



grandparents as educators and carers in China

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ABSTRACT

Many grandparents play a significant role as educators and carers of children in the preschool years. Recently, this role has become the focus of much early childhood research as challenges facing grandparent carers and grandparent-headed households increasingly become an economic and social issue. Using survey data from China we explore the role of grandparents who have a primary care responsibility for a young child and discuss this contribution to the family in relation to quality of care and education. We argue that grandparents play a significant role in terms of home education of the young, workforce support for young parents, cultural identity within families and community capacity building. Grandparents are therefore deserving of more sustained attention from policy makers and educators when considering the young child's developmental environment.

KEYWORDS China, early education, grandparents, young children

Childcare and education preferences lead many families to use grandparents as primary carers of young children. This is a tendency accentuated by the fact that family structures are under pressure (Brandis, 2003). For example, in 2002 there were almost one million children in Australia living in sole-parent families (Goodfellow and Lavery, 2003). Similar pressures exist in China where family roles are challenged by marketization and industrialization. As part of the industrialization process over 120 million people have relocated from

rural to urban centres. This change has occurred over the past 20 years and many children have remained in the countryside in the care of grandparents (Chen et al., 2000; Y. Zhang, 2005).

Chinese parents tend to use grandparent care both because of necessity and because care of young children has traditionally been a right and an expectation of grandparents. A recent survey in Shanghai found that more than 50 percent of children under-three years were raised by grandparents (K. Zhang, 2007). However, wealthier and educated parents aware of research on the importance of stimulating environments on brain development in the early years, have begun to question the practice of in-home care and education with grandparents (Wang Shixiong, cited by Z. Kun, 2007) at a time when government agencies are beginning to consider how grandparents can best be supported in their childcare role (Li et al., 2005).

This article looks at grandparenting in China using a survey of 3517 families which was conducted across four provinces in 2005. The survey instrument was designed to provide data that enabled the researchers to differentiate children by precise age and relate grandparent care to key elements of daily life considered beneficial to the growing child. Data that can be drawn from this survey includes numbers of children looked after by grandparents, gender, age, education and income of parents and details of key shared activities such as book reading, story-telling, singing and family outings. As knowledge about the early years grows there is increasing evidence that positive relationships and experiences in the first five years of life will have a long-term impact on a child's health, well-being and competence.

... virtually every aspect of early human development, from the brain's evolving circuitry to the child's capacity for empathy, is affected by the environments and experiences that are encountered in a cumulative fashion, beginning in the prenatal period and extending throughout the early childhood years. (Knudsen et al., 2006: 10155)

As grandparents continue to be the primary non-parental form of care for young children they are therefore an important determinant of children's growth and development (Brandis, 2003; Gray, 2005). Whilst many governments pay increased attention to raising parenting skills to meet global educational demands there is less research directed towards grandparents (Wheelock and Jones, 2002). This article examines the profile of grandparents as carers, as reported in the early childhood literature (Clarke, 2003; Goodfellow and Lavery, 2003; Gray et al., 2005) and relates this to an identified need to extend parenting supports and services to grandparents as their role, both within the family and as educational and workforce supports increases. There have been limited programs accessible for grandparents in China (Fang et al., 2004), and we argue that, by extending services, family choice can be enhanced and relationships between parents, children and grandparents can be positive, meeting both

family and individual children's needs. Clarke (2003) found that whilst family relationships are increasingly complex grandparents overwhelmingly reported grandparenthood was important and that many 'rated the relationship with their grandchildren as one of the most important of my life' (p. 3). Orb and Davey (2005) also found that grandparents could articulate many difficulties with the role including unexpected emotional, social and financial problems. Policy-makers and educators, when exploring strategies to support families with childcare, should think beyond current assumptions about affordable and accessible childcare and also consider 'the socially negotiated moral and emotional responsibilities in choosing child care' that parents face (Duncan et al., 2004: 253).

