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Utilizing Family Life Education as a Resource for Grandparents Raising Grandchildren

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Abstract

Increasingly, grandparents have the responsibility for raising their grandchildren. Using Family Stress Theory as a theoretical framework, this study asked the question How can Family Life Education (FLE) be used as a resource to help grandparents raising grandchildren? Focus groups and individual interviews were conducted with grandparents who are raising their grandchildren. Findings suggest grandparents raising grandchildren could benefit from education in a variety of areas. There are multiple barriers, however, that participants identified toward the utilization of FLE. Interestingly, grandparents identified their adult children or grandchildren as better suited recipients of FLE. Ultimately, there is a lack of collaboration among services and support for grandparents raising grandchildren. Impact and implications for practice, research, and policy are discussed.

Keywords: grandparents raising grandchildren, grandfamilies, Family Life Education, Family Stress Theory, resources

According to the United States Census Bureau (USCB, 2016), 2.7 million grandparents in the United States are responsible for their grandchildren's basic needs. There are 5.4 million children under the age of 18 in the United States living with their grandparents, and one million families where neither parent is present at all (Ellis & Simmons, 2014). With the growing aging population and the increasing number of children without adequate parental care, older adults are left with the responsibility to care for children until the end of their lives and grandparenting is being experienced in a different way than ever before (Conway et al., 2010; McLaughlin et al., 2017).

There are many complex reasons for the tremendous growth in the number of grandparents who have sole responsibility for their grandchildren. Circumstances that give rise to grandparents raising their grandchildren differ greatly (Hayslip & Patrick, 2005) and include teen pregnancy, parental illness, divorce, incarceration, substance abuse, mental illness, HIV/AIDS, child abuse and neglect, and disability and death (Choi et al., 2016; Hayslip & Patrick, 2003; Hayslip & Patrick, 2005; USCB, 2016). Most grandparents take on a different role unexpectedly

and are faced with the new family situation because of the inability of the grandchild's parents to care for them (Sumo et al., 2018).

Benefits and Stressors

Most grandparents who care for their grandchild(ren) feel it is rewarding and fulfilling because they see it as a second chance at parenting, an opportunity to help their grandchildren and ensure their healthy development and reestablish their own sense of purpose (Hayslip & Patrick, 2005). These benefits are often outweighed by the stressors. Some common stressors identified among grandfamilies include financial needs (Hayslip & Patrick, 2005; Kresak et al., 2014; Shakya et al., 2012; Thomas et al., 2000), confusion around current parenting practices and skills, child development, childhood disorders or behavior problems (Dolbin-MacNab, 2006; Hayslip & Goldberg-Glen, 2000; Shakya et al., 2012), navigating their new roles, complicated or dramatic family dynamics (Hayslip & Patrick, 2005; Strom & Strom, 2011), their own decreased energy and agility, physical and mental health issues (Hayslip & Kaminski, 2008; Shakya et al., 2012; Williams, 2011), a lack of social and emotional support, and feelings of social isolation and alienation (Hayslip & Goldberg-Glen, 2000; Shakya et al., 2012). Currently, there are limited services, especially educational, for these families and many barriers to their involvement in the educational services that do exist, which leads to further isolation and marginalization (Dolbin-MacNab et al., 2013; King et al., 2009).

The goal of this study is to move past discussing *what* grandfamilies need to explore *how* to get them effective educational resources. Using family stress theory and a qualitative approach, we explored how Family Life Education (FLE) can help grandfamilies alleviate stressors using the following research question to guide the investigation: How can Family Life Education be used as a resource to help grandparents raising grandchildren?

Family Stress Theory and the Importance of Resources

Family stress theory aids in understanding the importance of resources to families in this situation. The ABCX model, created by Hill (1949) and Waller and Hill (1951), assumes that whether or not a family will experience crisis depends upon the magnitude of stress, their definition of the situation, and the availability of resources. The stressor event in the case of grandparents raising grandchildren is typically non-normative, as grandparents do not anticipate parenting again during the age of retirement. Non-normative events induce changes in boundaries, roles, and patterns of family interaction. Resources, whether material or nonmaterial, have the potential of stabilizing an otherwise upset family balance that is needed for effective functioning (Zimmerman, 1995). "To the extent that policies and programs represent stressors, they diminish family well-being; to the extent they represent resources, they enhance well-being" (Zimmerman, 1995, p. 217). How a family defines, or perceives, their situation is also integral to the family stress theory. Therefore, a program or policy is only effective if the family perceives it as such (Zimmerman, 1995). Previous research suggests that perceived inadequacy of family resources elevates stress. Alternatively, access to adequate resources can reduce stress (Whitley et al., 2016).

Existing Resources for Grandfamilies

Resources, support, and assistance for grandfamilies come in either formal or informal modalities (Goodman et al., 2007). Grandfamilies receive benefits and support from the local, state, and federal government (Williams, 2011); the child welfare system and case management

services with licensed social workers (Kresak et al., 2014); family preservation (Hayslip & Goldberg-Glen, 2000); counseling and therapy (Hayslip & Kaminski, 2008); family life education (Hayslip & Patrick, 2005); and programming through Cooperative Extension (Jurkowski, 2008). Topics for programs currently available for grandfamilies include, but are not limited to sexual health, drug and alcohol use, school violence, and parenting education (Hayslip & Patrick, 2005). Education for grandparents has been disseminated in multiple ways including utilizing technology to provide education from a distance (Brintnall-Peterson et al., 2009; Jurkowski, 2008), group programming (Jurkowski, 2008), and community interventions (Fruhauf et al., 2012; Lee & Blitz, 2014).

