

# Family Connections: A Basis for Teacher Reflection and Instructional Improvement

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## Abstract

As teachers reach out to families in new ways, attempt to learn from them, and connect that knowledge to instruction, what do the teachers reflect on and consider? This article explores this question based on the experiences of two teachers involved in a multi-year study focused, in part, on school-family connections. Findings emerged from data collected during numerous visits made to the students' homes over two to three years, formal and informal interviews with the families, and the teachers' weekly reflections about their teaching and the students' academic development. They also reflected after each of the family visits, focusing their reflections on what had taken place on the visit, what they had learned from and about the family, and what this new knowledge meant for teaching that particular child or the class as a whole. The teachers' goal was to help students achieve academically by providing effective instruction that linked students' learning in school to their background of knowledge and experiences. The teachers' reflections helped them focus on whether and how they were reaching that goal and on what modifications might be needed.

Key Words: reflection, teachers and families, home visits, funds of knowledge, contextualized instruction, student achievement

## Introduction

*“Demand for the solution of a perplexity is the steadying and guiding factor in the entire process of reflection.”*

Since these early words of Dewey’s (1910/1997, p. 11), more recent writers have offered further elaborations about reflection, the reflective process, and how reflection can nudge teachers to clarify their values and intents and determine appropriate instructional choices (Goodman, 1984; Rodgers, 2002; Ross, Bondy, & Kyle, 1993; Schon, 1983, 1987; Zeichner & Liston, 1987). The purpose of this article is to describe how two teachers faced many “perplexities” in their reflections as they participated in a research study which took them into their students’ homes for extensive family visits, reached out to families in new ways to help them become more involved, and refined their instruction in light of these experiences, insights, and their new knowledge regarding teaching effectiveness.

## Teachers’ Reflections in a Reform and Research Context

This article shares results from one aspect of a longitudinal study that examined the effectiveness of Kentucky’s 1990 state-wide mandated K-3 primary program in which students have the same teacher for multiple years. One of the critical attributes expected of the primary program (Kentucky Department of Education, 1991) was an emphasis on positive parental involvement. Consequently, the teachers realized the need to learn more about their students and families. A significant aspect of this study, then, involved extensive family visits to the homes of the children in the research project to understand the families’ “funds of knowledge,” defined as knowledge and skills families have accumulated over time that are essential to families’ functioning (Velez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992). Furthermore, the teachers aimed at using that knowledge instructionally and exploring ways of involving the families more appropriately and extensively.

Data sources included multiple visits to the children’s homes, interviews with their families, and reflections by the teachers. The teachers reflected weekly about their teaching and their students’ academic development. They also made family visits several times each month and reflected on what had taken place on the visit, what they had learned from and about the family, and what these new insights meant for teaching that particular child or for the class as a whole. This article includes data from two of the teachers, who are also co-authors of this article. One (Gayle) met with her research collaborator one

evening each week; as she shared her reflections, her comments were recorded on a laptop. The other teacher (Karen) kept a weekly journal of her reflections, which was later analyzed by another research collaborator.

The teachers' ultimate goal was to provide the kind of instruction that would enable their students' academic achievement, especially by attempting to link students' learning in school to real-life experiences and contexts. The teachers' reflections helped them focus on whether and how they were reaching that goal.

Analysis of the data took place in two stages. First, the data were examined to determine the categories of topics and issues teachers addressed over the course of the study. These categories focused on issues around the statewide reform and primary program, the teachers' efforts to implement research-based practices, family visits, weekly instructional activities and events, and the research project itself. (See Kyle, McIntyre, Miller, & Moore, 2002; McIntyre, Kyle, Hovda, & Stone, 1998; McIntyre, Kyle, Moore, Sweazy, & Greer, 2001, for more on the larger study).

Second, for this article, we specifically examined the reflections data on the family visits. We address the following questions: What is the nature of reflection for teachers who have made a commitment to connecting with and learning from their students' families? How does the process of reflecting on what they learn about and from families impact their instructional decision making? What are the implications about how to support teachers as they reach out to families, reflect on their deeper knowledge about students, and implement effective instruction for the academic achievement of these (and other) students? These questions drove our reading of the data and subsequent development of the themes illustrated below. First, though, we discuss the theory that frames this study and, specifically, what teacher reflection means in our discussion.

