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Grand-parenting and extent of fulfilling the psychosocial well-being of adolescents from single parent homes in Buffalo City Metropolitan, South Africa

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ABSTRACT

The persistent rise in the number of custodial grandparents has been attributed to several factors such as parental incarceration, drug abuse, HIV/AIDS, death, divorce, mental health challenges, and poverty leading to the abandonment by the children's parents. With the supportive and parenting responsibilities of grandparents, they are likely to promote and influence the lives of children due to their wealth of experiences. The aim of this paper is to determine the extent to which custodial grandparents fulfill the psychosocial well-being of adolescents from single parents. The study utilized a qualitative research approach to gather data from 30 single parents and seven social workers using in-depth interviews and focus-group discussions respectively. The data collected were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed that socio-economic and health statuses of grandparents determine the extent of fulfilling the adolescents' psychosocial well-being from single parents. Based on the findings, the study recommended that social support should be provided to the custodial grandparents by the single parents, government, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

KEY TERMS: grand-parenting, adolescents, single parent, psychosocial, well-being, South Africa

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INTRODUCTION

It has been a historical norm in African societies for children to live in the homes of caregivers. Among these caregivers are the grandparents, who are from time immemorial, being a pillar of support to their children in caring for their grandchildren. Over the years, the responsibility of grandparents has continued to change from providing support to parents to custodial grandparents. Grand parenting is the upbringing of children of their children. A grandparent could either be a male or female. Therefore, custodian grandparents have continued to play a prominent role in numerous households, being a critical wellspring of assistance to parents, which improves their grandchildren's lives through a more extensive family arrangement. For adolescents to succeed in life, their psychosocial well-being must be attained and maintained. The adolescent children need proper guidance and mentoring for them to have a better and promising future which might not be provided by single parents. Therefore, parenting adolescents could be an enormous challenge for most single parents, as the majority of them may lack the experience to manage and cope with adolescence. The grandparents have gathered enough experiences on children's upbringing; hence, they are most likely to provide a better and loving home for children more than any other caregivers. Therefore, this study examines how grandparents are fulfilling the psychosocial well-being of adolescents from single parents.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Over the past decades, the numbers of children raised in the homes of grandparents have continued to increase across the globe (Griggs et al., 2010). Much evidence from the literature emphasized the implication that possesses on the grandchildren's well-being as they are being cared for by their grandparents (Triadó et al., 2014). However, there was a dearth of research on the extent to which the psychosocial needs of the grandchildren were fulfilled, based on the challenges of grand-parenting adolescents. The relationships existing between grandchildren and grandparents generally generate a positive influence on the well-being of children (Griggs et al., 2010). Grandchildren that have a stronger bond with their grandparents tend to show lesser symptoms of depression. Grandchildren from the home of single parents profited in almost all the cases showed the most symptoms of depression if the interaction grandparents were weak and showed lesser symptoms when the bond became stronger (Ruiz & Silverstein, 2007). According to Griggs et al. (2010), there exists a closer interaction between adolescents and their grandmothers in particular. They also proved that the more the closeness between the adolescent children, the more the grandparental involvement in the school's assignments.

The close relationship between grandparents and grandchildren often develops into the spiritual growth of the children. Children generally emulate the elderly, ones and they tend to follow them in whatever they do. Grandparents who are religiously upright may positively impact their children's spiritual lives (Dunifon, 2013). They serve as the spiritual guidance source to their grandchildren by teaching them how to live in love, compassion, peace, joy, resilience, gentleness, and merciful (Mansson, 2016).

The emotional well-being of adolescents is very paramount to their day-to-day activity. When children are emotionally stable, it has a multiplier effect on all other components of well-being. The grandparents must ensure that adolescent children under their custody are well emotionally stable. Therefore, adolescents' emotional well-being depends on how much effort their grandparents put into watching over them, teaching them about life, and making sure they have a good upbringing (Dunifon, 2013). The custodial grandparents do ensure that the social life of their adolescents is attained. The relationships between grandchildren and grandparents generally generate a positive influence on children's well-being (Zeng & Xie, 2014). They achieve the social well-being in grandchildren's lives through the active role of showing love, affection, and close relationship with the grandchildren (Downie et al., 2010).

