Teacher Home Visits: The Importance of Sharing a Meal

By Emily Kilgore

In a world full of expanding class sizes and endless paperwork, getting to know one's students often feels like a never-ending battle. As a new teacher, I made it a priority to know my students: I wanted to be able to wave goodbye on the last day of school without the gnawing sense that I had let an opportunity slip past. So on a late September afternoon, a colleague and I found ourselves walking to the apartment building that was home to Omar, one of my 2nd grade students. Little did I know that after sharing a meal with my student and his family, my outlook on developing relationships with my students would be drastically changed.

Emily Kilgore

A home visit is a way to bridge the gap between school and home for students, families, and teachers. A growing amount of research points to the importance of parents supporting their children's learning in the home. A home visit is one way to deepen the partnership between teacher and parent and increase the students' chances for success.

The school year was only a few weeks old, yet I knew visiting Omar was a priority. The family had moved from Jordan just four months prior, coming to the United States to escape the increasing violence surrounding their country. The purpose of my visit was to understand the family better. This would allow me to both communicate openly with the family and help teach Omar to the best of my ability.

We were quickly escorted up the elevator after being welcomed at the front of the apartment by Firas, Omar's middle-aged father. He immediately began apologizing for the small space and was visibly embarrassed that the family lived in an apartment. He explained that he still owns two other homes (one in Jordan and the other in Algeria) but...
didn't want to purchase a home in the United States until the family knew they liked the country and would stay.

**Teaching the Teacher**

As the apartment door opened, the smell of food enveloped me. Safia, Omar's mother, was busy working in the kitchen, pulling pans out of the oven and stirring a pot on the stovetop. Omar rushed up to hug my colleague and me, and then ushered us to sit down and relax on the couch. Again, Firas began apologizing for the small space. Omar brought out a bag of marbles and asked if I would play with him and his kindergartner sister. I kneeled on the floor and reveled in the joy Omar took in teaching me his made-up game of marbles. If only I had this time with each of my students. Although the living room was not small, it did feel cramped because of the placement of a large folding table along a wall. The entire table was covered with plates of various foods, including vegetables, chicken, hummus, and bread. Two large flower bouquets overlooked the food, hovering like tall pillars. The colors and smells of the table were outstanding. Never in my life had I seen such an array prepared by a single person!

The truth slowly snuck in that Safia had begun cooking at 6:00 that morning and had not stopped since then. I was overwhelmed by the work she had put in for our visit. Her tired eyes smiled as she began to place the last of the food on the table, insisting that my coworker and I help ourselves first. I filled my plate so that the bottom was hidden from sight. I wanted a taste of everything Safia had prepared. The first bite was amazing. I was trying foods I had never eaten before, and all of it was delicious. I occasionally asked Omar what I was eating and he proudly named everything. There was a muffin-like pastry that was filled with meat and the family kindly laughed when I began eating it with a fork. "No, Ms. Kilgore!" Omar had exclaimed, "Eat with your hands! Bite it!" He demonstrated with his own food. Sure enough, it's eaten like a muffin. The twinkle Omar had in his eyes while teaching me, his teacher, is a look I will never forget.

As the dinner progressed, I was able to learn more from the family. Jordan and Algeria were becoming more and more dangerous, and so Firas and Safia had decided to uproot their family and move to Minnesota for the safety and education of their children. As Firas put it, they gave up everything—a large home, an expensive top-rated school for their children, a community of friends, and a language they are all able to speak and understand—to help Omar and their younger daughter "have a chance."

**Know a Student's Story**

I would be lying if I said hearing this didn't concern me. The questions began swirling in my head: Would I be good enough for their family? Could I help Omar catch up to his peers academically? How could I help the family adjust to life in the United States? I am, after all,
a young teacher from northern Minnesota. How could I provide all they were seeking, knowing that there are also 21 other students needing my attention?

At that point, dinner was swept away and dessert was laid out. A tray was placed in front of us, overflowing with various fruits—bananas, peaches, apples, bundles of grapes, and strawberries. I could not thank them enough. Every time my coworker and I said, "Thank you," the parents responded with a smile, saying, "This is nothing compared to what you do." The amount of gratitude flowing around the room was immeasurable.

As the evening drew to a close, I had a moment alone with Firas and Safia. They asked how Omar was doing and wanted to know what they could do to help him from home. The concern and love they had for Omar and his success in school shone like a bright light. My heart was overflowing with emotions as I walked away from the family that evening: gratitude for their hospitality, humility for their praise, and determination for the task at hand. I knew that the self-doubting questions I had earlier in the evening were very real. But I also discovered at that moment that I would put my all into helping this family live peacefully with their decision to move for their children's education. I learned more about my student and his family through the home visit than I could have over a year of phone calls.

That home visit was the best way for me to get to know Omar and his family. It made the task of teaching him come alive by attaching their story, their life, to him. There is nothing quite like sharing a meal with someone to bring you closer together. It is with that shared meal that I go out to teach Omar and his classmates every day.

Emily Kilgore graduated from Luther College in 2011 with a degree in elementary education and a specialty in literacy. From there she moved to St. Paul, Minn. to pursue her teaching career. She has taught at Richardson Elementary School in North St. Paul for three years, first as a literacy specialist and currently as a second grade teacher. Emily is also on her school's leadership team, equity team, and is a career-ladder teacher for her district.