Enough is enough: Grandmother caregivers' strategies for mitigating out-of-school suspensions for African–American youth

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1. Introduction

They [educators] need to learn how to deal with these kids who aren’t going to respond well. I think a lot of kids who’ve dealt with trauma and grief in particular, have these sort of, dig their heels in stubborn reactions saying, ‘I know what’s best for me, I don’t trust you.’ And I think they have to learn some other strategies. I think the schools are behind the times in working with these kids. And if we really want to change dropout rates then the schools are going to have to get more effective with more kinds of kids.-Grandmother Magnolia

As reflected in Grandmother Magnolia’s comments the behavior of children in out-of-home placement are not well understood by educators, thus have a high probably of deterring school success. School success has been used by African–Americans as the major vehicle for upward mobility. Yet, the school success of African–American children continues to be thwarted by disproportionate discipline, especially out-of-school suspensions (OSS). OSS remove children from the educational process and disproportionately plague African–American children (Arica, 2009; Gregory, Skiba, & Naguera, 2010; Losen, 2011), hindering school success and future life achievement (Nichols, Ludwin, & Ladocola, 1999). They increase students’ likelihood of being referred to the criminal justice system (Michail, 2011). Caregivers of these children also found OSS morally problematic and unjust because they did not address the underlying problems and were racially biased and harmful to children (See Gibson & Haight, in press).

Approximately one-quarter of children in foster care are living in kinship care arrangements (Child Welfare League of America, 2009). Kinship care is a strategy used by relatives and the public child welfare system to preserve family connections and family-and cultural-identity. It enables children to live with people they know and trust (Child Welfare League of America, 1994). Nonetheless, the educational well-being of children who can no longer live with their parents continues to be of concern (Stone, 2007; Trout, Hagaman, Casey, Reid, & Epstein, 2008). Strozier, McGrew, Krisman, and Smith (2005) recommend that schools and other systems add to their knowledge about the special needs of families in kinship care. The aim of this article is to increase practice knowledge about grandmothers’ experience with OSS, report their actions and suggestions on how to mitigate OSS and provide professionals with specific implications for effective policy and practice with grandmother caregivers and educators.

1.1. OSS of African–American children in out-of-home arrangements

There are 2.7 million children whose relatives function as their primary caregiver (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2011). More than 1.8 million of these children (2.5% of all U.S. children) live in a home that is headed by a grandparent and 8.7% of these children are African–American (US Census). Skipped generation families are more likely to experience problems with educational attainment (Monserud & Elder, 2011). Children in...
kinship care often have experienced neglect or abuse, which puts them at a higher risk for educational performance and behavioral issues (Billing, Ehrle, & Kortenkamp, 2002; Cuddeback, 2004). Furthermore, children in out-of-home placements are more likely to be suspended than their peers (Cheung, Lwin, & Jenkins, 2012), and those whose grandparents are their primary caregiver often experience multiple suspensions (Dubowitz & Sawyer, 1994; Monserud & Elder, 2011).

Children who enter their grandparents’ care typically experience compromises to their development (Kelch-Oliver, 2011), which increases the possibility of having academic, social, and behavioral problems in the school setting (Altshuler, 2003). Behavioral problems experienced by children in kinship care with their grandparents include hyperactivity, demand for attention, defiance, depression, anxiety, and aggression (Smith, Savage-Stevens, & Fabian, 2002). In spite of these findings, Kelch-Oliver explains that grandchildren’s vulnerabilities may not be due to their current living situation with their grandparents, but rather older children’s prior experience of maltreatment. These unique circumstances make African–American children in kinship care at higher risk for out-of-school suspensions, leaving grandparent caregivers primarily responsible for dealing with their grandchildren and the school systems. Given that both kinship care arrangements and OSS have a disproportionate presence in African–American communities and are on the rise, it is extremely likely that practitioners will work with these families (Arica, 2009; Williams, 2011).