Unfortunately, there is a shortage of empirically tested programs (Baugh et al., 2012), treatment interventions, educational opportunities, and adequate policies for helping grandfamilies (Choi et al., 2016; Hayslip & Goldberg-Glen, 2000; McLaughlin et al., 2017; Sumo et al., 2018). Despite progress, most states have a long way to go to ensure a comprehensive set of supports (Generations United, 2015). With more consistency and reliability, community social service programs could be providing higher quality supports (Dellmann-Jenkins et al., 2002), especially with the inclusion of family practice strategies that are often left out of interventions altogether (Whitley et al., 2016). Improving grandfamilies' access to resources could reduce stress, improve quality of life, and provide them with the capability of providing a supportive and stable home for their family (Kresak et al., 2014). One such resource might include Family Life Education (FLE).

Family Life Education

According to the National Council on Family Relations (NCFR), FLE is the “practice of equipping and empowering family members to develop knowledge and skills that enhance well-being and strengthen interpersonal relationships through an educational, preventive, and strengths-based approach” (NCFR, 2019, para. 1). Although services like therapy or case management are based in intervention, FLE is based in prevention through education (Myers-Walls et al., 2011). FLE currently includes 10 broad educational content areas (see Appendix A for a list and explanation of each of the content areas) and includes building skills and knowledge in (a) communication, (b) human development, (c) decision-making and self-esteem, and (d) healthy relationships (NCFR, 2019). Goals of the field of FLE, and the providers who practice FLE, include to teach individuals across the lifespan so that their families can function optimally, to expand programs to audiences currently neglected or underserved, and to expand delivery systems to reach those that are not being reached (Arcus, 1995; NCFR, 2019). To delineate between three very similar domains of family practice—family case management, family therapy, and FLE—Myers-Walls and colleagues (2011) developed the Domains of Family Practice Model. The model depicts each domain as having the similar goal of creating and supporting strong, healthy families, and each domain accomplishes this goal differently and at different times in the family’s trajectory. FLE means to support families by increasing what they know and building skills to deal with needs the family is currently experiencing or will experience in the future (Myers-Walls et al., 2011).

FLE could address the common needs of grandparents raising grandchildren and the individualized needs of these adults and children, if done correctly (Baugh et al., 2012). Agencies working with grandfamilies frequently do not adequately provide opportunities for educational services to grandfamilies (Jurkowski, 2008). Often interventions merely tailor existing education strategies to grandfamilies, but fail to recognize the heterogeneity of the

population, the uniqueness of each family's situation, and grandparents are left with needs that are not met (Dolbin-MacNab & Targ, 2003). Although progress has been made in implementation and delivery of FLE programs to grandfamilies, grandparents still report a lack of availability or frustration with accessibility (Baugh et al., 2012).

Specific strategies geared toward the unique stressors of grandparents raising grandchildren and guided by family stress theory (i.e., developing resources to alleviate specific stressors) may prove to be a more beneficial resource than generalized parenting programs (Landry-Meyer et al., 2005). One approach to increase positive adaptation among grandparents raising grandchildren is by promoting the acquisition of knowledge and skills that make a family more competent (Kresak et al., 2014). Because of the transition these families are experiencing, education in most of a range of content areas could provide a resource that will help them. These areas include: 1) Families and Individuals in Societal Contexts, 2) Internal Dynamics of Families, 3) Human Growth and Development across the Lifespan, 4) Human Sexuality, 5) Interpersonal Relationships, 6) Family Resources Management, 7) Parent Education and Guidance, 8) Family Law and Public Policy, 9) Professional Ethics and Practice, and 10) Family Life Education Methodology. But research has not yet been conducted to determine if FLE would be an effective resource for grandfamilies.

The goal of this study was to explore *how* FLE can be used as a resource for grandfamilies. Using family stress theory, we explored how FLE can help grandfamilies, who are transitioning through an unexpected situation in their lives, deal with the many stressors they are experiencing. The following research question was used to guide this investigation: How can Family Life Education be used as a resource to help grandparents raising grandchildren?

Methods

Focus groups, a qualitative methodology, provide a way of listening and learning from people within a group dynamic through an environment of open discussion between participants (Morgan & Krueger, 1998). This methodology was used as an exploratory tool to hear from grandparents raising grandchildren how FLE can be used as a resource.

Participants

Upon receiving IRB approval, participants who fit the following criteria were recruited to participate in the study: (a) they were a grandparent of at least one child who was 19 years old or younger at the time of the study, (b) they had primary responsibility for caring for the child, (c) the child resided in the same household, and (d) the parent(s) of the child did not live in the same household. Participants were recruited through a university's Research and Extension office, a local foster care agency, and other human service and community agencies using email, listservs, and recruitment flyers. Interested participants were screened using the above inclusion criteria and were invited to participate if they met all four criteria. Eligible participants were provided information regarding the timing and location of the focus groups so they could select the focus group most convenient for them.

At the time of screening and focus group selection, participants' phone numbers, emails, and addresses were gathered for study reminder purposes. They were mailed a confirmation letter that included the time, date, and location for the focus group or individual interview and a reiteration of the study's purpose (Morgan & Krueger, 1998). Attached to the letter was a list of the 10 FLE content areas (NCFR, 2011), a FLE fact sheet (Goddard et al., 2014), and an explanation of FLE (NCFR, 2014). The letter asked them to look over these materials to

familiarize themselves with FLE to help facilitate useful discussion during the focus groups and interviews as people might have differing definitions of *education*. Participants were given a reminder phone call or email, depending on preference, 24 hours before each focus group or interview to protect against attrition (Morgan & Krueger, 1998).