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted at Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality in Eastern Cape Province of South Africa using a multi-stage sampling procedure to randomly select the three cities: East London, King William's Town and Mdantsane. The study adopted a qualitative research method and ex post facto research design. Ex post facto design is a descriptive research technique that is helpful whenever there are two or more groups that differ on an independent variable and to test hypotheses about differences on one or more dependent variables. Data were collected from a sample of 30 single parents and seven social workers using in-depth interviews and focus group discussion respectively. The discussion guide used in this study consisted of a list of topics and some series of actual questions used by the moderator to guide the discussion, keeping the discussion focused on the research topic. An audio recorder was used to elicit responses from discussions. The researcher engaged the services of a person with proficiency in both Xhosa and English languages to help translate for those respondents who could

only communicate in the Xhosa language. The data emanated from the studies were categorized and systematically transcribed, tabulated and decoded. The researcher ensured that differences and similarities from what was recorded and transcribed were corrected. The results obtained from these interviews allowed the researcher to group respondents based on the differences and similarities.

The ethical approval concerning the undertakings of this research was sought from the Research Committee (UREC) of University of Fort Hare and the university gave the consent through the issuance of an ethical clearance certificate numbered REC-270710-028-RA. The approved clearance certificate was presented to the single parents and the social workers to ensure proper approval from the University of Fort Hare before commencing the research. The participants were given written informed consent to ensure their free voluntary participation and the right at any time to withdraw from the study's participants. The researcher ensured that no participant was harmed, whether physically, emotionally and psychologically. When the study was conducted, the researcher ensured that the identities of the participants were protected by using pseudo names instead of revealing their true identities. The researcher also ensured that the respondents would not be exposed to anybody without their consent. Written informed consent was given to all participants to ensure that their participation in the study was voluntary and that they could freely withdraw their participation.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section discusses the findings on the two themes that emanated from this study. The themes are extent of fulfilling the psychosocial well-being of adolescents and challenges impeding the fulfillment of the psychosocial well-being of adolescents.

Theme 1: Extent of fulfilling the psychosocial well-being of adolescents

Five subthemes emanated during the interviews conducted with both the single parents and social workers. The findings on all the five subthemes are as follow:

Subtheme 1: Physical involvement of the grandparents

The grandparents' physical involvement is identified as one way the grandparents fulfill the needs of adolescents in Buffalo City Municipality. Findings from the study revealed that almost all the single parents explained that the grandparents were actively involved in the lives of their children by assisting them financially, guiding, and monitoring their children. They explained further that they were like stress buffers, family watchdogs, and supporters because they approached problems with calm and hope for their grandchildren.

One of the single parents stated that:

Due to my schooling and in-experiences, my parents had been actively assisting my family since 2009; I occasionally support her with the allowances I received from school (SP 4).

The findings also indicate that most social workers in the study had a contrary opinion on how children raised by grandparents are successful in life. They explained that most grandparents were so poor in supervision and guidance, especially the female adolescents.

One of the social workers said:

There is a minority of them who manage to pull through and succeed in life. However, the majority of them end up dropping out of school and having reprobate behaviour, and you would find out that the female grandchildren have children at tender ages because of poor supervision and guidance (SWP 6).

Another of the social workers said:

. I cannot imagine how a poor grandparent with no adequate social support could comfortably provide for his/her female adolescent grandchild; children of nowadays always want to measure up with their counterparts. You can even see that these children want to live large... (SWP 22).