## **Teacher Reflection as a Process**

As noted above, many educational theorists and researchers have written about teacher reflection. They have attempted to define what reflection is (Schon, 1983; Tom, 1985; Valli, 1997; Zeichner & Liston, 1987), argued its merits (Clift, Houston, & Pugach, 1990; Richardson, 1990), researched its use (Pugach & Johnson, 1990; Wildman, Magliaro, Niles, & McLaughlin, 1990), and described how to help others develop it as a process for teachers to engage in (Goodman, 1984; Rodgers, 2002; Ross et al., 1993; Schon, 1983, 1987; Valli, 1997). Yet, differences in theoretical orientations to reflection exist. In their comprehensive review of reflection in both literacy and general teacher

education studies, Roskos, Vukelich, and Risko (2001) note the multiple ways in which reflection is described and advocated in the literature:

Reflection and reflective activity are linked to teaching actions, thinking, development, awareness, beliefs, assessment, and educational reform.... But with all that has been hoped for and all that has been said in the name of reflection, much remains muddled and confused as to its purpose, development, and role. (p. 596)

In their review of 15 years of studies, Roskos et al. offer an analysis of similarities and differences as well as the conceptual patterns in common. They found similarities in the problem-solving basis for reflection, writing as a reflective process, qualitative research approaches for studying reflection, and the limited help in strategies for teaching prospective teachers to be reflective. They found differences in theoretical bases, definitions, use of dialogue, elaboration about coaching, and methodology. Based on their analysis, the authors offer several recommendations. They speak to literacy researchers in particular, but their admonition informs our own work as well.

Literacy researchers need to better frame the reflection problem under study as to its function (e.g., for personal, classroom practice, or professional outcome), features (e.g., of problem solving, of teaching actions, of sociopolitical and ethical criteria), temporal qualities (e.g., anticipatory, in-action, or retrospective), and structure (e.g., scaffolding, reframing, debriefing). (p. 618)

Using their suggestions as a guide, we describe our study in the following ways. First, we define a reflective teacher as one who “makes rational and ethical choices about what and how to teach and assumes responsibility for those choices” (Ross, Bondy, & Kyle, 1989, p. 3). The teachers taught within a statewide reform context and were expected to teach in ways that reflected the attributes of Kentucky’s nongraded primary program. These expectations were both rational in their grounding in constructivist learning theory and ethical in their aim of helping more young children achieve academic success. Further, the reflections provided a way for the teachers to self-assess and show responsibility for the choices they made.

Second, in connecting to the suggestions of Roskos et al. (2001), we describe the function of teachers’ reflection in our study as the improvement of classroom practice as they made instructional connections with students’ families. The features of the teachers’ reflections had a sociopolitical and problem-solving emphasis as they struggled to learn more about families’ access to schooling, as well as their funds of knowledge and how to embed that meaningfully into the curriculum. Their reflections were anticipatory as they

made instructional plans, in-action as they drew from their knowledge of the students, and retrospective as they assessed what they had learned from the families and what had and had not worked in their teaching. Thus, the structure of the reflections had both debriefing and reframing dimensions.

The notions of being responsible for rational and ethical instructional choices, as defined by Ross et al. (1989), and the temporal and structural dimensions of reflection as described by Roskos et al. (2001) connect with Schon's earlier work about reflection (1983, 1987). Schon describes "knowing-in-action, reflection-in-action and reflection on reflection-in-action" (1987, p. 1) as critical dimensions of professional knowledge and practice. For Schon, knowing-in-action captures the skilled performance one demonstrates publicly, such as serving an ace in tennis, or privately, such as an immediate and accurate translation of written text from one language to another. Knowing-in-action for a teacher could be making a spontaneous connection during a discussion of literature to a related concept in science. In such episodes "the knowing is *in* the action" (p. 25), and typically the person is "unable to make it [that knowledge] verbally explicit" (p. 25).

Reflection-in-action differs in a subtle way from knowing-in-action, referring to the ability of the performer to be sensitive and responsive to variations in the immediate context. Relating this to the classroom, a teacher's reflection-in-action might be viewed as the skillful responsiveness to a "teachable moment;" that is, paying close attention to and building from students' responses and contributions while keeping the overall curricular and instructional goal in mind.

Schon further elaborates on the notion of reflection on reflection-in-action, noting that it "may indirectly shape our future action" (p. 31). He describes how a Monday morning quarterback can benefit from this process, especially if he happens to be the quarterback for next week's game. It is just this process that enables a teacher, away from the immediacy and demands of the day, to consider decisions made, consequences, purposes, and next steps. In our study, this provided a time for the teachers to consider ways in which they did or could have connected their teaching to what they were learning from their students' families.

In the sections which follow, we elaborate on the family connections that enabled the teachers to make rational and ethical decisions (Ross et al., 1989) and to improve classroom practice on the basis of their elaborated sociopolitical knowledge (Roskos et al., 2001). We explain the teachers' reflections as anticipatory as well as retrospective (Roskos et al.), or as Schon (1987) describes the process, their reflections on their reflection-in-action.