Based off interest and availability, two focus groups consisting of five and six participants each were held at the local public library or public meeting room. Three participants were interested in participating after the conclusion of the focus groups, so in order to gather data from more grandparents, who are often a difficult population to recruit, interviews were conducted with these individuals in their homes to make a total of 14 participants, all residing within a 60-mile radius of a Midwestern university town.

Participant demographics. A total of eight women and six men participated in this study—11 in two focus groups, and three were interviewed individually. Participants were an average of 62 years old, with a range of 42 – 76 years; 12 were married, one was divorced, and one was widowed. Grandparents had been raising their grandchildren an average of nine years (range = 1 – 15 years). The participants' grandchildren for whom they provided care ranged in age from 1 to 19 years old. Grandparents had responsibility for their grandchildren for a variety of reasons including drug and alcohol abuse, physical abuse, parental and/or child mental health issues, and parental instability.

Procedure

To begin each focus group or interview, participants completed an informed consent form. The first author explained the purpose, goals, and rules and expectations of the focus group or interview. Similar interview guides were utilized in focus groups and interviews and included questions attempting to investigate the reasons for caring for their grandchildren, stressors they experience, services they were offered or utilized to alleviate those stressors, and their feelings or experiences regarding how FLE could be used as a resource. Prompts and clarifying questions were used when needed to gain additional insight into the topic discussed. Each focus group lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. The individual interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. All sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

Analysis was done collaboratively among the authors. One author had experience working with grandfamilies and was raised by her grandmother, while the other had more limited experience with grandfamilies, but was a Certified Family Life Educator.

Audio recordings from all sessions were first transcribed. Participants were randomly given pseudonyms during transcription for confidentiality. This served as the initial read through of the sessions to get a broad idea of what was said and what occurred. Notes, including nonverbal cues or other visual data, taken by the facilitator and the support person in the focus groups were added to transcriptions and analyzed. Data analysis began immediately following the first focus group session with open coding procedures. Codes or concepts fall under categories called themes (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Each transcript was then read through again line-by-line to identify themes. The second focus group and individual interviews were open coded and served as comparisons for identifying themes. Various strategies for analysis and coding were incorporated by those of the research team, including making comparisons; drawing upon personal experience; interpreting visual emotions or nonverbal cues, language, and context

to understand meaning; and becoming very familiar with the data by going through it multiple times (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Theoretical saturation, an important factor in establishing trustworthiness of the findings and an indication that further data collection is not required, was not reached with two focus groups so, as mentioned above, three individual interviews were also conducted. Participants within all of the individual interviews mirrored the responses of the focus groups, which allowed us to conclude that the findings were trustworthy.

Following data analysis, a questionnaire was developed based on the findings to perform member checking with three participants from each focus group to validate the data analysis. Participants were called on the telephone and asked if they would be willing to help verify conclusions that were made. Questions like “does this statement appropriately summarize your experience as a grandparent raising your grandchild(ren)” or “do you feel you agree with this statement” were asked by specifically mentioning findings. All participants confirmed the following findings.

Results

This study sought to answer the question “how can FLE be used as a resource to help grandparents raising grandchildren?” The findings suggest participants felt education in areas such as finding resources, navigating systems, parenting and guidance, family relationships and dynamics, and development could be a useful resource to alleviate stress, but participants did not always classify the education as FLE due to a lack of understanding of the field’s purpose. Participants also reported numerous barriers to utilizing FLE, harming its ability to properly alleviate stress. Interestingly, the participants felt their adult children or growing grandchildren would benefit more from FLE than they would themselves. Ultimately, participants reported a lack of collaboration between services, educational or otherwise, and a need for better support overall. See Appendix B for an illustration of themes, subthemes, and supporting quotes.

Education Identified by Participants as Potentially Useful

The participants in this study suggested there were multiple areas in which they would like to receive more education. Often the lack of education or knowledge in a certain area had caused them stress. Sarah said:

I could've used a lot of education. How to manage my stress, you know. I just think there should be some places out there where people can go to, either a classroom or for stress related families, or parents or children, or because stress brings on a lot of different things for every person, and I had a lot of stress trying to keep everything together.

Participants most often reported wanting additional education in the following areas: finding resources and answers while navigating the different systems, parenting education and guidance, family relationships and family dynamics, and growth and development across the lifespan. Many grandparents also suggested that each situation is unique and this needs to be taken into consideration when providing FLE for grandparents.

Finding resources and answers while navigating the different systems. Grandparents reported finding answers to their questions, identifying useful resources, and navigating the

multiple systems involved in their lives as being some of the most difficult issues with which to cope. Not all participants were involved with the same systems due to the heterogeneity between their situations. Calvin reminiscing about the period of transition when taking over care of his 10-year-old grandson explained, “*We're in [one state] and the child's in [another state] and [we] absolutely could not get any leverage with the child's system there.*” Grandparents felt as if they had little control in regard to helping their grandchild because of a sense of helplessness while navigating the multiple systems.

When the opportunity to take over raising their grandchildren arose, grandparents were faced with decisions regarding the legality of care but found it difficult to find answers to their legal questions. Cindy, a grandmother newly involved in raising her grandchildren, stated, “Just knowing where, I mean, people don't think to explain words to you. Like, ours are wards of the state.” Even when help was offered, it was often inadequate.

The paperwork involved in completing any task related to the legalities of their situation or providing their family with more resources was often overwhelming. Alice, a grandmother raising a grandson with a mental illness said,

“There are so many papers that we have to fill out for this program and that program, you know, to get them help. I need a secretary.” The grandparents expressed the need for someone to educate them on completing the necessary steps to obtain legal custody and with navigating the various systems with which they are involved.

