Paying Them a Visit: Conducting Home Visits with English Learners and Their Families

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Abstract

As the U.S. student population becomes more diverse, it becomes more important for K-12 teachers to learn about and connect with their students. Making these connections can be hindered by cultural and linguistic differences, not only between teachers and students but also the students’ families. In this paper we argue that conducting home visits can strengthen relationships and increase mutual understanding between teachers, students, and students’ families. We discuss the rationale behind visits, the benefits to various stakeholders, and the challenges of conducting home visits. We close by offering before-, during-, and after-visit suggestions. Although home visits often require a great deal of time and effort up front, we believe that the long-term benefits prove them to be a worthwhile investment.

As the linguistic and cultural diversity of the US population continues to increase, it is more vital than ever for K-12 teachers to establish strong relationships with their students and their students’ families as a means to help students’ academic development. This is particularly the case with English Learners (ELs), whose rich linguistic and cultural backgrounds may go unnoticed or underutilized by teachers who do not foster those relationships. Building relationships can be particularly challenging, however, as misunderstandings can occur between ELs, their families, and the teachers. In the worst case, misunderstandings may lead teachers to draw inaccurate conclusions and thus develop a negative impression of ELs and their families. This can then have a long-lasting and detrimental impact on many components of the ELs’ educational experiences (Valdés, 1996).

Misunderstandings or miscommunications between teachers and families can come from a variety of sources. Some scholars have suggested that teachers and families can view parental involvement
differently, resulting in teachers’ beliefs that parents are unconcerned about their children’s education if the parents do not participate in ways that conform to specific norms of behavior (Lareau, 2011; Lawson, 2003; Valdés, 1996). Other sources of confusion and tension can stem from when teachers’ and parents’ beliefs differ on the nature of education and how parents should support efforts to educate their children (Valdés, 1996). Teachers may struggle to understand competing priorities in the lives of ELs and their families as the teachers’ focus is mainly on students’ academic development, while the parents’ focus goes beyond the realm of education (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). These misunderstandings can lead teachers to develop deficit views of parents’ behaviors, wherein they feel that the home lives of the students are lacking and need to be compensated for by the schools. This thinking can, in turn, lead teachers to disregard the families’ strengths, lived realities, and community-centered stories (Lawson, 2003).

For these reasons, we promote the virtues of visiting ELs and their families in their homes. Home visits, as the term implies, typically entail a teacher visiting the home of a student, although a neutral location such as a public park or place of worship can also be used. Prior to the visit, teachers arrange a time to meet the ELs and their families. In addition to the academic- or school-related information teachers plan to discuss, teachers may bring a gift (e.g., a notebook for the student) or an icebreaker (e.g., family photos to share). Home visits may also involve the teacher reflecting on the visit afterwards; for instance, teachers can journal or keep records of an EL’s progress based on the visit (Keilty, 2008). The home visit is a way to bridge divides of misunderstanding, to show concern, and to make connections in ways that are difficult to accomplish in school settings.

In the next section of this paper, we will address the benefits of home visits to all parties involved: teachers, ELs, and their families. Then we will discuss the challenges of conducting home visits. Finally, we will offer a number of tips and suggestions for teachers as they prepare to do a visit.

**Benefits of Home Visits**
Home visits can benefit many different stakeholders, including the teachers conducting the visits, the students, and their families. These benefits extend to the larger school and home communities. In this section, we describe these benefits in terms of the stakeholder groups in the context of their communities.

**Benefits to Teachers**

Home visits made me even more aware of the need to provide opportunities for students to learn about each other’s lives in the classroom. Although I wanted to honor students’ affinity groups, I also wanted the classroom to prompt students to step outside of social comfort zones. I became more intentional about student grouping: assigning partners, groups, and reasons for students to interact more often than I had in the past. (Schlessman, 2013, p. 21)

This quote illustrates not just the challenges that teachers face with including ELs in their content-heavy classes, but also the rewards that they may experience personally and professionally when they conduct a home visit. As stated above, teachers may have limited knowledge of their ELs’ linguistic, academic, and cultural backgrounds. To this end, a home visit can transform teaching perspectives by inviting teachers to “ask and wonder instead of label and assume” (Schlessman, 2013, p. 19). For instance, teachers might witness their ELs moving easily within a close-knit community of loved ones who care for them. In other circumstances, they might see situations where students’ needs are not being met or where there might not be sufficient resources to support the students’ education. In both cases, the teachers will develop empathy for their students’ lives, which can then positively affect their approaches and strategies in teaching the ELs (Stetson, Stetson, Sinclair, & Nix, 2012). As teachers increase their awareness, relationships with ELs may improve, which ultimately can effect positive change in ELs’ academic motivations.

