

# Would You Step Through

**W**hen I was growing up, my teachers never would have stepped through my front door. Not that I was a bad, unlikable kid—I was well-behaved in school. My mom had no issues with teachers or schools. But the abyss between the school’s clean desks and bright lights and the government housing I grew up in was great, and it would have been too embarrassing to allow any teacher to cross it. Even if a teacher had tried to visit my family, it would have been impossible. For as long as I can remember, my single mom juggled two or more jobs.

So, as a teacher in an urban, high-poverty school, I get it when I make my annual phone calls to my students’ families and they balk at my suggestion of a home visit. I empathize with the embarrassed sighs and even the defensive, “What do you mean you want to come to my place? Can’t we just talk at the conference later?” But I persist because I know that these same parents will probably be unable or unwilling to show up for parent-teacher conferences in a few months.

I wish I could reassure parents by saying, “I’m not checking the legality of your residency or counting how many people live in your apartment.” Instead, I say something like, “The school is always asking parents to enter our world—to come to conferences or family night or volunteer in

*Visiting low-income kids in their homes often sheds light on their hidden strengths.*

**Stephanie Smith**

classrooms. I want to return the favor and go into your world. Maybe hear about what your typical day is like instead of walking you through our class schedule—or play a card game in your living room instead of explaining our flash cards.”

Inviting parents into school and discussing things like class schedules are important. But why do teachers judge parents for not setting foot on our campus when we make no attempt to set foot on their front porch?

## **Bonds of Trust**

Home visits are especially essential in areas characterized by poverty and diversity. Most teachers come from a middle-class background and have never experienced the realities of low-income students’ lives. It’s my responsibility to experience and embrace that reality, even if just for 30 minutes in a student’s living room. Tish Howard, author of *Poverty is NOT a Learning Disability*,<sup>1</sup> believes that “the first step in developing effective lines of school-home communication is making it easy

for parents to get to know, like, trust, and respect us—to see us as their peers, not their superiors” (p. 67).

I can’t think of an easier way to begin building mutual liking and respect than to give parents a home-court advantage. Bonds of trust begin to build the moment I walk into a parent’s home and compliment his or her hard work in raising an amazing child. As I tell families something of how I grew up, any assumptions that I’m superior to them—or think I am—disappear. We discuss childhood chores, local events, and, eventually, their hopes for their child’s education. The relationship starts when I take that first step toward the family instead of hiding behind my classroom door.

Teaching in high-poverty schools during the past four years, I’ve conducted more than 80 home visits. After these visits, not one of the families missed a parent-teacher conference or failed to return a phone call. I can’t express how beneficial these home visits have been in terms of understanding my students. But I can provide a glimpse by walking you through one recent visit, to the home of children I’ll call Gabby and Davon.

## **Glimpsing Their Hidden Strengths**

Gabby was a 4th grader who came to our school in January. Her older brother Davon had been expelled from their former school. Gabby’s mom—a

# My Door?



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**I can't think of an easier way to begin building mutual respect than to give the parents a home court advantage.**

supportive, yet extremely busy parent—wanted a fresh start for her children. She expressed reluctance the first few times I tried to set up a home visit. But as I built a relationship with Gabby, she began to pester her mom into letting me come. Gabby heard about my visits with other classmates and saw the books and school supplies I'd brought them. Finally, Ms. Ross allowed Davon's teacher and

me to come one day after school.

As the four of us walked to Gabby and Davon's home, I was amazed at these children's critical-thinking skills. Gabby explained the purpose of their path at every turn: "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 so that stray dog doesn't notice you."

## Tips for Home Visits

- *Never go alone.* Invite the teacher of your student's siblings, an administrator, or staff member to accompany you. If a translator will be needed, invite someone who speaks the parent's language.
- *Ask your principal for training* (and perhaps compensation). Our district gets training for visits through the Parent Teacher Home Visit Project ([www.pthvp.org](http://www.pthvp.org)).
- *Bring a gift.* A baggie of school supplies, a book, or a seasonal gift not only shows your appreciation, but also is a great, positive ice breaker.
- *Take copious notes* right after each visit. After a few visits, conversations with different families might blur. I keep a parent communications binder in which I write down notes from every home visit and other parent communications throughout the year. Before conferences, I go through my notes to build on those conversations.
- *Don't worry about timing.* It's ideal to get many home visits in at the beginning of the year, but fall is often busy. Send out a general request to visit families in their homes, listing times that work for your schedule. Then make phone calls to arrange visits early on with those parents with whom you anticipate needing a strong relationship. I've even done a home visit in May, taking a teacher from the next grade level along.
- *Don't worry about location.* If parents are—like my mother—too embarrassed to have you in their living room, visit on the front porch, the lawn, even at a local restaurant or park. The point is to visit parents in a place where they're comfortable—and get yourself off campus.

