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# Intergenerational Learning Within the Home Reading Environments: The Role of Grandparents in Developing the Language and Reading Skills of Preschool Children

Międzypokoleniowe uczenie się w ramach  
domowych środowisk czytelniczych – rola  
dziadków w rozwijaniu umiejętności językowych  
i czytelniczych dzieci w wieku przedszkolnym

## ABSTRACT

The article focuses on the issue of the importance of multi-generational families for the functioning of home reading environments, especially for the development of reading and language skills of children in middle childhood. A descriptive and critical analysis of the literature was conducted in order to find an answer to the question of how grandparents can contribute to their grandchildren's early literacy education, as well as to identify the theoretical and empirical grounds for the possibility of mutual intergenerational learning between grandparents and grandchildren through joint activities in the home reading environment. The text discusses the following issues: selected

## KEYWORDS

intergenerational  
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## SŁOWA KLUCZOWE

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aspects of home reading environments, the importance of grandparents in developing grandchildren's cognitive and language skills, opportunities for intergenerational learning, and the benefits of grandparents' involvement in raising grandchildren. I also point out implications for pedagogical practice, including the need to intensify educational partnership activities to foster the development of children's language and reading skills through their interactions with grandparents. The data collected from the analysis of Polish and foreign literature provides arguments in favor of the need to promote activities supporting intergenerational learning initiatives in home reading environments.

## ABSTRAKT

W artykule podjęto problematykę dotyczącą znaczenia rodzin wielopokoleniowych dla funkcjonowania domowych środowisk czytelniczych, w szczególności dla rozwijania umiejętności czytelniczych i językowych dzieci w okresie średniego dzieciństwa. Przeprowadzona analiza opisowo-krytyczna literatury miała na celu znalezienie odpowiedzi na pytanie, w jaki sposób dziadkowie mogą się przyczyniać do wczesnej alfabetyzacji wnuków, a także rozpoznanie teoretycznych i empirycznych przesłanek pozwalających określić możliwości wzajemnego międzypokoleniowego uczenia się dziadków i wnuków w ramach podejmowanych w środowisku domowym wspólnych aktywności czytelniczych. W tekście omówiono kolejno zagadnienia dotyczące: wybranych aspektów domowych środowisk czytelniczych, roli dziadków w rozwijaniu umiejętności poznawczych i językowych wnuków, możliwości wynikających z międzypokoleniowego uczenia się oraz korzyści z zaangażowania dziadków w wychowanie wnuków. Wskazano również implikacje dla praktyki pedagogicznej, odnoszące się m.in. do potrzeby intensyfikacji podejmowanych w ramach partnerstwa edukacyjnego działań sprzyjających rozwijaniu umiejętności językowych i czytelniczych dzieci poprzez kontakty z dziadkami. Zgromadzone w wyniku analizy polskiego i zagranicznego piśmiennictwa dane dostarczyły argumentów na rzecz potrzeby promowania działań wspierających inicjatywy międzypokoleniowego uczenia się w ramach domowych środowisk czytelniczych.

## Introduction

For many years, researchers have been interested in the determinants of children's school achievements, particularly at the early stages of education. Much of the research has been directed at identifying

selected aspects of children's home learning environments, including home literacy environments, which provide a space conducive to children's acquisition of valuable language experiences, activate their cognitive and motivational mechanisms and play a significant role in the acquisition of basic school skills. Whilst this analysis addresses many diverse aspects of the family environment, it takes little account of the multigenerational context of child development. Meanwhile, the successive lengthening of life expectancy observed today, as well as changes in the dynamics of family life—linked, among other things, to the increasing pace of life and the imbalance between work and family life—are factors that could contribute to grandparents participating more in their grandchildren's education and upbringing. Such participation becomes particularly important in the context of professionally active young parents, single-parent families and families with children with special educational needs, for whom—according to research—grandparents' participation in raising the children contributes greatly to the family's wellbeing (Prendeville, Kinsella 2019).

Grandparents seem to play not only the role of educators and caregivers, but also of the first teachers, who can make an important contribution to the development of children's language and reading skills, particularly during early and middle childhood. Thus, they can contribute significantly to their grandchildren's educational achievement. Although this may not always be an easy task for various reasons—such as being employed, living away from the grandchildren's home or having limited digital competence and familiarity with fast-changing new technologies—intergenerational learning seems to offer an opportunity for grandparents to actively participate in their grandchildren's education, which could also very likely have a positive impact on the wellbeing of the seniors. However, is there a theoretical/empirical rationale behind this thesis? The descriptive critical analysis of the literature carried out in this study investigated whether (and if so, how) grandparents can contribute to their grandchildren's early literacy. Furthermore, the aim was to identify opportunities for mutual intergenerational learning in grandparent–grandchild relationships within home literacy environments.

