A Case Study of Schooling Practices at an Escuela Secundaria in Mexico

Marcela de Souza

The High School Journal, Volume 96, Number 4, April/May 2013, pp. 302-320
(Article)

Published by The University of North Carolina Press
DOI: 10.1353/hsj.2013.0017

For additional information about this article
https://muse.jhu.edu/article/511328
A Case Study of Schooling Practices at an Escuela Secundaria in Mexico

Marcela de Souza
Concordia University Chicago
Marcela.deSouza@cuchicago.edu

This article reports results of a qualitative study conducted at a public escuela secundaria (U.S. grades 7, 8, and 9) in Guadalajara, Mexico, during the spring of 2010. As the second phase of an ongoing project, the main goal was to learn from direct classroom observation about the most prevalent teaching and institutional practices at this level of education in a region from which large numbers of English learners arrive in the United States every year. Findings contribute to the limited existing knowledge about the school culture typical of Mexican schools, which includes warm relationships between teachers and students across content areas, the infusion of technology in curriculum and assessment, and the active role of parents in school governance. Practical information presented in this article may help U.S. teachers better understand the prior educational experiences of Mexican-born students and design effective instruction that facilitates their adjustment to cultural norms, routines, and expectations in U.S. classrooms.

Keywords: Mexican English language learners, educational system in Mexico, cross-cultural competence, culturally responsive teaching

Introduction

Culture encompasses the distinct beliefs, moral values, norms of behavior, commonly agreed-upon symbols, communication styles, traditions, and artistic expressions shared by members of a society, which are often transmitted from generation to generation. Culture may be defined as the way life organized within a community, and it includes the ways that members of this community use language, interact with one another, take turns to talk, relate to time and space, and approach learning (Villegas & Lucas, 2002a, 2002b). The concept of culture has evolved over the years, but what has remained constant is the fact that culture involves both observable and non-observable components. According to Cole (1998), “culture is exteriorized mind and mind is interiorized culture” (p. 292). Everyone has a culture, which is central to an individual’s identity, and cultures evolve in response to life experiences.

Through culture people make sense of the world and their everyday lives. Being all-inclusive and all-pervasive, culture impacts everything, including teaching and learning. Not only may the home culture of foreign-born students be different from that of their mainstream teachers in the U.S., but also the school culture foreign-born students were used to before entering the U.S. school system may be dissimilar to the norm in this country. Therefore, it is essential that we learn as much as we can about our students to help avoid alienation, clashes, and misunderstandings that are often born out of misconceptions and insufficient knowledge.

Immigrant students cannot make this “cultural translation” (Ross, 2008, p. 9) on their own and need teachers who can bridge cultures and provide responsive instruction,
which will encourage students to take ownership of their classroom experiences. Teachers can accomplish this after having closely examined their own identity and realized how it was shaped and continues to be shaped by cultural experiences. Self-reflection, then, becomes an essential part of becoming increasingly culturally competent, a process that is ongoing in nature. In this article I attempt to show that when teachers have a good understanding of their foreign-born students’ previous school experiences, they will be better able to connect with their students and help them acclimate to the new school norms and expectations without sacrificing their own cultural identities. Cross, Bazron, Dennis, and Isaacs (1989) contended that to work successfully with students from different cultures, teachers must abandon “the belief that the approach used by the dominant culture is universally applicable regardless of race or culture” (p. 15). Thus, we need to accept that what we call “best practices” in the U.S. may not apply to classrooms in other countries.

With this in mind, as well as the rise in the number of foreign-born students and U.S.-born children of immigrants in U.S. schools, this project was undertaken with the assumption that helping raise teachers’ cultural competence may take us a step closer to achieving the goal of educating all students well. The professional literature is replete with studies of English language learners (ELLs), many who are of Mexican origin; yet only a small number of researchers have focused on gaining a greater understanding of the teaching practices that are currently prevalent in Mexican classrooms by actually visiting some of those classrooms. This fact underscores the importance of this study, which was conducted at an escuela secundaria in one of the municipalities of Guadalajara, Jalisco, off the Pacific coast of Mexico. The main goal of the study was to seek answers for the following questions: (1) What are the most prevalent teaching and institutional practices in Mexican public schools at the junior high school level? (2) What can we learn from these practices to improve the experience and academic performance of Mexican-born students in U.S. classrooms?

Literature Review
Ruiz-de-Velasco and Fix (2000) reported that the Mexican population in the U.S. grew from 4.3 million to 7.2 million from 1990 to 1999, an increase of 65 percent. Presently, Mexicans account for approximately 30 percent of the U.S. foreign-born population, making Mexican-Americans the fastest growing minority group in the United States (Bravo, 2005; U.S. Census Bureau, 2007) and Mexico the largest source of immigrants to this country. Therefore, Mexican-origin students, many of whom are ELLs, constitute a high percentage of the school-age population in states like California. By 2002, more than 5 million students were identified as ELLs, and by 2003, Latino students made up 18 percent of the student population (Genesee et al., 2005; U.S. Census Bureau, 2003c). Educational scholars have made a strong case for the need of continuing research to identify the factors that have led to the high dropout rates among these students and to get a step closer to closing the achievement gap between these students and their non-Hispanic White peers. Research by Fry (2003, 2005) and Hirschman (2001), for example, has focused on ethnic populations and trends in school enrollment, which revealed that Mexican immigrant teenagers have the highest dropout rates among all immigrant groups. The non-enrollment rate for Mexican students who arrived in the U.S. as teenagers has reached a staggering 40%. At the risk of stating the obvious, without a high school diploma, job opportunities are limited and pursuing post-secondary education is impossible. This segment of our population needs continued attention.

