

## Fostering Culturally Relevant Teaching through Family Visits

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**ABSTRACT:** This study examines if teachers can learn to be more culturally relevant in their classrooms by reading culturally relevant literature and then engaging in the practice of family visits. The study employed a basic qualitative design with data sources such as transcripts of discussions and visits, interviews, and participant journals. Results show that family visits led to new and more culturally relevant classroom practices. Based on this study, teachers who engage with culturally relevant training, including the practice of family visits, may become more culturally relevant in their classrooms.

**KEYWORDS:** Home visits, family visits, culturally relevant pedagogy, culturally sustaining pedagogy, professional development

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Classroom teachers often seek ways to engage more deeply with their students' families, communities, and cultures; yet, they often do not know how. Culturally relevant and asset-based pedagogies provide a frame from which teachers can learn. In *Reading, Writing, and Talk: Inclusive Teaching Strategies for Diverse Learners K-2*, Souto-Manning and Martell (2016) propose that engaging in family visits can be a way to foster more culturally relevant teaching in the classroom. Using data from multiple family visit projects, this research examines if Souto-Manning's and Martell's proposal is supported by family visit data. As such, this study considers the research question, *Do family visits foster more culturally relevant teaching practices?*

The practice of *home* visits has been common for decades. Teachers visit the homes of their students and talk with the parents about school and how to be successful, perhaps teaching the parents how to adapt to some aspect of school

(homework or behavior modification). This type of visit is steeped in assimilationist ideas that families must change to be successful in school (Banks, 2016; Gorski, 2018). For this study, I specifically consider the practice of *family* visits. This change in label indicates multiple differences from a traditional home visit. First, the visit does not have to take place in the home but somewhere in the community of the family's choosing. Second, the visit does not only occur with parents but anyone in the child's life outside of school. This often includes grandparents, siblings, or other caregivers. Third, teachers who engage in family visits develop a lens of listening and learning. Teachers meet with the families to learn more about the child, community, and practices, not the other way around (Auerbach, 2009; Johnson, 2014; Lopez-Robertson et al., 2010). For this study, I only considered if *family* visits led to more culturally relevant practices as I do not engage with teachers in the practice of traditional *home* visits.

This study describes four different teachers as they engage in family visits for the first time. The data come from two different research projects, both with elementary school teachers who voluntarily engaged in work on culturally relevant pedagogy including the practice of visiting the homes and communities of the families of their students. This study considers the actions, reflections, and changes the teachers experienced as they participated in this new (to them) practice.

### Literature Review

The literature on culturally relevant pedagogy and the connections to home/family visits is small but increasing. Although culturally relevant pedagogy has its roots in the 1990s and early 2000s, the important mission has never fully been attained; thus, it is important to consider the history of this movement for this project. Home visits and family visits have been a common practice for a long time but are seeing a resurgence in the literature, especially as they connect to learning from families as asset-based visits.

### Culturally Responsive, Relevant, and Sustaining Pedagogies

Geneva Gay (2000) presented "culturally responsive teaching," a pedagogy that put best practices for diverse students at the center. She defined this pedagogy as, "using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant and effective for them" (p. 29). Gay (2000) framed the need for this shift around the continued underachievement of students of color in schools. Culturally responsive teaching, however, is framed in high expectations and striving for personal excellence. This shift in thinking was based in how culture influences the way students learn and how teachers make decisions. As Gay states, "even without our being consciously aware of it, culture determines how we

think, believe, and behave, and these, in turn, affect how we teach and learn” (p. 9). This pedagogy was built around concepts of validation, affirmation, legitimacy, connection, and meaningfulness. Gay added that responsive teaching was “empowering,” “transformative,” and “emancipatory” (2000, p. 32-35). Villegas and Lucas (2002) further framed the theory in terms of changing teachers’ orientations. They stated that a culturally responsive teacher must have a constructivist view of learning and that students’ interests, strengths, and knowledges are a part of learning and must be incorporated into the curriculum.

