

From the Classroom to the Living Room: Eroding Academic Inequities through Home Visits

ABSTRACT: This article illustrates the experiences of teachers who conducted home visits as a way to cultivate sustainable avenues of school-home communication with families from an immigrant and/or language-minority background. The data stemming from these experiences are used to outline a sociocultural approach to conducting home visits and strengthening relationships with parents. This particular analytical lens addresses a significant gap in the literature concerning how educators across the K–12 spectrum should implement home visits. This article is especially relevant for school administrators seeking to establish what Auerbach (2012b) calls “leadership for authentic partnerships” with families and communities.

In the current U.S. educational environment where standardized tests and educator accountability drive policy decisions, parental outreach efforts are often overshadowed by the immediacy of rapidly accumulating student achievement data and looming assessment preparation strategies. While it is easy for educators to get bogged down in the day-to-day minutiae of these ever-present challenges, Epstein (2009a) reminds us that there “is no topic in education on which there is greater agreement than the need for family and community involvement” (p. 1). Even though the immeasurable contextual differences among classrooms across the United States make it difficult to put forth a comprehensive set of guidelines for effectively integrating families and communities into schools, the most formidable aspect of this process is often figuring out how to start cultivating such relationships (Auerbach, 2009, 2012a). Moreover, the logistical complexities involved in collaborating with families are intensified in districts

Address correspondence to Eric J. Johnson, PhD, Washington State University Tri-Cities, 2710 Crimson Way, Richland, WA 99354. E-mail: ejj@tricity.wsu.edu.

where there are greater differences in the socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds between educators and students (Cooper, 2009; M. Johnson, 2011; Lopez, Scribner, & Mahitivanichcha, 2001; Olivos, 2012).

Considering the widely documented positive academic outcomes stemming from school, community, and family collaborations (Auerbach, 2012b; Epstein, 2009b; Goodall et al., 2011; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Swap, 1993), it is easy to see why the federal policy on education—namely, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001—requires schools under improvement status to “include strategies to promote effective parental involvement in the school.” Unfortunately, schools that are under the tightest federal sanctions are usually situated within socially and academically diverse contexts that pose unique challenges for schools, causing further struggles for teachers to identify with their students’ backgrounds and communicate with parents (Speth, Saifer, & Forehand, 2008). Recognizing the need for more information on effective approaches to collaborating with families, Epstein (2009c) urges for more research “on the results of specific practices of partnership in various schools, at various grade levels, and for diverse populations of students, families, and teachers” (p. 15).

Heeding Epstein’s call for further investigation on the specific practices involved in connecting with families in diverse contexts, this article highlights the experiences of teachers who were asked to conduct home visits as a way to cultivate sustainable avenues of school-home communication with families from an immigrant and/or language-minority background. The data stemming from these experiences are used to outline a sociocultural approach to conducting home visits and strengthening relationships with parents. By exploring the literature on parental involvement, school-family partnerships, and home visits, I draw attention to the varying orientations to working with families as a way to emphasize the importance of conducting initial home visits within the larger context of developing school-home collaborations in diverse communities comprising bicultural, bilingual, and immigrant families.

This particular analytical lens addresses a significant gap in the literature concerning how educators across the K–12 spectrum should implement home visits. This is especially relevant for school administrators seeking to establish what Auerbach (2012a) calls “leadership for authentic partnerships” with families and communities. To underscore the systemic nature of school leadership in this process, reference to professional categories such as “administrators” and “school leaders” is meant to be inclusive of a variety of educational personnel who contribute to the professional development of classroom teachers. More important, my position aligns with Theoharis’s (2012) stance of “social

justice leadership” that pushes leaders to “advocate, lead, and keep at the center of their practice and vision issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically marginalizing factors that are found in US society” (p. xiii).

FRAMING SCHOOL–HOME INTERACTIONS

SHAPING/RESHAPING PRACTICES

To better understand how deeply entrenched institutionalized inequities in the American educational system (Kozol, 1992, 2005) have structured present norms of parent–educator interactions, it is necessary to view schooling within the larger social architecture of intolerance toward ethnic, linguistic, and economic minorities that has pervaded the United States over the last century (Marger, 2006; McCarty, 2004; Ovando, 2003; Takaki, 1993; Zinn, 2005). Acknowledging that the current U.S. education system is the product of historical forces allows us to underscore the contribution of embodied experiences over extended periods in the development of ingrained habits (for educators as well as others). Historically contoured patterns of schooling have formalized distinct boundaries between classrooms and homes; nowhere is this divide larger than in immigrant communities facing cultural and economic challenges (Gonzales, 2009, 2010).

Consequently, the persistent pattern of dominant-class subordination over minority groups in the United States has produced a mutual ethos of misunderstanding, misrecognition, and unawareness between mainstream educators and minority families. Here, Bourdieu’s (2004) notion of *habitus* is employed to describe the generation of cultural expectations and social practices that reinforce educators’ perceptions and professional activities. For educators, the habitus guides everyday classroom practices that have institutionalized norms of interaction within the broader social structure. Through the embodied experiences of everyday social interactions in the classroom as well as outside of school, “obvious” notions of right and wrong, social appropriateness, and cultural norms mold an individual’s mental schema of reality. Restructuring the habits/habitus of parent–educator interactions and blurring the boundaries between classrooms and living rooms can positively influence academic outcomes (Lopez et al., 2001) and highlight the valuable funds of knowledge that abound in students’ home environments (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005a; Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 2005).

PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

As described here, current U.S. federal education policy explicitly points to the importance of parental involvement. In spite of this parent-centered emphasis, how parents should be involved on the ground level is often narrowly conceived and usually based on White middle-class models of participation (Auerbach, 2011; Barnyak & McNelly, 2009; Cooper, 2009; Faltis, 2001, 2006; M. Johnson, 2011; Olivos, 2012). Olivos (2012) explains that educators tend to view “involved” parents as those who “participate in traditional and recognizable parent involvement activities or demonstrate supportive behaviors that educators believe benefit their students’ academic and social endeavors” (p. 99). This orientation to school involvement is not shared by many groups—most of whom come from language-minority backgrounds and feel uncomfortable asserting their voice in a schooling context (Lopez, 2001; Olivos, 2012). Moreover, “in the case of parents of second-language learners and particularly immigrant parents, there may be little understanding about the way U.S. schools work” (Faltis, 2001, p. 176).

