

Principals' and teachers' views on home visits in Turkey

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Abstract

Schools must cooperate with parents to be effective. “Families are critical to children’s educational success” as Sheldon (2018, vii), declared. The history of cooperation with parents is quite old. One effective way of cooperating with parents is home visits. The impacts of home visits on school-parent cooperation and student outcomes have been revealed in the researches. Since home visits are mostly an out-of-school activity, they are made with the dedication and personal efforts of the teachers. This study aims at revealing the opinions of teachers and principals about home visiting practices in Turkish primary and secondary schools. This is a qualitative research. The study group consists of 12 secondary schools and 10 primary schools in Sivas city center. So, the questionnaires developed by the researchers were distributed to the determined schools. The survey forms were distributed to volunteer teachers and principals. 102 survey forms from teachers and 41 principals were evaluated in accordance with the research purpose. The data obtained from the research were analyzed by content analysis method. The results show that both principals and teachers believe the positive effects of home visits and they find home visits necessary to build an effective school environment. However, they have some reservations of home visit practices.

Keywords: Home Visits, School-Family Cooperation, Family Support, Student Outcome

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Introduction

The idea of providing social support to schools and cooperation with parents to improve the quality of education goes back to the 1960s (Coleman, et. al. 1966; Epstein, et. al, 2002). In our country, the principle of cooperation between schools and families dates back even further. The founders of the Turkish Republic, who tried to make use of all kinds of tools in order to promote literacy and increase the quality of education in the country, gave importance to school-family cooperation in the 1930s and later made it a legal obligation. As part of this fact, among the principles adopted in the basic law of national education, which was rearranged in 1973, the principle of cooperation between school and family is also included. There are various ways in which schools can cooperate with families. One of these ways is home visits. A home visit is an informal visit to students' home by school staff, mostly by teachers. It can be said that this practice, which exists in Turkish history and culture, has been neglected by teachers and administrators for some time. However, it has become a popular topic that is being discussed and emphasized again at the Ministerial level and other media.

As Byrd (2012, 43) reports from Cutler (2000), "home visits, or visits by educators to the residences of their students, have been a part of the American educational situation for almost as long as schools have existed in the United States". There are important reasons why home visits are so important and goes back to the early days of schooling. "More than 50 years of research has shown that the influence of families on children's development and academic achievement begins before children start their schooling and lasts through high school" (Sheldon, 2018).

"Research demonstrates that effective schools have high levels of parental and community involvement. This involvement is strongly related to improved student learning, attendance and behavior" (Australian Government, 2019, 2). Parental and community involvement is provided strongly through family visits. "Home visits also provide a positive opportunity to meet federal and state mandates that families be meaningfully informed of their child's academic standing" (PTHV, 2019).

"Home visiting programs have been providing services to families with young children in the United States for many years; the first published documentation dates back to the 1880" (Sweet and Appelbaum, 2004, 1435). With the recognition of the importance of education in technological improvement and community development the search for quality education has also increased and more attention has been paid to cooperating with families to improve schools. a good example of this search was the studies conducted by Coleman. "The Coleman Report, commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education to examine causes of educational inequality and published in 1966, for example, found that out-of-school factors far out-weighed in-school factors as an explanation of student achievement" (Sheldon, 2018, vii). The Coleman Report has showed that inequalities in

educational opportunities and achievement can only be remedied through collaborations among educators, families, and community partners. Families are critical to children's educational success (Sheldon, 2018, vii).

Home visits are very important in school-family collaboration. Home visits are considered important to ensure parent involvement. Home visits strengthen communication between school and family. It is also effective in creating a supportive environment at home learning (Epstein, 2001).

Parent Teacher Home Visits (PTHV) is a strategy for engaging educators and families as a team to support student achievement. The PTHV model developed from an understanding that family engagement is critical to student success. However, complex barriers often prevent meaningful partnerships between educators and families. A group of teachers and families in a low-income neighborhood in south Sacramento, California, came together in 1998 to address a deep distrust between the school district and the community. Out of this, parents and teachers created PTHV based upon community organizing principles of empowerment. The model focuses on building trust and communication (Sheldon, 2018, vii).

In the last 20 years, PTHV has expanded to a network of over 700 communities in 25 states, each a collaboration between local partners such as school districts, unions for credentialed teachers and classified staff, and community organizations. While details of the model vary by location, participating sites agree to five core practices (Sheldon, 2018, viii):

- Visits are always voluntary for educators and families and arranged in advance.
- Teachers are trained and compensated for visits outside their school day.
- The focus of the first visit is relationship-building; educators and families discuss hopes and dreams.
- No targeting – visit all or a cross-section of students, so there is no stigma.
- Educators conduct visits in pairs and, after the visit, reflect with their partners.

The findings of this study do more than support the existing research literature suggesting that family engagement promotes student success; they affirm the efficacy of school outreach to families as a strategy to improve student attendance and achievement outcomes. Specifically, the findings support the implementation of PTHV as an evidenced-based family engagement approach to improve student outcomes. Using a large dataset, with information about thousands of students drawn across several districts and controlling for important student variables including (Sheldon, 2018).

“Research on the effectiveness of home visiting programs has produced mixed results as it has been reported that their influence is dependent on implementation quality. It seems that for home visiting to be successful the visitor and family must develop a positively affective relationship” (Knoph and Swick, 2008, 423).

