Baylor University Institute for Oral History

Bianca Ochoa
Oral History Memoir
Interview Number 2

Interviewed by Rick Strot
June 25, 2004
Waco, Texas

Strot All right. This is for the Hillcrest PDS [Professional Development School] Oral History Project. I’m Rick Strot. I’m interviewing Bianca Ochoa. This is our second interview. Today is the 25th of June, I believe—yes—2004, and it is one ‘o clock, and we are in Bianca’s classroom at Hillcrest PDS. All right, Bianca, last time we kind of ended off talking about collaboration, and so I’d like to start off with talking about learning at Hillcrest. And that is, tell me, first of all, in the early times of the school, what influenced what you guys did in the classroom? What influenced the curriculum that was implemented in the classroom, for your classroom?

Ochoa For my classroom, I think that personally mine would be just my experience because the teachers had a lot of freedom to pretty much design their curriculum in their classroom. There were some things school-wide that we focused on: the math, some of the reading, but it was pretty open on how that was structured.

Strot As you made your decisions for opening the classroom that first year when the classroom first opened, what kinds of things did you think about as you made decisions about characteristics of your students and what you were going to teach and what you’d taught in the past? Oh, thank you, we just had the air conditioner
kick on, and now we’ll just sweat awhile. (both laugh)

**Ochoa** But one of the things that I really wanted to do for sure was thematic units, which was, I guess, somewhat different from traditional, so I wanted to make sure and bring that into that first year with my students.

**Strot** And that was something that, as I remember, Dr. Johnsen also did a presentation to the whole group about it—

**Ochoa** Right.

**Strot** —before we started. So, it was also something that was talked about as maybe everybody doing, correct?

**Ochoa** We talked about it, we had a workshop, and part of that—

**Strot** Okay, so when you set up your curriculum as an experienced teacher then, let’s follow that line. What kinds of themes did you have that first year—or can you remember?

**Ochoa** (speaks at the same time) I know one of the ones we had that first year was medieval times. We had another one that was an invention unit. I believe we had one that was Waco, which was discovering Waco. And so, they were all three different, and I think we did four that year because we did one every nine weeks, a different one every nine weeks, and focused it around that.

**Strot** And talk about the role of the interns in those units in planning and putting those units. I mean, did they have things they had to do from their Baylor professors that went into how those thematic units were designed?

**Ochoa** We did plan all together, and they did have certain requirements that they had to
fil. So, they had an opportunity to work with different students and plan different activities that would be part of that unit. So, it made it really nice to break down not just my classroom but the whole environment, which consisted of forty-four students, into smaller groups so we could work through those thematic units, especially during science and social studies because that’s really when we did more of that science, social studies through the thematic units.

**Strot** Okay. And then during those times that you had to cover a less integrated way of approaching a subject—so during math time, reading time—what kinds of materials were provided for you to work with that first year?

**Ochoa** Within the classroom—

**Strot** Yes.

**Ochoa** —or just some of them?

**Strot** Let me just put it this way. I know the state-adopted materials were available. Is there anything else you remember that was thrown into the mix that was noteworthy?

**Ochoa** Well, I know through some of Dr. Johnsen’s classes and I’m sure of the other Baylor classes some of the students actually created workstations or working little modules that our students could work through because one of the things we wanted to focus on was differentiating our curriculums so that not only the high students were being pulled out. Since there were not a lot of pull-outs, we wanted to include them all in the classroom, and so we had to have activities and lessons that would be for both those with special needs and then those with GT. So, part
of that was creating those kinds of materials that would do that.

Strot Now, what you just said was one of the themes that Dr. Proctor talked about in his interview, and that was inclusion. And so, there was special ed kind of inclusion, was the idea. Now, what about the gifted program? How was that handled?

Ochoa I think through the same kinds of things. There was a pull-out, I think.

Strot Well, that first year, first of all—

Ochoa (speaks at the same time) It was included.

Strot —there were special ed teachers, but there was not a gifted teacher, was there, the first year?

Ochoa No.

Strot The first year. So, in the case of your classroom then and the students you had who were GT students, how did you handle that?

Ochoa I did individual contracts, which was kind of new. And that first year, actually, I had a fourth-grader and I had a first-grader and everything in between, so some are on individual kind of contracts.