Parents who operate from cultural schemas and scripts that differ from traditional involvement models are usually seen as uninterested or apathetic in their children’s education (Auerbach, 2007). Even though parents of minority students are generally very concerned about their children’s education and see themselves as contributing in a variety of ways (Cooper, 2009; M. Johnson, 2011), schools prioritize involvement strategies that are based on expectations of parents coming to the school, instead of schools going to the parents (Lopez et al., 2001). For example, according to the Michigan Department of Education (2002), “when parents come to school regularly, it reinforces the view in the child’s mind that school and home are connected and that school is an integral part of the whole family’s life” (p. 2). This particular philosophy fuels the common misperception that only parents who participate at school functions are interested in their children’s education; it does not take into consideration the perspectives of culturally and linguistically diverse families (Lopez, 2001; Speth et al., 2008).

Considering the difference between traditional parental involvement activities and what Lopez (2001) calls “the transparency of parent involvement” for immigrant families (p. 418), it is easy to see why recommendations for working with minority families tend to stress ways to “help” or “educate” parents (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003). While such remediation efforts are generally based on good intentions, their implementation generally involves a one-way approach that puts the responsibility of communication and interaction (as well as improvement) on the parents (Baeder,

2010; Desforges & Abouchar, 2003; Ginsberg, 2007; Hebbeler & Gerlach-Downie, 2002). When parents are viewed as a vehicle to intervene and correct academic challenges, parental involvement efforts quickly devolve into ineffective attempts “to find small solutions to what are extremely complex problems” (Valdés, 1996, p. 31). Shifting away from a remediation orientation to parents and children requires reshaping the way that school-home interactions are viewed and integrated into the professional routines of educators at all levels.

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT AND PARTNERSHIPS

For the purposes of this discussion, I align with the notion of parental “engagement” rather than “involvement” as a way to acknowledge issues of inequality that have affected minority parents (Auerbach, 2009; M. Johnson, 2011), while valuing bicultural parents’ perspectives and contributions (Olivos, 2012). Discussing interactions between educators and parents in terms of “engagement” suggests broader avenues for creating authentic and sustainable school home links based on underlying ideologies of respect (Goodall et al., 2011, pp. 20–47). To avoid the potential negative connotations associated with traditional parental involvement programs, educators are encouraged to envision school-home relationships in terms of family and community partnerships (Auerbach, 2012b; Epstein, 2009b; Swap, 1993) to recognize that “parents, educators, and others in the community share responsibility for students’ learning and development” (Epstein, 2009a, p. 1).

Conceptualizing collaborations between educators and parents in terms of a “partnership” is intended to mitigate the unequal distribution of responsibility inherent in parental involvement programs that are based on intervention models. The most fundamental tenet of this orientation involves viewing minority students, parents, and communities as resources that can enhance the educational process—not as problems to fix (Valdés, 1996; Zentella, 2002, 2005). Epstein (2009c) offers a multidimensional framework consisting of six types of involvement for partnership programs: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community (pp. 16–18). While Epstein’s partnership framework has been widely accepted (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Pate & Andrews, 2006), significant points of contention have been noted (Auerbach, 2007, 2012a; Cooper, 2009; M. Johnson, 2011). Auerbach (2012a) draws particular attention to potential caveats surrounding the concept of “partnership,” since it has become synonymous with parent and community *involvement*; that is, while partnerships imply parity, they are often unequal in nature (p. 31).

Vital to the process of identifying and restructuring traditional parent communication strategies is having school leadership personnel incite a philosophical shift (Auerbach, 2012b). Rogers, Freelon, and Terriquez (2012), Ruffin-Adams and Wilson (2012), Olivos (2012), and Swap (1993) all underscore the role of leaders at the building level in the development of effective two-way communication strategies. The significance of developing sound communication strategies becomes even more imperative when working with families from diverse backgrounds (Auerbach, 2011; Lopez, 2001; Lopez et al., 2001). From this perspective, not only are administrators within diverse contexts the ones who ultimately create policies that establish an environment of parental support, but they also hire and mentor teachers—who are “the key agents for reaching out to parents” (Swap, 1993, p. 65).

Conversely, when administrators establish expectations to favor the school or teachers more than students and families, the balance of power shifts back toward an exclusionary model of parental involvement (Cooper, 2009). As González (2005) warns, “if educational institutions are serious about creating partnerships with the community, the relationship cannot be an asymmetrical alliance, with one component defining and limiting the role of its counterpart” (p. 42). Using this perspective as a lens for viewing teacher–parent collaborations, home visits can be viewed as a vehicle for disrupting the institutional power imbalance that requires parents to come to school to feel—and be viewed as—“involved.”

HOME VISITS

The research on home visits spans an array of fields. Of particular breadth is the literature on health and wellness intervention programs (Astuto & Allen, 2009; Daro & Harding, 1999; Gomby, Culross, & Behrman, 1999; Sweet & Appelbaum, 2004) and parenting skill development (Hebberer & Gerlach-Downie, 2002; Korfmancher, Green, Spellmann, & Thornburg, 2007; Korfmacher et al., 2008; St. Pierre & Layzer, 1999; Zajicek-Farber, 2010). While evaluations of the quality and challenges of home visits are widely discussed in these fields (Cowan, Bobby, St. Roseman, & Echandia, 2002; Daro, McCurdy, Falconnier, & Stojanovic, 2003; Gomby, 1999; Gomby et al., 1999; Hebbeler & Gerlach-Downie, 2002; Olds et al., 1999; Roggman, Boyce, Cook, & Jump, 2001), scant in comparison are similar descriptions of K–12 educators’ experiences with home visits.