The article begins with a review of the relevant literature on grandparent care and in particular on issues related to grandparent care in China. Next we discuss the survey data that is related to quality early childhood experiences and grandparent involvement in those experiences. Examples taken from the 2005 survey include reading with the child, narrating stories with the child, shared singing and family outings. These are all indicators of family environments that are educationally rich (Fleer and Raban, 2005). We conclude with a discussion of policy and research implications.

grandparent care

There is a steady growth in the literature that has been devoted to the role of grandparents in providing education and care for young children and helping shape developmental outcomes (Chen, 2005; Chen et al., 2000; Li et al., 2005). Key factors that have been documented as accounting for the increasing involvement of grandparents in childcare include the increasing participation of women in the workforce, change of work patterns, the growth of sole-parent families, increase in life expectancy, affordability and access to formal childcare and other barriers to the utilization of formal childcare (Chen, 2005; Goodfellow and Laverty, 2003; Gray et al., 2005; King and Elder, 1997).

As work patterns change and types of work change families have increasing difficulties in meeting demands for flexibility. In China 85 percent of women of working age participate in the workforce (Zhu and Guang, 1991, cited in Chen et al., 2000). Full-time work is very common, although in rural areas women may combine agricultural work with child rearing. However, a significant disruption has been internal migration within China as parents have left rural areas to seek work in the cities (French, 2006; Y. Zhang, 2005). In many cases children are left in the villages with grandparents. Many of the youngest children may accompany their parents to the city and then return to the country when they no longer need intensive physical care (Y. Zhang, 2005). However, early education and care scholars increasingly emphasize the research from political

and economic perspectives of development and the idea of the early years of life as being crucial to a country's growth of human capital (e.g. Knudsen et al., 2006). This pervasive idea about the importance of the early years has meant that many debates about children's early experiences have become part of a global discourse.

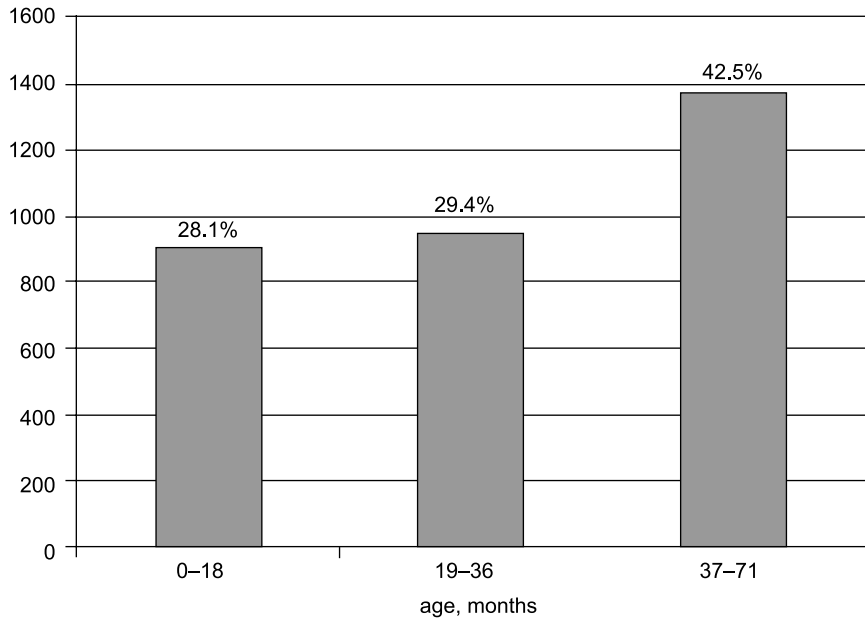
In China, as elsewhere, brain research (e.g. Shonkoff and Philips, 2001) has become part of the early childhood education and care debate and the importance of relationships and quality of early experiences is widely discussed at a policy and research level. This has brought about some criticisms of grandparent care. In the American literature Peyton et al. (2001) found the choices of mothers suffering high levels of stress were more likely to be influenced by issues that diminished the stress rather than driven by the child's needs. Coley et al. (2001) found this trend especially prevalent amongst low income urban families whose finances limited their ability to access high-quality care. Importantly, she also found many parents preferred forms of care that educationalists might deem of relatively low quality if these options could increase parents' economic security. Formal childcare was contrasted with informal care settings (largely grandparents). Grandparent care was described as 'typically inadequate or minimally adequate in providing care that meets children's developmental needs' (Coley et al., 2001: 1) but nevertheless a great many families turn to grandparent care because it is more flexible and/or affordable (Coley et al., 2001; Porter and Kearns, 2005; Snyder and Adelman, 2004).

