**Outside of My Comfort Zone**

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My palms started sweating and my stomach churned as a fog, thick as wool and dank as a dead man’s hand, crept up from the pit of my stomach and settled like an icy shroud over my thoughts. She’s got to be kidding. I can’t do this. The fog thickened and ice clogged my veins, accelerating my heartrate and choking out rational thoughts. Why do we have to do this? I can’t do this! I don’t even have a classroom right now!

 Anxiety wrestled with excitement when I was asked to engage in home visits. I’ve never been on a home visit nor have I ever had the opportunity but I was eager for the occasion to connect with students and families in order to foster the home school connection. The closest I’ve ever been to a home visit was the year my district asked us to go door to door in the community and pass out information about the upcoming school levy. Aside from that experience, I didn’t even know about home visits until my first class in the Educational Administration program. I had no idea that something like this was even allowed. I remember one of the first things I was told as a new teacher was to not give out my personal phone number so I never even considered visiting my student’s at their homes as an option for furthering communication between home and school.

If I had not had the opportunity to learn about home visits through my coursework, I would never have considered this as an option – because you don’t know what you don’t know. Across all of my years of educational training and across all of my years of teaching, I’d never heard of home visits. Neither professors nor administrators had ever suggested this as a way to connect with families. Furthermore, the professional journals I regularly read focused on topics such as instructional strategies and behavior management techniques for improving academic achievement. Unfortunately, home visits were never mentioned. Fortunately, I was able to virtually experience and learn about home visits through course readings and videos and I now recognize the significance of connecting parents, students, and teachers in order to enhance overall student success.

I believe that teaching should provide students with the opportunity to meet their fullest potential through active engagement in the learning process. By providing meaningful experiences that focus on student learning, differentiated services and opportunities can promote the strengths and unique abilities of individual learners. Content should be based on meaningful subject matter that actively engages learners and should focus on enriched instruction that incorporates real world learning experiences and quality instruction with the goal of moving students from the ‘role’ of the student to that of active learner.

In order to enhance learning, I believe the teaching process requires active collaborative and cooperative engagement of learners. Active engagement in the learning process facilitates social and emotional development and greater social and emotional competence promotes academic success as well as positive personal outcomes for students. Products and activities produced throughout the learning process should allow for individualized, flexible, and differentiated experiences. Furthermore instruction should provide learners with interdisciplinary opportunities to construct knowledge, employ higher level thinking skills, and allow for reflection and connection of abstract concepts and ideas. Recognizing, understanding, and supporting the needs of individual learners provide students with the opportunity to actively engage in meaningful learning experiences thereby fostering academic confidence, achievement, motivation, and autonomous learning.

What I found throughout my coursework is that everything I believe in about teaching is interwoven within the pages of the texts I read. Our students are tapestries and their ‘funds of knowledge’ are entwined with the unique interests and abilities they already possess. By tapping into our students’ home knowledge we can access skills and strengths that can be used to enhance learning. Additionally, by connecting with families and students our collaborative efforts are strengthened. Relationships are built and trust is established weaving a cohesive synergistic community that inspires academic success and yields positive personal outcomes for students.

Because I am not currently working in a school district, I was partnered with two colleagues. We discussed a strategy for determining which students we would visit and decided to ask parent permission at the upcoming fall conferences. Three parents agreed to a home visit albeit somewhat reluctantly when they were informed that two additional colleagues would be accompanying the lead teacher. Two parents were from a K-2 building and another parent had a student in the 9th grade on home instruction. The students we planned to visit attend an urban school in Canton, Ohio. Overall, the district serves a low socioeconomic population and all of the students receive free breakfast and lunch.

I went on my first home visits with two other colleagues. We chose to visit three families who were willing to let us come to their home. Each family has a child with a disability with comorbid social, emotional, or behavioral concerns that interfere with achievement at school. We decided to visit each student and family in order to strengthen the home school relationship and to determine any funds of knowledge that we might be able to use in order to enhance school instruction for each student. I also hoped to have an opportunity to observe the home environment of each child in order to gain more insight about the family dynamics and learn about any needs and concerns from the parents point of view.

Home Visit 1: Mrs. P. and Drew



Figure 1. Drew’s House

On the day of my first home visit, I was excitedly anxious. Tension traipsed up my spine and tapped at the back of my head as I drove toward my destination. Although I’ve been an educator for years, I’ve never experienced a home visit and I felt uncomfortable going to visit the family of a student I’d never met. As I turned onto the side street, the afternoon sun backlit the houses casting premature shadows across worn porches (*Figure 1*). The neighborhood was ominously quiet and my anxiety increased when I saw boarded up houses standing guard on either side of my destination. This was definitely not the good side of town!