The shift from culturally *responsive* pedagogy toward *relevant* pedagogy reiterated and maintained that culture is an important piece of learning and teachers must learn how to adapt their teaching to the students in their classrooms. Ladson-Billings (2009) explained that the primary goal of culturally relevant pedagogy was “to assist in the development of a ‘relevant black personality’ that allowed African American students to choose academic excellence yet still identify with African and African American culture” (p. 20). She found that successful culturally relevant teachers used student culture to frame how they “impart[ed] knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (p. 20). Culturally relevant teachers disrupted deficit cultural notions, embedded instruction in larger cultural contexts, incorporated the lived experiences of the students into the curriculum, expanded definitions of literacy to include broader conceptions, and taught students to have high expectations while resisting the status quo. Ladson-Billings also found that culturally relevant teachers engaged in “a collective struggle against the status quo” (p. 127) and took action toward being political about their work.

By questioning the usefulness of the terms *relevancy* and *responsiveness*, Paris (2012) made the most recent shift towards culturally *sustaining* pedagogy. He pushed for the re-centering of diverse cultures as opposed to *responding* to them with the goal of upsetting systemic inequalities in classrooms. Paris and Alim (2014) pushed teachers to see rich and complex linguistic and cultural practices instead of pedagogies that are “filtered through a lens of contempt and pity” (p. 86). For example, teachers who sustained student culture provided space for counterstorying, “refusal,” and expression (Moore & Paris, 2021, p. 22). Instead of comparing students of color to white middle-class norms, they argued that being multicultural and multilingual should be seen as paths toward power in our diverse society (Paris & Alim, 2014).

For this analysis, I purposefully chose the term culturally *relevant*. The professional preparation the participants received was in line with cultural relevancy and not to the level of sustaining practices or truly disrupting power differentials. In line with recent usages of the term, teachers who are culturally relevant choose specific texts to reflect their students’ culture (Christ & Cho, 2021), use student culture as a starting point for teaching writing and the arts (Kelly et al., 2020; Machado et al., 2017), and incorporate family and family stories into the literacy classroom (Lifschitz-Grant, 2020). The data show that teachers became more relevant in their practices, going beyond responding to culture, but not to the level of sustaining culture in the classroom.

## Family Visits

Improving classroom pedagogy by knowing more about students' home lives and their family practices has been researched for years. González et al. (2005) observed and documented families' strengths and literacy practices. The important key to their view on family visits was that the teacher was the learner, not the family. This view differs from most home visits practices where the teacher shows the family how to "do school." Teachers participating in these home visits were looking to build from the family's practices, or what they called *funds of knowledge*. Examples of families' funds of knowledge included construction, plumbing, or gardening (Moll et al., 2005).

More recently, Ilhan et al. (2019) found in a study of over 100 families that home visits and family engagement positively impacted student achievement and attitudes. Kronholz (2016) followed a teacher who engaged in family visits that led her to better understand her students and their families. Lopez-Robertson et al. (2010) and Sugarman (2010) showed how teachers' assumptions about family deficits can be changed through the practice of family visits. El Yaafouri (2017) showed how family visits led to more differentiated instruction in her classroom. Park and Paulick (2021) determined that family visits had positive impacts yet fell short of achieving more culturally sustaining practices. They recommended that teachers first train in culturally sustaining and asset-based pedagogies. The present study seeks to build upon this research to make a more explicit connection between preparing teachers to engage in family visits and culturally relevant teaching practices.

## Methods

The findings shared in this paper come from two different research projects. One, from a project where teachers chose to participate in a professional development course on culturally relevant pedagogy in the elementary classroom. An optional part of this course was to engage in the practice of family visits. The other data presented here are from a professional development after-school book club where the teachers also had an option to engage in family visits. The professional development course teachers were not paid for their family visit time, however, the teachers in the book club were paid hourly for their family visits from a community foundation grant. Full IRB approval was obtained for both studies.

## Setting and Context

*Project One, Professional Development Course:* The professional development course met monthly over the course of a semester at the teachers' elementary school in a fourth-grade classroom. I, the researcher, designed and

led the course as the instructor. Nine teachers read and discussed professional articles and books with their colleagues (for example, Allen, 2010; Delpit, 2006; Dudley-Marling, 2009; González et al., 2005; Rogers & Mosely, 2006). They also were exposed to and practiced new ideas for becoming more culturally relevant in their classrooms including family photo projects, new and different children's book choices, new lesson designs, and optional participation in family visits. Four of those nine teachers chose to participate in a family visit. I highlight two below because of the triangulated data sources available (transcripts, reflections, and interviews). The other two visits had only one source of data to draw from and are thus less complete (transcripts of the visit). I requested that the teachers participate in more than one visit with the same family, but time and scheduling prevented this from occurring.