The findings on the physical involvement of the custodial grandparents in the lives of their adolescent grandchildren are supported by the findings of Horsfall and Dempsey (2013) that grandparents took a central position in providing support for their grandchildren. According to Griggs et al. (2010), grandparents fulfilled the role of educator and teacher to their grandchildren, and they usually placed positive pressure on them by making sure they excel academically. They achieved these by always relating to adolescent children through their wealth of experiences. However, the result of the social workers' findings revealed that many grandparents that are old and face health challenges might have challenges in the effective monitoring of their adolescents. This finding

supported by the finding of Mudavanhu (2008) and Dunifon (2013) that most grandparents were faced with the difficulty of raising children, giving needed attention and supervision due to old age and health-related issues.

Subtheme 2: Spiritual involvement of the grandparent

The results from the in-depth interviews indicate that most of the participants firmly stated that grandparents were actively involved spiritually in the lives of their grandchildren through prayers, adding that they often pray for them. They also blessed them with significant hope by helping them discover the ultimate hope found in a relationship with their maker and develop their God-given abilities.

One single parent stated as follows:

My mother was a role model to my children; she models a faithful life for them, also shined a light of the gospel into their lives by incorporating biblical truth into every part of their lives (SP 2).

Another single parent stated as follows:

My parents do go on fasting and praying for the kids that I put under their custody; they do that so that God can touch their lives for them to be good children (SP 11).

The findings revealed that most of the social workers supported the opinions of the single parents on the spiritual involvement of the custodial grandparents in the lives of their adolescent grandchildren. They explained that most grandparents spiritually upright than those young single parents. They have more time to attend church programmes since the majority of them are retirees.

One social worker stated as follows:

You cannot give what you do not have, most of these custodial grandparents are well behaved, and they attend church services regularly than the single parents who are mainly occupied with their jobs. They do teach and influence their grandchildren in the way of the Lord (SP 11).

The findings on the spiritual involvement of the custodial grandparents in adolescents' lives corroborated with Dunifon (2013) finding that a religious-belief grandparent is associated with a high quality of the relationship between grandparents and their grandchildren, thereby improving the spiritual well-being of their family. Zeng and Xie (2014) supported that the relationships existing between grandchildren and grandparents generally generate a positive influence on the well-being of the grandchildren. They served as the spiritual guidance source to their grandchildren, including teaching them how to live in love, compassion, peace, joy, resilience, gentleness, and merciful.

Subtheme 3: Psychological involvement of the grandparents

The study revealed that most single parents were apprehensive about the wellness and stability of their children towards fulfillment and significance in life by self-determination through thoughts, emotions, and behaviour. One of the participants indicated that:

The environment within which a child grows has a significant influence on the child's behaviour or psychological state. In a home with good values, ethics, and beliefs, any child who grew up from such a family structure becomes a better and more responsible person. In other words, the child will have optimistic views and perceptions towards life and everything. My mother is the best life coach to my children (SP 12).

Another single parent said

People who were raised by grandparents are very caring because grandparents taught children to share things they have and to socialize with others (SP 17).

The findings on the psychological involvement of the custodial grandparents in adolescents' lives corroborated with King et al. (2009) that grandparents, most times, positively impact their grandchildren's lives by ensuring that they are well socialized and culturally aligned within their environment.

Subtheme 4: Emotional involvement of the grandparents

In the study, most single parents' participants mentioned that their parents often exhibit affection and unconditional love for their children, making them find unique acceptance in their relationships with grandparents with the attendant emotional and mental benefits. A participant states as follow:

As a single parent, my children have gained a lot of skills and knowledge about caring for others from their grandparents. (SP 8)

Another participant said:

When I had a problem that affected my family, my mother actively took up the responsibility of my child till now, thereby involving my family's well-being (SP 6).

