CREATING CONNECTIONS WITH FAMILIES THROUGH HOME VISITS IN THE
PREKINDERGARTEN PROGRAM

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ABSTRACT

The practice of home visits in early childhood programs offers the potential to build meaningful partnerships with families. Drawing on Bronfenbrenner’s (1994) sociocultural model and Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez (1992) funds of knowledge perspective, this capstone project takes a critical and practical look at the practice of home visits, and how they support the important connections between school, home, and the community. A focus on building relationships with children and families, rather than, promoting school readiness is emphasized. The benefits of home visits support many of the goals of early childhood education programs including, smooth transitions (both into the early childhood program and into Kindergarten), teacher and peer relations, increased academic achievement, a focus on students interests, family centred practices, and the education of the whole child. Home visits provide educators with the opportunity to reflect on their own philosophical beliefs and approaches towards diversity and families’ role in education. Including families’ perspective to the practice of home visits was an important finding of this capstone project. A power point presentation for educators and administrators, a brochure for families, a reflection document for educators, and a survey for families are offered as professional resources.
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“If you could only sense how important you are to the lives of those you meet; how important you can be to the people you may never even dream of. There is something of yourself that you leave at every meeting with another person.” Fred Rogers
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

This paper will explore the ways in which home visits in the Prekindergarten program benefit young children, their families, and their educators. Home visits typically mean that the professional (e.g., educator) visits the child and family in their home environment with the purpose of establishing reciprocal relationships. I will review the research that explores the practice of home visits in order to examine what elements increase the success of the visits. Elements that may indicate success include creating ongoing reciprocal and respectful relationships with families, gaining an appreciation for families’ unique cultural backgrounds, and understanding what each family deems important for the prekindergarten teacher to know about the family, their child, and their educational aspirations for their child (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2008; Stephens, 2010).

This paper will also explore barriers that may exist for educators conducting home visits. By outlining barriers, discussions can be had about how to overcome these challenges, thus, allowing educators to conduct home visits in a way that is beneficial for the diverse children and families with whom they work. Barriers, such as personal beliefs about diversity and the families’ role in the education of their child may impact the quality of the visit. This is supported in the research by Souto-Manning and Meisels (2006) and Coleman and Churchill (2012) who suggest that educators examine their personal beliefs and reflect on how those beliefs affect home visits and relationships with children and families. Keyser (2006) believes that recognizing possible barriers to home visits allows educators to be more sensitive and responsive to the concerns and needs of the families in the program.
Defining Key Terms

For the purposes of this paper, I am using definitions of key concepts pertinent to my topic as defined by researchers, policy documents, and scholars in the field.

*Home visit* is a term that is important to define as it may have a different meaning in different contexts and is often unique to the program it is intended for. The research surrounding the topic of home visits is plentiful; however, many studies discuss home visits (i.e., educators visiting the child in their home environment) from the perspective of early intervention programs. While many of the findings from studies about early intervention home visiting programs may be applied to home visits in Prekindergarten, it is important to define what is meant by the term home visiting for the purpose of this paper. Hebbler and Gerlach-Downie (2002) and Santos (2005) suggest that it is important to examine the purpose for the home visit in relation to the program to determine effectiveness. The Saskatchewan Ministry of Education (2012) defines home visits in Prekindergarten as a strategy for connecting and building meaningful relationships with families, thus, allowing educators to learn about the family and child within their home environment and for the family and child to get to know the teacher (p. 17). Keyser’s (2006) understanding of home visits fits nicely with the definition of home visits for this paper when she states that, “home visits gives the teacher, child, and family a chance to build their shared history” (p. 148).

*Family engagement* is a common term in the literature surrounding the topic of home visits. As defined by the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education (2012), the term family may encompass all members of a child’s family including mother, father, grandparent, step parents, aunts, uncles, siblings, foster parents or other guardians (p.1). Home visits are often viewed as a strategy for family engagement. Family engagement in Prekindergarten programs
is seen as an approach to support respectful relationships with families and to encourage shared responsibility for children’s learning (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2012).

Finally, it is important to define what is meant by the term *Prekindergarten* for the purpose of this paper as in each province it may be defined differently. In Saskatchewan, where I am located, Prekindergarten is available for children who are 3 and 4 years old. Families or agencies must apply and children are selected based on guidelines from the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education. Guidelines outlined by the Ministry of Education (2008) include, low socio-economic status, English as an additional language, young or single parent, family in crisis, child is experiencing delays (emotional, language, cognitive), speech and language needs, access is limited to programs, and referrals from partner agencies.

Prekindergarten is currently not universal in Saskatchewan, therefore, priority is given to children deemed at risk. The focus of the program is on the development of the whole child. This includes social, emotional, physical, intellectual and spiritual development (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2008). Developing relationships between home and school are viewed as important. In Saskatchewan’s Prekindergarten programs, home visits usually occur three times a year. Ideally, the first visit happens at the beginning of the school year before the child starts coming to school, the second visit occurs in March or April and the final visit at the end of the year.

**Rationale**

The topic of home visits is intriguing and unique to my role as a Prekindergarten teacher. I believe home visits are an important, yet often over looked, topic in the field of early childhood education. As a Prekindergarten teacher, I have participated in many conversations with fellow teachers, administrators and families about why we value the
practice of home visits in Prekindergarten and generally there is a lack of understanding about its purpose and importance. This project will provide me with the knowledge base from which I could inform educators and families about the theoretical underpinning of the practice of home visits. There are currently minimal guidelines provided to Prekindergarten teachers for conducting visits that purposefully and meaningfully create connections and establish relationships between home and school. Moreover, there is lack of information about overcoming challenges that may exist within this practice. Reviewing the research and literature about home visits will provide me with the opportunity to strengthen my current practice and inform my decisions when conducting future visits. The information gained could potentially enhance Prekindergarten curriculum and pedagogical practice.

Home visits are unique to Prekindergarten programs in Saskatchewan as they are not conducted in any other grade. Prekindergarten teachers hold the important position of being the first educators that families work with when they enter the school system, and therefore, creating these initial connections and meaningful relationships between home and school is extremely important. Home visits provide educators with the opportunity to reflect on their beliefs about diversity and the role of families in our current education context. I will suggest, throughout this paper, that educators consider home visits to be more than a strategy for family engagement, as is commonly suggested (e.g., see Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2012), rather, I will argue that home visits are an important pedagogical practice that assists educators to create partnerships with families by creating a culture of welcoming and caring within the school.
Theoretical Framework

Bronfenbrenner’s sociocultural approach, as expressed in his ecological system model of development, provides a framework for understanding the connections between home, school, and the community in which a child grows and learns. Bronfenbrenner argues that, “in order to understand human development, one must consider the entire ecological system in which growth occurs” (Bronfenbrenner, 1994, p. 37), including the child’s home, school, community, and broader society. From this premise, strengthening connections between home and school is valuable as it contributes to the child’s growth and development.

Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez (1992) also speak to the important connections between home and school and the valuable knowledge teachers can gain about children’s funds of knowledge from visiting them in their homes. It is important to recognize the integral role that children’s funds of knowledge play in their learning and well-being. Funds of knowledge, as described by Moll et al. (1994), is the valuable knowledge children learn from their families about their values, culture, and community. The authors argue that by visiting children in their homes teachers can gain an understanding about the funds of knowledge children are immersed in within the context of their families. This knowledge is important for creating relationships and appreciation for family diversity. It can also inform and enrich pedagogical practice. I chose this theoretical perspective because I see a connection between Bronfenbrenner’s ecological perspective and Moll et al.’s (1994) concept of funds of knowledge. Both perspectives discuss the connections between home, school, and community as being important for optimal growth and development for young children, thus, their theoretical approaches contribute to the exploration about the benefits of home visits for families, children, and educators.
Through the lenses of Bronfenbrenner (1994) and Moll et al. (1992) I propose that home visits are a valuable social pedagogical practice. Furthermore, home visit is situated in philosophical practice that is embedded in the belief that children and families are valuable partners in the educational journey.