So, why should teachers and administrators conduct home visits? While parent communication takes many forms, “the most effective way to develop and establish rapport with parents and learn about their community

is through a home visit, which enables you to gain firsthand knowledge of some of the constraints that parents may face” (Falits, 2001, p. 177). Since educators’ lives are often disconnected from the lives of their students, “teachers have a harder time getting to know students and their families,” and schools are increasingly more dependent on traditional parent involvement at school events as the main vehicle of interaction with their students’ families (Baeder, 2010, p. 57). Moreover, even though programs that do not produce immediate academic results are not readily embraced by educators, home visits help to cultivate the type of relationships and social support that enhance academic progress in a variety of ways (Lopez et al., 2001; Parent Teacher Home Visit Project, 2011).

In addition to alleviating pressure on parents, home visits simultaneously demonstrate the educators’ willingness to relinquish authority and learn from their students’ families and communities. Whether conducted by teachers (Auerbach, 2012c; Barnayk & McNelly, 2009), administrators (Auerbach, 2009; Sternberg, 2006), or school social workers (S. F. Allen & Tracy, 2004) or as an entire districtwide program (Cowan et al., 2002; Lopez et al., 2001), the positive results stemming from home visits can be seen across multiple levels of implementation and personnel. Of the most impactful outcomes of home visits is an essential shift in the perceptions and assumptions of educators toward minority students and families (Auerbach, 2012c).

Considering the widening demographic gap between educators and diverse student populations, Lin and Bates (2010) explain that even though “the teaching force might not truly reflect the diversity that defines the student population, that does not mean teachers cannot learn to work more effectively with culturally diverse students” (p. 179). In the current era, where numbers of migrant students are increasing and schools are seeking better ways to support minority students, “home visits not only help faculty, administration, and staff become aware of the social context of students, but they also allow school personnel to develop more personal relationships with families” (Lopez et al., 2001, p. 264). In addition to cultivating mutual respect and opening avenues of communication with parents, conducting home visits allows teachers to develop a better understanding of the variety of knowledge and skills situated within students’ homes (Ginsberg, 2007; González et al., 2005a; Lopez et al., 2001; Meyer & Mann, 2006; Pérez, 2004).

Pointing out the potential benefits of home visits for students, parents, and educators is one thing—actually conducting the home visit is another. While the positive impacts of home visits are consistently promoted in the literature, descriptions of the interpersonal nuances of what takes place

during the visits are less visible. In reality, the interplay among the actions, reactions, emotions, and activities on the microlevel is what solidifies the authenticity of the school-home collaboration on the macrolevel; thus, understanding the social and power dynamics involved in this process is of great importance (Swap, 1993). That said, without adequate training on how to conduct a home visit, even the most enthusiastic educators are often left feeling uncomfortable and unaware of what to do on a visit (Taveras, 1998).

To ease the anxiety involved in preparing for a home visit, various suggestions have been outlined. Lin and Bates (2010) demonstrate the difference between unstructured and structured home visits as a recommendation for developing a script of conversational questions before conducting a home visit. While lists of questions help stimulate conversation, they can also be used to collect valuable information about the students' backgrounds and their parents' perceptions on education (Ginsberg, 2007, p. 58; Lin & Bates, 2010, p. 184; Peralta-Nash, 2003, pp. 114–115). In addition to conversation prompts, Stuht (2009) offers preparation ideas that include designing communication strategies, visiting in teams, ensuring an adequate time frame for visits, appropriate attire, and district documentation procedures (pp. 25–26).

Other recommendations include utilizing “home kit activities” to encourage parent-child interaction during the visit (Taveras, 1998), as well as charting observations after the visit has concluded and analyzing findings to assist in development of classroom applications (Ginsberg, 2007). Moreover, Ginsberg (2007) points out the importance of being prepared to conduct visits in a culturally responsive way (p. 59), and Faltis (2001) provides multiple resources as starting points for learning about cultural norms for specific ethnic groups (see pp. 177–178). Providing ongoing training on cultural diversity can further heighten educators' awareness of their students' backgrounds (J. D. Allen & Porter, 2002; Au & Blake, 2003; Peralta-Nash, 2003; Terrill & Mark, 2000).

Swap (1993) reminds us that “for parents, having a teacher or principal as a guest in their own home creates a different context for a relationship” (p. 125). When teachers enter their students' homes as learners, they are able to cross the threshold of socioeconomic, ethnic, and racial divides that often exist between classrooms and living rooms. Conducting home visits transcends an educator's dedication to a particular student or family; home visits are also an investment in the professional growth of individual teachers—as well as the overall school culture—and ultimately extend into the lives of all students.

Unfortunately, empowering approaches such as home visits must contend with a current educational context “that isolates practitioners,

mutates autonomy, and pushes for standardization and homogenization” (González et al., 2005b, p. 2). Considering the transformational nature of family and community engagement practices, I assume a stance of advocacy against the overwhelming tide of standardization and accountability that continues to discourage educators from conducting home visits. While the project described here highlights my efforts to better understand the emotional and professional processes involved in conducting home visits, my overall objective involves establishing a guiding framework for educational leaders—spanning the district, building, and university levels—to adapt to their particular professional contexts while supporting teachers and encouraging home visits as an institutionalized practice.

METHOD

As part of the requirements for earning a master’s degree in education with an emphasis in English as a second language and bilingual education at a major university in the state of Washington, educators must take a practicum course that focuses on various approaches to working with students from a language-minority background. While graduate students compose the majority of participants in this program, undergraduate preservice teachers seeking an endorsement in English-language learners are also required to take this course. In addition to covering pedagogical features of bilingual education, participants in this particular course are required to conduct a home visit.

To better understand the interpersonal, professional, and academic nuances of conducting home visits, teachers in this course were asked to document their experiences as part of an ongoing study of home visits. Since the teachers in this course represent primary, middle, and secondary levels of education, the home visit strategies covered in this course are designed to be applicable to all K–12 teachers. Data for this discussion were collected from 13 teachers (9 in-service and 4 preservice) spanning two semesters (spring 2010 and 2011). Table 1 lists the teacher participants by grade and language background (all names are pseudonyms).

