
Transforming relationships and curriculum

Visiting family homes

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Parent–teacher partnerships are critical to enacting the principles of *Te Whāriki*: relationships, family and community, empowerment, and holistic development. Our project used “funds of knowledge” as a theoretical, methodological, and pedagogical tool to explore partnership connections for children between the contexts of home and centre. This article discusses teachers’ experiences of visiting children’s family homes and ways these visits transformed relationships and curriculum. The teacher-researchers’ words illustrate the potential power of such visits to stimulate reflection, challenge assumptions, and spark changes. We therefore argue that visits to families be re-ignited to enhance relationships and curriculum.

Making links between homes and centres

Teachers who act on the sociocultural theories that underpin much of *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996) develop reciprocal connections between centre, cultural, family, and community contexts. These connections enhance teachers’ ability to recognise and use children’s family knowledge in educational settings. Visits to families may affirm, clarify, deepen, or challenge teachers’ knowledge of children and ways children’s interests and actions relate to children’s wider lives.

Undertaking home visits is not new in New Zealand (see, for example, Renwick, 1989). Kindergarten teachers historically visited families when children transitioned into the kindergarten. Some teachers still visit families to gain insight into infants’ sleeping and feeding routines. These types of visits therefore occurred early in the partnership. Anecdotal comments from those involved suggest the visits were quite intimidating for many parents

as teachers were positioned as experts and perhaps held deficit views of some families.

In contrast, the visits we undertook in our research were carried out after relationships had already been established. We positioned families as experts and teachers as learners. In this article we describe our underpinning framework of funds of knowledge, ways visits were undertaken, and some experiences and outcomes. Consequently, we argue that visits to family homes can be transformational, and therefore might be reinstated more thoughtfully in teacher practices.

Funds of knowledge—a theoretical tool

The original funds-of-knowledge research was an early form of what is now called “culturally responsive pedagogy”; that is, teaching approaches designed to address deficit views of children and families. It was a partnership between academic researchers and teacher-researchers that explored languages and literacy practices

in everyday household activities in bilingual Mexican-Latino communities (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). Moll, Amanti, Neff, and González (1992) define *funds of knowledge* as the bodies of knowledge, including information, skills, and strategies, which underlie household functioning, development, and wellbeing. These include ways of thinking, approaches to learning, and practical skills. For example, children might observe a parent writing a shopping list or reading a recipe. In this way, children develop early knowledge of literacy embedded in specific family routines and practices. This cultural knowledge can then be drawn on in curriculum.

Funds of knowledge—a methodological tool

In the original project (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) primary school teachers visited family homes (and sometimes community settings) up to three times. These teacher-researchers talked with family members about their lives, languages, cultures, experiences, and artefacts noticed in the home. Subsequent improvements in school-home/teacher-parent relationships were noted. Conversations were more in-depth and parents felt more welcome in the classroom.

A funds-of-knowledge perspective shifts the balance of power towards the family as the expert while the visiting/interviewing teacher-researcher presents him or herself as a learner. In our study, the teacher-as-learner stance was also taken. Our approach was underpinned by the view that families have specific knowledge, skills, and abilities related to household “socialisation, care, and learning” (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 17).

Funds of knowledge—a pedagogical tool

The pedagogical goal of a funds-of-knowledge approach is to recognise and incorporate family-based knowledge and expertise in educational settings in order to improve outcomes for diverse children. For example, during one visit Hensley (2005) asked about a guitar she noticed. She learned that the father played guitar and keyboard and wrote songs and poetry. She asked the father to write some children’s songs and create a musical. Another parent she visited with a background in dance was asked to help choreograph the musical. The musical was performed by children five times.

The concept of funds of knowledge has been extended since the original research to other subject domains, to early childhood education, and to consider wider influences of family and community members on children’s learning and interests (Hedges, Cullen, & Jordan, 2011). Funds of knowledge is now used to describe everyday knowledge of matters related to, for example, economics, household maintenance, literacy, and the arts, that can be used as a foundation for developing culturally relevant curricular provision in educational settings. Teachers who invite and value family knowledge can support the development of an increasingly responsive and relevant curriculum.

