



The aspirations of vulnerable grandparents and the life chances of their grandchildren

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INTERGENERATIONAL EXCHANGE is a three year research project investigating how grandparents support and care for their grandchildren. It is based in a low-income estate in the north of England, where we have been conducting research since 1999. Our strenuous efforts during this research to access the most hard-to-reach, and ongoing engagement with formal and third sector workers in the area, support our claim that through our various research projects we are in regular contact with the most marginalised and vulnerable individuals and families living on the estate. An important aspect of this research has been to critically engage with how peoples' lives unfold over time, what they consider to be the most important events and, especially for the families we study, what their aspirations are and how they think they can change their lives. Our interest in investigating the role of mid-life grandparents (35-60yrs) in their grandchildren's lives stems from observations about how family is absolutely central in the lives of vulnerable families. Children and grandchildren provide a sense of purpose to these families. Traditional working class relationships of family support are held in high regard. There is a powerful morality that binds the family unit. This is a key coping strategy to deal with chronic and acute experiences of vulnerability. Families are held together by very strong bonds of sharing, support, and care, most often organised in a matrilineal structure, in which grandmothers (and occasionally grandfathers) are central. Here we briefly report on the aspirations of marginalised and vulnerable mid-life grandparents, their efforts to improve their grandchildren's life chances, the constraints they experience, and key features of service provision to address vulnerable children's life chances we have identified.

- When we ask about their plans for the future, the overwhelming response is that they can not make plans. They talk about how their experiences of the past and the present have been about coping with the here-and-now. Rather than the cosy granny image of grandparenting, these grandparents characterise their family experiences as fire-fighting. The severe lack of resources within these families, and in their localities, means making ends meet on a daily basis is extremely difficult. Any small additional demand tips these families into chaos. This means they cannot plan for a future that extends beyond the immediate present. This lack of ambition for the future is a coping strategy rather than a personal failing.
- These vulnerable grandparents talk about how they don't want their children and grandchildren to have the same experiences they have had, but, nevertheless, their own experiences constrain their aspirations. Their limited aspirations arise from their lack of power, control, and autonomy to address many needs in their lives.
- While they put considerable effort into caring for their grandchildren and supporting their children, particularly their daughters, they often have to come to the rescue of their grandchildren. Their ability to change the life-circumstances of their grandchildren is constrained by other responsibilities, early-life disability and ill-health, and behaviours borne of repeated experiences of lack of control.
- Their experiences of service provision is frequently punitive or demanding in terms of monitoring and assessments. This leads to a general distrust of helping professionals. They see these interventions as highly problematic because they reinforce their feelings of powerlessness, and consequently are fearful of many of the attempts to intervene in the private heart of their family. This response is particularly pronounced when the family do not perceive there to be a problem within their family that additional resources would not address. Where families do feel there is a problem, particularly where younger children are involved, these grandparents often step in and take over so that, as they say, 'the social won't take them'. In this way, at times of greatest need, these families are most invisible to services.
- Support for parents needs to recognise the vital practical role and powerful influence these grandparents have in their families. If early interventions are designed to enable parents to achieve their aspirations for their children, then these interventions need to engage with the structural reasons for limited aspirations across the generations. The most effective way in which this can be done is through delivering services that are trusted. We have observed over the past eleven years, that service providers who collaborate with families on creating a sense of control are most effective in raising aspirations.