



## Commentary on the 2010 CAE Presidential Address

### Ethnographies *de Lucha* (of Struggle) in Latino Education: Toward Social Movement

SOFIA A. VILLENAS  
*Cornell University*

*In this article, I describe the fight back imperatives of Latino educational ethnography at a time when Latino children's education continues to be the battleground for nation and culture wars. I briefly trace the expansion of the field of Latino educational ethnography during the last two decades, and point to the possibilities for the future of Latino ethnographies de lucha as social movement. [Latino education, ethnography, agency, social movement]*

In this article, I discuss the “agency” of Latino educational anthropology alongside Teresa McCarty’s (this issue) urgent critique of the policy language of crisis, and her equally urgent call “ ‘to make public’ the injustices our ethnographic work reveals.” As McCarty (this issue) makes clear, this language of educational crisis is circular, repetitive, and stagnant, locating the problem within the very families and communities who are disenfranchised by inequitable schools and structural social inequality. The policy response continues to assume that the cultural and language practices of families and youths from nondominant communities are deficient and need to be remediated and changed (McCarty this issue).

This is nowhere more true than for Latino families, and in particular for emerging bilingual students who continue to be defined as linguistically “limited” immigrants in federal education policy.<sup>1</sup> One might think about the role of racist nativism in educational policy for Latinos/as. Pérez Huber and colleagues (2008:43) define racist nativism as “the assigning of values to real or imagined differences, in order to justify the superiority of the native, who is to be perceived white, over that of the non-native who is to be perceived as People and immigrants of Color” thereby defending the right of whites, or natives, to dominance. According to George Sánchez (1997), the late 20th century was marked by three kinds of racial nativism—English-only policies and fear of linguistic difference as a threat to national identity,<sup>2</sup> characterizations of multicultural and affirmative action initiatives as tilting against opportunities for white peoples, and the sentiment embodied by California’s proposition 187 which engendered the idea of undocumented immigrants exploiting educational and health services and thus depleting resources for deserving true natives. Now in the 21st century, contemporary racist nativism manifests in proposals such as Arizona’s Bill 2281 signed into law on May 11, 2010. This law, in its intention, targets Ethnic Studies and Tucson’s Mexican American Studies in particular as un-American, antigovernment, and promoting resentment toward other races or classes of people. Going beyond the threat of language difference invoked as in previous English-only state laws, this law more explicitly indexes the threat of cultural and social histories, and claims to belonging. The language of “promoting resentment” and “ethnic solidarity” embodies the perceived threat of collective responses to oppression, including civil and human rights activism.

In these ways, Latino children’s education continues to be the battleground for nation and culture wars. As McCarty (this issue) points out, language–culture–immigrant are

---

*Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, Vol. 43, Issue 1, pp. 13–19, ISSN 0161-7761, online ISSN 1548-1492.  
© 2012 by the American Anthropological Association. All rights reserved.  
DOI:10.1111/j.1548-1492.2011.01153.x.

all discursively bound up in the language of crisis in immigration and the language of crisis in education. And the two crises inexorably work as one and the same. Precisely at a time when 21st-century globalization requires the unprecedented number of immigrant and immigrant-origin youth to be equipped with a more complex set of skills, competencies, and sensibilities, U.S. national policies and accountability systems remain unresponsive to their needs (Suárez-Orozco et al. 2011). Assumptions of cultural deficiency and linguistic limitations, and the requirements of assimilation and remediation continue to undergird educational policy and practices affecting Latino students in particular.

It is within this context of racist nativism and language of crises, that Latino educational ethnography has moved with urgency to name or expose how inequities are structured in Latino youths' schooling—inequities that produce high school push-out rates of over 38 percent for Latinos and 44 percent for Mexican-origin youth, and 54 percent and 60 percent, respectively, from the lowest income quartile of these populations (see Covarrubias 2011). With equal urgency, Latino education ethnographers counter deficit perspectives in documenting and theorizing transnational cultural, language, and literacy practices across home, school, and community. Their classroom ethnographies also point to the value of language and cultural heterogeneity for organizing effective teaching and learning environments (Gutiérrez et al. 2009), including bilingual education and culturally responsive classrooms. Participatory action research with youth (Cammarota 2008; Duncan-Andrade and Morrell 2008; Sánchez 2009), and with parents, especially mothers (Dyrness 2011; Hurtig 2008), bring together identities, cultural practices, and critical civic action as the foundation for powerful education. This research has always been deeply political, intentionally confronting the debates about immigration, culture, and language that comprise the intertwining crises of language and education policy (see Zarate and Conchas 2010). McCarty (this issue) inspires me to refer to this body of work as “fight back ethnography” or in Spanglish, “ethnographies *de lucha*.”

