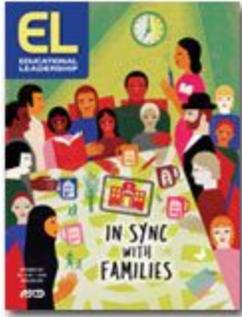




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How Home Visits Transformed My Teaching

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Particularly with immigrant and refugee students, visiting families' homes connects teachers to students' histories, needs, and strengths.

In 2008, I met my first class of 3rd grade newcomers, students whose families had only recently come to the United States. I had 17 students total, all between the ages of 8 and 10, representing 15 countries, more than a dozen languages, and six religions. Some of the learners had never been in school before, many had experienced lapses in formal education, and others had been in private school consistently since kindergarten. Some possessed vast amounts of background knowledge and a beginning handle on English; others required skill building around letter recognition and developing fine motor skills. This was differentiation on the grandest scale.

Nothing could have prepared me for those first experiences as a newcomer teacher. Sure, I had a new English as a second language curriculum in my classroom. I'd taken plenty of courses on teaching ESL, and I'd taught in Title I schools. But I was still gravely underequipped to serve my class of newcomer learners optimally.

To compound matters, I began to feel like an island. I searched but failed to uncover a single collegiate course or professional resource to guide me through this unique scenario. I didn't have just one or two English language learners (ELLs); I was the English-speaking unicorn in the room. No teacher's manual attempted to cover such a spectrum of diversity.

I entered survival mode. That first year, I did the best I could to meet the needs of my students. The following academic year, I chose to stop waiting for answers to fall out of the sky and got busy creating positive change. I created a plan to significantly accelerate my students' academic and social growth, and part of that plan involved a commitment to visit each of my students' homes at least once. I worked home visits into my schedule, spread out over the course of the school year, and put at the top of my list students for whom I had the greatest academic or social concerns.

The Missing Link

For me, teacher home visits proved to be the missing link to achieving positive results in student growth. This investment of time transformed my teaching—and my students' learning—beyond any other measure. Sometimes I realized a family's traditions about learning were already helping a student and saw how I could coordinate instruction with those contributions. Other times, I perceived practices in a family's culture that might have worked out fine for schooling in the heritage country, but presented challenges—usually resolvable ones—within a U.S. school.

Teacher home visits are exceptionally significant in working with diverse student populations. They provide an essential link to students' families, granting insight into learners' lives, language, culture, and needs. Home visits support academic gains and positive social integration for ELLs. These visits are linked to improved academic progress and attendance rates and decreased behavioral incidences.¹ Newcomer families, in particular, are more likely to become invested in school activities after a level of trust in a child's educational practitioners has been established.

Since my first newcomer class, I've continued to work with students from refugee and immigrant families. Home visits remain essential to my work. Let me give a few examples of how this practice has fed the growth of my students.

A Clue in a Case of the Fidgets

With Pralad, it took a family encounter to get to the heart of baffling behavior. Pralad was showing signs of what I presumed to be lingering distress from his transition from Nepal to Colorado. He was extremely restless in class. He struggled to remain seated for any period of time and often shook or twitched nervously.

On my first visit, Pralad answered the door beaming. Barefoot, the thin boy gestured to the heaping pile of shoes near the entrance as an indication of the expected protocol. Moments later, a trio of ladies greeted me, kissing my cheeks and hands. "Namaste, Namaste. You are welcome."

A flurry of activity followed, culminating in me sitting alone at a small dining room table, a tall glass of sweet milk-chai and a heaping plate of traditional food before me. More family members arrived. Now, eight of them stood over me, watching for me to take my first bite. Looking around the small apartment, I inferred that the nourishment before me impacted the family's existing food resources.

Moreover, it appeared that they couldn't be happier about it. The Mishra family wished to share the little they had in a spirit of generosity.

As I ate, the family led me through old photo albums, with an English-speaking uncle translating Pralad's grandmother's stories. The Mishras came from Bhutan, but had fled to Nepal. After relocation, the refugee camp they lived in burned to the ground—*twice*. Here, in a landscape of tarps and tents, Pralad and his sisters were born. Following the second fire, the family made their way into the forest, living in makeshift houses in the trees. After those houses were destroyed in a powerful storm, the first of the Mishras appeared before U.N. officials for their first resettlement interview.

"In Nepal," the father explained in broken English, "people is cruel to us, because we are Bhutanese. And in Bhutan, we cannot live because our home is gone, and the killings happen every day." I inquired as to whether the family, as a whole, wished to eventually return to their original home. "This [America] is our home. Here we feel good. People are nice to us and they help us. Our children is safe and they learn and one day they will maybe go to college."

It occurred to me that this family was eager for someone to know their story. They longed for someone to recognize that the Mishra family of Denver included doctors, lawyers, educators, farmers, and artisans. These individuals hoped to communicate their resiliency; their enormous pride in their heritage culture; and the overwhelming sense of honor they felt in becoming Americans. Finishing the last of the *sambusa*, I was glad to be among those who would come to celebrate the Mishras' story.