The benefits of parent involvement in a child's education at all levels are well-documented (Wright, et. al., 2018, 67). "Current research findings support the continued use of teacher home visit programs as a tool to encourage students' academic success and parent involvement in the classroom, with many studies also noting teacher home visit programs' improvement of students' classroom behavior" (Wright, et. al., 2018, 68).

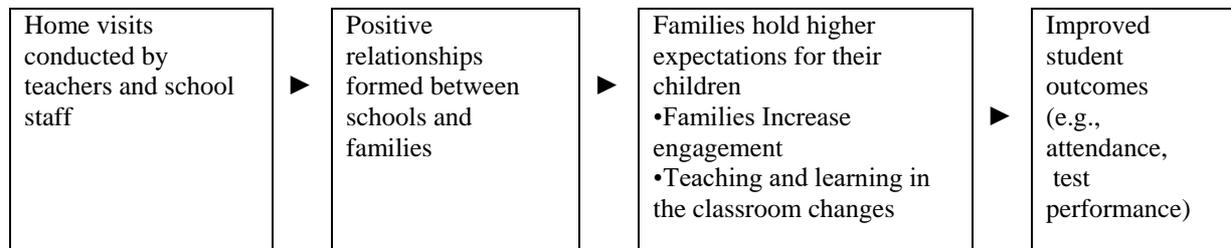


Figure 1. The impact of home visiting (Sheldon, 2018).

Home visits are important in building the bridge between the school and the family, as well as creating an opportunity for the parents to express their expectations from the school as well as their expectations from the family. The teacher can obtain information from the primary source on the family structure, lifestyle and past experiences of the child during the home visits (Allen & Tracy, 2002, in Bütün-Kar et. al., 2018, 590).

Home visits by teachers can be used as an effective method for better recognition and understanding of the students who grow up in families with serious differences such as socioeconomic, belief and origin in our country (Bütün-Kar et. al., 2018, 592). In qualitative research, the purpose statement and the research questions are stated so that you can best learn from participants. You research a single phenomenon of interest and state this phenomenon in a purpose statement (Creswell, 2012, 17). This study aims to reveal the principals' and teachers' opinions of on home visits. For this purpose, the following questions were prepared, and this study seeks answers to these questions:

1. Do principals and teachers have different opinions on home visiting?
2. How effectively do home visits implemented in schools?
3. What are the principals' and teachers' suggestions for home visits?

Method

Research Design

This is a qualitative research. In this context, the research is structured according to the phenomenological pattern. "Phenomenology is the study of experience through reflection. The individual reflects on an experience and describes its essences through imaginative manipulation (an

intuitive grasping of what is essential about an instance). It is not a passive process but rather an active sifting through of contingencies and variables to perceive the essential character of an instance or experience” (Given, 2008, p. 116). Individuals interact with many phenomena in daily life. As a result of this interaction, individuals have several experiences related to phenomena. These phenomena, which are experienced by individuals but not fully explained by themselves, can be examined in depth by phenomenological research (Yıldırım ve Şimşek, 2011). Home visits by schools are considered as a phenomenon that directly affects students, parents, teachers and school principals. Teachers and administrators participating in home visits gain experience in this phenomenon, but uncertainties remain about how this experience is reflected in the school. Phenomenology pattern was used in this study in order to investigate the phenomenon of home visits in depth according to the experiences of teachers and administrators.

Participants

The study group consists of 12 secondary schools and 10 primary schools in Sivas city center. These schools were chosen through an easily accessible sampling technique. Easily accessible sampling enables the researcher to collect data faster during the research process and makes it easier to access the sampling during the research process (Yıldırım ve Şimşek, 2011). In qualitative inquiry, the intent is to develop an in-depth exploration of a central phenomenon. Thus, to best understand this phenomenon, the qualitative researcher purposefully or intentionally selects individuals and sites (Creswell, 2012, 206). So, the questionnaires developed by the researchers were distributed to the determined schools. The survey forms were distributed to volunteer teachers and principals. 102 survey forms from teachers and 41 principals were evaluated in accordance of the research purpose.

Data Collection

Data were collected by questionnaire method. The questionnaire was developed by the researchers. “The questionnaire can be described as a data collection tool consisting of questions prepared to get the opinions of individuals, groups and communities on a certain subject. These can be beliefs, values, thoughts, interests, attitudes, self-confidence, alienation, and so on” (Sönmez ve Alacapınar, 2011, 110). Four stages should be followed in developing the questionnaire. These are identification of the problem, writing the items, taking expert opinion and pre-application stages (Anderson, 1990 reported by Büyüköztürk, 2005).

The problem of this research is the home visits, which is a current phenomenon in Turkey and revealing the opinions of teachers and administrators. After the identification of the research problem, literature was searched, and questionnaire items were formed. The questionnaire questions were then examined by two academicians specialized in educational sciences. The questionnaire was applied to

six teachers and six principals and final corrections were made according to the application results. Accordingly, the survey consists of four questions after the instructions section.

1. Do principals and teachers have different opinions on home visiting?
2. How effectively do home visits implemented in schools?
3. What are the advantages and disadvantages of home visits?
4. What are the principals' and teachers' suggestions for fruitful home visits?

