

*Crossing Borders and Building Bridges: A Video Ethnography
of Special Education in Nuevo Progreso, Mexico*

John Lowdermilk, Ph.D.

Mrs. Julie Pecina

Cheryl Fielding, Ph.D.

University of Texas Rio Grande Valley

Mrs. Lisa Beccera

TEAM MARIO

Abstract

This paper presents an overview of a video ethnographic study of a special education school on the Texas/Mexico Border. The public school is located in Nuevo Progreso, which is a town in the Río Bravo Municipality in the state of Tamaulipas in Mexico. The town is located on the United States-Mexico border. The Progreso-Nuevo Progreso International Bridge connects the town with Progreso Lakes, Texas. The 2010 census showed a population of 10,178 inhabitants. Both the school and town have very little resources making the creation of the special education school a very special event. For a public school to start a program requires many people (e.g., parents, teachers, school officials, students, and other stakeholders) bringing many resources to the table. One group was able to bring together the people and the resources.

Crossing Borders and Building Bridges: A Video Ethnography of Special Education in Nuevo Progreso, Mexico

“Education is all a matter of building bridges.” Ralph Ellison

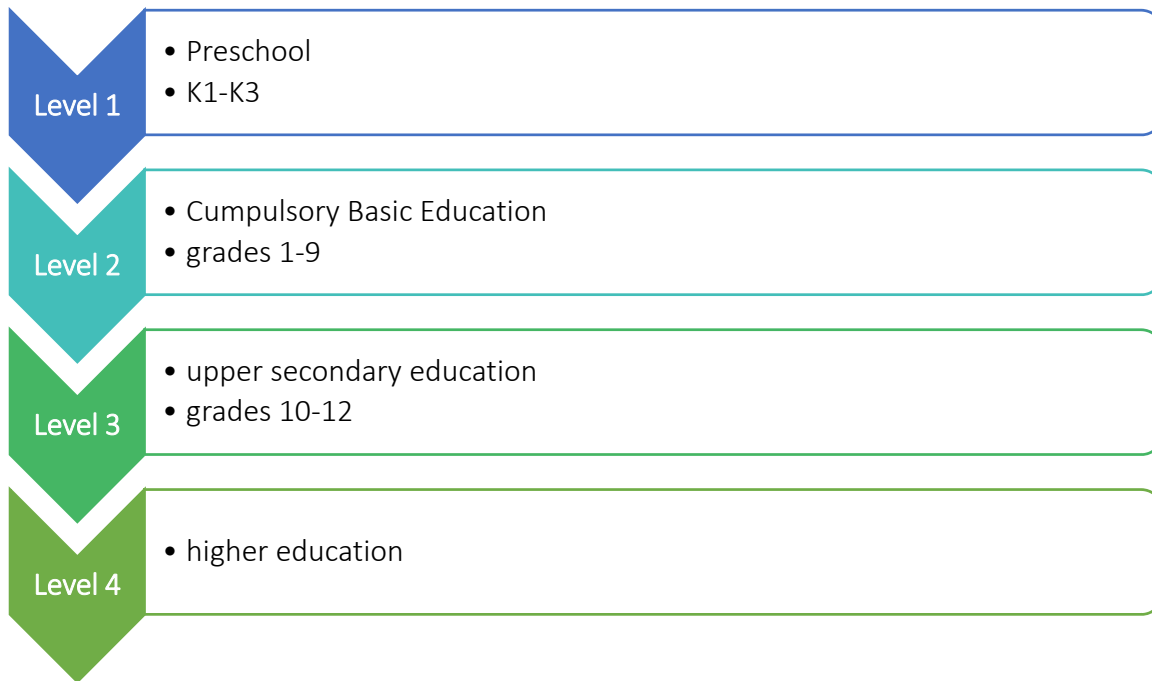
It is temperate morning, slightly humid, the sun disrupts peaceful cotton coated clouds overhead and a set of green t-shirts emerge from their vehicles at a local grocery store. They gather school supplies, cleaning supplies, and building materials as they make their way towards the U.S./Mexico border towards the small town of Nuevo Progreso. The group is known as University of Texas Pan American Student Council for Exceptional Children (SCEC) and for the past nine years they have been adopting a school in the border town of Nuevo Progreso, Mexico that services children with special needs. While the members of SCEC live and go to school only 30 miles away from the Mexico/U.S. border (a quick 30 minute drive) Mexico’s public education system is unlike the United States. Over a span of seven months a video ethnography documentary was produced that focused on special education services available at a border school in Nuevo Progreso, Tamaulipas, Mexico. This documentary was used to raise awareness regarding special education in Mexico and as an instructional tool for students who plan to work with children who have special needs. This article will cross several bridges to better understand