In addition to spanning the K–12 spectrum, 12 of the 13 teachers were working in schools in high economic poverty districts during the home visit process, and all visits were conducted with families from an immigrant and/or language-minority background. Collecting data from students in this particular practicum exposed me to the perspectives of multiple teachers at various grade levels and professional experience (i.e., student teachers to experienced veterans). Beyond the varying degrees of experience, the

Table 1. In-Service and Preservice Teachers' Backgrounds

<i>Teacher</i>	<i>Grade</i>	<i>Teacher Languages</i>
Ms. Bates	1	Russian, English
Ms. Bolton	11	English, American Sign Language
Ms. Borne	4	English
Ms. Castor ^a	K	Spanish, English
Ms. Glenn	10	English, Spanish
Ms. Locke	3	English, Spanish
Ms. Lorenzo	1	Spanish, English
Ms. Olsen ^a	1	Spanish, English
Ms. Opal	1	Spanish, English
Ms. Peralta ^a	5	Spanish, English
Ms. Shelton ^a	2	Russian, English
Mr. Taft	9	Bosnian, English
Ms. Walters	8	English, Spanish

^aPreservice.

students in this class represent a sample of teachers interested in learning more about accommodating linguistic diversity in their classrooms. That said, their perspectives (before the visits) on conducting home visits ranged from being very open to opposing the idea. For this reason, this sample of teachers can be seen as a good representation of the views reflected in the faculties in the local school districts. Whereas recruiting volunteers from a local school most likely would not have yielded teacher participants who were not motivated to do the visits (as was the case for many of the participants here), this course motivated teachers with a range of perspectives to actually conduct the home visits.

Before conducting the home visits, teachers were exposed to the theoretical foundations of the “funds of knowledge” work described by González and colleagues (2005a) to prepare them for going into homes to learn about their students’ families (i.e., not remediate a problem). The participants were provided with some background on conducting home visits (stemming from ideas in Faltis, 2001; Ginsberg, 2007; Lin & Bates, 2010) and then informed that they would be required to reflect on their experience by addressing specific prompts/questions revolving around the visit. We dedicated class time (over multiple days) to parental communication techniques, different strategies for setting up the home visits, and culturally appropriate interactions with culturally diverse families. Through these dialogues, the teachers generated numerous ideas on how to approach students (and their parents) from varying grade levels and language backgrounds.

As a way to organize their thoughts, the students were provided with the following list of prompts to review before conducting the visit:

Prompt 1: “Why did you select your particular student?”

Prompt 2: “How did you arrange the visit?”

Prompt 3: “**BEFORE** you make the visit, describe your expectations.”

Prompt 4: “Describe the home setting.”

Prompt 5: “What were the topics of conversation?”

Prompt 6: “What did you learn about the student and her/his family?”

Prompt 7: “What did you enjoy about the visit?”

Prompt 8: “What was difficult about the visit?”

Prompt 9: “What can you do differently next time? Or what would you recommend to a colleague about doing a home visit?”

After the visit, the students were asked to chronicle their experiences in a detailed reflection paper according to these prompts (the length of the students’ reflections ranged from 5 to 15 pages). While this methodological approach of gathering reflections of home visit participants parallels Lin and Bates’s (2010) work, my analytical design differs in that the reflection prompts were used to establish distinct analytical categories.

Employing an inductive approach influenced by Corbin and Strauss (1990), I was able to analyze the students’ reflections by identifying distinct themes within each prompt and by organizing them according to general categories. Once all the reflection papers were collected, the students’ answers were grouped according to each prompt and analyzed for emerging themes; that is, all answers for Prompt 1 were analyzed and divided into themes, then answers for Prompts 2, 3, and so on. The emerging themes under each prompt category were then quantified by frequency across all the students’ answers (i.e., for each individual prompt) and then grouped within a matrix that included rhetorical examples. It was also common for students to mention multiple themes within each category, which resulted in a higher overall number of themes than students in some categories. After establishing distinct themes for each prompt, I then examined the entire set of data in terms of three main categories comprising specific prompts. These categories represent activities, perceptions, and events that occur in the three chronological phases involved in the process of conducting a home visit: before the visit, during the visit, and after the visit:

Phase 1: Preparing for the Visit (based on Prompts 1–3)

Phase 2: Crossing the Threshold (based on Prompts 4–6)

Phase 3: Critical Reflections (based on Prompts 7–9)

In the next section, I discuss each category according to the order of the prompts. By analyzing each category in terms of multiple perspectives, the emerging patterns allowed me to begin constructing a general approach for conducting home visits. That said, the following section is intended to describe the experiences of the teacher participants and make recommendations for educators who are designing their own home visits. Describing the data according to the three phases will help organize the nuances involved within each phase as they relate to the overall process. In the Discussion section, I draw on the participants' experiences to establish a framework that can be endorsed by school leaders for promoting home visits. This particular model offers strategies to guide educators through the process of conducting home visits according to the three phases outlined in the analysis.

RESULTS

PHASE 1: PREPARING FOR THE VISIT

Home visits have traditionally been initiated for an academic reason (e.g., to remediate, because of behavior issues), generally making the visit tense and impersonal (S. F. Allen & Tracy, 2004; Cowan et al., 2002). To shift this pattern and move toward a more personal connection, the teachers in this study were instructed to arrange a visit with any student they wanted, as long as their selection was not based on academic remediation. The reason for this being the only guideline is to push teachers to think of alternative purposes for visiting students, as well as how to approach the visit when it is not based on "fixing" a classroom problem. Some of the most popular reasons for selecting students were based on classroom challenges, previous familiarity with parents, welcoming new students, and sharing academic success with parents.

