove and Takang).

   Culturally relevant teaching. Attending to culturally relevant teaching, the grandmothers participating in family literacy programs described how the instructors incorporated individual's lived experiences into the lesson as a way to facilitate learning. When participating in their adult programs, one of the grandmothers reported as a way to enhance the learning within their programs, the teachers incorporated the participants' cultural experiences into the lesson. She described,

> During the family literacy program, each parent would take a turn reading a page from a book. Afterwards, we would have a discussion. During the discussion… relate the book or story to our personal lives…. examine the pictures in the book and describe how the story fits into our personal lives. The children… develop a piece of artwork to describe how the reading fits into their family life (Henrietta).

Henrietta recalled times when the instructor allowed them to incorporate their experiences into the lesson. This enabled both the children as well as the adults to learn about the personal and cultural experiences of other participants in the class. Minority groups like Blacks are affected, as their experiences are seldom incorporated into the lessons (Guy, 1999).

   Behavioral modeling. Behavioral modeling can be described as activities performed by the teacher, mentor, or most learned individuals and performed by the students (Hansman, 2001). Some of the grandmothers found teacher or mentor modeling to be an effective approach to teaching and learning. Individuals who participated in CNA and LVN programs found this strategy to be most effective. One of the grandmothers shared the following modeling experience:

> Ms. Magdaline was the coordinator and we worked in the nursing home. We were the first group that was certified. She pushed us to do our best work…. take care of the patients.... provided us with the training needed to take care of the patients. We felt important…. she watched as we performed some of the duties (Wilhelmina).

The grandmothers explained that the behavioral modeling experienced in their learning environments assisted them in their learning and development throughout the program.

Category II: Self-Promotion of Literacy Aside from Program Participation
   When examining the literacy competencies the grandmothers acquired apart from the learning in the classroom, there were three dominant themes that materialized. Such themes were: (a) political literacy, (b) civic literacy, and (c) faith literacy.
   Political literacy. In the research Boggs (1991) mentioned three levels that defined political literacy which are: information, values, and action. Many of the grandmothers shared a commonality of advocating on behalf of their grandchildren. As part of the advocacy, they had to learn to navigate the politics existing within the schools their grandchildren attended. Such advocacy was done in the form of meetings where the grandmothers met face-to-face with administrative staff, or instant communication through digital sources such as e-mail. For example, Dove recalled the challenges she faced when trying to remove her granddaughter from a classroom where the instructor was not providing her with adequate

assistance needed to meet the requirements of a math class. Dove suggested that racism played a part in the challenges she faced because she was not getting the cooperation of the teachers. She explained,

> The next day she called and told the teacher we are gonna move her. I was getting ready to go further with it. I was gonna take it to the administration office. I told the principal that I wish I could advocate for every Black child in this school…. I am constantly fighting for my grandkids. I gotta fight in my house, outside. (Dove).

Civic literacy. In regards to civic literacy, some of the grandmothers immersed themselves in the PTA culture as a way of being involved in many of the decision making processes affecting the school attended by their grandchildren. Two of the grandmothers served on the PTA board of their grandchildren's school. Aside from PTA participation, some of the grandmothers also volunteered at their grandchildren's schools on several occasions and have participated in other civic activities. These forms of civic engagement can aid in the process of civic literacy engagement. Pansy explained,

> I am in the PTA and I attend meetings regularly…. an organization known as multi-faith. This is an organization where people of all faiths come together and work as an action group. In this organization…we learn about things going on in the community…. For instance, we organized forums for candidates … when we got our first Black mayor. She [grand-daughter] has been going with me to all of the meetings (Pansy).

Based on the findings, PTA and other civic engagements have become a way of life for some of the grandmothers. By partaking in such initiatives, these grandmothers are able to learn for their development and to pass the learning on to their grandchildren in their care.

Faith literacy. Faith literacy can be identified as the way in which individuals become literate in their faith. Across participants, faith literacy was a competency these grandmothers both promoted for themselves and for the grandchildren in their care. The four facets of faith (author developed) which depicts the practices of these participants were: (a) scripture reading for meaning making, (b) participating in such communities of learning as: Sunday school, Vacation Bible School, and bible study classes to enhance learning, (c) daily prayer (before bed and/or before eating), and (d) participating in church activities that promote the sacraments of their faith (e.g. song, dance, ushering, praying, or lighting of candles (acolytes)). Some of the grandmothers accounted,

> Kendall has his Sunday school book and we read lessons…. He also has his own bible which he reads….I really should be making him read at least one scripture…. I make him sit down and read. If I do not encourage him to read; he is not going to do it (Nettie).

> You know I am a Christian. I am a born again Christian. So, I am training her. If you put food in front of her, she will say, "oh na na let's pray"…. "amen" (Takang).

Literacy as it relates to an individual's faith has been a large part of the culture of many Blacks dating as far back as slavery (Issac, 2010). Here, the grandmothers reported having acquired these faith literacy competencies outside of the formal learning environment.

Category III: Methods for Transferring Literacy to the Grandchild or Grandchildren

For many of the grandchildren in the study, the grandmothers reported them as having either a cognitive or emotional disability. Studies have shown that some grandchildren residing in the home of their grandparent may experience physical disabilities, cognitive delays, delays in gross and fine motor skills, along with social and emotional disabilities (DOHHSACFRIV, 2007). When looking at the ways

in which these grandmothers transferred literacy to their grandchildren, a laundry list of strategies was named. The strategies were categorized under three thematic headings namely, (a) developing oral and written language skills, (b) developing visual literacy skills, and (c) developing numeracy skills.

Implications for Theory and Practice

The findings from the research can serve as a guide to inform adult and higher educators on the most suitable instructional arrangements for women and particularly Black grandmothers who are the primary caregivers of their grandchildren. The themes from the data also suggested that multiple literacy competencies like political literacy, civic literacy, and faith literacy were acquired outside of the formal learning environment. Adult educators in more informal learning environments can provide education that support more innovative practices on how to navigate the sometimes hegemonic systems that can affect the livelihood of these grandmothers and the children in their care.

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