Finally, over cups of hot tea, we got to the heart of my visit—my concern for Pralad.

"I'm so glad to have Pralad in our class," I began. "Pralad is kind and respectful. He is also very bright. He has grown from a reading level 4 to an 18 in five months." Then I described Pralad's distressing "symptoms."

A quick exchange of glances followed, from aunt to mother to cousin to grandmother—to Pralad.

Grandmother motioned Pralad to her side. Wordlessly, she patted at his pockets. Finally, her hand emerged with something I would later discover to be evidence of betel nuts.

Betel nuts are a traditional part of Nepali customs. The chestnut-colored betel is actually a berry. Betel nuts have a long history of use as natural remedies and totems throughout the Far East. The thin, quarter-sized cross-sections, white with deep red tunnels, are also chewed. And they are high in arecoline, a nicotine-related psychoactive compound.

In our American schools, we have plenty of "no" signs—the overt red circles with a diagonal slash across them. No fire arms, no smoking, no drugs, and no cell phones. Where was our "no betel nuts" sign? How had our communication with the Mishras (and the many families from Thailand, Malaysia, and nearby countries whose red-stained lips gave away betel traditions) overlooked this potential source of distraction and harm?

In the weeks after that first home visit, Pralad's school-time tremors ceased. He transitioned from the Bosu Ball we had been using as an intervention-based seat to a standard classroom chair. He grew in his ability to make eye contact and maintain friendships and continued his upward academic trajectory.

My relationship with the Mishras continued in the years that followed. In Pralad's most recent email to me, he requested a letter of recommendation for a college scholarship. I won't mention the betel nuts.

Kalid's Homework

Newcomer parents often feel more confident when meeting in their home. Caretakers may be more forthcoming with information that's helpful to a teacher or school—as I found out when I probed why a strong student was weak on homework deadlines.

Kalid was a disciplined student. However, each Friday, when the weekly homework was due, Kalid would insist that he'd "forgotten" it at home. He'd promise to return it the following Monday—and always did.

In visiting Kalid's home, I learned that he'd arrived from Yemen with his mother and grandmother, his only known living family members. His mother worked long hours in hotel service to provide for the family.

When asked about Kalid's homework, his grandmother—with Kalid translating—expressed her frustration in not being able to help her grandson with his homework. She explained that Kalid often got stuck in his work, and she had no choice but to tell him, "I cannot help you." This brought her to tears: "I am a smart woman. I can read in my language. I can understand difficult things in my language. I cannot do these things in English."

Each Friday evening the family went to their mosque for prayers. Afterward, the grandmother would call on English-experienced members of the community to translate unknowns in Kalid's homework and offer academic insight where she couldn't fill in. So the weekly homework packet was completed on Friday night, arriving to our classroom on Monday.

I used what I learned from Kalid's grandmother to develop strategic interventions with his specific academic and socio-emotional needs in mind. I modified Kalid's homework to ensure that it was wholly within his range of efficacy and extended his homework due date to Mondays, no questions asked. Other school staff

equipped the home with a picture dictionary and beginning-level English reading materials. Eventually, we were able to enroll Kalid's grandmother in adult ESL and crafting classes at a local welcome center, where she began learning English and growing a support network for the family.

Kalid graduates from high school this year.

Esther's Study Space

Sometimes it takes quite a few visits, and patience, to resolve a cultural clash that isn't helping learning. Esther, whose family had recently relocated from Tanzania as refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo, was having difficulty concentrating. She often fell asleep in class.

In entering the family's home, I nearly stumbled over Esther's bed, a cot that was adjacent to the entry. Other cots, presumably belonging to other family members, dotted the living room. Esther had her younger sister on her slight nine-year-old hip and was simultaneously helping her mother prepare a meal. Esther explained that two of her older siblings worked in the evening and came home late from work, usually laughing and talking.

It wasn't difficult to determine the root cause of Esther's school-time sleepiness. Her home life was full of activity and responsibility. Her sleeping place didn't allow for sleep.

Working through Esther's situation required multiple visits, with a translator, because our initial attempts to create a shift in sleep and study space for Esther were met with confusion and resistance. The older children in the home contested moving from their bedroom—a place they felt they had earned as a marker of sibling seniority. Creating change required getting the entire family on board.

I first bolstered my background knowledge by talking with my paraprofessional at the time, Rasulo, who was from East Africa. I learned that in East Africa, parents are instructed to avoid engagement with the school. Approaching the teacher for any reason would be a direct insult to his or her capacity to educate children. The family and I talked through parent involvement expectations and discussed American normative values around supporting students' academic efforts at home.