**Purpose**

The purpose of this paper is to establish the benefits of home visits for children, families and educators through a thorough study of the literature. As well, I purport to outline the elements that increase the success and effectiveness of the visit and to identify and recognize any potential challenges and issues that may exist. More specifically, the aim of this paper is to share with educators the potential of home visits as a practice that enriches the lives and classroom practices for Prekindergarten children, their families, and the Prekindergarten teacher. This project encourages educators to thoughtfully reflect on their beliefs about the practice of home visits, and the family’s role in the education process while exploring what current research states about home visits. To that end, this paper explores the following guiding questions:

What are the benefits of home visits to young children, their families and educators?

What are the potential challenges of home visits and how might we address them?

**Summary**

In this chapter, I discussed the purpose, rationale and theoretical frameworks that guide and support the topic of home visits. In Chapter Two, I will present current research and literature about the benefits of home visits, potential barriers and strategies for successful home visits. I will connect these topics to the theoretical perspectives presented by Bronfenbrenner (1992) and Moll et al. (1994). In Chapter Three, I will connect research to
practice by sharing personal experiences from conducting home visits, quotes from families, activities that I have done at home visits and suggestions for overcoming challenges. Chapter Three will also reference a presentation for educators and administrators that illuminates the key findings from my literature review. In Chapter Four, I summarize my conclusions and reflect how my own understanding and practice of home visits has been strengthened through this project.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

As outlined in Chapter One, the theoretical perspectives that frame this project include the ecological model of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1994) and the funds of knowledge perspective (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). It is through these frameworks that I will reflect on the topic of home visits. I will explore studies that discuss the benefits of home visits for young children, their families and educators, the challenges and issues that exist in conducting home visits, and effective home visit practices. The research discussed in this chapter, outlines that connections between home and school are valuable and contribute to young children’s growth and development (Howes et al. 2011; McCormick, O’Conner, Capella, & McClowry, 2013; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004; Sayers et al., 2012). Through this literature review, I build the argument that home visits are more than a strategy to build connections between home and school. Through an examination of the research that looks at home visits from a variety of perspectives, I propose that home visits in Prekindergarten are a fundamental social pedagogical practice embedded in a particular theoretical approach.

Ecological Model of Human Development

Bronfenbrenner’s (1994) ecological model provides educators with a framework for understanding the complex and dynamic environments in which children grow and learn. Bronfenbrenner’s (1994) ecological model of human development discusses the systems that interrelate and contribute to the child’s growth and development. The systems include the microsystem (family, school, friends), mesosystem (the connections between two or more settings), the exosystem (the connections between a child’s immediate surroundings and the surroundings that are not directly part of their life such as a parent’s workplace), and the
macrosystem (the culture and community in which the child lives). It is helpful for educators to appreciate how each system is interrelated. Connections between home and school are valuable and contribute to positive growth and development. Within the context of home visits lies an attempt to understand and strengthen the relations between the child’s systems of development by building connections between the various systems. Bronfenbrenner’s ecological framework provides educators with a model for understanding how the child’s environments interrelate and why the relationships among the various systems are important for growth and development of the whole child.

**Funds of Knowledge**

Funds of knowledge, as described by Moll et al. (1992), is the valuable knowledge children learn from their families about their values, culture and community. Moll and his colleagues conducted a study in which methodology was a collaborative approach between anthropology and education. Through qualitative research techniques that included ethnographic observations, informal interviews, case studies and life histories, they observed the household and classroom practices of several Mexican communities in Arizona. According to Moll et al., (1992), “The primary purpose of this work was to develop innovations in teaching that draw upon the knowledge and skills found in local households” (p. 132). Moll and his colleagues have illustrated for educators how learning about a child's funds of knowledge can create a bridge between home and school and assist teachers to view student’s households as an important part of who they are and how they learn. Furthermore, it is important to understand the family’s funds of knowledge in order to build relationships and an appreciation for family diversity. As Moll and his colleagues argue, “Our claim is that by capitalizing on household and other community resources, we can organize classroom instruction that far exceeds in quality the rote-
like instruction these children commonly encounter in schools” (p. 132). Including and valuing children’s home and community experiences in classroom activities and curriculum is also emphasized by the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education (2012) which claims that, “The Prekindergarten team may learn about family activities, traditions, values, expectations, views on discipline, culture and others. This information can help the Prekindergarten team provide the most effective learning opportunities and supports for children in the program” (p. 18). By visiting families in their homes, educators can gain a deeper appreciation and understanding of each family’s funds of knowledge, which is simply not possible through interactions at the school alone. Educators learn important information about the child’s home environment, cultural beliefs, routines, and family values. Families’ funds of knowledge can be reflected in classroom curriculum, thus, bridging the gap between the child’s ecological systems of development such as, home and school, as described by Bronfenbrenner. In addition, during the home visit families may have the opportunity to ask the teacher questions about their child at school, the school itself and the Prekindergarten program. Teachers may use the visit as an opportunity to share information about their own life, creating reciprocal relationships. Stephens (2010) illustrates the importance of the above point eloquently: “Helping relationships bloom authentically between staff, parents and children is a core mission for early childhood professionals” (p. 38).

Bronfenbrenner’s (1994) ecological model and Moll et al.’s (1992) funds of knowledge perspective are interrelated. They both contribute to understanding the importance of home visits and how they can enrich and strengthen the relationships between children, parents and educators in the Prekindergarten program, informing and strengthening pedagogical practice. Both perspectives discuss the connections between home, school and community as being
important for optimal growth and development for young children, hence, their theoretical approaches contribute to the exploration of my guiding questions about the benefits of home visits for families, children, and educators.

**Benefits of Home Visits**

It is important to establish, what may be the potential benefits of home visits. Many authors agree that relationships and connections between home and school are optimal for young children’s growth and development (Dombro, Jablon, Stetson, 2011; McCormick et al., 2013; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004). Several authors emphasize that home visits are an effective strategy for building meaningful relationships between school and children and families (Keyser, 2006; Middleton, 2008; Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2012; Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2008; Stephens, 2010).

In 2004-2005 the Mason County School District in Kentucky introduced an initiative that involved 2,800 students from prekindergarten to grade twelve. Each student received a home visit from his or her homeroom teacher prior to the beginning of the school year. Middleton (2008), a school administrator and author of the article, embarked on the home visit initiative to “increase connections between staff and students in their community” (p. 1). The results of this study, based on teacher’s, parent’s and student’s feedback and observations, indicated that through home visits teachers discovered individual students’ talents and interests. Teachers also had a greater appreciation and empathy for students’ challenges and individual needs. This, in turn, led to smoother transitions and more effective classroom practice, extending the walls of the schools into children’s homes and the community. The Mason County School District shifted their focus from test scores to teacher-student connections acknowledging research that suggests that relationships are a foundation for success (Middleton, 2008). This
study illuminates how home visits can create connections between Bronfenbrenner’s (1994) interrelated ecological systems to positively affect children’s growth and development. As well, it serves as an important reminder of the power of developing a “culture of caring” (Middleton, 2008, p. 2). Throughout the pilot, teachers documented and shared the impact of their visits. Data sheets were collected and shared by administrators who followed the students as they moved through the school system. The educators involved demonstrated through the documentation collected that they valued the relationships between the child’s family, home, community, and school and acknowledged how the connections impacted the school’s ability to help students achieve greater academic success. Moreover, the school community understood, appreciated, and was able to reflect the knowledge and values of the children and families into their classroom practices, thus creating a more inclusive, caring, and connected school environment. This study reflects how home visits can help educators understand children’s funds of knowledge and how this knowledge can impact pedagogical practice. Middleton (2008) noted that, “During the visits, teachers create important bonds and extend education beyond the four walls of the classroom, inviting parents to be a part of their child’s education” (p.1).

