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Conducting Successful Home Visits in Multicultural Communities

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Abstract

The connection between home and school is vital in the success of all students; however, this connection faces a significant challenge when educators and caregivers do not share a common language or culture. With the increase of immigrant children in schools today, educators cannot assume that all parents will understand the U.S. school system and its expectations. One means of achieving purposeful dialogue between home and school is through home visits. Drawing on the professional literature and personal experiences of in-service educators, this article describes the process for conducting successful home visits in multicultural communities. It also discusses alternative ways of working with those families who do not wish to have school personnel come to their homes. The ideas presented are applicable to the teacher as well as the teacher educator who wishes to address and apply this important form of communication between educators and non-native English speaking families.

Home visits, or visits by educators to the residences of their students, have been a part of the American educational situation for almost as long as schools have existed in the United States (Cutler, 2000). Home visits are an idea that all teaching professionals (i.e., teachers, administrators, counselors, and educational support staff) can employ to help foster students' success. The popularity of these visits tends to fluctuate in accordance with the dominant school of thought in education. With the busy lifestyle of many people today, school personnel are learning that not all caregivers are able to come to schools for meetings. Similarly, with the increased influx of immigrant children to the schools, many caregivers, although they were very successful in their native schools, may neither understand the American school system with all its complexities nor feel confident enough in their English communication skills to reach out to the school personnel (Colombo, 2006; Delgado-Gaitán, 1990; Freeman & Freeman, 2001). With increasing frequency, schools are finding that willing caregivers need to be shown how to work with the school system. Frequently, they simply need to be approached first to be assured of their welcome (Borba, 2009). Districts that have reached out through home visits have almost always found success in promoting academic achievement and social development of students (Delisio, 2010; Freeman & Freeman, 2001; Steele-Carlin, 2010; "There's No Place Like Home…visits," 2009).

Unfortunately, much of the literature on this topic deals with visits to English speaking homes. Although this background supplies a solid foundation, some differences exist when visiting non-native English speaking homes. In order to lessen the gap between the differences contained in the majority of the literature, the author investigated the narratives of in-service teachers who conduct home visits on a regular

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basis in both Midwestern and Western U.S. school districts. The data sources consist of interviews, email correspondence, and participants' journals. Using grounded theory, common themes were identified in these various data sources, which suggested guidelines to extend the existing literature and to structure effective visits to English learners' (ELs) homes (Merriam, 1998).

Background

School-Home Relations

Establishing firm school-home relations is vital to working with all students and their families, but presents some challenges for ELs (Borba, 2009). Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (2001) discuss how many immigrant families come to the U.S. because they feel that their children will benefit from educational opportunities here, but are often at a loss for how to navigate the educational system which may differ significantly from the one in their homeland. Through improved school-home relations, they can be shown how to work within that system to improve student learning through effective two-way communication (Delgado-Gaitán, 1990).

Two Models of Interaction

Epstein (1995) developed a model for interaction between schools and homes that supports the establishment of strong communication pathways. First, partnerships between home and schools tend to decrease across grades *unless* schools develop and implement appropriate partnership practices at each grade level. Second, affluent communities have more family involvement on average, *unless* schools in distressed communities work to build positive relationships with students' families. Third, schools in distressed communities tend to make more contact with families about problematic behavior, *unless* a balanced partnership program that includes contacts about the positive accomplishments of students is established. Fourth, fathers, parents who are single, who are employed outside the home, or who live far from the school tend to be less involved at the schools, *unless* the school organizes opportunities for families to volunteer at various times and places to support the school and children (Epstein, 1995, p. 703, emphasis in original). It is evident that stakeholder interaction, intervention or both are vital to the success of this model.

Likewise, Cortés (1986) developed a model of school-community interactions. Cortés' Contextual Interaction Model is a two-way interactive representation and demonstrates how the school context is subsumed within the larger societal context, but still influences it. This model is directly applicable to the EL community and school relations. In the larger societal context, Cortés has included constructs such as family, culture, and ethnicity. In the school context, the model includes ideas like student language proficiency and parent involvement. These two areas influence each other when representatives from each area interact with the other. In other words, family

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members can play a role in the workings of the school when they interact with school personnel.

Why Home Visits?

As stated above, home visits can be a significant resource in improving student academic and social achievement. Research has shown that entering the homes of EL families for educational purposes can be effective. Power (1999) suggested that, although home visits are time consuming, in homes where English is the second language, a visit can provide more information than any other method (p. 24). Moll, Amanti, Neff, and González (2005) reported that they gained a "more sophisticated understanding" (p. 79) of their students and the students' life experiences when visiting their homes.