Strot Now, you’re talking about first through fourth grade age-wise, right, in terms of where they would be if they weren’t in your classroom?

Ochoa Grade level, right.

Strot Their grade level. And so, I assume—

Ochoa (speaks at the same time) So, I had a first-grader and a second— I had second-graders, third-graders, and a fourth-grader.
And I assume they all had differing—was the ability ranged?

All abilities.

Okay, so. And were the interns involved in helping set up and monitor the individual contract types of things?

Yes, because we had them in groups, and if they were doing contract kind of work, then it may be up to an intern to follow that through.

Good. Now, after the first year, what happened in terms of—as the faculty worked together the first year, how were issues of curriculum and instruction handled because, after the first year, there were test scores to look at, and there were those kinds of things that then began to influence curriculum decisions?

We knew that one area that we really needed to concentrate on was math.

Okay, and when you say, “we knew,” that was based on test scores?

On test scores, um-hm. And even throughout the year, I think we found that that was an area where we were really not together, and so we needed to come together. We needed to have a more of a refined focus on what we were going to do as a campus. So, we had testing that was done for the whole school at the beginning of the year, and then we met as a group to look at different programs. And Tom Proctor helped us in that area, and so we selected the—I think it was the SRA [Science Research Associates] math. Was that—

Uh, yes.

I think that was called SRA, and then we did a post-test at the end of the year, which would see how we were doing. And just the process, I think, was very good
for us to go through because we really looked at it as a campus. It didn’t come from the principal. It didn’t come from the district. It was just something that we knew we needed to change.

**Strot** Okay now, the structure of that math, the way that math was done at Hillcrest, in terms of how it was organized and how kids were placed, was very different from most schools as well, right?

**Ochoa** Right because since we are—and I think that’s for several different reasons. One area, like I said, we wanted to focus on was to really put students where they needed to be. So, it didn’t matter if you were in second grade. If you were working on third-grade-level math, you could come to the third-grade math class. If you were in second grade and they were working on fourth-grade-level math, if that’s where you placed, then you could actually move up. So, we didn’t really move students down below their grade level. We worked with them within the classroom, but you could always move up to be placed where you would best fit.

**Strot** Now, I know the curriculum changed. You selected one that was used for two years or three years, and then there were some other decisions made to change math, so the actual curriculum model being used changed. But did that structure of having everybody do math at the same time and switch kids to wherever they needed to be, did that continue—

**Ochoa** That stayed.

**Strot** —no matter what the curriculum being used was?

**Ochoa** Yes, and even now. We’re doing that now. So, it’s made it really nice for the
students. This year, instead of just having one or two second-graders who were
doing third-grade math, we had a group of high-achieving second-graders who
weren’t really totally ready for third-grade math, but they didn’t need to be in
second-grade math. So, I had about seven second-graders that made a—we called
them the second-and-a-half group because they still stayed in here. They did a lot
of the work that the third-graders were doing, but they also needed help to fill in
some of those gaps. So, I mean, next year they’re just going to be extremely ready
to tackle anything in third grade and then add some more to that.

Strot And have you been satisfied with the outcome over the years now with looking at
math curriculum closely, periodically, and making changes as needed and keeping
kids that way? How have the kids’ scores reflected the effectiveness of this?

Ochoa Oh, I think it’s a 100 percent. I mean, our scores have been great.

Strot So, it seems to be working.

Ochoa I think it’s working. (laughs) I wouldn’t change it.

Strot Now, if someone asked you to describe—say it was a parent who was looking at
Hillcrest as a school—to describe what a student experienced in learning at
Hillcrest, how would you describe that to them?

Ochoa What they would be learning. I think I would first say how they would be
learning. I think it would be non-traditionally because I think we’re looking at
things not just within the classroom but outside of the classroom and what would
make a whole school. We focus on technology, which I think a lot of schools do
now, but also in the arts. We take our fourth- and fifth-graders—this year they’re
even going out of state for a field trip. They do a musical, the big production musical. Our kindergartners and first-graders are doing—I mean HyperStudio-technology kind of thing. So, it’s really looking at all the way around and not just the curriculum out of a book. So, I would like to say that we really are looking at a lot of different areas to make education what it should be.