## Learning About and From Families

As explained, the research team made extensive family visits throughout the study, each visit followed by reflections on the experience and on possible connections in teaching. What did the teachers consider? What did they most focus on as they thought about their conversations and interactions with the families? The data suggest four main themes in the teachers' reflections: how they began to see the child as the parents did, the support parents provided for their children, the challenges and concerns families faced and shared, and how the families viewed their children's school experiences. (Note: All student names below are pseudonyms.)

### Seeing a Child Through Parents' Eyes

"Will loves to talk." "Jonetta is shy in front of a group." "Tonya is always moving." "Timmy just keeps us all laughing." "Sammy throws tantrums when he doesn't get his way." These are just a few of many insights about children in their classrooms that the teachers learned through structured interviews and casual conversations with family members, mostly parents. The parents helped the teachers understand who their children were and what they needed.

#### *Who Is This Child?*

One of the most significant benefits of the family involvement activities was getting to know the children through the perspectives of their parents. The teachers learned about talents the children possessed that may have taken them months of classroom time to learn, if ever. For example, after a family visit with one student, Karen wrote:

We learned how talented Charlie is with drawing and making things; he built a tent out back that is very detailed, and he made a raft for the Derby Boat Race. Before he made it, he sketched it out on paper in a very detailed way with arrows showing where and how it would be put together.

Gayle discovered something similar about her student, Eric, when his dad offered during one family visit, "Eric really likes to build things. He works on a tractor that I had when I was a kid. He's changed the seat and hooked things on to it." Gayle reminded herself in her reflections, "I need to use his interest in building and making things and find related books and provide this as a way for him to demonstrate what he knows." She and Karen each later found ways in the classroom to involve Charlie and Eric in hands-on activities that tapped

into their interests in building structures. For example, in a unit on neighborhoods, Eric took part in constructing three-dimensional homes and other community buildings out of clay.

Of course, the teachers learned of non-academic interests of their students as well. This went a long way in building relationships. Karen shared,

I did attend it [a basketball game], and two of my students were on the team and they just glowed when they saw me arrive. This will allow me to talk to them about something very important to them outside of school. I saw how important that game was, which makes me think of all the other kids that play sports or do other things that we do need to talk about and celebrate. This will make me have more meaningful conversations with the kids.

The teachers also learned about strong family relationships in children's lives. Gayle, for example, learned about one child's uncle with cerebral palsy who had always lived at home with his parents. Gayle noted in her reflections that Will's mom described her brother as needing total care, not talking at all, making loud noises, and biting himself when angry. Gayle asked how Will and his sister responded to their uncle. His mother shared,

They hug and kiss him and interact with him like he was a child like them, which he is in many ways. They accept him as he is, and I think it's important because they have learned to accept people that are different.

When reflecting on this child's knowledge and experience, Gayle reminded herself to incorporate some readings about differences and respectful, caring ways of treating those with differences. She mentioned using Dugen's (1998), *Helping Paws: Service Dogs*, Carrick's (1985), *Stay Away from Simon*, Berenstain's (1993), *The Berenstain Bears and the Wheelchair Commando*, and Martin and Archambault's (1987), *Knots on a Counting Rope*.

Reflecting on family relationships experienced by the students she visited, Karen wrote in her journal,

I see the love that exists between my students and their families and it has made me want to do more for them. It's not just my student and some family that I don't know. I do know them, and that has made me so much more thoughtful with each individual child and the life that child is living. I am more loving and more concerned.

In this case, Karen's reflection illustrates how learning more about her students through the family visits powerfully shaped her fundamental nature as a teacher. As she began to see her students differently, she also began to see herself as a more loving and caring teacher. This illustrates a more personal rather

than classroom practice function of reflection (Roskos et al., 2001), yet one that may ultimately impact Karen's teaching in long-term ways.

And, finally, the teachers learned who the children were within the cultural context of the family. Gayle, for example, reflected on the issue of racial identity after visiting in one household:

During the interview about family history, she [Jonetta's mother] didn't mention the fact that her children are biracial and that her present African American husband is not the father of her children. However, at the end of the interview, when asked about ethnicity, she described her family's make-up and then said, "We don't see race here." I mentioned that in the classroom we talk about valuing our differences as well as what we have in common. She didn't respond to this idea and seemed to focus more on the idea of not acknowledging differences and treating everyone the same.

This interchange caused Gayle to consider what would be appropriate and needed by her student. Knowing that Jonetta describes herself as white when she clearly has an African American parent led Gayle to reason that Jonetta may need more multicultural materials available in the classroom as she continues to develop her personal cultural and racial identity.