A recent survey conducted in 34 Shanghai communities by the Shanghai Population and Planning Committee indicated that 53 percent of children aged up to three years old were in the care of grandparents though 70 percent of the families were unsatisfied with this practice (K. Zhang, 2007). The reasons given for the dissatisfaction included perceptions of grandparents' lack of awareness of the importance of early childhood experiences, plus attitudes to rules which might restrict a child's activities, unconscious nurture of overdependence and timidity, more attention paid to physical needs like food and clothing, less emphasis on emotional or cognitive development, use of traditional wisdom and experiences rather than knowledge of childcare and use of dialects which parents were concerned could hinder a child's language development. Whilst the quality of grandparent care is questioned by some it is also the situation that grandparent care has become an essential complement to parent, or formal, care and needs to be examined in a more systematic manner (Wheelock and Jones, 2002). For the grandparents themselves there are issues that should be addressed. Grandparents report on their strong family feelings and ties for their extended families (Clarke, 2003) but there are also grandparents that express disquiet at their ability to care for grandchildren full time and the resources they feel should be available to support them in this task (Orb and Davey, 2005).

Reasons why grandparents are motivated to provide care for their grandchildren are grounded in family values and beliefs, employment, availability of formal childcare services (Goodfellow and Lavery, 2003) and the age of the child (Y. Zhang, 2005). Many grandparents consider the care of grandchildren to be a family responsibility. Importantly, grandparent care enables parents to participate in wage work (Gray, 2005; Gray et al., 2005). The level of satisfaction of parents regarding grandparent care appears partly to depend on the age of the child and the child's developmental needs associated with age. Despite the emotional and social benefits arising from the close bonds between grandparent and grandchild through shared care arrangements parents do not perceive grandparent care to be beneficial to the child in terms of preparation for school (Goodfellow and Lavery, 2003). In other words they do not view grandparent care as educational. This is a twist in the care and education debate that has often differentiated between childcare and preschool programs and under-three and pre-school programs (Nyland and Rockel, 2007). In order to further explore the role of grandparents we examined recent survey data that gave comprehensive information about young children in China in relation to dimensions of both care and education.

the baseline survey

In 2003 China drafted national guidelines on early childhood care and development with the support of UNICEF and accorded unprecedented attention to the social and cognitive development that occurs through the first three years. This emphasis was a change from earlier policies that emphasized, care, health and nutrition in the first three years and education becoming an added focus in the preschool years. This more holistic approach to early childhood development, that is inclusive of care and education from birth, reflects the acceptance by both UNICEF and the Chinese government that ensuring young children have access to high-quality learning opportunities, nutrition and health throughout the early years is fundamental for China's long-term capacity to remain globally competitive and enable its population to realize its potential. Following formal adoption of the 2003 national guidelines the government commissioned the 'baseline survey' on which this article draws. The survey was designed and carried out by drawing on and expanding the guidelines for health and nutrition surveys by including questions relating to children's social development, parent's ECEC knowledge and the distribution of public resources relating to ECEC provision. The purpose of the survey was to provide a foundation body of data on which policy debate and future research on ECEC provision could be built. It was conducted in 2005 in nine counties of four Chinese provinces, Gansu Kongtong, Guizhou Xixiu, Guizhou Pingtang, Jiangxi Anyuan, Jiangxi Linchuan,