“In the morning, we can walk through this alley, but not after school. The guys hanging out are up to no good.” I made a mental note that I would use her obvious critical-thinking skills in the next day’s math lesson on multiple strategies for solving two-step word problems. Home visits often shed light on strengths that don’t show up on standardized tests.

When we reached the house, Gabby explained that we’d walked a little too fast. Her mom wouldn’t be back from picking up their little sister for another 10 minutes. A light bulb went off as I recalled the numerous times I or other staff members had chastised Davon for hanging out too long after school. What we saw as loitering was a time-management strategy. When I asked Davon about this, he responded shyly, “Yeah, I’d rather my sister wait around at school than on our street.” His protectiveness impressed me.

When Ms. Ross pulled up, I smiled as I watched Davon and Gabby snap straight to work getting their little sister out of the car seat, bringing in bags from the car, and asking their mom about her day. They certainly weren’t fitting the stereotypes of “lazy and apathetic” that many people hold about students from poor families. They cared deeply for their mother and sister and wanted to help in any way possible.

At first, Ms. Ross was full of apologies. Sorry for being late, sorry for the messy house, sorry for the dark living room (they try to keep the electric bill down), sorry for not having much food or drink to offer, sorry Gabby didn’t always get her homework done correctly (she didn’t have time to check it every night). 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 20 minutes, we laughed while she told hilarious stories about various photos. Gabby and Davon jumped in with their perspectives. With her home-court advantage, Ms. Ross became open and comfortable. I became

## TRENDS *of the* TIMES

# \$32

**A family of four living in extreme poverty lives on less than \$32 a day.**

Source: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 2011 Current Population Survey.

simply an eager listener, sharing my own family stories along the way.

### . . . And Struggles

When it came time to wrap things up, I asked Gabby if there was anything else she wanted to show me. She walked 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 I grew up in government housing). Inside were two sets of bunk beds. Gabby explained each bed’s occupant. This was her bed, this was Davon’s, and the other two were for her little sister or for her cousins when they visited.

I recalled the frequent arguments over space that erupted at Gabby’s work table. Gabby regularly complained about her neighbor taking too much space, taking her pencil, moving her book, and so on. Right then and there, Gabby’s need for more personal space made sense. The next day in class, Gabby and I set aside a special spot on the floor to which she could take her work whenever she felt crowded. Such collaboration to accommodate a student’s particular needs becomes more likely when a teacher sees the conditions of that learner’s life firsthand.

As we said our good-byes, Gabby and Davon insisted they should walk

us back to school, while Ms. Ross was adamant about giving us a ride. I reassured them that we could walk back with no trouble. Walking back, my colleague and I debriefed about the insights we’d gained in the last 30 minutes. We had seen glimmers of pride in our students’ eyes and noted skills they possessed that we could accentuate in class. Misconceptions we’d had about Ms. Ross and her involvement in her children’s education had been shattered.

Perhaps we could have had a relationship-building conversation like this with Ms. Ross after a parent–teacher conference or at a family literacy night. But that assumes that Ms. Ross would have taken the first step by coming to our campus. Instead, I’d taken the first step. I had seen firsthand what living in poverty was like for her and gained valuable insights.

As embarrassed as I was by my own childhood home, I can’t help but wonder how things would have been different if a teacher had visited my house. That teacher might have seen my brother’s hilarious sense of humor and my mom’s sheer determination to make her children’s lives better than her own—and seen more clearly why I was so shy and lacking in confidence.

The paradigm needs to shift in schools that serve poor students. Teachers need to spend less energy complaining about parents’ lack of involvement—or even brainstorming how we can get parents to step through the school doors. Instead, teachers need to ask themselves when they are going to step through *students’* front doors. This shift can make all the difference—to students, families, and school culture. ■

<sup>1</sup>Howard, T., Grogan, S., & Dunklee, R. (2009). *Poverty is NOT a learning disability: Equalizing opportunities for low SES students*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

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