INSTRUCTIONAL SNAPSHOT *(IS)* IN MEXICO: PRE-SERVICE BILINGUAL TEACHERS TAKE PICTURES OF CLASSROOM PRACTICES

Ellen Riojas Clark
Belinda Bustos Flores
University of Texas at San Antonio

ABSTRACT

It is often said that a picture is worth a thousand words. Snapshots not only capture the moment, but also provide an everlasting impression. Likewise, instructional snapshots can provide the pre-service teacher-trainee with a glimpse of instructional and pedagogical strategies employed by teachers. If the intent is to improve instructional practices, teacher performance must be viewed within different contexts. The primary goal of a retreat held in Monterrey, Nuevo León, México, was to provide pre-service teachers with an opportunity to gather observational data of Mexican students and teachers in educational settings. Because of demographic changes and teachers' lack of educational experiences with immigrant LEP children, bilingual teachers are faced with instructional challenges. It was hoped that these observations would provide the pre-service teacher with a better understanding of these learning needs. The purpose of this article is to provide a brief account of impressions gathered through an observational method: Instructional Snapshot *(IS)*. The impressions answer the following: What do we see in the different pictures of schools and classroom structures? and, What do we see when we sharpen our focus on specific classroom techniques and strategies?

It is often said that a picture is worth a thousand words. Snapshots not only capture the moment, but also provide an everlasting impression. Likewise, instructional snapshots can provide the pre-service teacher-trainee with a glimpse of instructional and pedagogical strategies employed by teachers. It was with this in mind that a *Pre-service Bilingual Education Teacher Retreat* was held recently in Monterrey, Nuevo León, México, during our University's Spring Break holiday. During the retreat, ten undergraduate and graduate students had the opportunity to observe and conduct fieldwork in some public schools there. The primary goal of the retreat was to provide the pre-service teachers an opportunity to take instructional snapshots, that is, gather descriptive observational data of Mexican students and teachers in educational settings. We felt that this field experience and that instructional snapshots would provide the pre-service teacher with a better understanding of an immigrant LEP child's learning needs.

In Texas, like many parts of the Southwestern United States, many of the bilingual teachers are Mexican American (Texas Education Agency [TEA], 1994, 1995), and many have not had any experiences south of the border, much less any exposure to school experiences in Mexico. Recent demographics show that the number of limited English proficient (LEP) children continues to increase. In Texas, approximately 50% of our students are Mexican American children and we have a high immigration rate from Mexico (Reyna, 1993). We have a 36.1% Latino student population as compared to a 14.6% Latino teacher population and an increased student enrollment of 7.1% in bilingual/ESL education classrooms (TEA, 1995). Because of these demographic changes and teachers' lack of educational experiences with immigrant LEP children, we felt that bilingual teachers are faced with instructional challenges when meeting the educational needs of immigrant children.

Our purpose is to provide a brief account of impressions gathered through an observational method which captures the moment, that of an instructional snapshot or an *IS*. We will describe the students' impressions to answer the following: What do we see in the different pictures of schools and classroom structures? and, What do we see when we sharpen our focus on specific classroom techniques and strategies? According to Wood (1992), most observations of teachers are affected by the observer's attitudes, beliefs, and expectations. She stresses the use of a "more naturalistic approach," one that will very likely enhance the objectivity and meaning of observations (p. 57). Because to see is to believe, it is, therefore, important for us as teachers to focus our observations.

Since our intent is to improve instructional practices, these observations of teacher performance must be viewed within different contexts. Wood (1992) recommends that observations should include the "context in which particular behaviors and interactions take place" so that the observer can become "more engaged or mindful during the observation process" (p. 58). According to Kagan (1980), it is important to conduct observations that look at a range of roles and it is important to look at cross-cultural settings. He mentions that it is not possible to infer individual motives with certainty because certain contexts can provoke different behaviors. Therefore, we recognized that we needed to develop other ways of seeing real behavior and to use the observation to help future teachers focus on different teaching needs and approaches. We will present the rationale for the following three areas: (a) the benefits of field observations in Mexican schools, (b) the need for pre-service training, and (c) for employing an observational method.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO VISIT SCHOOLS IN MEXICO?

Different researchers have investigated the benefits of visiting Mexican schools as a means to provide educators insight in the schooling process of Mexican children. Arribas (1991) vividly describes the extensive educational, cultural, and personal benefits to a group of Michigan pre-service and inservice

bilingual teachers in a Spanish immersion program in Tlaxcala, Mexico. He notes that the participants' initial concerns about fluency subsided as they gained confidence communicating in Spanish at higher levels. Based on the participants' responses, Arribas concludes that the program had a strong effect on the teacher-trainees that would ultimately have strong repercussions on their teaching styles.

