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The role of grandparents in childcare in Ireland: Towards a research agenda

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Abstract

This paper discusses the role of grandparents in informal childcare in Ireland. It considers how recent demographic change and government policy on childcare have the potential to place greater pressures on the provision of grandparent childcare. It illustrates research literature that has examined the prevalence and intensity of grandparent care, factors influencing such care, and the role and needs of grandparents in childcare. We argue that there are significant gaps in Irish research evidence about the extent of, role and needs of grandparents as childcarers and outline a data and research agenda that builds on previous research in this area.

Keywords: Childcare, Policy, Grandparents, Intergenerational

Introduction

Despite the recent growth in numbers of centre-based childcare places in the Irish formal childcare sector, the provision of childcare by relatives to pre-school and school-aged children continues to be an important resource for many parents. Ireland's 2005 Quarterly National Household Survey (QNHS) (CSO, 2005) indicates that while parents/guardians were still the main carers during working days for families with preschool children (59.7%) and those with primary school going children (78.5%), unpaid relatives (9.7%) were the most important source of non-parental childcare for families with primary school children. Paid carers (12.1%) and unpaid relatives (11.5%) were the most important for pre-school children (CSO, 2005). Although the survey does not specify which relatives are the carers, anecdotally we know that grandparents play a large role in the informal childcare sector, meeting their adult children's regular and sporadic childcare needs. This issue is poorly understood in Ireland, but international research has found that the prevalence and intensity of the childcare provided by grandparents varies and they are often part of a 'jigsaw' of childcare arrangements used by families. The situation in Ireland may be similar.

Changes in family structures, the economic and employment circumstances of families, social policy on retirement and inward migration trends are likely to place greater pressures on grandparents' capacity to provide such services in the future. In common with other countries where there have been major socio-economic and demographic shifts, research has tended to focus on grandparents as the recipients rather than providers of care. This approach is limited in that it fails to capture the complexity of the lives of older people and intergenerational relationships (Wilton & Davey, 2006).

At a national policy level, while Ireland's National Children's Strategy (Government of Ireland, 2000) recognises the importance to children's well-being of a mix of formal and informal supports, almost no policy attention has been given to the issue of grandparents as one of the childcare bedrocks in Ireland. Grandparent care, and relative care in general, have remained in the private sphere along with so much of Irish family life. Such care constitutes an important aspect of intergenerational relationships and reciprocity and sustains social and economic life, yet research, scholarship and policy treat of love and care work as private and personal matters (Lynch & Lyons, 2008). Such kinship caring relationships are based on mutuality and reciprocity, differing from other forms of childcare either in the formal or informal black economy sectors. While informal care giving plays an important role in human development and intergenerational relationships, it remains invisible, unsupported and unacknowledged within Irish policy because it has largely been regarded as women's work (Lynch & Lyons, 2008).

This paper discusses the role of grandparents in informal childcare in Ireland. First we consider how recent demographic change in Ireland has the potential to place greater pressures on grandparents as childcarers. We then outline the policy context for childcare in Ireland in which grandparent childcare may be understood. Research, (mainly from the United Kingdom (UK), Australia and the United States), that has investigated the role and needs of grandparents in childcare in terms of social, economic and psychological factors is reviewed. Grandparent childcare in the context of intergenerational relationships is also discussed. Finally, we propose that much more needs to be known about the extent of, role and needs of grandparents as childcarers in Ireland and their psychological well-being, and accordingly outline a research agenda that builds on previous research in this area.

This paper discusses grandparent childcare where they care for their grandchildren sporadically or regularly, and the grandchildren live with their own parents. Some grandparents assume the parenting role, with and without legal custody of their grandchildren, and the grandchildren live with their grandparents. While the latter group requires further empirical investigation and policy consideration and support, they are not the subject of this paper.

Demographic change

Women's labour force participation

The unprecedented rise in women's workforce participation in Ireland is credited as being a key factor behind the rapid economic growth of the 1990s, with the increase attributed to women who were previously outside of the workforce (Russell et al., 2002; Sweeney, 2006). In 1990, 35 per cent of women aged 15 to 64 years were in paid employment (Russell et al., 2002); by 2007 this figure had increased to 60.3 per cent (CSO, 2007a).