Our project’s decision making about visiting family homes

Our research was a partnership between the University of Auckland and two early childhood centres. The research team leading the project comprised Maria and Helen from the university, and teacher-researchers Daniel and Trish from Small Kauri Early Childhood Education Centre and Bianca and Lindy from Myers Park KiNZ Early Learning Centre. Teachers’ active involvement in research about their practice potentially enhances their understandings of themselves, learners, and ways to transform curriculum and teaching (Souto-Manning, 2012). Both the concept of funds of knowledge and the concept of being a teacher-researcher positioned these teachers as agents of change (Tenery, 2005).

Small Kauri Early Childhood Education Centre is a privately owned mixed-age setting situated in Mangere Bridge Village in South Auckland. The turnover of children is low as many young children stay until they transition to school at 5 years of age. Children who attend are from a diverse range of cultural backgrounds. Myers Park KiNZ Early Learning Centre is also a mixed-age setting, situated in the central city. The centre has a high turnover of children as many families are new migrants to New Zealand and/or are international students attending university for the academic year only. Children who attend also represent diverse cultural backgrounds. Many families live locally in central city apartments or in homes shared with other relatives to help with the cost of living in a large metropolitan city. In both centres, most children lived in two-parent families where both parents were either in paid employment or one was studying.

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Undertaking home visits requires careful preparation. Teacher-researchers approaching families, rather than the academic researchers, meant less chance of mistrust and suspicion about the reasons for a home visit (González, Moll, Tenery, et al., 2005). Our teacher-researchers approached families to explain the purpose and, if agreed, organise a suitable day and time to visit. Teachers went to the homes with a set of open-ended ideas and questions aimed at eliciting families' perspectives and understandings of their children's interests and inquiries. Teachers adopted a conversational approach, sharing a little about themselves as well to foster more dialogue (see appendix).

The research team made collaborative decisions about which families to visit based on analysis of data generated during the first phase of the project. Criteria related to the project funding body's aim of improving outcomes for diverse children were then used to ensure a range of ages, gender, and family type, and that these children represented different cultural groups. Seventeen families were visited altogether. In most cases, the children were present. Three children were visited twice in two family settings (one with each parent) and another was visited in a community setting as well as at home. While the teachers represented diverse cultures, they did not share the varied cultural backgrounds of the families they visited.

We stress that both centres had pre-existing positive relationships with families. We were interested to see if and how home visits might strengthen relationships further and deepen knowledge about children. Both teacher-researchers from each centre visited, rather than just one, for mutual support. Later, we realised the advantage this provided as one teacher-researcher could focus on the conversational interview, while the other played with child/ren if present, talked with a second family member, or noticed artefacts such as photos. The findings revealed that the initial aims were exceeded in that teachers' beliefs and practices were challenged in unanticipated ways.

The transformational effects of teachers visiting families

Some teachers had earlier experiences of visiting families. Not all the teacher-researchers were convinced these visits held promise. However, after one visit, their realisation of the value of this approach to visits and their confidence

in carrying them out grew. In addition, having experienced the potential of these visits, teacher-researchers further challenged themselves to visit families they wanted more background knowledge of and a stronger connection with. Far from families finding these visits intimidating, families warmly welcomed the teacher-researchers.

Adopting the style of González, Moll, Tenery, et al. (2005), the teachers' experiences of visiting families are shared in the teachers' own words through reflective memos written after family visits. These reflections are powerful ways to reveal the ways relationships and curriculums were transformed.

Bianca

Our first home visit was to Nathan and Ali, who are cousins. Both children are of Indian descent and live with their parents and uncle in a joint household. This was an opportunity for us to see firsthand and hear about life in a joint household, cultural practices that the families valued, and how life in New Zealand is different to life in India.

Nathan's mum says that she feels the relationship between us has changed since the home visit. We don't seem like the teachers so much and she didn't think she would have been able to discuss her concerns about Nathan if we had not visited.

We continue to support both families. Having visited the families in their home has deepened our relationship and understanding and made addressing "the hard stuff" a bit easier. However, the visit also raised our awareness about the importance of respecting the cultural practices of families and the rules and protocols that may exist in a family. We hope we haven't stepped over a line invisible to us.

