Kinship Voices: Listening to Grandparent Caregivers Raising School-Age Children

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This dissertation focused on the phenomenon of grandparent caregiving within a small town in Pennsylvania. The following descriptor was used to define grandparent caregivers: Grandparent caregivers are grandparents who have gained full or part-time guardianship of one or more school-age grandchildren and co-reside with their grandchildren. Increasingly, grandparents in the United States have been thrust into the role of primary caregiver of their grandchildren (Harnett, Dawe, & Russell, 2014). The wellness of grandchildren raised by their grandparents dominates the scholarship regarding grandparent caregiving. This study aimed to uncover the ways in which grandparent caregivers of school-age children, describe how they navigate various support systems.

This study was phenomenological in nature and consisted of a series of two in-depth and face-to-face phenomenological interviews with each of the seven study participants. A modified version of Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological systems theory was used to illuminate the intricate support pathways that exist within the lives of those who took part in this study. Findings reflect a positive correlation between the relative happiness of grandparent caregivers with the depth of their interpersonal support systems. Further, all of the grandparent caregivers who took part in this study relied upon relationships found within the microsystem e.g. school district personnel, friends, biological parents, and other kin. Grandparent caregivers from five of the seven grandfamilies utilized relationships found within each system of the modified

version of Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological systems theory, i.e., the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem.

The implications of this study cast a light on the successful journeys undertaken by a group of rural Pennsylvania grandparent caregivers. School district administrators and faculty will benefit from studying the quality of the interactions throughout the modified version of Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological systems theory. Moreover, school district stakeholders who read this study may feel compelled to include grandparent caregivers in the creation of enhanced professional development opportunities and more inclusive district policies.

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Preface

Thanks to the influence, support, and encouragement of many individuals, I am able to complete this first part of my journey. Those among my friends, peers, and family who have inquired about my motivation for pursuing this degree were surprised by my response. This was never about advancing my career from that of an elementary school teacher; for few professions are more rewarding or noble. No, the response I have given to those who wanted to know why I did this was simple: I wanted to learn more than I knew.

And learn I have! Thanks to my faculty advisor Dr. Maureen McClure, I have honed my ability to listen deeply and without preconception. From the earliest interaction when she said, “Andy, nobody likes an intervener!” to her most recent advice to “Make it difficult for policymakers to come up with reasons why they shouldn’t listen to you.” She has been a pragmatic mentor. To Dr. McClure, I wish to offer my gratitude. Hopefully, I will honor your tutelage with a lifetime of questioning, reflection, and scholarly investigation!

I wish to thank my University of Pittsburgh Dissertation Committee for giving guiding me down a path of engaged advocacy. You have reminded me to constantly reflect on why I want to tell the story I want to tell. Direction without experience is just posturing. Experienced direction can impact multiple lives. You have exhibited the latter. It has been a privilege to work with and learn from, my Dissertation Committee.

The debt of gratitude I owe my wife, Jen cannot be repaid with mere words. Therefore, I will attempt to make up the difference through my actions as a husband and community servant. You are yet to waver in your belief that I can do anything I set my mind to do. My mind often wonders why you believe in me as you do; then my heart reminds me to accept

your unconditional support as the embodiment of our compact. I thank too, my SCAE family. Kendria, Scott, Tchetchet, Sim, Tiff, Misti, and Meiyi will walk down this revolutionary road together. Forever.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my first teachers. Mom and Dad, you have inspired me by your actions for as long as I can remember. When I close my eyes and think back to childhood, I can feel what it was like to hand out food to those who needed it, without question or judgement. You embody the elegance of community servants.

Key Terms and Definitions

Creative Self-Efficacy (CSE) - A measure of one's subjective judgment and ability to participate in activities that activate one's creativity (Karwowski and Kaufman, 2017).

Ecological Systems Theory (EST) - Developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner, an explanation of the influence different environmental systems have on human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1977).

Grandfamily – Those families where children are raised by grandparents (Edwards, 1998).

Grandparent Caregiver – People who had primary responsibility for their co-resident grandchildren younger than 18 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003).

Informal Kinship Caregiver – A caregiving arrangement made by families, with or without legal recognition of the caregiver's status (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2019).

Kinship Care – Full-time care, nurturing, and protection of children by relatives or others with a kinship bond to a child (Cox, 2019).

Student Assistance Program (SAP) – A systematic team process used to mobilize school resources to remove barriers to learning. SAP is designed to assist in identifying issues including alcohol, tobacco, other drugs, and mental health issues which pose a barrier to a student's success (SAP, 2019).

1.0 Introduction

The goal of this qualitative research study was to understand the transitory nature of the human experience through the narratives of grandparent and great-grandparent caregivers of school-age children. The researcher sought to uncover the ways in which grandparent caregivers of school-age children navigate support systems such as state-funded adoption assistance programs or a local school district's Student Assistance Program (SAP). The findings from this study are trustworthy as they are derived from the self-reported, lived experiences of grandparent caregivers who raise school-age children. Triangulation was achieved using member checks while an independent researcher's reading of the data provided inter-rater reliability. The process of multiple interviews among study participants helped the researcher achieve validity. The researcher attained confirmability using memos and an audit trail of post-interview notes. Semi-structured phenomenological interviews guided this study.

1.1 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to uncover the ways in which grandparent caregivers of school-age children describe how they navigate various support systems. As a third-grade teacher in a pre-K-12 public school district, I was aware of both school staff and student caregiver perceptions of alternative caregiving, i.e., kinship care. I also had a unique research opportunity to unearth how these perceptions enrich and limit constructive discourse and ultimately, policy decisions between school staff (e.g., faculty, paraprofessionals, and

administration) and grandparent caregivers occur. However, school support is but one example of the social supports available to grandparent caregivers.

Scholarship has suggested grandparent caregivers are more reluctant than non-grandparent caregivers to engage teachers in conversation (Williams, 2011). The grandparent caregiver's reticence to engage school district personnel contradicts Husserl's view of phenomenology (Husserl, as cited in Crotty, 1998). Husserl's view of phenomenology provides pathways "to learn to see what stands before our eyes" (as cited in Crotty, 1998, p. 43). Williams (2011) reports grandparent caregivers find alternatives to contacting teachers directly or, forego communication altogether thereby, creating self-imposed impediments to learning about their grandchild's classroom experiences. Researchers who have studied the ways grandparent caregivers find answers to school-based questions (e.g., academics and bullying) discovered most grandparent caregivers default to non-school personnel and often, refuse to approach administrators, faculty, and staff (Williams, 2011). If one is unready to analyze their context in this regard, they may miss opportunities for the "emancipating effect" proposed by Farber (as cited in Crotty, 1998, p. 234). Consider the findings of McCormick, Cappella, O'Connor, and McClowry (2016), who evaluated school and home relationships in regard to the ways in which teachers and caregivers allow perceptions to foment. Reflection of one's context and potential support options precede self-advocacy. Recall the informal nature of many grandparent caregiver arrangements and the impact on guardianship, which in turn diminishes certain rights and protections enjoyed by grandparent caregivers of school-age children (Lee & Blitz, 2016), e.g., exclusion from a school district's SAP team. In a later chapter, I explore connections between the exosystem (teacher, school counselor, and school administration) and microsystem (grandparent caregiver, immediate family, and spouse) using

my interpretation of Bronfenbrenner's (1977) first iteration of his ecological systems theory (EST).

1.2 Importance of the Study

Relatively few studies on the topic of grandparent caregivers focus on the caregiver, most focus on the grandchild. Even less scholarship exists concerning the ways in which grandparent caregivers report their relationships with school districts. Phenomenological interviews with grandparent caregivers connected what Seidman (2013) referred to as "events, structures, roles, and social forces operating in people's lives" (p. 131).

Often, grandparent caregiver arrangements are informally arranged, thereby eliminating the need for a family attorney. In such instances, caregivers may be denied certain rights, allowances, and protections afforded to those with more formal custodial arrangements. Lee and Blitz (2016) reported working grandparent caregivers or those on fixed incomes, prefer custodial privileges, as opposed to full legal guardianship; as guardianship implies permanency, while a custodian arrangement remains flexible (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019). One example of reduced caregiver rights occurs when grandparents without full legal guardianship are excluded from important academic, behavioral, and trauma-informed decisions made by a school district Student Assistance Program SAP team.

Even grandparent caregiving situations resulting in adoption come with rich contextual insight that many within the field of K4-12 education may do well to understand better. Báez et al. (2019) acknowledged newly admitted or recently traumatized students lack the services afforded by a school's SAP team, as their cases have yet to be reviewed or, school staff

members have yet to refer them to the SAP team. These students need a baseline of supportive behavioral, social, and emotional measures, especially when they have gone through trauma such as those found to precede grandparent caregiving (Báez et al., 2019; Edwards & Ray, 2010). Báez et al. (2019) shared the words of a student who participated in a school-based trauma-informed social and emotional learning intervention known as Wedico, with a behavioral health clinician working in concert with school staff:

> I didn't grow up with my mom or my dad, I grew up with my grandmother. When I came here, I didn't have no one to talk to. I didn't even feel like talking to my mom or my dad… I just go home and I close the door. But when I started talking to Ms. **, I felt like I could tell her everything that's been going on. (p. 107)

Marken and Howard (2014) and Ramugondo (2012) acknowledged interventions which provide grandparent caregivers opportunities to engage in shared activities with their grandchildren serve the dual purpose of "re-establishing normalcy" among traumatized children and act as "a mechanism for overcoming" childhood trauma. Teachers, children, and caregivers who benefit from interventions such as Wedico enjoy programming supported in part through the allocation of federal and state funds. The American Community Survey (ACS) gathers demographic information, such as the number of custodial grandparents living with grandchildren under the age of 18, to apprise policymakers of need (e.g., community and school- based family intervention programs). According to U.S. Census Bureau (2019), the ACS poses questions to better equip federal agencies with the information needed to best distribute funding.

This study may lead to a follow-up study, aimed at determining the creative self-efficacy (CSE) levels of members of the current study. According to Karwowski and Kaufman

(2017), CSE is a measure of one's subjective judgment and ability to participate in activities that activate one's creativity p. 238). Positive and energetic parental self-efficacy correlates with supportive home-based behaviors (Karwowski & Kaufman, 2017; see also Ryan & Deci, 2000; Whitley, Fuller-Thomson, & Brennenstuhl, 2015). Numerous scales have been developed to measure CSE within various groups, e.g., middle school students, graduate school students, and adult employees (Karwowski & Kaufman, 2017).

1.3 Problem Statement

American public-school districts face an evolution of caregiver demographics. Families are increasingly fragmented due to (a) divorce and (b) improvements in healthcare, which ultimately improve the quality of life among grandparents (Leeson, 2018). Thus, a surge in intergenerational family structures during the turn of the 21st-century extended the years grandparents fulfill the duties of parent to their grandchildren, e.g., homework helper, childcare provider, and disciplinarian (Bengtson, Rosenthal, & Burton, 1990). Pennsylvania is no exception; according to Generations United (2019), approximately 7.5% of children living in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania live in households where grandparents are also caregivers.

Moreover, the number of grandparent caregiver-headed households without the presence of a biological parent is 32.5%. This figure represents nearly 29,000 grandparents. Among states with similar populations (10-12 million), Pennsylvania has the second lowest number of grandparent-led households with 88,000. Georgia has the most grandparent-led households among similarly sized populations, with 115,000. Michigan has the fewest grandparent-led households with 66,000. The other states considered include Illinois, North

Carolina, and Ohio (Generations United, 2019). Nationally, 3% of children in the United States are living in grandfamilies. This percentage represents 2.5 million children (Generations United, 2019).

Grandparent caregiving is a form of kinship caregiving. According to Cox (2019), kinship care is "the full-time care, nurturing, and protection of children by relatives or others with a kinship bond to a child." (p. xx). Rubin, Downes, et al. (2008) noted the passing of the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 compelled policymakers to consider kinship caregivers first in the event a child's biological parents can no longer care for them. Children who have been placed in foster care exhibit higher rates of harmful educational, behavioral, and psychological activities than children in kinship care (Winokur, Holtan, & Batchelder, 2018).

While significant research has been conducted on the wellness of grandchildren raised by their grandparents, there exists a dearth of scholarship focusing on the ways in which grandparent caregivers of school-age children make sense of their emotions, the availability of support systems, and feedback from those who may or may not, provide support to the caregiver. In this dissertation study, personal perceptions of grandparent caregiving were suspended to reveal the unique narratives of grandparent caregivers. As Husserl (as cited in Carr, 1970) stated:

> Phenomenology invites us to 'set aside all previous habits of thought, see through and break down the mental barriers which these habits have set along the horizons of our thinking . . . To learn to see what stands before our eyes.' (p. 43).

During my teaching career, I have joined in conversations in which the topic was grandparent caregiver-as-deficit, rather than community asset. My phenomenology was subject

to change once I started the GRANDstories podcast and began to learn how the resiliency of grandparent caregivers supports grandchildren and the biological parents of the grandchildren; those adult individuals who may have experienced one significant or ongoing traumatic situations in their own lives. As Edwards and Ray (2010) pointed out, the "nine Ds" of grandparent caregiving include divorce, desertion, drugs, death, diseases, delivery (adolescent childbirth), detention, deployment, and departure are each significant enough to cause trauma within an entire family, let alone a multi-generational family (p. 180).

When comparing the depth of scholarship on the topic of children raised by grandparents, to available research on caregivers, one may find a distinct imbalance. Comparatively less scholarship exists which has examined the relationship between grandparent caregivers and their grandchild's educational experience. Those scholars who have studied the intersection of the caregiver and their grandchild's educational experiences found notable hurdles negatively impacting the relationship between grandparent caregivers and the schools their grandchildren attend (Carr, Gray, & Hayslip, 2012; Grant & Ray, 2013; Reynolds, Wright, & Beale, 2003).

Examples of such hurdles include (a) adaptability of the grandchild and (b) the importance of the grandparent caregiver's social support system in mitigating stressors associated with reparenting (Hayslip, Blumenthal, & Garner, 2014).

As stated earlier, there exist significant gaps in research regarding the happiness of grandparents raising school-age children. Even rarer is research aimed at identifying the needs of grandparent caregivers raising children with special needs. One study, in particular, focused on the challenges faced by grandparent caregivers of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (Hillman, Wentzel, & Anderson, 2017).

Hillman et al. (2017) cited a study that reported 77% of single (traditional) mothers of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder were at high risk of depression (Dyches, Christensen, Harper, Mandleco, & Roper, 2016). What can we learn from grandfamilies experiencing the same realities associated with raising special needs children? I have gained crucial experience in the artistry of the interview process through involvement in the GRANDstories podcast. This experience proved beneficial as each phenomenological interview commenced.

1.4 Research Question

The primary research in this question was as follows: How do grandparent caregivers of school-age children view success in their kinship relationships? The foundation for this line of inquiry is presented in the following section.

1.4.1 Rationale

Classroom experience as well as experience interviewing grandparent caregivers via the podcast platform led me to uncover the feelings, descriptions, and supportive connections grandparent caregivers use to find happiness within their kinship relationships.

Emick and Hayslip (1999) along with Lee and Blitz (2016) found grandparent caregivers who self-rated better overall health, less parental role confusion and strain, as well as less isolation were also those who reported higher levels of social support. Accordingly, the key research topics in this study are detailed in the next section.

1.4.2 Research Topics

1.4.2.1 Research Topic Number One (RT1)

In order to describe a potentially unrecognized problem to a local school board, I may need what Backhouse and Graham (2012) called the "information-rich" stories of real people tasked with raising a grandchild to best state our case for new systems of support and education to be put in place within school districts where this phenomenon exists.

1.4.2.2 Research Topic Number Two (RT2)

Grandparents who assume caregiver status for their grandchildren do so after one or more disruptive events have occurred within their family (Cox, 2008, 2014; Edwards & Ray, 2010; Hayslip, Fruhauf, & Dolbin-MacNab, 2019). Risks of isolation from one's social group, health problems, as well as, financial strain are factors that may degrade the sense of cohesiveness previously enjoyed by the family (Wohl, Lahner, & Jooste, 2003). Wang, Hayslip, Sun, and Zhu (2019) recently conducted a cross-cultural study of grandparent caregivers in China and the United States using empirically- based comparisons to determine the effect of factors such as self-efficacy and parenting styles. The authors found both Chinese grandparent caregivers and their U.S. counterparts exhibited greater resilience, were more authoritarian, and had higher levels of role satisfaction, in instances where they reported greater parental self-efficacy (Wang et al., 2019).

