

# The role played by grandparents in family support and learning: considerations for mainstream and special schools

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The twenty-first century family faces many demographic changes. Despite this, the importance of intergenerational relationships remains. This article initially reviews the literature surrounding the role that grandparents play in their children's families, highlighting a growing body of research demonstrating the important support role that grandparents play in the lives of families with non-disabled children. In contrast, there is limited research on the role played by and support needs of grandparents to families with disabled children. Recognising the significance of 'family' rather than purely 'parent'-based partnerships in UK schools, this article considers the role and importance of grandparents in schools; in particular, intergenerational learning, and how schools can begin to include grandparents and also provide support to meet grandparents' own support needs. Despite a limited literature on schools working specifically with grandparents of children with SEN, some policy and practice issues are discussed and areas for future consideration suggested.

**Keywords:** grandparents, family support, disabled children, special educational needs, family-based school partnerships.

The family in late modern society faces many demographic changes: 'what the family is' and 'what it ought to be' is much debated (Silva and Smart, 1999). Traditional ideas of the nuclear family are frequently inappropriate and many alternative and/or extended models are theorised: for example, Carpenter's 'extended family support network' (1996, 2000). Despite this diversity, many post-modern theorists (Morgan, 1999; Silva and Smart, 1999) stress that feelings of obligation to and caring for kin persist. Indeed, numerous studies (for example, Grundy, 1999; McGlone,

Park and Roberts, 1999) have demonstrated the continuing importance of intergenerational relationships and exchanges of resources amongst kin, and grandparents today remain an 'integral part of family life' (Future Foundation, 2002). Research into and recognition of the significance and complexity of grandparent support for families of non-disabled children has developed and continues to gain credence. However, research exploring the support that different grandparents provide to specific groups of children, such as disabled children and their families, is underdeveloped. This is an important area of knowledge, and a number of potential areas for future research were identified by Mitchell (2007).

Recognising the contribution that grandparents can play in intergenerational relationships is important, especially in areas such as informal childcare provision. However, it is also important to consider implications within other areas of policy and professional practice, such as education. This review explores the role of grandparents and the support that they can provide to families with and without children with special educational needs (SEN), and also the support that grandparents can provide to schools and their staff. Recognising that grandparents may themselves have support needs, the review considers how schools can begin to identify and address these needs. Drawing on past literature, this article highlights a number of potentially important issues for schools seeking to include and work with grandparents, especially grandparents of children with SEN, and suggests some areas in need of further research. Although the literature reviewed focuses predominately on the primary years, links to secondary and further education are made for families of young people with SEN.

## Grandparent support: families with non-disabled children

The literature surrounding grandparents demonstrates that the experience of grandparenthood is complex and diverse.

The care and support that grandparents can provide ranges from legal guardianship to occasional, informal caring, and grandparents themselves are a heterogeneous group in terms of age, ethnicity and socio-economic circumstances (Dench and Ogg, 2002; Richards, 2001). This review initially focuses on non-custodial grandparents in the industrial world. Grandparents in less industrialised societies can play an important caring role; however, the existence of potential cultural differences is beyond the scope of this review. The second half of the article explores the literature surrounding grandparents, support and schools. The review is broadened to include studies drawing on the experiences of schools working with a diverse range of grandparents including those with both informal (non-custodial) and formal (largely custodial or legally recognised) caring responsibilities. Although this is clearly a diverse group, many of the issues and strategies adopted provide important general lessons for schools, including schools working with families of children with SEN.