In spite of being asked not to select students per a problem orientation, this emerged as one of the most common reasons. Upon closer examination, though, the reason for targeting challenges was not solely based on academic remediation. Ms. Locke justified her selection because "José is extremely below grade level in reading and math and that is not what we like to hear, as parents." She explained that parents "often feel judged by their children's progress," and thus, she wanted to reassure José's parents that they were not being blamed. In another example, Ms. Walters chose to visit her student Dario because she had been feeling a lot of racial tension and wanted to let him and his parents get to know her personally and meet

her Spanish husband—thus, even though her motivation for conducting the home visit was based on behavior challenges at school, the actual visit did not focus on classroom behavior.

Another prevalent reason for selecting students was based on previously established relationships with parents. While two teachers indicated knowing the parents from school events (e.g., conference, having a sibling in a prior class), others explained that their meetings with the parents were more opportunistic (e.g., at a school dance, escorting students to the bus after school). The other reasons for conducting visits entailed a particularly personal connection and desire to open avenues of communication—especially sharing students' academic success with parents and welcoming new students to the area. The main point here is that the selection of initial visits should not be based on remediation, and if challenges motivate parent contact, teachers should avoid blaming students and emphasizing problems.

The next logistical concern that most teachers mention is how to arrange the visit once a student has been selected. Strategies for arranging visits are highly contextual, and teachers must be flexible, especially when working with linguistically diverse homes. In addition to drawing on bilingual competencies to contact parents, teachers relied on a variety of communicative resources: phone calls, in-person invitations, letters home, student correspondence, home visitor communication, and e-mail. While most of the teachers in this study were able to contact the parents personally (in person or by phone), other options proved to be just as effective when working with language differences. Even though Ms. Borne does not speak Spanish, she was able to get help from her students to compose a personalized parent letter that she sent home with all her Spanish-speaking students. As described by Ms. Borne,

although the parents did not write a return letter, the mother did stop by my classroom after school to thank me for the letter. At that time, I expressed my desire to visit with the family further and share student work samples.

When significant language differences surfaced as a challenge to home communication attempts, the teachers endorsed using their students as primary resources to arrange the visit.

The next step involved having the teachers document their expectations *before* conducting the home visit. Predictably, the most common theme revolved around feelings of anxiety and uncertainty. The uneasiness expressed by the teachers stemmed from a variety of perceptions. For some, language differences heavily influenced expectations: "Before the visit I was pretty stressed about the entire experience. The main stressor was the

fact that Eddie's mom, Guadalupe, did not speak any English" (Mr. Taft). For most teachers, though, the potential reactions of the students' parents were the locus of angst. Ms. Shelton's remarks reflect these sentiments:

I was not sure what to expect. I was uncertain what Ciarra's parent would think of me or why I decided to visit their home in particular. I was nervous and afraid I would not be able to carry a conversation with the family.

While the parents' emotions were widely noted, it is more likely that the teachers' reactions were based on their own insecurities. As Ms. Glenn admitted, "I am anxious as it is something that calls me out of my comfort zone." The general feeling of anxiety suggests an overarching factor in the widespread lack of home visits in U.S. schools. Acknowledging the prevalence of these emotional reactions as normal and healthy can help educators confront their misperceptions and reshape them by actually conducting visits and having positive experiences.

PHASE 2: CROSSING THE THRESHOLD

While the use of "threshold" here refers to walking through the front door, it also reflects penetrating the emotional, intellectual, and professional barriers that inhibit educators from conducting home visits (Ginsberg, 2007; Lin & Bates, 2010; Stuht, 2009; Taveras, 1998). To prepare for the visit, the teachers were asked to brainstorm a range of discussion topics to keep the conversation flowing. In addition to a sample of the students' classroom work, other suggestions to prompt interaction and stimulate conversation included bringing small gifts, activities, food, or personal items. During the visits, most teachers expressed the overall open and welcoming atmosphere of the homes. To Ms. Walters, "the home was warm and had a very calm feeling," and Ms. Opal added, "[The family] opened the door and was very welcoming to me."

Even for teachers who were overcome with nerves before visiting, anxiety eventually waned. Ms. Borne explains,

At the start of the visit I felt there was a strong mutual awkwardness. I had never visited a student's home, and I got the impression that this was a first for this family as well. The boys seemed very shy and somewhat uncomfortable to be part of the conversation. As we began to talk about the boy's progress in school, conversation became a little more comfortable.

Ms. Borne's comment on the development of conversation highlights one of the most important aspects of the visit—what to talk about. The variety of discussion topics varied greatly. Among the most common were school/academics, the teacher's gifts, family, student behavior, heritage, culture, language, and personal hobbies.

During initial visits, the easiest conversational topic is the student's educational context—though this does not necessitate a lengthy description of the student's academic progress. Having a sample of school work on which the students were successful allowed the teachers to steer the conversation in a positive direction. Whereas Mr. Taft used the opportunity to demonstrate his student's overall effort and "emphasized the fact that he received one of the highest grades on the assignment in his class period," Ms. Lorenzo informed her student's mom about "a parent meeting the night before and what we talked about." Discussing school during home visits offers opportunities for teachers to understand the parents' views on education. Ms. Opal reported that her student's mother eventually became "confident enough to retell the efforts of her and her husband to raise their children by promising them an education that would make them better individuals."

While academics and behavior were widely mentioned in the conversations, discussing school matters also provided a platform for shifting the conversation to a variety of other topics—especially when the teachers introduced personal items and gifts. The gifts served as a gateway for reducing emotional stress and expressing gratitude. For some, school supplies proved to be very applicable to the home visit: "We brought two paper bags filled with school supplies such as a notebook, pencils, crayons, sharpener and erasers for the boys" (Ms. Olsen). Other teachers found food to be useful:

I brought homemade bread and some salsa dip. The little boy was excited, and then Dario's mom took it from me and immediately went to the kitchen and sat her son down and sliced some bread and gave him some sauce to dip his bread in. (Ms. Peralta)

After the home visit, the next day Ciarra said her mom loved the Russian candy and wanted to know where the Russian store is located. (Ms. Shelton)

In addition to gifts, photographs seemed to spark a great deal of interest. Ms. Bates relayed that "the kids were surprised to see the photos I brought. Apparently it did not occur to them that teachers too once were children. . . . We then had a pleasant conversation centered around the kids."