While in the mid-1990s the enrollment in U.S. public schools was 65.6% White, 16.7% Black, 13% Hispanic, 3.6% Asian, and 1.1% Native American, a few years
into the new millennium these percentages have changed to 57.9% White, 17.3% Black, 19.2% Hispanic, 4.5% Asian, and 1.2% Native American (National Center for Education Statistics, 2006, as cited in Orfield & Lee, 2006). Not only are elementary and secondary school teachers predominantly monolingual, English-speaking White women from cultural backgrounds different from those of their students, but they also have little to no cross-cultural knowledge or experience. Scholars like Smith-Davis (2004) point to a “lack of cultural and linguistic understanding on the part of general... educators” (p. 25) to know how to appropriately modify instruction to make it comprehensible for ELLs. Many in-service and pre-service teachers do not receive adequate training in teaching this particular student population. To date, only Arizona, California, Florida, and New York require all prospective teachers to demonstrate competence in teaching ELL students (Ballantyne et al., 2008). Demographic data of teacher preparation programs indicate that the current cultural mismatch is likely to be perpetuated in the U.S. educational system (Ross, 2008).

ELLs are faced with the double-challenge of simultaneously learning grade-level content and academic English while adjusting to a new life in the United States, a decision in which many of these students had no say. Not surprisingly, the achievement gap between them and their native English-speaking peers continues to widen. In general, performance of ELLs on standardized tests is (much) lower than that of non-ELL students, especially in content areas and language-related subtests such as reading where the linguistic demand is higher (Abedi, 2002). Most standardized, subject matter based tests are normed on native English-speaking test populations, turning these assessments into English language proficiency tests. Complex sentence structures, highly academic vocabulary words, idiomatic expressions, and lengthy paragraphs are factors that increase the level of difficulty of these tests for non-native speakers and writers. In light of what we know about ELLs and their performance both in class and testing situations, scholars like Genesee et al. (2005) have claimed that teachers need new tools to be more effective with these students.

Silverman (2010) attested to the fact that over the past few decades, educational researchers such as Delpit, Ladson-Billings, and Zeichner have addressed the growing need for teachers to raise their sensitivity to the multiculturalism represented in their classrooms. Smith-Davis (2004) contended that “a lack of understanding of prior education and experiences in the students’ countries of origin” (p. 26) interferes with providing an effective education to ELLs. Lucas (2011) added that both educational scholars and policy-makers have been arguing for the need to prepare classroom teachers to work with ELLs, “yet there is little guidance and no generally accepted approach for preparing teachers to teach students who speak languages other than English at home” (pp. 3–4).

No “one size fits all” instructional model will work for all ELLs given the variability within this diverse group of students. To date, sheltered instruction and Specially Designed Academic Instruction in English (SDAIE) continue to be among the most effective pedagogical approaches to educate ELLs who have reached an intermediate level of proficiency in English (Eggington & Eggington, 2010; Moughamian, Rivera, & Francis, 2009). One of the most popular models of sheltered instruction is known as the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) model developed by educational researchers Echevarría, Vogt, and Short (2010), which is currently being in many school districts around the country. The SIOP model incorporates cooperative learning, differentiated instruction, state standards, flexible grouping, and multiple intelligences. Stemming from research on second language acquisition and linguistics theories laid out by Stephen Krashen, Jim Cummins, and others, the goal of these
methods is to facilitate student comprehension of content and language objectives in the mainstream classroom by making adjustments in instructional tasks and speech while providing opportunities for students to build on their background knowledge and life experiences. ELLs develop academic language and literacy skills while learning content curriculum. Teachers adjust their lesson delivery in order to provide *comprehensible input* (Krashen, 1985). Lesson adaptations include slower speech rate and increased wait time; using graphic organizers, visuals, and *realia* (real life objects); incorporating *cooperative learning* (Kagan, 1986) groups; providing multi-sensory learning experiences; and establishing a welcoming, low-anxiety environment. These modifications are effective when ELLs are held to high expectations of achievement and the content is not watered down.

It is well established in the literature that preparing teachers for cultural competence needs to be high on the agenda of teacher educators (Sleeter, 2001; Vavrus, 2002). According to Ross (2008):

>Culturally responsive teaching requires deep reflection into the issues of cultural competence and socio-political consciousness. Culturally competent teachers understand the complexity of culture and its role in education, take responsibility for learning about students’ culture and community, use student culture as a basis for learning, and promote a flexible use of students’ local and global culture. Socio-politically conscious teachers know the larger socio-political context of the school, community, nation, and world and have knowledge of the social and political realities in which they live. (p. 1)

Cross (1989) acknowledged that becoming culturally competent is a developmental process that takes time and suggested that to know where we are in that process it is useful to think of how we would respond to cultural differences. He further emphasized the need to capitalize on the strengths inherent in all cultures and claimed that there are five essential elements that contribute to the development of cultural competence at the institutional level: (1) valuing diversity, (2) having the capacity for cultural self-assessment, (3) being conscious of the dynamics inherent when cultures interact, (4) having institutionalized culture knowledge, and (5) having developed adaptations to service delivery reflecting an understanding of cultural diversity.