*Project Two, Professional Book Club:* The book club met monthly over the course of a school year at the teachers' elementary school in a first-grade classroom. I, the researcher, was the facilitator. The 12 teachers who attended read Lareau's (2011) *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life* and Stanton-Salazar's (2001) *Manufacturing Hope and Despair: The School and Kin Support Networks of U.S.-Mexican Youth*. These were books that they, as a group, chose from a list generated by the researcher. Of the 12 teachers, four participated in family visits and were paid hourly for them. Those four teachers also read González et al.'s (2005) *Funds of Knowledge: Theorizing Practices in Households, Communities, and Classrooms* to prepare for the visits. I highlight two visits here due to the ability to triangulate data. These two teachers participated in multiple family visits, wrote multiple times in their reflective journals, and participated in individual and group interviews about the project.

Both suburban elementary schools were in the same district in a midwestern town with a large university nearby. Both schools were welcoming and warm places upon entry and were filled with students, families, and staff. Each school prided itself on its daily attendance rates, multilingual and diverse families, and growth scores on state standardized tests. The school for project one had 73% students of color, 23% English language learners, and 63% of its families qualified for free and reduced lunch. The students at the project two school were 40% students of color, 14% English language learners, and 32% qualified for free and reduced lunch. These schools were chosen because of their prior relationship with the university and willingness to participate in research projects.

## Procedures

These two projects were conducted during two different school years, one after the other. After all IRB approvals were met, I reached out to the prospective teacher participants in an email to invite them to the respective projects. As teachers enrolled in the study, we met initially to determine times, books, schedules, etc. After each project began, I approached the groups about participating in family visits. Many were hesitant but were more assured when I

committed to attending with them. The teachers in project one, the professional course, reached out to one family in their own classroom that they decided they would like to get to know on a deeper level. They explained our course and asked if we could come over to visit or meet at a mutually agreed upon location. One family chose to meet at the local library, but the others invited us to their homes. The teachers in project two, the book club, created a form for all teachers in the school to nominate families they thought might benefit from a deeper connection to the school (for any reason they deemed appropriate, there were no stipulations or qualifications). Of those nominated, the teachers and principal met to determine who they would contact (they had to narrow the list for time purposes). Then, the teachers reached out to those families and set up times to visit. One of those families was uncomfortable with the idea of a visit so the teacher invited them to her house for the first visit and then they agreed to invite her over for the subsequent ones.

At the first visit, I explained the IRB consent forms and answered any questions. I then set a recorder in the middle of the room and tried to allow the teacher to take the lead; however, I was a participant in some of the conversations and activities and asked some interview questions. Because the teachers in project two did multiple visits, they were more comfortable and did not ask me to attend all of them. I accompanied them on their last visits to interview the families about the project.

### **Participants and Role of the Researcher**

Esperanza was a first-year teacher at the time of the study. I taught her in undergraduate methods and served as her reading practicum supervisor, so I knew her well. She was smart and quiet, a first-generation college student, and an excited but shy teacher. She identified as Hispanic. Her family visit was conducted mostly in English, but they occasionally switched into Spanish. Amira was a 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher in her 21<sup>st</sup> year of teaching. She identified as white. Prior to teaching fourth grade, she was a special education teacher. She was very enthusiastic about the course readings and discussions. Her family visit was conducted in English. Alana was a 5<sup>th</sup> year ELL teacher at the time of the study, who identified as a white woman. She had attended the elementary school where she worked, so she described herself as particularly invested in the community and motivated to teach there. Although a native English speaker, she spoke Spanish well as she minored in it at college and studied abroad in Spain. All her family visits were conducted in Spanish. Ellen was a mid-career first grade teacher at the time of the study who also identified as white. She was always excited to try new projects and helped organize the book club for her colleagues. Her family visits were conducted in English. More detailed descriptions of the participants and their visits can be found in Table 1.

I, the researcher and facilitator of the groups, identify as a middle-class white woman. As a former elementary school teacher for 11 years, I participated

in family visits which changed my outlook on teaching and schools. As a current literacy professor, I work with undergraduate students and practicing classroom teachers on becoming more culturally relevant, driven by the notion that I was uneducated in these areas as a classroom teacher, although interested and willing to change. I attended all the family visits described that resulted from the professional development course and many of those in the book club project.