Data Analysis

The data obtained from the research were analyzed by content analysis method. The qualitative data analysis may be both a description of the story and themes that emerge from it (Creswell, 2012, 507). "In this type of analysis, it is necessary to examine the contents of the text and the document. Then this data should be divided into themes (categories) and lower and upper restrictions should be made. The matrix must be prepared to show the relationship between them. Then these classifications can be converted to tables" (Sönmez and Alacapınar, 2011, 159; Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2011). The obtained data were examined, and codes, categories and themes were formed. The classifications obtained as a result of the analysis are presented in the figures for presenting the results better. Direct quotations from the participants were provided to support the findings. Teacher participants were coded as (T1, T2, T3, ...) and principals were coded as (P1, P2, 3,.. in the study.

The concepts of validity and reliability in qualitative research is handled fully different. Therefore, the concepts of credibility, transferability, consistency and confirmability are used instead of validity and reliability (Mills, 2003). From this point of view, the research process is presented in detail in the research. The questionnaire was structured according to the relevant literature and expert opinions and the sensitivity required for an objective coding was shown during the content analysis process. Necessary explanations were made to the participants during the implementation process and the questionnaires were distributed to volunteer teachers and principals. In the study, direct quotations obtained from the participants were included and the data were supported. The data were presented objectively without generalization.

Results

The research data have been examined in two different titles: principals' views and teachers' views. Each of these titles have also three subtitles corresponding to the themes. Principals' opinions are handled as three themes: 1) The implementation of home visits, 2) Positive and negative opinions and 3) Suggestions on home visits. Teacher opinions were also presented similarly.

After the analyzes made about the principals, 19 categories were formed, and 24 categories were formed after the analyzes of data obtained from the teachers. The analysis results of the answers given by the participants to the question "Do you have home visits?" are seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Home visit implementation according to the opinions of the principals and teachers

		f	%
Principals	Yes, it is done.	26	68,4
	Sometimes	9	23,7
	No, it is not done.	3	7,9
Total		38	100
Teachers	Yes, it is done.	51	54,3
	Sometimes	28	29,8
	No, it is not done.	15	15,9
Total		94	100

When Table 1 is examined, it is seen that most of the principals and teachers expressed that home visits were done in their schools. It is also seen that principals have a higher level of percentage (68,4 %) than teachers (54,3 %) about home visit practices. This can be explained by the fact that the principals make a general assessment of the school in terms of home visits, and the teachers make individual assessments. Similarly, teachers' opinions of “sometimes done” and “not done” is found higher than the opinions of principals and this supports the previous implication.

Positive Opinions of Principals about Home Visits

The positive opinions of school principals about home visits are structured in seven categories. As shown in the figure, some categories stand out; they are knowing the student's home and family environment much more, contributing to student development and strengthening school-family communication. These are seen well in Figure 1 below

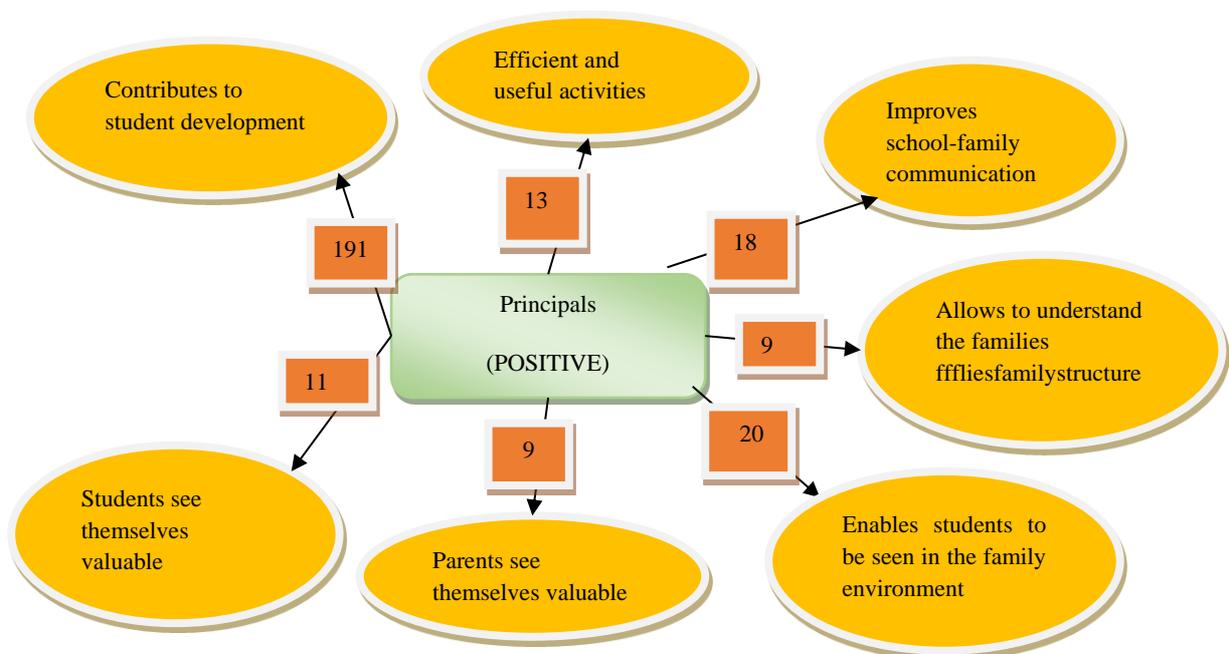


Figure 1. Principals’ positive opinions on home visits

One participant (P10) explains it as *“Thanks to home visits, we both know more about our students’ families and see the working environment of our students in their homes.”* Another participant (P37) expresses his opinions as *“Observing the students with their families and feeling close to them strengthens the relationship between the teacher, the students and the parents.”*