Bradley and Schalk (2013) noted that a successful home visit can pay many dividends as it provides teachers “insights into the home lives, demeanors, interests, and hobbies of the children” (p. 72). Further, the home visit helps to establish rapport with parents or guardians, and it aids teachers in encouraging normally reluctant parents to become more involved in their children’s education (Stetson,
Stetson, Sinclair, & Nix, 2012). In sum, a well-timed, successful home visit will benefit teachers, but may ultimately prove valuable to other stakeholders as well.

**Benefits to Students**

Schlessman (2013) tells the story of visiting the home of one of her ELs, a 4th grade student named Juan, who is a fluent speaker of Spanish and Trique, an indigenous language spoken in the Oaxaca region of Mexico.

By occasionally asking, ‘How do you say that in Trique?’ I offered Juan the power that comes with being an expert, being a teacher. I was reminding him that he was smart, that he was lucky, that he could learn, that indigenous languages – and the people who speak them – are of great value. And I was reminding myself how little I really knew (Schlessman, 2013, p. 21).

Through exchanges such as this one, the tables are turned as the EL is in a more comfortable and familiar environment, and is thus able – perhaps unknowingly – to communicate to the teacher what everyday life at school is like for an EL. Although there is a paucity of studies involving ELs and home visits, findings have been promising. In Epstein and Sheldon’s (2002) study, for instance, it was discovered that when schools reached out to EL families and conducted home visits, the number of students who were chronically absent decreased. Studies in other contexts support this finding as well, emphasizing the positive effects of seeing students outside of the classroom (Bradley & Schalk, 2013).

**Benefits to Families**

A third beneficiary of home visits are the ELs’ families. The home plays an important role in the teacher-family interaction during home visits, providing a safe haven for ELs and their families that the in-school visit cannot furnish. Teacher-family interactions at both school and home may serve similar purposes, but the two environments are markedly different. As Schlessman (2013) notes, “School-based family interactions are filled with agendas, information, and activities” (p. 20). Although a home visit provides teachers with the opportunity to convey important information to the families of ELs, other positive interactions between the teacher and the families can also take place. A home visit can positively
affect outcomes unrelated to agendas and academics, such as parents simply becoming more familiar with their child’s teacher (Bradley & Schalk, 2013). The teacher-family interactions that occur during a home visit take place in an environment that is more comfortable for and familiar to ELs and their families, as well as more convenient, than in-school meetings. Consequently, important issues are more likely to arise in conversation.

The ultimate benefit to families in home visits relates to increasing parental involvement in school, which has been shown across a variety of contexts to be very important to students’ achievement (Delgado-Gaitán, 2004). Other benefits that might reveal themselves over time include encouraging ELs’ educational aspirations, their motivation to increase their independence, and the length of time they stay in school (Matuszny, Banda, & Coleman, 2007).

Challenges of Home Visits
The benefits described above provide ample reason to conduct home visits with students and their families. Although many teachers recognize the benefits and have expressed a desire to do home visits, they remain a relatively underutilized practice. In this section we discuss some of the challenges in conducting home visits so that teachers can better prepare for them, focusing on the challenges brought about by linguistic and cultural differences.

Linguistic Differences
A perennial challenge to doing home visits with EL families is the language barrier. There is a strong likelihood that the parents of ELs will not be confident in communicating in English and that the teachers will not speak the non-English language that is spoken in the home. For this challenge, we have several suggestions.

Our first suggestion is that the teachers explore whether or not they have enough command of a common language to navigate linguistic differences. In our experience, when teachers try to conduct home visits, they are most effective at communication when they simply do their best with what they already know. Above all, we wish to emphasize that teachers need not feel that proficiency in the home
language is a requirement for a successful home visit; they are probably much more capable of communicating than they might think. If a language barrier hinders communication, remember that the teacher’s presence on the family’s doorstep, or in their home, already speaks volumes.

A second suggestion is to find an adult interpreter to accompany the teacher to the home. This individual might be an aide in the school, an official school interpreter, a friend of the teacher, or another community member who is trusted by the family.

A third suggestion is also a challenge in and of itself: to use the EL as an ad hoc interpreter, also called a language broker (Love & Buriel, 2007). Because the children of EL families often have greater English proficiency than their parents, the ELs are often used as interpreters “to compensate for the limited (or nonexistent) accommodations institutions make for diverse populations” (Katz, 2014, p. 195). Although using ELs as interpreters with their own parents has been found to have both positive and negative effects (Love & Buriel, 2007), the practice remains generally discouraged. First, if the students themselves do the interpreting, they must relay information about their performance in school. The children may be asked to deliver unwelcome information about their behavior, their grades, or about sensitive topics at home, and they may feel motivated to minimize, omit, or falsify bad news. Second, asking the children to understand, process, and accurately relay sets of information that involve higher-order thinking may exceed their maturity and/or linguistic skill in both languages. Because of these concerns, we recommend following the lead of the head of the household, exercising diplomacy in the questions teachers ask, and following the guiding principle that the teacher is there to learn and observe.