Increasing female workforce participation, and poor formal childcare supply, have implications for the propensity of adult children to rely on their parents, particularly mothers, to care for their children, and also the ability of their mothers to take on the childcare role. From 1998 to 2007, older women aged 45 to 64 years who had 'reared their children' re-entered the work force with their participation rate almost doubling: the labour force participation of women aged 55-59 and 60-64 has more than doubled during the same period from 23,100 to 53,500 and 12,500 to 29,800, respectively (CSO, 2007a).

Age of mothers' first birth and life expectancy

In the period 1980 to 2006 there was a notable increase in the age at which mothers gave birth to their first child. For women within marriage the average age is now 32.9 years; for those outside marriage, it is 27.1 years (CSO, 2006a). The postponement of childbirth by younger women means that grandparents are older than they were for previous generations (Gray, 2005). Therefore, grandparents may find that childcare responsibilities extend well into their retirement years. Proposed government policies aimed at redressing future pensions crises through creating more flexible retirement ages and/or extending the age of compulsory retirement (Government of Ireland, 2007) could have an impact on the supply of grandparent childcare.

The issue of age of first birth needs to be considered in the context that the life expectancy at birth for both men and women has increased. An Irish male infant in 1926 was expected to live to 57.4 years, and a female 57.9 years. By 2002, these figures were 75.1 and 80.3 years (CSO, 2004). Increases in longevity mean that generations enjoy longer years of shared lives than ever before thus increasing the relevance of multigenerational bonds and family support, of which grandparent childcare forms a part. In contemporary Western societies grandparenthood has become a prominent feature in an individual's lifecourse (Mann, 2007).

While there have been significant improvements in life expectancy, the later years may be accompanied by chronic health conditions that require family members' involvement in the care of their relatives (Bengston, Marti & Roberts, 1991). In the UK context Gray (2005) identifies a 'middle generation squeeze' where grandparents who act as childcarers may need

to care for their own ageing parents, creating tensions in intergenerational care. This group of parents is caught between obligations to children and obligations to parents. While this may also be true in the Irish context, research with a representative sample of Irish people over the age of 50 on health, ageing and retirement (Delaney et al., 2007) found that one-third of people aged 50 to 59 years have a long-term illness, increasing to over 40 per cent for the older age group. This indicates that grandparents may not always be able to care for their grandchildren and may require support from their own children.

It is not just the later stages of the life course that are of concern to grandparents and their children and grandchildren. Lundström (2001) highlights an increasingly common phenomenon in Ireland where the transition to grandparent occurs when a child gives birth at a young age. Grandparents are still caring for their own child, while also caring for their grandchild, often within the same household. This finding is supported to some extent by Census data that shows that of 19,452 lone parent families, over 10 per cent live in multi-family households (CSO, 2007e).

Lone parents

In Ireland there has been a substantial increase during the period 2002 to 2006 in the number of lone parent households, the vast majority of which are headed by females (CSO, 2007c), having implications for the provision of grandparent childcare. One third of lone parents with pre-school children and just under a half (48%) of lone parents with primary school-aged children were at work in the first quarter of 2005 (CSO, 2006b). While unpaid relatives are the main non-parental childcare used by all families with school-going children, this is more apparent for lone parents than for two-parent families (CSO, 2005). Furthermore, lone parents continue to be disproportionately represented in Ireland's poverty and deprivation statistics.

While consistent poverty rates for the population overall have changed little from 2005 to 2006 (6.9% to 7%) those for lone parents have increased in the same period from 27.2 per cent to 32.5 per cent (CSO, 2006c). For employed lone parents with pre-school-aged children, just under a half (41%) availed of paid childcare and a third (33%) engaged the services of an unpaid relative (CSO, 2006b). Given that being a lone parent is characterised by living in poor economic circumstances and having incomplete second-level education (Department of Social and Family Affairs (DSFA), 2006) it is not surprising that large numbers reside in multi-family households (Combat Poverty Agency, 2006) and may avail of parental and sibling help with childcare. Even if a young lone parent is able to avail of employment in the first year following her child's birth, childcare responsibilities restrict her ability to move beyond low-skilled, low-income employment into better paid jobs that require training and experience (Sandfort & Hill, 1996). In addition, recent Irish government policy aimed at steering lone parents into employment when their youngest child turns eight years (DSFA, 2006) as well as the low-wage prospects of a substantial number of lone parents in Ireland, are likely to place further pressures on grandparents to care for their grandchildren.