In a longitudinal study of Latino families, Valdés (1996) found that schools did not understand EL families. She stated,

> Schools expected a 'standard' family, a family whose members were educated, who were familiar with how schools worked and who saw their role as complementing the teacher's in developing children's academic abilities. It did not occur to school personnel that parents might not know the appropriate ways to communicate with the teachers… (p. 167).

By entering the homes of the Spanish speaking families in her study, Valdés was able to come to a greater understanding of the families and, at the same time, provide caregivers with crucial information about their children's schooling. She found that support from home increased as she demonstrated to families that she cared and was willing to build relationships with them. Work done by Fairbairn and Jones-Vo (2010) echoed this finding.

Structure of Home Visits

Pre-visit Preparations

The successful home visit begins long before the educators make initial contact. Education professionals must consider ideas such as safety factors and effective communication skills in terms of non-native English speakers (Delisio, 2010; Meyer & Mann, 2006).

Cultural considerations. Considerations towards culture also need to be addressed sufficiently. For instance, Luis López, director of School and Community in Ogden Partnering for Excellence (SCOPE) stated that it is important for non-Latino educators to realize that not every Spanish speaking family is from Mexico (personal communication, February 19, 2010). He pointed out further that this type of assumption is very offensive to families from other Central and South American countries. To

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counter this supposition, educators need exposure to a variety of cultural concepts such as language, gestures, food, sports and other games to help with effective communication. Further, Fairbairn and Jones-Vo (2010) pointed out that many cultural gaffs can be avoided simply through careful observation, such as removing shoes upon entering a home, which is common among many Asian cultures, as well as others.

Establishing a purpose. Ideally, all students will be visited, not just those who are experiencing academic or behavioral challenges. Regardless, educators must set a goal for the visit beforehand. The purpose of an initial visit is simply to meet the family. Berger (1987) suggested that teachers may begin home contact with a "Block Walk," an activity in which teachers map out an area where students live and make informal visits to those caregivers who are home (pp. 111-112). Laurie V., an elementary teacher in the West, reported in her weekly journal that she often visits the homes of her future students before school begins. Note that pseudonyms are used throughout. Her main objective is simply to meet her students and their caregivers, but she also brings items like a school calendar, vital contact information, and a personal letter of welcome. She also gives students a book written in either English or their native language, as reported on school documents, being careful to adjust as needed.

Familial matters. Further, it is crucial at this early juncture to discover who the caregivers are. Even in EL families, the parents may not be raising the child. Learning the names of the caregivers and their relationship to the student will help the caregivers feel validated ("There's No Place Like Home…Visits," 2009). If the student is living in a multi-generational home setting, the educator will need to ascertain if the grandparents or other relatives will take part in the visit, as the extended family members can be valuable allies in the education of the child.

As mentioned above, safety concerns must be addressed in all home visits. Most importantly, an educator must never visit a home alone. Some homes of students are in dangerous parts of the community and, of necessity, must be avoided. These concerns do not necessarily rule out the possibility of a home visit, however. Alternative ways of conducting home visits will be discussed later.

Language issues. Education professionals who do not speak the student's native language need to arrange for a qualified translator. District offices often supply translators, but universities, churches, and local community groups may also have qualified second language speakers. It is important to keep in mind that utilizing students as translators is far from ideal. First and foremost, interpreting for adults is not their job. Likewise, the students may experience a "conflict of interest." In other words, they may tell either the teachers or their caregivers information that is inaccurate to keep from being punished. Finally, they may not possess the needed linguistic skills. A qualified translator must be well versed in the language of education so that important points can be made clear to the family (Harklau, 2009). If using a translator, educators need to look at the family member with whom they are speaking at any given point in

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the visit and not at the translator. This may be awkward at first and need to be practiced before entering the home.

Making appointments. When the above arrangements have been carefully made, educators need to contact the caregivers, using a variety of methods, such as a phone call, a letter, or communication through the Internet, if available to the family. Scheduling of appointments must be made at least a week in advance and made as convenient for the family as possible. The educator making the appointment should set a time limit, generally between 30 and 60 minutes, for the visit based on what needs to be accomplished, When scheduling the appointment, the educator should inform the caregivers of the specific goal for the visit.

During-visit Procedures

Beginning the visit. For a successful visit, educators need to be certain to have all necessary paperwork, documents or other items, like a small gift or token for some cultures, before leaving the school. Upon arrival at the home, the educator in charge of the visit can introduce himself or herself and others in the visiting group, explaining their relationship to the student and describing the function of each member, as caregivers will want to know why each person is there. Next, the educators confirm the names and relationships of caregivers that had been ascertained before the visit. If anyone new is introduced, the visiting group determines their relationship to the student as well. Some cultures will place value on extended family members being included in the success of the child.

Some cultures require that food be provided when guests are in the home. The amount and type of food will vary greatly depending upon the culture and the economic circumstances of the family. Educators need to try a little of each offering in order to show respect to the family. Of course, expressing gratitude is always appropriate.