Mexico's current education system and provide a new perspective on the uses of video ethnography.

Current Public Education in Mexico

At the national level education in Mexico is governed by the *Secretaria de Educacion* (SEP). According to *Education in Mexico* (2014), sponsored by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and conducted by RAND Education, public schools serve 87% of all students in the country and teachers and school administrators have little autonomy in the system.

Mexico's Education System is divided into four levels:



(Santibanez, Vernez, & Razquin, 2005)

Although the government is also involved at the other three levels through the public provision of preschool and upper secondary as well as public funding of higher education in most states it is only officially responsible for providing the required basic education (grades 1-9) (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2013; Santibanez, Vernez, & Razquin, 2005).

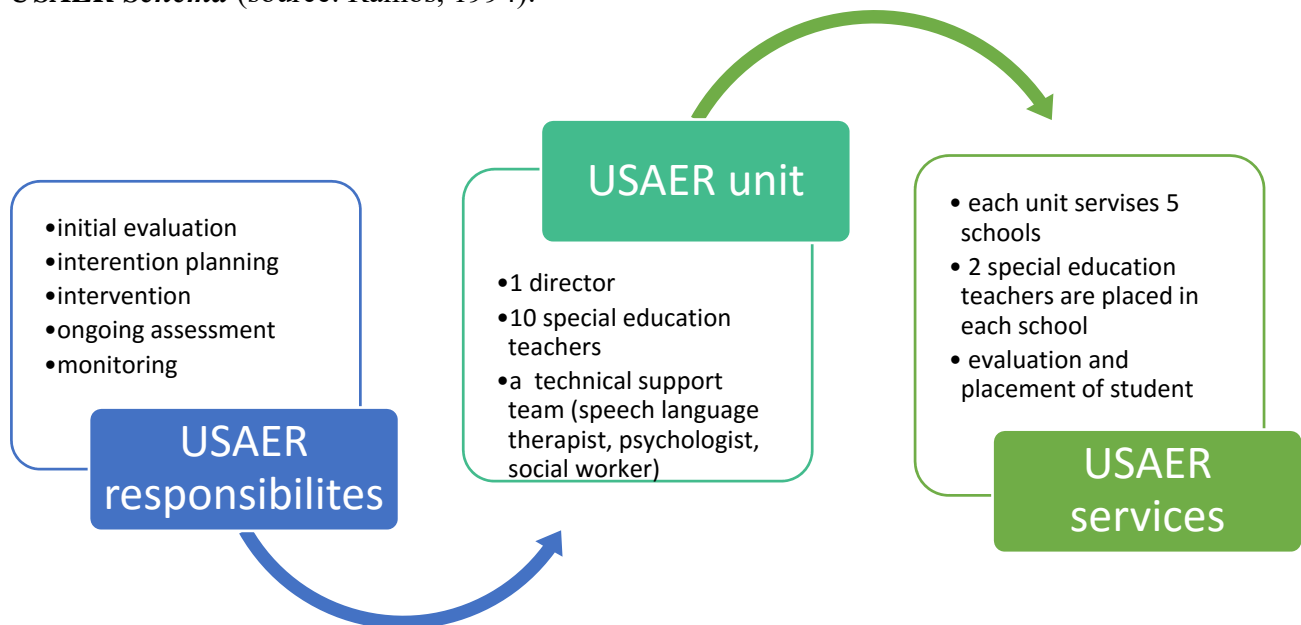
There is an estimated 440,000 children with special education needs that receive basic education and 4,246 special education centers (Santibanez, Vernez, & Razquin, 2005). The centers offer two types of services: *Centros de Atencion Multiple* (CAM) (Multiple Attention Centers) and “the integration of children with special education needs in comprehensive classrooms” (Santibanez, Vernez, & Razquin, 2005). After students are identified with special educational needs, depending on evaluation results, they are placed with other students according to their ability (Ramos & Fletcher, 1998).