#### *What Does This Child Need?*

The family visits afforded the teachers many opportunities to develop insights about a child's needs, some of which were shared explicitly in response to interview questions or in casual conversation. For instance, Sammy's mother told Gayle, "He got kicked out of a couple of daycares because he didn't behave and get along with the other children." She went on to say how she's struggling with how to be an effective parent. Gayle reflected, "She talks a lot about him being out of control or really angry and not knowing what to do [with him]." In further reflections, Gayle commented,

Sammy's mom's goals for him are learning to be better disciplined and getting along better with others. I think he's going to need lots of assistance with social development and how to "do school."

Gayle learned from Crystal's mother how very much Crystal wanted to learn how to read so that, in the child's own words, she could "read all the books." Knowing already that this was a positive, confident, eager young learner, Gayle was a bit surprised at how much Crystal (and her mother) saw reading as such a major need. When Gayle reflected on this, she noted, "It will be important to give her lots of support in reaching this goal and to sustain her enthusiasm for learning."

The family visits helped the teachers see their students through parents' perspectives. Sometimes the new lens affirmed the teachers' assessments, but at other times, their views were broadened. For example, one parent wondered if her child might be "hyper," another was concerned whether glasses might be needed, and another worried about her child's lack of friends. Concerns also included academic issues of reading, writing, mathematics, and so on. In all instances, though, the teachers felt the family visits and subsequent reflections on what they learned clarified their understanding of the children's needs and their possibilities for responding instructionally. Thus, they demonstrated Schon's (1987) notion of reflection on reflection-in-action as well as Roskos et al.'s (2001) problem-solving and anticipatory dimensions of reflection.

## Family Support for the Child's Learning

### *Valuing Education*

Unfortunately, many teachers of students of poverty assume that education is not as valued by some families. Delpit's (1995) work illustrates that teachers often hold lower expectations for poor children, especially poor black children, and so, it is likely teachers hold such expectations about poor families as well. Through the visits, however, Karen and Gayle learned otherwise; all the families of their students wanted their children to learn, do well in school, and graduate. Several spoke of going to college as a possible goal. When asked what else she had learned through family visits, Karen explained, "I wouldn't have known about Selená's two sisters. I wouldn't know how they all read a lot." About Jason's family, Karen wrote:

I'd never have known how much Jason's family really values education. They put it top on their list and are very supportive. Jason is a fantastic reader; his older brother doesn't have the passion for it and so doesn't read much on his own. [If I hadn't made these visits] we [Karen and the parents] wouldn't be comfortable enough to both discuss our children, our values and troubles and questions we have in raising them.

Sometimes parents' worries revealed their value of education. Karen once expressed her surprise that a student's family was well aware of the student's struggle with reading. When asked to respond about the power of the family visit, Karen said, "I would never have known how worried Amy's parents are about her reading. I see them worry and see why Amy's self-esteem is not so great. I work hard at helping her be more positive and at seeing herself as a good, smart kid."

Gayle also observed parents' value of education. Jonetta's mother spoke about the family visits, saying, "I can find out more about what's going on at

school, and you can find out what's going on at home, and that is very helpful. It should happen all through school...a lot of problems could be resolved." In this mother's words, Gayle was able to see how much she wanted to have a partnership with her child's teacher—currently and in the future.

Other times, the value of education was revealed through the family's desire for upward mobility and a better life. After one family visit, Karen wrote,

We were introduced to Charlie's [the student's] father who was wearing dirty blue jeans and no shirt. He apologized for how he looked but said he's been working all day in the heat with concrete. Charlie's mother mentioned that is why they tell their kids to work hard at school, so they can get a better job than that. Dad nodded his head and said, 'Yea, I tell them they gotta stay in school so they don't have to get a job like mine.'

Comments such as these from the families prompted Karen and Gayle to realize as they reflected that many of their students' families viewed schooling as their children's ticket to a better economic life. Viewed from this perspective, the teachers' reflections took on the sociopolitical and ethical features identified by Roskos et al. (2001), as they considered the long-term goals the families had in mind and the instruction they needed to provide for the students.