figure 1 the proportion of sampled children by age

Guangxi Longlin, Guangxi Napo, Guangxi Gongcheng, and Guangxi Pingguo. The nine counties vary in their geography, social and economic development and demography and the surveyed population consists of 3517 families all of whom had at least one child aged birth – six with the number of sampled children from the selected counties ranging from 369 to 403 (Table 1). Sampled households had an average per capita income of 1798 Yuan in 2004, about 39 percent lower than the national average of 2936 Yuan but 200 percent higher than the poverty line of 882 Yuan. Of the sampled children 43.2 percent were female and 56.8 percent male.

the survey – grandparent care

From the survey we looked at the form of care according to the child's age (see Figure 1) and found, in keeping with the international literature, the younger the child the more likely the child was to be in the care of the parents.

Table 1 shows how form of care varied as the children progressed through three developmental stages in their first six years. As indicated in Table 1, grandparent care is the primary form of non-parental care for the children in our study. Grandparents offered care during the day for 28.7 percent of the children aged birth–18 months, compared to 40.1 percent of the children aged between 19–36 months and 42.9 percent of the children aged between 37 and 71 months.

table 1 relationship between form of care and child age

Child age	0–18	19–36	37–71	Total
Parents	(605) 69.9%	(531) 58.5%	(726) 55.9%	(1862) 60.7%
Grandparents	(248) 28.7	(364) 40.1	(557) 42.9	(1169) 38.1
Other relatives	(5) 0.6	(6) 0.7	(11) 0.8	(22) 0.7
Others	(7) 0.8	(6) 0.7	(4) 0.3	(17) 0.6

There was significant increasing involvement of grandparents in caregiving as the child age increased, especially when the child reached preschool age.

Questions in the survey that were directed towards the child having a stimulating language and cognitive environment become the focus of the discussion about grandparent care (Anning and Edwards, 1999; Dickinson and Tabors, 2001; Fleeer and Raban, 2005; Nelson, 1996). In the ensuing discussion when we refer to grandparents the tiny percentage of other relatives and others, identified in Table 1, is included. The survey, for the enrichment questions, did not include carers outside the child's home but included these two small groups. The questions were all directed at the child's experiences in the last three days and we chose the following:

- reading with the child
- narrating stories with the child
- singing together
- going out with the children
- drawing or counting together.

Table 2 presents the relationship between age of the child, stimulating activities at home and the participation of grandparents in childcare. For children who were in the day care of grandparents, the proportion of shared language and literacy related events with others increases as the child grows older. For example, 5.3 percent of the children aged 0–18 months, who were cared for by their grandparents, were engaged in reading activities with others during the past three days. This proportion increases to 10.1 percent and 20.0 percent for the toddler and preschool age groups respectively. As grandparents were the principal source of non-parental care for the children, there was a strong likelihood that the 'others' who were proactive in promoting quality activities with the children were grandparents. The patterns that emerge from these tables indicate the mother is the most likely to interact with the child in ways that are considered to be measures of a stimulating quality language environment in the early months. Fathers tended to become more interactive after the child was 18 months old. Nevertheless, the percentage of children cared for by grandparents who were exposed to shared language and literacy related activities

table 2 relationship between quality activities and the participation of grandparents in child care