Principals, coded as P 9 and P 24, stated that home visits increase student motivation. one participant (P25) stated that the students and parents were guided at their home and that they made suggestions for students’ academic success and other social activities. Similarly, participant (P14) quoted as *“Although we know students in school environment, the home environment is always different. With the identification of positive and negative points, the child is supported in terms of psychological, educational and personal development.”*

Negative Opinions of Principals about Home Visits

School principals' negative views on home visits are structured in six categories. These are listed as; 1) unwillingness of parents, 2) having problems with parents, 3) parents’ preparation for these visits and seeing these preparation process as drudgery, 4) parents’ embarrassment because of their economic problems, 5) change in students, and 6) confidence problems. As seen in Figure 2, parents’ unwillingness, having problems with parents, and parents’ preparation are the main negative opinions expressed by the principals. Results relating this category are given in Figure 2 below.

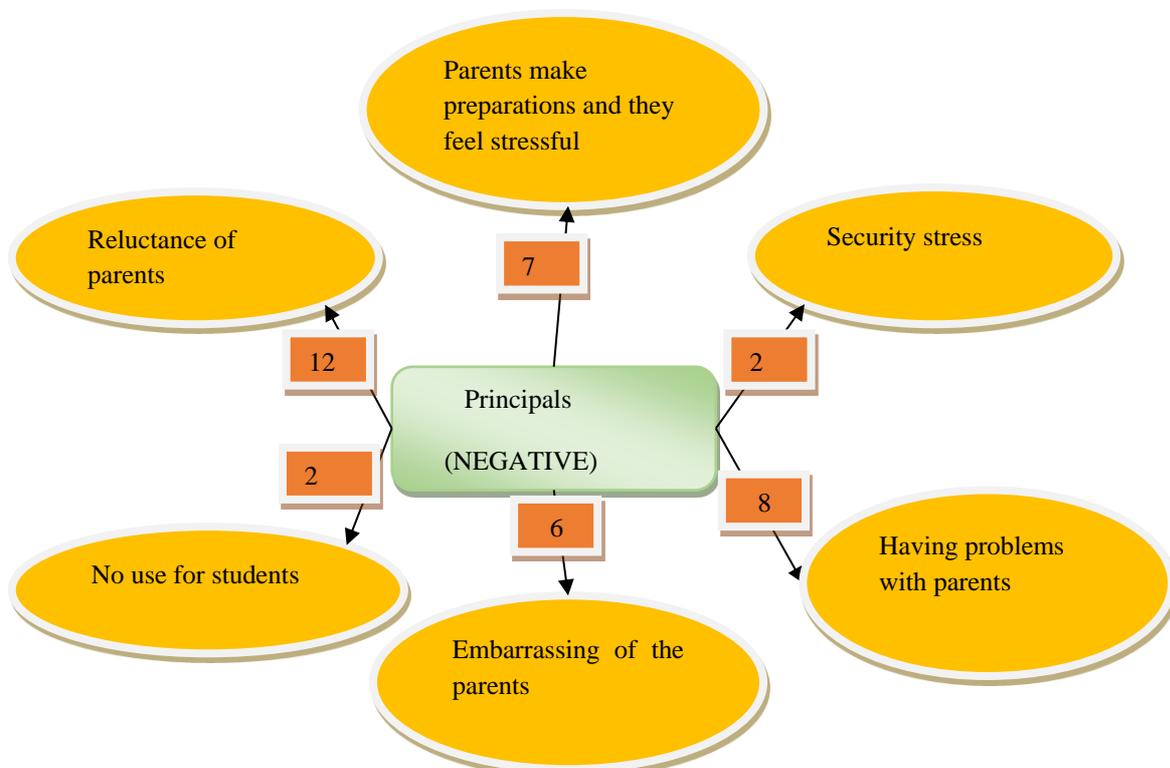


Figure 2. Negative views of school principals

Principals' quotations about these concerns are variable. One participant (P19) says, *"When parents are informed of a home visit, they are preparing meals, food and drinks etc. We don't want that either. Apart from that, the parents can be embarrassed if they have negative living conditions. Because we do not know whether they have a separate living room to accept us as a guest in their homes."*

Another principal (P22) says. *"Parents do not want us to see and understand their poorness and poverty. Students do not want it, either. They feel embarrassed and in despair. Because of these reasons they do not like home visits."*

The principals believe that home visits bother parents as most of the parents make long preparations for home visits. Turkish hospitality plays an important role in this regard. Still, sometimes parents may think that teachers come to eat and drink for home visits and school staff feel uneasy for that. For instance, a principal (P7) says *"In our culture guests are welcomed very well. Parents offer you foods, drinks, etc. They try to please their guests. when the school staff are their guests this becomes more and more important. However, we do not like it this way. It is not an entertainment program, it is a kind of official meeting, or situation, something more like that. We have to change this mentality first. Parents must see these visits as the part of our job."*

Two participants (P17 and P31) stated that the parents abused the home visit and made meaningless and unnecessary requests from school staff. *"They forget that it is an official visit and they try to be more sincere. They request irrelevant things such as high grades for their children, etc."* Participant P13 draws attention that the parents of problematic students do not want school staff at their homes. He adds that *"students with more absenteeism and their parents don't welcome us at their home."* Participant P27 emphasizes another problematic area. He quotes *"We have difficulties when visiting students who have family problems, for example, divorced parents."* One participant, (P20) said that they couldn't know and guess what they would encounter at student homes, therefore they did not look positive home visits.