Strot Okay. In that first year and even preceding that, when learning was talked about at Hillcrest, what was the vision for learning, in your mind?

Ochoa That school was everywhere. That’s all I can remember. (laughs) It was an everywhere school. And, like I said, even within our campus, I mean, you were here with the garden. That was a really big new kind of area to explore in learning. The students had their plot, a one-foot garden, and they plotted that out. So, we had a lot of math involved with that and a lot of pride when their vegetables started growing. And they had a chance to select what they wanted to grow and how to take care of it and how much water and when to plant and when to take it out, but just that, I think, was unique in knowing that you’re not learning just within the classroom, that it’s everywhere. And we had parents come in at night for Kids Institute of Technology, and we had the students actually teaching the parents how to use computers and some of the things they were learning.

Strot And this was in ’93, ’94, computers.

Ochoa Right.

Strot Nobody had really computers at home yet.

Ochoa Well, and even if they had them in the school, it was usually the teacher who had it
and had total control, and students needed to not even get near it because something might break. But to see our kids at night telling the parents how to open it up, how to work the programs, and actually just show them—and so the parents became very comfortable and familiar with what they were doing in the classroom, but that was pretty nice to see.

Strot One phrase that I remember from that time—everywhere school, of course—is community of learners. That was one of the things that I think Holmes group talked a lot about as one of the sort of characteristics of PDS.

Ochoa And I think that that really holds true because not just the kids were really learning, but, like I said, the parents, we had a lot of parent involvement where they were learning, but also the teachers. I think it was almost not expected, but there was a lot of opportunity for teachers to continue to grow either through classes at Baylor, through workshops, through going out, talking to other teachers, presenting, so it was a community. We had visits to TSTC or visitors to come in. So, it became a real community of everyone learning.

Strot Well now, take your case, Ms. Ochoa. You have your master’s degree in education, you have been a teacher of the year for the district, you’ve been teacher of the year for gifted and talented for a large district in Texas, and you’re a national board certified teacher. And much of that happened during the time you were here at Hillcrest.

Ochoa Right.

Strot So, how do you feel over time you—how have your opportunities professionally
played out at Hillcrest in terms of your role in training the next generation of teachers, the respect you may or may not have been given for your ideas? Talk about, say, kind of the equity issues because many times university-school-district relationships tend to be one-sided or something, but talk a little bit about sort of the idea at Hillcrest for the professional teacher.

**Ochoa**  Well, I think the opportunity is there, and I think Hillcrest has really been the place where I’ve had that advantage and, I think, for different reasons for our collaboration with Baylor. I mean, I don’t think if I was at another school at that particular time in ’93 that I would have had that opportunity to make those connections with Baylor like I had. And I think especially at the beginning, in the early years, working with some of the professors, working in committees, being able to share my ideas or work with someone whom I really wanted to listen to and learn from, it just provided me a lot of opportunities to grow and to learn and then to try other things. I mean, once I finished my master’s and had no idea to start now my other program(??), there was kind of this, Yes, I think you can, and here’s what you need to do. And so, there was just a lot of help in helping me see the advantages of continuing.

**Strot**  Now, I’d known you before you came to Hillcrest through the UYP program, University for Young People Program, for, I guess, three years before Hillcrest started. And so, I know that you knew Dr. Johnsen at Baylor, and I wasn’t at Baylor yet. Was this a characteristic of teachers at Hillcrest that they had a previous relationship or that the Baylor faculty knew something about their
teaching, having had students with them or had them in their classes or things like that? When you think about the master teachers, not necessarily those first-year teachers, but—

Ochoa  Trying to think. I know I did. I mean, like I said, I’d worked with UYP with Dr. Johnsen and teaching gifted and talented for five years and going through her classes and classes at Baylor.

Strot  We had two other master teachers who knew the principal, so they had a previous relationship with the principal—

Ochoa  (speaks at the same time) With Dr. Mac. He came—

—where he knew about their teaching, and—

Ochoa  Kindergarten was Ann DeWeise.

Strot  She certainly knew the early childhood people at Baylor and had had their students in her classroom. I know that. And then—

Ochoa  Victoria Ward.

Strot  Had had student teachers.