Number Centers for Special Education (source: OECD, 2013;; Santibanez, Vernez, & Razquin, 2005):

Total Number of Centers: <i>(including CAMs and USAERs)</i>	4,246
Number of CAMs:	1,516
Number of USAERs:	2,730

Within the public school there are *Unidades de Servicio para Apoyar la Educacion Regular* (USAER) or support classroom that work with students and their families. The USAER provides technical advice to classroom teachers and provides guidance and orientation to students. The USAER also provides the appropriate personnel in schools that integrate students with special needs into the general education classroom. The USAER may also provide separate special education groups (Santibanez, Vernez, & Razquin, 2005).

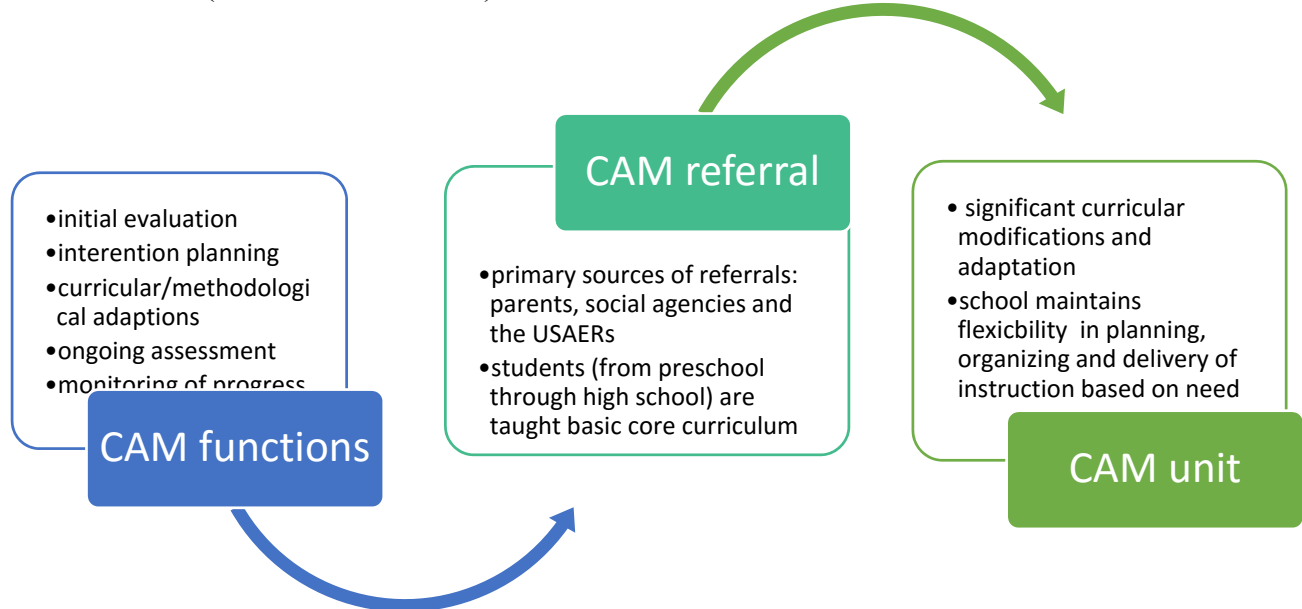
USAER Schema (source: Ramos, 1994):