Bianca's rationale for strengthening the relationship with this family was initially to act on a genuine interest in and openness to these children, families, culture, and home life; in particular, to enhance knowledge about Indian culture and joint family living. Undertaking the visit not only provided these insights but a sensitive way to raise and discuss difficult matters that were complicated by social and cultural structures. As a result, the relationship with Nathan's mother was transformed and Nathan's experiences were improved. However,

Bianca's awareness of limited knowledge (the "invisible lines") and desire to develop respectful relationships revealed her growing confidence in taking cultural risks, which she attributed to spending time meeting with families on their home territory.

Lindy

Jessica was a 3½-year-old New Zealand European. She has grown up in the inner city, where both her parents have apartments. At KiNZ Jessica displayed a fervent flair for the arts. Knowing Jessica's mother was an artist, one reason we wanted to visit was to see how her art had influenced Jessica's creativity. We were surprised to find that Jessica's mother had not done art for a while, mostly due to the confines and constraints of apartment living and rental agreement conditions. They spent most of their waking time out of the apartment as Jessica had to be quiet in the apartment.

Although I had always been friendly to Jessica's mother, it was on my time. I had been frustrated that they often arrived an hour early each day; I now realised that they had nowhere else to go where Jessica could be a child. So whatever time they arrived, I tried to be more welcoming and attentive.

Still curious about the flair for the arts, we decided to also visit Jessica's father, whom we did not know. Jessica's father is able to arrange his work so that Jessica has his full attention when they are together. He recognises her innate creative talents, encouraging this by role playing, dancing, and drawing with her. Jessica's father knew nothing about his child's day at KiNZ because we had not developed a relationship with him.

I felt that we had failed this family. We had made assumptions and judgements that were unfounded and inaccurate. Teachers have taken steps to build a relationship with Jessica's father, to involve him in her learning, and create a second portfolio. Presently we are also encouraging Jessica's mother to share her artistic skills with the children and teachers. Jessica continues to blossom at KiNZ, with a newfound self-confidence and a deeper trust in her teachers. Since the home visits, I believe we have become more empathetic to families' individual

situations, and therefore more supportive of their individual needs.

The initial rationale for this visit was to gain insight into children's experiences in inner city apartments, as many children attending KiNZ lived in these. Lindy's honest account and critical reflection of ways that teachers' unfounded assumptions and judgements might be challenged as a direct outcome of engaging with family members in their own contexts is clear.

Trish

Hunter, aged 4 1/2 years at the time of the visit, lived with his Mum and Dad, his 9-year-old sister, and his two aunts who are 11-year-old twins. Hunter's Dad identified as Samoan, and his Mum identified as Cook Island Māori. Before the visit I had assumed that in Hunter's home three languages were spoken: English, Samoan, and Cook Island Māori. However, I learned that English is the main language spoken along with a little Cook Island Māori. Both parents valued English as the best language to speak because of the perceived link to having a good education. It is only now they are able to revive some of their home languages and encourage Hunter to learn these.

I also learnt that despite the somewhat strict upbringing that Hunter's Dad had, Hunter's parents have made a conscious decision to see their children through a lens of being confident and competent and want to respect them by enabling them to pursue their own interests. Through the research both teachers and parents had shared and increased knowledge and responsiveness to Hunter's interest in music, especially drumming. This originated in his family (his father shared the interest) and church activities.

I believe that "invisible barriers" were broken down by this visit. Although Hunter's older sister attended Small Kauri until she transitioned to school, Hunter's Mum had come into the centre with her head down and would rarely communicate with the teachers as she signed Hunter in and out. I had thought maybe she was just shy. However, after the visit, I noticed how much her demeanour had changed and she began

to smile and communicate freely not only with me but also with other teachers.

This visit highlighted to me the importance of home visits in early childhood education. It counteracted some of my assumptions about Hunter's family and transformed the relationship I had with them until he went to school recently.