The need for pre-service training of bilingual and monolingual teachers to work with the immigrant LEP population is reflective of the recent demographics and is supported by the literature. Macías (1990) notes that since few studies have examined the implications of the formative schooling experiences of immigrant students, educational decisions in relation to student assessment, curricular planning, and instructional behavior are often made by educators without any consideration of these prior experiences. His study clearly identifies the need for pre-service teachers to have appropriate training and knowledge in the schooling experiences of immigrant children.

He and also Cornell (1995) find that many immigrant children may come from a teaching and learning environment in which lessons are presented from a direct instructional mode. These contrasting teaching and learning styles may present academic difficulty for immigrant LEP children. Cornell further contends that many teaching styles in the U.S. are reflective of the availability of technological advances, abundance of classroom material, and facilities. In another article, Jose Macías (1992) also tells us that "Mexican students' past instructional experiences in the informal social milieu of the Mexican classroom are ripe for transfer into the formalized cooperative learning environments currently enjoying increasing interest in U.S. Schools (p. 23)." He also thinks that cooperative learning and interactive learning approaches can be effective techniques because these "approaches recognize that the teaching/learning process is transactional in nature (p. 23)."

In a prototype for multicultural education, Clark, Nystrom, and Perez (1996) describe four stages that are important in the preparation of teachers for language minority students. They describe the development of ethnic and cultural identity, linguistic knowledge, intercultural teaching repertories, and the matching of teaching and learning as necessary elements (p. 195).

Currently teacher training is reflective of a generalist's perspective. Although teacher-trainees may be provided information on diverse groups, their field experience may not reflect this diversity. In essence, pre-service teachers may limit their field experiences to certain geographic or demographic areas. As is noted by Macías, many educational decisions regarding an immigrant child are often made without consideration of prior schooling experiences. This type of situation will permeate if the current status in field experiences is allowed to continue.

Only when teacher preparation incorporates field experience that is reflective of the current demographics can pre-service teacher training become more effective. The field experience must be guided through an observational

instrument that initially allows a wide-lens perspective and then narrows the field to specific teacher or student behavior. For this field experience, the observational data gathered is used to focus the pre-service teacher to the schooling of Mexican immigrant children and to increase the teacher-trainees' understanding of the educational needs of these students.

This background information clearly demonstrates the benefit of observing schools in Mexico. For pre-service bilingual and monolingual teachers, field experiences of Mexican classrooms can allow them at first hand to gather descriptive, observable data about the teacher, classroom, and student characteristics that have been described by these authors. This type of experience can assist the novice teacher in meeting the educational needs of immigrant LEP children.

WHAT IS AN INSTRUCTIONAL SNAPSHOT (IS)?

As part of a future teacher's field experience, the observer-learner model has been used in their training. Clark, Harris, and Howard (1996) suggest that observation can help the teacher to improve instructional practices in the classroom. They concur that observational data can be collected and analyzed in relation to professional growth. Clark et al. (1996) used Dale's (1969) Cone of Experienced Data as the springboard for examining classroom practices. The Instructional Snapshot, (*IS),* was employed as a means for observers to focus and zoom-in on classroom interaction, instructional practices, and questioning strategies. The use of an ethnographic approach that involves the process of intensive and direct observations, or the "wide-lens technique," served as the premise for the *IS* (Acheson and Gall, 1980). This wide-lens classroom observation process of "anecdotal records" used by Acheson and Gall (1980) provides for a certain set of variables to be observed. The anecdotal record is seen as a "broad-focus technique." That is, the teacher can "decide how wide to open the lens. ... The wider the lens, the more behaviors can be observed" (p. 128). Narrowing the lens narrows the focus of the observation, but broadens the opportunity for more intensive observations of teacher behavior.

As a result of our using *IS* as an observational tool in another school study, teaching styles and instructional modalities were modified in the school. In essence, Instructional Snapshots allowed these teachers to engage in reflective practices that adjusted, or perhaps, fine-tuned their teaching approaches. These changes in their teaching also reflected a more student-centered approach within this school.

WHO WERE THE PHOTOGRAPHERS?

We took eight undergraduate students and two graduate students to the retreat in Monterrey. The majority of the students (6) are completing their student-teaching semester in San Antonio area schools. Four students are finishing required school based field-experiences in San Antonio. These ten students were interested in visiting the Mexican schools primarily from an

observer-learner model. They were accompanied to Monterrey, Mexico, by a professor and two student-teacher supervisors. The school sites were selected in collaboration with faculty from the Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León. Both the elementary and the junior-high schools were located near the central area in Monterrey.