The Multiple Attention Center (CAM) is designed as an educational institution to replace special education schools, early intervention centers, and centers of professional development which, previously serviced students with severe disabilities (Ramos, 1994). The learning environments of public schools in Mexico are very challenging. The learning time is short: half-day schools are prevalent and many special education students do not attend public schools (Insituto Nacional de Esadistica y Geografia, 2012)

Ramos and Fletcher write that CAMs provide the same core curriculum and quality education to students with disabilities who are unable to be successfully integrated into public schools. The CAMs function like general public school with cross-categorical grouping of students by ability that are taught in classes of about 20 students each (Insituto Nacional de Esadistica y Geografia, 2012).

CAM Schema (source: Ramos, 1994):



The face of special education in Mexico has changed over the years. It has been restructured to provide appropriate services to students based on academic performance. In an effort to better accommodate Mexico’s unique population the following educational implications are considered of great importance:

“Special education no longer subdivides its services by types of disabilities, but rather by educational performance levels and services are provided on the basis of each students leaning capacity. As a result, the field of special education focuses on the special educational needs of children rather than on their disabilities...Successful integration depends in large measure on the on family participation, collaboration between general and special education teachers, the leadership of the principal of each school and the expertise provided by the education personnel you need a reference here.”

The Little School That Could

Ford-45 Elementary School, located in border town of Nuevo Progreso, Mexico was built in 1971. Nuevo Progreso is a town in the state of Tamaulipas located on the US/Mexico border. It had six classrooms and a few restrooms. Over the years the school has grown to house 15 classrooms, 400 students in grades preschool to sixth grade, and 20 teachers. Mr. Rodrigo Martinez, the current principal said that despite its setbacks Ford-45 has been a school that integrates students with “different abilities.” Throughout the filming process he always referred to children with special needs or disabilities and children with “different abilities” rather than the generalized term “students with special needs or disabilities”.

In April 2008 the first Multiple Attention Center (Centro de Atencion Multiple-CAM) in Nuevo Progreso opened its doors to service children with severe learning disabilities and special needs. The first year was filled with setbacks and for the small school and students needed to cross a frequently flooded, unpaved street to get to school. This proved to be an extremely daunting task for children who are in wheelchairs or have difficulty walking. The school also encountered a series of financial hurdles because the public school system in Mexico does not cover 100% of the budgetary needs required to run a CAM. Financing for this exceptional school came through the monetary donations of the community. The state matches all of the funds that are received by members of the community. This particular CAM needed to raise money for basic necessities such as: (a) purchasing the land, (b) air conditioning, (c) building materials, (d) school supplies, and (e) food supplies. Many of the parents provide the food for breakfast and lunch as well as pay for school uniforms. Despite the numerous challenges the director, Angelica Herrera, said “It’s a challenge that we face every day but we just have to keep moving forward... We’re thankful for everyone’s help.”

Helping Hands

For the past nine years the Student Council for Exceptional Children (SCEC) has adopted Ford-45 Elementary School. The SCEC chapter consists of student members from the University of Texas-Pan American. Over the years students gather school supplies, furniture, painting supplies, books, and any other need that the school or USAR classroom might need. As the CAM school opened its doors for the first time SCEC was there to provide school supplies and classroom equipment (e.g., shelves, floor mats). SCEC currently adopts the CAM school every year and members travel across the border to deliver the supplies. As the border violence increases it becomes more complicated to travel across the border but members continue to supply the CAM school with the necessary supplies. Parents work alongside educators by providing breakfast and lunch to the students at the CAM. The center has a limited supply of groceries. Parents are often asked to take turns cooking and bringing breakfast and lunch for the students because they currently do not have a working cafeteria. Parents pay for half of their child’s tuition and help the teachers by purchasing supplies to ensure that their children receive the appropriate education.