1.2. Grandmother caregivers and schools

Grandmothers encounter a host of challenges when assuming the role of caregiver for their grandchildren who are in school (Billing et al., 2002; Cuddeback, 2004; Lawrence-Webb, Okundaya, & Hafner, 2003). Grandparents report feeling pressured to facilitate the educational achievement of their grandchildren (Gibson, 2005; Zetlin, Weinberg, & Shea, 2010). Still, they also report encountering problems negotiating for services within the school setting (Kolomer, McCallion, & Overeynder, 2003). Additionally, grandmothers may lack knowledge on current school policies that are new and were not in place when their adult children were school age (Cox, 2003). Furthermore, they are responsible for a third generation that has a high probability of experiencing trauma (Zetlin et al., 2010), but lack information concerning the stressful events that may have a bearing on their grandchildren’s behavior that resulted in OSS. Children living in kinship arrangements have generally experienced some form of traumatic stress (Bell & Jenkins, 1991; Scannapieco et al., 1997). They have potentially suffered from abuse, neglect, prenatal exposure to substances and/or exposure to domestic violence and/or exposure to community violence (Bell & Jenkins, 1991; Ososky, 2003; Oswald, Heil, Goldbeck, 2010; Scannapieco et al., 1997). Depending on the child’s developmental status, the structure provided by their environment and their own genetic predisposition to tolerating trauma, this exposure to traumatic stimuli could result in adverse consequences such as the development of posttraumatic stress, lower self-esteem, a decline in cognitive functioning and hindrances to school achievement (Oswald, Heil & Goldbeck, 2010; Garity, 2013; Bell & Jenkins, 1991; Ososky, 2003).

Grandmothers’ interpersonal factors may act as barriers to advocating for supports and services for their grandchildren within the educational system. Kinship caregivers, on average, are less educated than non-kin foster parents and are more likely to have concerns about their health (Cuddeback, 2004). Generally, caregivers have lower incomes and fewer resources. While these factors are known to lead to poverty, they are also associated with academic failure. Yet, little information exists on the day-to-day lives of grandmother caregivers and how they interact with the school system (Musil & Standing, 2005). How grandmothers, who have been away from the public school system for decades and are usually uninformed about the contemporary operations, policies and procedures in schools, deal with OSS has little to no presence in the literature on public child welfare, education or aging. This study aims to help fill this gap by examining the perspectives and experiences of African–American grandmother caregivers informed by a capacity building framework.

In this study, “capacity building” is defined as the ability to mitigate consequences of problems and build community (Mathbor, 2013). All persons, despite economic or racial disparities, have innate capacities and potential. Capacity building includes a combination of empowerment, problem-solving, and strengths (Briar-Lawson, 1999; McMillen, Morris, & Sherraden, 2004). The capacity building framework is deeply rooted in social environments and acknowledges individuals’ context (Eade, 1997). Grandmother caregivers have prior experiences as parents. They have been found to support the development of their grandchildren (Bertera & Crewe, 2013; Sheridan, Haight, & Cleeton, 2011) in a variety of ways that they may view as a regular part of their caregiving instead of seeing them as strategies. Using the capacity building framework guided the development of the research questions in a manner that captures the grandparents’ routine caregiving, which may also be deemed as strategies for supporting their grandchildren’s school success.

2. Methods

This article is part of a larger, qualitative study with African–American caregivers (parents and relatives) who experienced a suspension of their children conducted from September 2009 to May 2010 (Gibson & Haight, in press). This report focuses on specific strategies used by grandmothers to mitigate suspensions

2.1. Participants

Participants were recruited via notices posted and letters mailed from social service agencies and a public school system inviting them to participate in the study. Grandmothers were primary caregivers of children with at least one suspension in the last two years who identified as African–American. The birth parents of the children were not living in the household. Ten grandmother caregivers participated. The majority of them were single; earning incomes that allowed their grandchildren to be eligible to receive free lunches (100%) and had completed high school. Although other female relatives (aunt, N = 1 and great-grandmothers, N = 2) participated in this study, all are called grandmothers because of their intergenerational status. They had been in the role of caregiver for the past 6 to 36 months. Grandchildren (N = 13) had been suspended an average of three times. The main reason for being suspended was fighting. Grandchildren experienced trauma or stressful events both prior to (N = 12) and after being (N = 6) in care, with an average of one traumatic experience per child. Stressful or traumatic events were unrelated to grandmothers’ care and included: observing a police raid in the home, witnessing the death of a parent, relocating frequently, changing caregivers many times, running away from home, being restrained at school, having an altercation with a therapist, being arrested and having to participate in an investigation of a relative. See Table 1 for a detailed description of sample characteristics.

