



2010 CAE Presidential Address

Enduring Inequities, Imagined Futures—Circulating Policy Discourses and Dilemmas in the Anthropology of Education

TERESA L. MCCARTY

Arizona State University

This article is a slightly revised version of the CAE Presidential Address delivered at the Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association in New Orleans, LA on November 20, 2010. The address inaugurated a CAE program change in which a full evening session was devoted to the talk, including commentaries by Hugh Mehan and Sofia Villenas, and followed by a lively discussion among all those present. [anthropology of education policy, education equity, crisis narratives, “culture of poverty”]

“Circulation”—the theme of the 2010 American Anthropological Association Annual Meeting—affords a useful metaphor to explore the place of policy in the anthropology of education. Critical policy analysis and policy activism have been CAE priorities for some time, and both initiatives are near and dear to my heart. We can think of circulation in two senses. The first is as a flowing process—a circulating, rotating movement in which boundaries shift and blur. The antonym for this sense of circulation is stagnation. The second sense is as a distributive process: to circulate is to disseminate, disperse, diffuse, propagate, spread, transmit, and make public. Antonyms for this sense of circulation are to stop, hold back, keep secret, conceal, or suppress. Both senses of the circulation metaphor offer affordances into what Norma González, in her 2009 CAE presidential address, called “object lessons”—the “small theories” that force us to critically examine the ubiquitous social-educational inequities that are the focus of so much of our work (González 2010:122). Metaphors also help us imagine possible futures, and I use the metaphor of circulation in its second sense to “make public” a hopeful story in a troubled political landscape that has implications for praxis and how we think about policy itself.

One of the things one does in preparing for a talk such as this is revisit words of wisdom from past presidents. My term was the 31st in our organization’s now-41 years, and the presidential addresses that precede this one constitute an enormous reservoir of collected wisdom. In that spirit, I would like to begin by recalling the words of one past president:

We have entered another period of social change, another rearrangement of the elements of American political, social, and economic life. The last decade has been marked by:

- economic retrenchment,
- recession,
- demands by the middle class for reductions in taxes,
- less willingness to support government funded social programs at home and abroad in education, in health, in social services, and in economic development, and
- less interest in communities that have benefited from such projects.

This past president went on to note the “stagnant” (i.e., anticirculating) resource base within public universities, a reduction in federal funding for university-based research

and training activities, and an “[a]cross the board” dwindling public interest in issues of concern to anthropologists.

Which past president wrote these words? Perhaps they were a prelude to Norma González’s (2010) object lessons? Part of Perry Gilmore’s (2008) “backroads” insights into a socially engaged educational anthropology? Spoken by Catherine Emihovich (2005:305) when she called for increased anthropological activism in these “deeply troubling and unsettling times”? Part of Kathryn (Katie) Anderson-Levitt’s (2007) exposition on the renewed emphasis on racial justice in CAE? Or, going back even further in presidential history, a prelude to Hugh (Bud) Mehan’s (1995:249) urging that we not give into the “politics of despair”?

Actually, these words were those of Jean J. Schensul, CAE’s 14th president, assessing the times during her term of office from 1982 to 1983 (Schensul 1985:64). Her assessment was right on the mark more than 25 years ago, and it hits the mark as a description of the social, political, and economic climate today. These conditions reflect enduring inequities that are both veiled and reproduced by equally enduring hegemonic policy discourses about the causes of those inequities. The point I will make is that, central to these discourses is a recirculating—and toxic—*narrative of crisis*. An enduring dilemma for educational anthropologists is deconstructing this policy narrative in a way that exposes and counters the inequities it refracts and recreates. Let me turn now to a closer scrutiny of that dilemma and the narrative at its heart.

The Constancy of the Crisis Narrative

In her book, *The Culture of Education Policy*, Sandra Stein argues that the narrative elements of official policies—“the scenarios and argumentation on which policies are based” (2004:5, see Emery Roe 1994)—construct persistent and taken-for-granted ways of thinking about those who are the subjects of the policies. These ways of thinking have material consequences. What kinds of people and situations does the crisis narrative evoke?

According to the *Webster’s Dictionary* I consulted, crisis is “a turning point, as in a sequence of events, for better or for worse,” a “condition of instability . . . that leads to a decisive change,” a “personal tragedy, upheaval, or the like,” the “point in the course of a serious disease at which a decisive change occurs, leading to recovery or to death,” or the point “as in a play, at which the antagonistic elements confront each other” (Random House 1997:313). Crisis evokes antagonism, pathology, villainy, and heroism in an unstable situation of danger, risk, and fear. Moreover, by definition crisis is an acute condition—“a turning point . . . for better or worse.” And yet, in U.S. education policy, crisis as a narrative with the elements above has been a chronic theme. It is worth revisiting some of that narrative’s history to examine its place in education policy discourse and practice today.

