CHAPTER 3: DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

3.1.   Data collection

3.1.1. Observations

Observations are essential in qualitative studies because they allow the researcher to witness certain patterns of behavior. Although one might argue that any desired information could be obtained solely through interviews, it is important to note that individuals are often unaware of their own conduct, especially of practices and routines to which they have become accustomed over time. Literacy classrooms are no exception. Both students and teachers possess unconscious attitudes and beliefs toward learning and teaching to read and write, which inexorably govern their actions in the classroom.

Accordingly, the first motivation behind the choice of using observations in this particular study was that these sessions permitted the researcher to identify characteristics of the classroom relevant to literacy instruction, such as the quality and quantity of student involvement, materials, and teaching styles and preferences. The second reason observations were conducted was so that the teachers and students could become somewhat familiar with the presence of the researcher prior to the onset of more personalized data collection procedures, namely participant observations and interviews. In this way, it was assumed that the participants would feel more comfortable and willing to share their ideas, work, and experiences at the time of such interactions.

The observations for this study took place once a week in each of the two classrooms, with the purpose of identifying patterns of behavior toward literacy and literacy learning. Between September and November, these observations were largely non-participative, again given that the researcher needed this time to become familiar

with new participants and the new context, and vice versa. As the research developed, around December, observations became increasingly participative, and the researcher began to interact to a certain extent with the students during their Spanish literacy lessons. This contact permitted a deeper level of understanding of the student-student and student-teacher collaboration in the classroom, especially regarding the acquisition of literacy.

Regarding participant observation, the first-grade teacher gave permission to assist students who were having difficulty completing the in-class assignments. These students were usually made to sit at the back of the room, in close proximity to the researcher. When the other students noticed this interaction, many of them likewise began to approach the researcher for help or revision, and the teacher welcomed this aid, as it allowed her to focus attention on other children. These instances also made it possible to closely observe the production of student work in the school context.

The fourth-grade teacher agreed to let the researcher implement a 40-minute class activity with his students a week before Christmas vacation. This session permitted the researcher to learn the names of many of the students, to ask them specific questions about their reading and writing practices, and to obtain an example of writing from each student. The children were instructed to write their names, the date, the number of years they had studied at the school, as well as three questions they would like to ask the researcher about his personal or professional life. Around the same time, a similar activity took place in the fourth-grade classroom at the other school involved in the larger study. As with the first-graders, this interaction yielded valuable, student-produced texts for subsequent analysis.

A total of 40 observations were carried out between September 2003-March 2004: 22 in the first grade, 9 in the fourth grade, and 9 on the school grounds. All of these visits were in the morning in accordance with each teacher's schedule for Spanish classes. It is necessary to mention that the first nine observations did not take place in actual classrooms, but rather on the school grounds in general. As explained in chapter two, although the research team of the larger project had already negotiated access to the school and classrooms, formalities delayed an introduction to and meeting with the two teachers, with whom toward the end of September the researcher was finally able to schedule the classroom visits. Also, the total number of observations is limited to 40 due to the fact that exams and festivities occurred at the school quite frequently, and on these days it was not possible to observe literacy instruction. Specifically, exams took place for most of a whole week every five weeks. Thus, time restraints, along with these occasional events, regulated the number of the observation sessions.

Throughout the observation sessions, the researcher took notes by hand and then transcribed them as soon as possible so as not to forget the data and context observed. In order to facilitate the organization and analysis of the data, each transcription included a heading with the following information: researcher's initials, observation number, date (day, month, year), time (beginning and end) of observation, name of school, teacher's name, grade level, subject (see Appendix C for example observation). With the aim of becoming reasonably systematic and consistent as far as what types of data were recorded, the researcher underwent training in taking field notes. Research meetings were held on a weekly basis, permitting members of the research team to exchange and read each others' transcriptions.

