

# 13 TEACHERS TEACHING TEACHERS™

FOR A DYNAMIC COMMUNITY OF TEACHER LEADERS

## Lessons from the kitchen table

VISITING WITH FAMILIES IN THEIR HOMES

By Margery B. Ginsberg

With more than 130 million migrants worldwide and nearly 30 million people in the United States who were born in other countries, immigration has, now more than ever, profound implications for schools. In New York City, 48% of students come from immigrant-

headed households speaking more than 100 languages. In California, 1.5 million children are considered to be English language learners. Even in places like Dodge City, Kan., more than 30% of the children enrolled in public schools are the children of immigrants. As one scholar, quoting Dorothy in "The Wizard of Oz," notes, "We are not in Kansas anymore" (Suarez-Orosco & Suarez-Orosco, 2001).

Visiting immigrant families in their homes provides a rich way to learn more about the families and their culture and to discover ways to connect them to their new schools. As increasing numbers of schools receive families who are new to the United States, there is a widespread call to include the sources of knowledge that reside in all families in classroom learning (Moll, et al, 1992; Suarez-Orosco & Suarez-Orosco, 2001; Gay, 2000). This approach to teaching has the potential to enhance motivation and achievement

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#### Voice of a teacher leader

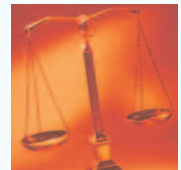
Bill Ferriter is stunned by a mother's question.

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(Veléz-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2000). Just as significant, it can amplify the voices of historically underserved families to inform collective commitments to equity and excellence (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 1997; Moll & Ruiz, 2002; Valdez, 1996).

But visiting the home of an immigrant family requires preparation by the school and by the teachers who will be visiting. In this article, I offer suggestions for preparing teachers to make those important visits.

A six-part tool is printed on pp. 3-6:

1. Start with questions
2. Read about funds of knowledge
3. Identify questions for the conversation
4. Practice asking questions
5. Take notes
6. Learn from interpreters

#### Applying what you learned in home visits

It is beyond the scope of this article to chronicle the many ways in which teachers can apply what they have learned from visiting families in their homes. In one classroom that comes to mind, for example, a teacher taught literacy through collages of children's travel experiences, photography and poetry about students' neighborhoods, "where I'm from" poems (Christensen, 1997), and math problems that embed in student narratives. These displays remind visitors to classrooms to see children's inclinations and capacities broadly. They also testify to new forms of curricular innovation that engage children's motivation.

Perhaps, however, the most important outcomes cannot be seen. As teachers listen to stories about refugee camps in Kenya, negotiating the health care system in Seattle, and becoming self-sufficient in the United States by working two or three jobs, they share with one another various reminders of the strength and determination of the families they serve. Related to this, they consistently communicate that one of the most significant outcomes of home visits has been eradicating the discourse on "lack of parent involvement" and the concomitant sense of hopelessness that accompanies such conversation. This process engages educators in new ways to

think about and communicate about the extraordinary knowledge that resides within all families. One of the consequences is that teachers are more likely to view households as contexts where rich learning occurs, as opposed to contexts that hinder academic progress.

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## Start with questions

**B**egin the process of visiting with families in their homes by answering several introductory questions about the expectations for the visits.

These four background questions will stimulate an initial discussion about the purposes and possibilities of visiting with families in their homes. I recommend answering the questions in small groups, perhaps grade-level teams. Another alternative would be to do a carousel activity in a larger group, perhaps an entire school staff. In this scenario, post each question on a separate piece of chart paper and move small groups of teachers from question to question, adding the comments of each group to the chart paper.

1. What might home visits teach us that would be difficult to learn in another context?
2. How might we want to know, with greater breadth and depth, about the lives of diverse linguistic communities in teaching practices?
3. As teachers, how can we continuously dismantle deficit thinking?
4. What have we learned about “respect” that we want to keep in mind as we visit families in their homes?