Parenting education and guidance. Sarah, a grandmother raising her adopted daughter's child said, “Sometimes parents, we just don't know what to do with them... And anybody that hasn't gone through it, doesn't understand it.” Multiple grandparents explained that a lot of stress came from explaining their current situation to their grandchild so the child would still feel wanted and loved. Ellen explained how her new role was sometimes a difficult one: “It's conveying to the kids that I think their parents still love them, know they do, but even though we're the disciplinarians, we love them as well, or as much.”

Grandparents realized that guiding the children down a path to become healthy citizens was something for which they felt very responsible. Angela stated:

That's really where the education comes in. It's just, how do we raise these kids to be healthy and whole and...I don't want to screw him up.I mean, that's what I think every day, with every interaction I have with him. I do not want to screw this kid up.

Many struggled with being honest and communicating openly with their young grandchildren about their unique situation, but not causing them any harm. Paul said:

One thing I'm struggling with is wanting to be honest, but you can't be honest with a 6-year-old. You just can't. You can cause more trouble for them down the road and that's tough... That's our concern, the fragileness of the little people's

mind, you know.

The grandparents with young grandchildren expressed confusion on handling the task of communicating with the children about their current situation in a way that the child could understand. The grandparents also wanted to make sure the children felt safe, had a family to support them, and a stable home, despite their parents being out of the picture.

Family relationships and family dynamics. The grandparents' adult children, other children still at home, and other family members provided a multigenerational situation that was admittedly difficult to juggle. Bob explained the importance of understanding family dynamics:

One of the family dynamics is this multigenerational dynamic. I don't see a whole lot on that. When we get these three generations together, how do you balance? Obviously, there's these stressors in the process. How do you manage the dynamics of the family?

Some of the grandparents were raising their grandchildren while their children were still in the home. They explained that the other children in the household were sometimes affected by their parents raising their nieces and/or nephews. Ellen, a grandmother raising her three grandchildren with her youngest child in high school, said, "Probably the internal dynamics of families, understanding of family strengths and weaknesses and how family members relate to each other. I think that's the one thing that I have the hardest time getting a grip on."

Growth and development across the lifespan. Grandparents indicated that because of the extended time since raising children, having information and someone to talk to regarding proper child development would alleviate some anxiety for them. A few grandparents raising young grandchildren experienced the difficulties of toilet training and explained that it was especially difficult because they had not been exposed to it in many years. Others wanted information on child behavior during various stages as they felt times have changed since they parented their own children. Laura stated:

I will say that going through middle school, it was nice being reminded of how middle schoolers behave so that kind of life stage stuff is a helpful reminder...Being told that and the way kids are these days is different than they were the last generation or certainly different than the way I was raised and just a reminder of how they are now was helpful.

Each situation is unique. Many grandparents expressed interest in receiving education regarding something that was unique to their situation. For example, grandparents from this study were coping with things like grandchildren with mental illnesses, adult children with drug addictions, spouses suffering from alcoholism, and teenage grandchildren becoming pregnant. When asked about educational opportunities she had been involved in, Alice explained that she found classes related to mental illness to be helpful:

Mental health has been a tremendous value, and we've gone to a lot of classes that they've offered, and how to get a kid that's not gonna do what you want him to do, to do it. That's been very helpful and I think you could probably do that same type of thing.

Sarah admitted that her husband had a substance abuse problem, and that her granddaughter became pregnant as an adolescent. Sarah indicated it would have been nice to receive education on substance abuse, family stress and crisis, and family dynamics. She said:

If I'd had more Family Life Education, someone to go to or to be able to call someone and say this is our situation at this point in time. If there was a way for a Family Life Educator to give me some leads on which way to turn. I can't see where it would be any harder than getting therapy. Because, maybe a Family Life Educationer could come into the home and say something different if they saw the home, whereas you go to an office.

Previous Experience with FLE

Many of the grandparents had prior experience with FLE in one way or another, whether or not they were aware that it was such. Quite a few of the grandparents involved with the child welfare system had taken the foster parent classes to become licensed foster parents, which may or may not be formally classified as FLE. They explained that the classes were beneficial to receive formal parenting training. Others were involved with programs offered through their school systems that they identified as being useful. Ellen explained that through her youngest grandchild's Early Head Start:

They had family nights where you not only learned about budgeting and child development and the kids' interaction with each other, you got to meet the other families, too, and watch your kids play and grandchildren play and interact and find out what they're doing and what they're not.

Others were given books, pamphlets, and various reading material from their local social service agencies. A few reported still utilizing those materials even after much time had passed. Sarah received services from a Parents as Teachers parent educator from the community who came into her home. She said, "I always appreciated whatever information she gave me. ... She would evaluate [my granddaughter] and she was very good at it... Talking with [my parent educator] sometimes helped me in some situations."

Education is Great, But Not for Me

Grandparents identified many areas of education as being relevant to their current situation. They also indicated, however, that their adult children or grandchildren would be better suited for FLE than were they.

Adult children. Some of the education was seen as needed presently for their adult children. As Bob explained:

Talking about resources and needs, these parents of the grandkids need resources. They're the ones who need. We could get resources, particularly for our son to get some of the help he needs, and I think it would solve a lot of problems with raising the kids.

Although some of the grandparents felt their children could benefit from FLE (e.g., parenting education or information on growth and development) now, most of the grandparents felt the education was too little too late, that the adult children needed FLE before they had children or while they were having children. Cindy stated:

These people could not become better parents unless it starts way younger. Why aren't they doing more in high school to teach people how to relate to each other and how to care for each other, even if it's not caring for children? I just think it all needs to go back a little farther, 'cause by the time it's in this situation, it's almost too messed up to fix...I guess I'd just like to have all of these services for my adult children, not necessarily for myself 'cause that's the stuff. I don't know where they're supposed to get it.