These types of transitional points provided powerful segues into more profound themes, including cultural differences between the United States and the families' home countries, language difficulties, immigration, and relationships (Ginsberg, 2007; Lopez et al., 2001). In some instances, these conversations allowed the teachers to make deeper connections with the parents. Mr. Taft recounted their discussion of what it is like to be an immigrant in America: "The first topic we discussed was how long Eddie and his family have been in America (4 years). I told them I also came to America almost 17 years ago and have experienced the same things."

Personal connections transcended cultural background and language. In a rather poignant conversation concerning marriage and childrearing, Ms. Glenn explained,

The father gave us a word of advice: that our spouse should be number one in our lives, and our children should come second. That I, as a mother, must not devote all of my attention to the child and forget about my husband and that the best gift my husband could give our children is to love their mom. I truly felt like I was sitting in a room with people I had known all my life who cared deeply for our success as professionals, parents, and as a couple.

While actually making home visits is crucial for cultivating effective parent partnerships, conversations like these constitute the foundation on which mutual trust and respect are established.

During these conversations and interactions, the teachers were intimately exposed to the students' lives and social environment. By merely being in the students' home environment, teachers were exposed to valuable funds of knowledge that included music abilities (Ms. Glenn, Ms. Bates), horticulture expertise (Ms. Walters), technology (Ms. Peralta), child care (Ms. Lorenzo), linguistic diversity (Ms. Beltran), and artistic interests (Ms. Shelton). Teachers also noted the importance of immigration issues, challenging home environments, language abilities, and student personalities away from school. While there was a variety of learning points mentioned, heaviest emphasis was placed on the parents' views on school. Through interaction and dialogue, the home visit helped Ms. Opal "see [her] student through his parents' perspective." Ms. Peralta's experience resonates with this point and provides insight into why parents often feel intimidated around schools:

I felt that it provided a bridge for parents with the school. I really feel that parents felt as if they could not contribute in school because they did not finish school. Dad mentioned that he never went to school because school in Mexico costs too much money. Mom mentioned that she went to school in Mexico until second grade. . . . Parents shared with us that they are very proud of their children who have an education because they work in the fields and do not want their children to follow in their footsteps. Both parents encourage their children to put their best effort in school so that they do not have to do agricultural work when they get older.

Developing a greater appreciation of the parents' view of education is especially significant considering the general expectation of indifference that many teachers hold toward language-minority parents. On the contrary, as Ms. Locke candidly admitted, "The majority of my students' parents are very open to in-person communication and ideas for helping their kids." While this sentiment is commonplace in most schools, Ms.

Locke commented that because of the home visit, she now feels that she and the parents “are on the same team” and she now believes that the parents know that she is “in this with them, not against them and not to judge them.”

The process of realigning perspectives also involved learning about meaningful events that have influenced the parents’ and students’ interactions with school: “Dario’s mother told us about Dario’s father being deported recently, and how it had really affected him. . . . Learning about his dad made a huge difference in the way that I view his attitude and behavior” (Ms. Walters).

During home visits, teachers must be prepared to field a variety of topics and situations. The points listed here demonstrate the degree of sensitivity needed to be a supportive listener but also how to take this type of information and translate it into classroom support without singling out the students.

PHASE 3: CRITICAL REFLECTIONS

This section outlines the students’ critical reflections of the entire process. By juxtaposing what they enjoyed and the challenges that arose during the visit, the teachers were able to filter their thoughts and emotions dialectically to develop a more holistic perspective of their experiences. When describing what they enjoyed about the visits, the majority of teachers ($n = 10$) highlighted their interactions with the parents. These positive interactions manifested in various ways. As Ms. Opal described, “I believe Cruz’s family and I made very good connections because we shared the same language (Spanish), similar experiences coming to this country, and similar struggles being an immigrant.” Ms. Walters reflected on the symbolic value of her gift: “When [the mom] saw that I brought something homemade for them, that I had done, I think that she looked at me as more of a fellow ‘woman’ rather than a ‘teacher’ from the district.” These types of connections show how visits can help level the power differential between the roles of teacher and parent (Cooper, 2009).

Dismantling fear and suspicion is a critical part of establishing sincere relationships based on mutual understanding and aspiration (Lopez, 2001; Lopez et al., 2001). While a fundamental restructuring of teacher–parent relationships can have numerous benefits, the most tangible effects of home visits are seen through student performance and attitude modifications in the classroom (Peralta-Nash, 2003). Ms. Borne commented that her visit was going to help her student “feel more comfortable in school and develop relationships,” and Ms. Peralta brought up that “both mom and dad

are scheduled to come in and help in the classroom” as a result of the visit. Transcending the classroom are the intangible connections that develop between parents and educators. Here, Ms. Castor articulates the unfolding effects that her visit produced for the parents and student:

I enjoyed spending time and getting to know Arianna’s mom [Leticia]. I would love to keep doing this. I feel like I have such a better relationship with Leticia and also with Arianna. Now when I see Arianna’s mom at the pickup area, we actually talk and have a conversation instead of just smiling and saying hi. I also feel like Arianna listens more now because she knows I have that connection with her mother.

The accounts of the challenges encountered during the visit reflected deep-seated emotions and perceptions of difference. For many, the most common challenge involved “getting over the awkward and uncomfortable feeling” (Ms. Castro). While feelings of anxiety and awkwardness generally faded quickly, some teachers mentioned the “language barrier” as a persistent obstacle. In some cases, the difficulty focused on the accuracy of the interpretation being conducted by the student. Mr. Taft explained, “The entire visit hinged on Eddie being a truthful translator, but I listened for key words he was saying and he seemed to have done a good job.” In a similar situation, Ms. Beltran expanded on her suspicions:

I am not sure that Daniel’s interpreting was “faithful,” especially in telling me what his mother said. She seemed to use many more words than what he said back to me in English, but I do believe the message was communicated adequately both ways.