A weary woman waited: alone on the front porch. Premature lines etched deep on her face. With a lethargic wave she motioned us to the front porch steps. We were not invited in, instead we gathered on the front porch as my colleague made the introductions and small talk to disperse the initial awkwardness.

Mr. and Mrs. P. have two boys with disabilities. The oldest is 9 years old and he goes to special school for low functioning children. According to Mrs. P. he is “just a handful and the family has to help him with all of his needs”. Drew is 8 years old and attends second grade at a nearby school. Like his brother, Drew has a disability but he is easier to manage at home. He has an individualized education plan (IEP) for a diagnosis of ‘other health impaired’.

 Drew gets along with everyone in his family and he especially likes to spend time with his grandpa (*Figure 2*) and his uncle. Although he enjoys playing in the neighborhood and riding his bike, Drew’s favorite past time is playing video games. Recently, the family got a computer and he loves to play games on the computer as well. Drew also loves wrestling and watching World Wrestling Federation (WWF) matches with his dad and his grandpa. He knows the names of all of the wrestlers and every detail about all of them. The family doesn’t usually have cable TV but once wrestling comes on then they will pay for cable. Sometimes Drew has friends come over to watch TV or play video games but a typical day for Drew consists of going to school, playing with his brother, eating dinner, and then going to bed. Most of Drew’s activities are limited to his neighborhood and his home but sometimes he plays with kids in the neighborhood.



Figure 2. Drew’s Grandpa Figure 3. Popcorn Figure 4. Picnic area Figure 5. Swimming

The family enjoys visiting grandpa and uncle D. They like to watch movies so sometimes the family has movie nights and Mrs. P. will rent a movie and make popcorn (*Figure 3*). The family also enjoys summer activities like picnics (*Figure 4*) and swimming This summer the family went to Baylor Beach (*Figure 5*) and had a lot of fun. Other than family and neighborhood friends, Drew has limited social interactions. He is not involved in any afterschool activities or sports teams.

Mrs. P. would like Drew to behave in class and do well at school. She wants the teachers to continue to work on reading, writing and math with her son. She goes to conferences and IEP meetings but she is tired of the school calling her to come and deal with Drew’s behavior all of the time. Mrs. P. doesn’t think the teachers really know how to deal with Drew’s outbursts. This is concerning to her because the teachers say that Drew misbehaves in school by acting out and not listening but she doesn’t see this same behavior at home. Mrs. P wishes the teachers could manage her son better. Although they communicate with notes and through the class Dojo computer app, she is unhappy with all of the negative phone calls because he behaves at home.



Figure 6. Drew’s stuffed puppy

When Drew does get angry or upset at home, he has a stuffed puppy (*Figure 6*) that he likes to hug and squeeze and this usually calms him down. When Drew really gets out of line, Mrs. P. calls her brother and he comes over and helps Drew calm down. Because of Drew’s outbursts, the school wants the family to work with Child and Adolescent Behavioral Health but Mrs. P. doesn’t think that they need that kind of help. She’s offended that the school even called and suggested this.



Our home visit concluded with encouraging words for mom and the promise to brainstorm some positive supports for helping Andrew at school. In spite of the awkward beginning, mom was friendly and answered all of our questions. I was still surprised that we were not invited into the home. It seemed odd that our interview was conducted on the front porch but mom must have had her reasons for not asking us into the home.

From this home visit, I learned that Drew has a cognitive disability and manifests behavior problems at school. Worry clouds Mom’s brow as she expresses concern with the way the school handles Drew’s behavior. She is not confident that the teachers know how to deal with her son and she wishes they could manage his outbursts better. From our home visit, we learned that Drew’s social circle is limited to family and a few neighborhood children. He does not participate in extracurricular activities that could enhance social skills and he has limited interests (e.g., video games, T.V., wrestling).

Funds of knowledge from the student are limited for several reasons. First the child has a disability that limits knowledge that the student can communicate from his family and cultural background. Additionally, his interests are limited and he has a small social circle that consists primarily of family members however his interests can be used to build on his strengths and teaching from his strengths will help him achieve school success. The family has abundant knowledge that the school can use in their family engagement efforts. Both mom and her brother have learned strategies that will deescalate Andrew’s behavior. They also know his interests, passions, strengths and needs. These are important for building relationships and for helping the student find meaning in school activities.

The strength of this family is their tight family network. Andrew’s uncle and grandfather are both involved in his life and both are supportive of Andrew and his mother. The challenges they face is ‘the disconnect’ with teachers at school. If families are to trust teachers and other school members, they must believe that school personnel are qualified, fair, and dependable, and have their child’s best interests at heart. Trust takes time to develop and it is based on consistent and continued interaction. As a teacher I understand the significance of initiating and encouraging home visits in order to develop trust and to help teachers better understand the funds of knowledge that they can learn from their students.