School Principals' Suggestions on Home Visits

School principals' recommendations regarding home visits are structured in six categories. The most valued suggestions can be listed as; 1) These visits should be planned and made according to these plans. 2) Home visits should be done on a voluntary basis, without forcing the parts, not compulsory. 3) Home visits should be made according to needs. Results related to their suggestions are seen in Figure 3.

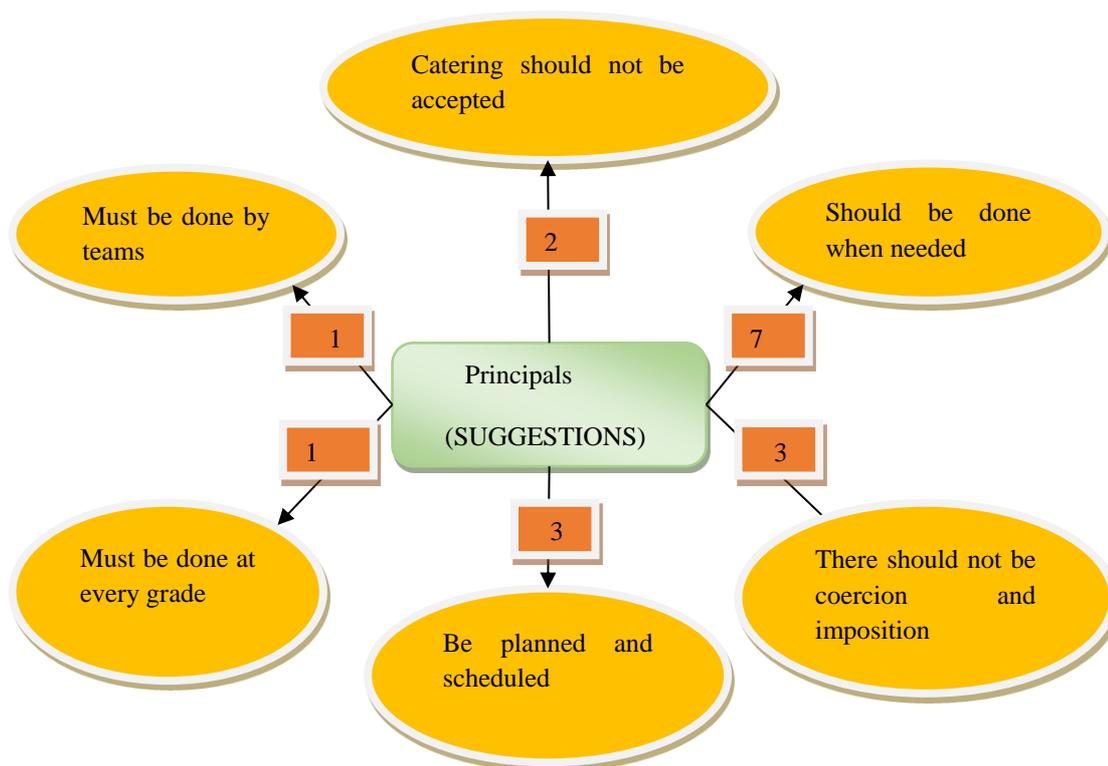


Figure 3. Principals’ recommendations on home visits

Principals suggest that home visits should be planned well. The aim should be not to visit all the students but to visit the ones who really need it. One principal, P10 says “*We should have a plan. School staff must do it regularly and purposefully. We should give importance to home visits; we should pay attention. Students with some problems should be visited first. Then comes the others.*”

“*Financially poor students could be identified and especially their parents would be visited. They need more help. school stakeholders do some help to those families and their children.*” says Y8, another principal. One of the participants, P27, suggests school staff not to insist on home visits if they think that the families and their children feel uncomfortable with these visits.

Some participants said that teachers also had difficulties while visiting families. They have the idea that teachers should not have been forced to visit families in some cases. Some parents do not want to welcome these visits and if they are visited by school staff, they might behave unexpectedly bad. This may harm the school-family relationships.

Another suggestion is not to let the parents know these visits long before visiting day so that they do not prepare, and they don’t see these visits as a home party. Parents should be informed that these visits are a kind of school activity and it is an official meeting. Participant P29 quotes “*Home visits should be done as small teams, might be two teachers, one administrator, etc. It should be planned, yet families should not be informed so earlier. They should*

not be directed to prepare foods and drinks, etc. They should be informed that it would be an official visit for the purpose of corporation.”