1.4.2.3 Research Topic Number Three (RT3)

Instead of focusing only on the distribution of tangible goods and services, Stewart (2013) pointed to the procurement of circumstances affording vulnerable groups or individuals

the best opportunities—or "functionings" (Sen, 1977)—for cultural recognition, financial, social, nutritional, and educational freedom; freedoms that occur in the form of respect, future opportunities, ability to provide for one's basic needs. Scholarship of grandparent caregivers often focuses on the procurement of goods and services (Lee & Blitz, 2016; McLaughlin, Ryder, & Taylor, 2017). The third inquiry question of this study was influenced by the researcher's desire to understand how a group of grandparent caregivers valued immediate needs (e.g., those offered by lawyers and child services) versus more altruistic needs (e.g., preventative health measures, volunteerism, and enhancement of parenting skills; Jang & Tang, 2016; Minkler & Fuller-Thomson, 2005; Smith, Strieder, Greenberg, Hayslip, & Montoro-Rodriguez, 2016).

1.4.2.4 Research Topic Number Four (RT4)

Regarding the three-pronged conditional theory that is the cornerstone of self-determination theory, grandparent caregiving poses significant risk for the loss of any one of the three psychological conditions: social relatedness, autonomy, and competence. The final inquiry question was intended to uncover the language study participants used when describing their problem-solving strategies and how their strategic outcomes affect their sense of worth.

1.5 Significance of Inquiry

This research holds significance because of the nature of the population studied. Furthermore, the researcher is an elementary classroom teacher, with 20 years of practical experience. This experience includes working with caregivers of every level of guardianship.

My professional knowledge of caregivers and the children they care for, has enticed me to discern belief from truth, via phenomenological interviews. Grandparent caregivers often go many years without school-age children, before facing the challenge of reparenting (Hayslip et al., 2019).

However, the landscape of the American educational system has changed dramatically in the 21st century According to Ravitch (2011), organizations have noted a test's ability to reflect a student's experience both within the school but also the hidden factors of those tested; e.g. socio-economic status of the student's family, a student's mental health, motivation, and parental engagement (p. 154).

1.6 Demonstration of Research

The research findings were presented to the administration, faculty, paraprofessionals, and interested school board members within the school district studied. Potentially, presentations could be prepared for professional development seminars and school board meetings. Study participants who wished to review this research were invited to do so as well. Other school districts may find utility within the findings of this study. Opportunities to present study findings at workshops and conferences may present themselves. In the event these opportunities occur, I would honor the stories of this particular population of grandparent caregivers. Potential outlets for these research findings include the annual Pennsylvania Department of Education Conference and the annual National Rural Education Association Conference. Additionally, these discoveries may be of interest to advocacy/scholarly groups

such as Generations United and Grandfamilies: The Contemporary Journal of Research, Practice, and Policy.

1.7 Assumptions, Delimitations, And Limitations

An assumption in the current study was each participant responded to my interview questions and probes honestly. Furthermore, it was assumed study participants were able to reconstruct traumatic events and articulate feelings from their subjective point-of-view. Seidman (2013) reminded the interviewer to attempt to understand the experiences felt and lived by study participants and complete understanding is impossible because we are merely visiting one's experiential truths; we have never occupied them. Finally, I made the assumption study participants maintain the level of guardianship they said they maintain, as I did not ask for official paperwork e.g., adoption and school guardianship papers.

A delimitation of the study was its size, as it was a small study; less than eleven participants were interviewed. Another delimitation of the study was it was limited to research participants from one small town. Study participants were recruited from within this town's school district population. Thus, the findings might not be conducive to being generalized to other groups of grandparent caregivers (e.g., those from urban or suburban areas). However, the findings of this study could indeed be used to inform communication tactics and guide professional development within similar school districts.

The current study was faced with notable limitations. When I conducted the participant recruitment phase, there were 16 known grandparent caregivers within the local school district. The number of known grandparent caregivers has since grown to an amount closer to two

dozen. Some of those who chose not to take part in the study may have provided deeper layers of information and potentially, helped to create a more fruitful study. The impulse to intervene for the sake of intervention implies the researcher, holds an authoritarian edge over those interviewed. Freire (2000) warned this mindset makes true dialogue impossible and any dialogue that occurs is unauthentic. As this was a small qualitative study descriptive statistical information (e.g., questionnaires and a large sample size) are missing. In the future, county-wide information such as rate of grandparent caregiving, the age of onset of grandparent caregiving, genders most responsible for grandparent caregiving, and other demographic data may benefit local and state policymakers and inform those interested in family wellness and education.

Another limitation was an accurate appraisal of all grandparent caregivers within this school district is implausible for a number of reasons: (a) some families move in and out of the district more than once within the same academic year; (b) some grandparent caregivers are hesitant to self-report their unique caregiving situation; and (c) grandparent caregivers have reported they did not know how to begin the process of adoption nor, did they feel they could afford associated legal fees. Therefore, the children whom they care for are erroneously reported as being raised by their biological parent(s).

Reciprocity is another limitation present. Seidman (2013) noted reciprocity presents the most problems when conducting interviews. Perhaps the study participants will find comfort in the knowledge their testimony may guide and inform other grandparent caregivers, school district personnel, and perhaps, policymakers.

Two final limitations of this study are perception and bias; relative to my role as a public- school teacher and the study participants' role of caregiver of students enrolled in a

public school. Starks and Brown Trinidad (2007) reported the interpretive approach known as phenomenology helps to “describe the meaning of the lived experience of a phenomenon” (p. 1373, Fig. 1). Every attempt was made to suspend perceptions of grandparent caregiving and allow the unique narratives of grandparent caregivers to be revealed from the perspective of study participants. According to Englander (2012), researchers interested in qualitative, human scientific studies utilize the interview as the primary data collection device. A warning must be given to the potentiality of confirmation bias, as the emotional connections to my classroom experiences with grandparent caregivers must be kept separate from the narratives of this study’s participants. With equity in mind, I have remained humble enough to admit some information about one's lived experiences will remain hidden.

1.8 Conclusion

Grandparent caregivers face many life challenges, including role confusion, medical and behavioral health dilemmas, financial uncertainty, stressful communication with school personnel, and weakened kin and social supports (Lee, Clarkson-Hendrix, & Lee, 2016; Lee & Blitz, 2016). However, these life impediments can be mitigated through positive social support and volunteerism (Jang & Tang, 2016). Social engagement can be used as a motivational factor, thereby, increasing one’s connectivity to other grandparent caregivers (Wohl et al., 2003). Based on a 1-year longitudinal study, researchers found grandparent caregivers who took part in support groups noted increased resiliency and vigor as well as, more effective communication with their grandchildren (Dolbin-MacNab, Roberto, & Finney, 2013; Hayslip et al., 2014).

Therefore, a study using phenomenological interviews was conducted to increase knowledge of a caregiver demographic in a small town in Pennsylvania. Much of the scholarship on grandparent caregivers of school-age children has been conducted by university research groups, public health providers, and seasoned ethnographers. This study was conducted by a research practitioner with 20 years of classroom experience. Therefore, readers will experience a unique account of my propositional knowledge, as I have bridged my practical knowledge of a demographic with explanatory knowledge, revealed through phenomenological interviews.

The current study used a novel approach to plot the self-reported experiences of grandparent caregivers onto a modified version of Bronfenbrenner's EST. Future research may yield opportunities to intersect my current findings with the evolution of the environments presented in my modified model, i.e. the microsystem, mesosystem, ecosystem, and macrosystem. Furthermore, potential studies may include the three additional systems Bronfenbrenner developed in the final iteration of his bioecological theory, i.e., micro-, meso-, and macro-time (Tudge et al., 2016).

The search for knowledge is referred to as the "what" of this particular set of phenomenological interviews (Høffding & Martiny, 2016). Essentially, I attempted to learn what it is like to be a grandparent caregiver of a school-age child, while acting as a neutral participant throughout the interviews.

2.0 Literature Review

Grandparent caregivers exist in a sort of disequilibrium. In a study of 54 grandparent caregivers, Scott (2016) reported grandparent caregivers experience an average quality of life. Conversely, Taylor, Marquis, Coall, Batten, and Werner (2017) discovered in the absence of community, emotional, and financial support, grandparent caregivers commonly face "role overload/conflict" (p. 3).

The psychological, behavioral, and emotional health implications for grandparent caregivers have been shown to be positive, negative, and often, somewhere in between (Arpino & Bordone, 2014; Azar & Hill, 2006; Whitley et al., 2015). However, much of the scholarship on grandparent caregivers of school-age children has depicted a gloomy picture of the lives of these individuals. Although grandparent caregivers may benefit from both formal and informal social support systems, particularly within the areas of resiliency and adaptability (Gerard, Landry-Meyer, & Roe, 2006; Hayslip & Smith, 2013; Musil, Warner, Zauszniewski, Wykle, & Standing, 2009), a paucity of research on the saliency of their social support systems exists.

The act of grandparent caregiving can be viewed as a demonstration of wisdom gained from experience and of resiliency. However, if a school's faculty, staff, or administration view grandparent caregivers with a lens focused solely on deficit reduction, the school personnel may fail to recognize the assets grandparent caregivers offer the school community, as well as the community-at-large. McCormick et al. (2016) uncovered the importance of critical positive school and home relationships to the efficacy of various emotional support measures adopted by both teachers and caregivers.

As previously, there are gaps in the literature where happiness, resiliency, and contentment are concerned. The review of the literature focuses on the factors driving this study's interview protocol: (a) phenomenological precedents, (b) family continuity, and (c) transition mechanisms by which grandfamilies face transitions. This chapter concludes with a synthesis of research relative to this particular study and to provide context and insights to the phenomenology of grandparent caregiving with school-age children.

2.1 Phenomenological Precedents

Many factors give rise to grandparent-caregiver situations, including divorce, desertion, drugs, death, diseases, delivery, detention, deployment, and departure (Edwards & Ray, 2010). Any of these factors could undermine the stability of a family. However, it is during these life events in which many grandparents step in and take on the role as caregivers. Although grandchildren may suffer from the loss of one or more biological parents, they often report a renewed sense of being nurtured by loving family members.

Thus, grandparents may face the initial burden of seeing their biological children suffer through a potentially crippling life event, as well as further challenges in taking on parental responsibilities such as attending parent-teacher conferences, helping with school projects, and being expected to volunteer at the school.

Morrow-Kondos, Weber, Cooper, and Hesser (1997) were some of the first scholars to study intensive grandparenting, i.e., grandparent caregiving, in a small, qualitative study that included 10 middle-class grandparents. Although none of the study participants reported their

context as grandparent caregivers as ideal, 50% anticipated their biological children would eventually be able to begin or resume, their roles as parent.

Interventions in the form of therapy and support groups, have shown to be effective when working within the grandparent caregiver demographic. As Edwards and Benson (2010) found, trauma most always precedes grandparent caregiving. Inevitably, grandparent caregivers and the parent of the grandchildren they have been tasked with raising, seek to establish or reestablish, positive relationships with each other (Hayslip, 2003; Kirby & Sanders, 2012; Smith, Palmieri, Hancock, & Richardson, 2008). Doing so often necessitates skills such as communication, coping, legal, financial, and problem-solving training are considered as the most sought after among grandparent caregivers and the parents of the grandchildren they are raising (Kirby, 2015).

2.2 Family Continuity

Extant scholarship on the efficacy of therapeutic interventions when working with grandparent caregiver families has shown a failure to utilize the biological parents as resources (Edwards & Ray, 2010; Strom & Strom, 2000). However, counselors may be able to assess a family's situation from the viewpoint of the grandparent caregiver and identify potential health risks associated with relationship dysfunction, especially when this dysfunction is intergenerational (Poehlmann, 2003). Grandparent caregivers face decreased amounts of energy due to advanced age (Edwards & Ray, 2010). Therefore, finding a balance between parenting and wellness activities is crucial to a grandparent caregiver's ability to maintain habits that once provided them with joy, exercise, and overall contentment.

Therapeutic interventions can teach grandparent caregivers strategies to respond to the daily challenges of grandparent caregiving (Lee and & Blitz, 2016). Arpino and Bordone (2014) found that among both men and women, even moderate amounts of grandparental involvement provided a positive effect on verbal fluency. Some grandparent caregivers are tasked with raising very young children who are learning sound and symbol awareness, speech patterns, and discovering their verbal fluency for the very first time. This scenario may cause grandparent caregivers to be more cognizant of their verbal fluency. The day-to-day neurocognitive productivity involved with raising a child may stimulate both temporal and frontal activity, therefore, hindering neurocognitive degeneration. Also, the authors noted grandparents who had an "optimal" level of engagement with their grandchildren tended to be the oldest in the study (Arpino & Bordone, 2014).

Although 20% of Pennsylvania grandparent caregivers live in poverty (Generations United, 2019), the diversity of grandfamilies is striking and cannot be discriminated by socio-economic factors. Grandparent caregiving has shown to cause financial stress for grandparents for a number of reasons, most notably because of the informal nature of many grandfamily arrangements (Shovali, Emerson, & Augusta, 2019). Financial hardships notwithstanding, grandparents who utilize services available to caregivers involved in formal and informal arrangements have noted, positive long-term outcomes for themselves and their grandchildren (Brown et al., 2017). Project Healthy Grandparents, an intervention aimed at providing psychoeducation-based intervention, uncovered a positive correlation between use of their services and the probability that grandparents would seek out and utilize other social supports in the future (Kirby, 2015).

Disputes over visitation privileges can cause stress within the family structure (Edwards & Ray, 2010). Grandparent caregivers must face the possibility of the grandchild's biological parents' reentry into the context of the newly established family. Moreover, role ambiguity tends to occur as grandparents and biological parents find balance in their new contexts. Edwards and Benson (2010) warned of relationship stressors when this level of ambiguity occurs. In most cases, grandparent caregivers and biological parents complete this readjustment phase without much incident. However, grandparent caregivers may occasionally feel the child's biological parents are passing judgement on them.

This sense of being observed in a pejorative manner could subsequently move beyond the confines of the home and impede a grandparent caregiver's ability to maintain their peer relationships. Despite the struggles reported in the majority of the extant body of research, the following quote from Edwards and Ray (2010) points to not only the resiliency of the grandparent as the caregiver, but also the flexibility of the grandchild: "Although grandparents may be unexpectedly thrust into this new role, grandparent-headed homes often offer a stabilizing and positive alternative when families are faced with difficult circumstances." (p.179).

2.3 Transitions

Support for and among grandparent caregivers falls under a multidisciplinary umbrella of kin, medical professionals, clergy, financial advisors, and friends. The level of social relatedness felt by an individual supports their corresponding level of self-value; three conditions supporting self-value include (a) initiative, (b) value, and (c) production (Ryan &

Deci, 2000). Discourse and storytelling are critical elements in the evolution of grandparent caregiver empowerment. Grandparents who assume the role of primary caregiver look within their social and family circles for support (Edwards & Benson, 2010; Edwards & Ray, 2010; Strom & Strom, 2000). However, this support may wane due to resentment, limited time or energy, and a lack of understanding. When limited support occurs, available stakeholders can work to provide support for the entire family. At this critical juncture, grandparent caregivers who choose to accept suitable support structures have been found to experience an increased sense of community respect and decreased levels of role confusion (Backhouse & Graham, 2012).

Harnett et al. (2014) used semi-structured interviews to develop baseline characteristics of both grandparent caregiver and foster caregivers. Similar to research conducted by Kelley, Yorker, Whitley, and Sipe (2001) as well as Harnett et al. (2014) found grandparent caregivers were considerably more likely than foster caregivers to have experienced a significant financial problem when they reported notable life events, such as an unexpected medical expense or a grandchild's first foray into organized sports and the ensuing economic strain on a family. Furthermore, the authors found grandparent caregivers reported lower levels of financial support than foster caregivers (Harnett et al., 2014).

Gerard et al. (2006) conducted a study with 113 grandparent caregivers sought to determine if themes prevalent in existing scholarship on grandparent caregivers could be positively addressed through social support mechanisms. Most of the participants were female and European American; moreover, about 20% percent were African American. One objective of their study was to discern if stress and life satisfaction were positively amenable to social support mechanisms. Gerard et al. (2006) posited formal support systems benefit grandparent

caregivers with numerous health issues and who expressed contending with an abundance of parenting stresses. Although legal counsel is may be beneficial to those grandparent caregivers who assumed informal custody, the majority of grandparent caregivers who took part in the study failed to establish more formal support systems through the court of law.