While there is no shortage of research on ELLs, there have been few investigations conducted in Mexico with the purpose of expanding our understanding of the Mexican educational system and the pedagogical practices it promotes. Levinson (1996) pointed out that, “while numerous studies of primary education exist, few have studied the *secundaria* in Mexico” (p. 213). Years later, Nelson et al. (2001) confirmed, “little research has been published in English on Mexican students and teachers in Mexican schools” (p. 464). At the time this study was conducted, very few relevant studies were identified. What follows is a synthesis of what we know from those studies.

Escamilla, Aragon, and Fránquiz (2009) led a two-week study in two public elementary schools in Puebla, Mexico, during the summers of 2003 and 2004. The authors learned that the U.S. teachers, administrators, and paraprofessionals who participated in the study expressed deficit views about the Mexican schools they visited. Escamilla and her colleagues speculated that these views stemmed from what Johnson (1980) termed the *material culture* and the fact that U.S. teachers believe in the superiority of U.S. schools, a concept they likely internalized in their teacher education programs where the assumption was that “best practices” as we know them apply to *all* children (p. 271).

Jiménez, Smith, and Martínez-León (2003) visited both a public elementary school and a Montessori school in a small city in south central Mexico to examine current
uses of language and literacy practices by teachers, students, and administrators in beginning levels (pre-school through first grade) and intermediate grades (fourth through sixth). The public school served the needs of children from working class backgrounds whereas the private school catered to middle-class students. The authors found many of the texts used, both print and electronic, had originated in the U.S. and that teachers were overly concerned with students’ written linguistic output. It is worth mentioning that what many Spanish language teachers in Latin America consider what is prescribed by the Real Academia Española (Spanish Royal Academy) to be “correct.”

With the intention of learning about teaching practices that increase students’ social responsibility, McLaughlin and Bryan (2003) visited two rural Mexican elementary schools over the course of three years. The model of social work implemented in those schools instilled positive attitudes and strong social values in the students, making the authors question whether the social curriculum should be given more emphasis in the U.S.

In 2001, Nelson et al. (2001) conducted a qualitative study in Monterrey, Mexico, and Atlanta, Georgia, to investigate cultural differences in attitudes, expectations, and behaviors exhibited by Mexican and U.S. students and teachers. Data analysis from interviews with 140 teachers and students in grades four to eight revealed that Mexican educators were often perceived as “relatively authoritarian but loving” whereas American teachers were seen as “less personally involved with students” but always encouraging students’ responsibility (p. 463).

Quiroz (1991) and Levinson (1996) conducted earlier investigations in secundarias mexicanas. Using ethnographic research, Quiroz uncovered four main obstacles to the acquisition of academic content students experienced. These obstacles were the level of significance of the content, the predominance of the logic of the activity, the students’ adaptive effort, and the emphasis on formal evaluation. The author concluded that the way this level of schooling was set up, as a result of the formal curriculum, the teachers’ working conditions, and their academic traditions, was not the most compatible with students’ appropriation of content knowledge. Also through an ethnographic study, Levinson focused on the strategies students developed to negotiate the social world within and outside the school. Students adopted a schooled identity by appropriating official school discourses of equality and solidarity within their grupo escolar (school group or cohort), which downplayed any class or ethnic differences within the school. Outside the school, however, the students who were in school to “become somebody in life” and fare better in society distanced themselves from those peers who they considered relatively unschooled because of their inability or unwillingness to acquire a schooled identity.

**Conceptual Framework**

This research was informed by two related theoretical frameworks: (1) sociocultural theory and the notion of “funds of knowledge” (Moll et al., 1992), and (2) findings from recent, pertinent studies of Mexican schooling (e.g., Escamilla, Aragon & Franquiz, 2009, and Smith, Jiménez & Martínez-León, 2003).

Sociocultural theorists argue that individuals learn best in interaction with others, a belief that was first put forth by Vygotsky (1978) as part of his theory on cognitive development. In his view, all knowledge is socially and culturally constructed. Culture also plays a central role in the view of best pedagogical practices espoused by Moll et al. (1992). They contend that foreign-born students possess procedural knowledge that they developed by observing family members perform household
tasks in which they assisted. Building upon their cultural knowledge would improve the chances of success these students have in U.S. classrooms. By drawing on this type of capital, teachers can bridge cultural differences and lessen the effect of “cultural discontinuity,” which is believed to occur when the beliefs, values, norms, and practices an ethnic minority student experiences at home are not taught, expected, or appreciated at school. The misunderstandings and tensions that may result from this cultural mismatch challenge these students’ opportunities for academic achievement.

In an attempt to better understand the experience of Mexican-born students in American classrooms, it is critical to recognize the importance of social and cultural contexts in learning. This belief led to the decision to conduct direct observations at a public junior high school in Mexico with the purpose of learning how teachers work and students learn in that particular context. Although findings from this case study cannot be generalized to all escuelas secundarias in Mexico, I hope that insights gained from this research may provide a clear illustration of the types of educational experiences Mexican-origin students may have in their home country. Working from a sociocultural framework that assumes that students learn best when immersed in socially and culturally mediated activities, Luis Moll’s notion of funds of knowledge provides an excellent tool to validate the cultural knowledge and lived experiences that foreign-born students bring with them to school, which may not be congruent with what is expected of them in terms of norms of conduct, forms of address, and class participation among many other cultural differences.