HOW DID WE TAKE INSTRUCTIONAL SNAPSHOTS?

Each student was provided an observation form, Instructional Snapshot (*IS)*, which was developed by Clark et al. (1996) and was modified by Belinda B. Flores for use in the Mexican schools. Instructional Snapshot *(IS)*, employed both a checklist and open-ended questions. The observation form focused the student in observing the (a) physical environment of the classroom, (b) teacher-student classroom interactions, (c) classroom instruction, (d) questioning strategies, (e) classroom management, and (f) motivational strategies. In addition, the students were asked to reflect on the teaching strategies as employed by the Mexican teachers in comparison to their current student-teaching or field-site assignment.

The students were able to conduct observations in elementary and junior-high school settings. At the elementary school, dyads were formed based on grade-level interest. The two student-observers and a university supervisor were assigned to observe the particular classrooms by the school's principal. At the junior-high school, dyads were formed based on content area interest, i.e., science, social studies, math, or English as a second language (ESL). After instructional snapshots were collected from different classrooms and grade levels, the group would gather to share their findings with their peers and supervisors.

WHAT DID OUR *IS* FROM MEXICO TELL US?

The wide-lens approach was used to gather data about the school, classroom structure, classroom interaction, and classroom management. The narrow-lens approach was used to focus the students on the questioning strategies, instructional strategies, classroom management techniques, and motivational strategies. The students were asked to give a global comparison between the Mexican teacher's style with the teacher-trainees present cooperating teacher.

WHAT DID WE SEE USING THE WIDE-LENS APPROACH?

IN THE SCHOOLS

The elementary and junior-high schools are each housed in two-story brick buildings. The classrooms encircle an open patio used for outdoor assemblies. Many observers noted the deteriorating conditions of the school buildings, doors, classrooms, chalkboards, desks, etc. At the elementary school, a national hero was depicted above each classroom doorway, for example,

Emilano Zapata, Pancho Villa, Benito Juarez, etc. At the junior-high school, patriotic murals were painted on small wall spaces. In both the elementary and junior-high schools, the students wore uniforms; the only difference noted were the shoes and coats that the children wore. Both schools are government owned; however, they are operated by the state. The government is responsible for the costs of water and electricity. Books are also provided by the federal government; however, the schools did not have books for the first month of school. Parents must maintain the general upkeep of the school, such as painting walls, and must pay for the school uniforms. Because teachers are underpaid, teaching is usually a second job for most educators. The school hours have been shortened due to the lack of teachers and evening classes. Also, a second shift uses the building during the evenings.

THE CLASSROOMS

In all the classrooms observed in the elementary and junior-high schools, the classrooms were organized in the traditional model, i.e., desks arranged in five rows. In one second grade classroom, the students noted that the rows alternated by gender i.e., girls' row, boys' row. The students also remarked on the size of the classrooms, which were relatively small and generally appeared to be overcrowded with 30-36 children per classroom. All classrooms had one chalkboard (usually in poor condition), some classrooms had bulletin boards and some used instructional aids such as poster boards.

TEACHER AND STUDENT INTERACTIONS

In both the elementary and junior-high schools, the university student observers reported that the primary mode of instruction was teacher to whole class with the teacher utilizing lecture method for instruction. Direct teaching instruction was noted as the primary instruction. Some student observers reported the use of demonstrations in certain content areas, for example, when explaining math problems and in the placement of accents. We noted that when students' directed questions to the teachers, these questions appeared to be mostly procedural in nature. Some student-to-student interaction was noticed. When students were called upon to respond, the student was asked to stand by their desk or to come to the front of the classroom and to provide the class with the correct response.

CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

There were no major classroom management incidents reported by our students observers. One second grade classroom had class rules posted at the front of the room and on each side of the room. The rules were (a) *respeta a tus compañeros* (respect your peers); (b) *manten limpio el salón* (keep the classroom clean); (c) *no tires basura* (don't throw trash). In most classrooms, students raised their hand when responding to a question or when directing a question to the teacher, and only one student was allowed to speak at a time during the class lecture. However, student-to-student interaction was noted

when students were assigned independent tasks. More classroom management incidents were seen in the junior-high classrooms as compared to the elementary classrooms.

