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ARTICLES

HOME VISITS: A WAY OF CONNECTING WITH CULTURALLY AND LINGUISTICALLY DIVERSE FAMILIES

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For today's young diverse children, the home environment plays a critical role in their cultural and linguistic development. Every family, including both native-born or newcomers to the country, has varying cultural and linguistic backgrounds and holds unique experiences, values, and beliefs towards early learning and family interactions. Home visits are an important way for understanding and connecting with culturally and linguistically diverse families. Home visits can be a vehicle for educators to learn about family households and to expand their own knowledge of their students' lives and cultural backgrounds (Ginsberg, 2007; Sanders, 2008).



For many mainstream educators, working with families whose home language is not English can provide an exceptional challenge: they have to effectively teach students who have diverse and largely opaque literacy practices that might differ from the mainstream culture. The classroom teacher will often turn to the English Language Learner (ELL) teacher for instructional advice to gain a better understanding of the students/families. Visiting homes is an effective way for the ELL teacher to learn more about the families and their cultures. This information can be shared with other faculty and staff members to help them reach out to families. Because of this, knowledge about conducting home visits should be part of English Language Teaching (ELT) training programs.

It is essential that we begin to learn about the families' lives so that meaningful connections between everyday and school learning can occur. Families can share their personal perspectives and their funds of knowledge that they bring to any learning situation. Moll, Armanti, Neff, and Gonzalez (1992) describe *funds of knowledge* as the rich and untapped intellectual resources that students, particularly those who are culturally or linguistically diverse, bring to school or any situation. This unique information gained during a home visit by the ELL teacher can be recognized and then used to extend, enrich, and infuse meaning into the school-classroom environment and curriculum for the students.

Considerations for Conducting Home Visits

When conducting a home visit where the culture environment is different than one's own, the ELL educator will want to reflect on his/her own cultural heritage and established knowledge base. This allows the person to realize what influences his/her own beliefs and if there is a match or mismatch with cultural and linguistically diverse families. If there is a mismatch, this mismatch is often interpreted through the lens of a deficiency and is not realized as an inherent strength of the family (Heath, 1983; Compton-Lilly, Rogers & Lewis, 2012). Home visits allow people to challenge their own assumptions and learn from others. By examining one's own cultural background, an educator can realize how a student's culture and language can influence his/her interactions and how s/he approaches learning situations (NAYEC, 2009).

Home visits can help to establish and build relationships between families and educators (Bradley & Schalk, 2013). When interacting with the parents, it is important to consider that most culturally and linguistically diverse families hold educators in very high regard. During the home visit, the family's questions and conversation about their children's education may hold different perceptions and expectations. For example, Chavkin and Gonzalez (1995) found that Latino parents perceived educating their children through nurturing, teaching values, and instilling good

behavior and characteristics, whereas school and educators were expected to handle the actual academic learning. Through home visits, closer cooperation between home and school can be achieved which can limit misunderstandings (Valdez, 1996).

Culturally and linguistically diverse parents tend to have low school participation rate at school events (Floyd, 1998). There is an urgent need for increased parental involvement among Latino parents who do not speak English as a first language and for them to participate in the decision making process of their children's education (Chavkin & Gonzalez, 1995). Research has shown that parent involvement tends to help student attendance and academic achievement (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). An increase in academic performance can result when the parents, the school, and the community create a partnership for the benefit of the children (Delgado-Gaitan, 2001). A recent research study showed that the children whose families took part in a home-visiting program showed positive benefits once they enrolled in school, compared with their peers who did not receive regular home visits (Samuels, 2013). Home visits are a way for ELL teachers to reach out to the families and help them feel welcome when entering the school.

Suggestions for Conducting Home Visits

The following suggestions have been culled from the conducting of home visits with culturally and linguistically diverse families:

- Make appointments in advance and follow up with reminders. Try to schedule visits when key family members (primary caregivers) will be home. It sends an important message of respect to arrive on time.
- Let partners know the purpose of the visits. Assure parents that they do not need to make any special preparations for the visit.
- Offer interpreter services if needed.
- Plan on brief visits, but follow the family's lead on how long to stay.
- Take something (e.g., books, crayons/paper, etc.) to provide an opening for sharing information and opportunities for observations (Johnston & Mermin, 1994).
- Expect the unexpected (e.g., cancellations, unfamiliar situations and surroundings, sharing of emotional and troubling information) (Kyle & McIntyre, 2000).
- If the parent offers you something to eat or drink, politely accept because the parents are observing you as well.
- Do not make quick judgments about the home environment. Every household has its own cultural values and beliefs.
- Focus on families' cultural norms when visiting. For example, where people sit in proximity to you during the visit can mean different things in different cultures.
- Remember that parents and family members are experts about their children, so observe, listen and learn.

Conclusion

Home visits allow ELL educators to learn more about culturally and linguistically diverse families' interactions and experiences and build on those activities in the educational setting. The visits can provide an amazing source of information regarding the socio-cultural processes, academic, and linguistic development of students. Home visits are a start to relationship building between teachers and parents where everyone benefits. ELL teachers benefit from learning more about their students' interests and cultural experiences. Parents benefit from the teachers showing how much they care and value what the parents have to offer to the educational process. Students benefit the most from knowing how much their teachers and their parents care about them.

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