Within the context of these theories and drawing on insights provided by previous related work, I undertook research in the hope of helping increase cross-cultural awareness among U.S. teachers. A typical school day in the U.S. is different from a typical school day in Mexico in many ways. Therefore, Mexican immigrant students must adjust to a new academic environment where the rules, norms, and expectations vary significantly from those to which they were accustomed in their home country. Teachers who acknowledge and build upon the cultural knowledge and home school traditions that foreign-born students bring to the classroom can make this adjustment easier.

Methodology
Data presented in this article constitute part of a larger study aimed at learning about the most prevalent teaching practices in the Mexican school system with the intent of sharing this information with teachers in the U.S. who work with children from Mexico. With knowledge of frequently used Mexican schooling practices, teachers in classrooms around the country may better understand Mexican-born students and ease their transition from one educational system to the other. In its entirety, the study was conducted in three consecutive years: phase I was carried out in five escuelas primarias (U.S. grades 1–6) in late spring of 2009; phase II focused on one escuela secundaria (U.S. grades 7–9) in June of 2010; and phase III took place in two escuelas preparatorias (U.S. grades 10–12) in June of 2011. Findings from each investigation collectively help illustrate contemporary teaching and learning practices in Guadalajara, the capital city of Jalisco, one of the states with the highest migratory rates to the United States (CDE, 2007; Sañudo & Wilhelm, 2008).

In this study I followed a qualitative approach and incorporated non-participant observation in fourteen classrooms. Informal interviews were conducted with selected teachers, administrators, and support staff to clarify and supplement information gleaned from the observations. Following the guidelines of case study design, which is intended “to shed light on a phenomenon by focusing on selected cases” (Stake, 1994), daylong observations were conducted at an escuela secundaria. I sought to answer two overarching questions: (1) What are the most prevalent teaching
and institutional practices in Mexican schools at the junior high school level? (2) What can we learn from these practices to improve the experience and academic performance of Mexican-born students in U.S. classrooms? Given the exploratory-descriptive nature of the study, focusing on instructional processes and recording nearly everything teachers and students did, including their verbal exchanges, during each classroom observation was deemed the most appropriate research method. In this way I was able to obtain detailed and precise information in a naturalistic setting. These extensive field notes were not only descriptive but also reflective since they served as an instrument to record relevant patterns, emerging themes, and unanswered questions. Once the research period concluded, all field notes were typed and coded for themes relating to common instructional practices across grade levels and content areas.

Data presented here were collected at a coeducational escuela secundaria in Municipio Zapopan where daily observations were completed in two-hour segments in 14 classrooms during June 1–7, 2010. This particular region was selected on the basis of existing professional contacts in the area that facilitated my access to the participating school. It is worth noting that I had no previous relationship to the school, its staff, or the administration. A relationship of trust was established at a staff meeting held by the school principal before the start of the school day on June 1, 2010. Clarifying the purpose of the investigation made the personnel feel at ease, resulting in virtually everyone agreeing to participate. Subsequently, permission to conduct research at the site was granted on the merit of the study and the potential for benefiting Mexican students as they adjusted to the expectations of schools in the U.S. It is important to mention here that I am proficient in Spanish, which helped me to establish and maintain a personal rapport with everyone with whom I came in contact, rendering assistance with translation unnecessary.

Class size ranged from a minimum of 33 to a maximum of 45. The total number of students at the school was 1,700 and they were between the ages of 12 and 14. Older students must enroll in adult education courses in order to complete this level of education. Most students lived in the vicinity of the school, and, according to the teachers, were from lower middle class families. When asked about their ethnicity, those interviewed recognized themselves as mestizos and some as morenos claros (light brown complexion). Students from indigenous groups do not attend this school. The immediate community is characterized by humble homes and is approximately twenty minutes away from the Centro Histórico. Guadalajara is the fifth most densely populated city in Mexico (almost 1.5 million people) and it is divided into 2,300 colonias or barrios (neighborhoods). The homes and other buildings represent various architectural styles, from barroco, nineteenth century Europe, to constructions of the 1920s, 30s, 40s, and 50s.

While conducting the observations, I assumed the role of non-obtrusive observer, entering each classroom and sitting in one corner to collect field notes with minimal interaction with the students or teachers during class time. Notes were made of books and other learning materials used by the teacher and the students. During recess students would approach me and ask about my purpose for the visit, which led to spontaneous conversations in Spanish, and in some cases, some picture taking. Additional information was obtained through semi-structured interviews with teachers, administrators, and students during lunch and after school hours to further ascertain the social and cultural context of the data gathered through direct in-class observation. Through one of those “directed conversations” (Lofland & Lofland, 1984), I learned that some teachers carried a full-time teaching load while
others “trabajan por hora,” which means that they only teach one or two classes at this school and have additional teaching assignments in other schools.

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis began with an initial reading of detailed field notes to uncover salient themes, and continued through successive, focused, in-depth readings to confirm or disconfirm those themes. From this analytic process five categories emerged from coherent themes, and codes in the form of key words were assigned to each one. Information gleaned from classroom observations was cross-referenced with insights from interviews to test emergent understandings. Following the coding of observational data, attention turned to the interview data with the purpose of filling in any gaps that the data already analyzed had revealed. The integration of these two data sets helped develop a more robust picture of the school under study.

Although in most Spanish-speaking countries the term *escuela secundaria* corresponds to high school, in Mexico these intermediate grades separate elementary education from the more specialized training that students will need prior to college, which they receive in *escuelas preparatorias*. Along with six years of elementary schooling, *educación secundaria* constitutes basic compulsory education in Mexico and is the level of schooling called *Educación Media Básica*. This level of education consists of three grades: *primer grado* (U.S. 7\(^{th}\) grade), *segundo grado* (U.S. 8\(^{th}\) grade), and *tercer grado* (U.S. 9\(^{th}\) grade).