Emerging themes I noticed from this home visit is the importance of family. The family and extended family are tight knit and supportive of each other. Both the grandpa and uncle help out with the boys and spend time with them and it was obvious that the mother loves her family fiercely and puts her children first. Another theme that emerged was concern with the home/school relationship. Mrs. P wishes the school would do more to understand her child and she doesn’t think the teachers are prepared to handle her child’s behavior or meet his academic needs. All she wants is for her child to do well in school and she is tired and annoyed because the school is constantly calling her to deal with her son when in fact, a joint effort would probably resolve a lot of the issues at school.

 Kohl would respond to my experience with his quote, “If you look at a child through the filter of her or his environment or economic status, and make judgments through the filters of your own cultural, gender, and racial biases, you’ll find the characteristics you expect. You’ll also find yourself well placed to reproduce failure… but if you look for strengths and filter the world through the prism of hope, you will see and encourage the unexpected flowering of child life in the most unlikely places” (Kohl, 1994, p. 44). From this experience, I believe the school is looking at the child through their filter and instead of connecting with the family and the child, judgment was passed and the responsibility of the child’s behavior was placed solely on the parent. From mom’s comments we can tell that she is frustrated by all of the calls from school and to add insult to injury, the school was suggesting that she work with Child and Adolescent Behavioral Health services.

 Parental involvement for student success is critical however no parent should have to shoulder the blame or bear the full responsibility for the school success of a child. “Two way communications can increase understanding and cooperation between school and home and show students that their teachers and parents are in regular contact to help them succeed in school (Epstein et al, 2009, p.58). Schools must connect with their families in order to improve communication and student success.

 When teachers recognize how their own views about child development and schooling are influenced by a particular cultural perspective, they can more easily see parents as a source of knowledge – from a different perspective. “That ultimate border – the border between knowledge and power – can be crossed only when educational institutions no longer reify culture, when lived experiences become validated as a source of knowledge (Gonzalex, Moll, & Amanti, 2005, p.42). As educators, we need to meet our students where they are regardless of their family structure, financial status, or their cognitive abilities. In order to do that we need to know who our students are, where they come from, and what their culture values through face to face interaction with mutually respectful dialogue and thoughtful reflection.

As an educator and school leader I learned that my anxiety of going on a home visit was unfounded. Even though this first visit was uncomfortable for me, it was obvious that the mother was encouraged that we took the time to meet and talk with her about her child. She seemed relieved that we could understand her frustration with the school and grateful that we would seek solutions for bridging the ‘disconnect’ between the school and home. From this visit I learned the importance of connecting with families in order to learn about their cultural background – whether it is low socioeconomic status or ethnicity. Families can provide a wealth of knowledge when it comes to understanding children in our classrooms. By reaching out to families through home visits, trust can be established and the more teachers can interact with families, the more families will believe that teachers and administrators have their child’s best interest at heart.

 Part 2: Ms. J. and Nina



 Figure 7. Nina’s House

Nerves were dispelled by the time I went on my second home visit. Calm and purpose replaced nerves and tension as I traveled back to the rough side of town. Trash littered the side streets. Roofs sagged under the weight of their shingles. Porches drooped with memories of years gone by and windows winked as curtains were drawn back to see who was driving down the quiet street. If anything, this neighborhood needed a touch of sunshine. Perhaps this home visit could lend a bit of light and levity to the somber solitude.

Mom must have been waiting by the window because she came out to meet us when we pulled up to the house (*Figure 7*). Nina was playing in the driveway when we arrived. She greeted us with a huge smile and showed us her chalk drawings on the driveway. She continued playing quietly in the driveway while we talked with her mother on the front porch steps.

Ms. J. lives with her boyfriend. She has four children and her boyfriend has three and they visit every other weekend. The children in the home are all between the ages of 10 and 2. Nina is 8 years old and is in second grade at a nearby elementary school. She has an Individualized Education Plan for a speech and language disorder (SLD).

Nina lives with her mom most of the time but she visits her dad and his partner Rick every other weekend. Nina’s dad lives with Rick and Rick’s mom, dad, and brother. Nina is a sweet little girl who plays well with all of her stepsisters. She gets along best with Anna who is a year younger. Anna has a lot of emotional and behavior problems but Nina is really good at calming Anna down when she gets upset. Ms. J. really relies a lot on Nina to help soothe and take care of her sister. One of Nina’s favorite pastimes is playing with her dolls and her Barbie’s (*Figure 8 and Figure 9*).