We scheduled one site visit to correspond with the father's only afternoon off, so he could be an informed decision-maker around changes that would impact his family's living space. Gradually, in the months to come, Esther's sleeping area was moved to a bedroom, and the older siblings shifted to the front space of the house. Her parents helped create a homework space in the house. Other family members were asked to acknowledge this area as Esther's quiet working space and to lower their volume when Esther had entered her "office." Finally, the mother created a more reasonable chores list for Esther.

Esther's family members were proud of her school success and eager to help her succeed. They simply needed direction and encouragement within the new social constructs.

At one point, Esther's father opened up about some of the horrors of war and struggles the family had experienced. He explained that the family was still very upset about what they had seen, even as they

worked to begin life again in a new country. "Yes, we get sometimes sad," Esther contributed. "But it's kind of OK now because we feel safe and happy. And my dad says I can go to school now. I couldn't do that at my old home."

Challenging Assumptions

I always feel apprehensive at the possibility of transitioning a student from a sheltered newcomer classroom into mainstream programming in the middle of the school year. The move will have one of two outcomes for the student: he or she will sink or swim. Sometimes a home visit helps inform the decision to transfer. This was true with Samuel, a student from the Chin ethnic group who had lived in both Myanmar (also known as Burma) and Malaysia. Visiting Samuel's family also reminded me how important it is for educators to monitor our assumptions about immigrant students.

Although Samuel had been in America less than six months, he was producing at a level that indicated he was ready to transition to a mainstream classroom. I hoped to confirm that his parents were on board with the change and to prepare Samuel as much as possible for the transfer.

Samuel's home was sparsely furnished and meticulously organized. Although the family lived in the same government subsidized housing as many of our other newcomers, the home felt elegant and sophisticated; family members were smartly dressed. Samuel's mother invited me toward a platter of fresh fruit.

The boys' father expressed gratitude that his sons were able to attend school. "That is the only thing we want. That is the reason we are here."

I learned that both of Samuel's parents were highly educated, with multiple degrees between them. His mother was a teacher at a university in Malaysia. His father worked as an economist. None of their degrees transferred to the new setting. In Denver, his mother worked at a dry cleaner; his father at a local restaurant. Both Samuel and his brother had experienced gaps in education. In Myanmar, their region had long been under attack, and schools had closed months before the family evacuated. In Malaysia, private school was the only option. The children only attended classes during the months the family had enough funds to pay the tuition.

Yet Samuel's parents had remained disciplined in teaching the children at home. Both boys were literate in their first language and had a collection of English nouns even before they'd landed in America. The parents required the boys to do math "homework" each school day—regardless of whether or not there was school to attend. This explained why Samuel was the only student in my class that year to master multiplication and division.

Samuel's mother noted that even as a young child, Samuel had always been curious, eager to learn, and an avid reader. Before we'd finished our conversation, I knew he would swim.

This particular site visit was key for me in that it permanently altered unacknowledged biases I'd held about my students' backgrounds and home lives. Samuel is one of many refugee and immigrant students to come

from highly educated, supportive, and sometimes affluent homes. Just as no two children are the same, no two families—even from the same country or culture—are identical.

Family Visits, Family Strengths

One reality is reinforced for me on every home visit: Culturally and linguistically diverse families have much to offer, and when we make a way for them to do so, family members share their valuable funds of knowledge—the collective database of any individual's skills and understandings gained through life experience, education, and practical application.² When practitioners discover the depths of parents' knowledge, they can better prescribe home-learning plans that empower families to actively participate in students' school lives.

Going to a student's home gives teachers an opportunity to engage with students and their families in ways that illuminate how these particular individuals can best contribute to learning and even—as with Esther's family—illuminate *why* it's ideal for a family to connect with teachers and learn school requirements. In achieving this aim, there truly is no place like home.

Know Before You Go

These tips will make any family visit more productive.

Contact families in advance, through a translator if necessary, to establish a date and time for a visit.

Research the family home's location. Plan travel in advance. Be open to meeting family members at the school or in locations outside the home, and consider the family's transportation options when choosing an alternative meeting place.

Alert your administration to scheduled home visits.

It's often best—and in some districts required—to visit a family's home with a colleague.

Consider cultural preferences that might affect your visit. For example, is it appropriate in this culture for a man to shake hands with female family members? Are there stipulations around photography?

Make a point to recall and use names of family members.

Prepare talking points ahead of time, such as: What kinds of things does the family like to do together? Which family members now live in America? What questions does the family have

about school in America? About life in the new setting? How can the school best help the child with his or her learning?

Relax! Home visits are meant to be enjoyable. In most cases, families will be thrilled to have you as a guest.

Endnotes

¹ Epstein, L., & Sheldon, S. B. (2002). Present and accounted for: Improving student attendance through family and community involvement. *Journal of Educational Research*, 95(5), 308–318.

² Moll, L. C., Amanti, C., Neff, D., & Gonzalez, N. (1992). Funds of knowledge for teaching: Using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms. *Theory into Practice*, 31(2), 132–141.

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