Struggles for education, desegregated schools, school leadership, detracking, culturally responsive curriculum, and bilingual education have a long history in the United States (see San Miguel and Donato 2010). I would like to focus my comments here on the contemporary historical moment of the last two decades in which Latino education ethnography has emerged. The decade of the 1990s marked the beginning of the height of the Latino diaspora with growth in traditional gateway areas and the creation of new Latino destinations in the United States. At the same time, the launching of Operation Gatekeeper in 1994 marked increased militarization along the U.S.–Mexico border in the San Diego, California area. According to Julio Cammarota (2008), the 1990s and specifically California's Proposition 187 in 1994, marked the beginning of the contemporary, state-sponsored anti-Latino era. This time is roughly when the first Latino ethnographies were being published. It is also the time when I began graduate school in North Carolina to study education in a newly emerging Latino diaspora community. In the remainder of this article, I want to describe the fight back imperatives of Latino education ethnography and to point to the possibilities for the future of Latino ethnographies *de lucha* as social movement.

In the early 1990s, when I began working toward my doctoral degree, and asking questions about how Latino parents negotiate family education and their children's schooling in a new Latino diaspora community, there were not very many ethnographic studies about Latino education. In the late 1980s, with the publication of a Special Issue in *AEQ* (see Jacob and Jordan 1987) and Trueba and colleagues' (1989) coedited volume, *What Do Anthropologists Have to Say about Dropouts*, the anthropological conversation about “minority education” focused on explanations for differences in school achievement among youths of diverse ethnic and racialized groups. Perspectives about cultural differ-

ences, cultural discontinuities, and youth accommodation, assimilation, and resistance were all at play (see Gibson 1987; McDermott 1987; Trueba 1991; and Foley 1991 among others for discussion of debates).

Within this conversation, studies about Latino youth and schooling were important (see Matute-Bianchi 1986; Moll and Diaz 1987; Suárez-Orozco 1987; Trueba 1988). Did Mexican Americans and other Latino heritage children perform as involuntary minorities according to John Ogbu's cultural ecological model? For Ogbu (1987), a group's historical positioning within society influenced youths' frame of reference for responding to the cultural imperatives of schooling in the United States. As "involuntary" or descendants of "involuntary" minorities whose lands were taken away in 1848 (currently the southwestern United States), English-speaking Mexican American youths' frame of reference was the United States and their experiences of discrimination. According to Ogbu, their response of resistance, like that of African American youth, had negative consequences for their school achievement. Other Latino youth, such as the children of refugee Salvadoran parents in Suárez-Orozco's (1987) study, had their home country of El Salvador as a frame of reference where economic and political circumstances were seen as more difficult. Salvadoran youth worked hard and achieved in school—despite cultural differentials and discrimination—as a way to give back to their parents who endured sacrifices for their children (Suárez-Orozco 1987). Ogbu's theories certainly offered explanatory power for my thinking on differential school achievement among minoritized populations.

However, I needed more to help me think specifically about the complexities of Latino families' and youths' cultural lives. What else was out there to help me think about race and racism, power, language, culture, and family education? Meanwhile, I was introduced to the work of Henry Trueba (1988, 1989, 1991; Delgado Gaitan and Trueba 1991) who insisted on the importance of culture in learning and within a social and societal context. He was concerned with the cultural essentialism of the voluntary–involuntary categories that in his view served to predetermine youth responses. In his scholarship, Trueba emphasized the promise and potential of language minority youth, including Latino students.

Outside of this important conversation on differential school achievement, there were few other ethnographic studies available about Latino education. These few, however, were critical to my engagement with the anthropology of Latino education. Foley (1990) had recently published his ethnographic study of schooling and Mexican American youth in South Texas. This study provided me with a methodological and theoretical approach for thinking about Latino youths' cultural production with a class and race analysis. Importantly he provided a macroethnographic lens for considering Mexican American education and youth identities vis-à-vis larger sociocultural, political histories—in this case the Mexican America Civil Rights Movement—while keeping a focus on on-the-ground cultural practices.