Built in 1994 and recently remodeled, the participating school operates two shifts: *turno matutino* from 7:00 A.M. to 1:30 P.M. and *turno vespertino* from 2:00 P.M. to 8:15 P.M. to accommodate local educational demand. Seven class periods were taught in each shift, totaling six groups of each grade level respectively. Each group wore a different color uniform, which made it easier to identify students both on and off campus. Students had two breaks in each shift, which were 15 and 25 minutes long. Each class period lasted 50 minutes. Table 1 below shows the type of classes that students could take at this school and how many hours of instruction per week they received in each class. This information was obtained through informal interviews with teachers during recess and after school.

**Table 1: The Core Curriculum**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subjects</th>
<th>Hours per Week</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biology (1(^{st}) grade)</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physics (2(^{nd}) grade)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chemistry (3(^{rd}) grade)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civics &amp; Ethics</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History of Mexico</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Education</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Art Education</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ceramics, Crafts, or Technology</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homeroom</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In addition to core classes, students chose from three different types of talleres (workshops). Although every student must take contabilidad (accounting), they could select between clases de tecnología (technology classes) and clases de artesanías en cerámica o alfarería (ceramics or pottery). Approximately 60% of the work was done in the classroom and the remaining 40% was completed in the corresponding laboratory. Students who were not likely to enroll at an escuela preparatoria (U.S. grades 10, 11, 12) upon completion of the intermediate grades usually chose to learn ceramics or pottery given the close proximity to Tlaquepaque, a nearby area with a population of around half a million people, which is internationally famous for its ceramics, pottery, sculptures in papel maché and other crafts.

Table 2 shows the classes that were observed, the number of students per class, the topics covered during each observational period, and the main instructional strategies being implemented. For the purpose of confidentiality, letters A-N have been used to identify the teachers.

Table 2: Participants, Classes, and Instructional Practices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Number of Students</th>
<th>Topics</th>
<th>Teaching Methods</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>6/01/10</td>
<td>9:55–10:45</td>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>Matemáticas</td>
<td>Maestra A</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>La media aritmética y el promedio</td>
<td>Questions and answers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>10:45–11:35</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Application exercises</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>6/01/10</td>
<td>11:50–12:40</td>
<td>1st</td>
<td>Inglés</td>
<td>Maestra B</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Edificios públicos (e.g. library, schools, and museums)</td>
<td>Questions and answers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>12:40–13:30</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Poster-making in groups</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>6/01/10</td>
<td>14:00–14:50</td>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>Matemáticas</td>
<td>Maestra C</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Problemas algebraicos</td>
<td>Practice exercises</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>14:50–15:40</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>6/02/10</td>
<td>10:00–10:45</td>
<td>1st</td>
<td>Ciencias</td>
<td>Maestra D</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Reproducción y métodos anti-conceptivos</td>
<td>Review of key ideas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>10:45–11:35</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Group projects</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>6/02/10</td>
<td>11:50–12:40</td>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>Química</td>
<td>Maestra E</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Ciencia y tecnología</td>
<td>Review of key terms and definitions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>12:40–13:30</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Tele-communicaciones en los siglos XIX y XX</td>
<td>Group projects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>6/02/10</td>
<td>14:00–14:50</td>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>Cívica y ética</td>
<td>Maestra F</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Caridad y voluntariado</td>
<td>Reading and discussion of questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>14:50–15:40</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Making connections between content and students’ life experiences</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Continued on next page
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Number of Students</th>
<th>Topics</th>
<th>Teaching Methods</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>6/03/10</td>
<td>14:00–14:50</td>
<td>1st</td>
<td>Inglés</td>
<td>Maestra G</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>There is/are How many…? Prepositions of place</td>
<td>Description of objects based on their location in the classroom Dictation Answering questions about newspaper advertisements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>14:50–15:40</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>6/03/10</td>
<td>15:40–16:30</td>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>Inglés</td>
<td>Maestra H</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>The Simple Future tense</td>
<td>Individual projects (e.g., PowerPoint presentations) exemplifying the uses of “will.” The class took place in one of the computer labs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>6/04/10</td>
<td>9:55–10:45</td>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>Tecnología</td>
<td>Maestra I</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>PowerPoint design</td>
<td>Designing a PowerPoint presentation on information from Encarta 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>10:45–11:35</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>6/04/10</td>
<td>11:50–12:40</td>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>Español</td>
<td>Maestra J</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Documentos administrativos (e.g., cheques, contratos, recibo, y pagaré)</td>
<td>Creating a brochure that illustrates a specific document</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>12:40–13:30</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>6/04/10</td>
<td>14:00–14:50</td>
<td>1st</td>
<td>Inglés</td>
<td>Maestra K</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Vocabulary (e.g., fruit and vegetables, numbers, and classroom objects)</td>
<td>Review games</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>6/07/10</td>
<td>9:55–10:45</td>
<td>1st</td>
<td>Arte</td>
<td>Maestra L</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Artesanías en papel maché</td>
<td>Using paper maché to make crafts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>10:45–11:35</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>6/07/10</td>
<td>11:50–12:40</td>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>Español</td>
<td>Maestra M</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Artículos de opinión</td>
<td>Review of key terms Reading comprehension Group activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>12:40–13:30</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>6/07/10</td>
<td>14:00–14:50</td>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>Ciencias</td>
<td>Maestra N</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Proteínas y polímeros</td>
<td>Review of key concepts Book exercises</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>14:50–15:40</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Six of the fourteen classes observed exemplified direct teaching. The rest were more hands-on and utilized elements of cooperative learning. Below are two detailed examples of each type of instruction. “T” indicates teacher’s directions whereas “St” stands for student and “Sts” represents students.