Research on families of non-disabled children points to the important support role that grandparents provide practically, emotionally and financially to mother and child (Clarke and Roberts, 2003; Dench and Ogg, 2002; Dench, Ogg and Thomson, 1999; Evason, Lloyd and Dowds, 2005; Ross, Hill, Sweeting and Cunningham-Burley, 2006). Appropriate grandparent, especially grandmother, support has been shown to be particularly advantageous for young mothers (Mitchell and Green, 2002) and families of divorced parents (Ferguson, 2004). Amongst children whose parents are separated, matrilineal ties are often more active (Dench and Ogg, 2002), and closeness to maternal grandparents has been associated with more positive adjustment to changed family circumstances (Lussier, Deater-Deckard, Dunn and Davies, 2002). Conversely grandparent support can be a negative factor, associated with poorer child and mother adjustment, where conflict or inappropriate support between parent and grandparent exists (Gardner, Scherman, Mobley, Brown and Schutter, 1994; Lavers and Sonuga-Barker, 1997). One cannot always presume that grandparents want to provide support; a sense of obligation can be a heavy social, financial and/or emotional burden with real personal costs for some grandparents (Evason, Lloyd and Dowds, 2005; Ferguson, 2004).

Grandparent support in the provision of informal childcare frequently enables parents to undertake paid employment. Current UK government policy and initiatives advocate the return of mothers to paid employment, and the subsequent extension of improved formal childcare provision (DfES, 2006; DTI, 2000; HM Treasury, DfES, DWP and DTI, 2004). However, research has indicated that informal childcare, especially care provided by grandparents, is valued by parents and continues to be an important source of support that enables parents of non-disabled children, especially mothers, to undertake paid employment (Bashford, 2004; Clarke and Roberts, 2003; Ferguson, 2004; Kagan, Lewis and Heaton, 1998; Wheelock and Jones, 2002). Indeed, one in five children under 16 years are looked after by grand-

parents during the daytime (Clarke and Cairns, 2001). This support is particularly valued by working lone parents (Arthur, Snape and Dench, 2003, Clarke and Roberts, 2003; Dean and Shah, 2002; Ferguson, 2004) and parents working non-traditional hours (Gray, 2005a, 2005b). However, childcare also has important implications in grandparents' own lives, such as giving up paid work opportunities, the extra expenditure that caring can incur and the added caring burden, especially if grandparents are caring for both grandchildren and other elderly relatives (Grandparents Plus, 2003; Wheelock and Jones, 2002). Not all grandparents welcome this commitment and loss of personal freedom (Evason, Lloyd and Dowds, 2005; Ferguson, 2004).

## **Grandparent support: families with disabled children**

Parents with disabled children frequently face additional caring responsibilities and emotional demands in their everyday lives and are vulnerable to stress (Beresford, 1994; Roberts and Lawton, 2001). Social, emotional and material resources have been shown to aid family adjustment and parental coping, and close familial support has been found to be particularly important (Beresford, 1994; Carpenter, 2000; Dunst, Trivette and Deal, 1994; Horton and Wallender, 2001; Knussen and Sloper, 1992; Trute, 2003). Indeed, nuclear family dynamics are frequently influenced by attitudes, actions and relationships with wider kin.

However, there has been little research on grandparent support in families with disabled children. There appears to be even less research on the role of grandparents' support to families of children with SEN. This is important to note as disabled children and children with SEN are often associated with one another, but are two distinct groups. Under the Disability Discrimination Act (1995), disability is defined as a 'physical or mental impairment' leading to 'substantial' and 'long-term adverse' effects on everyday living. In contrast, SEN is defined by the SEN Code of Practice (DfES, 2001) more broadly as children who have 'considerably greater difficulty in learning than others the same age'. Some children with SEN may have a disability, but others will not be defined as disabled; similarly, disabled Children may not have a Statement of SEN. Recognising this difference is important as families of children with SEN may have different experiences of and needs for grandparent support as opposed to families with disabled children.

The studies of grandparents' support and families with disabled children that do exist are predominately based on North American data (Gardner, Scherman, Mobley, Brown and Schutter, 1994; Schilmoeller and Baranowski, 1998; Seligman, Goodwin, Paschal, Applegate and Lehman, 1997; Seligman, 1991; Trute, 2003). UK research is extremely limited. For example, Hastings (1997) provides a comprehensive review of international literature, but found very little UK-based research. In addition, a number of

USA-based studies are small scale and focus upon certain types of disability, such as families with deaf children (Nybo, Scherman and Freeman, 1998) and autistic children (Harris, Handleman and Palmer, 1985). Research is also frequently gender-specific, exploring only mothers' and grandmothers' perceptions (Baranowski and Schilmoeller, 1999; Hornby and Ashworth, 1994), and ethnic diversity has also received little consideration. However, from the limited research that exists, it is apparent that different ethnic and cultural traditions can influence the amount and type of support grandparents provide (Dilworth-Anderson, 1994; Hatton, Akram, Shah, Robertson and Emerson, 2004).