 

 Figure 8. Nina’s Barbie Figure 9. Nina’s Doll

She also likes to play on the computer (*Figure 10*), watch TV (*Figure 11*), and she particularly loves scary movies (*Figure 12*). Nina really likes animals and she enjoys playing with her pets. She has 2 dogs and 2 cats at home, and she has 3 dogs she plays with when she is at her father’s house. Nina has one special friend – another little girl in the neighborhood who she plays with a lot. Unfortunately her friend is moving in a few weeks so Nina is very upset that she is going to lose her friend. To console her, Nina’s mom suggested that Nina can help her with more of the housework and with taking care of Anna. Since most of Nina’s activities revolve around home and school, her typical day consists of going to school, playing with her sisters or a friend in the neighborhood, eating dinner, watching TV, and then going to bed. Nina does not participate in any outside activities or sports.



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Figure 10. Nina on the computer Figure 11. Nina’s TV Figure 12. Scary movies

Nina’s family enjoys spending time together. Once a month the family visits Grandma Joyce and her boyfriend. Nina and her sisters call him Poppi and although he has no relation to the children, they enjoy spending time with him. The whole family (including Nina’s dad and his family), likes to go on family vacations together. They enjoy camping and sleeping in tents. The family also likes to watch movies together and they often go to activities in downtown Canton.

Ms. J is happy with Nina’s education and thinks that the teachers are doing the best that they can for her daughter. School is hard for Nina but mom wants her to do well in spite of her documented disabilities. Mrs. J. stated that it’s difficult for Nina to fit in at school because she is very shy so she plays by herself. Ms. J. wishes Nina could make more friends at school because sometimes Nina tells her that no one wants to play with her and she feels lonely. Sometimes Nina comes home sad because the kids at school are mean to her. Her way of dealing with this is to go to her room and lay down for a while. Even though Nina has a friend in the neighborhood, mom would still like for her to have some more friends at school.

Ms. J thinks the school does a good job communicating with her about Nina. She stated that the teachers call her about Nina’s progress and they send home notes, even though Nina sometimes forgets to bring them home. Ms. J. also stated that the IEP reports and report cards are another way the school communicates with her, and she regularly attends conferences where she has the opportunity to talk with Nina’s teachers about her progress in school.



We concluded the home visit by thanking Ms. J. for the opportunity to talk with her and to learn more about Nina. We left with the promise that we would research some strategies to help Nina make friends at school. The biggest surprise from this visit is that the interview took place on the porch steps – again, and not in the home. I wonder if it’s because they feel like we might be judging them. Regardless, it was nice to meet with Nina’s mom so we could better understand her concerns for her daughter.

From this home visit we learned that Nina is a very shy child. She is close to her sisters and she generally plays with them or a neighborhood friend down the street. She is not involved in any outside activities that would promote social growth. We learned that mom is concerned because Nina doesn’t have any friends at school but other than that, mom is generally pleased with the home/school connection and believes the teachers are doing the best that they can for her daughter.

This visit provided us with funds of knowledge that will help us connect better with Nina in school. We learned that she is shy and feels lonely because she doesn’t have any friends at school. We also learned that sometimes her peers are mean to her. This information provides us with the knowledge that we need to watch for negative or hurtful peer interactions and behavior and perhaps provide some whole class lessons on bullying. We also learned that Nina is sensitive and caring and is able to deescalate her sister’s emotional and behavioral outbursts. Furthermore, we learned that Nina likes to play with dolls, Barbie’s, and her pets. This is important information that we can use to help Nina experience success in school and learn to make new friends.

Strengths we observed were the tight extended family network. Even though Nina’s mom and dad are divorced, Nina’s father and his family and Nina’s grandma are all involved in her life. Another strength we discovered is Mom communicates regularly with the teachers at school about Nina’s progress. This is important because it provides a good foundation to strengthen the relationship between home and school.

A potential challenge we observed is the number of children in the home. At any one time there are between 4 and 7 kids between the ages of 2 and 10. That makes for a busy and possibly frenetic home environment. In addition, Nina’s sister Anna has emotional and behavioral concerns and this can distract parents from the needs of the other children. Additionally, mom commented that Nina struggles in school however she doesn’t offer any reasons why she struggles or if she tries to help Nina with her school work. The challenge would be for Nina’s mom to try to clearly communicate the struggles she observes and communicate those concerns to Nina’s teachers. Many children thrive in school and they tend to dominate a teacher’s time in the classroom but there are also children who may be more reserved and prefer to play quietly alone. As a teacher it’s important to respond to all children and help them feel safe and comfortable in the classroom. We need to reach all children in order for them to experience school success.