Then I came across the work of Concha Delgado Gaitan (1992, 1993, 1994; Delgado Gaitan and Trueba 1991). She was pioneering in her ethnographic descriptions of the educational value of Mexican family language and literacy practices in the home space. For the first time I was reading about cultural practices such as *consejos* (narrative advice), *cuentos* (traditional tales), and *historias* (stories) as forms of education. The home life that I was familiar with was now full of education, full of language, and full of literacy. Even as Delgado Gaitan sometimes took the tone of a detached social scientist in her early work as the times demanded (see Delgado Gaitan 1992), she clearly wrote with great love and respect. Her collaborative work with Latino parent advocacy groups profoundly changed how she came to view her role as researcher–learner–advocate in Latino communities (see Delgado Gaitan 1993).

Delgado Gaitan (2001) later reflected openly about how to discuss oppression and needs in Latino communities without reducing people to their hardships. She realized the power of representation, and in particular the consequences when singular notions of Mexican and Mexican American “culture” take root in teaching, curriculum and school policy. She advocated for ethnography that centered families’ dignity and full humanity. This ethnographic scholarship in Latino education was and continues to be deeply political. How could it not be? It was following on the heels of the 1986 Immigration, Reform and Control Act, which provided legal residency to a substantial number of the Latino undocumented population. This scholarship spoke as border surveillance and detentions were drastically increased along the U.S.–Mexico border, and just as the public voted for the official English-only laws of the late 1980s (1986 in California, 1989 in Arizona). This work was clearly “talking back” if not fighting back at the discourses of immigration that served to inform deficit-based responses to Latino family cultural lives and youths’ education. These ethnographies de lucha continued to guide me through considerations of family cultural practices at the interface of home and school.

Since my graduate school years, there has been a plethora of outstanding ethnographic work in the field of anthropology of Latino education. We have deep ethnographic analyses about schooling and racialization, transnational youth cultural practices, children’s and families’ language socialization and bilingual language practices, school policy and programs, practices of teaching and learning, youth civic engagement, higher education, and education within and across families, communities, churches, schools, and afterschool programs (see Villenas and Foley 2010 for a review of Latino education ethnographies). These ethnographies of *Latinidades* have changed the vocabulary about “culture”—from cultural difference to transborder and borderlands cultural practices, cultural mestizaje, funds of knowledge (González et al. 2005), culturally “emergent practices” (O’Leary et al. 2008) and “cultural organizing” (Camarrota 2008). As ethnographers of Latino education, we have comprised a *lucha libre* (wrestling) tag team. We have been both talking back to negative public discourses about Latinos/as, but also talking to each other and engaging in our own conversations and disagreements about the complexities of Latino lives and education. Politically, we have become adept at planning our *movidas* (tricky moves) as we carefully consider our discourse to maximally affect policy, programs, and teaching practices. This is a far cry from the early 1990s when there were only a few Latino education ethnographies available. In such a short period, we have come a long way in terms of the number of ethnographic studies that have been produced, the knowledge that has been generated, and the conversations that we have been able to have.

Unfortunately, while research in Latino education has expanded in its scope and influence, the language of deficit in the public discourse remains. But our ethnographies de lucha are also reengaging in the project of education as social movement. In this vein, I am reminded of Jeannie Oakes and Martin Lipton (2002) who argue that school change efforts need to work at the ideological level. As long as school-based reform addresses change as incremental and apolitical and rooted solely in school structures and practices, we miss responding to the power of ideologies of meritocracy held by elite parents who posit that educational opportunities be afforded to deserving students based on merit (Oakes and Lipton 2002). We also miss the deleterious power of racist nativism. Oakes and Lipton (2002) urge educators and researchers to view their efforts as social movement, rather than organizational change. The strategies and skills of grassroots organizing and social movement provide educators with the tools to mobilize community and address the discourses that maintain the status quo (Oakes and Lipton 2002).

Latino communities in the United States have a rich and long history of mobilizing for economic, political, social, cultural, and educational human rights. Recent multiheritage social movements include the immigrant rights movement,<sup>3</sup> the Dream Act youth move-

ment in which young adults take great risks in exposing their undocumented status,<sup>4</sup> and the UNIDOS youth movement of Tucson, Arizona organizing against the dismantling of their school district's Mexican American Studies program. There are many more local and transnational mobilizations and grassroots organizing that do not make the news, but that are taking place every day. Moreover, for almost two centuries Latina/o-Indigenous creative work has documented the "methodologies of the oppressed" (Sandoval 2000) that have sustained communities in surviving, negotiating, and transforming social conditions. Coalitional work, solidarities across difference and effective readings of power have all been essential practices for grassroots organizing and movement building. As the anthropology of Latino education moves forward, it is doing so very intentionally and cognizant of its location within histories of struggle. For example, when Orellana highlights Latino immigrant children's contributions to their households (2001), and their bilingual practices of translation (2009), she centers direct attention on children's capacity for cultural agency, and by extension on that of their families and communities. In these ways, our ethnographies de lucha should continue to renew the field of Latino education as social movement, and to use our carefully crafted research to locate cultural agency and educational change from within and from without.

