Would You Step Foot Through My Door?

PTHP Conference Speech Version

When I first learned of the Parent Teacher Home Visit Project four years ago, I was, like many, instantly intrigued. But I also couldn’t help to wonder how such a project could’ve changed my own childhood. You see, it would have be very difficult; not impossible, but difficult for my teachers to have stepped foot through my front door growing up. I wasn’t a bad or difficult kid; I actually was pretty much a goody-two-shoe in school. And it wasn’t that my mom had issues with teachers and schools either. She continually valued education. But the depths of my mother’s exhaustion and the abyss between school’s clean desks and bright lights and the government housing I grew up in was too embarrassing for my mom to allow any teacher to cross. Even the attempt would be met with difficulty because, for as long as I can remember, my single mom had juggled 2-3 jobs.

So as a teacher in one Sacramento’s poorest neighborhoods, when I make my annual phone calls to my class’s families, I get it. I absolutely empathize with the dead silence, the embarrassed sighs, and even the defensive scoffs when I ask to do a home visit.

Their apprehension is understandable, but I present my genuine interest by putting it this way. *We, the school community, are always asking parents to enter into our world. Come to conferences, come volunteer in our classrooms. Come to family nights. Come pick your kid up early on shortened days. As the teacher, I would rather first GO. Go sit at their kitchen table instead of at my awkward kidney-shaped class table. Go hear about their typical day*
of working, cooking, and cleaning instead of walking them through our class schedule. Go play a card game in their living room instead of explaining multiplication flash cards. Go pick tomatoes with them in their garden instead of only picking apart the latest standardized benchmark tests.

Now don’t get me wrong, all of these ‘school’ discussions are important, but why is it that so many judgment calls are made on parents who don’t step foot on our campus when we, the teachers, too often haven’t made an attempt to step foot on their front porch? Home visits are especially essential to any school located in areas of poverty and diversity. I believe that it is my responsibility to experience and embrace the realities my students face, even if just for 30 minutes in their living room. Howard Tish in the book Poverty is NOT a Learning Disability reminds teachers that “we can’t afford to isolate ourselves from the communities we serve.” And that “the first step in developing effective lines of school-home communication is making it easy for parent to get to know, like, trust, and respect us—to see us as their peers, not their superiors.”

I can’t think of an easier way for me to begin that communication then to give the parents a home court advantage through the Home Visit Project. The bonds of trust begin to build the moment I walk into their home and compliment their hard work in raising such an amazing child. As I tell them more of my story growing up, the assumed superiority disappears. As peers, we discuss childhood chores, local events, and yes eventually their hopes for their child’s education. But the relationship starts when I take that first step towards the families instead of hiding behind my classroom door.
Over the last four year of teaching in Sacramento, I have completed nearly seventy home visits. After these visits not one of those families has missed attending a parent teacher conference or returning a phone call throughout the school year. I’m sure all of you can relate when I say the impossibility of speaking on the topic of Home Visits is trying to express all the benefits we see. Perhaps the best way is to invite you to ‘walk’ through a home visit I had last year. Gabby Ross, as we’ll name her today, was a 4th grader that came to our school mid-way through January. She had an older brother; we’ll call him Davon, who had been expelled from their old school. Gabby’s mom was a supportive, yet extremely busy mother and wanted a fresh start for her children. Not knowing our school culture, she was very reluctant to my first few attempts to set up a home visit. But as I built a relationship with Gabby in class, she began to pester her mom even more into letting me visit. Finally Ms. Ross allowed Davon’s teacher and me to visit one day after school. As we began our walk home with Gabby and Davon, I was instantly amazed at their critical thinking skills. Gabby explained every turn and the purpose of their path. “We don’t go down that street, Mrs. Smith. Even though it’s quicker, the man living on the right looks at us funny.” “Stay on this side of the street so that stray dog doesn’t notice you.” “In the morning, we can walk through this alley, but not after school. The guys hanging out are up to no good.” By the time we were at Gabby’s driveway, I had made a mental note to use these critical strengths of hers in tomorrow’s math problem solving lesson. That’s what home visits do for us; they shed light on to students’ strengths that simply won’t show up on a standardized test.
Gabby then explained that we got home a little too fast, and that her mom wouldn’t be home for another ten minutes from picking up their little sister. A light bulb went off as I recalled the numerous times I had chastised Davon for hanging out too long afterschool with his buddies. What I saw as loitering was really a time management strength of his. When I asked Davon about this, he responded with a shy “Yeah, I’d rather my sister wait around at school than on our street.” His loyalty and protection over Gabby filled my heart with appreciation. *Insight into students’ realities leads to teachers’ empathy and understanding.*