**Table 1*****Participant and Project Descriptions***

Pseudonym	Participant Description	Project Description	No. of Visits	Family Visited Description
Esperanza	Latina, Spanish and Dominant English speaker, 1 <sup>st</sup> year teacher	Professional Development Course Voluntary, not compensated	1	Mother, father, daughter: Latinx, Spanish speaking at home, mother and daughter also spoke English
Amira	White, Dominant English speaker, mid-career teacher	Professional Development Course Voluntary, not compensated	1	Mother and son: Black, African American Language and Dominant English speakers
Alana	White, Spanish, and Dominant English speaker, mid-career teacher	Professional Book Club Voluntary, compensated hourly	6	Mother and three daughters: Spanish speakers at home, daughters learning English at school
Ellen	White, Dominant English speaker, mid-career teacher	Professional Book Club Voluntary, compensated hourly	3	Mother and daughter: White, Dominant English speakers

## Data Collection

The methods for this research drew from the qualitative traditions of Glesne (2016) and Miles et al. (2014). Data sources from the professional development course included in-class journals, transcripts of the course discussions, transcripts from the family visits, family visit reflective journals, classroom observations, and in course assignments. During the professional development course and the book club, small recorders were left around the classroom to capture participants' discussions. Each of these was transcribed. During the family visits, the conversation was also recorded and transcribed. Directly after each discussion and family visit, I would take detailed analytic memos to capture feelings and nuance. I created Google Folders that were shared individually between the participant and myself. In these folders, I created Google Docs that had space for the teachers to respond to the in-class discussions as well as the family visits. I used these to triangulate the data from the discussions and my observations.

Data sources from the book club included transcripts of the book club discussions, transcripts from the family visits, family visit reflective journals (see Table 2 and Figure 1 below), and interviews with the teachers. As with the professional development project, recorders were placed around the classroom for book club discussion. I also recorded during the family visits and took notes.

**Table 2**

***Sample of Reflective Journal Prompt***

<p>Please write in your journal after each meeting. Tell me what you discussed or did and how you felt it went. Write down any concerns or questions you have after this meeting. Tell me what you think you want to work on for next time.</p>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What are some things you have learned from working with the families that you didn't know before?</li> <li>2. How have you grown from this experience?             <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Have any of your expectations or opinions changed since the beginning?</li> </ol> </li> <li>3. Have you seen any changes in the child since beginning this project?</li> </ol>



## Figure 1

**Family Visit Reflective Journal Example**

4. For the first visit, What are you nervous or excited about?

I am nervous that they will be so busy and forget that we had planned to meet. I am excited to get to see [redacted] and her family interacting in a non-school related way and just start to get to know them better.

5. Right after your first home visit (like in the car on the way home talk into your phone or something), *What surprised you? What intrigued you? What bothered you?*

I was surprised that the parents thought that this meeting was about something bad concerning their daughter. I loved that they had such simple but high goals for their daughter (go to and finish college) and how honest they were as a family. I knew about some of their struggles like the father going through surgery but it sounds like they are open about other things as well.

It sounded like the family does not spend much time together on a daily basis due to their different work schedules but I like that they still think of the ways that they can spend time together on special occasions.

I was a bit bothered by the occasional comments the mom made about how her older daughter was so smart and that we should meet her. I am not sure if she was just proud of her oldest daughter and liked to talk about it but I felt like we should have been focusing on [redacted] more.

6. Later reflection: Were you able to see any funds of knowledge? How did you feel? How did they seem? What did you actually do?

I think the funds of knowledge that I was able to see was knowing how to persevere through struggles. Even when she has nightmares, it sounds like her parents have taught her ways to help herself feel better (praying to a guardian angel). She is able to have honest conversations with others and is able to process those feelings in a healthy manner. Her parents speak to her in Spanish at home so it helps her build her skills in another language. She also has an older sister and a younger brother which from experience having siblings myself, can help you build skills that are helpful with working with others and in teams.

To answer my research question, *Do family visits foster more culturally relevant teaching practices?* I used qualitative coding methods (Glesne, 2016) to code my data set, looking for moments that reflected a change in practices. First, I created a code book based on attributes from the literature on culturally responsive, relevant, and sustaining teaching; ideas such as “reduce prejudices” (Banks, 2016), “hold high expectations” (Gay, 2000), “create relevant black personality” (Ladson-Billings, 2009), “adapt teaching” (Ladson-Billings, 2009), and “used student culture to frame lessons” (Ladson-Billings, 2009). See Table 3 below. From there, I combed through each data source from each family visit and coded for these concepts.