## Home literacy environment as a research category

Apart from the category of cultural capital introduced by Pierre Bourdieu (1986), an important starting point for a theoretical and empirical analysis of the environmental conditions of children's and adolescents' language and reading competences seems to be the home literacy environment. This term is becoming more and more popular, especially in research in the humanities and social sciences. It refers to activities related to both reading and to the diverse reading resources available in the home that can be used to develop literacy (Puglisi et al. 2017). In the literature it is usually considered in the context of two types of experiences related to children's early literacy: emergent literacy and early literacy. The first of these, referred to as formal, focusses mainly on code and involves primarily modelling literacy skills and directly teaching the child through work—initially with materials without letters, and later materials with letters. The second type, known as informal, focusses primarily on meaning and making reading material available as part of a shared object and play activity with the child, such as storytelling, reading dialogues, singing songs, drawing and taking the child to libraries, bookshops, community centres or theatres (Sénéchal, LeFevre 2002).

Although the two types of experiences appear to be weakly correlated according to empirical research (Hamilton et al. 2016), in practice they may be relevant to different aspects of literacy. Thus, there is no doubt that early reading initiation in the home environment enriches children's cognitive and linguistic experiences and enables them to explore both the abstract and pragmatic aspects of reading. It should be added that, according to William Teale and Elizabeth Sulzby's concept (1989) of developing literacy, depending on the predominant type of experience and the degree of involvement of the parent and child in reading and reading-related activities, the home literacy environment used to be described as active, passive or child-directed. The first type involves children and adults interacting with each other during shared reading activities; the second type involves preparing the child for literacy by observing adults' reading behaviour; and the third type primarily involves children's own reading play activities.

An analysis of the literature on the subject makes it possible to identify at least several aspects of home reading environments that are of interest to researchers from various research centres at home and abroad. One of the main areas of research inquiry appears to be the literacy activities taking place in the family home by parent-child pairs. Empirical research in this area is relatively often directed towards identifying paired reading sessions, the verbal involvement of parents during dialogic reading or the frequency of joint parent-child visits to libraries and bookshops. The second research area is identifying parental literacy as a determinant of children's later language achievements. The third focusses on parents' beliefs and attitudes towards reading, as well as their reading habits. Another is concerned with determining the size of the household library, measured by the number of books owned by the family (at the declarative level) and verifying its predictive function on children's educational success (Kuracki 2022). Although the empirical analyses appear to address many different levels of home literacy environments and to provide valuable data confirming that parents' education, beliefs about literacy, expectations of children and reading resources at home are important for the frequency and course of family reading practices (Frijters et al. 2000; Deckner et al. 2006; Dolezal-Sams et al. 2009; Torppa et al. 2011; Davidson et al. 2014; Esmaceli et al. 2017; Giménez et al. 2017; Kuracki 2022), a rare few research projects take into account sociodemographic variables related to children being raised in multigenerational families. Thus, many analyses of environments conducive to the accumulation of children's linguistic experiences fail to take into account the actual participation of grandparents, who—in the light of contemporary social changes associated with the increasing prevalence of multigenerational households—increasingly seem to assume the role not only of carers, but also of more experienced partners and teachers, accompanying the child in episodes of shared involvement (Schaffer 1994).

### Grandparents as a significant link in home literacy environments — opportunities for intergenerational learning

Evidence for perceiving grandparents as important members of the home literacy environment is provided by research showing the

complementary nature of parents' and grandparents' involvement in the child-rearing process. In a research project conducted by Stefani Milovanska-Farrington (2021), it was shown that although parental care has a greater impact on the social and behavioural development of children between the ages of three and six, grandparents can have a stronger impact on the development of their communication skills, in particular by helping to expand their grandchildren's lexical resources and narrative skills. According to the author's suggestions, being able to care for grandchildren for a minimum of 10 hours per week can lead to an increase in the children's cognitive skills of about 2%. The potential of grandparents and grandchildren aged 3–6 learning together was also recognised in a study of families of Bangladeshi origin living in East London (Jessel et al. 2011). The study found that a collaborative intergenerational learning space, in which the grandparents' relationship with their grandchildren is reciprocal and open, was highly conducive to the grandchildren's development of both reading and writing skills.