Cultural Differences

Where linguistic differences may seem straightforward when planning a home visit, cultural differences can be more unknown or ambiguous, particularly regarding aspects of culture relating to schooling. This can be a challenge for all stakeholders in home visits. Teachers rarely know ahead of time about the family’s customs and cultural values, their literacy practices, or the nature and quality of the adult family members’ educational experiences. Parents and adult family members may have very little
knowledge of the U.S. educational system, leading to easy misunderstandings about the purpose of a home visit (Valdés, 1996).

Parental roles in family, community, and schools vary widely across cultures, which can have a direct influence on the success of a home visit. For instance, in her study of 10 Mexican immigrant families, Valdés (1996) found that success was achieved through family ties and networks, and every member of a family was expected to contribute to the success of the family as a whole. Parents did not see themselves as adjunct teachers who were responsible to extend the teaching outside of school, especially when faced with many competing demands for their energy that would benefit the whole family, not just the one child. Also, the parents often did not accept the teacher’s authority to dictate what happened in their homes (Valdés, 1996). Indeed, it is not uncommon for adults in immigrant and refugee families to have histories of interrupted education or to have attained lesser educational levels than their children now have. Some family members may therefore seek to conceal the limits of their own education (Valdés, 1996). All of these cultural elements, if not taken into account when planning and conducting a home visit, can result in major problems.

Yet, although these elements can be challenges to conducting successful home visits, if teachers are aware of some of the cultural differences, they can use the home visit as an opportunity to learn. Home visits can help to increase teachers’ awareness of the cultural points of view in the families of the students that they visit. Communicating face-to-face is valued in many cultures, and there is less risk of misunderstanding than with a written message since there is an opportunity to ask questions and check for understanding for both the teacher and the family members. By communicating in person, the teacher has the opportunity to confirm and discuss messages. For instance, Valdés (1996) found that when some immigrant parents received notes from teachers requesting they contact them or visit the school, the parents viewed the letters as invitations that they could turn down. Home visits, then, can help ensure that the teacher can deliver an intended message or document.
Tips & Suggestions

The challenges described above may be some of the very things that make the visits worth doing; visits can be an effective way of investing in one’s students and of working toward mutual understanding. Below, we offer the following suggestions on how to set up and carry out home visits, grouped in categories of Before, During, and After the Visit. We recommend investing this time in one’s students and in their support groups as it has potential to pay dividends in both the near and distant future.

Before the Visit

- Be clear that receiving a visit is optional. If families refuse, there will be no penalty or shame for them or for the student.
- Recognize that someone other than the child’s biological parent may be the cultural parent, such as the student’s grandmother or aunt.
- Visit early in the year. By doing so, teachers may reap the rewards of an informational and cultural advantage all year long. Those benefits may extend years into the future, too, if a student’s younger sibling also is placed in a teacher’s class.
- Plan last-minute logistics, such as confirming with the EL and the parent the day of the visit, bringing the addresses with you, and making arrangements with a trusted adult or interpreter to go with you if desired.
- Consider bringing an icebreaker that will give people something to talk about such as family photographs. Also, consider bringing an inexpensive gift.
- Use time-saving techniques: arrange several visits that are geographically close to each other, travel outside of rush hour, pay attention to weather predictions.

During the Visit

- Remember that the teacher’s purpose is to observe, listen, and learn. Discuss school-related issues, and encourage parents (or other heads of household) to participate. Ask questions. For a list of non-intrusive questions, see Ginsberg (2007, p. 58).
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- Follow the lead of the head of household. There may be times when the teacher is unsure what is happening or feels unsure about what to do, but following the lead of the head of household can address many issues.
- Accept food if offered, unless there are significant dietary restrictions.

After the Visit

- Write down or audio-record observations, ongoing concerns, and new insights as soon as possible after the visit. This may be considered akin to a medical chart that helps track the history of the student and the visits. It can also serve as the start of a log that tracks the student’s development over time.
- Check in with the student again, making a personal connection in the classroom that ties back to the home visit. Ask about family members, pets, or home projects.

Conclusion

Teachers should think of home visits as an investment that families will recognize and students will appreciate. Home visits help teachers to discard misunderstandings about or miscommunications with ELs and their families. The visits may also raise their awareness of the rich cultural and linguistic diversity of ELs. Through building relationships, teachers can utilize these assets in the classroom to benefit everyone. This is why we stress that teachers are paying them a visit: teachers pay their time forward, and the investment in the relationship with their students and families pays off down the road.
References


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