Our observations are similar to those described by Macías' (1991) ethnographic study, he clearly describes the modal instructional characteristics of the Mexican classroom that primarily consisted of teacher direction, verbal interactivity, and group orientation. The instructional pattern of the teaching-learning process included the following main elements: teacher, student, and textbook. Instructional aids consisted of the chalkboard and an occasional handcrafted aid. This ethnographic study also reveals that the school curricula in Mexico is often more conceptually demanding in some content areas in contrast to the typical United States curricula. Macías (1992) also discusses the informal social interactive nature within the formal Mexican classroom. Thus, we concur with Macías where he suggests that immigrants often face cultural, social and educational challenges as they attempt to transition into the new country. This informal social interaction plays a great part in actively engaging students in the classroom milieu.

WHAT DID WE SEE USING THE NARROW-LENS APPROACH?

INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

Direct teaching was the strategy employed by the Mexican teachers most of the time. Integrated lessons were observed. For example, math was integrated into a social studies lesson about Benito Juarez. The use of oral dictation was observed during social studies. The students used stickers (depicting a topic) which were pasted in the *cuaderno* (notebook) with the corresponding lesson. The chalkboard was used for math problem solving, writing vocabulary, and sentences. Demonstration, repetition, practice by doing, and summarizing for closure were used as instructional techniques in the observed elementary and junior-high classrooms. The use of Total Physical Response (TPR) and Audio-Lingual Method (ALM) were observed in the ESL classrooms. In a secondary language arts class, observers noted the use of visual aids and different color markers as instructional aids.

We found what Cornell (1995) also suggests the need for teachers to be cognizant of the differing learning styles that immigrant LEP children possess. In his article, he discussed the specific characteristics of the teacher in the Latin American classroom: (a) assumes a role of academic authority; (b) may be the only one to possess a textbook; (c) lectures and writes critical information on the chalkboard; (d) is unable to provide much, if any, audiovisual or reference material to supplement the discourse; (e) expects students to provide specific detailed information on tests and examinations; and (f) tends to use fill-in-the-blanks and short answer testing techniques.

The role of the student in the Latin American classroom is also described with the following characteristics: (a) depends almost entirely upon the teacher

as the source of subject information; (b) copies, in a *cuaderno* (notebook), anything and everything the teacher writes on the chalkboard; (c) focuses upon memorizing material, often word for word; (d) depends upon and will seek help from fellow classmates to explain points not understood; (e) frequently consults with classmates outside class to decipher unclear notation or statements by the teacher; and (f) readily shares notes, ideas, and knowledge with classmates.

QUESTIONING STRATEGIES

The student observers noted that the teacher provided cues and examples. Choral responses were also noted by the observers. Comprehension and recall questions were the typical type of questions employed. For example, "*¿Qué día nacio Benito Juarez?* " (What day was Benito Juarez born?) *"¿Por qué recordamos a Benito Juarez?* " (Why do we remember Benito Juarez?) It was also noted that if a student response was incomplete, the teacher would ask the class to help the responding student to clarify or expound on the response.

MOTIVATIONAL STRATEGIES

Tone of voice was reported as a motivational technique to reinforce students' responses. Verbal praises as a means of motivational strategy were observed in the elementary schools. A junior-high school teacher often reinforced a student's response by repeating the response and then by stating "*muy bien*" (very good) as a verbal reinforcer. Teachers would also encourage students' responses by prompting for clarification or additional information.

CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT TECHNIQUES

One observer noted that the teacher would remind the students that certain behaviors were not appropriate. The observers remarked that the students were, for the most part, attentive and that off-task behavior was quickly curtailed by the teacher's tone of voice or a direct statement about their behavior. For example, *"Ya saben como se van a comportar* " (You already know how to behave). *"No quero llamar la atención a nadie"* (I don't want to call attention to anyone). It was also noted that a second grade teacher would use proximity and redirection as classroom management strategies.

WHAT DOES A PANORAMIC VIEW TELL US?

The benefits of observing in Mexican classrooms were many for these pre-service teachers. After having spent the day gathering observational data, the group would gather to share their experiences. The discussion group was led by the supervisors and would allow the students to clarify any misconceptions that had been formulated and would allow for extension on their perceptions of what had been observed. The use of dyads to observe with the *IS* widened the focus for a panoramic view of different grade levels, different contexts, different teachers, and different students.

Throughout the week, our student observers also remarked on their growing confidence in their Spanish proficiency and in their teaching ability. As was summarized by one participant, "*tengo mas confianza en hablar Español y me siento mas preparada para enseñar en un salón bilingüe. Yo recomiendo que cada persona estudiando educación bilingüe haga el esfuerzo de tomar una oportunidad como esta* ." (I am more confident speaking Spanish and I feel more prepared to teach in a bilingual setting. I would recommend that everyone studying to become a bilingual teacher take an opportunity like this). The benefits that our students gained were consistent with Arriba's (1991) points that this type of preparation and experience will have a strong impact on pre-service teachers and their future practice.