Positive Opinions of Teachers about Home Visits

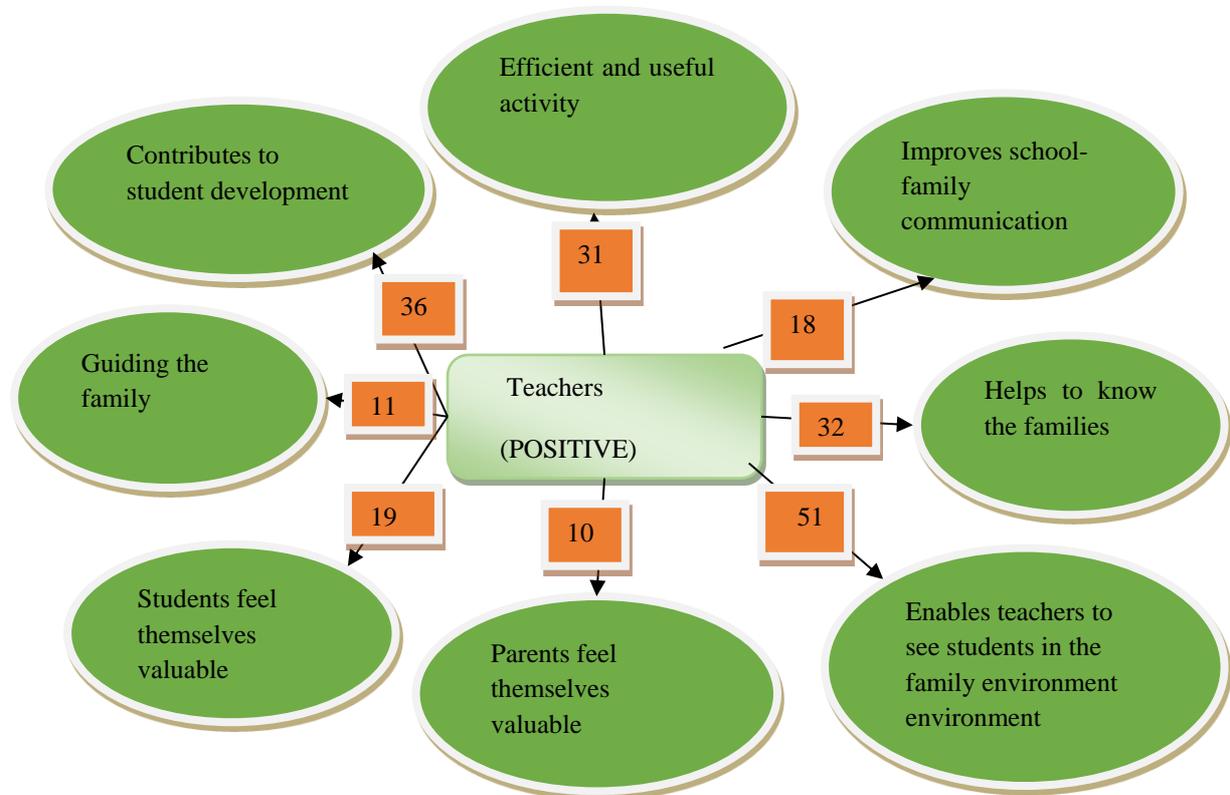


Figure 4. Positive opinions of teachers on home visits

The positive opinions of teachers about home visits are structured in eight categories. Most important ones could be listed as knowing the students in their home environment, knowing the families better, contributing to the students’ development effectively, and doing more fruitful activities with students. These and other results related all categories are seen in Figure 4.

Teachers generally have positive opinions on home visits. alongside with those mentioned views they think that home visits make school-family relations stronger. Most participant teachers believe that home visits students and their families feel that they are important and valuable. Most teachers also accept that they can help parents in terms of guidance and counseling. For instance, a participant teacher, T5, says *“Visiting the students in the home environment helps to increase their motivation and develop positive emotions to the school. It also helps them to feel that are important and cared by teachers and other school staff”*. Another teacher T67, expressed that *“There are positive aspects of visiting the students at home in terms of seeing the conditions they live in, communicating with the parents better and solving the existing problems effectively.”*

Some teachers (T37, T94, T 28) emphasize that home visits increase the students’ academic success and they express that positive communication ways are formed between students and the school.

A teacher participant (T57) sees home visits as a part of school activities. He quotes as *“It is the main task of the educators that the administration and the teachers visit and see the environment where the students live and study. It is also necessary to see the economic, social and individual differences between the students”*. T44 also says home visits is a part of educational activities.

Negative Opinions of Teachers about Home Visits

Besides positive opinions, teachers also have negative ones. The negative opinions of teachers about home visits are structured in seven categories. The prominent reasons not to have home visits are justified as 1) Embarrassment of parents because of their economic situation, 2) Reluctance of parents, and 3) Stakeholders believe that home visits are not fruitful. All seven categories related to the negative opinions of teachers are given in Figure 5.