A theme that emerged from this home visit is the importance of family. The family and extended family are tight knit. Both Nina’s mom and dad are involved in her life and they spend time together at local events and even go on vacation together. Another theme that emerged was the hope that the school would do more to help Nina make friends. Even though Nina’s mom feels that the school communicates will with her, she wants her child to do well in school and she wishes they could facilitate the opportunity for Nina to make friends.

 This home visit reminded me of Kohl’s quote, “that it’s essential to analyze the situation and learn about community… in order to be able to discover what has the greatest chance of working while at the same time maintaining the students’ dignity and self-respect in a particular context” (Kohl, 1994, p. 61). In this experience, we need to look at the whole child in order to figure out how we can support Nina academically while respecting her quiet and shy personality. There is a narrow line we have to walk between teaching content and skills that are expected and letting students follow their inner needs (Kohl, 1994, p. 63).

At this home visit, mom explained that Nina struggles with school, yet she thinks the teachers are doing the best they can to work with her daughter. There is a need for the teachers at Nina’s school to continue to connect with Ms. J. in order to facilitate school success for Nina. Learning at home activities could provide Ms. J. with information about how to help Nina at home. Learning at home activities can guide parents in how to help children practice skills; discuss their work in a particular subject; complete homework; and other learning opportunities (Epstein et al., 2005, p.59). By involving parents, the school can bridge the home/school gap and help students reach academic and behavioral goals (Epstein et al., 2005, p.60).

Bridging the ‘cultures’ between home and school requires getting beyond the surface details of behavior to the underlying cultural reasons for it and “as long as minority students continue to be subjected to standardized and prescriptive tests, the issue of whose knowledge and whose voice are embedded in these measures can be answered only as we cross this furthest border between knowledge and power (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005, p.45). Home visits offer the first step toward crossing the border and bridging the gap between home and school.

As I drove home after this particular home visit, I believe I realized the great value of stepping out of the classroom. It’s an easy way to learn how best to serve our individual students and show them how much we really care. As an educator and school leader, I know that relationships are foundational and establishing relationships with families is the first step toward building trust. Home visits are a simple yet powerful way to connect with students and foster the home/school connection.

Part 3 Ms. C and Tommy



 Figure 13. Inside Tommy’s House Figure 14. Tommy’s kitchen

They say three is a charm and that was true of my third home visit. As I drove toward my destination, the boarded up houses and the empty streets didn’t seem intimidating like previous visits. And in spite of littered sidewalks, crumbling neighborhoods, and grey skies, I knew there were flickers of hope living behind each doorway I passed. Hope for a better future. Hope for school success, and hope that someone cares enough to make it happen.

Mom excitedly greeted us when we arrived at the front door and welcomed us into her home (*Figure 13*). We sat around the kitchen table (*Figure 14*) to talk and although the aged house was worn and cluttered, it was clean and inviting. This was the first time we were warmly welcomed into the home.

Ms. C. is a single mom who has four children: two girls ages 8 and 10 and two boys, ages 15 and 14. We chose to visit Ms. C. because her son Tommy is one of the students we wanted to establish a better home/school relationship with.

Tommy is 14 years old. He has an Individualized Education Plan and was diagnosed with autism when he was 6 years old. He is considered low functioning. This means that Tommy is on the more severe end of the autism spectrum. He has multiple impairments that manifest in odd behaviors, low cognitive ability, and limited expressive and receptive language skills that have negatively impacted Tommy’s educational success. Additionally, Tommy exhibits social, emotional, and behavioral deficits that present challenges to educators and for this Tommy was removed from the public school he attended and home instruction was offered until his behavior was under control.

Tommy lives with his mom and siblings. He gets along well with everyone in the family but his sister Mary seems to get along best with Tommy. She seems to know just what he needs and how to take care of him. She is very patient and helps calm Tommy down when he becomes overstimulated and has meltdowns. According to his mom, no one can handle Tommy by themselves so there is no extended family that Tommy spends time with.



Figure 15. Movies Tommy likes Figure 16. Tommy’s computer

Tommy’s main interests are watching movies (*Figure 15*) and using technology (*Figure 16*). He likes to watch movies on the computer and scroll through the movie credits so he can read and memorize them. He also likes to go outside and jump on the trampoline. These favorite activities are also soothing for Tommy. When he is upset he will repeat various jingles or chants that he’s heard on television programs, movies, or commercials. Jumping on the trampoline (*Figure 17*) also helps calm Tommy down and when he gets overstimulated, he will resort to rocking or stimming (the repetition of physical movement such as hand-flapping, spinning, or repetition of words and phrases). This usually happens when he gets overwhelmed and frustrated by unexpected events, such as changes in his routine. Weights (e.g. lap pads, and vests) are another strategy mom uses to help Tommy relax. Although the family enjoys spending time together, they don’t participate in a lot of activities outside of the home. They like to go to waterparks and amusement parks but it all really depends on what kind of a day Tommy is having.