"Our education is under attack, what do we do? Fight back!" is the chant among UNIDOS youths and supporters. The youths of UNIDOS are calling us to action as they link culture, language, and education to their basic human rights, and to organized community resistance to secure these rights. In one of UNIDOS direct actions at the Tucson Unified School District school board building on April 27, 2011, a youth leader read UNIDOS' demands for their human right to an education that honors their history, knowledge, language, and cultural expression:

We want full compliance with our civil and human rights. The ban on ethnic studies is unconstitutional, dehumanizing and is a violation of our human rights. According to article 31 of the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples of 2007, we have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop our cultural heritage, traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expression. [YouTube 2011]

Our ethnographies de lucha have contributed immensely to the field of Latino education at large. But excellent ethnographies are not enough. The UNIDOS youths call on us to join them, to fight back, and to continue to learn from and locate our strategies within social movements that underscore the human rights and human dignity of all people.

## Notes

1. See the English Language Acquisition, Language Enhancement, and Academic Achievement Act, Title III of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.

2. California also passed Proposition 227 in June of 1998. Referred to as the "English for the Children" initiative by its supporters, this proposition essentially outlawed bilingual education or the programmatic use of the native language in children's education.

3. Immigrant rights demonstrations emerged across the country in reaction to the passage of the Sensenbrenner bill (H.R. 4437) by the U.S. House of Representatives in 2005. The bill would criminalize undocumented immigrants and those who aid and abet them.

4. The Dream Act (Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors act) is legislation that would provide citizenship for unauthorized youth and young adults who have attended U.S. schools and will continue on to higher education or serve in the U.S. military.

## References Cited

Cammarota, Julio

2008 *Sueños Americanos: Barrio Youth Negotiating Social and Cultural Identities*. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press.

- Covarrubias, Alejandro  
2011 Quantitative Intersectionality: A Critical Race Analysis of the Chicana/o Educational Pipeline. *Journal of Latinos and Education* 10(2):86–105.
- Delgado Gaitan, Concha  
1992 School Matters in the Mexican-American Home: Socializing Children to Education. *American Educational Research Journal* 29(3):495–513.  
1993 Researching Change and Changing the Researcher. *Harvard Educational Review* 63(4):389–411.  
1994 Consejos: The Power of Cultural Narrative. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 25(3):298–316.  
2001 *The Power of Community: Mobilizing for Family and Schooling*. Denver: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Delgado Gaitan, Concha, and Henry Trueba  
1991 *Crossing Cultural Borders: Education for Immigrant Families in America*. London: Falmer.
- Duncan-Andrade, Jeffrey M., and Ernest Morrell  
2008 *The Art of Critical Pedagogy: Possibilities for Moving from Theory to Practice in Urban Schools*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc.
- Dyrness, Andrea  
2011 *Mothers United: An Immigrant Struggle for Socially Just Education*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Foley, Douglas E.  
1990 *Learning Capitalist Culture: Deep in the Heart of Tejas*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.  
1991 Reconsidering Anthropological Explanations of Ethnic School Failure. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 22(1):60–86.
- Gibson, Margaret  
1987 The School Performance of Immigrant Minorities: A Comparative View. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 18(4):262–275.
- González, Norma, Luis C. Moll, and Cathy Amanti  
2005 *Funds of Knowledge: Theorizing Practices in Households, Communities and Classrooms*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Gutiérrez, Kris, P. Zitlali Morales, and Danny C. Martinez  
2009 Re-Mediating Literacy: Culture, Difference and Learning for Students from Nondominant Communities. *Review of Research in Education* 33:212–245.
- Hurtig, Janise  
2008 Community Writing, Participatory Research, and an Anthropological Sensibility. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 39(1):92–106.
- Jacob, Evelyn, and Cathie Jordan  
1987 Introduction: Moving to Dialogue. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 18(4):259–262.
- Matute-Bianchi, Maria Eugenia  
1986 Ethnic Identities and Patterns of School Success and Failure among Mexican-Descent and Japanese-American Students in a California High School: An Ethnographic Analysis. *American Journal of Education* 95(1):233–255.
- McDermott, Ray  
1987 The Explanation of Minority School Failure, Again. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 18(4):361–364.
- Moll, Luis C. and Stephen Diaz  
1987 Change as the Goal of Educational Research. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 18(4):300–311.
- Oakes, Jeannie, and Martin Lipton  
2002 Struggling for Educational Equity in Diverse Communities: School Reform as Social Movement. *Journal of Educational Change* 3:383–406.
- Ogbu, John  
1987 Variability in Minority School Performance: A Problem in Search of an Explanation. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 18(4):312–334.
- O’Leary, Ana Ochoa, Norma E. González, and Gloria Ciria Valdez-Gardea  
2008 Latinas’ Practices of Emergence: Between Cultural Narratives and Globalization on the U.S.-Mexico Border. *Journal of Latinos and Education* 7(3):206–226.
- Orellana, Marjorie Faulstich  
2001 *The Work Kids Do: Mexican and Central American Immigrant Children’s Contributions to Households and Schools in California*. *Harvard Educational Review* 71(3):366–389.