Despite these geographical and methodological limitations, available research demonstrates that grandparents can be both a potential source of support and a stressor for parents. For example, grandparents of disabled grandchildren may experience a period of mourning, as they come to terms with the loss of the grandchild they expected (Hastings, 1997). Adjustment is interwoven with past and current family relationships (Mirfin-Veitch and Bray, 1997; Mirfin-Veitch, Bray and Watson, 1996, 1997), but this process can be further hampered if grandparents receive little support and information about their grandchild's disability (Burns and Madian, 1992; Schilmoeller and Baranowski, 1998). In a minority of cases, grandparents' reactions to and lack of understanding about their grandchild's disability can affect the support they feel able and willing to give. This can create tension and conflict amongst family members, adding to rather than reducing the emotional and caring burdens parents face (George, 1988; Hornby and Ashworth, 1994; Seligman, 1991). Different studies provide conflicting results as to whether grandparent support is associated with different levels and types of psychological stress for mothers or fathers of disabled children (Green, 2001; Hastings, Thomas and Delwiche, 2002; Sandler, Warren and Raver, 1995). Trute (2003) suggests that support experiences and stress levels are potentially more complex than previously thought, demonstrating that different relationships exist between grandparent support and parents' stress depending on the blood relationship between parents and grandparents, and whether support is emotional or practical.

However, grandparents can play an important support role providing both practical (for example, respite care, domestic help) and emotional (for example, non-judgemental advice, a 'listening ear') support (Baranowski and Schilmoeller, 1999; Findler, 2000; Hornby and Ashworth, 1994; Mirfin-Veitch and Bray, 1997; Mirfin-Veitch, Bray and Watson, 1996, 1997). Not all grandparents are able to provide the same degree of support due to issues such as geographical distance and personal health. However, emotional support and the importance of 'being there' is less dependent upon geographical distance (Baranowski and Schilmoeller, 1999). Past research has tended to focus predominantly on parents' perceptions of the support they receive, especially mothers' perceptions. There has been very little consideration of the support other family members receive from grandparents, particularly the disabled child and other sib-

lings. In addition, the literature demonstrates the existence of a hierarchy of support, with maternal grandmothers as the most important source (Baranowski and Schilmoeller, 1999; Findler, 2000; Seligman, Goodwin, Paschal, Applegate and Lehman, 1997). However, Trute's (2003) more recent Canadian research has indicated that fathers also value grandparent support, particularly from their own mother.

Mothers with disabled children may have lower rates of paid employment than mothers of non-disabled children (Family Fund Trust, 2003); however, the provision of childcare for working families with disabled children remains an important and often problematic issue, but one that has received little research. Current government policy in England recognises that childcare provision has failed to meet the needs of disabled children and their families (HM Treasury, DfES, DWP and DTI, 2004; Prime Minister's Strategy Unit, 2005). As the Daycare Trust (2007) notes, provision is often inappropriate, inaccessible or unavailable to parents of disabled children.

In addition, although all grandparents may share a need for information and guidance, grandparents of disabled children have additional disability-specific needs, such as information about their grandchild's condition, the support services available and medical training in order to perform specific care tasks (for example, Burns and Madian, 1992; Hastings, 1997; Vadasy, Fewell and Meyer, 1996). Although the importance of support for grandparents is recognised in the UK with the work of generic groups such as Grandparents Plus and disability-specific organisations such as Contact a Family (2005), this is still peripheral amongst statutory services. Research has indicated that professionals, especially social workers, do not always translate their everyday knowledge of the supportive role grandparents can play in family life into practice. Grandparents are frequently not actively involved by professionals working with families (Findler and Ben-Ari, 2003; Grandparents Plus, 2003).