After introductions, the visitors can participate in some small talk. Most cultures view this informal time as a way to become acquainted with guests to begin to build relationships. Next, a work environment that is appropriately comfortable should be free from distractions (e.g., televisions, computers, and children not participating in the visit). Fairbairn and Jones-Vo (2010) suggested following the host's lead in this manner to avoid cultural misunderstanding. However, after acknowledging the caregiver's suggestion, the educators may need to insist on a private area if serious matters are to be discussed. If using a translator, the work environment should be set up where the educators and the translator can look at the caregivers directly while speaking.

Focus on the student. After the work environment has been determined and all are comfortable, educators should reiterate the reason for the visit. As always, the education professionals should praise the child. Caregivers of all cultures enjoy hearing positive comments about their child. This is also an opportunity to find out more about the student. Educators can ask questions that are related to the visit or general

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inquiries, such as “Tell me about your child” or “Tell me about your dreams for your child.” Likewise, caregivers can ask questions about their student as well. They may not be aware of the child’s behavioral or educational expectations at school in the U.S.; this is a good time for them to learn about such matters.

Educators can carefully observe any family interactions in a non-judgmental manner. During a face-to-face interview, William S., an elementary educator in a Midwestern school district, related his experience with this, “I like seeing what the kids do with their free time. Most importantly, I watch how the student interacts with his or her family. I pay attention to similarities and differences between the student’s interactional behaviors at home and at school.” His experience is supported by work done by Allen and Tracy (2004), who likewise pointed out that information gathered through observation during a visit in the natural environment can provide a wealth of understanding for educators. The educator must be aware of any interactions that may be influenced by the native culture of the family. If some actions seem unique or odd, a mental note should be taken followed by consultation with a trusted cultural broker from the community.

Visitors must be careful of taking written notes early on, so that the family does not feel that the educators are evaluating them. Paper for such notes should appear only after everyone feels comfortable. Educators need to explain the purpose for the note-taking.

Focus on the caregivers. In building positive relationships with the caregivers, educators can try to discover their interests and hobbies. Many immigrant caregivers are well educated and are more than willing to share their knowledge and talents if given the opportunity (Fairbairn & Jones-Vo, 2010; Ladky & Peterson, 2008). Some immigrants may feel reluctant to help at the school since they do not feel that their English skills are strong, but if the caregiver has a musical talent, for instance, he or she can be invited to play along with the children as they sing during a concert or in class.

Michelle F., a middle school English as a second language (ESL) teacher in the Midwest, reported in an email correspondence that she uses a variety of extracurricular activities to involve caregivers. One of the highlights of the school year is a concert that highlights the rich multicultural backgrounds of her students, featuring the talents of both students and caregivers. She also encourages them to share these talents more informally in her classes as often as the occasion arises. By doing this, she has found that the caregivers see how the school operates, which makes them feel more comfortable and often leads to further interactions.

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Concluding the visit. As the end of the visit nears, the visiting educator needs to summarize what has been accomplished at the meeting, and to review the decisions that have been made so that everyone is in agreement. If information gleaned from the home visit is to be shared with others, the educator should inform the caregivers that it will be done so in a discrete and appropriate manner.

The end of the visit is a good time to tell caregivers about upcoming events at the school or in the community. They can be reassured that they are welcome to participate in any and all activities that are taking place at the school, especially those that involve their children.

Next, if necessary, educators can discuss a follow-up visit. In the event that the business of the present home visit cannot be accomplished in the time promised, a subsequent visit may need to be scheduled so that the caregivers do not feel that their time is being infringed upon. Megan G., an elementary ESL teacher, relates during an interview an incident when she visited an EL home and discovered that the mother had kept every document and flyer that the school had sent home up to that point in the school year. The mother had not understood what needed to be done with the papers and was relieved that she now had someone to help her. The sheer number of papers required that Megan return again to sort through, fill out, and return the vital documents. Not all home visits will necessitate a follow-up, but educators must be sensitive to the needs of the caregivers. Upon leaving, the visiting educators can assure the caregivers they are accessible by providing contact information, as well as that of the school and any other personnel as appropriate.

Post-visit Procedures

Document the visit. After visiting the home, educators need to document carefully what was accomplished during the visit in order to provide an accurate record of what occurred at the home of the student. Such documentation can be referenced later as needed, for instance, for a subsequent visit or during a meeting between a counselor and teacher. Those who conducted the visit should supply as much detail as possible in recording the purpose of the home visit, and what was achieved and discussed. If the home visit was a simple visit at the beginning of the school year to introduce the educator and to tell about the upcoming academic calendar, little may be recorded. On the other hand, if the home visit was directed towards discussing or resolving a serious behavioral or academic issue, more detail will be required in the post-visit documentation.