Stephens (2010), a director of Illinois State University Child Care Centre and an instructor in Child Development for the University of Illinois Family and Consumer Sciences, agrees that home visits are a powerful strategy for creating connections with children and families. She reminds educators that, “we are among the first adults outside their family to make and impact on the child’s and family’s lives” (p. 38). Home visits can set the stage for communication, discussion and information sharing. The educator may be inclined to use the visit as an opportunity to share about the prekindergarten program and what families can do to support their child’s learning but it is very important, if the goal is to create relationships and
understanding about the child’s funds of knowledge, to view the visit as an opportunity to listen and learn about what is important to the family and child. Families can share important information that will create understanding about that child’s interests and abilities that they educator may not fully witness in the classroom (Stephens, 2010). For example, this may include, information about the child’s spirit, culture, temperament, social/emotional health, nutritional health, learning style, interests and special needs (Stephens, 2010). Keyser (2006) adds in creating family-centered early childhood programs, home visits provide the teacher, child, and family with an opportunity to build shared history. She posits that, “The home provides a wonderful place to acknowledge diversity, respect one another’s knowledge, have two-way conversations, and begin shared decision making for the child” (Keyser, 2006, p. 148).

The research indicates several other benefits of building relationships with children and families. For example, Howes et al. (2011) argue in their study that examined 800 preschool children’s relationships with peers based on classroom environment and teacher-child relationships, that the relationships between teachers and children may affect peer interactions. They proclaim that, “There is extensive literature that links children’s interactions with peers to the nature of their relationship with their teachers” (p. 401). This is especially true for children from diverse cultural and language backgrounds, thus, reinforcing the important knowledge and connections teachers can make through home visits. Furthermore, “when the practices of teachers are very different from practices at home, and particularly if the differences are confounded by discrimination, children may fare better in classrooms if there are bridges between home and classrooms” (Howes et al., 2011, p. 400). McCormick et al. (2013) and Dombro et al. (2011) explored the connections between teacher-child relationships and learning. For example, McCormick and colleagues study investigated the implications of high-quality
teacher relationships between 324 low-income, Black and Hispanic students, and 112 Kindergarten and First Grade teachers in relation to math and reading achievement. Through an extensive review of the research surrounding teacher-child relationships and the results of their study, McCormick and his colleagues concluded that positive teacher-child relationships promote academic resiliency. Dombro et al. (2011) discuss the importance of everyday interactions with children. Dombro and her colleagues argue that enhancing the quality of interactions with young children will make a positive difference to their development and learning. Dombro et al. (2011) reinforce this assertion when they state, “This link between emotional safety and learning has been identified and described by researchers, who tell us that the quality of teacher-child relationships influences children’s achievement in school” (p. 29).

The work of Stephens (2010), Middleton (2008), and Keyser (2006) speak to the importance of reciprocal relationships between teachers, children, and families. McCormick et al. (2013), Howes et al. (2011), and Dombro et al. (2011) further emphasize why relationships are important for young children highlighting that quality teacher-child interactions positively influence peer relationships and academic achievement. The relationships created and strengthened through home visits impacts the overall learning and success of children in Prekindergarten: “Simply stated, establishing successful relationships with adults and other children provides a foundation of capacities that children will use for a lifetime” (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004, p. 1). Therefore, it may not be surprising that the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education (2012) notes that home visits is a strategy that has a higher impact on student’s achievement than many other family engagement strategies, as home visits are believed to strengthen relationships between educator and children which translates into children’s social-emotional resiliency. It is well established that relationships between
children, families and educators are important for young children’s learning and development. Future studies that specifically examine how home visits strengthen these relationships would be beneficial.

Although many studies support the benefits of home visits as a strategy for creating connections between home and school, Santos (2005) noted gaps in the research. Santos (2005) observed that there is a lack of research about the effects, long term benefits and real-world effective or active ingredients of home visiting. He does not discredit the importance of home visits to early childhood programs, but instead emphasizes the need for a focus on the benefits and strategies that are necessary for their success. Santos illustrates the need for educators to be purposeful and mindful about why they are conducting home visits and to consider if practices are effectively meeting goals as set by the program guidelines, educator, school division, families, and Ministry of Education. I believe Santos (2005) makes a valid point in reminding educators to be mindful about why they are conducting home visits and to consider if the practices they are using match their objectives and pedagogical philosophy and benefit children and families. Santos cites Kitzman’s (2004) research that attempted to assess what components of the home visits are important and have the most impact. Kitzman’s (2004) research that involved low-income families, with children under the age of five, in the United States, revealed that programs differ greatly in their clientele, background, experience of providers, theoretical models, and program content. Kitzman determined that a positive visitor-family relationship is one aspect that is important despite differing program characteristics and theoretical backgrounds. Kitzman (2004) and Santos (2005) both emphasize the need for further study in defining the contributing aspects of positive visitor-family relationships and the specific components that contribute to successful home visits.
Potential Challenges to Home Visits

Home visits may be a tool for connecting with families and children but there are challenges that make conducting home visits difficult and may affect the overall effectiveness of the visit. Keyser (2006) suggests that understanding some of the issues surrounding home visits will “help teachers approach home visiting more sensitively and responsively” (p. 149). Recognizing and overcoming barriers is an important step in conducting successful home visits that build positive relationships and connections with families. Focusing on family and child strengths, welcoming and respecting all families, building trust and respect, encouraging two-way communication, individualizing strategies to meet specific family needs (e.g., meeting in an alternate location or time; not during school/work hours), reflecting families funds of knowledge in classroom activities, demonstrating respect and concern for families feelings, fostering a sense of school community by helping families make connections to other professionals in the school and community, and considering special circumstances, such as homelessness, and families that do not speak English, are important strategies for overcoming barriers (Carlisle et al., 2005; Keyser, 2006; McWilliam, 2011; Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006).

Teacher and parent comfort levels are important to consider when planning visits to a family’s home. Parents may feel judged or embarrassed having the teacher in their home. This could be due to their personal experiences with the education system, financial, social, language, cultural differences, and beliefs (Finders, 1994; Keyser, 2006; Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006). The following section outlines how teacher’s beliefs and the school culture influence the success of the home visit.

A number of authors suggest that educators be aware of their own bias and beliefs before visiting families in their home (Carlisle, Stanley, & Kemple, 2005; Coleman & Churchill, 2012;
Souto-Manning and Swick (2006) argue that “teacher beliefs about parents and families are heavily influenced by current and past contextual and cultural elements” (p. 187). Educators must carefully examine, through purposeful reflection, how their experiences, beliefs and personal bias may impact their ability to create positive relationships with families and children. An awareness and acceptance of cultural differences is critical in respecting the diverse families and children in the prekindergarten program (Coleman & Churchill, 2012).

Another important aspect to consider is how the school culture influences home visits and parents’ comfort and ability to be involved. Souto-Manning and Swick (2006) suggest that the traditional paradigm of parent involvement is limiting for families and does not address the diverse families the school serves. The traditional paradigm of school involvement emphasized that parents help children “get ready for school” through readiness activities that are viewed as valuable by the education system such as “read to your child, be involved in your child’s education, and be involved in your child’s school” (p. 188). This paradigm often neglects to acknowledge the many ways that families are involved in their child’s lives. Through home visits, educators may gain a deeper understanding of what families’ value and how they help their child grow and learn. Souto-Manning and Swick (2006) believe that an ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1994) for parent/family involvement must be utilized, “Otherwise, many parents are isolated from success because their patterns of relating and interacting with their children do not fit the school culture” (p. 188). Home visits that focus on building relationships with families and creating connections between home and school are a more encompassing, ecological view of family involvement. Allowing educators to understand, appreciate, and respect the unique ways that families relate and interact with their children. Finders and Lewis
(1994) agree that acknowledging the valuable cultural activities that families share with their children and recognizing how they support their child’s growth and development builds trust and respect between school and home. They remind us that, “as teachers, of course, we marvel at the way in which such home interactions do, indeed, support our goals for learning at school; but we won’t know about these practices unless we begin to form relationships with parents that allow them to share such knowledge” (Finders & Lewis, 1994, p. 53). Keyser (2006) adds that, “Knowing yourself as a teacher can help you design home visiting in ways that increase your own comfort as well as that of the family” (p. 149).

Home visits afford educators with an opportunity to reflect on their philosophical beliefs and approaches towards diversity and families’ role in education. It is important to consider how the lives of children, families, and the community can enhance classroom pedagogy and assist educators to see beyond the traditional walls of classroom and schools. Home visits provide educators with the opportunity to learn alongside parents and value each student and family for their richness. Visits are also an occasion to challenge our stereotypical notion of family “happiness” as Keyser (2006, p. 149) so eloquently states:

I slowly started to understand that it isn’t the size of a child’s house or having his own bed that makes a difference in that child’s happiness, well-being, or school success. It’s the way the family relates to each other, the way they spend time together, that makes a difference.