Bridging the Gap Using Video Ethnography

Video ethnography is an extremely powerful technique (Pink, 2013) and comes from the academic discipline of anthropology. According to Pink (2013), “anthropological methods of observation and analysis are used in market research, healthcare, technology, and product design—any field that requires an understanding of people...” When using video the ethnographers’ goal is to understand how individuals respond to situations and attribute meaning to the situations (Banks & Ruby, 2011). Video ethnography has the capacity to work alongside other forms of research and support quantitative and qualitative analysis (Pink, 2013).

The University of Technology in Sydney Australia used video ethnography as a means to improve clinical communication within a local intensive care unit (ICU). Video-ethnographic methods were used to provide practitioners the expertise and insight into the dynamics of their own work processes (Stafford, 2006). This current study used video ethnography to increase the understanding and awareness of special education system and practices in Mexico. Investigators

took several trips across the border and collaborated with SCEC (Student Council for Exceptional Children) and the Mexican Border Children's Fund to document interviews with the faculty and staff at Ford-45 Elementary School and the local CAM in Nuevo Progreso, Mexico. Specific children were at each school were interviewed.

Conclusion

The documentary has been shown at several film festivals and conferences. Students, educators, and audience members agreed that the video ethnographic documentary gave them a new perspective of special education in the border town of Nuevo Progreso. Ethnographic studies enhance the researchers', future special education teachers', and community members' understanding of intervention and educational practices in another country. Video Ethnography bridges the gap between learning and experiencing firsthand the natural environment in another country. Further ethnographic studies have the capacity to teach a myriad of pre-service educational skills and give light to numerous educational situations across the country and around the world.

References

- Banks, M. & Ruby, J. (2011) *Made to be seen: Perspectives on the history of visual anthropology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Education in Mexico (2014). *The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation*. Retrieved September 23, 2014 from www.hewlett.org
- Ellison, R. (n.d.). BrainyQuote.com. Retrieved July 23, 2014, from BrainyQuote.com Web site: <http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/r/ralphellis378873.html>
- Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (2012) *Perspectiva estadística: Puebla*, INEGI. Mexico: DF
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2013). *OECD Economic Surveys: Mexico 2013*. OECD Publishing: Paris.
- Pink, S. (2013) *Doing visual ethnography* (3rd ed.). London: SAGE
- Santibañez, L., Vernez, G & P. Razquin. (2005) *Education in Mexico: Challenges and Opportunities*. RAND Corporation, www.rand.org
- Stafford, B. M. (2006). *Echo objects: The cognitive work of images*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Ramos, E. G. (1994). Unidad de servicios de apoyo a la educación regular (USAER). *Cuadernos de intergración educativa*, 4.

About the Authors

John Lowdermilk, Ph.D. is the Interim Chair of Human Development and School Services at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley. He is also an Associate Professor of Special Education and has been involved in a number research projects involving technology and digital media. Starting September 1, 2015 the University of Texas Pan American joined with the University of Texas Brownsville to form the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley.

Mrs. Julie Pecina is the undergraduate, special education coordinator at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley. She has been at the University for 15 years where she teaches in students in undergraduate special education. Mrs. Pecina is a faculty member of Human Development and School Services.

Cheryl Fielding, Ph.D. is the graduate coordinator for the Educational Diagnostician program at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley. She is also a Board Certified Behavior Analyst and conducts extensive research into autism in the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas. She is a faculty Member of Human Development and School Services

Mrs. Lisa Beccera is a graduate of the speech therapy program at the University of Texas Pan American and works in Edinburg, TX as a licensed speech therapist. She is also actively involved in a local non-profit TEAM MARIO, which provides training and advocacy for families and individuals with autism.