After I began coding, I noticed that many of the codes were inward, or *teacher* oriented, and many were outward, or *teaching* oriented. Two larger categories emerged to group these codes: “personal/affective attributes” or ways the teachers themselves would have to change, and “teaching attributes” or how the teaching itself would change to become more culturally focused. I began to code and categorize for both ideas: specific attributes of culturally relevant teaching, as well as if the change was within the *teacher* or the *teaching*. Codes in italics below are ones that I found in the data. By reviewing these codes and

organizing them into categories, I began to see ways that family visits did impact a teacher's ability and knowledge about being more culturally relevant.

**Table 3****Code Book**

<b>Personal/Affective Attributes</b>	<b>Teaching Attributes</b>
reduce their prejudices	<i>variety of teaching and learning styles</i>
high expectations	constructivist lens
<i>validation, affirmation, legitimacy, connection, and meaningfulness</i>	integrate content and curriculum from many cultures
one's worldview reflects a person's cultural position	<i>adapt their teaching</i>
understand the power differentials	<i>used student culture to frame</i>
<i>interests, strengths, and knowledges are a part of learning</i>	<i>expanded definitions of literacy</i>
<i>relevant black personality</i>	embedded instruction in larger cultural contexts
<i>disrupted deficit</i>	<i>building on prior experiences, frames of reference</i>
awareness that there are multiple perspectives	empowering, transformative, and emancipatory
struggle against the status quo	get political

**Findings**

As described in detail below, results of this study show that engaging in family visits did lead to more culturally relevant teaching in the classroom. However, results also show that the learning was perhaps surface level, not deep enough to enact large scale changes nor disrupt power structures. Results show that engaging in family visits led to three main findings related to culturally relevant teaching: teachers validated and legitimized students' family practices; teachers adapted their teaching practices; and student academic excellence was displayed.

## Validation, Legitimacy, and Meaningfulness

Overall, engaging in family visits led to teachers validating and legitimizing the students' home practices and making meaningful connections to their lives. Ladson-Billings (2009) explained that culturally relevant teaching uses "cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, or attitudes" (p. 20). By disrupting deficit notions that families or cultures need to be helped or fixed, engaging in these visits showed teachers a way to view families through lenses of strength and wholeness. Ladson-Billings (2009) explains that, without disruption, "this invalidation of African American culture is compounded by a notion of assimilationist teaching, a teaching style that operates without regard to the students' particular cultural characteristics" (p. 24). Through family visits, these teachers saw places to view their students' families and cultures as unique.

For example, Esperanza wrote in her journal after the visit, "[What] I was able to see was knowing how to persevere through struggles. Even when she has nightmares, it sounds like her parents have taught her ways to help herself feel better (praying to a guardian angel)." Esperanza took a family story from the visit about praying to guardian angels and used it as a way to frame the family's challenges differently. Instead of viewing the family from a deficit lens of struggle, she took this one fund of knowledge (prayer, angels) and applied it to viewing them with perseverance.

Later in class together, Esperanza reflected on valuing and legitimizing diverse ways of solving problems and practicing literacy, another way of validating their lives:

[A family visit] just shows, like, what they're doing and what I can draw into the classroom that they already know about, and that's pretty powerful to show that what you're [the family] doing is important, and just challenges me to just keep a more open mind about what literacy can look like, because it's different in many people's families. So just, like, thinking about that, valuing that other people might see it differently.

Here, Esperanza's mindset shifted. She described a new awareness that her own frame of reference was just one of many, and that all perspectives should be valued in the classroom. Her reflection gives legitimacy to the ways that different families practice literacy. During her family visit, she experienced a family whose religion was a main source of literacy teaching and learning. Through this she understood that school literacy practices are just one path to literacy. Religions often provide a diversity of ways to practice literacy in terms of listening, speaking, interpreting, responding, and comprehending (literal versus inferential, for example).

Amira also described how meaningful her visit had been. In class, she described the physical connection of going to the family's neighborhood and how it expanded beyond the student she did the visit with:

I feel like I've made more connections like with kids that live by Darius, because I'll say, like, "Oh you just moved over by Darius, I know where Darius lives," or "oh I saw you at Darius's house, yea you live by Darius," so there's just a lot of those little things - that I just saw kids who live there and I think that's kinda cool.