It is important for educators to become aware of personal social and cultural bias in order to create reciprocal relationships with children and families and to understand children and families in the particularities of their own homes and communities.
Strategies for Successful Home Visits

In this section, I will highlight effective strategies for home visits. Several authors mention strategies for including and valuing family input in their child’s education which can be applied to the topic of home visits. Roggman, Boyce, Cook, and Jump (2001) and Reglin (2002) suggest examining effective practices from the families’ and educators’ perspectives. The tendency in education is to consider if we, as educators, feel that what we are doing is effective. From a family-centred, sociocultural approach, it is important to ask families how they view the home visit and if they find it to be beneficial. Do families feel more connected to the school and teacher because of the visit? Roggman et al. (2001) also suggest, as mentioned earlier, to consider to what extent “the process and content of home visits match the program’s intended model and are effective” (p. 54). This again reminds educators to be mindful when planning activities for the visit. It may be helpful for educators to reflect on the visit and answer some guiding questions to help them determine if the goals of the visit are being addressed. For example, the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education (2012, p. 19) outlines the following questions:

What have I learned about the child and family by having a home visit?

How is this new knowledge integrated into the learning opportunities and supports for the child in the program?

How has this strengthened my knowledge and relationship with the family?

Are supports needed to ensure home visits are conducted as intended?

How would I help other Prekindergarten staff understand and feel comfortable with home visits?

Additionally, I believe that it is also important to consider how the child and family will benefit from the visit.
It may be necessary to have a framework that represents the focus of the visit, but it is also important to be flexible and allow the visit to match the needs of the families as Souto-Manning and Swick (2006) explain:

While it would be easy to prescribe steps for parent and family involvement, we purposefully chose not to do so, as we would risk defining one more inflexible framework that would unavoidably fail many parents and students by seeing them from a deficit perspective. (p. 192)

Peterson et al. (2007) and Brorson (2005) also emphasize that visits will not be identical as they may be tailored to meet the needs of the family. Peterson et al. (2007) conducted two studies that examined home visit intervention strategies. The first study involved 28 families and the second study involved 92 families. Data was collected and measured using a home visit observation form that documented interactions, content, and the specific strategies that were used by the interventionist at the visit. It was noted in the results that the interventions used did not match the program goals which included increasing parent-child interactions. This study reminds educators that in order for home visit to be effective the visit must meet the individual needs of each family. Brorson’s (2005) ethnographic study examined how home-based services were delivered for families of toddlers and infants with diverse needs. The discussion addressed the difficulty in prescribing a home based delivery model that accounts for the unique needs of each family. The above studies reinforce the importance of the shift from a traditional model of family involvement to a family-centered model that respects the uniqueness and diversity of each family.

Dombro et al. (2011) provide a framework for connecting with children that can also be applied when working with families. The authors suggest that through powerful interactions,
families and children will feel heard, appreciated, and understood. The first step is to be present. Being present includes observing and thinking, listening with an open mind, paying attention and being mindful to the situation. It is essential to focus on what the family or child is showing and telling you. The second step is to connect: “You acknowledge and validate children by letting them know you see them, are interested in them, and want to spend time with them” (p. 6). Connecting with families may mean sharing a common interest, asking questions about their interests, culture, and background, demonstrating genuine intent and interest in being with them. Step three is to extend the learning. Extending the learning may include learning more about the family’s interests and beliefs, sharing your own interests, answering questions about the Prekindergarten program or helping the family make connections within the school or community. Dombro et al. (2011) provide educators with a simple and straightforward strategy for connecting with children and families. They remind us of the importance of relationships as the basis of early childhood programs. Pawl and Dombro (2001) say that, “Being considerate, interested, curious and respectful of parents is the most important thing you can do- for the relationship with the parent, for the child, for today, and for tomorrow” (p. 43).

**Summary**

The authors outlined above highlight current information on the topic of home visits. There is a shift from a traditional model of family involvement to a family-centred approach which fits well with the theoretical framework guiding this project. Bronfenbrenner’s (1994) and Moll et al.’s (1992) theories provide a relevant framework for illustrating that the connections between home and school are fundamental for children’s growth and development, as well as for approaching children and families from a capacity or strengths-based, rather than a deficit, point of view. A family-centred approach to home visiting reflects this principle and encourages
educators to build relationships with families through meaningful, reciprocal interactions. In addition, there is an emphasis on understanding the purpose and focus of the visit. Although there is no set framework that will ensure the success of the visit, it is important for educators to reflect on their own personal beliefs about families, and focus on the purpose of the visit.
CHAPTER THREE: CONNECTIONS TO PRACTICE

In this chapter, I will connect the literature supporting home visits in Prekindergarten to practice. The objective in connecting the literature to practice is to engage teachers of young children in considering the underlying pedagogical tenets and value of home visits. Connecting theory and research to practical suggestions and activities creates an opportunity for home visits to become more than a strategy to build relationships with families. While in Saskatchewan, home visits are a recommended practice for engaging with families (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2012), based on my investigation, I would like to bring to teachers an awareness that home visits are based in the understanding that children and families are viewed as valued partners and participants in education.

To that end, I will share experiences and strategies that represent the philosophy of home visits through the lenses of Bronfenbrenner (1994) and Moll et al. (1992). More specifically, the activities and suggestions will highlight home visits as a practice that significantly impacts the quality of the connections between home and school, while enhancing the quality of the classroom pedagogical practice. Furthermore, I will urge educators to consider how their experiences influence their beliefs about the unique and diverse families with whom they work. A flexible framework for conducting visits will be shared. This chapter also includes information that accompanies a presentation or workshop (Appendix A) for educators, administrators, and school division personal. The presentation is suitable for professionals working with young children who wish to reflect on and enhance their current practice, beliefs and policies about home visits, families and their participation in their child’s educational journey.
**Home Visits are More Than a Family Involvement Strategy**

I believe, as stated in Chapter Two, that it is important to articulate and understand why we choose a particular practice in our programs. As educators, we often are called on to share with administrators and families why we enact practices such as home visits. This is an aspect that both Santos (2005) and Kitzman (2004) highlighted. Educators who have a firm understanding behind the purpose and goals of the program will experience greater success in connecting those goals to the home visit. For example, in Prekindergarten in Saskatchewan, home visits are viewed as “powerful vehicles for relationship building” (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2012, p. 17). While building relationships with families through home visits seems like a simple concept, it is important to thoughtfully consider the implications of this practice when planning or discussing home visits.

As a new Prekindergarten teacher, I struggled with the concept of home visits because it was something that I had never heard of or tried before. My understanding of the benefits of home visits has grown over the past seven years, as I have witnessed the consequences of home visits in my own program. In my opinion, home visits can be more than a strategy to build relationships with families. Home visit is a practice that can impact all areas of the Prekindergarten program. The visits form the important base of connection with families that is otherwise very difficult to do by meeting with families in the formal context of the classroom. In the classroom, families learn about the school, but through home visits, educators learn what is important to families. This may include families’ hopes and dreams for their children, their worries and fears, their cultural affiliation, their languages, their beliefs about school and child rearing. Educators also learn about other people in the child’s life, such as grandparents, aunts, uncles and siblings, and can then welcome the relatives into the program acknowledging the
important role that they play in the child’s life. As a result, grandparents and relatives attend
family nights and activities in school, because every effort is made to make them feel connected
and welcomed. As Bronfenbrenner (1994) theorized, multiple social and cultural contexts in the
child’s life influence who the child becomes and how they learn and develop. Through home
visits, it is possible to learn about children’s interests, their pets, and their hobbies. The
information gathered can later be reflected in classroom activities or discussed and shared at
school, creating important connections between home and school. For example, I have invited
families to share their languages in the classroom through stories, songs, and translation of
numbers and letters into their home language. Families are invited to bring in pets and animals,
such as calves, snakes, dogs, bunnies, birds, while others share cultural traditions and traditional
foods. I believe that by visiting families in their home the educator gains an opportunity to
demonstrate an interest in learning about the family and what is important to them.