Grandparents may therefore significantly reinforce and/or complement the effect of parental interactions. However, it should be noted that, in the light of cross-cultural research, the links between grandparents' involvement in the upbringing of grandchildren living in shared three-generation households and grandchildren's school readiness may be influenced by variables such as race and ethnic origin (Pilkaukas 2014). Although empirical work also indicates that the same parenting styles used by parents and grandparents may affect children's emotional and social functioning quite differently (Li et al. 2019), there is no doubt that grandparents' participation in raising grandchildren can actually contribute to developing the cognitive functions of children with and without special developmental needs (Hillman et al. 2017). This is because contact with the grandchild creates an opportunity to co-create a space for reading together, telling fairy tales and stories, recalling past events, looking at family photographs, learning through word games and rhymes established in oral tradition (often forgotten by the parents' generation), passing on information about traditions and culture, singing, drawing, being in proximity to nature and going together to various cultural institutions. This can be an important step towards providing children with

both formal and informal early literacy experiences, as well as building an active and passive home literacy environment.

However, it is worth noting that, according to empirical analyses, grandparents' involvement in activities that develop children's language and reading skills increases with the age of the child in their care (Nyland et al. 2009). Furthermore, it may also be influenced by the type of relationship between grandparents and grandchildren, which can be identified as distanced, involved or social. In the first type, the grandparents' contribution to a home literacy environment could be described as negligible due to the rare opportunities for physical contact. In the case of the other two types, however, grandparents seem to have more opportunities to help develop their grandchildren's cognitive and language skills. In their role as "caring guardians" or "wise companions"—as Karolina Appelt (2007) describes both groups of grandparents—they have significantly more opportunities not only to meet their grandchildren's basic needs, but also to explore, play and experiment together.

In light of the analyses cited above, it also seems interesting to mention the research conducted by Jeylan T. Mortimer and Mark Lee (2021), who showed that grandparents (generation 1) can significantly influence parents' (generation 2) expectations of their children (generation 3). The analysis of data from over 470 American families made it possible to determine that the educational expectations that grandparents (generation 1) had of their own children (generation 2) allow us to predict the expectations that parents (generation 2) had of their children (generation 3). This relationship is particularly important in the case of grandparents who have a university degree and, as can be assumed, have made a great deal of effort to ensure that this level of education is also achieved in subsequent generations. Therefore, based on the results, it can be assumed that grandparents can be a significant source of motivation and support for their children (parents' generation) in co-creating a conducive learning environment for their grandchildren. Moreover, the grandparents' participation in the development of their grandchildren's cognitive and communication skills may also be indirect. This is also confirmed by the findings of Hannu Lehti and colleagues (2019), who report that grandparents, as the eldest in the family—by bringing their grandchildren into contact with other, distant family members (aunts, uncles or

cousins)—may contribute to the transfer of knowledge and other intangible resources (e.g. skills) from the extended family network to the grandchildren.

Moreover, the reading and related activity between grandparent and grandchild, which fosters the grandchild's cognitive and linguistic skills, seems to provide an opportunity to activate the learning processes of the grandparents themselves. This is because, according to Appelt (2007), this relationship is an opportunity to maintain a kind of balance between variability, which is not usually challenging for the grandchildren's generation, and the constancy and continuity provided by the grandparents' generation.

Thus, the home literacy environment appears to be a space that offers a real opportunity for intergenerational learning, i.e. a reciprocal process of transferring new skills between generations, which can take place on three levels: learning from each other, learning with each other about issues that are important to both generations and learning about each other with a view to exchanging experiences or worldviews (Brown, Oshako 2003). As Ryszard Kałużny (2014) points out, in such an arrangement of reciprocity, both grandparents and grandchildren with certain beliefs and values have the opportunity to include them in areas of shared reference. Thus, multi-generational learning not only creates favourable conditions for the development of the actors involved, but it also encourages the development of different communication strategies between older and younger participants in the educational process. Moreover, it is also an opportunity to encourage the grandparents to make an intellectual effort and motivate them to learn more and more about newer technological discoveries (Muszyński 2014). This fact was confirmed by an international study conducted in Colombia, Italy, Peru, Romania and Spain among seniors over 65 years of age, which showed that family intergenerational dynamics can facilitate grandparents' acquisition of digital skills (although not in all areas) (Rosales, Blanche-T 2022). This issue seems particularly important in relation to the opportunities seen in virtual reading activities, increasingly undertaken within home literacy environments due to the restrictions imposed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Interesting results of an experimental study have been reported by Caroline Gaudreau and her colleagues (2020), which examined the extent to