## Schools working with whole families

Although limited, the above literature has demonstrated that grandparents provide a range of practical and emotional support for families with disabled children. This may be experienced differently by different families and different family members, as families with disabled children are not homogenous. Research has indicated that although disabled children in the UK face an increased risk of living in poverty – 30 per cent as opposed to 27 per cent across all households (Every Disabled Child Matters, 2007) – beneath this, families with disabled children experience a range of socio-economic circumstances and family relationships. Families of children with SEN are similarly heterogeneous.

Recognising the changing face of family life in the twenty-first century and, as noted above, the important role grandparents can play in supporting families with and without disabled children, especially in terms of childcare

for working parents, grandparents may have increasing contact with schools as they pick up grandchildren (with and without SEN) from school and/or help with homework after school. School and home life are clearly interwoven: the support a child receives in the home impacts on how they learn and develop (Lawrence-Webb, Okundaye and Hafner, 2003; Reynolds, Wright and Beale, 2003). For teachers, grandparents may be a first or, at least, significant point of contact with a child's home life, providing important information about their current home situation and learning.

Government policy in England – *Every Child Matters: Change for Children* (DfES, 2004a), and especially *Every Parent Matters* (DfES, 2007a) and *Every Child Matters: Change for Children in Schools* (DfES, 2004b) – advocates schools developing positive school/home links, with teachers being aware of and sensitive to each child's home situation; a priority reiterated in the recently published 10-year Children's Plan (DCFS, 2007). However, the focus is primarily on working with parents in order to actively promote children's learning and well-being. This is presented as relevant to parents of all pupils (although the focus is often on early years education), but it is recognised that some parents are 'harder to reach' than others.

A raft of policies is currently being developed and piloted to facilitate partnerships with 'personalised learning' and the provision of 'learning guidance teachers' and 'parent support advisers'. The role of carers may be noted, but very few direct references are made to grandparents as carers, or the importance of schools and their staff working directly with grandparents in order to develop 'family-based' links, or draw on the support that grandparents can provide to different family members. In addition, within *Every Child Matters* (DfES, 2004a, b), schools are presented as a key community resource, working towards 'extended' school status (by 2010) as multi-agency support and advice centres providing whole-family support and links to other community services/professionals.

In SEN, links to other services and professionals have been advocated for many years; the extension of this to mainstream schools is potentially an important consideration and development, especially as current English education policy advocates greater inclusion of children with SEN in mainstream education. With these potential policy developments, it is thus timely for schools to consider how they can facilitate whole-family school/home links, particularly in terms of working with grandparents, examining areas such as the support that grandparents can provide to pupils at home and at school. Schools also need to consider the support that grandparents themselves may want or require from schools and school staff.

However, it must also be recognised that it will not be appropriate for schools to work with all grandparents. As noted above, not all grandparents want or feel able to be involved in their grandchildren's care. This can result from many factors, such as negative family relationships, conflict

with grandchildren's parents, and/or grandparents' own health status. Schools need to be aware of changing family circumstances. This raises questions for schools: for example, how can staff ensure that they know when working with grandparents is not appropriate or wanted by parents, grandparents or pupils? Schools must consider how to approach this area in a sensitive manner, with parents and other family members (such as grandparents and grandchildren) being consulted.

The literature exploring the relationship between schools and grandparents, in particular the support grandparents can play in children's learning and wider family stability, is limited. As with the literature surrounding grandparent support and families of disabled children, research focusing specifically on schools, grandparents and families with children with SEN is even more limited. However, there is a small but growing international body of literature exploring the general benefits of intergenerational learning between grandparents, grandchildren and schools (Boström, 2002; Reynolds, Wright and Beale, 2003; Strom and Strom, 1995; see also older people acting as surrogate grandparents in schools (Strande, 2007)), and another body examining how some schools have sought to involve and support grandparents, often grandmothers with 'extensive caring responsibilities', sometimes custodial (Dannison and Smith, 2003; Edwards and Sweeney, 2007; Grant, Gordon and Cohen, 1997; Kropf and Burnette, 2003; Lawrence-Webb, Okundaye and Hafner, 2003).