- 2009 *Translating Childhoods: Immigrant Youth, Language and Culture*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Pérez Huber, Lindsay, Corina Benavides Lopez, Maria C. Malagon, Veronica Velez, and Daniel Solórzano  
2008 Getting Beyond the "Symptom," Acknowledging the "Disease": Theorizing Racist Nativism. *Contemporary Justice Review* 11(1):39–51.
- San Miguel, Guadalupe, Jr., and Ruben Donato  
2010 Latino Education in Twentieth-Century America: A Brief History. *In Handbook of Latinos and Education: Theory, Research and Practice*. Enrique Murillo Jr., Sofia A. Villenas, Ruth Trinidad Galván, Juan Sánchez Muñoz, Corinne Martinez, and Margarita Machado-Casas, eds. Pp. 90–107. New York: Routledge.
- Sánchez, George  
1997 Face the Nation: Race, Immigration and the Rise of Nativism in Late Twentieth Century America. *International Migration Review* 31(4):1009–1030.
- Sánchez, Patricia  
2009 Chicana feminist strategies in a Participatory Action Research Project with Transnational Latina Youth. *New Directions for Youth Development* 123(spring):83–97.
- Sandoval, Chela  
2000 *Methodologies of the Oppressed: Theory Out of Bounds*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Suárez-Orozco, Marcelo M.  
1987 "Becoming Somebody": Central American Immigrants in U.S. Inner-City Schools. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 18(4):287–299.
- Suárez-Orozco, Marcelo M., Tasha Darbes, Sandra Isabel Dias, and Matt Sutin  
2011 Migration and Schooling. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 40:311–328.
- Trueba, Henry T.  
1988 Commentary: Culturally Based Explanations of Minority Students' Academic Achievement. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 19(3):270–287.  
1989 *Raising Silent Voices: Educating the Linguistic Minorities for the 21st Century*. New York: Harper and Row.  
1991 Commentary: Comments on Foley's "Reconsidering Anthropological Explanations . . ." *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 22(1):87–94.
- Trueba, Henry, George Spindler, and Louise Spindler, eds.  
1989 *What Do Anthropologists Have to Say about Dropouts? The First Centennial Conference on Children at Risk*. London: Falmer Press.
- Villenas, Sofia A., and Douglas E. Foley  
2010 *Critical Ethnographies of Education in the Latino/a Diaspora. In Chicano School Failure and Success: Past, Present and Future*. 3rd Edition. Richard R. Valencia, ed. Pp. 175–196. New York: Routledge.
- YouTube  
2011 Unidos Students Take Over School Board, April 26, 2011. <http://www.youtube.com/user/WhatABCs>, accessed July 12, 2011.
- Zarate, María Estela, and Gilberto Q. Conchas  
2010 Contemporary and Critical Methodological Shifts in Research on Latino Education. *In Handbook of Latinos and Education: Theory, Research and Practice*. Enrique Murillo Jr., Sofia A. Villenas, Ruth Trinidad Galván, Juan Sánchez Muñoz, Corinne Martinez, and Margarita Machado-Casas, eds. Pp. 90–107. New York: Routledge.