During the home visit, educators may discover something about the child and family that
they did not previously know. For example, two years ago there was a child in my class who
was very shy and quiet. He did not speak very often and if he did, it was in a quiet voice. The
educational assistant and I planned a visit to his home and when we were there, we discovered
that the child and his dad loved to play the drums as they were both very musical. My four-year-
old, quiet, shy student was an amazing drum player. We were able to talk to the child about his
musical interests at school and included several music activities into the classroom. He slowly
shared his talent with others in the class and before long we witnessed him talking and making
connections with other children. Had we not visited him in his home, I am not sure that we
would have known about his musical abilities. It was a wonderful discovery that later created an
opportunity for community connections as the dad invited us to a Filipino fundraiser where his
band was playing. This became an opportunity to expand my understanding of the Filipino community and culture.

Moll et al.’s (1992) funds of knowledge research illustrates that children’s learning expands and deepens when funds of knowledge are represented in the child’s classroom. As illustrated in the example above, the child’s love of music was brought into the classroom creating an opportunity for him to share his knowledge, expand his classmates’ knowledge and create peer connections. A child’s funds of knowledge may impact peer relationships as the teacher can connect children and families that may share a common interest. McCormick et al. (2013) and Dombro et al. (2011) highlight the topic of peer and teacher interactions as positively influencing children’s academic achievement at school. I have noted this in my work with young children as children seem more willing to take risks and try new things when they feel secure, safe and connected. For example, I shared with the student above that I valued his musical interests and talents. I believe that this helped him gain confidence and he began to interact with his peers and try new activities in the classroom.

Middleton (2008) very eloquently refers to home visits as an opportunity to contribute to a “culture of caring” (p.2) in the school. Through home visits, educators not only learn about the child’s funds of knowledge, they may also learn to appreciate and respect the unique dynamics, struggles, and success of each family. In my own experience, I have found that because of our initial connections at the home visit, families are more willing to reach out if they need support through the year as a trust has been built. Additionally, I find we share in the child’s success at home and at school more frequently, creating the important connections between home and school. Many parents have shared with me that the home visits helped their child feel more comfortable staying at school on their own at the early age of three or four. As Stephens (2010)
reminds us, Prekindergarten teachers may be the family’s first experience with the school system, and therefore, building trust is of utmost importance.

It is important to note that the reciprocal relationships between educators, families, children and communities may benefit all involved, including the teacher. This has been true in my experience. Visiting families in their homes has encouraged me to reflect on my own beliefs about education and families. I have learned about different cultures, traditions, languages and life styles. I have met many interesting people that have influenced and helped me to grow as an educator and as a person. For example, I have met families from all over the world who have recently immigrated to Canada. While I was visiting in their home, the families have shared with me their experiences of moving to a new country, learning a new language and culture. Through the families’ stories, I have gained an awareness and empathy to the challenges they face and a new appreciation for my own life in Canada that I often take for granted. I have also had the privilege to learn about cultural traditions, languages, and foods that I may otherwise never have the chance to experience.

As with any practice, home visits are not without their challenges. Acknowledging and addressing the challenges of home visits may assist educators in overcoming the barriers that exist (Keyser, 2006). This topic will be addressed in the following section.

How to Respond Thoughtfully to Potential Barriers

Be responsive: Approaching home visits in a sensitive and responsive way is helpful in overcoming barriers that may exist. Parents may express concern about having a teacher come to their home. I have found that this is especially true when parents view their own school experiences negatively or if they feel they, their children, or homes will be judged. If the family is unsure about having the educator visit their home another option is to have the visit in a
neutral location such as a restaurant, coffee shop, or a park. Some parents simply do not understand why we are conducting home visits and this leads to worry and fear. It may be difficult to engage the family or even have them sign up for a visit. Focusing the conversation on the purpose of the visit, who will be at the visit, and how long the visit will be, is often helpful in reassuring anxious families (Keyser, 2006). Keyser also suggests providing parents with the information about the visit ahead of time. Her suggestion has inspired me to create a brochure about home visits to share with families during our orientation that takes place in the fall (Appendix B). The brochure will provide a few points about the purpose of home visits, testimonials from families that have experienced home visits, and information about what to expect during the visit. Moving forward, I plan to investigate translating the brochure into other languages.

Finding time for home visits can often be a challenge. At the beginning of the year, we reserve a few days before the children start school to conduct home visits. We also schedule times for home visits in March and April. It is important that the administration and school division support the practice of home visits and provide time for educators to conduct the visits. Many families work full time outside of the home and cannot meet during the day. An alternative that I have tried is to visit homes in the evening. While the older grades are having parent teacher interviews in the spring at the school, I visit families in their homes. I have found this to be very successful, and many families enjoy it as it allows for more family members to be present.

Be reflective. Another challenge that educators face is their own beliefs and feelings about visiting families in their homes. I suggest that it is important to examine and reflect upon beliefs, experiences and personal bias in order to understand what aspect of home visits is
causing unease. Souto-Manning and Swick (2006) emphasize that past experiences influence educators’ ability to connect with families. Keyser (2006) suggests that reflecting on our own experiences as a child may be helpful. She asks educators to imagine a favorite teacher coming to their house when they were a child. Imagine how that would have made you feel? A personal reflection that comes to mind when I read Keyser’s suggestion is a visit from my son’s Grade 3 teacher. Tyler had been sick so his teacher stopped by to drop off his school work. I remember that Tyler was in awe of having his teacher in his home. Instead of rushing off, the teacher stayed and played video games and let Tyler show him his bedroom and Lego. Tyler is now in Grade 10 and still fondly remembers the visit and the connection he had with Mr. Hayes. This experience always reminds me of the power of personal connections with students and families and how important it is to show interest, listen and follow the child’s lead. In my opinion this fits with Moll et al.’s (1992) funds of knowledge theory. Moll and his colleagues respect the diversity of families and acknowledge that each family is unique and by implication each visit will be unique. An important role of the educator in home visits is to reflect and carefully consider if the visit was responsive to the family and child. When I conduct home visits I have an activity such as play dough, a book, a craft, or pictures of the child at school to share with the child, yet many times the child and family want to visit and show us around and I often do not use the activity that I brought.

In order to support educators in reflecting on the home visit, I prepared a resource that contains guiding questions for them to consider before, during, and after the visit (see Appendix C). For example, before the visit educators are asked to consider how their experiences and beliefs about families influence how they view home visits and building relationships with
families; after the visit educators are encouraged to consider how classroom pedagogy may be affected by what they have learned about the child and family at the visit.

Learning and sharing ideas with other educators is often reassuring for teachers that have concerns about home visits. Sharing strategies that have been successful and personal experiences is a wonderful way to support fellow educators. The following section will highlight successful home visit strategies.

**Flexible and Responsive Home Visit Practices**

**Seeking multiple perspectives.** Encouraging dialogue among different stakeholders about home visit strategies is often a welcome support for new educators or educators who are unsure about conducting home visits. In the school division where I work there are currently six Prekindergarten teachers and we often share strategies and provide mentorship to new teachers. Asking for families’ perspectives about the home visits is also a powerful strategy for growing and strengthening the program. This is an aspect that Roggman et al. (2001) and Reglin (2002) highlight. In order to garner families’ perspectives, I created a survey for parents’ that was inspired by the work of others (see Appendix D). I recently used this survey with families in my program and found that it provided very useful information for enhancing my home visit practice. The survey asks families’ how they feel about the home visit, whether the visit helps them getting to know the teacher and school better. It also, welcomes their suggestions and ideas of what they would like to do or discuss during the visit. The results of the survey were encouraging as families shared that they valued the visit as an opportunity to talk about their child. They also enjoyed visiting with me in their home. The families who completed the survey shared that the visit gave them a chance to get to know the teacher, and that after the visit, they felt more comfortable leaving their child at school for the first time. The survey also revealed
that the families viewed the visits positively and that they made them feel that the teacher really wanted to get to know them and their child. Several families shared that they thought it was important that teacher get to know their child in their home because that is where the child is most comfortable, especially at the beginning of the year. I believe that by seeking families’ input educators are demonstrating the belief that families are active partners in the education process and that their voice is important.