	Age of child (months)					
	0–18		19–36		37–71	
	Parents	Grandparents	Parents	Grandparents	Parents	Grandparents
<i>Reading with the child in the last three days</i>						
Mother	(29) 16.6%	(5) 6.6%	(76) 31.8%	(43) 22.9%	(242) 35.2%	(106) 20.2%
Father	(7) 4.0	(2) 2.6	(32) 13.4	(19) 10.1	(129) 18.8	(59) 11.2
Others	(5) 2.9	(4) 5.3	(18) 7.5	(19) 10.1	(64) 9.3	(105) 20.0
<i>Narrating stories with the child in the last three days</i>						
Mother	(42) 23.7%	(11) 14.7%	(89) 37.2%	(35) 18.5%	(192) 28.4%	(81) 15.4%
Father	(8) 4.5	(2) 2.7	(36) 15.1	(18) 9.5	(117) 17.3	(55) 10.5
Others	(3) 1.7	(4) 5.3	(16) 6.7	(27) 14.3	(52) 7.7	(92) 17.6
<i>Singing together with the child in the last three days</i>						
Mother	(60) 33.9%	(23) 29.1%	(87) 36.9%	(40) 21.5%	(196) 29.5%	(94) 18.0%
Father	(7) 4.0	(4) 5.1	(26) 11.0	(11) 5.9	(72) 10.8	(34) 6.5
Others	(7) 4.0	(8) 10.1	(22) 9.3	(20) 10.8	(75) 11.3	(91) 17.5
<i>Going out with the child in the last three days</i>						
Mother	(52) 30.4%	(15) 20.3%	(76) 32.5%	(43) 23.8%	(173) 26.0%	(72) 14.0%
Father	(14) 8.2	(11) 14.9	(43) 18.4	(37) 20.4	(120) 18.0	(63) 12.3
Others	(6) 3.5	(8) 10.8	(18) 7.7	(32) 17.7	(56) 8.4	(111) 21.7
<i>Playing with the child in the last three days</i>						
Mother	(98) 56.0%	(26) 34.2%	(128) 54.9%	(69) 38.3%	(300) 44.3%	(111) 21.5%
Father	(38) 21.7	(18) 23.7	(82) 35.2	(44) 24.4	(204) 30.1	(77) 14.9
Others	(23) 13.2	(19) 25.0	(38) 16.3	(58) 32.0	(114) 16.8	(198) 38.3
<i>Counting or drawing with the child in the last three days</i>						
Mother	(45) 25.9%	(17) 23.3%	(105) 44.5%	(47) 26.3%	(271) 40.0%	(113) 21.8%
Father	(17) 9.8	(8) 11.0	(41) 17.4	(30) 16.8	(173) 25.6	(81) 15.6
Others	(9) 5.2	(6) 8.2	(21) 8.9	(36) 20.1	(83) 12.3	(165) 31.9

with fathers appears to be lower than with others, who are most likely to be grandparents. By the time the child was three the grandparent presence had clearly become important. Concentrating on the children three years and over we then looked at children who were enrolled in early childhood services and compared parent and grandparent interactions with the child using enrolment and non-enrolment in services as a variable.

Table 3 presents the relationship between the preschool service enrolment status of the child, the person in charge of the child's day care and the opportunities to be engaged in stimulating activities with others. Overall, children who were in the care of grandparents and enrolled in a preschool service were provided

table 3 enrolment status of the child, form of care and the child quality activities

	Parents	Grandparents	Total
<i>Others read together with the child in last three days</i>			
Enrolled	(49) 12.1%	(76) 27.7%	(125) 18.4%
Not enrolled	(28) 5.3	(41) 10.4	(69) 7.4
<i>Others narrated stories to the child in last three days</i>			
Enrolled	(42) 10.7%	(60) 21.8%	(102) 12.5%
Not enrolled	(21) 4.0	(49) 12.5	(70) 7.6
<i>Others sang together with the child in last three days</i>			
Enrolled	(56) 14.4%	(57) 21.1%	(113) 17.1%
Not enrolled	(40) 7.6	(52) 13.1	(92) 9.9
<i>Others went out in last three days</i>			
Enrolled	(41) 10.5%	(65) 24.2%	(106) 16.1%
Not enrolled	(33) 6.4	(74) 19.6	(107) 11.9
<i>Others played with the child in last three days</i>			
Enrolled	(75) 18.8%	(109) 40.1%	(184) 27.5%
Not enrolled	(77) 14.7	(141) 36.9	(218) 24.0
<i>Others counted or drew together with the child in last three days</i>			
Enrolled	(62) 15.7%	(101) 37.1%	(163) 24.4%
Not enrolled	(37) 7.0	(89) 23.5	(126) 13.9

with more quality experiences than those who were with parents or with grandparents but not enrolled in any preschool service.