### *Ways of Providing Help*

Further demonstrating their hopes for their children, many of the families talked about how they tried to provide help, even though at times they also acknowledged limitations (discussed below). Gayle reflected on Crystal's mom who explained, "We do things in the car like spell words and read signs and sing the alphabet and play games." Gayle also gained much insight from a detailed explanation Jonetta's mother offered about how she provided help:

When she asks a question, I turn it around and ask her a question. Like the other day, while I was cooking, she asked me how to make 25¢. I said right back, "How do you think you make 25¢?" She said, "A quarter," and I asked, "What makes up a quarter?" She then said, "Twenty-five pennies." I told her that was right, but how else could you make 25¢? I said, "How many nickels would it take?" At first she said 25, but I asked her, "If it takes 25 pennies, how could it take 25 nickels? How many pennies in one nickel?" She knew it took five pennies, so I told her, "You know how to count by 5s, so how many 5s until you get to 25?" She figured out five. Then I said, "OK, what about using dimes? How many dimes could you use?" She figured it out and said, "Two," but I told her she'd only be to 20, so what would she have left? She said, "Five pennies or one nickel." That's the kind of thing I do—just ask lots of questions.

Many people would find this kind of elaborated support, provided by a working class mother, surprising. Lareau (2000), for example, found that working class parents were less involved in their children's schooling, which may be why some teachers think parents do not care and that little academic help exists in such homes. However, in examples such as those above, Gayle and Karen found that academic help does exist and what it looks like for their students. Indeed, without the family visits and opportunity to talk at length, Gayle might not have known of the kind of help Jonetta received. However, having this insight and reflecting on its benefits for Jonetta as a learner, Gayle realized that this student was used to being nudged to provide reasons for her problem-solving and could be similarly challenged in the classroom.

### *Confessions about Academic Limitations*

Although the families provided many examples of help given at home, they also confessed their limitations and concerns about how to provide some of the assistance their children needed in order to be successful. Reflecting on these findings informed the teachers about ways they might need to fill the gap and help the families better grasp what the schools expected.

As a result of these insights from the families and their reflections about how to help, both Karen and Gayle planned a series of Family Night events that served many purposes. They were able to get to know the families better in a more informal setting and also provide some of the kinds of assistance the families had sought. (See Kyle, McIntyre, Miller, & Moore, in press, for detailed examples of Family Nights).

### *Families' Funds of Knowledge*

Through the family visits, the teachers discovered rich and diverse "funds of knowledge" (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 1992; Vélez-Ibáñez, & Greenberg, 1992) held by the families. For example, Karen and Gayle learned that the families of their children knew much about making crafts, construction, cooking, auto mechanics, lawn and tree care, pets, truck shows, the Bible and religious traditions, gardening, collections, and extended family reunions. Through their reflections, they were able to think more deeply about what the children knew and had experienced as learners in their own families. Knowing that one liked to plant snapdragons, or another wanted to know how to do the crafts her mother could do, or that each member of one family had interesting collections, helped Karen and Gayle think about how to use those insights in teaching. Although they couldn't make explicit connections about everything, they reported that just having this information in the back of their minds helped them connect more personally to particular children, sometimes through just a quick comment in the middle of a lesson.

## Family Challenges and Concerns

### *Financial and Material*

One of the challenges for the teachers was learning how difficult life was financially for so many of the families. Struggles were usually detected informally, often simply through seeing empty cupboards or hearing a parent worry aloud over money. At other times, they found out more directly, such as the time Gayle tried to call to arrange a visit and discovered the phone had been disconnected. The parent later said that, due to the father's injury and being laid off from work, there just wasn't enough money for monthly phone bills.

In one reflection Karen wrote about a somewhat chaotic family visit in which several young children were told to go to "time out," but they didn't. She added:

On top of that, Maria [Karen's student] came into the room drinking a glass of milk, and we overheard Mark [Maria's brother] say to her, "You know you're not supposed to drink milk until Dad starts making more money."

### *Emotional and Behavioral*

Sometimes the teachers learned of emotional pain suffered by some of the families as well as current family emotional problems they might be experiencing. Over the years, these included such issues as death, divorce, abandonment, and physical abuse. The teachers valued knowing what their students were going through, and they chose to be a caring, listening ear to the families. When asked about the impact of her visits, Karen responded that had she not made the visits,

Justin's mom wouldn't have told me about her marital problems. She wouldn't have talked to me about Justin's hyper tendencies. She sees how I look at Justin for who *he* is and make allowances for his behavior. She appreciates the fact that I am not pushing him to see a doctor and push him towards Ritalin.

About another family, Karen said, "I'd never have known about the troubles Charlie has with the battles that exist between the two divorced parents."

A mother of one of Gayle's students, who had often put on a "happy face" during the visits, finally acknowledged about her son, "I'm not going to lie to you. What he gets at school is all he gets." Gayle, knowing that the family had been dealing with the tragic death of Timmy's older brother, had been concerned about Timmy's emotional and violent outbursts. This acknowledgement from the mother opened the door for conversation about ways the mother

might be able to provide more help. She decided that driving the kids in the van and cooking supper, routine daily activities, were prime times to have Timmy read to her. In her reflections, Gayle realized the increased importance of making sure appropriate and engaging books went home with him, of following up in a caring way with the mother, and of seeking professional resources in the school and district to help Timmy with his emotional needs.