Ochoa  Oh, okay.

Strot  And so had—so everybody had at least had—the master teachers had had student teachers or known the principal.

Ochoa  (speaks at the same time) Knew the principal.

Strot  I’m sorry. I digressed. It just occurred to me that there was that dynamic there as well. Let’s turn to the families of the kids. Describe during that first year the families. How would you describe families who sent their children to Hillcrest,
who went through the process and got selected?

Ochoa Well, I think they were parents who, first of all, were very well read because they read about Hillcrest and read about all the new kinds of things we were going to open up with. They are the more probably affluent people who were interested in sending their students because even when Hillcrest first opened that first year a lot of people in the community thought it was a private school and partly because of the application and the lottery and that, but it wasn’t. I mean, it was a regular school. So, those that first applied were those that you would probably find in a private school, parents of private-school children.

Strot And this was the fall before the school opened that they started taking applications? Is that correct? Do you remember?

Ochoa Right, because we opened in the summer.

Strot Right, so it was a good five-month period when they could start—in between when they could start enrolling and when the school opened, okay. So, there was the group who got in early, were interested, wanted their kid enrolled. And what other kinds of families were there?

Ochoa When we first opened or those that first applied?

Strot Well, when you first opened, as the application went—how did it actually pan out? What kind of families did—

Ochoa Well, then we—I know Dr. Mac had said, “No, we’re not going to open this school as an all-white, rich kind of population.” So, if this was going to be a real school, a real professional development school, then we needed to have a blend
and a mix of students.

**Strot**  And he was very passionate about that.

**Ochoa**  He was. Always, always wanted a blend and a mix, and so he had gone to the principals’ meeting and asked the principals then to have parents apply here, which would help benefit the students—pick those students who would benefit coming to Hillcrest. And so, I’m sure the principals sent applications to those students who would best benefit and those (laughs) with a lot of needs, lots of needs.

**Strot**  And some of those whose principals suggest they be nominated were actually picked, so yes. We did have—during that first year, it was in some ways not a typical school because it had more than its fair share—

**Ochoa**  Yes, we did. We did.

**Strot**  —for its size of children with special needs whether it be gifted or whether it be the other way. Okay, other people have mentioned that, too, about that skewed population. Now, how were issues of equity dealt with at Hillcrest?

**Ochoa**  You mean with students or teachers or—

**Strot**  Well, just kind of in general. When you hear the word equity and think of those first years, what comes to mind?

**Ochoa**  Well, I think we were all as a staff—I’ll talk about the staff—I think as a staff, we were all on the same playing field. I think everyone had a vested interest in getting the job done, and the job was to have students succeed. And so, I think parents, teachers, administration, the principal, Baylor, all were focused on that one, and so we all were. There was not a chain of, I couldn’t do something before I asked my
higher up, and my higher up couldn’t do something without asking someone else. I mean, if it needed to get done, we just needed to do it.

Strot And part of that you talked about in talking about Dr. Mac in our first interview and the way that the school was organized. And part of it, too, was that once the faculty decided on something or a teacher decided on something usually you were backed up by the administrator and by the collaboration with Baylor in some way.

Ochoa Right, and as long as there was the—if we could say why that was important, whatever the issue was, and gave reason, I mean, it was pretty much our choice to make sure we could do it.

Strot Can you think back to one of those first meetings we had during those first months of school and kind of describe anything you remember that would illustrate how equal everybody was in the decision-making? How would you—think back, and what comes to mind as descriptive of that?

Ochoa Well, I would say probably one example—well, and even before when we were having our faculty meetings—once we had the whole faculty in, the teachers had already worked together. I had mentioned earlier that some are buying furniture, buying supplies. It didn’t take us long to know, Yes, we are able to really make some decisions that are commonly not done by teachers. So, once we had the whole faculty together and even with Baylor professors there and the rest of the staff, everything from the custodians to people who worked in the cafeteria, the secretary, we all sat in a circle, and everyone had a voice. And so, whatever the issue that was brought up, we decided as a whole faculty. And so, we had to go
around in the circle and say, Yes, I agree, or, No, I don’t agree, or it was a shake of the head. And it did not take long at all for you to feel comfortable to say why you didn’t agree, and it was perfectly fine. I mean, there was not any kind of disrespect. There wasn’t a question of not being a team player. It was almost expected that if we even knew you felt one way and didn’t speak your voice then it was something wrong, so we were very comfortable after a very short time to just voice our opinion and throw that into the conversation.