Gerard et al. (2006) pursued positive grandparent caregiver narratives, leading the scholars to utilize the work of Hayslip and Kaminski (2005) within their study. Negative impacts of grandparent caregiving drive much of the discussion of the phenomena. The authors wished to stress positive aspects coinciding with raising one's grandchild. For instance, grandparent caregivers who utilized interventions such as parent training and psychosocial support groups reported increased parental self-efficacy. Furthermore, stressors connected to role ambiguity, financial strain, and depression declined (Hayslip & Kaminski, 2005).

Lee and Blitz (2016) articulated similar findings to those previously discussed (e.g., Azar & Hill, 2006; Edwards & Ray, 2010). Lee and Blitz (2016) interviewed grandparent caregivers taking part in a school district and university partnership program called We’re GRAND, finding grandparent caregivers reported increased levels of agency due to a sense of closure as a parent. This sense of closure occurred whenever grandparent caregivers felt the arc of their new context shift their emotional state from filled with second-guessing, guilt, and embarrassment to one in which they felt like accomplished parents once again. The foundational components of We’re GRAND were built on the learning theory and behavioral intervention research conducted by Corey (2008).

2.4 Synthesis

The contextual realities faced by grandparent caregivers can benefit both grandparent and child. Grandparent caregivers may show increased levels of verbal fluency due to their daily interactions with children, teachers, counselors, and other family members. The act of grandparent caregiving may provide moments of exuberance for the caregiver. This uptick in happiness is especially true whenever a grandchild achieves a significant life-stage achievement; one that their biological father or mother may have missed. Events such as being named to an honor roll at school, making a sports team, and graduating high school are examples of these significant life-stage events.

3.0 Methodology

In this chapter, I begin with an explanation of the research, perspective, approach, and the techniques I used to conduct the current study. Then, I will describe the population studied and sampling characteristics of the study participants.

Next, I describe the strategies and procedures used to respond to my research question, as well as qualitative data analysis procedures used to interpret data collected during participant phenomenological interviews. Later in this chapter, I clarify my method to guarantee the trustworthiness of my findings. Finally, I provide an explanation of the way my data and findings were analyzed.

3.1 Type of Research

I chose to ground this study in a transformative paradigm, while remaining true to my honest interpretations of grandparent caregivers. Creswell (2013) posited the nature of phenomenology is that of a philosophical assumption and a research method. According to Carpenter and Peña (2017), qualitative researchers commonly use interviews to gather data from among a participant pool of individuals who share a similar experience. Existing scholarship on a particular phenomenon can be compared with the analysis of one's interview data.

The qualitative data analysis may unearth sociolinguistic strands or themes, inherent in the stories unearthed through participant reflection. In this regard, the primary challenge of a

phenomenological researcher is to provide a comfortable environment in which interviewees feel safe enough to recall a full spectrum of life events tied to their context as grandparent caregivers. Seidman (2013) stated, “striving for equity is not only an ethical imperative; it is also a methodological one” (p. 111). I verbally acknowledged my understanding of grandparent caregiving was incomplete. Moreover, I reminded participants the questions had been carefully crafted to maintain their dignity, and elicit responses that could be used to form a more complete understanding of their respective journeys into grandparent caregiving.

I attempted to illuminate the multiple systems of support used by grandparent caregivers of school-age children, and ultimately, how grandparent caregivers make decisions finding the best support systems for their families. For example, the “GRANDstories” podcast mentioned discussed how grandparent caregivers of school-age children try to balance between family-based and community-based support with those offered within the communities in which they reside. One may argue the grandparent caregivers who agreed to participate in the GRANDstories podcast began their new context from a deficit perspective and only realized the inequality of power that existed in their pursuit of support once they sat down and reflected on their experiences. The warp and woof of perspective, context, storytelling, and reflection anchor a qualitative study such as this.

3.2 Perspective

In 2015, during my 16th year of teaching elementary education, I noticed a demographic shift among the families of my elementary age students. Since that time, I have

observed increased rates of students living with their grandparents. The heads of these grandparent-led households routinely shared their experiences once I gained their trust.

Eventually, I began a podcast called “GRANDstories” and archived four interviews with grandparent caregivers of school-age children.

As an elementary school teacher and research practitioner, my interest in phenomenological interviews grew from an intellectual desire to know more about the lives of the families I serve. Reflection and storytelling are the foundational blocks of sense-making throughout human history (Seidman, 2013). Mertens (2015) suggested semi-structured interviewing beginning with open-ended questions provides a “broader lens for the researcher” (p. 384) to gaze through and interpret one’s context. An example of an open-ended question from my interview protocol is “How did you come to be grandparent caregivers?” Participant responses provided insight into the phenomenological precedents that caused grandparents to transition to grandparent caregivers. Thus, phenomenological interviews allowed me opportunities to listen to the narratives of a group of people who are meaningful caretakers within my career of choice and then, share the parts of their stories they wish to be shared.

As an interpretivist investigator, the researcher aimed to balance a teacherly understanding of grandparent caregiving with the study participants’ understanding in order to gain what Bevan (2014) described as “clarity of meaning” (p. 142). In order to describe a potentially unrecognized problem to a local school board, researchers may need “information-rich” (Backhouse & Graham, 2002) stories of people tasked with raising a grandchild to articulate the need for improved systems of support, communication, and education within school districts.

McCormick et al. (2016) pointed to the positive effects on student learning when caregivers deliver home-based learning activities, volunteer at school, and utilize consistent home-school communication practices. As Ryan and Deci (2000) acknowledged, the social relatedness of an individual acts as one of three conditions supporting self-value, initiative, value, and ultimately production. The other two psychological conditions are autonomy and competence. When any one of the three conditions, i.e., initiative, value, or production become compromised within one's social context, detrimental outcomes such as aggression and apathy may arise.

3.3 Approach

Using Bronfenbrenner's (1977) first iteration of his ecological systems theory (EST), Garbacz, Zerr, Dishion, Seeley, and Stormshak (2018) illuminated specific ways in which parental involvement in a child's educational experience improves the child's welfare to two of Bronfenbrenner's four modalities: the child's microsystem and mesosystem. According to Sontag (1996), Bronfenbrenner's ecological taxonomy utilizes a four-model lens to observe a child and the child's environment holistically. The microsystem is essentially how a child interacts with those most intimately connected to the child; parents, siblings, extended kin, teachers, and clergy (Sontag, 1996). Bronfenbrenner's mesosystem is the study of two or more interconnected microsystems (Sontag, 1996). The outer-most layer of Bronfenbrenner's ecological taxonomy, known as the exosystem, includes individuals and groups on the periphery of the child's existence. Inspired by Bronfenbrenner's four-modal lens to survey one's holistic development within systems, I utilized the EST as my theoretical framework.

Table 3.1 below details a breakdown of the five modalities of Bronfenbrenner's ecological taxonomy, situating grandparent caregivers within the core, instead of a child.

Table 1 Theoretical Framework

Modality	Study Context
The Individual	Grandparent caregivers
Microsystem	Kin connections, co-workers, school, friends, biological parents, religious
Mesosystem	The movement or interactions of grandparent caregivers, throughout each system
Exosystem	Health, school district policy, social services, state policy, finances, legal services
Macrosystem	Political climate, family care, cultural norms, religious values, economy

Adapted to the context of grandparent caregivers raising school-age children, the EST developed by Bronfenbrenner (1977) focused one's ontological lens in a manner revealing where support is present and where gaps exist in the lives of grandparent caregivers. Essentially, my experience in public education has taught me grandparent caregivers are often reluctant to engage in problem-solving endeavors with their grandchild's teachers. Therefore, the modified EST could illuminate those support systems grandparent caregivers find more comforting. Furthermore, this model can show how the conduits of support enjoyed by grandparent caregivers open, close, reopen, and can be revisited.

As a practitioner, I assumed most grandparent caregivers lived in a state of confusion and regret. These beliefs were shared by other professionals within my place of practice. Interested parties might use the economy of the EST (adapted for this study) to reframe their own understanding of the phenomenon of grandparent caregiving.

Crotty (1998) compared the way a researcher studies natural science with that of social science, as the former finds understanding as generalizable laws unfold and become established, while the latter focuses on an individual, human phenomenon (p. 67). Crotty went on to describe “symbolic symbols” (p. 75), including the language humans utilize to express their uniqueness. Identified in the present study, were themes in the language of those interviewed (the actors) and interpreted. Interestingly, this study of grandparent caregiving should be deemed deductive research. However, in terms of the phenomenon of grandparent caregiver research, I utilize inductive reasoning, due to the scarcity of relevant studies. Thus, this study was grounded in the transformative paradigm, while remaining true to the narratives of grandparent caregivers who have chosen to partake in this study.

3.4 Techniques

Phenomenological interviews of grandparent caregivers of students within a small town in Pennsylvania were the foundation of this study. Similar to a study conducted by Backhouse and Graham (2012), the researcher asked participants questions aligned on a continuum from formal to informal. Mertens (2015) suggested semi-structured interviews provide the researcher autonomy to probe more deeply with follow-up questions when necessary. Semi-structured interviews took place, either in-house or in a public space.

The following sections reveal how I used semi-structured phenomenological interviews during this qualitative study of the lived experiences of grandparent caregivers of school-age children. I sought information about the macro level of the grandparent caregiver demographic,

or what Husserl called the “natural attitude” as well as, the micro level which Husserl labeled the “lifeworld” pillar of phenomenology (Carr, 1970).

This qualitative study utilized private, semi-structured, face-to-face phenomenological interviews to allow the study participants opportunities to reveal their subjective experiences as grandparent caregivers. Additionally, I hoped to learn which features of today’s public-school environment are most helpful and supportive of grandparent caregivers. Participant questions were aligned on a continuum from formal to informal.

Seidman (2013) created four phenomenological themes for the interviewer to consider:

(a) Theme I: the temporal and transitory nature of human experience; (b) Theme II: subjective understanding; (c) Theme III: lived experience as the foundation of “phenomena”; and (d) Theme IV: an emphasis on meaning and meaning in context.

In the first theme, Seidman (2013) noted an interviewer aims to empower the interviewee to make present truth about feelings and events that happened to them in the past. The present is so fleeting that it may make honest and absolute recall difficult.

In the second theme, Seidman (2013) reminded the interviewer to remain mindful of the impossibility inherent in understanding another person’s reality or that person’s understanding of their reality. An interviewer should use the phenomenological approach to elicit the interviewee’s recollection of their experience from the interviewee’s subjective point of view.

Regarding the third theme, one school of thought posits those who have endured trauma hyper-compartmentalize their traumatic memories as a way to improve intentional and unintentional recall on demand (Berntsen, 2009; Rubin, Boals, & Berntsen, 2008). Other theorists have suggested a traumatized individual will intentionally vacate the stimuli most

prevalent at the time the trauma occurred, as a way of minimizing unintentional recollection later in life (Ehlers & Clark, 2000).

Lastly, in relation to the fourth theme, van Manen (2016) illuminated the value of mining the meaning of another's experiences. Thus, context must precede any attempt to understand another person's point of view regarding their experiences.

3.5 Population and Participant Selection

The researcher wanted to use phenomenological interviews to learn about co-resident grandparent caregivers of school-age children. Qualifying characteristics of the study participants included: (a) full-time co-residential custody and (b) grandchildren enrolled in the same public school-district. Only grandparent caregivers of children enrolled in grades K4-12 of a public-school district were selected. I focused my recruitment on individuals who enrolled their children in one rural school district in Pennsylvania. According to the Center for Rural Pennsylvania (2017), school districts with a minimum population density < 284 residents per square mile are considered rural. Those with a population density >284 residents per square mile are considered urban. Thus, the school district in which the current study took place classifies as rural.

A total of nine grandparent caregivers took part in the current study. Additionally, two great-grandparents agreed to become study participants. The mean age of the grandparents was 60.6 years of age, with a range of 48-75 years.

I brainstormed with school district paraprofessionals and school principals to create a list of students thought to be living in grandparent caregiver, co-residential environments.

Paraprofessionals in the school district's elementary office looked up the demographic information of each student and printed that information, as I do not have administrative privilege to complete the previous action. From September through January 2018, stakeholders within the school district provided names of people they either knew or thought might be grandparent caregivers. This criterion sampling (Moser & Korstjens, 2018), with the assistance of paraprofessional and administrative gatekeepers allowed me to gain more familiarity with the local population of grandparent caregivers (and vice versa) pare down those without full guardianship and co-resident status from those who held a school guardianship level of kinship care.

The next step in the recruitment process involved informal telephone calls to 10 known grandparent caregivers within the school district. This number was chosen after studying the levels of guardianship among a pool of 16 known grandparent caregivers; I sought only co-resident, full-time guardians for this study. Moreover, I wanted to ensure a manageable sample size. The range of children attending district schools ranged from elementary through high school. For all of the reasons mentioned, I equitably selected the most appropriate population to recruit for this particular qualitative study. Seidman (2013) stated, “Building the interviewing relationship begins the moment the potential participant hears of the study” (p. 50). During the telephone call, I introduced myself as a third-grade teacher first, and a student enrolled in the University of Pittsburgh's Doctorate in Education program second. It was necessary for the respondents to know my interests came from a place of action, as opposed to strictly research for the sake of research. Once rapport had begun over the phone, I described the study and elicited questions and concerns from the grandparent caregiver. While still on the telephone call, I asked permission to mail a more in-depth description of the research study to

them so that they may gain a deeper understanding of the type of information sought. Some potential study participants had already heard an individual was planning a study involving local grandparent caregivers of school-age children, and communicated this to the researcher during the initial phone calls. The fact some individuals knew of my research study attests to the closely-knit fabric of the community in which the study took place. If a potential study participant agreed to receive an informed consent form mailing (see Appendix A) and ultimately decided to take part in the study, a face-to-face meeting was scheduled at the local elementary building or another, more agreeable location, depending on the participant's desires. All grandparent caregivers contacted during the initial telephone calls welcomed further information about this study.

3.6 Procedures

The University of Pittsburgh's Institutional Review Board (IRB) granted this study "exempt" status under section 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2) in November 2018 (see Appendix B). Previously, the researcher submitted the documentation required of a qualitative study, including the statement of potential risk to research subjects and research protocol abstract.

Grandparent caregivers of school-age children in a small town in Pennsylvania were invited to take part in a series of semi-structured phenomenological interviews. Once the phenomenological interviews commenced, a better thematic understanding surrounding this particular caregiver demographic emerged. Shutz (1967) proposed using a series of three semi-structured interviews to allow participants to engage in the "act of attention" as they develop their own contextual understanding, through reflection and discussion. Due to time constraints,

a version similar to that of Seidman's three-part interview series was used, as only two interviews were planned with each study participant. Based on the two interviews, I attempted to bridge the decisions and descriptions present at the onset of grandparent caregiving with current family, social, therapeutic, and medical decisions and descriptions. Participants were given opportunities to reflect on their statements during and after each interview. The interview protocol was designed to allow study participants, including the researcher to review and clarify responses (see Appendix C).

After each participant had an opportunity to reflect on their two interviews and subsequent data analysis occurred, the evolution of themes could begin. These themes were used to generate profiles of a phenomenon; in this case the profiles of grandparent caregivers raising school-age children informed the creation of first-person narratives. Faculty and staff members shared how their perceptions of grandparent caregiving evolved and now understand the context of reparenting as unique journeys precipitated by events not unlike those that have occurred within their own families-much like my own perceptions evolved to view grandparent caregivers as assets and not worthy of pity.

Perhaps a change in perception will uplift other local grandparent caregivers of school-age children and their own sense of agency will grow and lead them into roles of caregiver advocacy within local school districts. Next, I outline four inquiry questions that are the foundation of my interview protocol.

3.6.1 Inquiry Question Number One (IQ1)

IQ1: How did you come to be grandparent caregivers?

3.6.2 Inquiry Question Number Two (IQ2)

IQ2: How has the decision to become grandparent caregivers affected your family's stability?

3.6.3 Inquiry Question Number Three (IQ3)

IQ3: If I was a brand-new grandparent caregiver, what advice would you give me, to help transition into this new chapter in my life?

3.6.4 Inquiry Question Number Four (IQ4)

IQ4: Please consider your role as a grandparent caregiver raising a school-age grandchild. What are your strengths in this regard? What solutions have you found most practical in working within the modern-day public education system? More than one question, I know. How about: what are your strengths and most practical solutions-but it's post interviews so, would that be appropriate?

3.7 Data Analysis

Data analysis was accomplished using inductive coding. The phenomenological interviews allowed for the interpretation of the contextual narratives of grandparent caregivers raising school-age children in a manner that manifested themselves in clear themes. Phenomenological interviews revealed where power struggles, class divisions, as well as,

personal and professional relationships intersect. Yuval-Davis (2006) used a macro and micro framework to describe ways organizational and culturally devised arms of power (macro level) construct the ways society frames individuals. The interviews revealed both gaps and bridges exist in the lives of grandparent caregivers navigating 21st-century public education, levels of guardianship, access to human resources, and affairs within one's kinship circle. I sought external reviewers with no connection to the context in which this study occurred, to increase the rigor of my study.