The literature largely focuses on mainstream educational settings and the projects are predominantly small scale and specific, exploring/evaluating particular programmes of support. As noted previously, it is recognised that grandparents with 'extensive caring responsibilities' are a very specific group with a distinct role and status. In addition, it is also important to reiterate that grandparents are not homogenous; they face different socio-economic circumstances and have different individual support wants and needs. Despite this diversity, these pilot programmes raise some important general issues and considerations and also help to identify areas still in need of further research and future consideration for schools, especially schools working with children with SEN and grandparents providing non-custodial care.

## **Grandparents: intergenerational learning and school support**

Research has demonstrated the importance of intergenerational learning between grandparents and their grandchildren, frequently utilising a 'special relationship' that is felt to exist between the two generations (Al-Azami, 2006). This has recently been highlighted within two UK-based pilot studies undertaken by the Basic Skills Agency (Al-Azami, 2006; Gyllenspetz, 2007) and Goldsmiths College, London University (Gregory, Arju, Jessel, Kenner and Ruby, 2007; Jessel, Gregory, Arju, Kenner and

Ruby, 2004; Kenner, Arju, Gregory, Jessel and Ruby, 2004; Kenner, Ruby, Jessel, Gregory and Arju, 2007; Ruby, Kenner, Jessel, Gregory and Arju, 2007). Both pilot studies worked with small groups of white English and black and minority ethnic grandparents (providing non-custodial care) and their grandchildren (early years and primary school age). The research demonstrates that intergenerational home-based learning can be advantageous for schools, with home-based activities, such as cooking, gardening, storytelling, reading and shopping, not only viewed as 'fun activities' by grandchildren, but also as providing important intergenerational learning opportunities. This was particularly apparent for black and minority ethnic grandparents sharing cultural, religious, historical and linguistically based knowledge with grandchildren. The home activities also developed skills that could be transferred to the classroom, and were relevant to more formal national curriculum learning: for example, developing reading skills via stories and improving numeracy via shopping and cooking. In addition, reciprocal learning was also demonstrated, with grandchildren teaching grandparents new skills, such as IT skills. Al-Azami (2006) and Kenner and colleagues (2004, 2007) suggest intergenerational learning raises potential advantages for all three parties: pupils, grandparents and schools. For pupils, there is learning in a fun and relaxed manner whilst also developing/building on a 'special relationship': 'It was fun learning with grandma because we do everything together' (Gyllenspetz, 2007, p. 26).

For grandparents, recognition of a 'teaching' role and involvement in their grandchild's learning was associated with feelings of increased self-worth: 'It was lovely to feel involved in my grandchild's education'; 'I feel more confident in helping with reading and writing' (Gyllenspetz, 2007, p. 21).

For schools, intergenerational learning provides an important mechanism to extend school/home links and draw home learning into the classroom. Grandparents can be potential volunteers/helpers in schools: an important consideration as more parents, especially mothers, are encouraged to return to paid employment in the UK (HM Treasury, DfES, DWP and DTI, 2004; see also Strom and Strom's earlier 1995 Swedish work on the value of grandparents as school volunteers). However, in order to facilitate this, schools and their staff need to recognise the potential of grandparents, and move towards 'family-based' approaches.

## Schools involving and supporting grandparents

The literature demonstrates the advantages of schools (largely primary) employing a range of approaches in order to include grandparents, such as:

- involving grandparents in school learning as volunteer helpers, with grandparents listening to children read

and helping out with school activities (Kenner, Arju, Gregory, Jessel and Ruby, 2004; Kenner, Ruby, Jessel, Gregory and Arju, 2007; Ruby, Kenner, Jessel, Gregory and Arju, 2007); Strom and Strom (1995) stress the need for schools to develop a planned programme of support and guidance for grandparents, both introductory and ongoing;

- inviting 'family members', including grandparents, into schools for events such as assemblies, progress report meetings and information evenings (Al-Azami, 2006);
- acknowledging the important role of grandparents in children's lives and the support they provide by hosting specific grandparent events/days on the curriculum including intergenerational projects: for example, children learning about different generations, especially the role of grandparents in different families (Al-Azami, 2006);
- thinking creatively how to involve grandparents geographically distanced from their grandchildren; pilots such as Gyllenspetz's (2007) have developed school projects using letter writing, videos/CDs and the internet in order to involve grandparents actively in their child's learning.