WHAT DOES ZOOMING-IN ON THE PICTURE TELL US?

The instructional snapshots did indeed focus the observers on the teaching/learning styles in Mexican classrooms. They noted that some of the techniques they had observed could be implemented into their own bilingual classrooms. The narrowing of the observations allowed the participants to focus in on different teaching styles, different student styles, and to see the different inter/intrapersonal interactive styles of students and teachers. It allowed them to compare their training in instructional techniques and strategies with those being implemented with Mexican students. Overall, our students found it absolutely necessary to compare the way children are taught in Mexico with the way schooling operates in the United States.

WHAT WILL WE REMEMBER?

A lasting impression was that the Mexican children were achieving academically despite the deteriorating conditions of the school and the low socioeconomic status of the community. In addition, the pre-service teachers were able to globally compare and contrast their cooperating teacher's teaching style with the Mexican teacher's style. From this, the pre-service teachers concluded the following: (a) recent immigrant children may need a period of transition to adjust to the teaching/learning environment in a U.S. classroom; (b) bilingual teachers should be cognizant of this adjustment period and should accommodate the recent immigrant by planning appropriate lessons and evaluation activities; (c) as bilingual teachers, it is simply not enough to have linguistic and sociocultural understanding of one's own ethnic group; (d) as bilingual teachers, it is important to have an understanding of immigrant children's schooling experience in their native country.

At the end of the busy week, the pre-service teachers wished they had more time to observe and collect data. Many expressed a desire to return to learn more about the Mexican schools. Although this retreat was brief and there are many more experiences that could enlighten our pre-service teachers, we felt that this observational experience had indeed been positive and enriching for everyone involved. The use of dyads to conduct observations allowed for

the validation of what had actually been observed. These types of impressions are difficult concepts to teach or learn from simply reading an article or a textbook. The simple reading of academic material does not provide pre-service teachers with the contextual dimensions of the socio-cultural intricacies found in daily classroom interactions. The exposure to other instructional approaches and materials that can be readily borrowed or redesigned for use in our bilingual classrooms should be part of a pre-service experience. To sharpen the focus of the teacher training picture, innovations such as the one we used should be integral components of pre-service training. Finally, the overall affect on these students was (a) a reaffirmation of their commitment to teach language minority students, (b) their understanding and knowledge base of differing socio-cultural contexts, and (c) pride in their abilities and attributes as bilingual bicultural prospective teachers.

REFERENCES

Acheson, K. & Gall, M. (1980). *Techniques in the clinical supervision of teachers: Preservice and inservice applications.* Longman: New York.

Arribas, E. J. (1991). Bilingual teachers take part in immersion program in Mexico. *The Journal of Educational Issues of Language Minority Students, 8.*

Clark, E. R., Harris, G. S. & Howard, M. (1996). Taking a picture of instructional practices and classroom climate using Instructional Snapshots: *IS*. Article submitted to the *High School Journal.*

Clark, E.R., Nystrom, N., & Perez, B. (1996). Language and culture: Critical components of multicultural teacher education. *The Urban Review*. 185-197.

Cornell, C. (1995). Reducing failure of LEP students in the mainstream classroom, and why it is important. *The Journal of Educational Issues of Language Minority Students, 15.*

Dale, E. (1969). *Audiovisual Methods in Teaching*. Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc.

Kagan, S. (1980). Cooperation, competition, culture, and structural bias in classrooms. In S. Sharan, P. Hare, C. Webb & R. Hertz-Lazarowitz, (Eds.), *Cooperation in Education.* Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press.

Macías, J. (1990). Scholastic antecedents of immigrant students: Schooling in a Mexican immigrant-sending community. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly, 21.*

Macías, J. (1992). The social nature of instruction in a Mexican school: Implications for U.S. classroom practice. *The Journal of Educational Issues of Language Minority Students, 10* (Special Issue).

Reyna, M. (1993). Summary of focus seminar: The critical shortage of teachers and other school personnel prepared to work with language minority students. *Texas Education Agency.* 201-223.

Texas Education Agency (1994). *Texas Teacher Diversity and Recruitment: Teacher supply, demand, and quality policy research project, Report No. 4*. Austin, TX: Author

Texas Education Agency (1995). *Texas public school statistics: Pocket edition, 1994-1995*. Austin, TX: Author.

Wood, C. (1992). Toward more effective teacher evaluation: Lessons from naturalistic inquiry. *NASSP Bulletin, 7,* 52-59.