**Direct Instruction: Observation #13 - Español (Spanish)**

T: Hoy vamos a leer artículos de opinión. ¿Qué es un artículo de opinión? Es un artículo que tiene carácter subjuntivo a diferencia de un artículo de información que es objetivo. ¿Qué artículos de opinión han leído sobre el partido de México con Italia?

St: Leí un artículo en el periódico en el que decía que México ganó aunque fue un partido muy peleado.

T: Muy bien, Carlos. Gracias. ¿Quién recuerda la estructura de un artículo?

St: Creo que la primera parte es la entrada; la segunda es el desarrollo, pero no me acuerdo cuál es la tercera…

T: ¿Quién puede ayudar a Teresa?

St: ¿Es el remate?

T: Correcto! El último párrafo se llama el remate. De paso les pregunto, checaron las palabras de tarea? ¿Qué es proceloso?

St: La definición que encontré es: “Se dice del mar en el que hay muchas tormentas y tempestades.”

T: Muy bien, Ángel. Por consiguiente, tormentoso y tempestuoso son dos sinónimos que pueden usar en vez de proceloso. ¿Está claro para todos?

Sts: Sí, señorita M.

T: ¿Qué significa “free style”?

St: Estilo libre.

T: Exactamente. Free style, como okay, son extranjerismos; es decir, vocablos extranjeros, en este caso del idioma inglés, que se usan de manera corriente en el español. Ahora van a abrir el libro en la página 224. Vamos a leer el texto “Las ruedas del Ciclotón” en voz alta. ¿Quién quiere ser el primer voluntario?

(Translation)

T: Today we are going to read an opinion paper. What is an opinion paper? It is an article that is subjective as opposed to an expository text that is objective. What opinion papers have you read about the soccer match between Mexico and Italy?

St: I read a newspaper article that stated Mexico won although the match was hard-fought.

T: Very good, Carlos. Thank you. Who remembers the structure of an article?

St: I believe that the first part is the introduction; the second part is the body, but I don’t remember what the third part is …

T: Who can help Teresa?

St: Is it the conclusion?
T: That’s right! The last paragraph is called the conclusion. By the way, did you look up the vocabulary words you were assigned for homework? What is the meaning of proceloso?

St: This is the definition I found: It is the sea where there are lots of storms and tempests.

T: Very good, Angel. Therefore, tormentoso and tempestuoso are synonyms that can be used instead of proceloso. Is this clear to everyone?

Sts: Yes, Miss M.

T: What is the meaning of free style?

St: Estilo libre.

T: Exactly. Free style, like okay, are borrowings; that is, they are foreign words, in this case, from the English language, that are commonly used in Spanish. Now you are going to open the book to page 224. We are going to read the text “Las ruedas del Ciclotón” out loud. Who wants to be the first volunteer?

Students take turns to read the passage out loud while the rest of the class follows along. Once the reading is done, the teacher instructs the students to get into groups of three and asks them to identify the introduction, main argument, and conclusion of the article. After that task is completed, the students are instructed to distinguish between the topic and the author’s opinion. While the students are working, the teacher walks around the room to monitor their progress and answer questions.

Cooperative Learning and Hands-On Instruction: Observation #4 - Ciencias (Science)

The chairs have been pushed to the sides of the room. The students are sitting in small groups on the floor.

T: “Corazones, los quiero ver en sus grupos. El tiempo es corto y se nos acaba.” (“My sweethearts, I want to see you in your groups. Time is short and we will run out.”)

Students take their materials (light cardboard of different colors, markers, rulers, and scissors) and join their team members. They immediately resume work on a project on contraceptive methods. The teacher passes out a textbook per group. This text provides suggestions for the project, but it is up to the students to design their final product. This is the fifth and last project of the school year. The students are focused and seem eager to continue working on their projects. Figures 1 and 2 show the teacher and students in action:

Figures 1 and 2: Science class - Observation #4
The classrooms where the observations took place were very plain in design. No posters, student projects, or decorations lined the walls with the exception, in some cases, of the Mexican flag and/or the weekly calendar. The seating configuration was not always the same, but in most cases the student desks were organized in rows facing the front of the classroom. The teacher’s desk was often to the side of the room facing the students. On every front wall there was either a whiteboard or a chalkboard, and in most rooms there was a ceiling fan. Some classrooms, as figures 3 and 4 show, were in need of paint and had areas covered in graffiti.

Figures 3 and 4: Traditional Seating Configuration in Plain Classroom Settings – Observations #2 and #5

To help run efficiently, this school counts on a Consejo Consultivo Escolar or “collaborative team” in addition to its certificated and classified staff. The constitution of this team and the responsibilities of each member are shown in the table below. This information was obtained from an informal interview with the assistant principal and two of the academic coordinators during lunchtime on the last day of observations.