My unique role as a teacher conducting research within the school district which employs me, caused me to consider the fact many of those interviewed also knew me as a teacher with two decades experience in the classroom. My self-acknowledged assumptions of the demographic being studied as well as, the professional relationships shared with some participants propelled me to constantly reflect on how best to balance these two phenomena. The unrest felt by the researcher characterizes the "concept and process" ideology underpinning epistemological reflexivity (Palaganas, Sanchez, Molintas, & Caricativo, 2017).

All interviews were professionally transcribed using a password protected service known as Rev. All data collected on paper was securely stored using my classroom file cabinet and only I had access to the key to the cabinet. Examples of such paper data include (a) interview protocols with my handwritten notes; and (b) memos based on reflections between interviews. Recordings of interviews and subsequent analysis were made available to the principal researcher, individual study participants, and my dissertation committee; all members of the team had access OBJAt that point, open coding began. The cloud-based data collection, transcription, and coding website known as Dedoose provided the researcher with a trusted and secure data management tool. Dedoose is a cloud-based and password-protected qualitative

analysis website. Both Dedoose and Rev maintain non-disclosure agreements with the primary investigator.

There were hurdles to overcome during my data analysis. I had to constantly balance my emotions with experience. For example, some of the most poignant excerpts from the grandparent caregiver interviews were comments that traditional caregivers have said in one form or another. My experience as a classroom teacher provided an abundance of parent-teacher conversational memories from which to draw upon. As such, I had to determine if a truly moving comment from interviews conducted during my study were typical of most caregivers or phenomenological.

I encountered another hurdle when study participants recalled interactions between themselves and their grandchildren. As I reflected on my memos, I discovered one participant who stated, “Does some of this sound like normal teenage behavior?” I had to monitor my emotional responses during the phenomenological interviews with rational thought.

Often, I had to remind myself not to cloud my knowledge of present-day context with what I aimed to discover through the interviews. A pertinent example occurred when I began thinking about a grandparent caregiver who went to prison for a crime committed within the home and toward a grandchild. This was especially evident whenever the current family context could cause bias among those who may read this document.

My inexperience with the data analysis website Dedoose also proved challenging. I often questioned if I was over-coding, and more specifically whether I was creating codes that were both positive and negative and if this was a problem. I was able to decipher which excerpts were atypical and which were thematic or emblematic of the phenomenon studied through careful review of the codes and descriptors prior to each iteration of coding. As I wanted to

utilize every qualitative analysis tool afforded by Dedoose, it took several months to arrive at the following two conclusions: (a) I did not have sufficient time, and (b) some of the charts and matrices were not useful for the current study.

3.7.1 Open, Axial, and Selective Coding

A three-step process of inductive coding, similar to work done by Lee and Blitz (2016), was used to analyze the data. Following the phenomenological interviews, (a) open coding, (b) axial coding, and (c) selective coding were used.

Step one involved open coding and was used to distill the raw narratives into categories. Step two utilized axial coding or coding that reveals intersectionality within the categories. Finally, step three employed selective coding, used to illuminate themes. Thereby, allowing all stakeholders in this study opportunities to draw comparisons and discern contrasting information.

Open coding is a way to assign codes to condense data collected from interviews into phenomenological categories. Axial coding follows this initial categorization of data. During the axial coding phase, connections were made from within the data. These connections were used to cluster certain phenomenological concepts. Thematic analysis using selective coding took place during the third stage of coding. During this stage, I sought emerging themes.

Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014) reminded researchers to utilize epistemological reflexivity; a type of check-and-balance system designed to increase the rigor of this particular type of study. Moreover, Guba (1981) suggested using external reviewers from the social sciences field to review the study's (a) credibility, (b) transferability, (c) dependability, and (d) confirmability.

3.8 Results

In order to best describe the journey of each grandparent caregiver in my study, I created a thematic matrix. Granted, I had some pre-existing knowledge of the grandparent caregiving through my role as a classroom teacher. However, my understanding was incomplete and remains so. As an interpretivist research practitioner, I find comfort in acknowledging my subjective understanding of another's recollections. Willis (as cited in Thanh and Thanh, 2015, p. 26), reminds the interpretivist researcher to embrace the inherent subjectivity involved when one attempts to understand the multiple ways in which individuals within a specific demographic explain the choices they have made. Essentially, the thematic matrix was derived from my interpretation of a set of interviews in which grandparent caregivers of school-age children recounted their journeys as best they could. My understanding of the recollections presented by the interviewees was bolstered by reflection and collaboration between the grandparent caregivers and me. Themes emerged after the interviews, thinking, and cooperation between interviewer and interviewees occurred.

The y axis displays each participant using a unique four-digit identifier, while the x axis displays themes that arose during the interviews. For purposes of this study, a theme was significant whenever a code was applied in most of the 14 participant interviews. "Connection with Younger Parents" and "School Differences" are two codes that do not appear into the matrix, as they were applied in less than half of the interview excerpts. Figure 3.1 below represents the results of the open-coding process.

Table 2 Thematic Matrix

	1621	0221	1612	0218	1201	1615	1618	**Total**
Adoption Experience	x	x	x		x	x		5
Transitions	x			x	x	x	x	5
Routines	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	7
GC Fears	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	7
Spousal Teamwork	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	7
Reparenting Style	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	7
Relationship with BP	x	x	x		x	x	x	6
Support from Kin	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	7
GC Self-Awareness			x	x	x	x	x	5
Confusions	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	7
Financials		x	x	x	x	x	x	6
Interactions with Courts	x	x	x		x	x		5
Social Services	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	7
Building New Relationships	x	x	x	x	x	x		6
Transitions				x	x	x	x	4
Family Traditions	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	7
Medicals			x	x	x	x	x	5
Social Support	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	7
Spiritual/Religious			x	x	x	x	x	5
Time	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	7
Threats	x	x	x		x	x		5
Regrets				x		x	x	3
Total	16	16	19	18	21	22	18	130

The thematic matrix did not illustrate the frequency or intensity of each code. Thus, I chose to re-read the excerpts I found most compelling during data analysis and study the code co-occurrence chart generated by the qualitative analysis website called Dedoose. Additionally, I re-read the 89 memos written during the summer and fall of 2019. The deepest level of reflexivity occurred when the researcher combined the re-reading of excerpts, memos, and studying the code co-occurrence chart, to begin open, axial, and selective coding of the data. It was then that I began to gain an understanding of the interplay of support systems and family decisions, illustrated by the modified EST model developed with "Grandparent Caregiver" at its core.

Next, I created a codebook (see Table 4.5) to illustrate my reactions to participant data based on the interview excerpts. I selected powerful or provocative examples of the interview participant's words into segments that summarized my thoughts during the open coding of my raw data, thereby reducing the data. These segments were merely observations based on reading and rereading the excerpts from each interview and were not based on theory.

Once I segmented my thoughts into the 10 open codes, I searched for connections between them. This search led me to two axial codes (see Table 4.6). The axial codes represent my move from inductive to deductive data analysis. During axial coding, I stretched my interpretation of the segments created during open coding.

Finally, I reread the data and searched for variables that connected my open and axial codes into an aggregate of raw data. This aggregate represents the core or most immersive variable. This step produced a selective code: Seeking a successful new normalcy, during the journey of a grandparent caregiver.

3.9 Assurance of Anonymity

The University of Pittsburgh's IRB processed and approved the Electronic Data Security Assessment Form, outlining the identifiers I planned to collect as well as the methods of data collection and storage. Audio-recorded interviews were used to archive each meeting with study participants. Each study participant took part in one introductory meeting and one phenomenological interview. All participant responses remained confidential, and any identifiable factors became de-identified. Each study participant was given unique study codes to identify necessary information such as identity, age, gender, and marital status. Therefore, study participants enjoyed the assurance of anonymity.

3.10 Dissemination of Findings

This process was iterative and interviews were revisited in order to fulfill the responsibilities of a qualitative researcher. In other words, my lens was focused on Husserl's (as cited in Carr, 1970) pillars of phenomenology; the illumination of one's natural attitude and lifeworld, in the service of a caregiver's view of their support.

The empirical research that drove this dissertation may shift a school district's administration, faculty, and staff's ontological assumptions of grandparent caregivers from community deficits to assets; strengthened by their energy, wisdom, and reserve. If this shift occurs, the collection of grandparent caregiver narratives could propel other school districts to take a critical look at their population of grandparent caregivers and listen to their needs.

4.0 Findings

The purpose of this study was to listen to and learn from the unique narratives told by grandparent caregivers of school-age children. Grandparent caregivers described the ways they have learned to solve problems, find joy, and create memories within their unique kinship contexts. The relief of finding solutions to difficult caregiving problems, the expressions of joy, and recollection of happy memories are tempered by the acknowledged impermanence of these very attributes of the modern family. This chapter details the demographic data of the grandparent caregivers who took part in this study as well as the results of the data collected during face-to-face, semi-structured interviews. The interview protocol was designed to elicit answers to the research question: How do grandparent caregivers of school-age children view success in their kinship relationships?

4.1 Characteristics of Participants and Grandchildren

Demographic information is included in Tables 4.1 to 4.4. The characteristics of the grandparent caregivers at the time of this study are listed in Table 4.1, including age, gender, educational attainment, marital and employment status, and number of school-age custodial grandchildren. The characteristics of the custodial grandchildren at the time of this study appear in Table 4.2, including age, gender, and grade level when participant interviews commenced. Table 4.3 details characteristics of the grandparent caregivers at the onset of their caregiving roles, which consist of age and marital status at the time the grandparents became caregivers

to their grandchildren. Finally, Table 4.4 presents characteristics of the grandchildren upon entrance into custodial care.

All grandparent caregivers were Caucasian. The grandparent caregivers who participated in the interviews were aged 48-75 years. The mean age of the grandparents was 60.6 years. Nine grandparent caregivers were married and two were separated from their spouse.

All custodial grandchildren were Caucasian. The grandchildren's ages ranged from 10-17 years. The mean age of the grandchildren was 11.6 years. There were seven total kinship families involved in this study and had grandchildren enrolled in the same school district.

All grandparent caregivers who participated met the qualifiers for inclusion in the study. The requirements were: (a) full-time custodial grandparent caregivers who co-resided with one or more grandchildren; and (b) the custodial grandchildren were enrolled in the same public-school district. One grandparent caregiver couple raised a grandchild who had already graduated from high school. This individual was mentioned during the course of the phenomenological interviews, but due to their age was not included in the data. Also, for one grandparent caregiver couple, this was the second time they had made the decision to become co-residential, custodial grandparents, i.e., third-generation caregivers but second-generation grandparent caregivers. All grandparent caregivers who took part in this study consented to the interviews, signed informed consent letters, and were given opportunities to review my notes at all times during the 14 interviews.

Table 3 Demographic Characteristics of Grandparent Caregivers

Characteristic	*n*	%
Age		
48-54	2	18.1
55-65	4	36.4
66-75	5	45.5
Mean Age of Grandparent Caregivers at Time of Study = 60.6 years		
Gender		
Female	7	64
Male	4	36
Highest Level of Education		
Less than high school	1	9
High school diploma	8	73
Associate degree	1	9
Bachelor degree	1	9
Marital Status		
Married	9	82
Separated	2	18
Employment Status		
Not Retired	4	36.4
Retired	3	27.3
Retired with Supplemental Income	1	9.1
Retired and Re-entered Workforce	2	18.1
Disabled	1	9.1
Number of Custodial Grandchildren Still in School		
1	9	75
2	2	17
3	0	0
4	1	8

Note: N = 11

Table 4 Demographic Characteristics of School-Age Children

Characteristic	*n*	%
Age at Time of Study		
10-13	7	64
14-17	4	36
Mean Age of Grandchildren at Time of Study= 12.3 years		
Gender		
Female	5	45
Male	6	55
Grade Level at Time of Interviews		
Elementary school	4	36
Middle school	4	36
High school	3	28

Note: N = 11

Table 5 Demographic Characteristics of Grandparent Caregivers at Onset of Grandparent Caregiving Status

Characteristic	*n*	%
Age at Onset		
36-46	5	45.4
47-57	3	27.3
58-67	3	27.3
Mean Age of Grandparent Caregivers at Onset of Grandparent Caregiving Status = 50.3 years		

Note: N = 11

Table 6 Demographic Characteristics of Grandchildren Upon Entrance into Custodial Care

Characteristic	*n*	%
Age at Onset:		
Birth - One Year	4	36.4
Two - Five	5	45.4
Six - Eight	2	18.2
Mean Age of Grandchildren at Onset of Custodial Care = 3.5 years		

Note: N = 11

4.2 Data Analysis

Once the first seven phenomenological interviews were complete, I reviewed and notated the transcripts of each interview. The notes were used to resolve inconsistencies or unclear interview responses, which were then addressed at the beginning of the second set of interviews. Later, all interview transcripts were imported into Dedoose. The transcripts were carefully read and reread to develop emergent codes. The researcher was able to archive memos during data analysis. Finally, each transcript was read a third time and coded accordingly. At this time, themes began to emerge which were used to generate profiles of a phenomenon—in this case, the profiles of grandparent caregivers raising school-age children informed the creation of first- person narratives.

A total of 83 codes emerged. Fifteen of the 83 codes were determined to be the most salient, as code co-occurrence was evident in all 14 interviews (see Appendix D for a co- occurrence chart). Eight codes were mentioned in all 14 interviews and discussed more than 100 times. A total of 89 memos were archived by the researcher during data analysis.

4.3 Results

Open, axial, and selective coding allowed for a better understanding as to how the grandparent caregivers who took part in this study viewed success in their kinship relationships. It is these relationships that give voice to the journeys each grandfamily has taken. The open coding revealed two subthemes underpinning the selective codes. I used emergent selective coding to

answer my research questions. Next, I described how the seven grandfamilies in this study worked to find a new normalcy and in turn, success in their kinship relationships. The open codes (see Table 4.5) and interview excerpts anchored the connections to my modified EST model.

Note: I have not used any participant names in Tables 4.5 and 4.6. I replaced all participants including their grandchildren, and third-party names with pseudonyms in the Interpretation of Findings section.