**1**

## Read about funds of knowledge

**F**unds of knowledge are strengths and talents that reside in all families, whether they are academic, civic, and/or technical. The concept of “funds of knowledge” is based on the simple premise: people are competent. We all have knowledge, often derived from sources outside of school, culled from within social, historical, political, and economic contexts. Providing educators with an approach to visiting homes in order to learn about a family’s funds of knowledge can reveal rich social fabrics, fascinating oral histories, ways of organizing complicated lives, and technical expertise that can be elicited to significantly enrich everyday curriculum.

As you prepare teachers to make home visits, have them read and discuss “Funds of knowledge for teaching: Using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms” by Moll, et al (1992). This literature is practitioner-friendly and often requires less than 20 minutes to read. (Check your university library for a copy of this article.) This article distinguishes between visiting a family’s home as the bearer of knowledge and visiting a family’s home as a learner. The idea of teachers as learners in this context is an important departure from convention.

An alternative to reading the work of Moll, et al (1992) is to read and discuss the following excerpt from the Center for Applied Linguistics (1994). This article in its entirety can be found online at [www.cal.org/resources/Digest/ncrcds01.html](http://www.cal.org/resources/Digest/ncrcds01.html). I ask teachers to read the following excerpt and compare what this author is expressing with some of their own reasons for visiting with families in their home.

“Teachers have voiced two underlying transformative potentials in viewing the households as repositories of funds of knowledge. The first challenges traditional notions of culture as only being represented through dances, food, folklore, and the like. As a result of these home visits, teachers begin to view culture as a dynamic process rather than a static end state. Teachers in the Tucson project learned, among other things, how households network in informal market exchanges and how cross-border activities enabled their students to act as mini-ethnographers. They also recognized that students acquire a multi-dimensional depth and breadth from their participation in household life (Moll et al., 1992).

“The second transformative principle of this research debunks the pervasive idea that linguistically and culturally diverse working-class minority households lack worthwhile knowledge and experiences. Teachers who have participated in these visits have been changed as a result of getting to know families that have survived against overwhelming odds or made great sacrifices to gain a better education for their children. Consequently, these teachers now view their students with more respect and understanding, and are better able to tie the academic content to the formerly hidden talents and abilities they have discovered in their minority students” (Gonzalez, et al, 1994).

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## Identify questions for the conversation

The goal in developing these questions is for teachers to learn from families without being intrusive. I often provide the following set of possibilities and ask teachers to underline what they believe are good questions, change whatever might be improved, and draw a line through less important or awkward options. Some of the questions include follow-up probes that can help to clarify. The nuance of language is so important, and sometimes the initial idea behind a question is difficult to communicate. This is one reason why it is ideal to work with interpreters throughout the process. Especially as partners in this initial review of questions, their insights provide a window into experiences that some families may wish to remain private.



1. Can you talk a little bit about the experience your child is having in school?  
Probe: What does your child talk about when he or she mentions school?
2. What are some of the things about schools in the United States that seem to differ from opportunities to learn when you were a child?  
Probe: What is important in your culture or family that you would like educators to know?
3. How did your life in other communities differ from your life here?
4. What are some of the things that you like about this community?
5. Are you currently able to use the skills or talents that you developed in your home country (or in another valued community)?  
Probe: Can you tell me a little about some of the skills or talents that you value?
6. What is something you have learned since coming to the United States or moving to this community that you might not have imagined?
7. What are some of the memories from your earlier community (communities) that you enjoy sharing?
8. What are some of your biggest interests now? Can you trace the origin of those interests?
9. In what ways might your child say she or he is similar to you?
10. If your child was to show up in a classroom where you were the teacher, what would you do to help him/her learn? What would you tell him/her?
11. What is a small thing that for some reason means a big deal to you?
12. If you could relive a single day, what day would that be?
13. What gives your family strength?
14. What contributions to the family does your child enjoy making?  
Probe: Can you tell me about any daily, weekly, and/or monthly routines that the whole family participates in?  
Probe: What are the special gatherings your family enjoys?
15. What stories does your child enjoy?  
Probe: What is a favorite story that you share with your children?
16. Has your child talked about any particular experiences at school that were challenging or fun?
17. How does the experience that you had (in school or just growing up) differ from your child's current school/growing-up experiences?
18. What are you most proud of about your son or daughter?
19. Does your child share their success at home?
20. We are developing a unit/learning experience about (to be determined). What do you think might be particularly important or interesting for your child to learn?
21. Are there any ways you would like to participate at school that you may not have had the opportunity to contribute?