This excerpt shows that she knows a little bit more about the students she sees in his neighborhood, that she feels more connected to them. It is also noteworthy to point out that she described it as "cool" - she did not say the students felt more connected to her but that she liked being connected to them. This demonstrates that she had a more meaningful connection with them.

Alana described a similar meaningful event when she visited the neighborhood of her student. Here she discussed it with another teacher, Ellen, in our final interview together (I interviewed both Alana and Ellen at the same time):

Alana: Well, I just felt like everything was hypothetical to me before, and it's not like I didn't know what aspects, what life was like, but I feel like it's a benefit to me to be in homes in [neighborhood name] too, I don't know what that neighborhood is like mostly. Um, although going there is insane because if I get spotted.

Ellen [interjects]: It's like a swarm.

Alana: Yes.

The connection that Alana described, and that Ellen related to, is an important one. It was so rare to see teachers in this neighborhood that the children "swarmed" them when they arrived. This indicated it was not a neighborhood where teachers lived nor frequented and thus likely quite different than those the teachers were familiar with from their own lives. Alana makes a key point that she knew things about the neighborhood, but they were purely "hypothetical." After spending time there, she learned real information about the kids and where they lived. This meaningful connection went from hypothetical to real in a span of a few visits.

Alana further described the connection she made with one of the mothers she visited multiple times. As she wrote in her journal after each visit, the ongoing struggle and desire to connect was clear. After one of her early visits she wrote, "House is beautifully maintained - Virgin Guadalupe alter... how to connect to church when I am not religious? Great community/literacy center." Here, she is trying to connect to surface level cultural icons to validate the literacy practices of

the family she visited. Later in their visits together, the mother connected the book they were reading, *En Mi Familia* (Garza, 2000), to their discussions. In her final interview Alana said,

I feel like just sharing texts [picture books] with her, she was so interested in telling [her daughter], like, “Oh here’s a picture of me wearing a similar dress” and she always was finding things on her phone to share about her life.

By engaging in these family visits and reading culturally relevant literature together, Alana, the mother, and the daughter (Alana’s student) were able to bond over the stories. Alana sharing this picture book showed that she viewed the mother’s life stories with legitimacy and validation.

### **Adapted Teaching Practices**

Results show that engaging in family visits led to adapted teaching practices in the classroom. Ladson-Billings (2009) described an important tenet in culturally relevant teaching, “students’ real-life experiences are legitimized as they become part of the ‘official’ curriculum” (p. 127). The teachers who participated in these family visits adopted many new and relevant practices in their classrooms. Because these participants also read professional books together and discussed many ideas, it is impossible to delineate what new classroom practices came only from the family visits. However, I chose to highlight the representative samples that most directly link to the visits.

In her final interview, Ellen described lasting impacts of the visits, including how she created a family book in her classroom. Families submitted pictures and stories to be included as a type of classroom photo album. She listed the lasting impacts on her:

Remembering to bring them [students/families] into the classroom. Making a family book is important. Adjusting projects or readings to connect to their outside life. I’ve always tried to go to soccer games but to remember *in* the classroom, to make sure that we are bringing that outside world *into* the classroom.

Here Ellen made an important distinction between connections outside the classroom (soccer) and how she must take the next step to bring them *into* the classroom and adapt her teaching. As Ladson-Billings (2009) described, Ellen was making an effort to have the family stories and lives be the “official curriculum” (p. 127).

Esperanza reflected on her family visit in her written journal. In the quote below, she shows how she is thinking about teaching this student differently because of what she learned. She also clearly related to this student better. “She [the student] also has an older sister and a younger brother which, from experience having siblings myself, can help you build skills that are helpful with working with others and in teams.” Esperanza saw this student’s family life from a position of strength and intended to build on that by recognizing her potential to be a leader in the classroom. In her final reflection, Esperanza wrote,

I have learned that it is even more critical to involve families within reading and writing so that students not only get more exposure to it at home but so that teachers can learn the literacy practices that go on within students’ families. This way, teachers can build upon what students already know and use it to build upon in the classroom. Teachers need to value the types of reading and writing that may not be usually seen within current curriculum.

Here, Esperanza is reiterating the ideas of Villegas and Lucas (2002) that there are multiple perspectives and teachers must learn to incorporate all of them in the classroom. When I visited her classroom months later, she told me that she was no longer requiring students and families to sign a “20 minute a night reading log,” instead opting for students to present regularly to their peers in class on what they were reading at home. She described how students felt accountable but not restrained by the school-like expectation. This minor shift blurred the boundary between school and home a bit by celebrating home literacies in the classroom.