Grandchildren. The grandparents were determined to make sure things turn out better for their grandchildren. They saw FLE as a valuable tool to prevent their grandchildren from continuing down their parents' path. Bob said, "We keep talking about grandparents or even the parents, maybe the kids is where the education should be." The grandparents felt that FLE could help both their grandchildren's current and future life. Many of the grandchildren were struggling with understanding why their situation was the way that it was. Ellen explained, "I guess if they had a sounding block to speak out to someone about their frustrations. Why is this going on, what's going on here, you know, that type of thing, that may be a good idea." The grandparents felt extra responsibility for the grandchildren because they felt it was not their fault and they did not ask for their life to be this way.

Barriers

The participants of the study also presented many barriers to the utilization of FLE as a resource. The most common barriers included: misunderstanding what FLE was; viewing FLE as irrelevant; timeliness of the resource; believing that educators might not know the information they need; finding it difficult for FLE to be provided in emergencies and to fit unique family situations; and other common barriers to FLE such as time, health, and finding childcare.

FLE is misunderstood and irrelevant. The participants were often confused about FLE and why it was relevant to them as grandparents raising grandchildren. Calvin said, "I was actually kind of at a loss as to what it was, and why it was included in the context of what we

thought we were gonna come here and talk about.” Other grandparents felt that the idea of FLE was idealistic or unrealistic. Paul said:

I kinda took it as you’re selling that one agency to educate everybody to be good parents...Get with those people and they’ll give you all the information on how to be the perfect family. I’ve never seen one myself, but give it a shot.

Some of the other grandparents were worried about the accessibility of FLE. Cindy said, “I thought it all sounded wonderful, but how accessible is it? It’s a great ideal, but I guess I can’t quite see that a person or organization could get all that done.”

Lack of knowledge in areas of need. Some of the areas the grandparents identified as being areas they could use more education in, they also felt educators would not “know” because they were not issues involving basic family life skills. For instance, Calvin expressed his concern about the validity of FLE by saying:

We’re talking about an organization that is offering a sort of family counseling services, or educational services related to the family relationships. Rather than the more tangible things that we’re all talking about, which is food, childcare, bills, and that kind of stuff...I don’t think we know these things so it’s hard to teach them. How do we communicate to a 5-year-old who his real dad is in these situations? Those are more difficult things, the questions I think we’re all still grasping with.

Other grandparents felt concerned that the education provided would not get deep enough to move past general knowledge. Ellen described a situation where her daughter, who had her children taken away, was participating in a parenting class. She said, “When [my daughter] was doing the family parenting class, it dealt with fairly general issues, but just did not get deep enough to where it was ever gonna do her any good.”

Because many participants described needing education suddenly, they thought FLE was an unrealistic answer to their needs. Many participants expressed concerns with how the information would get to them quickly, and that it may not be possible to have information available for every possible situation. Grandparents also shared the importance of the education meeting the needs and unique situation for the family at that particular time. Calvin said, “I think in terms of education, as I sit around and listen to this room, we still all have questions about all of these areas, but specifically dealing with our unique situation.”

Real life barriers. The most common issues participants reported were a lack of time and energy and difficulty with finding childcare. Laura said, “I don’t have the energy I had 20 years ago.” The participants’ age, fatigue, and energy level came up as deterrents to participating in any form of FLE multiple times. Ellen said, “Finding the actual time to commit to something else. Time management would probably be our biggest challenge.” Time and energy level were intertwined because participants admitted even with time available, they did not have the energy. Additionally, finding good and reliable childcare was identified as a barrier. Alice said, “When

you have somebody at home that you have to stay with all the time, you can't get out to a support group very easily.”

Lack of Collaboration

Ultimately, the participants expressed that a lack of collaboration existed between the many services and systems with which they were involved while caring for their grandchildren. Additionally, participants identified support, whether it be formal or informal, as being important for coping with and managing stress.

No magic place. When discussing the issues with finding resources and getting answers to her questions, Cindy said, “I kinda just hope there's this magic place where you can just go and find out all the information you want and it doesn't work that way... There's just not that little magic place to go to.” Grandparents were frustrated that they had to visit multiple places to find the answers they needed. No single place that specialized in their situation existed.

Support. When asked about what makes their family resilient, support from friends, family, their church, and the community came up as something that was very important. Grandparents identified with having support as a reason that they felt they were coping well. Ellen said, “Moral support more than anything... The services through Head Start, they were a lot of moral support.”

When the support was lacking, however, or they felt it was inadequate, the grandparents reported needing more. Ellen later said, “Friends can offer advice, but if they're not in the situation, they don't know.” The grandparents identified with support groups as being a useful thing due to the, as Calvin said, “slightly less academic and more experiential” nature. It was very important to them that the information, education, and support came from those people who were experiencing or had experienced a similar situation. The grandparents explained that a mentor relationship would be beneficial. Cindy said:

I think a support group of people who are there, in the thick of it or have been there. And maybe people who have been there but maybe aren't, like you have older ones, but like somebody who had little ones like we do now but are out of that now.

Discussion

These findings suggest there are a number of content areas in which more education could be useful (e.g., finding resources, navigating systems, parenting and guidance, family relationships and dynamics, and development), but numerous barriers to utilizing FLE and other issues exist. Grandparents feel their adult children or growing grandchildren would benefit more from FLE, however, especially if it is given early in life. Ultimately, there seems to be an overall lack of collaboration between services, education or otherwise, and an overall need for more adequate support.