2.2. Interview procedures

Grandmothers participated in semi-structured, face-to-face interviews in their homes and in a community setting where privacy could be maintained. Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 min and were audio-recorded. The capacity building framework guided exploration of areas of OSS that were salient to grandmothers’ experiences. These include consequences imposed on grandchildren due to their suspension, strategies used and needed to help grandchildren avoid future OSS, lessons learned about helping children avoid OSS, services and programs received and needed to increase children’s connection to learning and advice to educators to assist in reducing OSS.
Table 1
Sample characteristics.

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2.3. Data analysis

All interviews were transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were independently coded by the principal investigator and a research assistant using open, axial and selective coding techniques (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Identified themes were discussed and reduced. Subthemes were identified that provided more detailed description of the themes. Inter-rater disagreements were resolved through discussion and revisiting coding. Direct quotes were selected to illustrate the themes and subthemes. Member checking and peer debriefing further enhanced the credibility of findings. Grandmothers were assigned pseudonyms from trees that are classified as having hard wood as a symbol of their strengths and fitting within the capacity-building framework. Detailed information is provided about their personal context in a manner that maintains their anonymity and confidentiality but allows their rich experiences to be connected to aspects of the findings.

3. Results

All 10 grandmothers took action to mitigate OSS to lessen their grandchildren’s time away from the educational process that was imposed by the school. Those acts were reduced into four themes with accompanying subthemes: intense involvement with the educational process, structuring their relationships with grandchildren, identifying services and programs needed and receiving to enhance the grandchildren’s engagement with the learning process, and providing concrete recommendations to educators.

3.1. Theme 1. Intense involvement with the educational process

Grandmothers stated that procedures and policies at school had changed, especially since they were in school. They realized that they needed to become intensely and actively involved with their grandchildren’s educational process if OSS were to be avoided in the future. They described two types of intense involvement: at-school involvement and in-home involvement with education. At-school involvement with education was described in three subthemes: interactions with the schools in general, forming relationships with educators, and monitoring grandchildren’s in-school interactions. Grandmothers interacted with schools by having a physical presence such as visiting the schools, making time for surprise visits, staying involved with schools and volunteering at the schools. Grandmother American Basswood is caring for two grandchildren in elementary school, one of which has been suspended twice. She has had temporary custody for the past two years and shared her motivation for going to school in order to stop one of her grandchildren from bullying another child:

*They [grandchildren] called her or she called them or something and so the other little girl was out-of-town and when she came back in town it got started again [verbal bullying]. Now when the little girl goes to school, she won’t go in the classroom [attended by one grandchild]. She just cries, so that’s why I had to go up there.*

In forming relationships with educators, grandmothers contacted the schools to ask for information pertaining to their grandchildren’s academic performance or to talk with educators about other aspects of their grandchildren’s educational programming. Grandmother Green Ash, who is between the ages of 45 and 50, has been the grandchild’s legal guardian for over a year. She is unemployed and caring for a child who is in middle school and has been suspended twice. She explained how one educator has been helpful:

*She [granddaughter] now has a special teacher that she deals with in a program at school called ‘Check and Connect’. This teacher works with her one-on-one, helps her to pull up her grades and gives her extra attention. Without this teacher working with us this year, she probably would have failed the seventh grade.*

Grandmothers felt that the education of their grandchildren needed to be monitored. They accomplished this by asking about classes, ensuring special education services were received and keeping a file of paperwork from school. Grandmother Yellow Birch is single, unemployed, between 30 and 35 years, and is the child’s aunt who is co-parenting with the maternal grandmother. He has been suspended twice. She suggested: *Ask questions and take notes, keep a record, a log. I’ve got all the suspension papers. I got one of those little expandable accordion folders. Get yourself one of those expandables to keep all their records and suspension forms.*

Another kind of involvement was connecting with other parents. Grandmother Magnolia is single, between 55 and 60 years old, employed full time and started caring for her grandchild shortly after his birth. He is currently in middle school and has been suspended four times. School involvement also consisted of interacting with the parents of peers. Grandmother Magnolia explained her disconnection:

*I don’t know the other parents or haven’t tried to connect with a whole lot of the parents or anything, I didn’t go in the school last year because I was going through (named condition) and I was worried about contagion. So I’m not as connected. [She then went on to describe the importance of becoming connected].*

Home involvement focusing on education was described as the actions taken by grandmothers in their home to provide learning opportunities for their grandchildren. One main task was ensuring that homework was completed. The completion and submission of homework seemed to be a source of friction between educators and grandchildren. Some grandmothers helped with homework and others started keeping track of it. Some caregivers helped by participating in after-school education activities focused on doing homework with their grandchildren. Grandmother Magnolia shared:
There's been a lot of confusion between what is and isn't done (homework). When we get to checking on it, it's been done. So, my latest thing is I'm sending slips to the teachers to have them sign telling me whether some things are done or not. Because, they've got an internet portal that you can go to and check homework assignments—that's never up-to-date, it's just the cycle of nightmare, truly.