Table 7 Open Codes for Research Question 1

Open Code	Properties	Examples of Participants' Words
Transitioning and building relationships	• Uncertainty and lack of choice • Rushing into new situations • GC first moves • Thinking of the safety of the grandchildren first • Making split-second decisions in spite of traumatic environments	• She went into foster care • She was keeping them • Are you going to take him? • "Come get the kids" • Blood doesn't mean anything • She was not allowed to have them • Thrown in your face anyway • We weren't gonna separate them • It was a murder-suicide • Absent mother • "Can you come and get xxxx?"
Self-awareness and confusion co-exist	• Believing the new context was mutually beneficial • Worrying about ageism • Feeling there was no other choice • Understanding life won't be the same anymore • Feelings of abandonment and resentment	• At first, she knew she was in good hands • Us being 70-something years old and wanting to adopt these young children • I got a baby and I don't want it • When we first got the first two • She left state • No more contact • He was our baby (the grandchild) • Absent mother • He knows xxxx is safe

Table 7 (continued)

Life before and life after guardianship	• Attempts to support kin • Unexpected responsibilities • Feelings of disappointment because plans didn't work out • Using your instincts to do what's best for kin	• We lived out there for 4 years • They had been up here-about 8 months • That was a horrible couple years, whatever it took to get to her • We had him over half his life • A total of 6 months • We didn't build it for kids • She would live with us • She would have a baby with us • I hated every second of it • Progressively became where I had her the majority of the time
Threats and resilience	• Threats to their grandchildren mitigated by due diligence and family norms • Believing in second chances • Accepting new contexts while embracing your family • Acknowledging that family dynamics and structures are complicated • Understanding undesirable trade-offs can benefit the common good within a family	• I was a detective. I didn't let things go • You take care of them kids. • We're family and it's just how it works • We had to find a house, when, how I did it, I have no idea • It was harder the second time around • She deserves that chance to be a mom • I will be here to guide her through this • It's my responsibility, but just come and hold them and love them • We'll make it through. We'll make it through. • We would've done that…if it hadn't been for the fear of age discrimination

Table 7 (continued)

Gathering supports	• Reflecting on the silo mentality one may acquire during a transition to survival mode • Independence • Believing in the support of family • Leaning on faith to guide you through difficult times • Frustration and ambivalence with the social welfare system • Allow your logical mind to guide your emotional mind	• I was in my own little world • It was uncharted waters • Took care of members of my family • My family • Me. I did it. I make the decisions. • Just God. Prayer. • You have to be 100% dependent on the system before you can get this help to crawl out of this hole • You feel like you're alone but you have to express your feelings
Expectations	• Staying on top of things academically • School has changed significantly • Feeling like you need to be physically present at school • Believing you have to relearn school yourself • The belief that age impacts the grandchildren in their care • Age matters when it comes to helping their grandchildren succeed in school • Making time to be present	• And I'm really concerned about her not fulfilling her potential • Yeah because I was in preschool just about every day • I want her to do well and I know she can do it • Living with two old fogies like us, you have to make sure they have time with children their own age • Forget about everything you went through when you enrolled your biological child • Did you ever do rock climbing? Well, you ought to try it sometime with 100 pounds strapped to your back • As old as we are • You just work

Table 7 (continued)

		• I feel like I have to volunteer here because my kids haven't been in school in forever • I take appointments later in the day so I can be here to do stuff • There's no books anymore • I take them to school early
Family evolution	• Advantages of experience • Understanding multi-generational hardship • Embracing the layers of their current contextual situation • The power of choice • External threats • Embracing your family • Finding routines that work and matter • Understanding societal change	• I have more patience • I know where she's coming from • You're also taking care of two children because you got to deal with the child that has lost a child • Maybe you have more time to think about it now because you don't work as much as you did then • I would say the number one problem we have is drugs • Breaking up these families • I get them up with songs • We're trying to raise these and we're not talking ancient history here • Oh, you stepped in and decided to take care • It's probably easier for people who haven't gone into the empty nest yet

Table 7 (continued)

Social services	• Being equipped with the resources you never thought you'd need • Untangling the web of social services • Recognizing not everyone knows about the services available to them • Fear of the unknown • Minimal level of support is the expectation • The caregivers know about trauma • Asking for help overcoming the impacts of trauma • Unexpected consequences	• We knew nothing about our rights • There's no programs • I had to take a loan out, 30k • Not knowing who could be a babysitter, because they had to jump through all the hoops • But doesn't mean he can't find another reason to turn down his adoption • Navigate through the trauma • Well they have social workers and stuff • I mean, I never even gave it a thought there might be groups out there • Call just to get pointed in the right direction
Precedent and continuum of care	• Feelings of unconditional love for the biological parents • Believing in the continuity of family • You might not love your child's actions but you understand the weight of the caregiving responsibility • Focusing on a legacy • Accepting what's happened in the past can't be changed • Acknowledging when your caregiver responsibilities need transitioned to the biological parent • Acknowledging the fallibility of people and loving them anyway	• And it's the bipolar issue that he refuses to see and it drives me crazy • I told xxxx that "daddy thinks differently than a lot of people" • I pretty much had to sacrifice my relationship with my adult daughter to make sure xxxx was ok • I just love him where he's at. I have to because nothing he says is true, so I just learned not to question him on things • Wasn't her choice that she left and she would have done it, so we're here to do it for her • We're going to co-parent • xxxx is old enough now to just call me and say, hey, my mother's being crazy. Come get me

Table 7 (continued)

		• I never thought a person could not have a motherly bone in her body • I'm not sending her back to somebody who does drugs • Thought we would have her 6 months. Because I really thought they'd get their act together and then it kept just dragging
Judgement and self-worth	• Believing in your value to your community and family • Caring about others before oneself • Believing your decision is the right one and moving forward with it • Trying to pass on your family norms to another generation • Feeling appreciated	• Someone said, "What you do is come in and clean up everybody's messes" • xxxx arranged all her classes in college to watch xxxx • And I just felt what I was doing was right so it didn't really matter what anybody else said anyway • You're making her where she cares about people • One of the biggest things is no one ever judged us for having a teenage daughter pregnant • Our friends…were just right there

Table 8 Axial Codes for Research Question 1

Open Codes	Axial Codes	Selective Code
Judgement and self-worth; Gathering supports; Threats and resilience; Self-awareness and confusion co-exist	Believing in and understanding one's value while tempering emotions with pragmatism	Seeking a successful new normalcy
Transitions and building new relationships; Life before and life after guardianship; Social Services; Precedent and continuum of care; Expectations; Family evolution	Accepting one's worth in the face of trauma and negotiating a new journey	

4.4 Interpretation of Findings

4.4.1 Modified Ecological Systems Framework

Plotted below are the journeys undertaken by the grandparent caregivers from a small town in Pennsylvania, using a modified version of the first iteration of Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological systems theory (EST). This model reveals the interrelatedness occurring within a grandfamily, the school system, human service providers, cultural influences, and peer groups. Later iterations of Bronfenbrenner's theory have acknowledged the passage of time within a person's lifespan. Bronfenbrenner referred to the time component as the chronosystem (Tudge et al., 2016). The following illustrates the supports used most frequently by each grandfamily who took part in the study.

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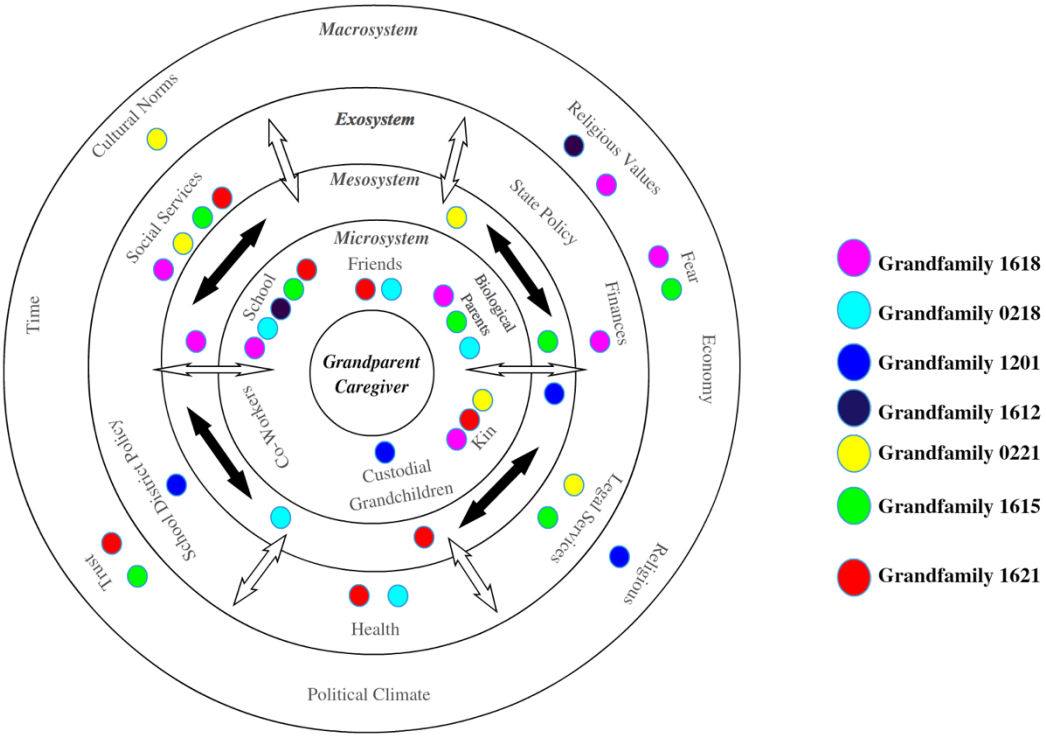

Figure 1 Supports Used by Each Grandfamily

In addition, my lens had been distorted to believe in certain truths. As a practitioner, I assumed most grandparent caregivers lived in a state of confusion and regret. These beliefs were shared by other professionals within my place of practice. Interested parties might use the economy of the EST (adapted for this study) to reframe their own understanding of the phenomenon of grandparent caregiving.

The following narratives were culled from interview excerpts. The researcher used poignant excerpts to underscore the plotted journeys of each grandfamily who took part in this study. Summaries follow the narratives and describe exactly where each excerpt fit on the modified

ecological systems theory (EST) model. Pseudonyms were used in place of participant's names as well as, third party actors within the narratives.

4.4.2 Grandfamily 1621

During the second interview, Carol stated, "Yeah, I've got to know people. I can't just let her go to somewhere where I just don't know who they are." Carol later had her need fulfilled prior to her grandchild's class field trip. As Joseph stated, "And you know what we did to get to ok that? The teacher had to walk with her." Carol commented, "I'm very cocooned with her. I don't let her go many places." during our second interview. I immediately wondered if Carol's fears will have any effect on her granddaughter's social mobility as her granddaughter grows older.

Also, during the second interview, Carol said about school "The teachers have been wonderful there. Any problems they get ahold of me. I mean and not even just schoolwork, I'm talking about problems." Joseph commented he was "impressed. She's had some really good teachers." Both Carol and Joseph shared they are a close-knit family, without much of a social group. Carol connected her need for social connections with her desire to spend time in her granddaughter's school when she recalled her friendship with the grandparent caregiver of one of her granddaughter's school peers. She said, "The older ones, no." after I asked if she found friendship with her granddaughter's peer caregivers. Carol went on to tell me that "I am friends with a grandmother that's raising her grandson." I immediately wondered if being a grandparent caregiver of school-age children limits their social desires to older parents.

Joseph talked about the community's social services when he recalled, "Especially when OCY (Office of Children and Youth) was a terrible resource at first. And then probably your next

best resource was someone in the program. Whitney." Whitney is a neighborhood friend of Carol and Joseph.

Carol commented how "everyone was very supportive and helped us any way they could. Cassie [daughter] arranged all her classes in college to help watch [granddaughter]." Carol went on to state "My mom would come from her job and watch [granddaughter]. Both Carol and Joseph worked full-time during this time in their lives. The granddaughter was a baby at the time and needed a sitter. A member of the immediate family as well as, extended kin, provided that resource.

4.4.2.1 Summary

Each level of the modified version of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model was visited by grandfamily 1621. Carol and Joseph's needs were not always met during their first forays into the systems. For example, Carol shared her overwhelming need for trust. This need can be found in the macrosystem. However, she needed a resource like her granddaughter's school, to find success. Carol sought people she found to be trustworthy. During our interviews, Carol mentioned some of her granddaughter's teachers fulfilled this need. Thus, she came back to her microsystem and found a trustworthy environment at the local school.

Joseph was disappointed with a community social resource found in the exosystem. He decided to stay in the exosystem and discovered a neighborhood friend who worked for the same community social resource that failed him. Joseph recalled finding success with this individual, who represented a resource found in the microsystem (friends).

Carol and Joseph recalled how they were able to utilize family members to help with child-care while they were at work. A combination of immediate family and extended kin fulfilled their need. The mesosystem is where entities within the microsystem-in this case immediate family and kin-interact.

Carol and Joseph recognized they have unique opportunities to find supports that seem to work and fulfill their needs. Joseph responded to my desire to know how he would describe their family to a group of teachers, what would he want them to know about his family. His response was, “I don’t think it’s any different than if she [granddaughter] was our own.”

Carol had opportunities to maintain regular sessions with a local therapist. The therapist was trained to provide support for both Carol and her granddaughter. Sometimes, the sessions were joint and other times, Carol’s time was separate from her granddaughter’s time with the therapist. Again, we have another example of the interplay between the exosystem and microsystem, using elements found in the mesosystem.

4.4.3 Grandfamily 0221

Both Dave and Janet were awakened by a late-night phone call. Their great- granddaughter and great-grandson were headed for Child Services in Louisiana as their biological parents had just been arrested for drug possession. Dave recalled, “She was not going to be able to take care of them, and she says the Child Services was getting involved because the parents were incarcerated, and she was keeping them. And it was about two o’clock in the morning when we got this call, and at four o’clock, we were headed for Louisiana.”

Dave and Janet reported caregiving hardships due to their ages. Dave said:

> Well, when the adoption come through before we ever left the courthouse, our lawyer took us down, and he explained to us, “Now, these are your children now. You got to furnish their health care. You don’t have to come to me. You go to someplace, and you…you’ve got to change your will.”

Dave continued by stating, “And we did pick someone to take care of them in case something would happen to us. You know?”

Both Dave and Janet commented on how fear of ageism impacted their decision to pursue adoption. Their fears were found to be plausible once they decided to seek adoption. Janet stated, “The attorney said he can’t make the decision using your age as the reason, because that’s discrimination, but he can always find another reason to not grant it.” Fortunately, the legal system worked for this grandfamily. Visibly moved, Dave recalled a judge saying, “I’m going to be the first one. There’s…There’s a lot…a lot of people are going to thank you. I want to be the first to thank you for getting them out of the system.”

4.4.3.1 Summary

Dave and Janet have the most experience with grandparent caregiving among those who participated in the current study as this is their second time in this role. Dave and Janet are great-grandparent caregivers; caring for the children of a grandchild they raised. The journey they have shared exemplified the ways one’s context can alter their perception in both grand and subtle ways. For example, Dave recalled his age as a great-grandparent caregiver made him realize his own mortality. Both Dave and Janet considered contingency plans for the guardianship of their great-grandchildren should one or both of them die or become incapable of taking care of the children. Both individuals confirmed how valuable the conversations with each other were, as they helped strengthen their relationship and move forth with their decision to adopt their great- grandchildren.

Dave and Janet learned a non-biological member of their kin had rescued their great-grandchildren at the onset of their journey. The children had been taken from their parent’s home by an older stepsister. The stepsister no longer lived in the same house as the younger children. In this instance, Dave and Janet needed the help of a member of their extended kin. Dave, Janet, and

the individual who rescued the great-grandchildren did not have a deep relationship. Their communication was historically, minimal. Yet, at this most critical time, the three of them acted to help the small children who could not help themselves. Furthermore, the stepsister had the wherewithal to contact Dave and Janet because of her fear of the foster care system in her home state of Louisiana. This onset story exemplifies interactions between the microsystem and mesosystem and avoidance of foster care, which is a social service within the exosystem.

Moreover, the Interstate Compact on the Placement of Children (ICPC) helped ensure the safe placement of the great-grandchildren in a state other than their own. According to the Child Welfare Information Gateway (childwelfare.gov), adoption cases involving multiple states tend to become problematic and ICPC is an agreement among all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and the U.S. Virgin Islands to properly ameliorate complex issues involving state-to-state adoptive practices.

Another age-related fear did not occur to Dave and Janet until a family services attorney acknowledged it and shared it with them. The attorney warned Dave and Janet their desire to adopt young children might be met with age-related bias. According to both Dave and Janet, the fear of ageism was one reason the adoption process took a relatively long time. Ultimately, the attorney representing the family convinced a judge to allow the adoption to commence. In this instance, the interplay between their exosystem (legal services) and microsystem (kin) helped them avoid an age-related hurdle. The potential for ageism resides in the macrosystem.

According to Dave's recollection of events, the family services attorney who represented them could not promise age-related cultural norms would not factor into the judge's decision to grant adoption.

4.4.4 Grandfamily 1612

The onset of grandparent caregiving was filled with trauma for Audrey and her husband. Audrey wanted to talk about their guardianship experiences, working with a social services agency in another part of the state. She recalled the following:

> We didn't file for custody but Children & Youth… I don't know what they did. We didn't even have to go to a hearing. To tell you the truth, they were the most incompetent agency I've probably ever worked with in all my life. I'd call her every two to three months to say, "Hey, how's the case going? Is this wrapping up?" And she would say, "Oh yeah…I'm glad you called me. I lost your name and your phone number, and your address, so we don't even know where this kid is to tell you the truth."

Similarly, Audrey recalled:

> I would say with preschool, I enrolled him. But because we live so far out in the country, I had to transport him. There was no transportation, so I transport him every day, twice a day here in town so that he would have that experience and that was like a financial thing because at the time, we weren't getting any kind of help-not zero dollars anywhere but we knew that would give him the building stones he would need for his education. And kudos to Miss Mindy. She's the best preschool teacher.

This excerpt articulates how one family pursued a better life for their grandchild through education. Audrey understood the family's financial situation and she and her husband made a choice to find a way to provide the schooling they desired. So, she found a way to provide schooling through her own sacrifice.

Audrey recounted how religion helps her find solace as a grandparent caregiver. Religious values can be found on the macrosystem. Audrey said:

> I always pray to God for wisdom because you can pray that you get a house, you can pay that you get your car paid off, or you make your monthly bills. You can pray all that stuff but if you don't have wisdom, what are you going to do for the next month? You know what I mean? So, I always pray for wisdom and it's good to hear that it's working.