 

 Figure 17. Tommy jumping on the Trampoline

 Ms. C. hopes that Tommy will continue to improve his behavior and learn to communicate better so that one day he will be able to live independently as an adult. She also hopes Tommy’s behavior continues to improve so she doesn’t have to worry about him hurting others. When he has a meltdown, he gets out of control and very few people know how to manage his behaviors.

Ms. C. was very unhappy with her child’s education until home instruction was provided by two teachers who really cared about her son. According to Ms. C., “these teachers changed Tommy’s life and Miss S. was the only person who never gave up on Tommy. She worked with him and was able to get Tommy to learn”. Ms. C. stated that, “no one worked harder than Miss. S. and Tommy would not have the life and opportunities he has now if it were not for Miss S”.

 As for communication with the school, Ms. C. did not feel the school listened to anything she suggested for helping Tommy. She asked for what she knew was best for her son but the school continually refused to provide the services she requested. Ms. C. was so frustrated with the school that she was ready to file ‘due process’ for everything that she was fighting for. (Due process is when parent may disagree with the program recommendations of the school district. The disagreement can be resolved through mediation or through a due process hearing.) If it had not been for Miss S. and her mom, Ms. C. would not have had success with obtaining the supports and services necessary for educating Tommy. When Miss S. and her mom began home instruction, Ms. C would always watch to make sure they could handle Tommy. Because they did such a wonderful job, for the first time in a long time, Ms. C was finally able to leave Tommy during home instruction and take time for herself and her family. As a result of his progress, academically, behaviorally, and socially, Ms. C. was able to take him more places, he started enjoying school again. Most importantly, he loved talking about his teachers.



We thanked Ms. C. for the opportunity to talk with her and to learn more about Tommy and we told her we would be back to check on Tommy soon. She was excited to hear that we would come back to see Tommy again and she thanked us over and over again for taking the time to visit. The biggest surprise from this visit is that we were so welcomed into the home. After our previous experience, it was reassuring to know that not all parents are reluctant to allow home visits.

From this home visit we learned that Tommy is making a lot of progress. His behavior has improved to the point where he can have instruction at school again. Additionally, he has improved academically and he is once again excited to go to school.

The funds of knowledge we learned from this home visit is that Ms. C. knows her son best. She’s acquired skills and strategies for dealing with her son’s behavior that should be shared with teachers at school. Additionally, we learned that Tommy loves to watch TV and movies and that he is able to read the credits and memorize them. His love for movies can be used as motivation in school and his talent for memorizing movie credits can be turned into a skill for future employment. We also learned some additional strategies that will help deescalate Tommy if he gets overstimulated at school.

A strength of this family is that they are a tight knit family. Even though there is not a lot of extended family support, Ms. C is a determined mom and she will do whatever it takes to make sure her son Tommy gets the support that he needs to experience school success. Another strength of this family is that Ms. C. is knowledgeable about special education law and can clearly advocate for her son.

A challenge the family faces is that they have very little outside support. They do not have the support of extended family and Ms. C. carries the burden alone. Families of individuals with autism are presented with many challenges throughout their lives. Many times the caregiver feels overwhelmed, siblings can feel isolated, and extended family can feel helpless. It’s important that Ms. C. finds some kind of support group so she won’t feel isolated or alone.

With 1 in 68 children being diagnosed with autism in the United States, it is important that teachers and administrators are aware of the impact that autism has on a family. Even though I have training as a special education teacher, this visit made me realize the importance of staying current with special education law as well as current evidence based practices that can make a difference in a child’s life.

Emerging themes from this visit suggest that family is important. The children care for each other and mom cares fiercely for the children. She is a pillar of strength and only wants what’s best for her family. Another emerging theme is mom wants her son to experience school success with the goal of living independently one day. Ms. C stated several times during our home visit that she wants her son Tommy to do well in school and she wishes the school would do more to help her child. It’s important to her that Tommy is provided with the necessary supports and services in order to live independently one day.

Kohl would respond to this experience by reminding us that “children in school act in ways that are shaped by the institution: so it is essential never to judge a child by her or his school behavior” (Kohl, 1994, p.133). This was evident in behaviors Tommy was demonstrating at school. He was displaying creative maladjustment and the school judged him based on the very behaviors they helped shape in Tommy.