Grandparents (and others) therefore act as an important source of childcare support for lone parents in helping them access employment and training opportunities. Grandparents also act as a very important source of childcare support in the period after divorce or separation (Hetherington, 2003). Children who have experienced parental separation typically see more of their grandparents and other relatives when parents separate (Hogan, Halpenny & Greene, 2003). Divorce is a relatively recent phenomenon in Ireland, introduced in 1997, and divorce and marital separation rates are increasing. While grandparents may continue to care for their grandchildren in such circumstances they do not have legal rights of access to grandchildren. The fear of losing contact with grandchildren in such circumstances has been expressed by Irish grandparents (Lundström, 2001). The bond between grandchild and grandparent is mediated through parents, particularly the grandchild's mother. Where children are born outside of marriage fathers lack legal right of access. This poses difficulties for fathers and paternal grandparents. Other non-traditional family forms are also on the increase such as blended families, which may include new in-law children and step-grandchildren. Extended family systems will increasingly impact on the roles adopted by grandparents, and on their well-being in stressful family circumstances.

Inward migration

Over the economic boom period since the mid 1990s, Ireland has experienced rapid inward migration: 10 per cent of a rapidly increasing population are a nationality other than Irish, up from 5.8 per cent in 2002 (CSO, 2007c). In the period 1997 to 2006 the level of net inward migration has increased from 19,200 to 69,000 persons per annum. Between Census 2002 and 2006 there was a significant increase in the number of people from the 10 new EU member states (CSO, 2008). Typically these are young people who themselves either have children or are of childbearing age thus creating future childcare requirements. Census 2006 (CSO, 2007b) indicates that there are 23,317 children under 15 years in households in Ireland classified as 'non-Irish'. Identifying and understanding the use of different types of childcare by immigrants in Ireland and their childcare needs is hampered by a lack of research on this issue with immigrant groups. Furthermore, the official statistics on childcare use do not differentiate immigrants from the general population.

Research undertaken in other EU states indicates that grandparent care acts as an important social support for first and second generation immigrant families who have been able to bring a grandparent to the new host country, and therefore is an important element in helping families cope with their care responsibilities (Wall & Sao Jose, 2004). Nevertheless, for first generation unskilled migrant families there are particular difficulties in managing childcare arrangements owing to occupational and residential segregation, long or atypical working hours and low earnings. Although there are good social networks in migrant communities, research in Finland, Italy, France and Portugal reveals that these networks are limited in the provision of childcare support. To this end, migrant families are likely to rely on a combination of childcare strategies such as workplace care, formal care supplemented

by older child care or low-cost childminders, leaving children alone before and after school hours or on Saturdays when parents are working (Wall & San Jose, 2004).

Grandparents and childcare policy in Ireland

The increase in female employment rates and inward migration rates took place despite Ireland's poorly developed formal childcare infrastructure. Public investment in childcare did not really take off in Ireland until the late 1990s when Ireland received childcare funding from the European Union as part of a labour market equality strategy to guide women into employment. The main focus has been on giving capital funding to childcare providers to increase the supply of childcare places, and also staff funding to community childcare, while neglecting issues of high costs and affordability for parents (Coakley, 2005, p.21). In the two year period between the fourth quarter of 2002 and the first quarter of 2005, childcare costs rose by 23 per cent with the average weekly cost in the first quarter of 2005 at €120 (CSO, 2006b).

Government childcare policy places emphasis on the provision of formal childcare services. Although there has been provision for a universal childcare income supplement, neutral in respect of parental employment, to parents of all children under the age of six years, there is no acknowledgement of the role of the informal childcare sector¹. Grandparents' contribution to childcare has yet to be given specific acknowledgement in Irish policy. There has been little mention or policy attention in the landmark family and childcare policy documents: *Strengthening Families for Life*, the final report of the Commission on the Family (1998) and the *National Childcare Strategy* (Department of Justice Equality and Law Reform, 1999), focused on increasing the supply of childcare places in the formal sector to increase women's workforce participation. Subsequent policy remains focused on formal centre-based childcare provided through the private market and community sectors. There has been an increased focus on disadvantage and ensuring childcare places for children aged three to four years, and on bringing paid childminding into the formal economy. Policy is silent on the position of both unpaid informal and paid relative childcare. When asked to formulate social policies to support grandparents, some Irish grandparents say that they want recognition as a resource within family life in Ireland (Lundström, 2001). The consideration of how best to recognise and support their contribution in a meaningful way is complex given grandparent childcare's location within intergenerational relationships and reciprocity, and it is an issue that has yet to be adequately debated in Irish social policy.