It is important to recognise, as Kenner and colleagues (2004) note, that grandparents need to be invited into school and made to feel welcome and 'at ease'. Grandparent links do not 'just happen'; they need to be nurtured in a similar manner to 'parent partnerships', as noted in *Every Parent Matters* (DfES, 2007a). The literature (Al-Azami, 2006; Edwards and Sweeney, 2007; Reynolds, Wright and Beale, 2003) also indicates that some grandparents (both non-custodial and custodial carers) can feel out of touch with school life; education today is frequently viewed as very different to their own parenting days. This lack of knowledge and understanding can act as a barrier, with schools viewed as intimidating rather than welcoming. Providing information about the curriculum, school policies/routines and also staff expectations (regarding school/home links) can help break down these barriers. As Al-Azami (2006) notes, schools may pass on some information to grandparents, but it is usually in 'special' rather than routine circumstances; a more holistic 'family-based' information programme is thus advocated. However, it is important to recognise that not all grandparents want or need the same type or level of information. Watson and Koblinsky's (2000) study of grandmothers in the USA found that the degree of information wanted differed by ethnicity, with African American grandmothers welcoming more information about their grandchildren's lives and schooling than their European American counterparts.

Internationally, there are some grandparent websites providing school-based information (Bales, 2003; de Toledo and Elder Brown, 1995), but there appears to be little available in the UK. Working with grandparents, especially consulting and/or involving them in the preparation of school materials, such as information guides to the curriculum and its objectives and also practical learning materials to use

with children at home, have been tentatively developed by the Basic Skills Agency. Accessibility is also noted as important: for example, writing in plain English: 'I found the jargon-buster useful and have passed it on to other sets of grandparents' (Gyllenspetz, 2007, p. 23).

As a 'community resource' in line with the current English policy of extended schools (DfES, 2004a, b), schools can play an important role providing support for grandparents, 'signposting' them to alternative social and health care community resources. Collaborative and co-ordinated inter-agency working is thus important for schools and their staff. However, not all grandparents want or need the same degree of support. Watson and Koblinsky's (2000) study found class differentials, with working-class grandmothers more likely to express a need and/or desire for more support than middle-class grandmothers. Furthermore, one cannot presume that schools and their staff will include all types of grandparents equitably or even want to begin to move towards a broader 'family focus'.

Although relatively small scale, Findler's (2007) study of mainstream and SEN teachers in Israel (80 mainstream and 82 SEN) found a complex and somewhat contradictory situation, with teachers (both mainstream and SEN) recognising the supportive role that grandparents generally play in family life, but, in practice, involving some more than others – in particular, maternal rather than paternal grandparents. Findler suggests this reflects the teachers' wider commonsense knowledge of who provided the most support and its perceived value. Findler also found that the everyday knowledge of both mainstream and SEN teachers was not used to inform or guide their practice when working with families, as grandparents were infrequently involved. Furthermore, the teachers she interviewed were not interested in or willing to change or even extend their future practice; there was little enthusiasm for working with grandparents.

## **Schools and grandparents with children who have SEN**

Very few specific studies were identified exploring schools working with or considering, the support that grandparents provide to families of children with SEN. One notable exception is the development of a model of 'extended family training' at Sunfield, an independent, UK-based special school (Carpenter, Addenbrooke, Attfield and Conway, 2004). The school worked with a range of family members, including grandparents, recognising the importance of professionals and different members of families sharing ideas. Indeed, family members frequently adopted the role of 'trainers', an experience viewed as positive by all parties – families and professionals alike. Although progressive, this work remains small scale and specific. The general dearth of studies, especially larger scale studies, is an important gap in the literature as children with SEN have many different

types of support needs and disabilities, and there are a substantial number of pupils with SEN: currently 229,100 pupils (2.8 per cent) across all English schools have Statements of SEN and a larger number (1,333,400 pupils or 16.4 per cent) have SEN but do not have Statements (DfES, 2007b). Despite this, the literature surrounding mainstream schools and grandparents and the support grandparents can provide to disabled children (summarised above) does raise a number of issues.