3.2. Theme 2. Structuring their relationships with grandchildren

Caregivers emphasized the importance of effectively interacting with their grandchildren. Grandmothers reported emotionally close relationships with their grandchildren but recommended imposing a structure to it to help their grandchildren avoid future OSS. This theme is described under four subthemes: (a) showing affection, (b) giving incentives and rewards, (c) teaching appropriate behaviors and (d) responding with appropriate consequences and discipline. Grandmother American Beech is between the ages of 55 and 60, unemployed, and has been the legal guardian for the past year. Her grandson is in middle school and recently received his first suspension. She was upset but reported that it

You just have to be there for them and to talk to them and just to love them and let them know that you are their biggest cheer leader, and you would always be there for them. Tell the child, you can talk to me about anything and don't let what other people say bother you.

Using incentives and rewards as strategies, grandmothers encouraged positive behavior. These were given when the grandchildren's performance in school was exceptionally positive or when their behavior was stable. Grandmothers usually used food or stickers. Grandmother Yellow Birch enlisted the help of grandchild's teacher:

I would tell him 'if you do good all month, no suspensions' … I got him started on the point list, 10 is the best, I had the teacher start it. She sends it home every day. I said, I'm going to let you get an eight, because you are not perfect. You know, no lower than an eight. And then, if you do good, the next month the whole class gets cupcakes.'

Grandmothers expressed that children in kinship care needed to be taught certain lessons on how to be successful in school. One lesson was around how they as students were expected to behave at school and in class. Grandmothers listed expectations such as respecting authority, exercising self-control, seeing school as important, having good relationships with their teachers and being active in class. They wanted their grandchildren to know the difference between play-time and work-time. They also inquired about the grandchildren's day at school, wanting to know whether or not the child was being respectful to teachers and other adults. Grandmother Butternut Tree is between the ages of 40 and 45 years, and is caring for a grandchild in middle school who has had one suspension. She offered:

I listen to them and they usually come home and talk about their day or what's going on. Like my daughter, she tells me stuff about kids picking on her, you know how girls are - saying things to her and she's saying things back to them, so I kinda understand.

Another lesson was how to treat others and how to request assistance. Grandmothers wanted to instill the importance of showing concern for the feelings of others. When there was a problem, grandmothers tried to prevent it from escalating. They cautioned their grandchildren to be aware of their surroundings and if problems arose, to tell an adult. Grandmother American Basswood expressed that her granddaughters must learn respect:

I tell them that 'you are supposed to respect your teachers. You are a child first of all and you can't say anything you want to grown-ups. And if you feel like they said something to you that you didn't like, you are supposed to tell me, don't take matters into your hands because you are a child.'

Encouraging self-control when talking to adults was emphasized, especially if the grandchild was prone to “talking back”. Grandmother Chestnut is between 55 and 60 years, has had temporary custody for more than two years. She is married and employed full-time. Her grandchild who is diagnosed with Emotional, Behavioral Disorder (EBD), is in middle school and has been suspended once. She explained:

I tell him, you need to be respectful, you need to listen to your teachers, you may not agree with it, but you need to do what they tell you because they are the ones that are running the show. (He/she) would say mean things. I would tell (her/him), don't say that! Say it in your head! You can think whatever you want but you need to just think that in your head. Don't say that out loud.

Grandmothers realized that they had to determine appropriate consequences when disciplining their grandchildren. Grandmother Boxelder Maple provided her views and the actions taken:

“We're gonna do some house work. You are gonna get up at 6 in the morning. Find you a book. We are gonna do something”. And then there are privileges taken away. But then she goes back to school after a suspension and she gets to go the school dance. I don't think so. Or she gets to go on a field trip that her class has organized. I don't think so. She's been suspended. Her behavior has not warranted having this privilege. My assumption is field trips are supposed to be – as an award, reward, or a content of the programming of the school. Are we learning something on these field trips or is this just another social gathering. So that is my frustration.