This comment demonstrates an underlying discomfort felt when involved in an interpreted conversation. Many components of a conversation do not directly translate to another language and must be either paraphrased or expanded to provide background knowledge and make connections. As with Ms. Beltran, however, this sociolinguistic phenomenon can invoke suspicion in the accuracy of the translation.

Aside from language-based difficulties, adhering to cultural norms surfaced as an important concern. Ms. Bates explained,

It was very difficult for me to approach Tatyana regarding the home visit. I felt it was inappropriate in the Slavic culture. People usually invite one to their house. I was put into the position of inviting myself. Considering my profession as a teacher and, thus, a role model of culturally appropriate behavior, I felt I was breaking all the rules of conduct when first mentioning the [visit] to the parent.

While this particular visit was very productive and positive, the teacher brings up a valuable point to consider when arranging visits. Informing

parents about home visits before approaching them can help frame the purpose and intent of the visit to be less imposing.

The final prompt involved having the teachers list recommendations for future home visits, whether for themselves or colleagues. The diverse range of teacher experiences produced a rich collection of suggestions:

- “Bring gifts or activities to share with the family.”
- “Ensure convenient visit schedule for parents.”
- “Develop home-language skills.”
- “Gather information on the students and families before the visit.”
- “Start the visits before school starts.”
- “Visit families of multiple students.”
- “Bring examples of student school work.”
- “Bring information about school services.”
- “Conduct parent conferences at the home.”
- “Use students to interpret.”
- “Visit students who are struggling in class.”
- “Bring family photos to share.”

As emphasized here, bringing some kind of gift (e.g., food or crayons) or activity (e.g., games or books) helps to facilitate conversation and demonstrate appreciation for the invitation to visit. Whereas Ms. Bates feels that “a simple game for the kids might serve as great ice-breaker and conversation starter,” Ms. Walters suggests that

another gesture that I feel would make me, the teacher, more personable is to bring the family baked goods or a special dish that I cook myself. Food is a something that all people have in common which we can talk about over the course of the home visit.

Since buying gifts or making food can be costly (if done for multiple students), these strategies can be done intermittently—especially after teachers get more comfortable conducting the visits and their reputation for visiting families spreads. Other home visit props can be just as meaningful, such as family photos, maps, student work samples, or “bringing something educational like a book to read or an activity game” (Ms. Shelton). Aside from gifts and props, additional suggestions should be considered according to the context of the individual needs of the teacher and family. For example, learning some basic phrases in the home language is a great way to demonstrate willingness to learn about the family. As for bringing an interpreter, much needs to be considered and negotiated before the visit to ensure low level of stress and appropriate translations. Since having a younger student interpret might be stressful for the child, demonstrating that you trust a family member to interpret can signal respect.

The accumulation of positive experiences during home visits should be shared among colleagues. Ms. Borne admitted,

Amidst the language barrier and awkwardness, I would recommend a home visit to others. I think it is a great way to get to know students and their families, and would be much easier if more people did home visits. As more teachers in a building or district perform home visits, families will become increasingly familiar with the concept.

Essentially, Ms. Bourne's comments demonstrate that home visits have the potential to shift professional practices (i.e., *habitus*) across multiple levels in education while reallocating distributions of power that account for the heightened expectations of families in the process. Above all other recommendations, tips, and strategies, Ms. Glenn articulated the most invaluable: "As for a recommendation for a colleague I would just say *do it*. It is completely worth it and I feel enriched by the entire experience."

DISCUSSION

By sifting through the logistics of actually entering the homes and cultivating relationships with families from a bottom-up approach, the analytical lens used here offers valuable insight into the influence of the educators' *habitus* and the manifested emotionally guided practices that are "objectively 'regulated' and 'regular' without being in any way the product of obedience to rules" (Bourdieu, 1999, p. 108). The nature of the particular visits in this discussion is even more impactful considering that all the families come from immigrant backgrounds (Auerbach, 2011; Baeder, 2010; Ginsberg, 2007; Lopez et al., 2001). Born out of embodied experiences, these commentaries illustrate how ingrained beliefs can evolve, enabling educators to simultaneously resist and transform institutionalized patterns of domination and exclusion. By eroding the misconceptions commonly fashioned to minority students, families, and communities, schools can be restructured to integrate "culturally relevant practices" (Benson, 2003) such that the interactions that are promoted within classrooms begin to reflect—rather than reject—experiences that take place in living rooms.

APPLICATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

While the positive effects of conducting home visits have been widely noted (S. F. Allen & Tracy, 2004; Auerbach, 2009; Auerbach, 2012c; Barnayk & McNelly, 2009; Cowan et al., 2002; Harvard Family Research Project, 2009; Lopez et al., 2001; Parent Teacher Home Visit Project, 2011; Stern-

berg, 2006), very little has been published on the experiences of educators who conduct the visits (Lin & Bates, 2010; Stuht, 2009; Taveras, 1998) and even much less on the entire process entailed in conducting them. Whereas the overall scale of this particular project might lack in terms of extensive data sets, the exploratory nature of the analysis is meant to emphasize the need to further theorize home visits through a sociocultural lens. Because school leaders are encouraged to promote home visits as a component of authentic family engagement (Auerbach, 2009; Auerbach, 2012c; Goodall et al., 2011; Lopez et al., 2001; Olivos, 2012), it is necessary to provide examples of what this process actually looks like so that they can effectively support their teachers and staff. The participant narratives portrayed here reveal the inner workings of conducting home visits, shedding light on the variety of logistical and emotional nuances involved in the overall process.