The findings on the emotional involvement of the custodial grandparents in the lives of their adolescent grandchildren agreed with that of Griggs et al. (2010), which stated that the relationships between grandchildren and grandparents generally generate to positive influence on the well-being of children. They served as the spiritual guidance source to their grandchildren, including teaching them how-to live-in love, compassion, peace, joy, resilience, gentleness, and merciful. In the African setting, it is a rule or social desire that grandparents positively impact the lives of their grandchildren by ensuring that they are well-social and cultured. Those individuals typically carry on, and the social and cultural milieu impacts the individual conduct in light of social position and different factors. Since the grandparents have taken the responsibility of grand-parenting, it is expected to fulfill their parental obligations.

Subtheme 5: Good interpersonal relationships with the environment and society

Throughout the interviews, most participants indicated that their children have a positive and good relationship with everyone, respect others, and exhibit ethical conduct.

Participants did not feel threatened that the grandparents might pamper their children; instead, they felt satisfied. A participant commented that:

My kid was just like me, friendly, humble and very fun to play with. I knew I imbibed that quality from my parents (SP 19).

This finding agreed with Horsfall and Dempsey (2013) findings that grandparents played a fundamental role in numerous households, being a critical wellspring of assistance to guardians that improving the lives of their grandchildren through the wealth of experiences. The findings also corroborated that of Uhlenberg and Cheuk (2010), which noted that the relationships existing between grandchildren and grandparents generally generate a positive influence on children's well-being.

Many social workers who participated in the focus group discussion believed that most adolescents raised by grandparents were unruly and ill-behaved. One added that they are most likely to have a behavioural problem because they are either too lenient or overprotective, thereby permitting the grandchildren to do as they are pleased and consequently misbehave.

One of the senior social workers (supervisors) stated that:

Mostly, they are unable to maintain interpersonal relationships because it is more common for them to have emotional and psychological issues, which then affect how they relate with others. A child raised by a grandparent is not taught, for example, how to build a good self-concept and so because of such shortfalls; they tend to have so many psychological issues (SW 7).

This finding corroborated the finding of Mudavanhu (2008) that most grandparents were faced with the difficulty of raising children and unable to give attention and supervision required due to old age and health-related issues.

The custodial grandparents in the municipality were making practical efforts to see that the needs of the adolescents were met. Therefore, the theory can be supported by the findings that the grandparents need to develop parenting skills and capacities that can attain and enhance the psychosocial needs of their grandchildren.

Theme 2: Challenges impeding the fulfillment of the psychosocial well-being of adolescents

Two subthemes emanated during the interviews conducted with both the single parents and social workers. The findings on all the five subthemes are as follow:

Subtheme 1: Socio-economic status of the grandparents

The single parents who participated in the study indicated lack of financial resources negatively impacted their parents. The low socio-economic status of the grandparents resulted in the inability to provide the necessities of the families.

A participant revealed that:

I felt pains; due to my schooling, I cannot be able to satisfy their needs as a parent, as my child-grant and my mother's old age grant is not sufficient (SP12).

Another participant revealed that due to the old age, her mother could no longer work:

...Sometimes I support my mother financially, but it is not enough to cater to my child's needs, even with her old age grant and child grant (SP5).

The study further revealed by one participant that her mother worried a lot because she could not provide some of her child's basic needs, thereby feeling anxious and concerned about the future of her family.

...looking after them for me alone is not easy because I cannot fulfill their excessive demands and it affects my mother physically and emotionally, and it is straining because there is nothing I can do. She usually gets depressed when she thinks about the situation of things now and what will be tomorrow (SP 18).