4.4.4.1 Summary

Audrey wanted to provide an education and quality childcare to her young grandson. Unfortunately, two major hurdles impeded her desire to enroll her grandson in a quality childcare and educational program: money and transportation. Both Audrey and her husband were on disability at the onset of the adoption journey. Compounding their financial and transportation issues were those resulting from health concerns. Audrey recalled, "So yeah, even though we were home, being disabled is just like, you're always having to lay down, you're always having to run to the doctor's, run after this, run after that, you're sick." She continued, "And there's really no help until you've got paperwork that says, 'This is your child,' or, 'You have full custody of this child.' Audrey and her husband did not have kin, their grandson's biological parents, or friends who they felt would provide support. Essentially, they had to bypass the microsystem and move into the macrosystem where their needs were met with the prospect of schooling.

Throughout the interviews, Audrey mentioned spirituality and religion. The frequency of this code occurred second-most of all grandparent caregivers who took part in this study. In fact, Audrey's interviews accounted for nearly 20% of the instances the "Spiritual/Religious" code was applied. Interestingly, Audrey admitted she has not gone to church in a long time. Audrey's spirituality and possibly, need for formal religion was activated frequently during our interviews. Essentially, Audrey bypassed the microsystem due to her choice to abstain from church services

and moved all the way out to the macrosystem and found solace in her religious values. Resilience, self-determination, and reluctance were made evident.

4.4.5 Grandfamily 1201

"I just love him where he's at. I have to because nothing he says is true, so I just learned to just not question him on things. Whatever he's doing. I just have to let it be." This powerful statement was Patti's response to my request to talk about her son's relationship with his biological children. She said, "He once in a while calls and the kids talk to him, but they know that there's not going to be any kind of a normal relationship with him." Patti followed by advising she has had to learn a new relationship with her grown son.

Patti emphasized the importance of education with her grandchildren. She is raising four by herself and found the methodology of Common Core math confusing. She felt unprepared to help her grandchildren with homework and test preparation. Patti recalled a conversation with one of her grandchild's friends that focused on how math teaching and learning had changed in only 15-20 years. Patti finally admitted:

> I did help them with their math, and then when they brought the paper home, it was all wrong. And I called the teacher and I'm, I have no idea how to do this, and she's [the teacher] like "Well, you can look it up on the Internet." I had to have someone come to my home and try and show me how to do this to help them.

Patti's experience as a parent and now grandparent give her a unique lens by which to view societal shifts in regard to her values and beliefs. She reflected on the wisdom and experience she's gained and agreed that being a grandparent caregiver of four school-age children is an opportunity for her; an opportunity to act reflectively rather than reactively. She stated:

> Because of the way society is today, you don't get, and I've just come to realize this, parents today seem to be more tolerant of things that were not tolerated a long time ago, and it tends to be things that they're tolerant of is things that can progress as they get older.

Patti realized she might need to shift her thinking and stated, "I pretty much changed my way of thinking and that's what switched me from the grandparent mode." In this instance, Patti was reflecting on the passage of time and how cultural norms tend to shift.

Finally, Patti revealed how a post-adoption family trauma affected her life and the lives of her grandchildren. Patti's husband committed a crime involving misconduct with one of their grandchildren living in their home. Patti reflected and said. "That just changed everything. That affected our life tremendously. So here he is, that I thought was a great father and with all this other stuff going on with him, throwing me and the children out of the house." She continued, "So we had to find a house, which, I did it, I have no idea. In [name of town], it is hard to find a big enough house for four kids. Plus my parents." Patti recounted her family found solace at a local church. One of her granddaughters said, "Mom, we need to go to church." Patti thought about what her granddaughter said and the next day told the family, "Okay, things have to change because I can't keep them in this place. And we go every Sunday and Wednesday."

4.4.5.1 Summary

Patti tried to reconcile her strong desire to help one of her granddaughters with homework and her confusion with 21st-century Common Core pedagogy. Communicating with faculty proved unhelpful. Patti found relief from a parent of one of her granddaughter's peers.

Patti spent a lot of time at her granddaughter's school, helping anywhere necessary. This opportunity proved fruitful as it opened up opportunities to meet her granddaughter's peers and

ultimately, some of their parents. Fortunately, Patti's granddaughter attended a school that encouraged parents to volunteer. Thus, Patti interacted with school policy and the school itself. Her journey took her to her microsystem thanks to the decisions made by the local school district directors. Ultimately, the intra-system movement allowed Patti to gain insight into helping her adopted granddaughter find success in school.

Patti gave a profound accounting of her relationship with her son; the father of her granddaughter. She made the choice to recognize the toll of her son's battle with mental illness and accept the choices he made. She's journeyed within the mesosystem, with all of the stress and self-reported heartache that go with her journey. At one point in the first interview, Patti commented on how changing her role from grandparent to parent affected her:

> As much as you want to be their grandparent, once you find out that they're going to be permanent, you can't be their grandparent anymore. You have to be their parent. No matter how much you want to, you just… it doesn't work that way. You can't be both.

Patti stayed within her microsystem to find happiness and success as a grandparent caregiver of school-age children. One aspect of this particular system failed her. That being, the teacher who chose not to help Patti learn how to assist her granddaughter.

Patti and her family of four grandchildren were affected by an incident that eventually forced them out of their home. Moreover, the incident that removed them from the home was the same that sent Patti's husband to prison. Patti recalled how the bonds she was trying to develop with her grandchildren suddenly deepened as their shared trauma accelerated the evolution of their familial bond. Concurrently, Patti's family began to develop supportive ties with a local church. First, Patti found deep comfort and success, as did her grandchildren within the microsystem. This deep rooting within a system gave Patti the courage to move into her macrosystem and embrace a

new, church family. Patti journey is reflective of a grandparent caregiver who has found success in her resilience, pragmatism, and vulnerability. These three traits coalesced when she said, “No matter how much you want to stay loyal to your children, your adult children who are the biological parents, all that’s done as soon as they decide they don’t want them and you have to raise them.”

4.4.6 Grandfamily 0218

John and Lori’s story begins with tragedy and ends with a remarkable resolve to honor a legacy. After inquiring about how they came to be grandparent caregivers, I was shocked to hear “And, anyway, her husband shot her and then shot himself.” Thus, John and Lori’s daughter was murdered, their son-in-law took his own life, and they were now faced with raising the deceased’s two children: one 10-year-old and an infant.

Lori recalled what it felt like raising a baby at nearly 53 years of age, saying, “He was our baby. Really. I mean, he was ours. I mean we had to walk the floor with him and take care of the and we both had full-time jobs. So, it was quite different.” John added, “We really didn’t, when we was building the house, we didn’t build it for kids.”

When asked to reflect on their journey raising the 10-year-old, Lori recalled, “We had to get him some therapy,” and then said the following:

> I remember school didn’t help a whole lot with a lot of that because they tried to protect him a lot. They wanted him, well you can sit back here and if you feel funny you can leave. And he wanted, he didn’t like that and he says well, I’m just going to sit where I used to, and be done with it.

During one of the therapy sessions, Lori recalled being asked if she and her grandson could write a letter. Lori stated, “And it was to [his stepfather] for killing [his biological mother]. And

we had to put our feeling down and I had to write one too. This letter that [grandson] wrote, it was wonderful." In this instance, they found school created more problems than solutions. So, this couple sought help from mental health professionals who were able to deliver therapy to their oldest grandson.

John always stayed home with the younger boy during therapy sessions. Interestingly, John stated he does not "…really agree with therapy, I think it's a waste of time" and Lori said her work was always therapeutic for her saying, "Right or wrong that's what I did. I just worked." John mentioned his distrust of therapy so he found solace at home with the baby. Lori was in the same environment as she discovered relief comparing her grief with the relative pain felt by patients within her care. Increasingly, John and Lori remarked how sickly the baby was and felt people were afraid to offer babysitting because of the baby's symptons. Regarding family support, John said, "They all said they were going to help but they weren't no help at all. Everybody disappeared." The most powerful statement on grandparent caregiving was likely made by John after I asked him what it was like raising a grandchild who was in middle school. John asked me "Did you ever do rock climbing?" After, I replied, "I've never done rock climbing, no." John responded "Well, you ought to try it sometime with 100 pounds on your back and see what it's like, because raising a kid as old as we are, it's probably 10 times worse than that!"

4.4.6.1 Summary

John and Lori were heavily involved in the microsystem, mesosystem, and exosystem environments as they found school (microsystem) created more problems than solutions. So, this couple sought help from mental health professionals [exosystem] who were able to deliver therapy to their oldest grandson. John and Lori were surrounded by people who wanted to help after the

tragedy that took the lives of their daughter and son-in-law. However, John and Lori soon discovered the supports who offered to help, vanished as quickly as new hurdles arose.

John commented, “Family disappears” on more than one occasion and in both interviews. John and Lori found success but not necessarily happiness, within their microsystem. Time spent in the exosystem with a therapist was beneficial only because Lori was challenged to write a letter to the man who murdered her daughter.

It is possible John was a bit fearful of the type of therapy found in the exosystem so, he stayed at home, with the younger of the two grandchildren, demonstrating he felt most comfortable in the microsystem. Lori found relief among her coworkers (microsystem) as she discovered a supportive environment, while comparing her grief with the relative pain endured by incoming patients who entered into care at the hospital.

Although John and Lori told me they know other grandparent caregivers in their area, they do not feel self-satisfaction whenever others in their context tell them they are doing a good job with their grandsons. Perhaps, the other grandparent caregivers are not thought of as friends and therefore found in the microsystem. Lori recalled a conversation when she and her husband were lauded for the ways they have stepped in and helped their grandchildren. She said:

> You don’t know what we’ve been through. Everyone goes through deaths and stuff; they don’t know about what we’re going through. I don’t know. You go through it and you don’t care if there’s, you’ve got to have some happy ending somewhere along the line, you know what I mean?”

It is evident this couple has not found contentment or the “happy ending” Lori spoke of. Their journey begins and ends within their microsystem.

4.4.7 Grandfamily 1618

Timothy became a first-time father and grandparent caregiver simultaneously. Their journey began more as a cautionary decision rather than traumatic precedent. Cindy recalled:

> She wasn't living with us at the time, but where she was wasn't a great situation so we brought her home. She wasn't taking very good care of herself while she was pregnant, so we knew right then she would live with us, and have a baby with us.

Timothy and Cindy had another teenage daughter, pregnant, and living at home. The grandchild who I asked Timothy and Cindy to focus on for purposes of this study is still living with them, while the daughter who became pregnant first, has moved out with her daughter. They remain a close-knit family. Cindy went on to state:

> We were there through the whole thing with Denise, all her medical appointments. The father was not involved, so it was me mostly. I mean Timothy's whole role in this thing when I need to scream, but financially, he did what he had to do to support everybody, so he basically has always worked two jobs. So, that's how it went.

Timothy and Cincy sustained themselves financially and made their own health connections. Community members may see this grandfamily's transition as so smoothly accomplished, it does not warrant the same abandonment as other study participants endured. Cindy stated they have "never been treated differently, but I see where some people [other grandparent caregivers of school-age children] are." Timothy responded to my questions about the role schools play in communicating with families about sensitive topics by saying, "I think when it comes to society, I would think that the school board frowns upon it [school-based therapy] because of liability. I mean, that's a sad part of our world now is lawyers."

As this grandfamily adjusted, Timothy and Cindy decided to lessen their role by giving their daughter more parenting responsibility. Cindy said:

> So, a lot of praying and she'll get through all of that and now, it's getting easier the older she [biological mother] gets and we've let her do more. It's like, you know what? You're taking her [granddaughter] to dance on Wednesdays so, we've pulled the mother in.

Cindy's religious faith guided her decision to release parenting responsibilities to her granddaughter's biological parent.

4.4.7.1 Summary

I found this family's onset story as well as, much of their current existence within the mesosystem. Here, an immediate family of biological parents, kin, custodial grandchildren, a grandmother, and ultimately, grandparent caregivers supported itself in a most intimate fashion. The aforementioned kin coexisted under the same roof at one time or another.

I asked the Timothy and Cindy to think about the ways they have navigated their granddaughter's academics; maybe provide some solutions to other grandparent caregivers of school-age children. Cindy quickly replied "I have lots to say, but what do you [Timothy] have to say? Because you just work." Timothy's response to my probe came several minutes after I asked. He simply stated, "Sacrifices." Cindy, who also works full-time, said, "Yeah, because I have to really schedule around this. So, I work around sometimes. I work, then I come here, then I go back to work and sometimes I could work straight through, but I take appointments later in the day, so I can be here to do stuff." Consider Cindy's line of work and her freedom to schedule appointments as dwelling within the mesosystem. Cindy and Timothy have found school success within their microsystem. A community of co-workers is found in the microsystem. However,

Cindy does not have co-workers; she has clients, many of whom are decades-old friends. The mesosystem is the space where friends and co-workers, in Cindy's case her clients, dwell.

Timothy responded to my questions about the role schools play in communicating with families about sensitive topics by recounting his views on society's fear of litigation. Recall he felt school districts are fearful of this level of interaction due to the same fear. Timothy needed to find trust within the local school district when he recalled:

> I need to be firsthand on like say who the kids are, what's, I don't know. I think you get a better picture when you're inside the building. To make sure she's hanging around the right people. That and just get a feel for the environment.

Here, Timothy ventures into his macrosystem in search of trustworthy relationships.

However, both he and Cindy agreed his work schedule does not allow him to spend much time inside the school. So, his journey took him back to his microsystem and that's where the communication between his spouse occurs. Both Timothy and Cindy want school success for their granddaughter. Only Cindy has freedom to gain the immersive experience they needed.

Thankfully, Timothy and Cindy find time to communicate with each other.

Cindy wanted to gradually release some parenting responsibility to her daughter. She recalled time spent in prayer helped her gain the confidence and trust to allow her daughter more freedom as the biological parent of her granddaughter. In this instance, Cindy relied on her faith so, she spent time in the macrosystem to allay fears about her daughter's readiness to parent.

Fear to allow a biological parent to gain a greater parenting role can is also found in the macrosystem. Moreover, this vignette describes Cindy's journey to the outermost environment within my modified EST model to allow more involvement from the biological parent (microsystem). Both Cindy and Timothy seemed to move throughout the exosystem, mesosystem,

and microsystem with greater mobility than other study participants. Perhaps this enhanced mobility within the modified EST model is due to being less encumbered financially and not dependent upon social services. Finances and social services are two supports found in the exosystem.

4.4.8 Grandfamily 1615

"Okay, I'm coming to pick [granddaughter] up. I don't know when I would see her again." These words were shared by Jeannie as we began our first interview. Jeannie felt the fear of losing her granddaughter and made a choice. Jeannie has told me her granddaughter was born addicted to cocaine. Her granddaughter's father is Jeannie's son. He is a truck driver and was not home much, according to Jeannie.

Jeannie had been taking care of her granddaughter off and on for several years before she decided she needed to pursue a more permanent placement for her granddaughter, herself, and husband Randy. I asked Jeannie to talk about her son and to reflect on the first 4 or 5 years of her granddaughter's life. Jeannie said, "He has put her in very dangerous places where she has suffered greatly. It was back and forth and back and forth. He would lie to me about the situation." Jeannie continued, "He has broken [his daughter's] heart. I get upset with, you know, him. I don't get along with… We tolerate one another because I'm still the mom." Jeannie spent nearly 5 years trying to encourage her son to become more supportive of his daughter but he has not been able to do so. Jeannie revealed, "I love my son but I don't like him."

During the years when Jeannie's granddaughter was being moved about between her son's home and hers, Janet attempted to find some normalcy for the young girl. Jeannie said, "While she

was in kindergarten, she was taken away early by [son] and his wife." Jeanni went on to describe how her attempts to make a better life for her granddaughter were marred by interruptions.

Jeannie described an incident in which she and her husband had to go to the police station and reported "She [her son's wife] kidnapped [her granddaughter]," and went to Florida with her. Jeannie said, "I needed to be able to… I needed that to be able to have [granddaughter] here in school." In this instance, the parents continually impeded on Jeannie's and Randy's attempts to settle their granddaughter into their home. I asked how they got their granddaughter back. Jeannie replied "His [Jeannie's son] parole officer was an amazing woman, just amazing. She contacted the stepmom's mother and said you have no rights to [the granddaughter]. You're not the biological mother." Once Jeannie and her husband got permission for their son to leave the state, they drove to Florida to pick up their granddaughter. Jeannie concluded by stating "She [granddaughter] was on total survivor mode" at this time.

During the first interview, Jeannie recalled a conversation with a representative from a child services agency in which she told the representative "Grandparents have no rights! Do you understand the dangers of this child? Here the child has to be either bruised or beaten or dead before you will do anything" Jeannie told me "All I was was just a grandparent."