This visit strengthened the knowledge teachers already had about Hunter's family through taking the time to talk with them "on their turf". In the security and comfort of the family home, the family and ECE teachers shared information more freely, engaged in deeper dialogue, and initiated action that focused on the child's interest. The parents were more forthcoming than they had an opportunity to be in the centre and this transferred to subsequent daily interactions. The experience also challenged Trish to consider further complex matters of language and cultural identity that she had made assumptions about.

Daniel

Our first home visit was with the mother of Hal (who was aged 4 years at the time) and Dan (who was 1 1/2). We were able to learn about the closeness of the family, how they came to live in Mangere Bridge, and about their Mum's general philosophy about life. For me, these were really important things to learn as they gave a background to the way that Hal and Dan were being raised, and an understanding about the decisions that were made at home. We also learnt about specific interests of the children. Both boys got involved in music, carpentry, cooking, and gardening at home, yet at Small Kauri we hadn't noticed this. We learnt that outings were important to the family, and we understood why Hal was often almost desperate to go on any outings at the centre. So we learnt about the family background, aspirations for the children, and also about specific interests that the children have at home.

Following the visit it seemed like my relationship with both boys changed and became deeper. Perhaps it was because they were able to show me their place; perhaps they saw that I am so interested in them that I would take the time to visit them; and perhaps the power balance has shifted slightly as I have been to their

place where they are in control. As our relationship changed it meant we spent more time together. Hal felt comfortable to share more about his understandings and working theories and we were able to learn together.

The family visits have felt like a great privilege as we have been invited into our children's homes and deeper into their lives. Shortly after the visit, Hal came up to me looking very shy, and quietly said "I love you Daniel." That special moment made the home visits all worthwhile.

Insight into family practices and values provided some deeper understandings of Hal and Dan. The visit also raised some queries about interests are always shared and present across contexts. More than this, however, it transformed the relationship between Hal and Daniel (teacher) so that Hal's learning experiences and outcomes could be enriched.

Wider benefits for all teachers and families

For home visits to be transformational, teachers do not need to visit all families. As Marla Hensley (2005) noted:

Once a teacher has spent time in a child's home, the teacher can, to some degree, have a better feel for the home lives of all students ... [C]onnecting with just one family creates an awareness of parents as people. These are people with skills to offer, with successes and struggles, and with goals and dreams. Teachers take more interest when children discuss happenings in the home and ask more questions. (p. 147)

These ideas are reflected in all four teachers' stories shared in this article. During our research team discussions about the power of family visits, we also thought about how others in the teaching teams might benefit. When Daniel left Small Kauri, Niky joined the research team. We asked her how she and other teachers had accessed the information from the visits and what value this had.

Niky

Although I was not a part of the home-visiting process, there have still been benefits for me as a teacher. For Hal, I learnt something new about an interest in music that changed what we offered him at the centre for a while. Another

benefit has been learning more about the history of these families. I learnt more about where they came from, what is important to them, and also some of the struggles these families have been through throughout their lives. This has given me a newfound sense of respect, understanding, and empathy towards them.

In terms of funds of knowledge as a theoretical, methodological, and pedagogical tool, Niky's reflection indicates an example of ways that Small Kauri attempted to use new information to make connections across the contexts. The research team looked back on video footage and found clear evidence of Hal enacting his interest in music prior to the visit. At that point however, the interest and significance had not been recognised. However, after the visit to the family home, and learning about the extent of the family interest in music, when Niky and other teachers offered Hal musical experiences, he did not appear interested. Therefore, teachers may continue to puzzle over children's motivations and interests. Niky's ponderings illustrate some of the complex dynamics at work within curriculum enactment. Moreover, there may not always be a straightforward connection between family activities and practices and children's interests as enacted in a centre.

At KiNZ, the experience of visiting several apartments and shared living spaces prompted changes to the layout of the previously open-plan learning and teaching environment. Teachers adapted the layout of the open-plan centre to smaller spaces with clearly defined resources to reflect the apartment-style living and shared family spaces. In addition, as noted, they invited parent expertise as a contribution to the curriculum when Jessica's mother was asked to share her artistic knowledge with children.

