Mindset Shifts and Parent Teacher Home Visits

Prepared for
Parent Teacher Home Visits

RTI International
2150 Shattuck Avenue,
Suite 800
Berkeley, CA 94704

Authors:
Katherine McKnight
Nitya Venkateswaran
Jennifer Laird
Jessica Robles
Talia Shalev

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Executive Summary

Parent Teacher Home Visits (PTHV) is a strategy for engaging families and educators as a team to support student achievement. The PTHV model developed from an understanding that family engagement is critical to student success, and yet complex barriers often stand in the way of meaningful partnerships between educators and families. In communities where educators and families differ by race, culture, and/or class, educators may have little knowledge of the communities where they teach, including historic racism and poverty. They may also be unaware of their own automatic and unconscious biases (henceforth referred to as "implicit biases") that lead to disconnects and missed opportunities in teaching their students.

Educators’ implicit biases are linked to the well-documented and persistent achievement gaps for Black, Hispanic, and low-income students (e.g., Gay, 2010). Decades of research shows that students of color and those from low-income households are often treated differently from White and middle- and upper-class students in ways that have a negative impact on their school experience and learning (Fabelo et al., 2011; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002; Smith & Harper, 2015). Although PTHV did not start as a program explicitly designed to reduce implicit biases in school communities, after close to two decades of practice, leaders of the model believe it does counteract these biases and that bridging divides as a result of race, culture, language, and socioeconomic status is an essential component of the program’s impact.

Acknowledging and addressing implicit bias based upon race, culture, and class is more important than ever in PK–12 education in the United States. Although student demographics have shifted to a majority of students of color, teacher demographics in public schools have not (Walker, 2016). Per the National Center for Education Statistics, over 80% of public school teachers in the United States are White, middle class, and female (Walker, 2016).

Parent Teacher Home Visits Model

The PTHV model is designed to promote a mutually supportive and accountable relationship between educators and families. Educators are trained in the model and then invited to visit the homes of their students in teams of two, conducting the initial visit in the summer or fall. The model emphasizes discussing hopes and dreams educators and family members have for their students. Other home visit models focus on student performance and academics, which can reinforce prevailing power structures between schools and families and hinder relationship-building. Communication continues after the first home visit, enabling teachers to apply what they learned about their students to instruction, and families to engage more fully with the school and children’s coursework. A second visit in the winter or spring focuses on academics, with reference to the hopes, dreams, and goals shared in the first visit.

In the last 20 years, PTHV has expanded to a network of over 450 communities in 20 states, each a collaboration between local partners such as school districts, teachers unions, and community organizations. While specifics of the model vary by location, participating sites agree to five core practices or “nonnegotiables”:

1. Visits are always voluntary for educators and families, and arranged in advance.
2. Teachers are trained and compensated for visits outside their school day.
3. The focus of the first visit is relationship-building; educators and families discuss hopes and dreams.
4. No targeting – visit all or a cross-section of students so there is no stigma.
5. Educators conduct visits in pairs and, after the visit, reflect with their partners.
**Study Overview**

This report summarizes findings from a study conducted by RTI International examining whether and how PTHV helps to interrupt implicit biases that educators and families may have about each other. Referred to here as mindset shifts, these changes may enable educators and families to more effectively partner to support student success. The research questions driving the study are as follows:

1. According to the research literature, how are mindsets related to race, class, and culture formed?
2. According to research, what are effective strategies for changing these mindsets?
3. What reported changes in beliefs and behaviors do educators and families attribute to participating in Parent Teacher Home Visits?
4. What aspects of Parent Teacher Home Visits support mindset shifts?

The study relies on three main sources of data: 1) research literature on the formation, maintenance, and change of implicit biases; 2) a field scan of other home visit programs; and 3) qualitative data collected from two or three schools in each of four large districts implementing PTHV. Each of the districts serves student populations that are majority students of color and majority students from low-income families. We interviewed the principals and conducted focus groups with educators and families at each school, totaling 175 PTHV participants.

**Key Findings**

*From the research literature review we know the following:*

**Implicit biases are part of being human.** They are not a character flaw but a feature of the human brain, and they have survival benefits. Although implicit biases are hardwired, the targets of those biases are not. Who we regard as the “outgroup” is not only influenced by how our brains categorize, but also by the direct and indirect messages we are exposed to about others throughout our lives, regardless of the accuracy of those messages. Furthermore, implicit biases distort our perceptions; they impair how we process and act on information about other people.

**The achievement gap can be at least partially explained by educators’ implicit biases,** which impact their expectations and behaviors toward students, which, in turn, affects student performance through mechanisms such as stereotype threat and self-fulfilling prophecy.