Jeannie said, "I have an affinity for people who are displaced. I even said to [school principal and school counselor] there are a lot of children here that are not in learning mode. They're in survival mode." During our second interview, Jeannie recalled how she too, was in survival mode from 10 to 15 years of age. Jeannie uses reflection and journaling to make sense of her journey into grandparent caregiving. She has what she calls her prayer warriors with whom she finds support and lends support to. When asked about her relationship with her husband, Jeannie said, "It wasn't just me, it was us together. It was constantly us."

4.4.8.1 Summary

Jeannie spent time in her microsystem and macrosystem when she tried to encourage her son to become a more trustworthy parent to her granddaughter. The constant negative interactions between her son and his wife is an example of intra-system movement between microsystem and mesosystem. This turmoil led Jeannie to seek legal support in her exosystem. Jeannie conceded her son shared some of the same fears for his daughter's safety. In this case, Jeannie activated her microsystem as she and her son communicated these fears. Both Jeannie and her son's communication derived from shared fear, which is a trait found in the macrosystem.

At one point, Jeannie enrolled her granddaughter in the local preschool and this shows her desire to provide a good start for her granddaughter's education and social development. Here is another example of a grandparent caregiver who used school to ultimately, find success as a grandparent caregiver. School is found in the microsystem of a grandparent caregiver of a school-age child. Interestingly, Jeannie and her granddaughter spend a considerable amount of time talking about Jeannie's academic dreams. Most grandparent caregivers within the current study were not able to find time for such an amount of self-reflection with their grandchildren. I found it admirable when Jeannie shared some anecdotes from their conversations. Jeannie revealed a conversation that must have been difficult when she recanted her attempts to attend college saying, "Oh yes. Yeah. We have talked about that. And she [granddaughter] said, "What would you be grandma?" Jeannie responded, "I don't know there are just so many opportunities. Maybe like my uncle Marvin I'll become a geologist. I would love that." This small conversation left me to wonder what motivated Jeannie to share her dreams with her granddaughter. Perhaps, her motivation was to give her newly adopted granddaughter room to dream.

Jeannie and her husband Randy spent more time in their exosystem than they would have liked. Each movement toward the center was met by an obstruction that caused them to seek support within the exosystem. The multiple experiences having to coalesce the services of the police and a child services agency ultimately proved beneficial but led to significant stress and self-doubt in the process. A grandparent caregiver's self-doubt is found in the macrosystem environment.

During the second interview, I learned this grandfamily needed time to move into areas of the modified EST model that proved fruitful. It took 5 years for Jeannie and her husband to gain custody of their granddaughter. It would seem as if everyone within their microsystem operated on some level of survivor mode during those 5 years. Each movement toward the center was met by an obstruction that caused them to seek support within the exosystem.

4.5 Reflection

My role as a research practitioner afforded me an opportunity to challenge personal perceptions of how kinship families, specifically grandfamilies, view success. Essentially, all caregivers of school-age children grant classroom teachers like me the privilege of academic collaboration; albeit with their children. Likewise, the 11 grandparent caregivers who took part in this study granted me the privilege of learning about their unique journeys as grandparent caregivers.

5.0 Discussion

This chapter presents a discussion of the most salient findings, first introduced in Chapter 4. I used my current study of grandparent caregivers of school-age children to learn more about the journeys of 11 grandparent caregivers, representing seven grandparent-led households.

Relationships between various support systems were revealed, as were the areas where supports were underutilized or unavailable to study participants. Participants' stories revealed the areas where supports were helpful, and where they were not.

My conceptual framework consisted of a modified version of Bronfenbrenner's (1977) first iteration of his ecological systems theory (EST) model. This model reveals the interrelatedness that occurs within a grandfamily, the school system, human service providers, and peer groups. My study revealed several interesting findings. Notably, the open codes that emerged during data analysis became apparent within the modified EST model. Moreover, participants recounted feeling a range of emotions as they responded to my interview questions and probes. Some participants found solutions within the microsystem and difficulty Thus, a practitioner or policy maker will be able to demonstrate success within a grandparent caregiver's journey using the baseline of a new normalcy, and this normalcy would reveal itself within the interactive pathways of the modified EST model.

Recent scholarship on grandparent caregivers of school-age children has relied heavily on the grandparent caregiver's physical, mental, and emotional responses to various interventions (McLaughlin et al., 2017; Schmidt & Treinen, 2017). However, missing in some of the literature are firsthand accounts of the quality of the journeys taken by grandparent caregiver-led families in areas where interventions are not readily available.

5.1 Research Question

This study was conducted to learn how grandparent caregivers of school-age children view success in their kinship relationships. Grandparent caregivers were defined as people who have primary responsibility for their co-resident grandchildren younger than 18 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003). A kinship caregiver is defined as a full-time care, nurturing, and protection of children by relatives or others with a kinship bond to a child (Cox, 2014). For the purposes of this study, grandfamily was a term meant to designate a family where children are being raised by grandparents (Edwards, 1998). I used the term grandfamily to describe the participants who took part in each interview. The following is a participant breakdown of those present during each interview:

- Grandfamily 1621: Both the grandmother and grandfather were present during both interviews.
- Grandfamily 0221: Both the grandmother and grandfather were present during both interviews.
- Grandfamily 1612: Only the grandmother was present at both interviews. The grandfather could not attend due to chronic illness.
- Grandfamily 1201: Only the grandmother was present at both interviews. The grandfather is incarcerated.
- Grandfamily 0218: Both the grandmother and grandfather were present during both interviews.

- Grandfamily 1618: Both the grandmother and grandfather were present at the first interview. Only the grandmother was present at the second interview. The grandfather had work travel commitments to fulfill.
- Grandfamily 1615: Only the grandmother was present at both interviews. The grandfather had work travel commitments to fulfill.

5.2 Additional Findings

Themes quickly began to emerge during the initial reading of each transcript. The varying themes were consistent with a modified version of Bronfenbrenner's EST model, created by the researcher and for this study. For example, I placed "biological parents" and "kin connections" within the microsystem of the modified EST model. Both groups proved to be among the first avenues of support used by grandparent caregivers at the onset of their grandfamily's journey.

Ten major themes emerged from the data analysis. They are listed on the left of the following table. Taken out-of-context, these themes might not make sense. However, the themes resonate when one reads the most powerful excerpts from the interviews on the right-hand side of the table.

Table 9 Study Themes and Interview Excerpts

Theme	Interview Excerpts
Transitions and building new relationships	"Come get the kids."
Self-awareness and confusion co-exist	"Us being 70-something years old and wanting to adopt these young children."
Life before and after guardianship	"That was a horrible couple years, whatever it took to get to her."
Threats and resilience	"It's my responsibility, but just come and hold them and love them."
Gathering supports	"You feel like you're alone but you have to express your feelings."
Expectations	"Living with two old fogies like us, you have to make sure they have time with children their own age."
Family evolution	"You're also taking care of two children because you got to deal with the child that has lost a child."
Social Services	"We knew nothing about our rights."
Precedent and continuum of care	"I just love him where he's at. I have to because nothing he says is true, so I just learned not to question him on things."
Judgement and self-worth	"And I just felt what I was doing was right so it didn't really matter what anybody else said anyway."

5.3 Implications for Practice

Pennsylvania recently implemented the Grandfamilies Workgroup which includes grandparent caregivers, AARP Pennsylvania, the Pennsylvania Association of Area Agencies on Aging, among other stakeholders (Wilburne, 2018). The workgroup was formed after Pennsylvania Governor Tom Wolf and members of the state's Department of Aging conducted a

statewide listening tour aimed at better understanding the needs of grandparent caregivers and their families. The work group has "helped raise awareness and make recommendations on issues facing grandfamilies" (Torres & Johnston-Walsh, 2019, para. 10). Representatives Kathy Watson and Eddie Day Pashinski achieved bipartisan agreement in 2018 and the Kinship Navigator Program was born. Grandparent caregivers can find a host of contact information using the Kinship Navigator Program. The supportive connections can be sorted by county and offers information about Commonwealth kin programs such as support and advocacy groups. Additionally, House Bill 1539 and House Resolution 390. HB 1539 promised temporary guardianship to grandparents interested in taking in their grandchildren and removing them from the grandchild's biological parent because of substance abuse issues. The latter bill accomplished the construction of the Joint State Government Commission, whose aim is to research and report on trends among grandparent caregiving in the Commonwealth (Pashinski, 2018).

Public food banks, Pennsylvania Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), the national adoption tax credit, and various non-government organizations are available to grandfamilies in need of assistance. Many Pennsylvania counties have kinship and specifically, grandparent caregiver support and education groups. Among them are A Second Chance Inc. (ASCI) of Allegheny County, Chester County Family Caregiver Support Program, and Grandma's Kids-Center for Intergenerational Learning at Temple University (Generations United, 2019). The Commonwealth recognizes the need for low-cost and efficient caregivers support services. This recognition is evidenced by the multiple layers of support I have previously discussed. The grandfamily context emerged suddenly. Some grandfamilies struggled with decisions that others made easily. The following table represents my recommendations for practitioners and policymakers alike:

Table 10 Study Recommendations and Supporting Evidence

Recommendation	Evidence
Create space for dialogue about kinship care's connection to trauma within the schools. Mandate professional development opportunities connected to the evolution of kinship and factors precipitating the evolution. Move from a traditional etic view of professional development in which presenters understanding of a culture or group comes from observation to an emic viewpoint, in which actual members of the grandparent caregiver demographic provide their expertise.	Positive school support was mentioned occasionally during the interviews. Most grandparent caregivers reported disappointment with the way schools reacted after the onset-trauma that occurred within the family. The scarcity of positive school references during the interviews is alarming. More alarming are the strategies used by school professionals in an attempt to mitigate the hurdles faced by both the grandparent caregivers and their grandchildren.
Acknowledge the wisdom that comes with re-parenting. Campaign for and promote the vitality of our more senior grandparent and great-grandparent caregivers. Run ad campaigns in which real grandparent caregivers share their journeys to successful kinship.	Among those interviewed were a great-grandparent couple. The couple waited years to move from informal caregivers to adoptive parents of their grandchildren. At one point during this couple's journey, an attorney warned them of the potential for ageism when he hinted that a judge couldn't specifically use age as a reason to deny adoption, but he/she could find another, more socially accepted reason to do so. The grandparents had financial resources to access legal help but not an unlimited supply of money.

Table 10 (continued)

Enlist the help of every public school in the state of Pennsylvania. Schools can be places where respite and support are offered. As a teacher, I have experienced being the only adult in the building who truly knew the caregiver status of a grandchild as some grandfamilies choose opt out of self-reporting.	Several grandparent caregivers in the current study reported their need to have other grandparent caregivers to talk to and support. They have taught me that both success and failure are provisional occurrences. Almost all of those interviewed said they would enjoy helping other grandparent caregivers find success in their journeys. Likewise, those wishing to offer support also expressed they were probably too busy with work and caregiving to attend a support group. Furthermore, many of those same caregivers expressed great difficulty finding childcare during their journeys.

After reflecting on my conversations with the participants of the current study, I can offer the following truths: (a) each study participant was surprised to discover how the interviews provided their first opportunities to deeply reflect on their caregiving experiences, (b) study participants feel society often considers grandparent caregivers to have been ill-equipped to parent thus, having to reparent, (c) all study participants found success within the microsystem, and (d) one's comfort level within systems outside the microsystem can determine one's accessibility to other systems. Thus, I am left to wonder how much impact a cohort group of grandparent caregivers could have in increasing agency among members, thereby expanding accessibility to other systems of support.

My role in this study was to listen and plot grandparent caregiver journeys. Once my role was established, the grandparent caregivers used my intrusion into their lives as a conduit to teach others about their journeys and offer fellow members of my profession opportunities to grow their understanding of the grandfamilies within our community.

5.4 Implications for Research

The researcher was surprised by the level of creative self-efficacy (CSE) exhibited by the grandparent caregivers who took part in this study. According to Karwowski and Kaufman (2017), CSE is a measure of one's subjective judgment and ability to participate in activities that activate one's creativity. Positive and energetic parental self-efficacy correlates with supportive home-based behaviors (Karwowski & Kaufman, 2017; see also Ryan & Deci, 2000; Whitley et al., 2015). All but two study participants (one grandfamily) recalled problem-solving strategies that took them into multiple levels of the modified version of Bronfenbrenner's first iteration of his ecological taxonomy. Participants reported intra-environmental movements throughout their context as grandparent caregivers. The grandparent caregivers who participated in the current study displayed resilience and determination as they attempted to find solutions to caregiving hurdles, both large and small. Moreover, they did so despite the onset trauma and acknowledgement many simply did not know where to turn for help. My observations may be reflected in those of Zauszniewski, Musil, Burant, Standing, and Au (2013). Their study on custodial grandmothers living in the United States revealed those caregivers who were provided training in resourcefulness, expressive writing, and verbal disclosure reported decreased levels of stress and depression and greater quality of life compared to a control group who did not receive resourcefulness training.

The current study utilized phenomenological interviews to gain a deeper understanding of the journeys undertaken and recounted by a small group of grandparent caregivers. Study participants were asked to help this researcher plot their journeys to success. The plotted journeys preceded short narratives that a reader could use to learn the decisions-making processes used by study participants and in their own words. The researcher understood the subjectivity of such a study. Complete understanding of another person's reality is impossible.

The researcher proposes an extended case study involving a peer cohort of grandparent caregivers of school-age children. Noted within the current study are examples of discomfort felt by study participants as they navigated various supportive pathways within the modified ecological systems model. The discomfort essentially blocked accessibility beyond the microsystem. Future researchers could utilize the tenets of creative self-efficacy proposed by Karwowski and Kaufman (2017), to measure one's understanding of creativity and how it impacts problem solving within a grandfamily.

A county-by-county search of the Pennsylvania Kinship Navigator reveals the vast majority of service connections are WIC, CHIP, Head Start, law offices, SWAN post-permanency service, and generalized grandparent caregiver support groups. There is not one grassroots, self-advocacy group which is grandparent caregiver-centered and using a model whereby one cohort of grandparent caregivers trains another cohort of grandparent caregivers in the intricacies of their journeys.

Accordingly, the Commonwealth would benefit from supporting a first-generation cohort of grandparent caregivers trained to impart their critical wisdom and experiential knowledge on a second cohort of grandparent caregivers, who would in turn train another cohort. The type of skills training included in this model would be determined by a representative group of grandparent caregivers from throughout the state. Furthermore, the state's public and private school districts would benefit from this cohort model whenever grandparent caregiver self-advocacy cohorts provide professional development and consult aimed at preparing faculty, paraprofessionals, administration, and other stakeholder to better understand the unique needs and strengths of grandparent caregivers and their grandfamilies.

5.5 Conclusion

The researcher was surprised to learn the depth of emotional intelligence revealed by the study participants. The interviewees went through boxes of tissues as they reflected on their journeys as families, spouses, and individuals. Tears were shed when grandparents realized they had evolved into caregivers who make decisions based on both logic and emotion. They had never considered the notion they were once stoic and authoritarian but now, passionate and took more time making disciplinary decisions as grandparent caregivers. Study participants grew up in an era before emotional intelligence was considered a virtue. The popular belief was emotional decisions were usually unrelated to cognition and therefore, conflicted (Dacre Pool & Qualter, 2012; Zeidner & Matthews, 2018). This is the traditional construct of emotional decision-making. Nowadays, emotions are found to be supportive of attention, memory function, and help erect the mental models used to create strong societal connections (Dacre Pool & Qualter, 2012; Zeidner, Matthews, & Shemesh, 2016).

It has been my high honor to gain the trust of a group of grandparent caregivers from a rural school district in Pennsylvania. I have begun to unravel my misperceptions of grandparent caregivers. I hope our work (myself and study participants) may help evolve others' perspectives. Where once I thought this particular demographic failed raising their own children, I now understand these individuals can teach all caregivers, teachers, school district administrators, and policymakers what the deepest levels of family commitment look (and sound) like.

Appendix A Informed Consent Form

To: XXXXXX

From: Andrew Pitrone

Subject: Informed Consent to Participate in Research Study
January 22, 2019

Dear XXXXXX,

Recently, we spoke on the phone about a research study I'll conduct with local grandparent caregivers. During our conversation, you expressed interest in being a participant in the study. Thanks for giving up some of your time on the phone and potentially, as a study participant.