Baugh et al. (2012) presented a suggested list of best practices for FLE with grandparents raising grandchildren. Among those were the need to address multiple issues through education unique to each family, remove barriers to participation and utilization, collaborate with other

family professionals, include nuclear and extended family members into educational opportunities, and offer support groups (Baugh et al., 2012). The findings of this research project support this list and suggest that FLE can be a useful resource for grandparents raising grandchildren to alleviate stress should the participants deem it as such, just as the ABCX model and Family Stress Theory suggest.

Although a practitioner can believe education can alleviate some of the stress a grandparent is experiencing while raising their grandchild(ren), the grandparent may not be in congruence with that belief. In order for grandparents to view FLE as beneficial, they need to be aware of the goals providers have when incorporating FLE into their practice, feel those goals are relevant to them and their family, feel they need it, and be offered the types of education in a timely manner. Their values, beliefs, and the meaning they attach to their situation will partially determine the effectiveness of services (Hayslip & Kaminski, 2008). Grandparents must identify with feelings of stress and believe that FLE is a useful resource to alleviate some of that stress (Bailey et al., 2009).

A variety of FLE content areas are relevant to grandparents (Baugh et al., 2012, see Table 1) and could serve as an educational resource connecting grandparents to solutions for their stressors. Similar to the findings of Hayslip and Kaminski (2008) and Baugh and colleagues (2012), grandparents in this study find that there is difficulty with understanding what policies, procedures, and expectations are established as well as where to find resources and how to access them. The FLE content areas of Family Law and Public Policy, Family Resource Management, and Families and Individuals in Societal Contexts can help provide consolation to grandparents who face stressors like obtaining legal guardianship of their grandchild, managing childcare instead of retirement costs, and/or navigating various societal systems.

Many of the current FLE programs have strived to address parenting issues for grandparents raising grandchildren (Hayslip & Patrick, 2005) and grandparents identify parent education and guidance as an area of interest. As the participants in this study suggest, the demands of the parenting role provide a unique form of stress and the context of parenting is different from when they parented the first time around (Hayslip & Patrick, 2005). Raising children is off-time and unexpected, and grandparents have lost touch with current parenting trends (Jurkowski, 2008). FLE programs on Parent Education and Guidance can be useful, as long as the education is not merely adapted from current parent education materials, and the unique stressors of raising a grandchild are addressed. Intervention strategies guided by family stress theory can provide resources to alleviate stress for grandparent caregivers as they adapt to the re-parenting role (Landry-Meyer et al., 2005). Providing grandparents with the tools and skills to communicate and guide their grandchildren, especially during their many transitions through life, will help relieve grandparents' stress regarding their grandchild's behavior and future and break the cycle of dysfunction.

Most interventions are aimed toward the grandparent to strengthen skills in managing grandchildren's behavior or to provide emotional support (Thomas et al., 2000). A unique contribution of this study is that grandparents feel they are not the best-suited recipients of FLE, but that their adult children or grandchildren would benefit more. Baugh and colleagues (2012) suggested that family professionals should focus on the physical and mental well-being of grandchildren as a way to provide support for grandparents who are raising their grandchildren. As the grandparents in this study explain, grandchildren need assistance with acknowledging and coping with their feelings about the absence of their parents and having their grandparents as their caregiver (Dolbin-MacNab, 2006). To take it a step further, grandparents in this study also

suggest their grandchildren needed to understand their family, in relation to their friends' families, to find some sense of normalcy. Strom et al. (2000) suggested educating more than one generation at a time creates an interaction where each age group assimilates some aspects of change together and establishes mutual support. Healthy family development requires the adjustment of more than a single generation, therefore, grandchildren, parents, and grandparents should all have access to education (Strom & Strom, 2011). Based on our findings, education regarding communicating with their grandchildren, adult children, and vice versa could be beneficial for each generation (Baugh et al., 2012).

As Bailey and colleagues (2009) also found, grandparents in this study struggle with coping with the confusing family dynamics that come with transitioning into a grandfamily, as well as changing family members' roles and identities. The Internal Dynamics of Families and Interpersonal Relationships content areas would benefit family members in grandfamilies as they learn to relate to each other again following role shifts and changes. Baugh and colleagues (2012) suggested that incorporating and respecting family diversity and family dynamics into educational opportunities should be considered, which would help with understanding how the family can operate with multiple generations involved in different and changing capacities.

Despite identifying many educational needs that could fall under most, if not all, of the FLE content areas, grandparents express many concerns and barriers to utilizing educational materials. Many grandparents in this study do not understand the purpose of FLE. Even after being offered very detailed explanations of FLE, it is difficult for grandparents to make the connection between its purpose and their lives. Even for those grandparents in this study who have worked with Family Life Educators, it is difficult for them to believe FLE is relevant to them. Possibly, as Dolbin-MacNab and Targ (2003) found, they are either unfamiliar or have a negative history with such services that causes confusion. The findings of this study suggest that grandparents raising grandchildren experience a lack of awareness of the existence of programs, feel the programs that do exist are irrelevant to their families, and feel services fail to meet the unique needs of their family, similar to the findings of Goodman and colleagues (2007).

Many of the grandparents in this study have been raising their grandchildren for quite some time now, and they have found all of the resources and the education they feel they need. It is during the initial crisis phase of taking on caring for their grandchildren that grandparents experience so many changes and shifts in roles, perceptions, and resources (Bailey et al., 2009). Whether or not a grandparent identifies an opportunity as useful or helpful depends largely on their other life roles and sequencing of life transitions (Luo et al., 2012). In order for FLE to be deemed appropriate by grandparents who are raising their grandchildren, it must be offered and available at the appropriate time.