Sometimes reaching out with a family reaped unexpected rewards or unexpected understanding about the families. As mentioned above, Karen and Gayle each planned several Family Nights during the year, evening events designed to bring families together at school for enjoyable, academically focused activities. After one of these, Karen wrote:

Maria's mom [one of the parents] was really happy about the evening. She started out, when she first got to the school, with a not-so-happy look on her face. She said it was hard to get there with her four kids, and she was supposed to be at an awards ceremony for herself but chose to come to our event instead. She seemed tired and not too happy. But, at the end of the evening, she was smiling a lot and told me she would be coming back a lot, even during the day while the kids used their computers.

### **Child's School Experience from Parents' View**

Reaching out to families and the subsequent reflection on the interactions helped the teachers see their students' school experiences through the eyes of the parents. Karen wrote in her journal of the injustice one of her students and his family faced:

Last week Luke's mom came in unannounced and wanted to talk to me during my planning period. She started crying. I immediately thought divorce. I was wrong. It was all about Luke being racially mistreated. I learned that he has to sit at the front of the bus with the few other African Americans. The bus driver called them niggers. And because kids sit in groups according to their bus numbers, Luke is segregated from the rest of our kids at breakfast. That is why Luke's mother has been bringing him to school lately. I found out this began last year and that the 'higher ups' knew about it, yet nothing was done until now....The bus driver was suspended while it is being looked into. But, I've just heard that the bus driver is not going to be fired, but is being moved to another school. What a sad, sad thing. Besides the awful racism, this made me think about the fact that Luke's mother was comfortable enough to come in and talk to me. I have tried to create a welcoming atmosphere and I have

tried to let my families know I am here to talk to.... This might ease some of their pain when they are troubled. I truly feel that if I hadn't had this relationship with my families, Luke's mother would have not come to me to let me know of his being mistreated by the bus driver.

Again, Karen's reflection about the issues of equity and social justice embedded in Luke's experience illustrates the sociopolitical and ethical dimension described by Roskos et al. (2001). As she notes, her relationship with the family enabled her to learn about the unethical, racist treatment Luke had experienced and to intervene. Through her reflections, Karen recognized the powerful benefit of making the family visits and, through them, developing a relationship built on familiarity and trust.

Not all relationships were as positive as this one, though. At other times, what the teachers learned was personally disappointing, as shown in the following excerpt from Karen's journal:

I was quite disturbed when my assistant principal said Donnie's mother had called to say she wanted to request that Donnie not get me as a teacher next year. She said we had a personality conflict. I am not sure if she meant between her and me or between Donnie and me. I just hate this; I feel deeply that I have been good for Donnie. I know she [Donnie's mom] didn't love me, but he's learned so much this year! He couldn't read a lick last year, and all she wanted was for Donnie to read. Now he can read so well. And I hate it [that Donnie will be removed from her class] for him. I know he is comfortable and happy in my class. I am not ever looking for popularity awards and I will never behave in order to get parents to love me... I don't have time for such falseness.

Gayle had the same situation occur with her student, Timmy. She, too, was surprised at the news, having felt a breakthrough with Timmy's mother about ways to support his learning at home. Although the parent explained her decision by saying she felt two years with one teacher was sufficient, Gayle, like Karen, found the rejection by a parent to be painful.

Through her reflection, Karen took a brave stance and soon after asked her families for feedback. She sent them a "How Am I Doing?" survey (Kyle, et al., 2002) asking parents how schooling was going for their children mid-school year. Her survey asked questions such as,

Is your child having a good year? Does your child like school? Explain. Do you see your child growing academically? Explain. Do you think your child is treated fairly? How do you feel about the homework? (p. 38).

Karen and Gayle also discovered through the family visits much that was working well from the families who made positive comments. As teachers, they

were pleased to hear: “It must be something you’re doing in school [that explains the child’s reading interest].” “She likes to come to school this year...she gets out of bed every morning eager to get ready and go to school.” These positive comments, too, informed the teachers’ instruction. Karen captured some of this perspective in one of her journal entries:

The family visits have made me understand how important all this is. I have made an effort to be honest, open and that I truly care about the children. I truly believe that this philosophy, attitude, openness has caused a lot of good to happen. The more you know about each individual child, the more understanding you are. It makes you more sympathetic to their individual lives. It allows you to talk to and teach a child in a more meaningful personal manner. I hope that each of my students really knows that I really do care for them.