The observations themselves consist of two basic types of information. First, as Merriam (1998: 97-8) recommends, the focus should be on the physical setting (context, space allocation, objects, resources/materials), participants (who, how many, roles, important characteristics), activities and interactions (sequence, norms and rules, timing), conversation (content, silence, non-verbal behavior), and dress. This data is largely descriptive and objective, dependent on what the researcher was able to see and hear.

The second type of information in the notes and transcriptions includes observer comments (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998), reflexive remarks made by the researcher during particular visits. These personal impressions, ideas, and opinions were bolded to distinguish them from the descriptive text and often were called into focus during subsequent observations or interviews. For instance, it was noticed early on that the fourth-grade teacher rarely seemed to use students' actual names in class. Instead, he preferred to say "compañero/a" (classmate) or "niño/a" (boy/girl). This pattern was confirmed through many subsequent observations.

3.1.2. Interviews

Interviews allow the researcher to "explore and probe participants' responses to gather more in-depth data about their experiences and feelings. They can examine attitudes, interests, feelings, concerns, and values…" (Gay & Airasian, 2002, p. 209). Many qualitative studies opt to combine observations and interviews as methods of data collection given that they can build on each other and prove quite complementary. More specifically, the data obtained through observation may be discussed, expanded, clarified, confirmed, and reflected upon during an interview session. In this fashion, participants typically reveal beliefs and attitudes toward the issue at hand. Considering that this study

focused on attitudes and ideologies toward literacy and literacy practices, it was evident that interviews were an indispensable tool. Only by means of face-to-face conversation could the researcher ascertain such deeply-engrained beliefs and opinions.

This research project included both formal and informal interviews. Informal interviews were carried out primarily with teachers and students before or after class, as well as on occasions in which the researcher happened to encounter a teacher on the school grounds during recess or after school. The first-grade teacher was notably more willing than the fourth-grade teacher to take a moment of her time to answer any questions or concerns. For example, she would frequently answer questions about student work, materials she had used that day, and student behavior and effort. Many of her remarks appear in the observation transcriptions, often as observer comments.

3.1.2.1. Individual Interviews

As in the study carried out by Rosales-Kufrin (1989), formal, in-depth interviews were conducted with students, parents, and teachers. Contrary to the focus of her study, which dealt with Hispanic dropouts in the United States, however, these interviews served the purpose of comparing and contrasting participants' attitudes toward different types of literacy practices. As mentioned above, such interviews allowed the researcher to gain a more profound understanding of the personal and community-wide ideologies underlying and informing literacy practices. These interviews (see below for a detailed description of the format and content) were modeled in part on previous interviews with elementary teachers, parents, and students in local schools and in the community (Ballesteros, 2003).

Interviews (in Spanish) with teachers, parents, and students were piloted during the month of November, specifically with two parents (of different socio-economic status), one teacher, and two students (of different socio-economic status). Most of these participants were associated with the same school, but at different grade levels (i.e. not first or fourth grades). Once the questions were revised, the interviews analyzed for this study were conducted in December and January. Participants included two teachers (first- and fourth-grade), six children (the case-study children described above), and six parents (the mothers of the case-study children). All interviews were tape-recorded (with each participant's permission (see Appendices D, E, and F)) and subsequently transcribed by a native speaker of Spanish. In addition, the researcher took brief notes during each session.

The six case-study children participating in this project were selected during late-November/early-December. By this time, the researcher had visited their classrooms enough to develop an idea of their literacy abilities. Once the list of potential case-study students was made, it was shown to each of the teachers, who confirmed the researcher's categorization of each child as low, average, or high with respect to skills in reading and writing.

Subsequently, it was decided to attempt to contact at least one of the parents of each of these six students. Both teachers recommended that the ideal time to meet parents was at two o'clock p.m., when the children were dismissed from class. The first-grade teacher was extremely helpful in this process, introducing the researcher to all three mothers in the course of two days. In contrast, in order to establish contact with the parents of the fourth-graders, the researcher had to stand with each of the case-study

students from that grade level and personally make an introduction to the parents when they arrived to pick up their child. All six mothers immediately agreed to participate after hearing a brief explanation of the goals and methods of the thesis project. Accordingly, they provided the researcher with a phone number, an address, and a possible date to visit their home.