There are many data gaps in relation to relative/grandparent childcare that may hamper policymaking on the family and childcare: it is not known how many grandparents in Ireland act as regular carers for their grandchildren or the roles they assume or whether the volume or type of care received varies with the age of the child or the changing circumstances of the

¹ An Early Childcare Supplement was introduced by the Irish Government in Budget 2006 giving parents approximately €1,000 per child under 6 years of age per annum. The Supplement was abolished at the end of 2009 and replaced by a free childcare place for children aged between 3 and 4 years of age.

parents. Basic questions relating to how regular or sporadic the childcare is and how many hours per week or month it takes up may be answered given Ireland's recent involvement in the European Union's Survey on Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe on the over 50s: Irish data on grandparent childcare from this survey is not yet publicly available.

Grandparents fill the gaps in child care provision

Although the number of childcare places in Ireland has increased, there continues to be an inadequate supply of local, affordable childcare places (Government of Ireland, 2006). In Ireland childcare is situated within the commercial realm and parents themselves must take personal responsibility to access childcare in a market economy (Moss, 2007). Difficulties also arise for parents owing to the 'conceptual and structural' divide that exists between the provision of childcare and early years education services (Moss, 2007). A more co-ordinated approach to the delivery of childcare services has come about through the establishment of the Office for the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs but the delivery of early childhood care and education still suffers from fragmentation in terms of the roles and responsibilities of key agencies, and the historical lack of commitment to universal early years educational provision (Hayes, 2007).

Research elsewhere indicates that grandparents fill the gaps that result from the lack of integration of early years childcare and education. In the UK, a survey of informal childcare provision found that of 425 parent respondents, a fifth had a 'jigsaw' of childcare arrangements whereby parents combined formal and complementary childcare. The study also found that grandparents were the main source (79%) of informal childcare provision (Wheelock & Jones, 2002). In Australia, where data on grandparents as carers is routinely collected, 22 per cent of all children under 12 months of age were regularly cared for by grandparents. While the use of formal childcare continued to increase with the age of the child, grandparents were still part of the childcare mix used by their children, with one-fifth of children below school age in Australia cared for by grandparents as a part of regular childcare arrangements (Goodfellow & Laverty, 2003).

Grandparents are regularly engaged in the provision of care that supplements other 'formal' child care such as before and after school, pick up and drop off from school (Gray, 2005), as well as provision during school holidays (Wheelock & Jones, 2002) and when formal care is not available such as on staff training days and when children are unwell (Ochiltree, 2006). Grandparents' informal childcare provision works as the 'glue' that holds together the complex and varied childcare arrangements that are required in the absence of integrated services (Skinner & Finch, 2006), indicating the centrality of grandparents in the 'jigsaw' of care, both formal and informal.

Understanding childcare provision by grandparents: complexity of arrangements and needs

Proximity/Geography

While proximity of grandparents to their children determines the level of contact and nature and quality of relations that children have with grandparents (Fahey & Murray, 1994; Hank & Buber, 2007; Ross et al., nd) it also impacts on the extent to which grandparents provide childcare. Indeed all types of intergenerational help have been found to diminish with increasing geographic distance (Brandon, 2000). In the UK, population forecasting indicates that although the chances of young children having a grandparent under the age of 70 have increased since 1981, these grandparents are less likely to live nearby. In Ireland qualitative research with grandparents has indicated that the majority of grandparents and grandchildren live within 15 kilometres of each other, and on average saw them at least once a week (Lundström, 2001). The large-scale Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe (Delaney et al., 2007) found that of those aged over 50 years in Ireland, 20 percent live in the same household as their children, 10 percent lived nearby, just under 20 percent lived between five and 25 kilometres and around 10 percent lived between 25-100 kilometres. Similar proportions (approximately 15 percent) lived between 100 and 500 kilometres from their grandchildren, or in another country. The impact of such distances on intergenerational relationships and support is unclear at present, but we can surmise that the greater the distances, the less of an option grandparent childcare becomes.