Past studies exploring the benefits of intergenerational learning and grandparents as volunteers have tended to focus on early and primary years education (Al-Azami, 2006; Gyllenspetz, 2007; Kenner, Arju, Gregory, Jessel and Ruby, 2004; Kenner, Ruby, Jessel, Gregory and Arju, 2007). However, the educational and support role of grandparents may have an extended relevance and value for children with SEN, especially those with learning disabilities. Developing core language, linguistic and numeracy skills remains important for many children and young people with learning disabilities in both secondary and further education. Many 'life skills' and 'preparation for independence' courses include cooking, gardening and shopping modules, which, as noted earlier, are key intergenerational learning activities. For young people with SEN, this type of learning could be an important resource for schools and colleges to utilise. In addition, Kenner and colleagues' (2007) work demonstrates the value of reciprocal learning for both grandparents and grandchildren. For children and young people with SEN, showing grandparents 'how to do things', such as demonstrating IT skills, may provide an opportunity for schools to facilitate positive learning experiences. With the current educational focus on educational outcomes, such as SATS and exam results, opportunities for young people with SEN to achieve are not always apparent.

The value of providing accessible school-based information for grandparents (Gyllenspetz, 2007) and also disability-specific information to grandparents of disabled children (Burns and Madian, 1992; Findler, 2007; Schilmoeller and Baranowski, 1998) was noted above. Schools have the potential, especially in their 'extended' status, to be a useful resource and information provider for families of children with SEN in terms of information for grandparents about their grandchild's school and also disability-specific information. Current English guidance (DfES, 2006) advocates the value of 'parent support advisers'; this could be extended to grandparents of children with SEN. In addition, schools, especially special schools, have frequently been an important resource for parents of children with SEN to access other professionals and services, especially health and social care. Extending this provision to grandparents, recognising that grandparents of children with SEN may like to be involved in discussions/programmes about their grandchild, could be advantageous. Parents providing information to grandparents can, as Schilmoeller and Baranowski (1998) and Burns and Madian (1992) note, be viewed as stressful, and schools could help support parents

in this task. It may also provide an opportunity for grandparents to address their own support needs.

Amongst some schools, especially special schools where children are provided with school transport, distance may need to be considered. Regular opportunities to meet family members can be an important factor in whom schools include in school/home communication. If family members are not regularly seen by staff, this may impact on teachers' perceptions of the need for and relevance of 'family' rather than parent partnerships. This was demonstrated in Findler's (2007) study of Israeli mainstream and SEN teachers. Findler found that mainstream schools and teachers were more likely to involve grandparents routinely in school life and involve them in child-based discussions than teachers in special schools. Findler suggests that a lack of regular contact of special school teachers with extended family members may be an important consideration in teachers' perceptions of who is important to include. This has implications for developing school/family links and school staff's knowledge of significant others in pupils' lives: for example, the role and/or importance of grandparents. Although an increasing number of children with SEN are attending mainstream schools in the UK, school transport is still frequently provided for children with SEN, and teachers' everyday contact with family members (such as grandparents) remains an important consideration. Teachers may have less opportunity to meet these family members and keep 'up-to-date' with any changes in family circumstances, such as the changing role or importance of grandparents in pupils' lives. Residential schools also raise an additional issue as teachers not only have limited everyday contact with family members, but different family members are also frequently geographically distanced.