Grandmother Birch River is between 45 and 50 years old, unemployed and has been a caregiver intermittently over many years but most recently for three consecutive months. Her grandchildren are both in middle school. One has been suspended five times and the other child has been suspended 11 times. She feels suspensions are an intergenerational cycle/curse. When asked about her feelings when she heard about the suspensions she explained: “I was angry. But used to it. Pretty much. And me being me I look at it as a cycle thing- a generation curse that has occurred in my family and I want it to stop. And I want to get down to trying to prevent this and what we (caregivers) can do.”

In order to truly understand where their children are coming from, many caregivers stressed the importance of creating a strong socio-emotional connection with the grandchild. In order to facilitate this connection, Grandmother River Birch suggested “communicating with them and on a daily basis. Study how your child behaves on a daily basis. Don't ignore them and don't consider them as 'just being a child'. And don't be quick to judge.” By listening to children, caregivers suggested that they may be able to detect issues that will later lead to suspensions. For example, Grandmother Butternut Tree said:

The parents should know what's going on with their kids and listen to their kids, because they would have known that that situation was going to happen. The kids, they come home and talk on the phone all day, you listen to them, “He's messing with me and I'm getting him when I see him in school.” And as parents, you can stop that before it starts. Before the situation happens.

Many of the children in these caregiving arrangements have experienced certain amounts of stress, but tolerate it differently. Grandmother Yellow Birch shared a unique way of respecting and defusing her grandson's emotional outburst. By helping him to regulate his emotions, he is able to rejoin his class and re-engage:

I wrote (to the teacher), if there are any problems, (if he) is not calming down in classroom, call me. Teachers have called me and said “(he) is not
calming down. It seems like when you talk to (him), the rest of the day goes good." So I get on the phone with (him) and I am like, "go take a deep breath and go back in the class." And then (he) has a good day.

3.3. Theme 3. Identification of services and programs receiving and needed to enhance grandchildren’s engagement in the learning process

Grandmothers were asked to identify services and programs received and needed to enhance children’s connection to learning. The three subthemes described: (a) getting counseling, (b) transferring to another educational institution and (c) enrollment in skill building activities. Grandmother Chestnut discussed services needed:

I would try to find the best child psychologist or psychiatrist that money could buy—one that deals specifically with kids that were abandoned. I guess I would try to find somebody that could really relate to him to help him so he doesn’t have issues with women, because I don’t want him to hate women. I can understand why he has problems with women. So I would want him to get that out or just whatever kind of help that would help him so that he could have a normal life, so that this wouldn’t hinder him in relationships.

Grandmother Yellow Birch identified a service received by her grandson that other family members questioned:

I also got him seeing a psychiatric doctor. You know, got him diagnosed. Found out what was the problem. I used to tell his family that you need to find out, what is going on. He is not going to talk to you guys. He needs to go to a therapist. He does not want to talk to you about what people did to him and how people hurt him, because he does not know how you guys gonna react. [They responded] ‘Oh, he does not need any therapy.’

Some caregivers wanted to change educational services by transferring their child to, what they perceive as, a better educational environment. Grandmother Yellow Birch stated: “I would take him out of that school. All those kids up in there have problems. When I go there, they’re running through the halls, they’re misbehaving. I would put him in a much better environment.”

Enrolling grandchildren in skills building activities was a common suggestion. Grandmothers talked about keeping grandchildren busy by putting them in sports, organizations such as the Boys and Girls Club and mentoring programs. Grandmother River Birch shared:

Each of the boys has a mentor. One is a lawyer and one is a veterinarian. The mentors show them that education is important. Helping other people is very important in life and so is doing positive things. Being around positive places, positive people.

Grandmother Green Ash described that participating in an arts program resulted in her granddaughter’s acquiring skills to deal with intense emotional feelings:

She loves art. She can take her anger, her frustration out on art. She loves music. She can put her love, her hate, and her feelings into her music and dance.

Grandmothers listed activities that are not accessible due to fees or the lack of transportation: Yellow Birch stated:

I would put him in sports. You know, and keep them involved because, he can’t sit still and he got ADHD. I would try to put him in football and basketball. I would want to buy him a bike. Grandmother Elm is between 50 and 55 years old and has legal custody of two siblings, who have been suspended twice and five times respectively is informally caring for another grandchild, who has been suspended twice. She talked about her actions if money was not an object: I would be able to take them to certain places and get them all personal tutors, one-on-one tutors. And we'd go places, like the Grand Canyon. Oh and I would take Facebook off of the Internet, for real. Grandmother Elm also raved about the tutor her granddaughter had and would like her to get one again soon:

A one-on-one tutor, he came twice a week from [local university]. Got her grades up and everything and stuff. So once you got to a certain part, now you figure you should stop, when you can advance yourself. She didn't want advance placement (to take the test for advance course). By him coming, my other child took the test, and she’s advanced now.