Participants in this study explained they would find information most useful for them if shared in ways that are less academic and more experiential and if they could access resources and information quickly in an emergency situation. Hayslip and Kaminski (2008) explained that grandparents' situations often do not allow for any time to prepare or progress through steps to adapt as they are confronted with multiple stressors and problems at once (Hayslip & Kaminski, 2008), which imposes an additional barrier. What is more, each family's experience of a similar situation will be different. The results of this study support Goodman and colleagues (2007) finding that formal services often fail to meet the unique needs of these families. Therefore, the education must come quickly, fit the unique situation of that family, and still be valid and useful material.

Ultimately, as Family Stress Theory suggests, it is important that in order for education to be an effective resource it must be identified as necessary and needed by the grandparents and family members in the situation. Many grandparents raising their grandchildren who have been involved in some sort of FLE have identified it as being useful. Previous experience with, and participation in, educational opportunities are relevant to whether or not a family will utilize existing resources that are offered (Baugh et al., 2012). If the education they were involved with met their unique needs at the time, they report positive feelings toward it.

Implications

The findings of this study hold many implications for practice and family policy. There is a gap that needs to be bridged between FLE and grandparents who are raising their grandchildren. Additional publicity regarding what FLE is and how it is relevant to grandfamilies would be beneficial. As family professionals, it is our job to learn what grandparents need, what we and others can do to help them, make sure those who need help are receiving it and it is ultimately useful (Hayslip & Patrick, 2006), and to address potential barriers. Fruhauf and colleagues (2015) suggested that not only is there an educational component that grandparents raising grandchildren need, but service providers across all areas of family service need better training regarding what stressors grandfamilies are experiencing and what their needs are. FLE could be used as a resource to not only educate grandparents, but also the various service providers who work with grandfamilies.

In addition to providing FLE for grandparents, FLE needs to broaden its targets and reach the individuals in all three generations within grandfamilies to provide education and support. The education that is implemented must be comprehensive, yet adaptable and individualized. Programs aimed to help parents and children in these situations would have spillover effects to also help grandparents and the entire grandfamily and vice versa (Pilkauskas & Dunifon, 2016). Additionally, involving the participation of all generations together through an inclusive program could further promote adjustment (Strom & Strom, 2011).

Many interventions and programs in place do not include the family as a whole or even include FLE or family practice strategies (Whitley et al., 2016). Including family fun and interaction in FLE programs for grandfamilies will promote motivation to learn and decrease defensiveness while accounting for strengths and empowering participants (Dolbin-MacNab, 2006). Additionally, involving families in the development of services makes it easier to ensure their needs are met.

Having one educator who works one-on-one with the grandfamily would provide family members a person they could turn to for guidance, education, and support, as well as to provide information in a timely manner, which would help to reduce potential barriers. It is also important that the FLE understand that they will likely need to collaborate with professionals in other fields to meet the grandfamilies' needs. Just as the Domains of Family Practice Model depicts, family case management, family therapy, and FLE have different goals and are needed at different times in family situations (Myers-Walls et al., 2011). It is important that FLEs and other family professionals be properly trained to effectively refer clients to other providers when necessary. As this study's findings suggest, support needs to be integrated into a network of established collaboration between professionals from all arenas to provide the best resources for grandparents raising grandchildren (Goodman et al., 2007). Similar to the recommendation by Kaplan and Perez-Porter (2014), creating a continuum of support that builds an integrated web of programs, structures, and policies to help grandfamilies would be a step toward a "magic place"

or “one stop shop” for them. FLE could potentially alleviate grandparents’ stress as educators could answer their questions, provide referrals, and the educator could be a source of support through an often chaotic and sudden life transition.

Family Life Educators need to be able to not only educate grandfamilies on the usefulness of FLE, but also policymakers on the importance of support for grandfamilies and funding for FLE programs. Another way to help reduce stressors for these grandparents would be encouraging state governments to enact grandfamily-friendly laws and policies (Generations United, 2015) such as de facto custody laws, education and health care consent laws, and policies surrounding financial assistance.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Although this study adds to our understanding of how FLE can be a resource for grandfamilies, there were limitations, and more research is necessary to clearly understand *how* FLE can be used as a resource for grandfamilies. Recruitment was difficult, so the decision was made to conduct individual interviews to complete the data, as two focus groups were not enough to reach theoretical saturation. The information gleaned from the interviews complimented the focus group data, but the difference in group dynamics versus a solo interview may have affected the participants’ responses. Even with the added interviews, a total of 14 participants all from the same Midwest region does not allow us to generalize findings.

Additionally, the participants’ understanding of FLE was difficult to interpret accurately. Although not all participants had read the FLE materials prior to the focus groups, even those who read the materials did not seem to comprehend FLE as a practice or how it could be connected to their family. Possibly a better explanation of the materials and purpose of the study were needed prior to data collection. It is difficult to say, however, if that would have biased the participants’ responses. Future research could focus on distinguishing differences between participants who had participated in previous FLE and those who had not. This characteristic could also guide recruitment to further narrow the research question. Furthermore, this issue points to the need for improvement in this area for the field of FLE.

Additional research needs to be conducted with grandparents in other geographic regions, especially those utilizing kinship navigator services, for comparative reasons and for the purpose of developing something more comprehensive. Additionally, more research is needed to understand the modes through which grandparents would prefer education and how a comprehensive education model for grandfamilies can be designed and implemented. Additional research investigating how FLE can be used for the adult children and the grandchildren involved with grandfamilies is also needed.

Conclusion

Hill (1949) said, “We believe that it is high time national and local policy was shaped which places family life first, not only in the national scheme of values, but also in the investment of time, personnel, and programs devoted to the common wealth” (p. 337). Even though Hill stated this more than 65 years ago, this statement is still accurate. Instead of being free of their parenting responsibilities and being able to enjoy their last years of life, grandparents are caring for their grandchildren now more than ever. Grandparents are in a vulnerable state themselves, yet state and local governments rely on them to take up the burden of caring for the nation’s most vulnerable population, their grandchildren (Generations United, 2017).