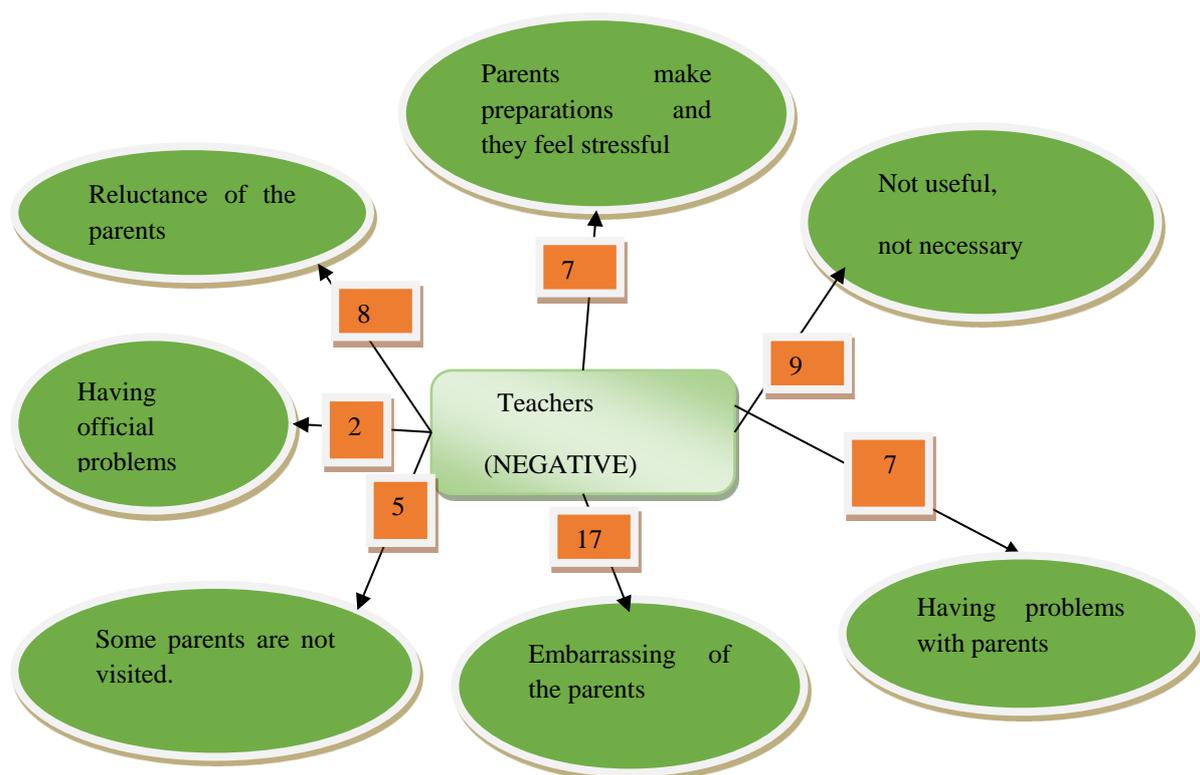


Figure 5. Negative opinions of teachers about home visits

A participant, for instance, says that *“Some parents do not want the teachers to come their home. Others exaggerate home visits and turn the event into a home party. They make a lot of preparations. But some families are poor, and they can’t have the same conditions to welcome us like the others. Then they feel uncomfortable and negative. The event leaves its purpose.”* (T21)

Similarly, T43 says that “families turn this into a food and drink program, and they are not realistic when they are together with the teachers.” She adds that “parents feel that they have to accommodate us as a special guest and compete with their neighbors. Then poor families feel insufficient and helpless. So, they don’t evaluate home visits fruitful”.

Some participants (T21, T55, and T100) find home visits useless because of similar reasons. They emphasize that some families turn these educational and academic activity into a show. And then the activity becomes a problematic situation especially among families rather than a cooperative work. A teacher (85) finds home visit risky for teachers. She quotes “It can create problems for the personal safety of the teacher. Teachers may come across with different reactions of parents.” Another participant teacher (T39) says that “Home visits are not necessary. They do not benefit to anybody. So, I do not go home visits. Our society does not have this maturity in terms of social development yet.”

Teachers’ Recommendations on Home Visits

Teachers' suggestions regarding home visits are structured in eight categories. Teachers mostly suggested well planned home visits. Some teachers only care about visiting students in need. They believe that home visits will be helpful and necessary for some students. Those students really need to be visited and helped both at home and school. Another remarkable suggestion is to visit all students at home. Some participants have the idea that all parents should be visited without any discrimination. All results related to the suggestions of teachers are given in Figure 6.