3.4. Theme 4. Grandmothers concrete recommendations

Along with strategies to mitigate suspensions, Grandmothers provided recommendations to educators, which took the form of changes in policies and procedures. They expressed the need for collaboration with caregivers and standardizing policies at the schools. One caregiver also conveyed that schools needed to ask them what works best for their grandchild. Grandmother Magnolia stated: My child is not mean, he’s not. He’s never been in a fight with another kid. There is none of the kind of things that I associate with suspensions. Grandmother Chestnut shared an ongoing battle with her child’s special education teacher. She was very upset because restraints were used on her grandson, “I told them, don’t touch him. It’s like a trigger point for him. And then they would and Oh my God, that just makes him really mad.” Grandmother Chestnut also expressed her aversion to special education for Emotional Behavior Disorders in general:

Because they put him in this EBD class, other kids know he’s not in the mainstream class. He had problems with one of the kids teasing him, “You’re in that stupid class”. Well you know what? If somebody said that to me, I would really be upset too! I want him to be in with the regular kids.

Caregivers overwhelmingly expressed a desire for cultural sensitivity in the schools. Many caregivers felt that race and their child’s custody arrangement were negatively viewed by schools. Grandmother Magnolia elaborated on the culture of a child in kinship care:

I do think that for children of relative caregivers, you’re more likely to have behaviors of one kind or another that have them cross paths with school officials. And I wish they (educators) could see the strengths in their (grandchildren in kinship care) experiences sometimes. The schools themselves question the quote unquote normalcy or lack thereof in our family because I’m a grandparent.

Grandmother American Beech explained, “The school he goes to is 90% kids of color but the staff is 100% white. It’s just a basic understanding of where people are coming from. There should be more teachers, staff in administration-of-color.” Grandmother Green Ash also suggested using an intervention as opposed to a suspension such as, “A three day boot camp where troubled kids go and they got these drill sergeants. Maybe they should have them for as many days as the suspension is, instead of just coming home.” However, Grandmother Green Ash shared that time out of class is detrimental to learning: “But that is not going to do her any good either, she’s gotta play catch-up. Falling further and further behind, she already is getting Cs and Ds and Fs. School suspensions aren’t working.”

To supplement the limited programming offered by the school districts, caregivers recommended additional services that provide individualized attention, life-skills training and college preparation to their children. Grandmother River Birch described her experience in attempting to access additional services: “They don’t have programs like that at his school. I did ask. They don’t have a program where someone comes up to the school and works on anger management.” Grandmother River Birch also suggested therapeutic services: “There needs to be more of a therapeutic release for children. Children shouldn’t have to walk around, keeping stuff inside - then they want to commit suicide.”

Caregivers expressed concern that schools do not provide enough career experience, which did not bode well with obtaining a job following graduation. They wanted their children to go on to college and
achieve more than their biological parents. Grandmother Butternut Tree recommended:

Help the kids focus on a career and help them to choose colleges. Show them, “you got to have this science, you got to have this government, you got to have this math, you got to have this English.” Once they get those prerequisites out the way, then they should be more focused on what they’re going to be when they grow up. By the time they get into 12th grade, they should have some kind of goal or career already. I think the school should be more focused on training kids and getting them prepared for the world.

Some caregivers suggested less conventional services. Grandmother Butternut Tree also offered specific suggestions: “Have them all work in a daycare. That will teach them whether or not they want kids right now. They’ll be like “No, I don’t like kids,” so then they can worry about time in ninth-grade.” Grandmother Elm focused on services for parents:

Schools should go after the parents and make them go to parenting classes. They can show us how to go on the computer, and how you can find your kids and see what they were saying. Also, how to understand texts? I didn’t know what that means!