Table 3 indicates that for both groups of children, both enrolled and not enrolled in a preschool service, grandparents are more proactive in supporting language and literacy related events in the child's daily life. What is also apparent is that children who are enrolled in services and presumably more familiar with literacy formats are also receiving more stimulation from the home.

discussion and implications

There has been much research carried out over the years in relation to parenting and child outcomes and increasingly parenting has come to include grandparents as governments urge parents (mothers) to continue to participate in the paid workforce (Gray, 2005; Wheelock and Jones, 2002). Low unemployment and skills shortages are problems for governments worldwide and therefore childcare and preschool have become part of the political and economic debate as well as an education issue. Increased pressure from the neuroscientists and economists on the educational implications of quality experiences in the early years and the costs of trying to ameliorate the effects of disadvantage in

retrospect have also brought pressure to bear on how to provide services that ensure quality care. These dual demands have seen the role of grandparents coming under the spotlight. Many families utilize grandparent care, and although this may be quite traditional practice in some communities, Brandis (2003) points out that the present discussion about grandparents as child carers has been brought about by changes to family and employment structures. China is also experiencing huge changes in family circumstances in relation to economic and political changes and also the advent of massive internal migration. The grandparents' role therefore is no longer one that belongs to the privacy of the home and personal choice but becomes a social policy concern.

There are a number of issues that arise from the literature and the survey results. Grandparents are necessary and widely used; there is a perception amongst some that many grandparents do not have the capacity to deliver high-quality educational care and grandparents themselves report both benefits and costs on taking on this role. From the survey data, the pattern emerges of the child becoming more involved with grandparents as age increases, as well as the high numbers in grandparent care. On the measures we selected, of high-quality language and literacy interactions, the grandparents became more proactive as the child got older and also the grandparents were more likely than parents to complement a preschool program. Children not enrolled in an early childhood programs were less likely to have shared reading, singing and storytelling from both parents and grandparents. There are implications for policy-makers here who need to consider the dual purpose of childcare for very young children.

One consideration is that grandparents are often members of the workforce in their own right. Grandparents make an important contribution to the informal childcare market and governments wishing to retain older, skilled workers in the labour market may experience tensions between keeping older workers at work and enticing lower paid, younger workers to stay in paid employment. The idea of grandparent leave for childcare is already mooted in some countries. On the other side there is research to suggest that intergenerational relations within families are potentially strengthened when family members are able to assist in the economic well-being of the family and grandchildren can have a significant influence on their grandparents' lives in relation to social supports and social inclusion. Therefore, the role of grandparents as child carers needs to be acknowledged and supported within the childcare policy frame.

The early language and literacy experiences the children enjoyed in the survey suggests a need for parental supports for early learning in the home and given the numbers of grandparents involved in childrearing strategies should be inclusive. Increasing interactions with age was a pattern with both the fathers and the grandparents, instead of changing interactions with age. An awareness of the educational needs of babies and toddlers is an important one

for the government to promulgate. The importance of the first three years gets a brief mention in China's national guidelines on early childhood education and care but it is fleeting. Given the numbers of children not enrolled in preschool programs and receiving less attention in the areas of literacy development and awareness, from parents and grandparents than those children who are in programs, there is a need to provide resources to carers to access such services. As so many grandparents become carers of preschool children any resources, parent classes and centres the government makes available to parents should also include grandparent access.

Children's growth and development in their early years is a powerful determinant of future health, well-being and competence. Research is highlighting how early experiences will be strongly linked to outcomes. During the first five years children will learn language, culture, motor skills and develop a disposition to learn and a sense of self. High-quality early learning environments are the best way a society can ensure the health and well-being of the society and future workforce.

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