## Practice asking questions

Once teachers have developed a set of questions, give them time to practice asking the questions. For this, a basic role play is helpful. Organize teachers into pairs for this activity. One teacher will play the role of the teacher; the second teacher will play the role of the interpreter since teachers will eventually work with an interpreter during the visits.

The teacher will ask the interpreter three to five questions. Then, they will reverse roles and repeat the activity.

After practicing the questions, invite teachers to suggest other ideas that will ensure that the home visits are comfortable and respectful. For example, teachers often mention the following:

- Ask questions slowly and provide time for people to answer.
- Start with easy questions.
- Ask follow-up questions to encourage families to share more information.
- Photographs and keepsakes can help people share stories.
- Moments of silence are OK.

If someone is recalling something that makes them uncomfortable, show that you know that something is very sad. Accept emotions as part of the process but if you are in doubt about continuing, ask whether they are comfortable doing so.

Don't let an interview last more than about 45 minutes. It is just too tiring for everyone.

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## Take notes

Taking notes during the visit will promote accuracy and reflection. To prepare teachers for this, I often begin by asking each teacher to take notes as they observe some aspect of school or the behavior and/or interactions of a group inside the school.

This experience enables teachers to recognize the difficulty of capturing detail and nuance and eases the way for working with a partner, whenever possible. Taking notes and listening in teams of two allows one teacher to ask questions while the other takes notes. After a few questions, they can reverse roles. Teachers often worry about bombarding a household with visitors, but most families are happy to host two teachers and an interpreter.

To take notes, use any inexpensive notebook and draw a line down the center of each page. Record concrete, observable/audible data on the left and personal thoughts or wonders on the right side of the line.

Both types of data will be informative but teachers will want to be aware that their notes are filtered through their own cultural lens. What we pay attention to, how we pay attention, and how we make meaning are influenced by how each of us is socialized in our families and communities. At a minimum, it is important to be cautious about confusing perceptions from a single visit with certainty about rich and complicated lives.

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## Learn from interpreters

Interpreters play a pivotal role as mediators of language and culture and in communicating policy. These individuals traverse boundaries every day. They negotiate the nuances of language and, in spite of their own limited status within school districts, they lead the way into new forms of learning. Their capacity to imagine possibilities for the families they serve is indefatigable.

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To help teachers create visits that are culturally respectful, I encourage them to talk with interpreters before their visits. I suggest using these questions for those conversations:

1. How might we promote a sense of respect and connectedness among all who are participating? (For example, a small gift of fruit and cookies is often appreciated. In addition, teachers will want to remember to look at the person to whom they are speaking, as opposed to the interpreter.)
2. Where are the opportunities to make the learning experience relevant to all who are involved, including ways for families to make choices? (“Relevance” and “choice,” as it applies to home visits, might simply mean sharing all of the questions up front and asking families to always feel comfortable to pass on a question or to suggest an alternate question. Families are also assured that the interview can stop at any time in the process. Finally, they are provided with a time frame that respects their busy lives. Interviews do not exceed 45 minutes.)
3. How can we create an experience that is challenging in positive ways and engaging for everyone?
4. How can we create an experience in which there are authentic and valued ways to identify success? (For example, before leaving, share one or two of the responses that were particularly informative or interesting. If possible, return with an example of something that you applied in your teaching and that is reflected in student work).

Interpreters negotiate the nuances of language and, in spite of their own limited status within school districts, they lead the way into new forms of learning.

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