The purpose of this research study is to allow grandparents who've gained full or part-time guardianship of one or more grandchildren to reveal their unique contexts as the head of a grandparent-led household. For purposes of this study, I will use the following descriptor to define grandparent caregivers: *Grandparent caregivers are grandparents who've gained full or part-time guardianship of one or more school-age grandchildren and co-reside with their grandchildren.* For the purposes of my research, I will conduct interviews with grandparent caregivers of children enrolled in the Union City Area School District, in Union City, PA. If you are willing to participate in this study, I will conduct face-to-face, one-on-one interviews with grandparent caregivers. The

interviews will take approximately one hour, and I hope to conduct two interviews with each participant. I will record each interview to ensure your words are accurately relayed. You may request to see or hear the information I'll collect. Excerpts from our interviews may be included in my final dissertation report. Your anonymity will remain throughout the entire process of interviews, data analysis, completion of my dissertation report, and other later publication of my findings.

As a researcher, I wish to allow the unique stories of grandparent caregivers to be revealed from the perspective of study participants; not my own. Further, I wish to provide participants opportunities to disclose the types and levels of social and kin support felt as well as, their overall sense of what it means to be a grandparent caregiver. There are no foreseeable risks associated with this study. Participants in this study will include only grandparent caregivers of school-age children, living in Union City, PA. All participants will remain anonymous and the information disclosed during our interviews will be collected, coded, and analyzed in such a way as to ensure your information remains unidentifiable. All data will remain guarded by the researcher, using a password protected computer application. Your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time. This study is being conducted by me, Andy Pitrone. I can be reached at (814)-823-5885 or amp271@pitt.edu. Please don't hesitate to call, text, or email me with questions or concerns. Thanks for your time and I hope to see you soon.

Sincerely,

Andrew Pitrone
Doctoral Candidate
University of Pittsburgh

I would appreciate it if you signed this form on the lines below, to show that you've read and agree with the content of my informed consent letter. Please use the self-addressed, stamped envelope to return this form only. You may keep the other page for your records and review. Thank you.

_____

Your Signature Above

_____

Please Print Your Name Above

Contact Information:

Phone Number #1 _____

May I text you at the above phone number? Please circle one. **Yes** **No**

Phone Number #2 _____

May I text you at the above phone number? Please circle one. **Yes** **No**

If you wish to use email to communicate, please write your email address on the line below.

_____

Appendix B IRB Approval Form

University of Pittsburgh
Institutional Review Board

3500 Fifth Avenue
Pittsburgh, PA 15213
(412) 383-1480
(412) 383-1508 (fax)
http://www.irb.pitt.edu

Memorandum

To: Andrew Pitrone

From: IRB Office

Date: 11/2/2018

IRB#: PRO18070522

Subject: Phenomenological Study of Grandparents who've Gained Full or Part-Time, Co-Resident Caregiver Status of One or More Grandchildren

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The above-referenced project has been reviewed by the Institutional Review Board. Based on the information provided, this project meets all the necessary criteria for an exemption, and is hereby designated as "exempt" under section

45 CFR 46.101(b)(2)

Please note the following information:

- Investigators should consult with the IRB whenever questions arise about whether planned changes to an exempt study might alter the exempt status. Use the "**Send Comments to IRB Staff**" link displayed on study workspace to request a review to ensure it continues to meet the exempt category.
- It is important to close your study when finished by using the "**Study Completed**" link displayed on the study workspace.
- Exempt studies will be archived after 3 years unless you choose to extend the study. If your study is archived, you can continue conducting research activities as the IRB has made the determination that your project met one of the required exempt categories. The only caveat is that no changes can be made to the application. If a change is needed, you will need to submit a NEW Exempt application.

Please be advised that your research study may be audited periodically by the University of Pittsburgh Research Conduct and Compliance Office.

Figure 2 IRB Approval Form

Appendix C Interview Protocol

Introduction

Hello. My name is Andy Pitrone. I'm happy you're here, today. First, thank you for taking on the role of grandparent caregiver. Second, I appreciate you for taking the time to teach me what grandparent caregiving is like for you and your family. As we've discussed, we will conduct two interviews together. The purpose of the first interview is to give you opportunities to describe the early stages of your grandparent caregiving experience to me, as best you can.

The purpose of the second interview is to talk about those areas of grandparent caregiving that give you a feeling of expertise, especially as they relate to your experiences raising a school-age grandchild.

Protocol

The reason I'm conducting this research on grandparent caregiving is to learn what makes grandparent caregivers such special stakeholders within a community and one day, share what I've learned with school districts serving grandfamilies like yours. This is a research project and I need your help as I work to improve my interview questions for potential future research projects. This is your story, not mine. Of course, I will ensure your and all other study participant's identities remain anonymous. I will share my writings with you at any time during and after the study. Do you have any questions for me?

Remember: a) your participation now and at any time in the next interview, is voluntary and b) you may opt out of responding to any questions that you feel uncomfortable answering. Please just say "I'd rather not talk about that" or something to that effect. You

will have the chance to reflect on my questions and your responses whenever you like. Do you have any questions?

Appendix C.1 Grandparent Caregiver Interview Questions: Interview 1

Question Number One	***Notes***
How did you come to be grandparent caregivers?	
Potential Follow-Up Explorations	***Notes***
a) What is your grandchild's name?	
b) How old was your grandchild when he came to live with you?	
c) How long has your grandchild been in your care?	
d) Where do your grandchild's biological parents reside?	
e) What role does your grandchild's biological parents have in decisions about school, hobbies, sports, expenses, and holiday traditions?	
Question Number Two	***Notes***
How has the decision to become grandparent caregivers affected your family stability?	
Potential Follow-Up Explorations	***Notes***
a) Early on, what strategies helped you face some of the obstacles associated with becoming new grandparent caregivers?	

b) How would you describe the ways in which immediate and (if applicable), extended family benefit from your role as grandparent caregivers?	
c) In what ways has your relationship with each other evolved since becoming grandparent caregivers?	
Question Number Three	***Notes***
If I was a brand-new grandparent caregiver, what advice would you give me, to help transition into this new chapter in my life?	
Potential Follow-Up Explorations	
a) Please tell me about your grandchild. How would you describe the relationship between you and your grandchild?	
b) What sort of resources or support, were you able to find on your own? Think of people or groups that have helped you care for your grandchild.	
c) Please complete the following sentences as best you can: 1) Some of our most useful resources were… When I look back, something I wish I would've known earlier is… 3) Some of the most rewarding moments we've shared with our grandchild are…	
d) What changes have you discovered regarding things like health care insurance, pediatric care, and any other health care- related changes since you've had the opportunity to reparent?	
e) If I was a working grandparent caregiver, whether first, second, third, or swing-shift, what solutions could you provide me as far as childcare?	

f) How would you describe your feelings whenever you've come up with solutions as grandparent caregivers?	
g) What sort of activities bring your family joy and a sense of togetherness?	

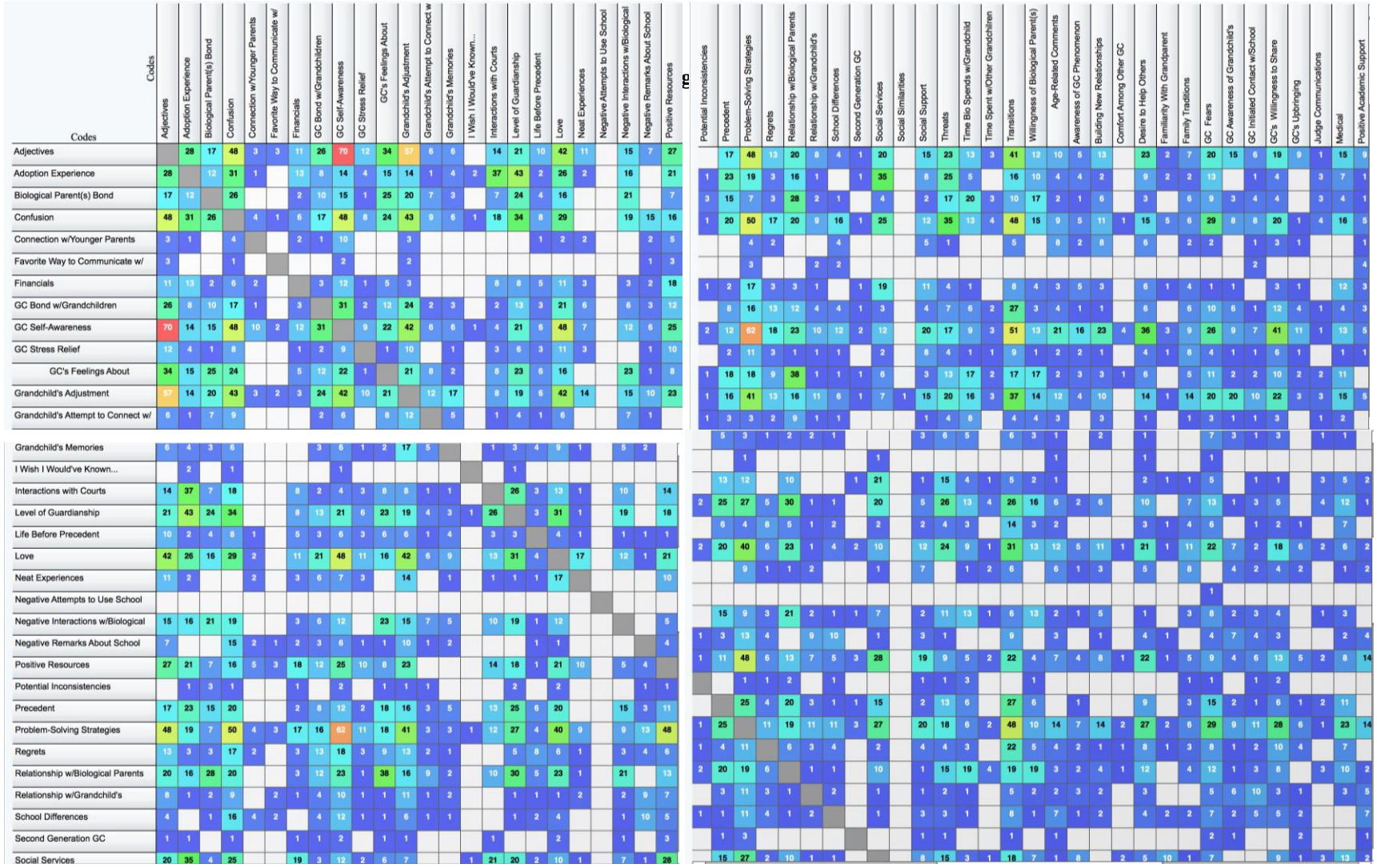
Appendix C.2 Grandparent Caregiver Interview Questions: Interview 2

Question Number One	***Notes***
Please consider your role as a grandparent caregiver raising a school-age grandchild. What are your strengths in this regard? What solutions have you found most practical in working within the modern-day public education system?	
Potential Follow-Up Explorations	***Notes***
a) What were those early days of grandparent caregiving like for you? For your spouse? For your grandchild?	
b) How would you compare grandparent caregiving to your first go-around as parents?	
c) What seems similar in terms of schooling?	
d) What is most different in regard to your grandchild's education?	
e) How would you describe your most effective communication with your grandchild's teachers?	
f) What is a typical school day and night like for you?	

g) What sort of school readiness resources have you discovered on your own?	
h) If you could describe your family to your child's teachers, what would you want them to know?	
i) How can you see yourself using a resource like Pennsylvania's new Kinship Caregiver Navigator Program? *	
j) What would you want members of the advisory council to know about grandparent caregivers?	
k) How do you define resiliency as grandparent caregivers? Synonyms: determination, flexibility, perseverance, patience, dedication, commitment, persistence	

*If unaware of the Navigator, I will describe and possibly, provide it to the study participant. A new federal advisory council was created to support legislation called the "Supporting Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Act" of 2018.

Appendix D Co-Occurrence Chart


Codes
Adjectives
Adoption Experience
Biological Parent(s) Bond
Confusion
Connection w/Younger Parents
Favorite Way to Communicate w/
Financials
GC Bond w/Grandchildren
GC Self-Awareness
GC Stress Relief
GC's Feelings About
Grandchild's Adjustment
Grandchild's Attempt to Connect w/
Grandchild's Memories
I Wish I Would've Known...
Interactions with Courts
Level of Guardianship
Life Before Precedent
Love
Neat Experiences
Negative Attempts to Use School
Negative Interactions w/Biological
Negative Remarks About School
Positive Resources
Potential Inconsistencies
Precedent
Problem-Solving Strategies
Regrets
Relationship w/Biological Parents
Relationship w/Grandchild's
School Differences
Second Generation GC
Social Services
Social Similarities
Social Support
Threats
Time Bio Spends w/Grandchild
Time Spent w/Other Grandchildren
Transitions
Willingness of Biological Parent(s)
Age-Related Comments
Awareness of GC Phenomenon
Building New Relationships
Comfort Among Other GC
Desire to Help Others
Familiarity With Grandparent
Family Traditions
GC Fears
GC Awareness of Grandchild's
GC Initiated Contact w/School
GC's Willingness to Share
GC's Upbringing
Judge Communications
Medical
Positive Academic Support

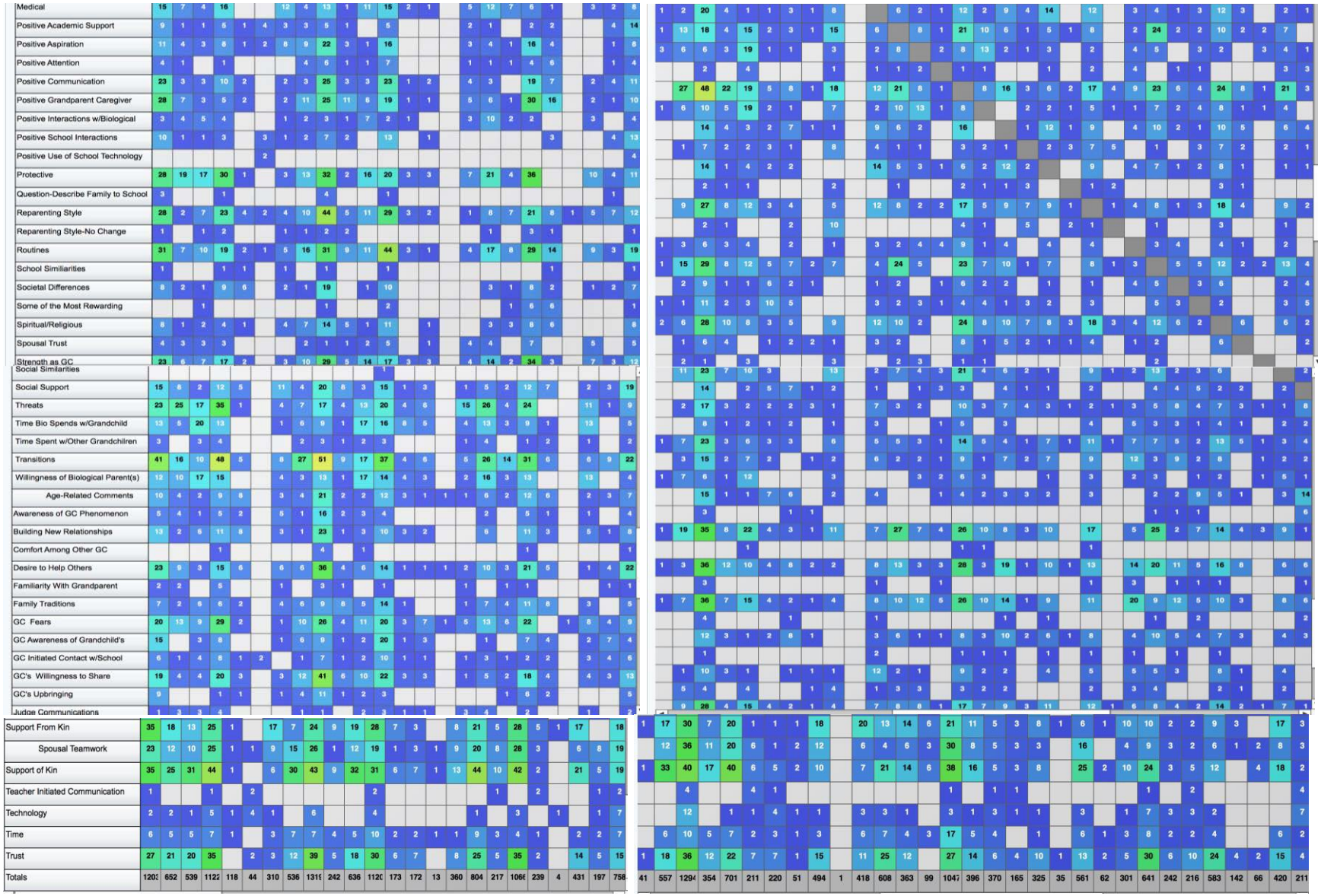


Figure 3 Co-Occurrence Chart

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