### **Impact on Instruction**

Throughout our study, the research team reminded each other of the primary goal of positive parent involvement: higher student achievement. To raise achievement, the teachers knew they had to improve instruction based on new understandings from the connections with families. Thus, as shown through examples above, the teachers made instructional changes toward more contextualized instruction (Tharp, Estrada, Dalton, & Yamauchi, 2000), instruction that built on what students already knew and were able to do, increasing the likelihood that the children would learn.

What students and families know outside of school is often not recognized in school as academic; however, when teachers learn of these areas of expertise and talents, they are better able to respond in a couple of ways. First, they can help the families see the academic merit in what they may view as commonplace experiences. For one family, this might mean realizing the math connections involved in determining the weight of tobacco it has ready to sell and what amount it will bring given the current price. For another family, this might mean realizing the science connections involved in using the machines in the backyard car repair shop. This message communicates explicitly the value of such learning, not just for its enjoyment or because the children develop talents (although worthy reasons), but because academic knowledge is embedded within such learning. This validates family knowledge and may expand the family’s realizations about it.

Second, teachers can use what they know about a particular student or group of students to make the kinds of instructional connections already described and further elaborated below. These instances demonstrate Schon’s

(1983, 1987) notion of reflection-in-action. The deeper understanding of the funds of knowledge held by families became a source these teachers drew upon in the immediacy of teaching, making subtle adjustments and connections to help children feel known and a part of the learning taking place.

Some of the examples of instructional change in the classrooms included the creation of instructional activities and units that built on families' funds of knowledge (Moll & González, 1993). Gayle created a unit on neighborhoods, using the school neighborhood as a reference point. This project especially tapped into the interests and skills of those children (such as Charlie and Eric introduced earlier) who helped build at home. Karen created a unit on experts which had students and their families sharing about subjects on which *they* were experts. In addition, both Gayle and Karen made multiple connections with literature in these and other family-connected units and lessons.

For example, Gayle collected many books on grandparents, because she knew many of her students lived with or spent much time with grandparents. Some of these included Woodson's (2000), *Sweet, Sweet Memory*, Wood's (1999), *Granddad's Prayers of the Earth*, Berenstain's, (1986), *The Berenstain Bears and the Week at Grandma's*, and Carlson's (2000), *Hooray for Grandparent's Day*. In fact, she created an entire unit on this topic, connecting it to the theme of "change over time" expected by the district's curriculum framework. The children generated survey questions and then interviewed a grandparent (or other significant adult), graphed results, chose topics for more in-depth study (toys, games, food, school subjects, clothing), wrote and delivered invitations, and then presented their findings to their grandparents in an afternoon of visiting and sharing.

In another instance, having learned of the families' uncertainties about their own mathematical understandings and how to help their children in this area, Gayle planned a Family Math Night. She included in the plans a potluck supper of family favorites and requested accompanying recipes. An expert mathematics educator, invited from a local university, helped the families understand mathematics in a new way and offered strategies for mathematical learning at home. Gayle subsequently built classroom lessons based on the families' recipes (Kyle, McIntyre, & Moore, 2001).

While the examples above reveal the power of building curricular events around what students know and can do or what families identify as a need, the increased family interaction also revealed to the teachers information about the teaching processes that demanded they rethink what they do. This kind of revelation was welcome, but also sometimes difficult to take. For example, after one Family Night, Karen revealed this:

I found out some families were stressed over a current assignment. All students are to be working on a *Reading Rainbow* style book talk that I am going to videotape. We will use the book clips on our [school's] *Today TV Show*. A couple of parents told me their child was upset over doing it. I assured them I would talk to their children and make them feel better.

And later, at the end of a long teaching week, she wrote:

I have had a lot of unhappy and confused parents about our homework this week. They were to locate things about rocks (I gave them a list of words) in teams. They have a week to get what they can. Well, the parents acted as if they couldn't begin to do it. This was the homework for the whole week!

This information revealed to Karen that she was not communicating well enough with all her families, and that what she thought were good, innovative types of homework were met with confusion and dismay on the part of many parents.

From their experiences, Karen and Gayle realized that as teachers plan their instruction based on academic standards and local curriculum requirements, they must also remember the importance of using what they know about their students to guide instruction. By considering what they know about each student and using that knowledge, they are more likely to make learning meaningful and, as a result, to raise student achievement. To accomplish all of this, however, structures must be in place to support teachers' work.