At Amira’s family visit, she asked the mother, “What would you like for me to assign for him to do at home?” The mom replied quickly and definitively, “History. I want him to read about his heritage. Mississippi.” The mom then added that she would like “some sort of newspaper writing assignment about sports” because he “likes to read the paper.” Later in our course together, Amira described how she changed her reading homework from books to articles for her whole class because of this project. Amira explains how she thinks parents are more open to reading articles, like the family visit mother described, when she sends them home. As a result, she is now assigning culturally relevant news articles, as shown by this conversation with another teacher, Jane, about her parent conferences:

Amira: I assign articles.

Jane: [About] current events?

Amira: They can relate to them.

Jane: Because it’s short?

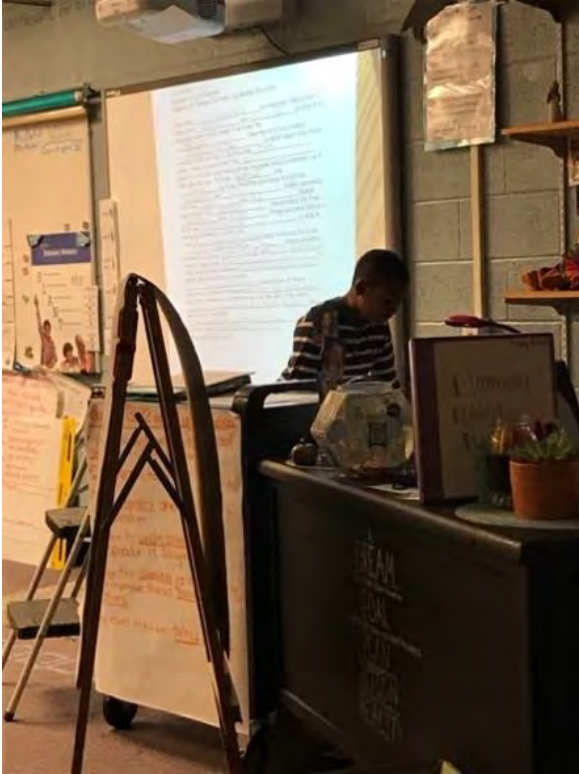
Amira: At conferences, I talked about the [article] “#1000BlackGirlBooks, Teen Makes Big Push for More Books with Black Characters” (Orens, 2018), the parents really were into that.

This change in reading assignments directly resulted from the family visit when she asked the mother what she would like to see as homework, then tried out that idea across her whole class. At conferences, she received positive feedback from the other parents. That small discussion at the family visit made a larger impact on her class and changed her homework assignments to be more inclusive of family desires and stories.

In her final in-class journal, Amira reflected on the course as a whole, stating how much she “loved talking to parents about their child and taking pictures of families for [the] room.” After the success of her family visit, she had asked all families to send in photos and she made a bulletin board where the students could hang work they were proud of underneath their family photo. “I feel that my classroom is now full of pictures and books that my students can relate to and that more of my students can see themselves in my class.”

### **Academic Excellence**

When I first met with Amira to discuss Darius, the student whom she visited at home, she described him as someone who struggled with reading in her classroom and “loud and fidgety.” She said that he had behavior issues regularly. Upon meeting him in his home, he did not act in those ways. He was quiet and attentive. He was clearly shy about his teacher being there but excited, too. He mostly listened as his mom and Amira talked. At the end of the visit, Amira showed him a template of the poem “Where I’m From,” originally by Lyons (1999). She explained how to fill in the parts about his home and his family. He and his mom seemed excited to work on it. The next week in his class, I observed as he led his classmates in teaching them how to write their own “Where I’m From” poem from the template (see Figure 2 below). He started off shy, but by the time he was finished, he was confident and happily teaching his midwestern peers about “fried okra” and “iced tea” from his Mississippi heritage.

