Testimony

Lysette Lemay
Teacher, Sacramento Region Coordinator 2015-2017

My Story and Bridging Culture and Race Through Home Visits

For the first eleven years of my teaching career I taught at schools with very strong parental involvement. My first year of teaching was at a brand new elementary school in an affluent, predominantly white neighborhood in Fresno. There were eleven stay-at-home moms who rotated in and out of my classroom helping with everything from centers to field trips to fundraisers. They were truly partners with me in their student’s education. When I moved to Sacramento, I took a position at a Title 1 elementary school (having no idea what that meant at the time) and had a slightly different experience in terms of family involvement. Although I didn’t have a cadre of moms rotating in and out of my classroom, I did have their support in other ways. For instance, when we could no longer afford to take our first graders to the pumpkin patch due to budget cuts, the families got together and brought the pumpkin patch to us turning our cafeteria into our very own harvest festival! These families were also keen on inviting me to their family functions from time to time. I always felt honored to be included, so I said yes to every birthday party, baby shower, and backyard BBQ invite. I never made a conscious connection between the relationships that I was building with families and students outside of the classroom and the positive things happening back in the classroom. I didn’t realize then that the connection I had with families and students that transcended the school boundaries was very important.

After teaching at this particular site for ten years, I chose to move to a different school to be a part of our district’s priority school initiative. My new site was also a Title 1 school – but completely different from the one I left. I was recruited to be a part of a select group of teachers charged with turning around this campus. We all came together that summer with high hopes, high energy, and high expectations. Personally, I thought the transition would be challenging in some ways, but mostly I assumed it would be easy peasy. After all, I am a black teacher working with black and brown students and families. I assumed I had an automatic “in”; an instant connection that would allow me to hit the ground running, so to speak, using all of my tried-and-true teaching tools. [Insert record scratch here] I quickly learned
that it doesn’t work that way. My blackness did not negate the fact that I represented a system that had historically underserved the community. I still had to work hard to gain trust and build rapport.

At the end of day one, I had already used every tool in my proverbial tool belt and was feeling less than successful. Everything I thought I knew about classroom management, effective lesson delivery, pacing, attention getters, wait time, etc. was null and void. I was desperate…and it was only day one! My colleagues and I were all feeling slightly defeated by the end of that first week. During my personal reflection time, it became apparent to me that I was feeling disconnected, and in fact, there was a complete disconnection between the community and the school. There was no relationship. There was no partnership. There was no collaboration. There was no sense of understanding between the two most important people in the kid’s lives – their families and their teachers. I also realized that I would need to make the first step in bridging the gap of disconnection if I wanted anything to change. But I wasn’t sure how to go about it. It was during a conversation with my principal about how I was feeling and how things were going that he asked me if I’d gone on any home visits yet. I remembered the PD session where we learned about the strategy but had to admit that I hadn’t tried it yet. Thanks to his encouragement, I eventually reached out to one of my moms, whom I saw on most mornings standing in line with her daughter, and set up my very first home visit.

That first home visit went extremely well, and following the visit, that Mom took me up on my invitation to help in the classroom. She eventually became our “class Mom” helping with everything from stations to field trips. She and I both got the connection we were after! This is when home visits became my go to tool for making meaningful connections with my students and families outside of the classroom. I say that home visits saved me because I was truly at a point where I questioned my calling as a teacher and contemplated “retiring” on an almost daily basis. Conducting home visits with willing families allowed my colleagues and I to begin building bridges of connection between the community and our school. Those connections gave me the sense of belonging that I needed and allowed me to relate to my students differently. I got to know them and their caregivers outside of the school and this helped me to be a more empathetic and responsive teacher.

After four years here, I moved on to the middle school world where I continued to make home visits for my 7th graders whose families were just as intrigued by the idea of teachers visiting them in their homes when there was nothing wrong with their student. Different community, bigger kids, same outcomes…trust, empathy, and connection that allowed us to work as a team for the student’s overall success.

**Recruitment and Motivation for PTHV position**

I had 5 years of experience with conducting home visits under the PTHV model and 2-½ years experience with Academic Parent Teacher Teams. At some point, I was invited to participate in an intro training with Yesenia and Alicia Dove in Alabama and that was my first foray into being a trainer. I helped Lisa L.
with piloting APTT, speaking at school board meetings, and being interviewed for the PTHV intro video. Because I was contemplating moving into site administration at some point, I was taking classes to get an administrative credential when I spontaneously said to Lisa that I would love to work with her and the home visit people! I didn’t expect anything to come of the comment, but about 9 months later I received an email from Lisa asking if I was still interested because she’d gotten a grant to cover the cost of hiring someone. After some consideration and talking with Lisa and Carrie in an informal interview, I accepted a one-year assignment to work with PTHV. I knew I was passionate about home visits and APTT and I knew that I enjoyed talking with others about it; other than that, I had no expectations about what the job would entail.

**My Experience and Advice**

These past 18 months have been equally exciting and challenging. It was exciting to be a part of a larger conversation around education equity and best practices for family engagement and to share the PTHV strategy and my experience with it with student teachers, teachers, and school/district staff both locally and nationally. The challenges came with adjusting to being in a work routine very different from the structured school day, learning about the world of non-profits and community based organizations, and feeling disconnected from students and families although still advocating for them. All in all, it has been a rewarding experience that allowed me to grow both personally and professionally. I am looking forward to taking what I now know about high impact family engagement with me back to a school site where I will continue to coach and mentor colleagues and advocate for students and families in a more direct way.

My advice to someone taking on this role is to always be authentic when sharing your home visit experiences; be honest about your fears, perceptions, mistakes, and assumptions. The rest you will learn, or make up, as you go!

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