Table 3: Job Description of Classified and Certified Staff

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Staff</th>
<th>Job Descriptions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Instructional, Administrative, Maintenance</td>
<td>The school principal serves as the educational leader, and as such, he is responsible for managing all policies to ensure students can learn the curriculum in a safe and nurturing environment. He also oversees all personnel, institutional practices, facility operations, and allocation of material resources.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Director (Principal)</td>
<td>The assistant principals work collaboratively with the school principal in the planning, organization, implementation, and assessment of school activities; monitor student attendance and academic performance; and schedule teacher assignments.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Continued on next page
Findings

The findings presented here represent five major themes that emerged from the data: (1) common instructional practices across the curriculum, (2) simply furnished classrooms, (3) warm relationships between teachers and students, (4) curriculum, lesson delivery, and assessments infused with technology, and (5) active role of the Sociedad de Padres de Familia (Parent Association) and its impact on the school.

Common Instructional Practices Across the Curriculum

Most teachers are traditionalists, but many incorporate aspects of cooperative learning in their instruction. They clearly articulate the purpose of the lesson and tap into students’ background knowledge before the lesson begins. Their questions promote critical thinking and help students make connections between new information and what they already know. Five times a year, teachers meet by content area and cover different topics: perfeccionamiento docente (professional development opportunities), problemas de organización (problems of organization), cursos especiales (special courses), and superación personal (personal growth).

Both core and supplemental texts are used. The textbooks remain in the school and are passed out when class starts and collected before the period is over. A variety...
of activities were carried out, ranging from note-taking during lecture, solving word problems and equations, completing conceptual maps and other graphic organizers, doing word searches and crossword puzzles, designing PowerPoint presentations, creating periódico murales (newspaper murals) where students publish their best work, writing a script from a narrative, answering questions on assigned readings, constructing small sculptures with papel maché, making rotafolios (flip charts), designing maquetas (scale models), playing vocabulary review games, and making brochures. 

Actividad permanente (ongoing activity) is a common practice among teachers at this school. When students have finished their last in-class task and the class period is not over, they are expected to continue working on an ongoing project until the class is dismissed. In 2010 the school-wide project focused on spelling. Students who have completed their project can read quietly. Raramente hay tarea (there is hardly ever any homework) and variations of the same expression is how teachers responded when asked about homework assignments students typically receive. Most homework consists of finishing up classwork and gathering materials that will be needed in class the next day. Sometimes students are assigned to look up words in the dictionary and write down the definitions in preparation for a reading that will be done at the next class meeting. An implication for teachers in U.S. classrooms is that Mexican-born students may not be clear about the purpose and benefits of homework, so they may require an explicit explanation of why they should consistently complete their homework assignments.

English is taught as a foreign language three hours a week and centers on the acquisition of basic vocabulary. The emphasis on oral communication is minimal. One of the teachers in charge of these classes expressed, “Casi no hay producción lingüística,” which literally means, “There is almost no linguistic output.” In another classroom, the teacher showed a city map on a big poster as an example of what the students were going to create in small groups. When designing their own, the students needed to draw pictures representing twenty different buildings and parts of the city. The location of these buildings was indicated in a series of sentences that the teacher had written on the white board. These sentences illustrated the use of “there is” and “there are.” Almost all of her explanations were given in Spanish.

Simply Furnished Classrooms

In terms of the learning environment, as observed at five public elementary schools in Guadalajara during the first phase of this study (de Souza, 2010), classes at this escuela secundaria take place in plain classrooms with very few to no decorations on the walls. In some classrooms there were posters with the weekly class schedule, expected norms of conduct, and/or influential historical figures like Miguel Hidalgo, a leader of the Mexican War of Independence. In all classrooms each student shared a table with a partner and the teacher had his or her own desk by the white board placed on the front wall.

In most classes teachers made very good use of instructional time and taught meaningful lessons with few teaching materials and learning resources. There was no visual support for learning other than the illustrations in the course textbooks. Despite the simplicity of the physical environment, the teachers strove to make it a nurturing place where students felt welcome and opportunities were continually created for them to learn. Although no exemplary work was on display, students were still expected to do their best. This expectation was conveyed through expressions such as “Espero un muy buen trabajo mis amores” (I expect very good work, my dear ones) and “Sé que pueden entregar un proyecto excelente” (I know you can turn in an excellent project).
Warm Relationships Between Teachers and Students
With regard to teacher-student and student-student relationships, this study confirmed that Mexican culture encourages a warm relationship between teachers and students as well as an espíritu de compañerismo (collegial spirit) among students. Teachers were seen as authority figures, highly regarded by students and their parents. In most of the classrooms where observations took place teachers used affectionate terms such as "jóvenes" (young ones), "mi amor" (my love), and "corazón" (sweetheart) when addressing their students. It was also noted that students immediately stood up and politely greeted any adult that came to the classroom.

Interdependence is also valued in the Mexican culture (de Souza, 2010; Díaz-Rico, 2012). Students felt they have a responsibility to help their classmates succeed in completing a task since they have been "socialized at home in a cooperative mode of learning" (Trueba & Delgado-Gaitán, 1985, p. 189). Although they were expected to work on their own assignments, there was an implicit commitment to assisting others. However, sharing a little too much information with peers can be perceived as copying, a dishonest practice in U.S. classrooms. Another instance of compañerismo is apparent when a problem arises. Finding a solution becomes everyone’s responsibility, and all classroom activities stop until that happens.

Additionally, evidence from these classroom observations support findings of Mindel et al. (1998) in that conversational boundaries were not rigid, student interruptions while the teacher is lecturing were not viewed negatively, and getting to the point was more like a spiral rather than linear. Clearly, this is not the norm in U.S. classrooms, but if teachers know about this difference, conflict with their Mexican-origin students can be avoided.