More than ever, education is increasingly viewed as a shared responsibility of educators and families to create an engaging supportive environment for learning both in school and at home. These school-community partnerships are the connections between schools and community individuals, organizations, and businesses that directly or indirectly promote students’ social, emotional, physical, and intellectual development (Epstein, 2005, p. 31). For Tommy, the family was viewed as separate from the school. Rather than sharing the responsibility of educating Tommy, the school expected the family to take care of behavioral issues while they take care of educating him. Educators and administrators cannot view a child simply as a student. Education requires a shared partnership. According to Epstein, “schools in more economically depressed communities make more contacts with families about the problems and difficulties their children are having, unless they work at developing balanced partnership programs that also include contacts about the positive accomplishments of students (Epstein et al., 2005, p.13).

Home/school partnerships are essential for student success. Because of possible cultural differences, it’s important that teachers and parents set joint goals. “By positioning teachers as research collaborators, teachers are better prepared to address the constantly changing diversity of their student population and the many issues associated with poverty that affects schooling (Gonzalez, Moll & Amanti, 2005, p.251). As a researcher of our students’ culture, we can learn important information about the families we serve. Many parents want to become more involved with their child’s schooling, but they may not know or understand the school’s expectations of them. By understanding our students’ culture, we can respectfully help parents understand what they can contribute to their child’s school success.

From this visit I realized that by listening to students and the families of students, I take on the role of a learner. And with the knowledge gained, I can apply the cultural and cognitive resources necessary to provide meaningful instruction. As a teacher and a school leader, I recognize that many teachers care for their students, but unless they care enough to learn, understand, and really know their students, they are missing out on a valuable opportunity to use what students bring from their own backgrounds into the classroom. Our home visit experience reminds me of a story I heard when I first started teaching. It had a profound impact on me that inspired me to really know and understand my students.

*Lessons Learned by E.L. Ballard*

*I have not seen Teddy Stallard since he was a student in my fifth grade class fifteen years ago. It was early in my career, and I had only been teaching for two years.*

*From the first day he stepped into my classroom, I disliked Teddy. Teachers (although everyone knows differently) are not supposed to have favorites in a class, but most especially are not supposed to show dislike for a child, any child.*

*Nevertheless, every year there are one or two children that one cannot help but be attached to, for teachers are human, and it is human nature to like bright, pretty, intelligent people, whether they are ten years old or twenty-five. And sometimes, not too often, fortunately, there will be one or two students to whom the teacher just can’t seem to relate.*

*I had thought myself quite capable of handling my personal feelings along that line until Teddy walked into my life. There wasn’t a child I particularly liked that year, but Teddy, was most assuredly the one I disliked.*

*He was dirty. Not just occasionally, but all the time. His hair hung down low over his ears, and he actually had to hold it out of his eyes as he wrote papers in class. (And this was before it was fashionable to do so!) Too, he had a peculiar odor about him which I could never identify.*

*His faults were many, and his intellect left a lot to be desired, also. By the end of the first week I knew he was hopelessly behind the others. Not only was he behind; he was just plain slow! I began to withdraw from him immediately.*

*Any teacher will tell you that it’s more of a pleasure to teach a bright child. It is definitely more rewarding for one’s ego. But any teacher worth her credentials can channel work to the bright child, keeping him challenged and learning, while she puts her major effort on the slower ones. Any teacher can do this. Most teachers do it, but I didn’t, not that year.*

*In fact, I concentrated on my best students and let the others follow along as best they could. Ashamed as I am to admit it, I took perverse pleasure in using my red pen; and each time I came to Teddy’s paper, the cross marks (and there were many) were always a little larger and a little redder than necessary.*

*"Poor work!" I would write with a flourish.*

*While I did not actually ridicule the boy, my attitude was obviously quite apparent to the class, for he quickly became the class "goat" the outcast; the unlovable and the unloved.*

*He knew I didn’t like him, but he didn’t know why. Nor did I know then or now, why I felt such an intense dislike for him. All I know is that he was a little boy no one cared about and I made no effort on his behalf.*

*The days rolled by. We made it through the Fall Festival and the Thanksgiving holidays, and I continued marking happily with my red pen.*

*As Christmas holidays approached, I knew that Teddy would never catch up in time to be promoted to the sixth grade level. He would be a repeater.*

*To justify myself, I went to his cumulative folder from time to time. He had very low grades for the first four years, but no grade failure. How he had made it, I didn’t know. I closed my mind to the personal remarks.*

*First grade: Teddy shows promise by work and attitude, but has poor home situation. Second grade: Teddy could do better. Mother terminally ill. He receives little help at home. Third grade: Teddy is a pleasant boy. Helpful, but too serious. Slow learner. Mother passed away end of the year. Fourth grade: Very slow, but well behaved. Father shows no interest.*