4. Discussion

This article reports the perspectives of 10 grandmothers who were in the role of primary caregiver to African–American grandchildren who had at least one OSS. Given that when grandmothers were interviewed, all of their grandchildren had already been suspended, this study focused on exploring the experiences of suspension rather than successful implementation of strategies to prevent suspensions. Using the capacity-building approach, grandmothers’ actions and perspectives were brought to the foreground. Grandmothers assumed a tremendous task when trying to successfully educate their African–American grandchildren. Since suspensions are the beginning of the process that leads to expulsion and the school-to-prison pipeline (Fenning & Rose, 2007), grandmothers are indeed working against the odds. Interestingly, in describing their efforts, they rarely mentioned the support of others. Though grandmothers reported many strategies, all were focused on their own agency. None of the grandmothers shared that they had enlisted the help of other parties in their quest to help their grandchildren avoid future suspensions. In fact, when asked about the role of the community, especially religious groups, only 40% (4 of 10) thought of these groups as a resource. Additionally, two grandmothers reported that teachers had been especially helpful to them.

In summary, grandmothers used three main strategies: intense involvement with the educational process, structuring their relationship with grandchildren and identifying of services and programs receiving and needed to enhance grandchildren’s engagement in the learning process. They also offered concrete recommendations to educators. Although their experiences with OSS varied, grandmothers clearly expressed a strong opinion that OSS hindered their grandchildren’s progress toward a productive life. None of their narratives included concerns over those prior experiences. Grandmothers have the capacity to share their experiences and provide recommendations to reduce OSS.

4.1. Increase educators’ knowledge about intergenerational caregiving by grandmothers

Learning about children, the caregiver and the context of their caregiving would increase educators’ understanding of the behavior that resulted in OSS. This information is not provided to stigmatize children in kinship care, but rather to understand the underlying dynamics of their behaviors toward adults and their grandmothers’ position about those prior experiences. Grandmothers have the capacity to share their experiences and provide recommendations to reduce OSS.

4.1.2. Community involvement to support grandmothers and deal with OSS

A need exists for a community-wide system to mitigate OSS. Schools are obliged to follow policies on criteria for OSS. However, policies were not always clear to grandmothers and concerns were expressed that some policies were not applied consistently to the misdeeds of students. Despite the schools’ history of dealing with OSS, they could benefit from the support of the local community including state and city governments to deal with this mounting problem. Given the strong evidence that OSS lead to incarceration, a coordinated effort could prevent increasing the prison and jail population as well as decreasing the numbers of youth who fail to meet their potential. Schools and policy makers should collaborate with grandmothers and others in the community on behalf of all African–American children. Professionals working with grandmothers could assist in this process by developing ways for grandmothers’ voices to be heard.

4.1.3. Importance of showing care and affection

Children who can no longer live with their birth parents may fear abandonment. Being with a relative may lessen those fears. Yet grandmothers in this study indicated a further step, the importance of relative caregivers displaying affection to the child. For children who have been maltreated and have experienced other types of trauma and stressors, such as those described by grandmothers in this study, frequent and heart-felt affection is called for. These children need to be shown that they are loved.

4.1.4. Services for help with homework and ability to do homework while suspended

Given the grandmothers’ reactions to homework, it is an issue that calls for help. After school or online programs could assist grandmothers to better monitor their children’s completion of homework. Though many school districts do employ some version of online technology, it was stated that it is not updated frequently and challenging to navigate. Despite grandmothers’ use of strategies, some grandchildren will get suspended. However, the time spent away from the educational process
4.2. Limitations and implications for future research

The interpretation of this study is limited by the small homogenous sample of volunteers, which may have limited the range of experiences and perspectives reported. Of the 10 grandmothers, all of their grandchildren were eligible for free school lunch. In the African–American community, however, grandmother caregiving occurs across income levels (McAdoo, 2007) as is the case of President Obama’s mother-in-law who is in the role of supplement caregiver in the White House (Bertera & Crewe, 2013). Future study ought to incorporate a variety of methods to not only capture grandmothers’ stories but also to observe their actions when dealing with their grandchildren including in school settings. Researchers in public school districts and at states’ office of education would increase knowledge about OSS by collecting data on the experiences of suspended students, their caregivers, and teachers involved in the suspension. In this study, strategies were discussed, but not labeled as such. In addition, collaborating with agencies who host Grandparents as Parents Support Groups and the participants of those group using participatory action research methods may assist researchers to gain a more holistic view. Practitioners might easily focus on the grandmothers’ emotions about OSS as opposed to their actions to mitigate as the former is highlighted in the stories of grandmothers while the latter is suppressed. These findings call for social workers to continue to educate the school system and the public about the needs of grandmother caregivers and their struggles with OSS.

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