**Strot** Along the same line, were there issues of diversity that had to be dealt with during those early years at Hillcrest?

**Ochoa** With the staff?

**Strot** Staff and student body. You already mentioned about having a blend whenever we did anything that **Dr. Mac** was very adamant about that.

**Ochoa** And the same held true with the staff. I mean, if we took our picture—if someone was coming by to even take a picture of a group of teachers, I mean, that would be one thing that he would even carry over there to say, “We’re not going to have all white teachers or all Hispanic teachers. We’re going to—this needs to really show that there is a blend and a mix here.” So, that was kind of carried over even with staff kinds of things.

**Strot** Can you think of any example of a diversity issue and how it was handled during those first beginnings of Hillcrest?

**Ochoa** Hmm. Let me think.

**Strot** I can think of one, and you may know more about this than I do, and that had to
do with the sibling rule and Hispanic extended families. Didn’t we allow cousins
to be counted like a brother and sister in some cases?

Ochoa  (laughs) Yes, we did.

Strot  I remember that as one way we dealt with an issue of diversity by just being more inclusive.

Ochoa  Inclusive to that. We’ve had some wonderful families come through. (laughs)

Strot  Now, were there any issues that dealt with things like staff appearance, staff privileges, lunch hours, anything like that, that you can think of that had to be settled that would be a good example of how things were handled at Hillcrest?

Those are things people are usually pretty concerned about if they don’t like it.

(chuckles)

Ochoa  Dress or appearance. I know we actually did our own scheduling, so—as far as lunch—and even that holds true today. We sit as a faculty.

Strot  I’m going to turn this tape over just—

_Tape 1, side 1, ends; side 2 begins._

Strot  We’re continuing the recording on June 25th with Bianca Ochoa, Rick Strot interviewing. So, there weren’t really issues that weren’t handled just as part of the planning and—

Ochoa  Right. And like I said, even this—before the year was out, we sat as a faculty and looked over the schedule and decided what changes should have been made and if we are comfortable making this particular change and having someone come during our lunchtime or should we have five minutes in between, but all that was
discussed in a faculty meeting. So, I don’t know if—it’s been so long since I’ve been at another campus—but I don’t know if that’s something that is done on other campuses where it’s the faculty who actually is the one that’s deciding on schedules or if it’s something that you’re getting two weeks before school starts to say, Here’s your schedule. And it makes for a lot of airing out of even problems, for example, in our lunchroom. We found out that the fourth- and fifth-graders were too close together back to back and just became too crowded. And so, we kind of all moved it five minutes ahead or within ours so that they would have a longer span in between their lunch break. So, some of that still is going on, which is good.

Strot We have round tables in our cafeteria.

Ochoa We have round tables, and that came out of—

Strot (speaks at the same time) That was very new at that time. Okay, in terms of changes now that have—you’ve been at Hillcrest for the entire time it’s been in existence, which is now in its eleventh year. And so, what part of the original vision has remained the same?

Ochoa The original vision. First of all, I would have to say our connection with Baylor. Our interns, that has changed somewhat because now they are—where they were—we’ve changed that up every now and then. Sometimes they came and were off a month, or they were off during intercession when we were year-round.

Strot That vision of them spending a year has remained the same.

Ochoa Yes, but that’s the same. So, we now have TA’s with a new program, so that part
has changed a little bit, but our connection with Baylor has stayed the same. Our team teaching has stayed the same. Multi-age has been the same up until this year because now we’re going with the environments will be multi-age and not the classroom. We still hold our faculty meetings pretty much the same way. We sit in a circle and have those kinds of decisions.

**Strot**  What about any part of the vision that has changed as years have gone by? I mean major changes, not little—

**Ochoa**  (speaking at same time) Major changes.

**Strot**  Things that would actually change the vision, not just a different road to get there.

**Ochoa**  (speaks at the same time) I think—and this is outside of Hillcrest—but I think part of the changes that have taken place has been because of the state testing, and so that’s kind of created lots of smaller types of changes that we’ve just had to do here at Hillcrest.