**Creating a framework.** Visiting with families may not be natural or comfortable for all educators, therefore, having a framework for interacting with children and families is helpful. In my opinion, Dombro’s (2011) framework for interactions is an excellent resource. Dombro suggests that through powerful interactions families and children will feel heard, appreciated and understood. In essence, she suggests demonstrating genuine interest by being present and connected. Dombro’s framework is well suited to my philosophy of home visits and to my experience working with families. Being present in a practical sense involves listening and following the child’s and families’ lead. If they are uncomfortable then, I will bring out an activity, such as play-dough or a little game, which we can play together. If they have questions or concerns then I will listen attentively and make sure I follow up with them after the visit with resources, or connect them to other supports in the school and/or community. If they are excited to show me their toys and bedroom then I will follow their lead. We have several families from countries around the world that have recently moved to Weyburn. When I visit their homes, it is often important for them that we eat, so we share a small meal together. Dombro reminds educators to be responsive, respectful, and mindful when interacting with children and families. To that end, each visit will be unique as will the connections and interactions that we share with each family. On a visit with a family that was initially reluctant to have the educational assistant
and myself in their home, we later discovered that the mother had grown up in the same community as the educational assistant. The mother and the educational assistant had a wonderful discussion about people they knew and the tone of the visit completely changed. Her daughter attended Prekindergarten again the next year and at the orientation, I heard her telling some of the new families how much her family enjoyed the home visit and that her daughter loved having the teachers at her house. This experience is a powerful reminder of the importance of connecting and being present as Dombro describes. The mother’s initial reaction of having teachers in her home may have been influenced by her own experiences. The connections that were made between her and the educational assistant directly impacted her feelings about the school and teachers, and consequently, influenced her daughter’s experiences.

Dombro framework’s third step is extending the learning. I propose that extending the learning from home visits challenges educators to consider how the relationships and understanding of each family’s funds of knowledge can then be reflected in their pedagogical practice in the classroom. How can we extend the walls of the classroom to create a more inclusive, caring, and connected school environment (Middleton, 2008)? For example, this may involve changes to family engagement days that we have once a month (focus on interests and talents of the families in the program), transition practices that are more reflective and responsive to the needs of the children and families (the Prekindergarten teacher may accompany children and families to meet their new teacher), and purposefully including activities in the classroom that reflect children’s interests and knowledge.

**Power Point Presentation for Educators and Administrators**

Appendix A includes a PowerPoint presentation suitable for a professional development workshop for educators and administrators. This workshop consists of current information about
the practice of home visits in Prekindergarten programs. It highlights the benefits of home visits, and addresses barriers to home visits with suggestions of how to overcome them with practical strategies. Testimonials from parents and teachers in the field are included to create a connection between theory and practice. During the presentation, educators are encouraged to think about and reflect on their own practice and beliefs.

Summary

In this chapter, I connected the literature about home visits to practical strategies and pedagogical ideas that educators could use in their own work with young children and families. I argued that through home visits various aspects of the Prekindergarten program are affected. Relationships with families are built through powerful interactions allowing educators to gain a deep appreciation for the unique and diverse families in the Prekindergarten program. Through thoughtful reflection educators can see that the connections between the child’s home and school are important for their overall growth and development as Bronfenbrenner emphasizes. Educators can also learn to incorporate families’ funds of knowledge and to include the lives of children and families in the day-to-day experiences of the classroom deepening and strengthening the bonds between home and school.
CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this final chapter, I reflect on the responses to my guiding questions, I discuss some of the limitations, and I present ideas for future directions. I return to the questions that guided this project, which were: 1) What are the benefits of home visits to young children, their families and educators? and 2) What are potential challenges of home visits and how might we address them?

The Importance of Relationships

This project reaffirms a long held belief that relationships with young children and their families are the foundation of early childhood, and the Prekindergarten programs. The project has deepened my understanding of a ‘family-centred’ approach to education. While Prekindergarten policy in Saskatchewan encourages educators to conduct home visits, respond to children’s interests, and include family values and culture in classroom, it, at the same time, require educators to assess children’s skills through standardized assessments with no inclusion or consideration of their sociocultural context, and funds of knowledge. Based on this project, I argue that it is important for both policy and practice to reflect the perspective that relationships (between school, home, and communities) promote academic resiliency through connected, inclusive, responsive and supportive environments which can be accomplished, at least in part, through of home visits (Dombro et al. 2011; Keyser, 2006; McCormick et al., 2013; Middleton, 2008). More information about how to connect home and school through home visits would be useful in accomplishing the goal of shifting toward ‘family-centred’ educational practices.

The practice of home visits has the potential to deepen educators’ understanding of educating the “whole child,” a term that is commonly used in Prekindergarten policy. Through the work of Bronfenbrenner (1994) and Moll et al. (1992), I have come to understand that all aspects of the child’s life, as well as on the child’s identity, are important as these aspects are
inextricably connected, and influence how the child learns and grows. The relationships established through home visits can create and strengthen important connections within the child’s network of ecological systems. This idea is expressed eloquently by Pawl and Dombro (2001) who say that, “the people that you were close to growing up- a parent, a grandmother, a great uncle, a teacher, a neighbour- and your experiences with them shape who you are today” (p.29). That is a powerful reminder that although we may only work with a family for a short period of time, the connections we establish may have lifelong implications.

Creating Partnerships with Parents

I have also gained an appreciation of the importance of actively and purposefully seeking parents’ input and thoughts about home visits, which prior to this project, I had not included in my practice. The survey that I developed and shared with families created a greater understanding of parents’ thoughts and feelings about home visits. I realized that they felt that the beginning of the year visits were particularly important as the visit helped them feel secure in leaving their child at school for the first time. This has increased my appreciation of how difficult the beginning of Prekindergarten year is for many families and children. The survey results also encouraged me to consider that parents may be a valuable source of support for each other. Including their testimonials in the brochure I created about home visits and allowing time for returning parents to share their stories at the fall orientation are strategies that could provide support for new families that are unsure and nervous about the Prekindergarten program and/or home visits. It is important to ask and respond to parents’ input. This may involve changing and adapting the program practices to reflect the specific needs of families and children. For future planning, I purport that it would be beneficial to include children’s voices and thoughts about
home visits as well. Creating a way to ask children what they like and dislike about the home visit would further deepen the understanding of the practice of home visits.

**Overcoming Obstacles**

It may be difficult to provide concrete ways to overcome challenges as they will be unique for each educator and family. Encouraging conversation and supporting fellow Prekindergarten teachers is an important and useful strategy in overcoming the challenges surrounding home visits. Overwhelmingly, the literature emphasizes that educators be flexible and responsive to the needs of each family (Brorson, 2005; Peterson et al., 2007; Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006). This project has raised my awareness that my own worldview, life experiences, and cultural background may limit and influence how I view families. How educators view families and the role they play in their child’s education may directly influence classroom pedagogy and is therefore very relevant and important to consider.

Also, as Santos (2005) postulated, the visit may be viewed as unsuccessful because the activities conducted do not reflect the initial goal of the visit or program. For example, it is often the tendency for the educator to lead, teach, or model preferred interactions with the child at the home visit. Instead, listening, observing, and respecting parents’ interaction styles with their child may require a conscious effort. It requires thoughtful preparation to focus on building relationships and partnerships with parents instead of focusing on school readiness.

**Building a “Culture of Caring and Welcoming” Within the School**

A school that encourages a “culture of caring,” as described by Middleton (2008), seems to have more success maintaining the initial connections with families that are established in Prekindergarten. A “culture of caring” focuses on building respectful relationships with children and families that acknowledges individual strengths and talents, while also, creating
understanding and empathy for challenges families may be experiencing. A “culture of caring” acknowledges that all contexts of the child’s life contribute to their growth and development, and that a focus on relationships, not test scores, has greater potential to enhance academic achievement. Research and experience lead me to believe that home visits that occur throughout the year are more successful in building and maintaining relationships with families. At the first visit it is important to build trust and establish a relationship with each child and family. The second visit is an opportunity to deepen the relationship and share the learning and development of the child from the home and school perspective. It is also a time to begin the conversation about transition for the next year. The third visit is a time to celebrate the accomplishments of the child, and continue to support families transitioning to a new class or program. Continuing the conversation about the role home visits play in creating a “culture of caring” within our schools is important and it may be possible to consider how this can extend past Prekindergarten into other areas and grades of the school.