## Discussion and future research

This review demonstrates that intergenerational relationships and exchanges of support continue to be important in late modern society. Research into and recognition of the significance and complexity of grandparent support for families of non-disabled children has developed and continues to gain credence. Despite this, research exploring the support that different types of grandparents provide to specific families, such as families with disabled children, remains under-researched. Building on the knowledge of the continuing importance but changing face of intergenerational relationships in the twenty-first century, it is important and timely to explore the nature and role of grandparent support in specific areas of family life and professional practice, such as education. This review has begun to explore the role and importance of intergenerational support within schools, both mainstream and special. The role of grandparents and the support they can provide to families with and without children with SEN has been considered. The review has demonstrated the current significance of schools (both mainstream and special) in recognising the important learning and support role that

grandparents can play in the lives of their grandchildren and wider family networks; and also the important role that schools themselves can play in providing support and/or guidance in order to help grandparents address their own support needs. The article demonstrates that working with grandparents has the potential to facilitate positive benefits for all parties: schools and their staff, grandparents, grandchildren and parents.

A range of international research evidence has been considered, but, despite this, the research evidence base is limited. Many studies are pilot projects and quite specific, working with small groups of grandparents providing a range of support from non-custodial to custodial care. In addition, there is very little specific research focusing on schools working with grandparents of children with SEN. Recognising grandparents' heterogeneity in terms of the care they provide, their own support needs and diverse socio-economic circumstances, the context of wider family relationships and the heterogeneity of children with SEN, generalisations must be treated with caution. However, a number of general issues come to the fore and could be considered by schools and their staff. In addition, the review has also sought to identify some specific issues for schools working with families of children with SEN. These are summarized below:

### *Family partnerships*

Recognising changing demographic patterns and the continuing significance of intergenerational relationships and support networks in the twenty-first century, it is timely for schools to think beyond parent partnerships. Current policy guidance in England (DfES, 2004a, b; DfES, 2006; DCSF, 2007) recognises the importance of schools working with parents and carers; this is a starting point for providing policy initiatives and suggestions for schools and their staff. Extending this focus to a more holistic 'family-based' approach, including grandparents, would be advantageous, with schools working to create school/home links with families as a whole and also specific links with grandparents, where appropriate.

### *Extending the evidence base*

Grandparents are a heterogeneous group, providing different types and levels of care and with different personal support needs. The support that grandparents provide to families with disabled children and grandparents' own support needs may differ from families of non-disabled children. A similar situation exists with grandparents and families of children with SEN: as noted above, children with SEN are heterogeneous and a broader group than disabled children. Recognising this and the absence of specific research on grandparent support and families of children with SEN, more focused research is needed; in particular, to explore the role played by different types of grandparents within families of different groups of children with SEN,

and how different types of schools, both mainstream and special in different sectors (primary, secondary and tertiary) can work with and support grandparents.

### **Developing 'active' school policies**

Recognising this potential heterogeneity and the fact that including grandparents in school life does not 'just happen', active school policies and initiatives need to be developed and implemented. Some key considerations for schools and their staff are the need to be sensitive and responsive to family diversity, including: different social, cultural/ethnic and class circumstances and family relationships (especially which families it is appropriate to work with in terms of grandparents providing support); the impact of different school settings; and also, the need to think creatively in order to include geographically distanced grandparents.

### **Training and development**

For schools to value 'family-based' partnerships, school staff must recognise the contribution grandparents can make to both family stability and school life. Providing information and training for school staff is thus important: ideally, a planned and coherent programme implemented with government and/or local authority support. Facilitating opportunities for schools to share experiences and 'good' practice would also be beneficial. Acknowledging the current policy in England of moving towards 'extended schools', it is also important for schools and their staff to work with other relevant agencies, especially social care and health services, sharing ideas and knowledge as to how best to provide support to grandparents.

### **Listening to grandparents**

In order to facilitate all of the above, it is important for schools and their staff to consult with and listen to grandparents. Current policy guidance highlights the benefits of working in partnership with parents (DCSF, 2007; DfES, 2006), this approach could usefully be extended to working with grandparents – how do grandparents want to be included, especially grandparents of children with SEN; and, if they do have specific support needs, how can schools begin to address these?

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