The current state of resources available for grandparents raising their grandchildren is inadequate. What is more, FLE could be doing a better job of meeting the needs of grandfamilies. Grandparents raising their grandchildren identify this education as being important and needed, but a number of barriers limit grandparents' use of FLE. Ultimately, collaboration among family professionals is key to helping these families cope with their stress. As Ellen, the participant, said, "It's kinda like a recipe. You put the seasonings in, but if it doesn't taste right to you, try a different seasoning, cut something out, change it, but at least you have a basic recipe some place." We know the many needs of grandparents raising grandchildren, which forms the foundation or basic recipe for us. The rest of the work includes perfecting it to each family's taste buds so that they may find what we have to offer useful.

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Appendix A
Family Life Education 10 Content Areas and Explanations

	Content Area Name	Brief Explanation
1	Families and Individuals in Societal Contexts	An understanding of families and their relationships to other institutions, such as the educational, governmental, religious, healthcare, and occupational institutions in society.
2	Internal Dynamics of Families	An understanding of family strengths and weaknesses and how family members relate to each other.
3	Human Growth and Development across the Lifespan	An understanding of the developmental changes (both typical and atypical) of individuals in families throughout the lifespan. Based on knowledge of physical, emotional, cognitive, social, moral, and personality aspects.
4	Human Sexuality	An understanding of the physiological, psychological, & social aspects of sexual development throughout the lifespan, so as to achieve healthy sexual adjustment.
5	Interpersonal Relationships	An understanding of the development and maintenance of interpersonal relationships.
6	Family Resource Management	An understanding of the decisions individuals and families make about developing and allocating resources including time, money, material assets, energy, friends, neighbors, and space, to meet their goals.
7	Parent Education and Guidance	An understanding of how parents teach, guide and influence children and adolescents as well as the changing nature, dynamics and needs of the parent/child relationship across the lifespan.
8	Family Law and Public Policy	An understanding of legal issues, policies, and laws influencing the well-being of families.
9	Professional Ethics and Practice	An understanding of the character and quality of human social conduct, and the ability to critically examine ethical questions and issues as they relate to professional practice.
10	Family Life Education Methodology	An understanding of the general philosophy and broad principles of family life education in conjunction with the ability to plan, implement, and evaluate such educational programs.

Note: Information Source: National Council on Family Relations

<https://www.ncfr.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/FLE-Content-and-Practice-Guidelines-2014-objectives.pdf>

Appendix B
Illustration of Themes, Subthemes and Supporting Quotes

Main Theme	Sub-Theme	Supporting Quotes
Education	Finding Resources and Answers while Navigating the Different Systems	<p>“There are so many papers that we have to fill out. For this program and that program. You know, to get them help. I need a secretary.”</p> <p>“...the system makes no sense.”</p>
	Parenting and Guidance	<p>“That’s really where the education comes in. It’s just, how do we raise these kids to be healthy and whole and have... I don’t want to screw him up. I mean, that’s what I think every day, with every interaction I have with him, I do not want to screw this kid up.”</p>
	Family Relationships and Family Dynamics	<p>“Probably the internal dynamics of families, understanding of family strengths and weaknesses and how family members relate to each other. I think that's the one thing that I have the hardest time getting a grip on.”</p>
	Growth and Development across the Lifespan	<p>“I will say that going through middle school it was nice being reminded of how middle schoolers behave so that kind of life stage stuff is a helpful reminder, from time to time.”</p>
	Unique Family Situation	<p>“Well, I think personally, if I'd had more Family Life Education, someone to go to or to be able to call someone and say this is our situation at this point in time. If there was a way for a Family Life Educator to give me some leads on which way to turn.”</p>
Previous Experience with FLE		<p>“Talking with [my Parents as Teacher educator] sometimes helped me in some situations.”</p>
Not for Me	Adult Children	<p>“I guess I'd just like to have all of these services for my adult children, not necessarily for myself. You know, ‘cause that's the stuff, I don't know where they're supposed to get it.”</p>

	Grandchildren	<p>“We keep talking about grandparents or even the parents, maybe the kids is where the education should be.”</p> <p>“I guess if they had a sounding block to speak out to someone about their frustrations. Why is this going on, what's going on here, you know, that type of thing, that may be a good idea.”</p>
Barriers	FLE is Misunderstood and Irrelevant	<p>“I was actually kind of at a loss as to what it was, and why it was included in the context of what we thought we were gonna come here and talk about.”</p> <p>“I don't know that it's relevant to us. There are parts of it that are okay. But not all of it. So, I think the family has to be strong in order to survive it. So, I don't know if there's a way you can teach that.”</p>
	Lack of Knowledge in Areas of Need	<p>“So again that was a thing I thought when [my daughter] was doing the family parenting class was that, it dealt with fairly general issues, but just did not get deep enough to where it was ever gonna do her any good.”</p>
	Real-Life and Not Uncommon Barriers	<p>“I don't have the energy I had 20 years ago.”</p>
Lack of Collaboration	No Magic Place	<p>“I kinda just hope there's this magic place where you can just go and find out all the information you want and it doesn't work that way.”</p> <p>“Because by and large, the folks that we've dealt with know a very teeny little area, and if it's outside that area, you know, forget it.”</p>
	Support	<p>“Friends can offer advice, but if they're not in the situation, they don't know.”</p> <p>“I think support groups can be very helpful and do that mentoring thing for grandparents that are just beginning to take it over.”</p>