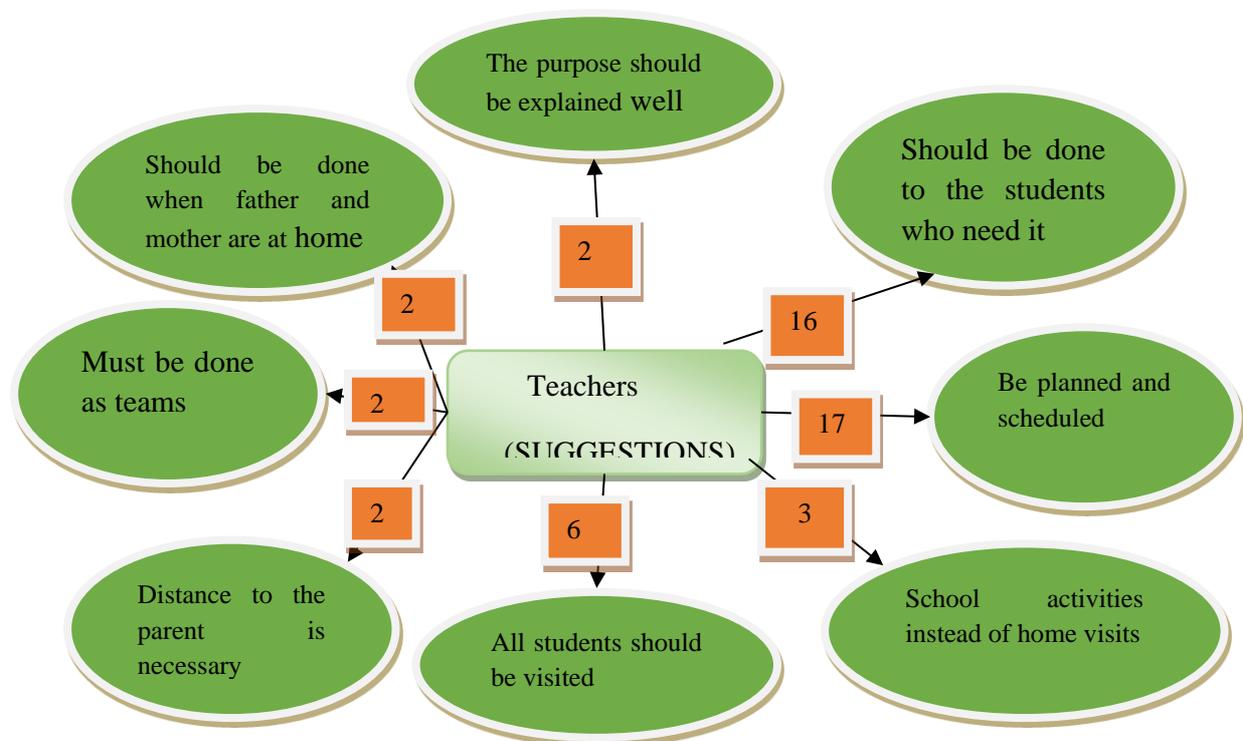


Figure 6. Teachers’ suggestions on home visits

On the other side, some participants believe that home visits are not enough, and they must be practiced more. A participant (T4) said *“Home visits are very rare. I think it should be done more often. In order to get to know the students better, teachers should frequently visit home and communicate with their parents.”* T79, another teacher, used the following expressions: *“Home visits should be made to the students who have some problems. Teachers can help their parents. They can give guidance.”*

Some teachers (T45, T59, T100) suggest various activities outside of school. These activities can be any time out of the school time. Going on a picnic with students and their families, having lunch or dinner with them, visiting parks and museums might be good alternatives. T59, for example, says *“A good alternative to home visits is to go on picnics together.”* Some participants (T32, T74, T87, T93) emphasize the importance of planning and preparations before home visits. T74 says *“The purpose of home visits should be told to parents at the school meetings. Teachers to visit parents should exchange views about their student among themselves. A good planning must be done earlier. Home visits should be done together with male and female teachers and as mixed groups, if possible, with an administrator from the school.”*

Discussion and Conclusion

Even though home visits date back to very old times, they are still being discussed and it is on the agenda of educators both in Turkey and abroad. While this study reveals the necessity and positive effects of home visits, on the other hand, it shows that there are some negative thoughts against home visits. All participants have the idea that home visits have a positive effect on student outcomes. As Wright, et. al., (2018, 70) stated *“literature supplies that teacher home visits have been shown to positively impact student attitude. They have found “significant differences in classroom behavior, academic achievement, level of parent involvement, and attitudes and motivation of the school system’s students who received a teacher home visit compared to similar students who did not receive a teacher home visit” (Wright, et. al., 2018, 86).*

This study revealed that teachers visited students’ homes to see their home environment, to talk their problems with their problems and to know more about their students. Similar implications were made by Bahçeli-Kahraman and Taner-Derman, (2012). In their study *“most of teachers preferring home visiting explained the reasons for home visits as seeing the child’s home environment, discussing domestic problems and getting to know the child better” (Bahçeli-Kahraman and Taner-Derman, 2012, 113).*

Negative attitudes of teachers towards home visits do not stem from the belief that they are not useful or necessary. Their concern is mostly due to the way home visits are made and the problems encountered. If arrangements are made to address these concerns of teachers, home visits will probably be made by all teachers. As Byrd (2012, 51) mentions *“Home visits are not a magical*

solution for every problem. There are many challenges surrounding home visits. On the side of the schools, they take time, which is at a premium for educators. On the side of the families, home visits can be challenging for various reasons”.

Efforts to make home visits more effective in many countries around the world continue (Faber, 2015; Christiansen and Morning, 2017; Australian Government, 2019). “A critical mass of research evidence over the last two decades indicates that gains in student achievement are possible when parents support students’ learning in the home. This is especially true for traditionally underachieving students and holds promise for narrowing the achievement gaps” (The NEA Foundation, 2012, 3). In this regard, home visits remain on the agenda for improving school-family relationships and for effective parent involvement. The results of a study conducted by Wright, et. al. (2018, 87), suggests “that the school system’s teacher home visit program positively impacts students’ academic and behavioral functioning in school”.

Home visits are a tradition that has been practiced in the Turkish education system for a long time. It is a known fact that the application has important effects. Principals and teachers have reservations about home visits recently due to some of the negative factors that have come to the fore in this study, as well. According to the results of the study, principals and teachers recommend that the home visits be carried out in a planned and scheduled manner, that they are carried out in accordance with the purpose, and that the home visits are carried out without disturbing parents.

Some schools, the Ministry of Education and various institutions have started to work to make home visits effective. One of these is “My guest is our teacher” project, which is carried out by the governorships of several provinces in Turkey (Istanbul Governorship, 2017). Some of the objectives of that project are listed as “Providing educational cooperation between the parents and the school by strengthening the cooperation with the parents of students at primary, secondary and high school levels through home visits. It has been determined to develop the parents' relations with the school, to determine the factors that affect the student success negatively, to take the necessary precautions and to improve the point of view of the parents positively ” (Istanbul Governorship, 2017, 5). The aim of this present study is to shed light the opinions of school principals and teachers who are at the center of the home visit applications and to make home visits more effective and continuous within the framework of their opinions and suggestions.

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