When Ms. Ross pulled up, I couldn’t help but smile as I watched Davon and Gabby snap straight to work getting their little sister out of the car seat, bringing in bags from the back, and asking their mom about her day. These were not children fitting the negative stereotype of “lazy and apathetic poor student”. These were children wanting to help out in any way possible and caring deeply for their family members.

At first, Ms. Ross was full of apologies. Sorry for being late, sorry for the messy house, sorry for the cold, dark living room (they try to keep the electric bill down), sorry for not having much to offer to eat or drink. But once I began commenting on the family photos covering the living room walls, Ms. Ross lit up with pride and love. For the next twenty minutes, we laughed while she told hilarious stories from various photo shots. Gabby and Davon jumped in with their own corrections and perspectives. Ms. Ross became so open and comfortable with her home court advantage and I became simply an excited listener commenting with my own funny family stories along the way.
When it came time for us to wrap things up, I asked Gabby if there was anything else she wanted to show me. Gabby immediately wanted to walk me to the bedroom where she did her homework and reading. I stood at the doorway of the smallest bedroom I’d ever seen (and remember, I grew up in government housing!). Inside this tiny bedroom were two sets of bunk beds, of which Gabby explained each occupant. This was her bed, this was Davon’s, the other two were sometimes for her little sister or when her cousins came around, they slept there too.

As I fought off the urge to pity Gabby, I recalled so many of our classroom discussions about her table group arguments over space. Gabby constantly complained about her neighbors taking up too much space, taking her pencil, or moving her book too far away. It all clicked right then and there. Gabby’s need for personal space made so much sense. The very next day in class, we located a special spot on the floor that Gabby could take her work to whenever she felt crowded. Such collaboration can only come from experiencing our students’ lives first hand.

As we said out goodbyes and thank you’s, Gabby and Davon both insisted on walking us back to school while Ms. Ross was adamant about giving us a ride. I reassured them that we could make the walk back with no trouble at all. If a fourth grader and her fifth grade brother could trek it, I was confident we could too. Walking back with my colleague, we debriefed on all the insight we had gained in the last hour. We had seen bright glimmers of pride in our students’ eyes and noted their strengths and skills to accentuate back in class. Misconceptions we had of Ms. Ross and her involvement in her children’s education were completely shattered. Perhaps we could’ve had this same conversation after a parent teacher conference or in the
cafeteria on a family literacy night. That is, of course, if Ms. Ross would’ve eventually taken the first step towards our campus.

But as the teacher, I had taken the first step. I had stepped foot on Gabby’s home turf. I had experienced her realities first hand and gained valuable insight because of it.

*I believe the paradigm needs to be shifted in public schools, specifically schools serving the poor.* Less energy needs to be spent on complaining, or at best brainstorming, how we teachers can get parents to step foot through our school doors. Instead, I challenge the shift to start with first asking if we would step foot through the parents’ front door. The Parent Teacher Home Visit Project makes such a shift possible for teachers. As embarrassed as I was of my own childhood home life, I can’t help but wonder how things would’ve been different if a teacher had visited my house. Would my mother have figured out a way to attend just one parent teacher conference between shifts? Would a teacher have realized why my brother messed up on most of his math homework? Would I have opened up just little bit to my teachers as to why I was so quiet and doubting?

I know it will make all the difference in our students’ families, our school culture, and ultimately in education nationwide. Thank You.