**Final Thoughts**

When I began this project I viewed home visits as a strategy to build relationships with families. This project has illuminated for me the possibility of home visits as an important pedagogical practice that reflects a particular theoretical perspective and a particular view of education. Seen from a sociocultural perspective, home visits allow educators to work with families from a capacity, rather than a deficit view, as the child’s context is recognized as contributing to their growth and development. Finally, this project has challenged me to consider more purposefully how I can incorporate what I learn during the home visits from children and families’ funds of knowledge into day-to-day classroom pedagogy, and, in turn, demonstrate the uniqueness and diversity of each family in the Prekindergarten program. I have
come to understand that rather than thinking about home visits as a one-time event, they have the potential to create meaningful opportunities to include families as significant partners in their child’s educational journey.
References


CREATING CONNECTIONS WITH FAMILIES THROUGH HOME VISITS

Presented by: Tamara Grieve

“Home is where one starts from”
T.S. Eliot
Why are home visits important?

• My intention in creating this presentation is to shed light on the many benefits of home visits for the child, family, educator and the Prekindergarten program.

• The Ministry of Education in Saskatchewan emphasizes home visits as an important strategy for building relationships with families.

• I will present home visits as more than a strategy but rather a fundamental practice that forms the base of relationships that the prekindergarten program rests on.

  “The interactions children have with family members, you, and other constant, important people in their lives give them their early ideas of who they are and what they can do”

  (Pawl & Dombro, 2001, p. 38)
Building relationships through home visits

Building relationships with the children and families we work with is like building a home. The foundation is the respect of individual differences and circumstances. The frame represents the trust that is being built. The walls and door represent the families’ willingness to let the educator in and share their life with them. By visiting families in their homes we must appreciate that they are opening their lives to us. As educators it is important to respect this special and unique opportunity.

(Grieve, 2012)
Home visits in Prekindergarten are a chance to get to know the children and families in their home environment. Home visits can set the stage for communication, discussion and information sharing (Stephens, 2010). They are viewed as an opportunity to establish connections and relationships between the home and the school. Keyser (2006) agrees and states that home visits give the teacher, child, and family a chance to build their shared history” (p. 148). In Prekindergarten visits are not used as a tool for teaching parenting skills or implementing intervention strategies which are common in other programs that conduct home visits.
A Year Plan for Growing Family Engagement

The Ministry of Education recommends the following guidelines when planning for home visits in Prekindergarten programs.

1st Home visit: Focus on establishing family engagement and building trusting relationships

2nd Home visit: Focus on sharing child development and learning.

3rd Home visit: Focus on learning by sharing the child’s portfolio and celebrating their year in Prekindergarten. Plan for transition to Kindergarten.

(Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2012, p. 38)

I share these recommendations as they are part of the documents that guide prekindergarten programs in Saskatchewan. Although they are helpful guidelines I believe that it is important to continue the discussion about home visits including the benefits, challenges and strategies for success.
What Does the Research Say?

- Urie Bronfenbrenner argues, “in order to understand human development, one must consider the entire ecological system in which growth occurs” (Bronfenbrenner, 1994, p.37).

Bronfenbrenner’s (1994) ecological model provides educators with a framework for understanding the complex and dynamic environments in which children grow and learn. It is helpful to understand how each system is interrelated.

The ecological model compliments the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education (2012) definition of home visits in the Prekindergarten Program which describes home visits as a strategy for connecting with families’ and building meaningful relationships, thus, allowing educators to learn about the family and child within their environment.

It also speaks to the important aspect of educating the whole child. As educators we know that all experiences that the child has impacts their growth and development. The relationships between school, home and the community are very important. Strengthening those relationships may positively influence all aspects of growth. Home visits are very helpful in creating bridges between the interrelated systems of development.
Diversity...

Everyone builds their house differently. They use different materials and decorations. We cannot base our observations on our realities or perspectives. We must listen, observe and respect the uniqueness of each family in the Prekindergarten program. Reflecting their culture, beliefs, and interests in classroom pedagogy.

Middleton’s (2008) study revealed that after conducting home visits, teachers felt greater empathy and appreciation for individual student needs, talents, and interests. Home visits helped to establish a "culture of caring" in the school.
Funds of knowledge, as described by Moll, Amanti, Neff and Gonzalez (1992), is the valuable knowledge children learn from their families about their values, culture, and community.

Funds of knowledge can assist teachers to:

- View student’s households as an important part of who they are and how they learn
- Enrich pedagogical practice by reflecting children’s funds of knowledge in classroom activities.
- Create a bridge between home and school
- Appreciate family diversity

The visit allows the teacher to see into the child’s home life and where they live. It gives the teacher the chance to teach the child using examples or ideas of things the child is familiar with at their home.

The Saskatchewan Ministry of Education (2008) emphasizes that the focus of the Prekindergarten program is on following children’s interests. “The Prekindergarten team may learn about family activities, traditions, values, expectations, views on discipline, culture and others. This information can help the Prekindergarten team provide the most effective learning opportunities and supports for children in the program” (p. 18). Thus, emphasizing the important connections between the funds of knowledge that families share with children and the pedagogical practice of the classroom.
Thoughts to ponder before the visit...

What do you think you might learn about the children and their families by visiting them in their home?

How do my own experiences influence how I view the families and children in my classroom?

Do I think that relationships with families and children are important? How could home visits strengthen those relationships?

How will the child and family benefit from the visit?

“In work with children and families, it is especially important to become aware of your own feelings, beliefs, and values, and to seek to understand the feelings, beliefs, and values of others” (Pawl & Dombro, 2001, p. 30)

Souto-Manning and Swick (2006) argue that “teacher beliefs about parents and families are heavily influenced by current and past contextual and cultural elements” (p. 187). Many authors agree that it is important for educators to reflect on their own experiences and beliefs about families and the role they play in the classroom and in their child’s education. (Carlisle, Stanley, & Kemple, 2005; Coleman, & Churchill, 2012; Finders, & Lewis, 1994).
Thoughts to ponder during the visit...

“Being considerate, interested, curious, and respectful of parents is the most important thing you can do for the relationship with the parent, for the child, for today and for tomorrow” (Pawl & Dombro, 2001, p. 43)

It is important to remember that each visit will be unique. It may help to have a framework for conducting visits but each visit will be reflective of the family that you are visiting. (Brorson, 2005; Peterson, Luze, Eshbaugh, Jeon, & Kantz, 2007; Jeon, & Jantz, 2007).

The research indicates that building relationships through family-centered, home visits is important for the overall learning and development of young children (Keyser, 2006; Middleton, 2008; Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2008; Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2012; Stephens, 2010)
Thoughts to Ponder after the visit...

How can I reflect what I have learned about the child and family into learning opportunities in the classroom?

Are there supports in the school or community that might be helpful for the family?

What I have learned about the family (e.g., their funds of knowledge...culture, beliefs, language) and how has this knowledge strengthened my relationship with the family?

“The people you were close to growing up—parents, a grandmother, a great-uncle, a teacher, a neighbor—and experiences with them, shape who you are today. Most of us still believe much of what those special people told us about ourselves, about others, about the world” (Paul & Dombro, 2001, p. 29)
Home Visits are More Than a Family Involvement Strategy

Home visits allow us to get to know the parents on a different level than just in the school. Parents are more likely to share about their child or ask questions when we are in their home. I like that we can get a lot of information about the child just by being in their home and having a one on one conversation with their parent/s.

- Prekindergarten Teacher

Establish important connections between home and school.
- This can ease the transition to school helping children and parents feel more comfortable leaving their child at school

Learn about what is important to families
- Culture, language, beliefs, worries and concerns, hopes and dreams
- Include this knowledge in classroom activities

Learn who is involved in the child’s life
- Parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, siblings, pets
- Welcome all family members into the classroom

Stephens (2010) posits that home visits are a powerful strategy for connecting with families as we are often the first educator they will encounter. It is often difficult for families to leave their child for the first time. Many parents share that having the teacher visit in the home first helps to ease with this transition and is reassuring for the parent and the child.