The study identified low socio-economic as one of the challenges facing custodial grandparents. This challenge affects the provision of basic necessity needed to cater for the adolescent grandchildren. The costs incurred by the grandparents in providing basic needs and school expenses for their adolescent grandchildren were very high. With the financial burden, there is a possibility of not attaining the well-being of the adolescent grandchildren. The findings from this study supported the research carried out in some selected cities in South Africa by Dolbin-MacNab et al. (2013) and Backhouse and Graham (2012), where custodial grandparents were financially constrained documented. They concluded that the socio-economic status of the grandparents determined the extent to which they could provide the basic needs such as food, housing, clothing, etc., for their grandchildren. Also, the finding of Mhaka-Mutepfa et al. (2014) argued that poverty hindered grandmothers from providing parenting support to their grandchildren and other relatives. However, McKenzie et al. (2010) did not corroborate with the findings, they argued that despite the financial struggles of grandparents, they were still making sure that their grandchildren's necessities were met. This may result from the grandparents' involvement in menial jobs that could provide additional income to their families.

Subtheme 2: Health status of the grandparents

The health-related issue is one of the challenges facing custodial grandparents. Many custodial grandparents in the Buffalo City Municipality were 60 years old and above and were more likely to face health-related issues. Some of the participants indicated that the health of their parents grown worse after they were involved in parenting.

...my mother complained of pains in her feet and hands because of washing (SP15).

Some participants affirmed that their parents were not healthy enough, having one illness or another due to pressure to care for their children.

My mother had high blood pressure and diabetes, which she is managing (SP 17).

While another participant said:

She was not fit because she was an asthmatic patient who needed someone to look after her; hence my children were with her (SP 1).

The findings revealed that South Africa custodial grandparents experienced different types of health issues caused by old age-related problems and their role as second-time parents to their grandchildren. The finding also showed that almost all the participants explained that the grandparents had different physical health challenges, which limit their ability to perform their daily activities as they take up the responsibility of raising their grandchildren. The finding revealed that the physical health of grandparents is affected either by the grief or the stress of caring for their grandchildren. This finding is supported by the finding of Whitley et al. (2016) that when grandparents engaged in strenuous exercises, they tend to stress-out, thus, resulting in health-related problems. Williams (2011) and Kelley et al. (2010) revealed that grandparents faced different health challenges that hinder their day-to-day parenting responsibilities.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

Based on the historical responsibilities of the social workers, they are in an excellent position to provide intervention to the custodial grandparents through practical skills, training and empowerment opportunities that can promote and enhance their parenting capabilities. The policies on assessing the psychosocial well-being of adolescents raised by grandparents are often invisible to policy-makers and service system administrators as they are either missed out or obscured in official databases. The Department of Social Service should consistently and perpetually monitor and evaluate the implementation of government policies to determine the best way it could effectively provide solutions that will alleviate problems among custodial grandparents and their families. It also required the agency to advocate the amendment of policies for effective service delivery. The followings are the recommendations made based on the findings of this study:

- From time to time, social workers should provide grandparents with skills and empowerment opportunities to assist in income-generating projects that can create wealth for them to cater to their families adequately.
- There is a need for social workers to regularly educate the grandparents on the need to adequately care for their health through stress management skills, which will promote their well-being.
- Single parents of adolescents should make it a point of duty to pay a regular visit and render financial assistant to their parents to ameliorate their financial burdens.

The relative and community members should provide assistant and support measures to the custodial grandparents to meet the day-to-day parenting. They should do this by setting up a business that could boost their financial capacities.

CONCLUSION

The study examined the grand-parenting and extent of fulfilling the psychosocial well-being of adolescents from single parent homes in Buffalo City Metropolitan of South Africa. The majority of the custodial grandparents met the adolescents' needs as expected because they have gathered enough experiences on their children's upbringing. The results obtained from this study demonstrated the significant positive relationship between grand-parenting and the extent of fulfilling adolescents' psychosocial well-being. However, some of them could not actively meet up with the financial and educational needs of their adolescent grandchildren as a result of being poor and not having access to adequate social support. Many of the grandparents' poor health status escalated due to unruly behavior exhibited by their adolescent grandchildren. Getting involved in the stressful activity of parenting at their old age can be very dangerous to the grandparents' overall psychosocial well-being. The results revealed that if custodial grandparents were adequately supported, they would overcome the challenges and enhanced good parenting.

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