Infusion of Technology into the Curriculum, Lesson Delivery, and Assessments
In order to integrate technology into the curriculum and enhance educational practices in all public schools at the nivel básico, a project called “Habilidades Digitales para Todos” (Digital Skills for All) was launched in 2008–2009 (Secretaría de Educación Pública, 2008). This initiative started with an experimental phase in the state of Tabasco and gradually extended to the rest of the states. It includes ongoing training and support for teachers and is an integral component of current Mexican education reform. The initiative aims at making it possible for teachers and students to create virtual spaces for the exchange of ideas and resources with members from distant communities in the country and from around the world.

At the participating school all tests were administered through the learning management system known as Moodle, a modality used since 2006. Tests were designed collaboratively by groups of teachers who share the same grade level. These formal assessments are given every other month. Unlike other escuelas secundarias in Mexico, which may have only one fully-equipped computer laboratory, this school had six.

The Active Role and Impact of the Sociedad de Padres de Familia on the School
A Sociedad de Padres de Familia (parent association) was active in this school, and its members met with the school principal before the beginning of each school year to draw up collaboratively an action plan for the year. Together, parent representatives and school administrators contemplated what the school needs and thought of ways to meet those needs to ensure the school facility was in good condition for all students. State funding covered teacher salaries as well as the water and electricity bill, but all other expenses were left to the school, which relies on the voluntary monetary contributions of the parents.
The members of this association were very dedicated, and their close collaboration with the administration was vital to the efficient running and proper maintenance of the school. Once the academic year is underway, the principal and the parent representatives would meet on a weekly basis to check on the progress made towards meeting short- and long-term goals as well as to identify new areas that need immediate attention. By grade level, teachers who served as tutores (homeroom teachers) held meetings with parent representatives to inform them about the goals for the year, class rules and expectations, and ways parents could help their children with homework. The parent representatives then relay this information to the rest of the parents.

This finding is particularly worth mentioning in light of the fact that some U.S. teachers believe that Mexican parents do not want to get involved in their children’s education. The parents at the participating school felt that their collaboration was an integral part of the success of the school, and in turn, their children’s success. A multitude of research findings shows that parental involvement produces measurable gains in student achievement (Cotton, 2001; Dixon, 1992; Epstein, 2001; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Shartrand, Weiss, Kreider & Lopez, 1997). Therefore, we need to make a greater effort to increase the level of parental participation of Mexican parents. Reaching out and letting them know that they are both welcome and needed would be a good first step in building a strong partnership and mutual support system. Non-English speaking parents and those with limited formal education may believe they have little to contribute. Perhaps, as in Mexico, the “ultimate responsibility for creating harmony between the school and the home rests with the principal” (Campbell, 1992, p. 3).

Conclusion
An increasing number of content area teachers across the nation are learning how to adequately scaffold their instruction to make grade-level curriculum accessible to ELLs. Still, the majority of K-12 teachers do not know enough about the type of schooling their foreign-born students experienced before entering U.S. classrooms, which may hinder their ability to work effectively with these students. It is not my intent to suggest that our teaching practices should mirror those of Mexican teachers, or that teachers in Mexico should run their classes the way we do it in this country. The more we know about our students’ level of foundational content knowledge, linguistic proficiency, personal background, preferred learning styles, and previous schooling, the better equipped we will be to make decisions that will positively affect their educational experiences. For instance, if a teacher notices that her classroom routines clash with those that are typical of the school culture of a foreign-born student, temporary adaptations can be made while the student adjusts to the new routines. Recognizing that some students may not be comfortable in activities that require cooperative learning skills, the teacher can allow individual work until those students learn how to work productively in groups. Giving students a choice, accommodating differences, implementing “pedagogical approaches that are more open to cultural differences in the classroom” (Johnston et al., 2009, p. 3) will help create an inclusive, positive learning environment where cultural differences are bridged and every class member is appreciated for who they are and the unique cultural knowledge they bring with them. The observations presented here highlight cultural differences and similarities between the U.S. and Mexican educational systems, but they are particular to one escuela secundaria in Guadalajara, and therefore, generalizations cannot be made to all other secondary schools in Mexico.

The demographic reality of our classrooms and the persisting achievement gap make it imperative that we affirm our commitment to educating all students by recognizing
that cross-cultural competence is an essential teacher competency for the 21st century. When teachers know their students, they can focus their efforts on accommodating their learning needs. In the case of culturally and linguistically diverse students who have completed part of their formal schooling abroad, teachers must help them transition from the school system they were familiar with to the new system they are entering. Maintaining high standards, making content comprehensible in English, and capitalizing on students’ strengths should rank high on a teacher’s daily agenda, but unless we bridge cultural differences and facilitate these students’ adaptation to American schools, they may continue to experience high dropout rates. For many of these students, the difference in school systems makes it difficult for them to succeed. Minimizing this difference may contribute to an increase in their academic performance and personal achievement in our classrooms.

Acknowledgments
The author wishes to thank Prof. Alvaro Valencia Abundis and Lic. María Edith López Melchor for facilitating her access to the school, and to all the students and teachers who so generously contributed to the study.

References


The High School Journal – April/May 2013


Moughamian, A. C., Rivera, M. O., & Francis, D. J. (2009). *Instructional models and strategies for teaching English language learners.* Portsmouth, NH: RMC Research Corporation, Center on Instruction.