**Strot**  You’ve watched that process unfold. Would you characterize the changes that have happened because of something that’s happening to everybody: the state-mandated test?

**Ochoa**  Right.

**Strot**  Would you describe the way Hillcrest has dealt with that as different from the way other campuses have dealt with those mandates for high test scores?

**Ochoa**  I think we’re trying to do things differently, not just to do it differently but because still trying to hold on to do what’s best for kids.

**Strot**  Well, you mentioned earlier that the school did have and has maintained now
good test scores past those earlier years, and I think you’re being modest. I think some would describe what Hillcrest has done as being fairly creative and not what many schools have done, which is a more direct approach.

Ochoa And we still question a lot. I mean, even part of the state testing has created our district then to create some new nine-weeks test, which take up a lot of instruction time. And so, as a campus, we’ve had lots of discussion about those tests and the need for those tests, and so our voices [were] heard quite a bit.

Strot So, this kind of gets back to that equity issue. So, do you feel that within the school district then that that dynamic between what the administration says needs to be done and how you as a teacher perceive it affecting the education of children, that they really do listen to and respect a professional development school’s voice in the process?

Ochoa I think they do listen. I mean, I really think they listen whether all the changes that we’ve asked or that we question may not—but I think that they are listening to what we have to say only because I don’t think that as a staff when we either disagree or we question something it’s not just because we don’t want to do it. I think it’s because there is really some valid questions we want to know.

Strot Now, you were one of the three people who ran the school for a while, weren’t you?

Ochoa No, it was—

Strot It was Vicky.

Ochoa Mark Benno.
Mark Benno and—

Paula Hoover.

Paula Hoover. Sorry, I just thought you were.

No.

But that was certainly a good indication that the school could practically run itself.

At least it did for the short term.

Right, and it ran very smoothly. We didn’t have a lot of problems even with budget and everything else that went along with running the school.

Yeah, as I recall, the only problems came when—was when the administration would send things down the previous principal had sort of acted as a buffer on.

(both laugh)

And the way they did that was that one took—I think Vicky took more of the role with discipline and student kind of affairs, and Mark took the role of budget and that kind of area, and Paula then took more of the administration of some of the school matters.

All right. Anything else you’d like to add about Hillcrest? I’ve asked my questions, but is there anything else you’d like to add about Hillcrest or its influence or programs that you’ve been involved in here.

Well, it’s a school that I’ve really invested a lot of my time in because I really feel that the professional development school concept is exactly what’s needed to change the way we look at education and the way that teachers need to have an opportunity to teach and to grow and to learn. And working with a university like
we are, having those advantages of continuing our own growth and working with new interns or rather with interns that are going to be beginning teachers and having a real big influence on their first years of teaching, it’s just a great place and time to really be working in a school like this. I do think the whole idea of professional development school and the way we opened up in ’93 is something that you can’t read about and try to recreate in itself. I think it’s something that is a mindset kind of thing. It needs to—I don’t know. We try to explain the way things used to be to some of our new staff, and some of the small things that are different from where they’ve come from are big things to them. But I remember some of those big new ideas on how we can really make a difference that have kind of slowly fading, so it’s kind of hard to recreate what was then. So, I think it is. I think part of that is the leadership. I don’t think we can continue to train principals the same way if we’re going to expect to have innovative schools like Hillcrest.

**Strot** How did we handle new people coming in those first few years because we always had a turnover in at least one teacher?

**Ochoa** Right, and back to the Hillcrest way of doing things, it was that the staff had a personnel cluster who was involved with hiring new personnel and so was—for instance, if my team teacher was leaving, then I would be part of that personnel group to interview.

**Strot** So, part of it was trying—you had a big say in who you’d work with. So, you’d pick somebody who had the experience and you felt would be a good complement
to your learning environment. Okay, well that’s good. And then once the person
came on board then, it was more a mentoring by the person on the other side of
the environment.

Ochoa Right.

Strot Well, thank you so much for participating in the oral history project.

Ochoa Okay.

Strot You’ll have a chance to read the transcripts and make any additions or request a
further interview if you’d like. (Ochoa laughs)

Ochoa All righty.

*end of interview*