While much work is still needed to better understand how educators, students, and parents are affected through this process, the commentaries of the teachers in this discussion afford us with valuable insight into the overall experience of conducting initial home visits. Building on the experiences outlined here, I encourage administrators and teachers to promote the initiation of schoolwide home visit program. That said, if home visit programs are not well planned, there is great potential for less-than-positive results. Based on the contextual diversity involved in conducting home visit, logistical demands will vary greatly among different districts, schools, and classrooms. Furthermore, even though the literature on home visits includes various tips and recommendations (see Faltis, 2001, pp. 177–178; Ginsberg, 2007, pp. 58–59; Lin & Bates, 2010, p. 184; Peralta-Nash, 2003, pp. 114–115; Stuht, 2009, pp. 25–26; Taveras, 1998, p. 3), absent is an extensive list of points and activities to guide educators across the entire process—that is, before, during, and after the visit.

Drawing from the experiences noted by the participants in this discussion, my personal experiences (E. J. Johnson, 2008), as well as the recommendations listed in the literature, I have compiled a list of activities that administrators can use to help teachers integrate home visits into their practice. The guidelines detailed in the home visit procedural framework outlined in Table 2 propose a variety of ideas that can enhance the overall experience of conducting home visits. Even though some of the suggestions might not apply to all contexts, organizing initial home visits around this three-step process provides a solid platform for structuring activities and ensuring sustainability.

While this extended list of recommendations is meant to incite thought and illustrate the complexities involved in promoting and conducting home visits, I want to emphasize that this framework does not constitute

Table 2. Home Visit Procedural Framework*Phase 1: Before the visit*

- Inquire about administrative policy on home visits.
- Find school or community assistance with translation of documents or phone calls.
- Send letters home with all students describing purpose of home visits.
- Talk to parents about home visits in person when informal occasions arise.
- Set up visits according to appropriate days/time for the family.
- Research culturally appropriate etiquette for visits.
- Collect home visit props (work samples, photographs, games, food, etc.).
- Compile a list of community resources that might be useful to the family.

Phase 2: During the visit

- When introducing yourself, let the family know what name they can use with you (e.g., Ms./Mr. Xyz or first name).
- Greet everyone present, including young children.
- Accept refreshments, though provide information about allergies if you cannot consume something being offered.
- Discuss topics that are not related to school, if possible—use your props as a prompt for conversation.
- Inquire about the family's home, customs, children, and so on.
- Take pictures if appropriate—start by asking if it is okay to get a photo of you and your student (include siblings, pets, friends, etc.).
- Mention to parents that you enjoy having parents visit your class, and extend an invitation if they seem interested.

Phase 3: After the visit

- Record details of visit and develop a “funds of knowledge” list.
- Share your experiences with faculty and administrators.
- Send a thank-you note home with the student, and include photographs of the visit.
- Post photographs in classroom on a “home visit wall” for other students and faculty to see (after getting permission from student).
- Contact other parents about visits, especially those who know the families whom you have already visited.
- Maintain informal communication—for example, send a personal note home to one family per week, or drop by the families' homes periodically for brief greetings.
- Invite an administrator or colleague to accompany you on a subsequent visit.
- Offer to accompany a colleague on a home visit.

an absolute set of directions for conducting home visits; rather, it should be considered as comprising malleable strategies that can be adapted to meet the contextual needs of various districts, schools, and classrooms. Logistically, administrators can employ these guidelines to help teachers visualize and plan home visits as a broader process. Optimally, all educators at the district and building levels will work together to add contextually specific strategies to this list—and then promote successful approaches with other teachers, administrators, and researchers.

A final point that merits discussion involves strategies to alleviate the anxiety felt by teachers before conducting home visits (as highlighted by the participants in this study). Such widespread anxiety is triggered at the margins of the habitus—epitomizing the potency of the social forces deterring teachers from conducting home visits. While these feelings manifest during Phase 1, they are actually mitigated by completing the entire process. Thus, the anxiety surrounding home visits on an individual level is most effectively overcome by actually conducting home visits—at least until such practices are institutionalized so that they become part of the overall educational habitus of schools.

CONCLUSION

In addition to building a stronger sense of belonging and respect between homes and schools, home visits have been shown to contribute to academic achievement and alleviate some of the escalating pressure stemming from the accountability mandates stamped on schools by No Child Left Behind. Lopez and colleagues' (2001) investigation of high-performing schools and districts with significant migrant populations revealed that "making home visits was a top priority for everyone" (p. 264). Furthermore, Lopez and colleagues report that "rather than perceiving themselves as organizations whose aim was to get parents into the school site, school personnel saw themselves as unrestrained agents who proactively go out into the homes, bringing the school to migrant families where they are" (p. 281). Not only does learning about families and communities broaden educators' perspectives on their students' true abilities, experiencing this through home visits helps teachers scaffold classroom topics more easily and contour lessons around the students' individual learning needs (Center for Research on Education, Diversity, & Excellence, 2011; Ginsberg, 2007, p. 59; Pérez, 2004; Zentella, 2005).

Conducting home visits entails more than building relationships, developing effective avenues of communication, and enhancing academic success. Engaging parents and families through home visits is about social justice and eroding educational inequities that have been institutionalized through broader cultural, economic, and political trends over the past four centuries (Marger, 2006; McCarty, 2004; Ovando, 2003; Takaki, 1993; Zinn, 2005). As a sociocultural process, home visits can have a significant impact on the future trajectory of professionally embedded practices that continue to be rooted in larger, historically contoured belief systems. Effecting change of this magnitude necessitates strong leadership and clear

guidelines for supporting teachers as they navigate the uncharted territory involved in conducting home visits.

Decentering the locus of power from classrooms and relocating it to living rooms gives parents and families from culturally and economically diverse backgrounds an alternative approach to interject their voices and contribute to the decision-making processes involved in their children's education. Through this inductive approach to parental engagement and relationship building, educators can begin to dispel the underlying deficit views that are widely ascribed to minority and immigrant families in educational contexts (Hadjistassou, 2008; Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2008). Advancing the visibility of diverse parents and students through home visits is a necessary step toward reinvigorating our approach to education and leveling the barriers that continue to dissuade widespread family and community engagement with schools.

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Eric J. Johnson is an assistant professor of bilingual/ESL education in the College of Education at Washington State University–Tri-Cities. His research revolves around issues surrounding language-minority education policies, immigration, and community engagement efforts in public schools.