**Fortunately, implicit biases are not un-changeable.** We can become aware of and reduce these biases.

*Based on interviews with 175 PTHV participants we found the following:*

**PTHV supports mindset shifts in ways that improve partnerships between educators and families and that are supportive of student success.** PTHV participants described the following changes in beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors:

**Families shifted beliefs and actions about educators and schools.**

- Most families reported that, as a result of home visits, they realized interactions with educators did not have to be negative or uncomfortable, and the families began to develop stronger and more equitable relationships with school staff. Many families’ perceptions of educators changed. Once seen as distant authority figures, educators were now people with whom families could relate.
- As a result, families reported increased confidence in reaching out to educators and communicating about students’ needs.
**Educators shifted beliefs and actions related to families and students.**

- Many educators recognized that previous deficit assumptions about families and students were unfounded. Instead of assuming that many parents did not care about their children's education, they recognized that many families cared, but demonstrated their care differently from expected. Educators reported similar shifts in perceptions about students' behaviors, moving from thinking students lack motivation or interest in school to recognizing students' capabilities.

- By visiting families in their homes, educators reported newfound understanding and empathy, which resulted in changes in their behaviors.
  - Educators incorporated students' interests and culture, information obtained from the home visits, to improve student engagement and motivation.
  - Educators' disciplinary actions reflected an empathic as opposed to a punitive approach.
  - Educators' efforts to communicate with families increased after home visits.

Despite these changes, some educators held on to deficit assumptions about families, focusing on their shortcomings, such as lack of resources or parenting styles, to rationalize nonconforming student behaviors.

By reviewing research on strategies to reduce implicit biases and interviewing participants about PTHV practices, we found the following:

**The PTHV model and its core practices align well with research-supported strategies for reducing implicit biases and discriminatory behaviors.**

- Creating opportunities for families and educators to meet, outside of school, and to get to know each other breaks down traditional barriers to partnerships.
- Providing individuation strategies, a particularly powerful element of home visits, helps families and educators focus on one another's unique qualities and reduces the tendency to invoke group stereotypes.
- Making home visits voluntary and scheduled helps to reduce anxiety and stress about cross-group interactions between educators and families and builds trust and acceptance.
- Providing training and supports for educators can build self-awareness of biased mindsets as well as motivation and skills to counteract biased mindsets.
- Focusing on hopes and dreams for the first visit, rather than on academics and/or student performance, is a particularly powerful core practice for decreasing implicit biases as it builds understanding and trust, reduces anxiety and stress, and fosters positive cross-group interactions. It also builds partnerships around a shared goal, which is an effective way for reducing implicit biases.
- Traveling in pairs reduces anxiety and stress about conducting visits for those new to PTHV, and debriefing enables self-awareness of biased mindsets and may motivate educators to change them and any potentially discriminatory behaviors.

**Conclusion and Recommendations**

Counteracting implicit biases is a necessary mechanism for building successful cross-group relationships. Our review suggests that the PTHV model has many strong, research-supported features for addressing and counteracting implicit biases and for building positive school and family partnerships focused on the success of the student. We offer five recommendations for strengthening the PTHV model for fostering successful school and family relationships, especially where race, culture, and class serve as barriers.

1. **PTHV could be strengthened by incorporating strategies to intentionally target implicit biases.** Shifting biased mindsets was not an intended outcome of the PTHV model when it was developed. However, PTHV training was instituted to attend to biased mindsets. Our study indicates that sites implement and attend to that aspect of the training differently. Because implicit biases are persistent and difficult to change, it may be challenging for PTHV to have a sustainable impact on mindset shifts without...
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strengthening how and the extent to which biased mindsets are addressed and ensuring consistent implementation across sites.

2. **PTHV could be strengthened by opportunities for ongoing reflection by educators.** Our study found that although debriefing is part of the five core practices, teachers in general are not using postvisit debriefs to challenge race, class, and/or cultural assumptions about students and families. Nor are schools holding school-wide discussions about home visits as an opportunity to discuss assumptions about race, class, and culture. It would be helpful for schools to offer other opportunities for reflecting on the home visits, particularly as the visits relate to biased mindsets. Debriefing is a critical component of building self-awareness and motivation to address implicit biases and discriminatory behavior.

3. **PTHV should consider providing more home visit supports to families.** Families were not always clear on the purpose of the PTHV home visits, and no training or supports were specifically geared toward them. Yet research indicates that for successful cross-group interactions, both groups should be invested. Families often reported they did not receive information about the purpose of the visit. Supports for families could go beyond their involvement in the training for educators to provide family perspective. These additional supports could include resources for educators curated by families, trainings for families, and/or opportunities for families to debrief.

4. **PTHV could be enhanced by providing an intentional focus on asset framing.** Debiasing techniques are effective for counteracting the influence of implicit biases on behaviors toward members of the “outgroup,” and they can help to shift mindsets. Asset framing can help individuals nullify dominant stereotypes and reduce the tendency toward confirmation biases and fundamental attribution errors.

5. **PTHV should be part of a systems approach to decreasing implicit biases and fostering school and family partnerships.** PTHV leverages multiple research-supported strategies that reduce implicit biases. However, to make a sustainable impact on the implicit biases of educators and families, PTHV should be one of multiple antibias interventions implemented by schools. PTHV could contribute to a systems approach focused on shifting biased mindsets by partnering with schools to identify how other interventions can support or be supported by the PTHV model.