*"Well, they had passed him four times, but he will certainly repeat fifth grade! Do him good!" I said to myself.*

*And then the last day before the holiday arrived. Our little tree on the reading table sported paper and popcorn chains. Many gifts were heaped underneath, waiting for the big moment.*

*Teachers always get several gifts at Christmas, but mine that year seemed bigger and more elaborate than ever. There was not a student who had not brought one. Each unwrapping brought squeals of delight, and the proud giver would receive effusive thank-you’s.*

*His gift was in the middle of the pile. Its wrapping was a brown paper bag, and he had colored Christmas trees and red balls all over it. It was stuck together with masking tape.*

*"For Ms. Thompson, from Teddy", it read.*

*The group was completely silent and for the first time I felt conspicuous, embarrassed because they all stood watching me unwrap the gift.*

*As I removed the last bit of masking tape, two items fell to my desk:  a gaudy rhinestone bracelet with several stones missing and a small bottle of dime-store cologne, half empty.*

*I could hear the snickers and whispers, and I wasn’t sure I could look at Teddy.*

*"Isn’t this lovely?" I asked, placing the bracelet on my wrist. "Teddy, would you help me fasten it?"*

*He smiled shyly as he fixed the clasp, and I held up my wrist for all of them to admire.*

*There were a few hesitant ooh’s and ahh’s, but as I dabbed the cologne behind my ears, all the little girls lined up for a dab behind their ears.*

*I continued to open the gifts until I reached the bottom of the pile. We ate our refreshments, and the bell rang.*

*The children filed out with shouts of "See you next year!" and "Merry Christmas!" but Teddy waited at his desk.*

*When they had all left, he walked up to me, clutching his gift and books to his chest.*

*"You smell just like my mom" he said softly. "Her bracelet looks really pretty on you too. I’m glad you like it."*

*He left quickly. I locked the door, sat down at my desk, and wept, resolving to make up to Teddy what I had deliberately deprived him of---a teacher who cared.*

*I stayed every afternoon with Teddy from the end of Christmas holidays until the last day of school. Sometimes he worked alone while I drew up lesson plans or graded papers.*

*Slowly but surely he caught up with the rest of the class. In fact, his final averages were among the highest in the class, and although I knew he would be moving out of the state when school was out, I was not worried for him. Teddy had reached a level that would stand him in good stead the following year, no matter where he went. He had enjoyed a measure of success, and as we were taught in our teacher training courses, "Success builds success."*

A year later, I found a note under my door, from Teddy, telling me that I was still the best teacher he ever had in his whole life.

*Six years went by before I got another note from Teddy. He wrote that he had finished high school, third in his class, and I was still the best teacher he ever had in life.*

*Four years after that, I got another letter, saying that while things had been tough at times, he’d stayed in school, had stuck with it, and would soon graduate from college with the highest of honors. He assured me that I was still the best and favorite teacher he had ever had in his whole life.*

*Then four more years passed and another letter came. This time he explained that after he got his bachlor’s degree, he decided to go a little further. Teddy’s letter explained that I was still the best and favorite teacher he ever had. But now his name was a little longer… the letter was signed Theodore F. Stollard, MD.*

*The story doesn’t end here. You see, there was another letter that spring. Teddy said he had met a girl and was going to be married. He explained that his father had died a couple of years ago and he was wondering if I would agree to sit at the wedding in the place that was usually reserved for the mother of the groom.*

Of course, I went to Teddy’s wedding. And guess what? I wore that bracelet, the one with several rhinestones missing. Moreover, I made sure I was wearing the perfume that Teddy remembered his mother wearing on their last Christmas together.

At the wedding we hugged each other, and Dr. Stoddard whispered in my ear, "Thank you for believing in me. Thank you so much for making me feel important and showing me that I could make a difference."

With tears in my eyes, I whispered back. "Teddy, you have it all wrong. You were the one who taught me that I could make a difference. I didn't know how to teach until I met you."

Connecting, caring, and building trusting relationships are foundational for effective teaching however home visits solidify relationships and show families that we not only ‘talk the talk – but we will walk the walk’ in order to improve school-community relations. We can improve relationships with families if we stop discussing our students in terms of low academics, home life problems, socioeconomic status, and test scores. Instead of viewing our students from a deficit model, we need to acknowledge students and families for the wealth of knowledge they house and recognize them for who they are and the talents they have to offer. As future leaders we need to be willing to bridge any gaps that interfere with student success. And the key to student success starts with us – learning from our students.

What will you do to make a difference for the Teddy’s, Tommy’s, Drew’s, and Nina’s

in your world?

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