**Figure 2*****Darius Reading His Poem to His Class***

At the end of his reading, Amira directed the rest of the class to try it out, “since Darius has done this poem already, he’s going to be around helping people.” As he circulated helping his peers, he was so proud. He was standing up straight and acting like a teacher. As they set off to start, he said, “Anyone have any questions?” After he helped a few friends, I overheard him say, in a very teacher-like voice, “write your name...” as he pointed to the name line just as a teacher would. This leadership experience for Darius came directly from his family visit. Ladson-Billings (2009) described, “the primary aim of culturally relevant teaching is to assist in the development of a ‘relevant black personality’ that allows African American students to choose academic excellence yet still identify with African and African American culture” (p. 20). Because of his family visit and the resulting activities, Darius was supported as he shared his story and was able to be a successful role model for his peers. “When schools support their [Black students’] culture as an integral part of the school experience, students can understand that academic excellence is not the sole province of white middle-class students” (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 12). Here, Darius’ family story was supported, and his academic excellence was on display.



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## Discussion and Limitations

Framing family visits from a lens of learning and listening—as opposed to being the “expert” teacher—allows teachers to learn from families. As a result, classroom practices can become more culturally relevant for the students. The teachers who participated in these visits changed their classroom practices and engaged more deeply with their students and families. By listening, asking questions, and allowing families to lead, teachers saw families as whole, and having positions of strength. The practice of learning from the families by leaving the school and humbly opening themselves up to the families’ lives and practices allowed the teachers to learn and grow in different ways than traditional professional development might. The practice validated the families’ lives where the teachers could see them from positions of strength and wholeness as opposed to deficit and assumptions. The teachers learned to change their in-class teaching methods to include the students’ lives and home practices more. In some cases, these visits led to empowering students to take on new identities of excellence in the classroom.

In Hammond’s (2014) work on the connection between brain research and culturally responsive teaching she stated:

The brain’s two prime directives are to stay safe and be happy. The brain takes its social needs very seriously and is fierce in protecting an individual’s sense of well-being, self-determination, and self-worth along with its connection to community. We cannot downplay students’ need to feel safe and valued in the classroom. (p. 47)

Teachers who engage in listening and learning family visits physically show students their commitment to the child’s community and culture, which in turn promotes the brain behavior needed for academic learning as outlined by Hammond. Although this project did not specifically measure academic achievement, future research could take up this thread.

Ladson-Billings (2009) ends her foundational work with the need to disrupt the status quo. She references Derrick Bell’s idea of the permanence of racism and the constant need to resist the inequities at play in our public schools. In this study, teachers who participated in family visits were working *toward* this constantly needed disruption by changing their attitudes and teaching practices while valuing and celebrating the diverse identities of their students. By engaging with families who are continually on the periphery of educational decision making and often absent in the official curriculum, teachers hold space for them and their stories in the classroom. This study shows that asset-based family visits can lead to this kind of disruption, especially if more time and focus is made available.

Related to this disruption of status quo, a limitation of this project was the length of time and depth of training to be able to observe more culturally sustaining

teaching practices. From the review of literature, culturally sustaining teachers must engage in disrupting the status quo, pushing back against dominant and assimilationist practices in the classroom and across the school community (Moore & Paris, 2021; Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2014). Although these teachers certainly engaged with family practices in the classroom and changed their outlooks on many issues, it is important to recognize that the traditional patterns of the dominant classroom held steady. In line with Park's and Paulick's (2021) findings, teachers need in-depth training on culturally sustaining practices and deep work with their own critical consciousness for meaningful classroom change to occur. Although these teachers were engaged with research and training, it was not enough to shift the status quo in a broad sense. Large scale and longer-term reform would likely need to be supported at a higher level (such as through teacher training, leadership training, community support) to be able to truly disrupt classrooms and change spaces enough to sustain.

Another limitation of this study is that some of the teachers only participated in one visit due to time and pay. Results of comparing the two projects presented here show that teachers who were compensated for their time were more likely to participate in multiple visits. As schools prioritize culturally relevant teaching and differentiated practices, results of this study show that family visits should be considered in the adapted changes and that teachers should be compensated for their time to engage in this important but time-intensive practice. Future research could track longer-term family visits and teacher pedagogical changes.

## Conclusion

Culturally relevant teachers put students and student practices in the center of their teaching. Culturally relevant teaching involves shifts in the mindset of teachers to seeing student culture as a place of strength and knowledge. By engaging in culturally relevant readings and discussions paired with participating in family visits and learning from families, teachers can see their students and families in a new light. This study shows the importance of setting aside professional development time for culturally relevant pedagogy, as well as funded time for teachers to visit families. By doing so, teachers can learn to adapt their teaching and bring students and family practices more into the center of curriculum and pedagogy. Family visits allow for teachers to see students as unique individuals worthy of being the center of their own education.

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