Costs and benefits to grandparents

Grandparent childcare brings with it a number of health, economic, social and emotional costs and benefits for grandparents. Around 20 percent of the grandparents in Irish research involving 58 grandparents found it tiring (Lundström, 2001), a finding echoed in other research with grandparents (Goodfellow & Lavery, 2003; Ochiltrie, 2006). Yet Hughes et al. (2007) in a US study of 12,872 grandparents report that the provision of childcare by grandparents does not impact negatively on grandparents' physical and mental well-being. Where there are health problems, these are as a result of prior characteristics. Moreover, evidence was found of benefits to grandmothers who provided 200-500 hours care per year for their grandchildren. These included having fewer functional problems, a greater likelihood of taking exercise and a decline in depressive symptoms for those who continued caring for their grandchildren (Hughes et al., 2007).

A study on the health of 30 grandparents from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in Australia, many of whom had childcare responsibilities, found that they viewed their grandparenting role positively. They enjoyed outings and attending playgroups with their grandchildren. Nonetheless, a number of grandparents expressed tiredness and were concerned about the loss of independence, narrowing of social contacts and unavailability of support services (WHIN & VICSEG, 2000 cited in Goodfellow & Lavery,

2003). Another Australian study (Goodfellow & Lavery, 2003) of grandparents' care experiences reported that grandparents found their childcare responsibilities rewarding. They saw care as a responsibility to kin and important to building relationships. However, they identified challenges such as the physical difficulties of lifting children; some found the care routine monotonous and limiting to free and personal time (Goodfellow & Lavery, 2003).

Although research shows payment to grandparents for childcare provision to be the 'exception rather than rule' and that grandparents view formal payment as inappropriate (Arthur et al., 2003; Skinner & Finch, 2006), this situation needs to be considered in terms of the potential for this care arrangement to become more pressured owing to changing family and socio-economic circumstances. The rights of grandparents as providers of childcare raises issues of whether or not they should be paid, how this would be organised and the impact that this would have on relationships (Mitchell, 2007). In the UK, while researchers have been critical of the UK government's decision not to subsidise informal childcare and their strategy of categorising all informal childcare under one umbrella, the issue of whether or not informal childcare should be funded is not clear-cut (Skinner & Finch, 2006). For grandparents who provide childcare to lone parents, payment is unusual, and childcare arrangements are based upon generalised reciprocity and a sense of obligation. Where other sources of informal childcare were availed of, relationships exhibited balanced reciprocity that entailed payment or in-kind activities (Skinner & Finch, 2006).

In the previous sections we have demonstrated that the changing demographics in Ireland, the policy context for childcare provision and the complexities of childcare arrangements and needs have implications for the childcare role of grandparents. In the following section we consider the diversity of grandparenting childcare and the social and psychological implications of this care.

Who cares, how and why?

International research indicates that grandparent carers are a heterogeneous group. Researchers have developed typologies of grandparent carers to understand the relationship involved and the intensity of care: avid carers, flexible carers, selective carers and hesitant carers (Goodfellow & Lavery, 2003). Vandell et al. (2003) supply the following categories: extended full-time, extended part-time, sporadic and no routine care.

Arthur et al. (2003) also use a typology that describes grandparenting childcare in terms of three broad models: grandmothers who regularly look after their children; those who look after their grandchildren frequently but in a more informal and ad-hoc way; and those whose role in childcare is less frequent but more formal and pre-planned. However, they suggest that these models vary over time and may vary between different sets of grandchildren. Arthur et al. (2003) highlight that these models are explained by other factors such as the

need for help, the financial need for a mother to work and the lack of alternative childcare arrangements as well as the availability and location of the grandmother and her physical capacity to help. A key element that underpinned these factors was the importance attached by grandmother and mother or father to the grandmother undertaking the childcare instead of alternative forms of childcare arrangements (Arthur et al., 2003).

Unsurprisingly, research has shown that mothers are more likely to call upon their own mothers rather than mothers-in-law for childcare provision (Wheelock & Jones, 2002), particularly when there are family difficulties or when regular commitment is needed (Arthur et al., 2003). A US national study of early childcare (Vandell et al., 2003) reports that maternal and family factors predict grandparent childcare: grandparent residing in the household, mothers' employment in the first three years, and ethnicity, with mothers 'of colour' more likely to use grandparent care than white mothers. Mothers working non-standard hours were more likely to use sporadic and part-time grandparent childcare, indicating the valuable role that grandparents play in facilitating employment when formal childcare is generally closed (Vandell et al., 2003). An Australian study (Goodfellow & Laverty, 2003) of the experiences of a diverse group of 32 grandparents found that underpinning all of their individual stories was a desire to support their adult children's well-being and an intense desire to be a part of their grandchild's life. Similar findings have been reported in UK qualitative research on grandparenting. Arthur et al. (2003) found that the main motivation for grandparents who looked after their grandchildren was the need to help their own adult children and to spend time with their grandchildren.