KiNZ are finding that one contribution of funds of knowledge as a theoretical, methodological, and pedagogical tool may be to reduce a reliance on documentation practices to build relationships with families and share knowledge of children. Instead, the importance of authentic interpersonal relationships beyond casual daily communications was again highlighted. The documentation that results from these enhanced relationships and understandings is likely to be more authentic and meaningful in relation to the families, children, and teachers.

Conclusion

The concept of funds of knowledge as an analytical framing provides various ways to transform the quality of relationships, communication, understandings, and curriculum. Visiting family homes is a powerful way to recognise children's everyday languages, cultures, knowledge, and experiences to the benefit of children. It positions teachers as learners, rather than experts, who can empower families to participate more deeply in their child's education. Respect for, and openness to, families and their contexts is an essential aspect of reconceptualising teacher home visiting.

Our project's family visits proved very powerful, including in ways unanticipated by the focus of the research on locating connections about children's interests across contexts. At the beginning of the project, the academic researchers' and teacher-researchers' expectations of what might be gained from visiting the families was that we might deepen understandings and make connections across contexts. However, the visits proved much more powerful and transformational by challenging assumptions, making invisible barriers explicit, and enhancing parent-led communication and contribution to the communication. It is clear to us that when visits are carried out with sensitivity and purpose they have the potential to transform relationships and curriculum for the teachers, children, and families involved.

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Appendix: Are you interested in visiting family homes? Our advice

Before the visit

Talk with families to establish if they are interested in a visit. Let them know the purpose of the visit (for you to learn about what they enjoy doing as a family; who the important people, places, and things in their child's life are; to make connections between the home and centre settings). Say that you are visiting in

pairs and are happy to simply observe and chat as they go about their usual activities. While you might audio-record it, this is not a formal interview. Establish that you would like to be there for one hour. Keep to this; don't overstay your welcome. Arrange a time to suit the family. Be aware of guest protocols appropriate to the family/culture; get advice from a community member if necessary. As a token of reciprocity, we took a small gift of flowers, a plant, or food (around \$20 value) to each visit.

At the visit

The following was used in our project as suggested questions. The order/topics/total coverage is not vital. It is more of a guide to the kinds of information you might consider. Adapt the following to suit, bearing in mind the *purpose of the visit* and the connecting theory—*funds of knowledge*. Enact careful, active listening techniques, using lots of *open-ended questions and probes* such as “Tell me more”, “That’s really interesting, can you tell me about (follow-up point of interest)?” etc. Audio-record if appropriate and you have protocols to keep these recordings secure; otherwise make quick shorthand notes you can elaborate on subsequently.

- What does (name of child) like to be involved in every day at home? Attempt to establish child’s everyday/regular routines and activities participated in at home—meals, household tasks (e.g., helping with meal preparation, looking after pets, helping with gardening or washing the car), and interests (playing outside, playing a musical instrument or game with sibling, reading books with grandparent, watching television—which programmes etc ...)
- Tell me about a typical family weekend (summer/winter) ...

- What are your hobbies and interests? Does (name) participate? In what ways? Other family members’ hobbies/interests?
- Observe what you see in the house carefully (and sensitively) and ask about photos, tools, books, artefacts, musical instruments, equipment ...
- Share a little of your assessment data about the child’s interests (where possible take laptop and video footage as well as portfolios) and get reactions and responses.
- In what ways, if any, do you think (name’s) interests have been stimulated by family and community activities and events? Any holidays? Trips and visits? Time with grandparents?
- Are there any special (cultural) practices/traditions that your family has? For example, about eating meals, celebrations (such as birthdays) ...
- Migrant families (and as appropriate for those with mixed ethnic heritage)—What do you like about living in Auckland/

New Zealand? How is it different from (home country)? What activities have you maintained from (home country/culture(s))?

- Given your child’s interests and activities as they are now, in what ways, if any, do you see these heading in the future?
- When the time is up, thank family profusely and let them get on with their busy lives.

Following the visit

- Write a reflective memo that records what you learned immediately afterwards.
- Listen to the audio recording (if undertaken) and either transcribe any interesting sections or add to your memo.
- Consider how you can effectively share the information gained with other members of your team.
- Consider ways this visit could assist your teaching and learning practices in your centre for this child or children and other children.

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