All of the people in the child’s life play an important role in their growth and development (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Moll et al., 1992; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004) I have found that home visits help to create connections with all the members of the child’s family. This in turn leads to their involvement in the school in a multitude of ways. (sharing talents and knowledge, bringing in snacks and pets, visiting when they bring the child to and from school) In Prekindergarten we also host family days once a month and because of our relationships with families we have an excellent turn out for these events often with several family members attending.

Through home visits we are also able connect with younger siblings that may come to Prekindergarten in the future.

Relationships between children and teachers are an important topic in early childhood research. McCormick at al. (2013) and Dombro et al. (2011) explored the connections between teacher-child relationships and academic achievement. Dombro et al. (2011) and McCormick et al. (2013) agree that positive teacher-child relationships promote academic resiliency.
Home Visits are More Than a Family Involvement Strategy Continued...

Develop trust and communication between children, parents and the teacher

- Families may be more willing to reach out if they have questions or concerns, share success stories.
- Children will respond to the teacher if they have a connection with them. This may also lead to an increase in academic growth, social emotional growth and peer relations.
- Teachers may be more empathetic, open and understanding to the diverse families in the program. Creating a “culture of caring” (Middleton, 2008, p. 1).
- Opportunity for teachers to reflect on their own beliefs and how they impact their ability to connect with families.
How To Respond Thoughtfully To Potential Barriers...

Parents may feel uneasy about having the teacher come to their house.
• Share information with the family about the purpose of the visit ahead of time
• Meet in an alternate location such as a coffee shop or park
• Allow them to sign up for a time that works for them
• Have parents that have participated in home visits share their experiences with new families

Teachers may feel uneasy about visiting with families in their homes
• Take someone with you such as the classroom educational assistant to help with the conversation and/or play with the children while the teacher visits with the parents. It is hard to do both!
• Reflect on the purpose of the visit and your own experiences. What makes you uneasy? What are some positive aspects of the visit?
• Talk to other teachers that have experience doing home visits. Ask if you could go with them to gain some experience.

At first I was nervous but once we did the first one I really liked it. My daughter enjoyed them being here as well.
-Parent-

Souto- Manning and Swick (2006) and Coleman and Churchill (2012) assert that teacher’s beliefs about parents and families are influenced by their experiences and culture. It is important for educators to carefully examine how their experiences, beliefs and personal bias may impact their ability to create positive relationships with families and children. An awareness and acceptance of cultural differences is critical in respecting the diverse families in the Prekindergarten program.
How To Respond Thoughtfully To Potential Barriers continued...

Time to do home visits is often a challenge

- Try doing home visits in Fridays when there are no students in Prekindergarten
- It is necessary for administrators and school division personal to support teachers in doing home visits and allow for time in the program
- Try doing visits in the evening during parent-teacher interviews
- Share with families before the visit how long you will be there so they know what to expect.

It is such a short time that the teachers are here. I think it shines a good light on their character. The fact they are willing to spend non teaching time with students is wonderful.

-Parent-
Creating a “Culture of Caring and Welcoming” Through Home Visits...

I always bring something to share. At the first home visit it’s a book of pictures of people and things they will see in the school when they come. I always bring play dough the first visit as well to leave. This generally gives the child something to do while parent and teachers visit as well and eases the parent.

Support each other

- Ask other Prekindergarten teachers what they find helps home visits to be successful.
- Ask families how they feel about the visit.
- Reflect if the activities that you are doing at the visit reflect the intended purpose of the visit.

Have a framework for the visit

- It is important to have a framework and at the same time be flexible and responsive to the children and family.
- Listen attentively and follow the child’s lead, share experiences and stories with the family, be responsive to the information shared and include it in classroom activities.

Seeking parents feedback is very useful and will help the educator to understand if the goals of the visit are being met (Reglin, 2002; Roggman et al., 2001). Dombro et al. (2011) provide a framework called Powerful Interactions that is helpful for educators seeking a flexible framework for interacting with children and families.
Powerful Interactions
Families and children will feel heard, appreciated and understood (Dombro, 2011)

**Be Present:** Listen with an open mind, be observant and mindful of the situation.

**Connect:** Share interests, ask thoughtful questions, listen attentively and follow the families lead.

**Extend the Learning:** Answer questions about the program, connect families interests and culture to the classroom, help the family make connections in the community if requested.

A flexible framework for conducting home visits adapted from Dombro (2011).
Many thoughts and ideas about home visits have been shared. The emphasis on building relationships with families is evident in both research and practice. Through home visits the possibility to connect with families in meaningful ways is beneficial for all involved. The overwhelming benefit is creating a “culture of caring” that Middleton (2008), a school administrator, speaks of in her experience conducting home visits. The power to extend the four walls of the classroom and invite parents and families to be a part of their child’s education is an exciting proposition and much more than a strategy for family engagement. It is important to note that home visits support many of the goals of the Prekindergarten Program including, smooth transitions (both into the early childhood program and into Kindergarten), teacher and peer relations, increased academic achievement, a focus on students interests, family centred practices, and the education of the whole child. I believe that home visits are a social-pedagogical practice that can create possibilities for educators and families to establish valued partnerships that benefits the growth and development of the young children with whom they work and the Prekindergarten program as a whole.
References


Appendix B
Brochure for Families
Page one

Home visits...
“Gives the teacher, child, and family a chance to build their shared history. The home provides a wonderful place to acknowledge diversity, respect one another’s knowledge, have two-way conversations, and begin to share decision making for the child”

Keyser, 2006, p. 148

What to expect at the visit...

Teachers will come at a time that is convenient for you.

The teachers will bring a little gift for your child.

The visit is informal and is a chance to play with your child and have a short visit with you.

The visit is about 20 minutes long.

We love to meet the child’s, siblings and other family members, or pets.

Home Visits in Prekindergarten

Family is not an important thing, it's everything
Michael J. Fox

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Appendix B

Brochure for Families

Page two

PREKINDERGARTEN

Home visits are an important part of the Prekindergarten program. Visiting with parents and family members in their homes is a highly effective way to establish and maintain communication and to foster trust between home and school.

Testimonials from families...

We love getting to know the teachers before my child started school.

I find it brings the teachers and parents closer.

I am sure some parents are nervous (the first time). It’s not something that has been happening since we were kids, but it really breaks down any wall between teachers and parents. The comfort level is so much higher after!

It shows the kids that the teachers are trusted and welcome in their home and gives parents like me who work on opportunity to sit and speak to the teachers.

*Parents have an opportunity to share their stories about the experience of home visit in a survey that will be sent home during the school year. We highly value parents’ thoughts and feelings about the visits and use your feedback to continuously improve our program.*

Why do we do home visits?

- To get to know children and families.
- To provide children and families with an opportunity to get to know the educators they will be spending time with at school.
- To listen to families and give them a chance to share information about their child and ask questions about school.
Appendix C
Reflection Page for Educators

**Before the Visit:**
What do you think you might learn about the children and their families by visiting them in their home?

How do my own experiences influence how I view the families and children in my classroom?

Do I think that relationships with families and children are important? How could home visits strengthen those relationships?

How will the child and family benefit from the visit?

**During the Visit:**
Am I listening and present during the visit? Am I following the child’s lead or focusing on my own agenda?

What am I willing to share about myself to promote a reciprocal relationship with the family?

**After the Visit:**
How can I reflect what I have learned about the child and family into learning opportunities in the classroom?

Are there supports in the school or community that might be helpful for the family?

What I have learned about the family (ex: their funds of knowledge… culture, beliefs, language) and how has this knowledge strengthened my relationship with the family?
Appendix D
Survey for Families

Home visits in Prekindergarten

Dear Prekindergarten Families,

I would like to ask for your input into our home visits as your thoughts and ideas are very important to us! (Please use the back if you need to)

1. How do you and your child feel about us coming to visit your child at home?

2. Do you think it helps you and your child get to know the teachers better?

3. Do you think that it helps to build a stronger relationship between the school and home?

4. Do you have ideas of things you would like to see us do or talk about at the home visit?

Thanks so much for your ideas and input into home visits. I appreciate your feedback to strengthen and grow our program!