UK Time Use Survey data reveals that mothers of under-fives are most likely to receive help from grandparents with childcare and that grandparents represent a mostly free alternative to formal childcare, in particular for women engaged in low income jobs (Gray, 2005). Australian official childcare data also indicates that many grandparents choose to care for their young grandchildren while their parents work, with mothers' employment being the main reason why grandparents accept responsibility for regular childcare, but that other grandparents do feel obliged to care (Goodfellow & Laverty, 2003).

Irish research has identified grandparents' childcare role. This mainly takes place when both grandparents and grandchildren are younger, is typically a female late middle-aged activity and extends from full-time in house care to occasional babysitting (Lundström, 2001). Similarly, UK research indicates that grandparents comprise a large proportion of the complementary childcare sector, and they are predominantly female (Wheelock & Jones 2002).

Although Mann (2007) notes that in recent years there has been more emphasis on the role of grandparents in families, there is little research that examines the roles and relationships of grandfathers. Yet there is some evidence of the role of grandfathers in childcare. While

grandmothers are dominant in complementary childcare, male carers in this sector have been found to be grandfathers (Wheelock & Jones, 2002). In the US, although more grandmothers (54%) provide childcare, grandfathers (38%) also make a significant contribution (Ochiltree, 2006). The childcaring that grandfathers undertake is often in the company of a spouse (Wheelock & Jones, 2002) and such an engagement may, for many grandfathers, be their first experience of participation in childrearing. This activity provides grandfathers with the opportunity to engage in nurturing and emotionally expressive relations that may be different to their prior experiences of fatherhood where they held responsibilities for the economic support of their families (Wilton & Davey, 2006). Notwithstanding the evidence that grandparent childcare is a gendered activity, the presence of grandfathers as childcare givers has the potential to be a positive influence that lessens the reproduction of gendered intergenerational child caring (Wheelock & Jones, 2002). Lynch and Lyons (2008) demonstrate that childcare work is regarded in public life as women's work. They argue that there is a need to challenge the gender divide in caring. This suggests that understanding the role and place of grandfathers in childcare could make an important contribution to shifting the ideology of caring as inherently gendered work.

Grandparent childcare and intergenerational relationships and exchanges

Overall, UK, Australian and US research positions grandparent childcare in the context of intergenerational relationships and exchanges. Such relationships are an important emotional and economic resource for parents and children (Goodfellow & Laverty, 2003; Hank & Buber, 2007).

Using informal care may not just be about being unable to access affordable childcare in the formal sector: women's decision-making processes are informed by a strongly gendered moral obligation to care, and militated by social class. Research with middle and working class parents in the UK (Duncan, Edwards, Reynolds, & Alldred, 2004) found that informal childcare by family was considered ideal, not because of cost and availability, but because the mothers trusted the carer and wanted someone who would show children affection and look after a child in the same way as parents would. In addition, middle class mothers were more likely to value child development through formal provision. Wheelock and Jones's (2002) research indicates that both grandparents and mothers regard grandparent care as the best alternative to parental care, as it is based on love and trusting relationships that create well-being among grandparents and their grandchildren. Furthermore, it allows for intergenerational transfer of values about raising children.

Informal childcare arrangements are complex and particularly so for lone parents who have been found to have strong preferences for informal care, not only based upon economic reasons, but for reasons of trust, commitment, shared understandings and children's happiness (Skinner & Finch, 2006). Furthermore, how lone parents come to avail of grandparents as childcarers has been found to be non-directive. Lone parents do not ask for grandparent childcare directly, rather they allow the grandparent to do the thinking and decision making

about the provision of care (Skinner & Finch, 2006). Grandparent childcare is also valued for its flexibility relative to formal childcare, and can also be beneficial for low-income families as it generally costs nothing (Ochiltree, 2006).