which teachers and grandparents reading books via new technologies to support distance learning can contribute to the development of language functions such as reading comprehension and vocabulary expansion in four-year-old children. The results show that, regardless of the three modes of text transmission (video chat, live streaming and video playback), the children involved in the experiment scored significantly higher than the children in the control group, who did not participate in any reading or reading-related activity. It should be added, however, that the best results were recorded in the group of children who participated in video chats or live broadcasts, and thus had the opportunity to interact and ask questions in real time. In the light of these results, it seems reasonable to claim that the process of intergenerational learning can be seen in terms of mutual benefits for both grandparents and grandchildren. Furthermore, as Wendy Mitchell (2008) rightly points out, the possibility for both generations to participate in joint learning activities is also extremely beneficial from the point of view of building an educational partnership among students, parents and teachers. Grandparents developing their grandchildren's cognitive and linguistic competences can take the form getting involved with the school, where they could volunteer for a number of national campaigns and programmes aimed at raising the reading skills of children and adolescents.

### Opportunities to support grandchildren's development and grandparents' psychological well-being

Grandparents' participation in their grandchildren's education, in addition to the mutual benefits of intergenerational learning, can also contribute to seniors' quality of life and psychological well-being. Analyses using data from the American Time Use Study (ATUS), which examined the relationship between the time grandparents spent with their grandchildren and other measures of their subjective well-being, show that grandparents living with their grandchildren in three-generation households experienced more happiness and had a higher sense of meaning in life when they had the opportunity to engage in joint activities with their grandchildren, rather than spending time alone or in the company of other people (Dunifon et al. 2020).

Similar conclusions were also provided by a Chinese longitudinal study which found that grandparents who had the opportunity to care for their grandchildren showed significantly better mental and physical health compared to those who did not have this opportunity. Even higher levels of life satisfaction and fewer depressive symptoms and somatic symptoms were shown by those respondents who cared for their grandchildren along with the parents or elderly in-laws (Xu 2019). Thus, it is highly probable that looking after grandchildren or being involved in educational activities with them makes it easier for seniors to maintain their self-esteem and to satisfy the need for affiliation and belonging. This is because, as Kałużny notes (2014), the active role played by older people as grandparents can foster a sense of usefulness and can contribute to receiving acceptance and support from other family members. It should be noted, however, that active participation in the upbringing and education of grandchildren depends on a number of factors and can also be a burden for seniors. According to research by Jessica Zamberletti and her colleagues (2018), whilst the likelihood of grandparents providing intensive care is determined by the gender, health status, professional activity or financial resources of the seniors, non-intensive or even occasional care is far more likely to be provided by grandparents regardless of their individual characteristics. In both cases, however, it is important that grandparents' involvement in their grandchildren's home learning environment is unforced, driven by an inner need and appropriate to their available time and psychophysical condition.

### Developing children's language and reading skills through contact with grandparents – lessons learnt and implications for practice

This review of Polish and foreign theoretical and empirical works allows us to conclude that grandparents, being an important link in home learning environments, including home literacy environments, can significantly contribute to their grandchildren's early literacy. Indeed, many studies emphasise the fundamental role of grandparents, not only in providing informal care for their grandchildren but also in developing their language and cognitive skills. Moreover, from

the analysis of the literature on the subject, a number of mutual benefits also emerge with regard to the opportunities for mutual intergenerational learning between grandparents and grandchildren. This state of affairs could contribute to further, in-depth interdisciplinary research which, by adding to the important area of ignorance regarding selected aspects of home reading environments, could result in a number of indications for both social policy and pedagogical practice.

However, the results of the literature review can already be used to formulate important postulates regarding the development of children's language and reading skills through contact with grandparents. The first of these concerns the need perceived by teachers and pedagogues working in kindergartens to raise awareness of the importance and value of intergenerational learning opportunities among families (in the form of lectures, workshops, informative materials etc.). The second is related to the need to promote educational partnerships and to initiate rewarding, multi-stakeholder cooperation between the family home—(pre)school environment—and local environment for the early literacy of children in middle childhood. With collaboration in mind, it seems particularly valuable to organise instructional classes for seniors that would provide an opportunity for them to learn to use various text materials (including e-books and audio-books) and new technologies for reading with their grandchildren. Moreover, it also seems reasonable to provide both parents and grandparents with methodological training on how to select and adapt reading materials for children with special developmental needs. Finally, it may also be important for the early literacy of grandchildren to invite grandparents to participate as guests/volunteers in preschool programmes and activities that promote the idea of reading books with children.

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