The student and parent interviews were carried out during the months of December and January, mainly during the Christmas holidays. This occasion was chosen due to convenience for the participants; the parents admitted that they had more free time during the vacation as a result of fewer work hours. Moreover, the holiday period permitted the researcher to make home visits to most of the households, which proved advantageous for at least two reasons. First, it was assumed that the participants would be less intimidated and nervous in a setting so familiar to them. Indeed, they seemed quite disposed to interact and share their opinions. Second, and of extreme importance to the study, home visits allowed the researcher to observe texts in the home, such as posters, drawings, storybooks, pamphlets, and encyclopedias. Upon being asked what kinds of texts they and their children read at home, the parents would often take them out and display them. Likewise, during the student interviews, the researcher asked them to read from a text that they owned.

The same basic questions (see Appendices G, H, I, and J for a complete list of questions) were asked of participants in each of the three groups, modified only according to age and role (teacher, student, parent). For instance, while the teacher was asked, "What types of texts do your students read in Spanish class?", the parent was asked, "What types of texts does your child read in his/her Spanish class?", and the child,

"What types of things do you read in your Spanish class?" The questions were worded as similarly as possible to permit a comparison and contrast of attitudes among the three groups (e.g. the first research question). The interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes with each parent and teacher and 20 minutes with each student.

3.1.2.2. Focus-group Interviews

Seidman (1998) recommends a three-interview series with each participant, considering that "interviewers who propose to explore their topic by arranging a one-shot meeting with an "interviewee" whom they have never met tread on thin contextual ice" (Mishler, 1986, cited in Seidman, 1998: 11). Taking into account this suggestion, it was determined that more than one interview would be desirable. Given the researcher's substantial involvement in the research site, however, focus-group interviews were conducted only with the some of the parents and with both of the teachers. In other words, the researcher's knowledge of the context compensated for the background information, thus making a third interview unnecessary.

After the first interview transcripts had been carefully read and analyzed, the researcher formulated further questions designed to probe participants' perspectives on literacy and literacy instruction, again with specific reference to the local school and community (see Appendices K and L for exact questions). Subsequently, five of the six mothers were contacted by telephone and asked if they would be willing to meet with the researcher as a group to answer several more questions. It was decided that the school monitor and nurse, Carla, would not be included in the focus-group discussion due to the fact that her presence as a school employee might inhibit the rest of the parents from expressing their true opinions about the institution.

Although all five of the mothers agreed to attend the interview session, which was held at the school in a quiet area in one of the administrative buildings, only three of them showed up, namely Tania, Ariana, and Susana. The discussion, which lasted approximately 35 minutes, was tape recorded with the parents' consent and later transcribed by a native speaker of Spanish.

That same week, the two participating teachers, Octavio and Gertrudis, were asked if they would dedicate an hour after school one day to elaborate on several of their comments during the first interviews. They both agreed and the researcher met with them for around 45 minutes on a Friday afternoon. As before, permission was obtained to record the conversation, which was later transcribed. These interview sessions yielded additional data which served to complement and enrich previous findings.

3.1.3. Document Analysis

In addition to observations and interviews, the researcher collected and analyzed formal and informal documents available in homes, in the school, and in the local community. School texts included posters, announcements (i.e. for food, outside the cafeteria), student work in Spanish classes, writing on the chalkboard, and classroom rules and regulations. Among the home texts there were written reminders, student drawings with text (i.e. cards for parents), letters to family members and friends, a religious proverb (hanging on the wall), and children's books. Community texts were limited to signs, posters, and advertisements (i.e. restaurants; apartments for rent). The community writings were taken directly outside the school.