Brandon (2000) posits that the relationship between relative-provided childcare and the presence of intra family in-kind resource exchanges is often ignored, and the choice of relative-provided childcare is part of a wider set of decisions about resource exchanges within extended families. Using data on childcare arrangements and family support networks from a national longitudinal survey of high school students in 1972 he concludes that mothers make their kin childcare choices as part of wider decision-making processes about giving or accepting help from other members of the extended family. Economic factors, costs of childcare and family income, still affected their decision-making. He locates relative childcare within the literature on family support networks, which operate within the availability of private market alternatives, and the role of kin in assisting families and individuals over the life course.

As women mothers and grandmothers re-enter or remain in the workforce, it is predicted that the work-family balance will increasingly become a multi-generational family issue rather than a challenge for young nuclear families alone (Hank & Buber, 2007). Lynch and Lyons (2008) point out that ‘nurturing care’ or ‘love labour’ cannot be easily translated into paid work yet there is an apparent lack of understanding of this in the public sector which presents challenges for societal organisation. They argue that “there is a mutuality at the heart of intimacy which does not enable us to offload that aspect of the relationship to others without destroying it” (Lynch & Lyons, 2008, p. 179).

Towards a research agenda on the role and provision of grandparent childcare in Ireland

Clearly the provision of childcare by grandparents is important to the well-being of children and families and in the generation of economic prosperity, yet little is known about how grandparent childcare works for parents, children and grandparents in Ireland. Although the Irish national longitudinal study of children, *Growing up in Ireland* (Williams et al., 2009) does gather child reports of their attitudes to grandparents, this will only provide one side of the relationship between children and grandparents, and will not specifically focus on the role of grandparents in childcare. In view of the changed socio-economic and demographic characteristics of the Irish population much more needs to be known about grandparent childcare.

There is potential for large representative national surveys, particularly the Quarterly National Household Survey’s (QNHS) periodic Childcare Module to uncover the extent of caring for children that grandparents do and how this care interacts with the formal childcare sector. Such a survey could indicate how many grandparents provide childcare, how many children they care for and the ages of the grandparents and children. Further, it

would indicate whether the time spent caring increases or decreases as children get older and start primary school and the early years of secondary school. Information related to payment could be gleaned in terms of what forms of remuneration grandparents may receive for child caring and the amount of hours given over by grandparents to care. There is also the potential to identify the use of different types of childcare amongst immigrant groups. The QNHS could also try to capture the mix of childcare, the jigsaw, used by Irish families. Currently participants are merely asked to state the main type of childcare they use and are not allowed multiple answers.

Further research is required to examine the activities that constitute grandparent childcare, the supports available to grandparents and the impact of caring on grandparents' own work-life balance. Research should consider the impetus for grandparent care (do they choose to care or do they feel obligated), and the nature and extent of reciprocity that occurs within families and between generations of which grandparent childcare is a component.

In the context of the changing Irish demographic landscape, research that examines grandparents' role as child carer needs to consider if, and how, labour market changes, longevity and later age of retirement impact on the provision of grandparent childcare. In addition, the role and nature of grandparent care within new immigrant communities in Ireland is a further area for investigation.

Research examining the impact of childcare on grandparents' psychological well-being and their life satisfaction is also required, focusing on areas such as role perception, feelings about grandchildren, and the effects of caring for grandchildren on relationships with their own children. Does grandparent childcare support and strengthen parent-child and intergenerational bonds and relationships, and what are the tensions around issues such as possible differences in parenting styles? Research should also examine children and young people's perspectives on, and experiences of, being cared for by a grandparent, and how intergenerational care contributes to linking young people with their family histories and older people to current trends in, amongst other things, media, technology, food and transport.

Research that locates grandparenthood within dynamic family systems will support an understanding of how such systems, including and beyond the nuclear family, impact on the role of grandparenthood and on grandparents' psychological well-being. For example, how does the timing of grandparenthood impact on the transition into the role? The level of caring responsibilities and attitudes towards the grandparent role may differ based on the age of their child at childbirth. The extension and contraction of family systems due to marriage and relationship breakdown and the development of blended families also impacts on the role of grandparent. The demographic changes that result in three or four generations enjoying longer years of shared lives mean that intergenerational support throughout the

lifecourse will be an increasing feature of Irish family life. All of these issues, and there are many more, should be of concern to Irish researchers and policy makers.

Such research will make it possible to illuminate the place of grandparents as childcarers in Ireland in a changing demographic landscape. It will highlight where there is reciprocity of needs and ultimately inform policy development on childcare and older persons in Ireland in a way that aims to “connect generations rather than separate them” (Huber, 2006, p. 21).

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