Report the findings. As appropriate, the visiting team reports findings to other educators, so that all can evaluate what took place at the visit. Together they can determine what steps need to be taken next. For instance, the student's education plan may need to be adjusted based on the newly obtained data. Likewise, caregivers should be given documents pertaining to the visits as needed, recognizing that such documents may need to be translated. The school personnel need to follow through

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with goals or plans that were made at the home visit. If the caregivers and the educators agreed on a plan of action or chose to work on a project, such as volunteering, the team should begin working toward those goals as soon as scheduling allows.

Further planning. Finally, if a subsequent visit was deemed necessary, educators can begin planning it by reviewing what happened during the previous meeting. They should examine what was accomplished and decided upon and begin working towards establishing goals and planning for the next visit. Writing down ideas for the following meeting while information from the past meeting is fresh will allow educators to make the home visits more effective.

Alternatives to Home Visits

Not all caregivers will feel comfortable having educators come into their home. Likewise, not all educators will be comfortable entering certain areas that the school serves. However, educators must bear in mind that a neighborhood does not need to "look dangerous" to be unsafe. In other words, dangerous elements of society can be found in any neighborhood. During these and similar instances that make a visit to the home impractical, another type of contact can be made. Although these alternatives are not the ideal, they can serve to provide vital contact. Similar to regular home visits, educators need to be sure to plan carefully, have a set purpose for the contact, and use them to build relationships.

Neutral Location

One option is to find a neutral location for the home visit, like a church, library, civic center or other similar public building, which can provide the privacy needed for the visit. Although the educators will not necessarily be able to observe the student interact with his or her family, both parties may feel safe and secure at the neutral site, where a meaningful dialogue can occur. However, cultural considerations towards the family may still play a vital role even if the visit is away from their home.

Phone Calls

Another viable option is to make a phone call to the home. The telephone is a simple piece of technology that is generally present in the home, but overlooked by educators (Longfellow, 2008). However, Longfellow emphasized that educators need to avoid using their personal cell or home phones to contact families to protect their personal privacy. Educators need to give special consideration to the call home, bearing in mind individual circumstances. The telephone may be daunting to an individual who does not feel comfortable with their English skills, as speaking on the telephone provides no non-verbal helps, like gestures and facial expressions (Delgado-Gaitán, 2004). Translators may help, but, if a translator is needed for a call home, the educator may need to arrange for a speakerphone or some other type of multiple-line communication. Educators speaking on a phone also does not allow one to see the

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caregivers and their reactions to small talk or inquiries. Finally, it is vital that the educator persist until contact is made with the caregivers. A message left on an answering machine, in a voice mail, or with another person may not reach the caregivers. Educators must keep accurate records of attempts to contact caregivers with details of what was discussed during the conversation.

Throughout my career, I have used this type of communication frequently and found it to be very successful. At the beginning, I felt somewhat intimidated due to lack of experience, but I established effective communication routines and was further encouraged by the generally positive results. Caregivers expressed gratitude that I was willing to take the time to contact them. At the same time, school administrators appreciated the work that I was doing to make initial connections with these families, which they found to be helpful when further contacts were made later either by them or other education professionals.

Conclusion

Home visits can be effective tools in building meaningful school-home relationships of trust with immigrant families (Borba, 2009; Delisio, 2010). Although the population of EL families has increased dramatically in many areas of the country (Harklau, 2009; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001), educational professionals have not always been able to keep up with the changing dynamic and understand this growing segment of the population (Valdés, 1996). Connecting to these families, if done correctly by planning thoroughly and showing respect for their cultures and values, home visits provide significant information for the education of the child, both for the school personnel and the family. Since these EL families may not be familiar with the U.S. school system, reaching out to them can prove to be a significant move in the right direction.

Home visits are not a magical solution for every problem. There are many challenges surrounding home visits. On the side of the schools, they take time, which is at a premium for educators. On the side of the families, home visits can be challenging for various reasons. Besides the incidences that have been discussed above, López pointed out that some of the families that he approached were skeptical due to their immigration status (personal communication, February 19, 2010). Some immigrants with emergent language skills may fear that there is a chance that they are not properly documented to be in the country. Similarly, some families are indeed undocumented. Both of these situations can cause fear and anxiety, which lead to a lack of willingness to communicate with the schools.

With understanding on the part of both parties, home visits need to become a regularly used strategy in connecting with the growing population of EL families in the U.S. school system. Research has shown that teachers who make regular home visits feel that it is well worth the time and emotional effort due to the significant payoffs in the classroom (Gorter-Reu & Anderson, 1998; Johnston & Mermin, 1994). These benefits

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can provide a significant source of understanding and connection between the school and the home and lead to greater student achievement, both in the classroom and at home.

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