Pictures were taken by members of the research team both before and throughout the duration of the project. Importantly, the researcher had access to all photographs

collected for the larger study. Many of the documents were photocopied, copied in the observation notebook, photographed with a digital camera, and/or scanned with a digital scanner. On some occasions the texts were not completely copied (especially in the homes), although the researcher made note of their presence and a summary of the content. All three groups of participants (students, parents, teachers) were asked for permission whenever a piece of their own writing was copied.

Such document analysis permitted a comparison and contrast of texts produced in the distinct contexts mentioned above, as well as an authentic, illustrative source of triangulation for data collected during the observations and interviews. Indeed, Bogdan & Biklen (1998) mention the immense value of documents and photographs as "cultural products".

3.2. Data analysis

This research project, as pointed out previously, followed a qualitative paradigm based on ethnographic methods. Consequently, most data took the form of extensive, typed transcriptions of field notes and interview sessions. Data analysis was carried out in accordance with constant comparative methods suggested by Bogdan & Biklen (1998). In other words, the formal analysis began early in the study and was nearly complete by the end. Key issues, recurrent events and activities in the descriptive data – focus categories – were given names and resulted in the concentration of further data collection, specifically more focused observations and interviews (explained in more detail below). Such procedures led to the gathering of data related to these categories, allowing the formation of sub-categories that provided a more in-depth picture of literacy practices

and instruction. These classifications were constantly compared and contrasted with those obtained by other members of the research team involved in the larger project. Accordingly, the researcher could be more confident that the findings were in fact representative of the context at hand.

With the objective of organizing the data, a coding system was developed. Although many computer programs are currently available to facilitate data analysis (i.e. NUD*IST, Ethnograph), it was decided that a mechanical sorting of the data was preferable, given the researcher's lack of experience with such computer software and the relatively limited number of texts included in the analysis. Thus, the transcriptions of the observations and interviews, as well as any other useful documents, were read numerous times on a weekly basis, during which time repeated words, phrases, behaviors, attitudes, and events were marked and eventually assigned to a general category and a more specific subcategory (utilizing a cut-and-paste method). Particular attention was paid to the observer comments. The units of analysis of focus included those possibly related to the research questions stated in the first chapter of this thesis. Additionally, the following coding families, suggested by Bodgan & Biklen (1998:172-6), were taken into consideration: setting/context, subjects' perspectives, subjects' ways of thinking about people and objects, activities, events, strategies, and relationships and social structure. The various readings of the data permitted the creation, revision, and refinement of all topics and bits of text judged valuable for the goals of the project.

Accordingly, the analysis yielded the categories and subcategories listed below in Table 4. The patterns revealed in this coding system formed the basis of the results and analysis presented in subsequent chapters. Where possible, these findings have been

illustrated through the quotation of participants' words, photographs, and documents. Moreover, this project has adopted (to a large extent) the three stages of data organization proposed by Wolcott (1994), cited in Ballesteros (2003): description, analysis, and interpretation. According to this author, description occurs when the data are kept in their original form, while the analysis consists of the isolation of the features of the data which

Table 3.1   Categories and Subcategories

READING	• Board / Cards • Out loud • Discussion • Silent • FOLK • Home
WRITING	• Date and names • Letters, words, and syllables • Phrases and sentences • Copying • Dictation • Communicative • Home
LIMITATIONS AT SCHOOL	• Reading • Writing • Home vs. school • Scolding for misbehavior
CLASS INTERACTION AND TEACHING STYLES	• Noise • Praise / Encouragement • Student-teacher interaction • Cooperative learning • Comments about school
ENVIRONMENTAL TEXTS	• Two classrooms • School grounds • Outside school

are important for the study, particularly the research questions. The last step, interpretation, involves the researcher's knowledge and experience in presenting the data in an insightful way. Such interpretation often yields the construction of new theories.

In this manner, the analysis revealed existing similarities and differences pertaining to attitudes and ideologies associated with each of the proposed research contexts: school, home, and community. Likewise, it helped to establish a comparison of the types of literacy common to home and community settings as opposed to formal instruction in the classroom. These findings are presented in the next chapter.