## Implications for Reflection, Policy, and Research

Several implications arise from the findings of this study of teacher reflection and family connections that relate to the process of reflection, school and district policies, and further research. As many have argued before (Goodman, 1984; Ross et al., 1993; Schon, 1983; Watson & Wilcox, 2000; Zeichner & Liston, 1987), reflection could and should be an ongoing part of teachers' practice. Through reflection, teachers can consider their overarching aims, their more specific goals, and their attempts to accomplish both. They may focus on the needs of their classroom of students in a general sense, or a particular group with particular needs, or a specific child. In any case, through the process of reflection, a teacher has the opportunity to think back, address and resolve problems, anticipate and "try out" possibilities, and sort through the "whys" and "hows" of what's working and not working. And, as our study has found, reflections about their involvement with families is especially needed

in order for teachers to consider what was learned and how it might connect with instruction. However, we also realize that the social nature of our research study and the funding for teachers' time (although minimal) encouraged reflection that may not have occurred otherwise. This leads to implications for policy.

Finding time for teacher reflection becomes problematic if viewed as an add-on in teachers' already busy lives. Teachers not only must find it *valuable*, but also must find it *valued* enough by school and district policy to allocate real time to the practice. We recommend building in designated daily or weekly time for teachers to talk, write, or plan together. In these informal settings, teachers have the chance to share their reflections with an audience of peers. Often, they can serve as critical friends for one another, nudging each other to consider new interpretations, to challenge assumptions, and to deepen their knowledge and understanding. As teachers reach out to connect with families in new ways, especially more and more families who may look unlike themselves, having a peer support group for reflection becomes especially needed.

In a similar way, school and district policies must be considered and, in all likelihood, modified in order to support teachers' involvement with families. Based on the positive results of teachers in our study, we would like to see teachers encouraged to make visits to students' homes in efforts to get to know students and their families better and to subsequently to improve instruction. However, again, this must be valued enough to allocate the time required, and the time must "count" in some way. Some schools we know, for example, consider teachers' family visits as appropriate professional development experiences that count for required professional development hours. Others have found ways to modify the weekly schedule so that teachers have a few hours one afternoon a week to make such visits.

We offer this caveat, however: We do not recommend family visits without structured time for reflection. Schools would be wise to allocate time for careful planning; much discussion ahead of time about purpose, assumptions, and strategies; and guided reflection time afterward. This approach is especially important as teachers first engage in this work. Our concern is that some teachers may come away from the family visits, especially visits with students of poverty, with a deficit view of students and an attitude that the students cannot learn much. Instead, teachers need to process what they observe with a skilled guide, one who can help them see strengths, discern funds of knowledge, and, if necessary, think more deeply about any tacit assumptions and biases that might be shaping their interpretations. In the funds of knowledge field (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 1992; Vélez-Ibáñez, & Greenberg, 1992), this kind of post-visit processing work is essential. Starting as a pilot initiative with a few

teachers who are interested in this kind of family connection may make the most sense.

We also believe that teachers do not necessarily have to visit students' homes in order to reflect on how they can improve instructional practices based on family knowledge. Teachers can take smaller steps toward involving families, such as inviting families into the classroom, using more family-involved kinds of homework or other instructional activities, having family night events, and communicating in positive ways. However, even with these activities, reflection is essential. Thus, we recommend collaboration across teachers for family involvement projects.

Finally, this study suggests implications for further research in order to understand the relationship between family involvement and subsequent reflection. Can reflection be a process for helping to change negative attitudes about families (especially when guided)? How must reflection be practiced for these changes to occur? When there is a systematic focus on teachers' involvement with families and follow-up reflection, what impact appears to occur on students' achievement and/or attitudes about school? What do families who are involved with teachers in the ways described share in *their* reflections?

This paper began with a quote by Dewey, who described reflection as a way to resolve the many perplexities in teaching. We end with another, this one an interpretation by Rodgers (2002) of just where Dewey's notion of reflection might lead. Considering that the focus of teachers' reflections can be what they learn about and from their students' families, as we have elaborated above, the potential is powerful indeed.

First, the process of reflection, and the steps of observation and description in particular, require the teacher to confront the complexity of students and their learning, of themselves and their teaching, their subject matter, and the contexts in which all of these operate. Any action the teacher takes, therefore, will be considered rather than impulsive and based on a deep knowledge of each of these elements and their interactions, which ultimately can only benefit students' learning. In like fashion...they can teach their students to do the same...they can encourage their students to confront thoughtfully the phenomena of their world. (p. 864)

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**Author's Note:** This work was supported with funding from the Center for Research on Education, Diversity, and Excellence (CREDE), a national research center funded by the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) of the U.S. Department of Education, under Cooperative Agreement No. R306A60001-96 (July 1, 1996-December 31, 2004). The findings and opinions expressed here are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of IES.

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