Consider the Soviet launch of the first earth-orbiting satellite in 1957. What came to be known as the “Sputnik crisis” propelled not only the Cold War and the space race between the United States and the U.S.S.R. [Union of Soviet Socialist Republics] but also unprecedented federal spending on public education, particularly in the sciences where U.S. students were deemed lacking. As Murray Wax, CAE’s first president, reflected: “The consternation in high governmental circles [caused by Sputnik] resulted in large sums of money being authorized for improving science education in the United States” (2002:118).

Large sums of money for public education can be a good thing—depending on how and for what purposes those sums are expended. My point is that the crisis narrative sets up facile and false but compelling images of heroes and antiheroes, deracializing past histories and diverting attention away from the social and economic injustices in their wake. Embedded in the hero–antihero subtext is a military metaphor, used to great effect in the Johnson administration’s War on Poverty legislative agenda. The educational

centerpiece of that metaphorical domestic war was, as we know, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965. Undoubtedly, many children and families have been helped by ESEA programs. The question is at what cost—not in dollars but in pervasive and pernicious “ways of thinking” about those children and families—ways of thinking that have material consequences.

Underwritten by the crisis narrative, the ESEA, as Sandra Stein brilliantly shows, constructs poverty as an individual failure induced by deficient parents and pathological communities unable to provide their children with the intellectual, moral, or financial resources they need to be successful in school and in life. In this policy narrative, deprivation, desperation, handicap, retardation, and lack are juxtaposed with the “crying need” for federally prescribed treatment, compensation, enlightenment, and remediation (Stein 2004:17). As the late Senator Edward (Ted) Kennedy opined on the Senate floor in 1967, the government’s largesse would “compensate” for the “heritage of cultural depravity” among the poor (see Stein 2004:54).

Enter the heroes and villains.

This policy narrative was abetted by a powerful scholarly discourse. In 1959, the culture of poverty made its debut in Oscar Lewis’s ethnographic study of five Mexican families (Lewis 1959). Lewis subsequently outlined 70 characteristics of the culture of poverty—feelings of marginality, alienation, powerlessness, and inferiority ascribed to the poor (Lewis 1966). The intertwining of race- and class-based deficit in academic and political discourses was unabashedly evident in the proceedings of the 1964 Chicago Conference on Compensatory Education for Cultural Deprivation (yes, there really was a conference by that name). Led by educational psychologist Benjamin Bloom, the conferees, who included the academic luminaries of the time, defined “culturally deprived” students as those “whose early experiences in the home, . . . motivation for present school learning, and . . . goals for the future are such as to handicap them” in school. “Cultural deprivation,” these researchers concluded, “should not be equated with race . . . [but] it is true that a large number of Negro children . . . are likely to be culturally deprived” (Bloom et al. 1965:4–5).

Despite multitudinous empirical research debunking the culture of poverty, much of it undertaken by educational ethnographers, the concept continues to pump through the arteries of public discourse as an explanation of deeply engrained disparities in wealth, civic inclusion, and educational opportunity.¹ My recent Google search of “culture of poverty,” for example, turned up more than 54 million results. Like the blood that circulates through the human body, the crisis narrative transports this dangerous “way of thinking” through the body politic.

Narratives tell a story that is as important for what it elects to exclude as for what it highlights. The “crisis of desegregation,” for example, first appeared in policy discourse with reference to Little Rock (Arkansas) Central High School in 1957. This was followed by a series of nearly identical crisis narratives differing only in their place names about individual schools in both the North and the South (see, e.g., Moore’s [2002] well-argued analysis of the Cleveland, Ohio, school desegregation crisis). Missing from the policy narrative is what Michelle Fine (2010:2) calls “the relentless, ongoing crisis in the Black community for quality education,” and Gloria Ladson-Billings (2006) calls the “education debt”—the systematic diversion of resources away from poor children and children of color and the condemning consequences of those structural inequalities (Stein 2004:28).

We have long been subjected to a dominant narrative of a language and literacy “crisis.” One version of this narrative portrays poor and minoritized children and families as illiterate, placing the very nation at risk. A prime purveyor of this narrative was the 1983 *Nation at Risk* report, prepared under the direction of Terrel Bell, Ronald Reagan’s Secretary of Education. Pairing images of former military enemies—those images themselves

imbued with racist stereotypes—with alleged deficiencies of minoritized and poor youth, the report warned that

the risk is not only that the Japanese make automobiles more efficiently than Americans. . . . It also includes the intellectual, moral, and spiritual strengths of our people. . . . [I]ndividuals in our society who do not possess the levels of skill, literacy, and training essential to this new era will be effectively disenfranchised. [National Commission on Excellence in Education 1983: para. 7, 8]

In this narrative, the “official story of past and present conditions in education,” as Enora Brown observed in a paper presented at this conference, conveys essentialized notions of good and evil that rely on “coercion and . . . moral appeal” (2010:10). The message is clear: Those who are not intellectually and morally fit to survive in the new world economy will, by virtue of their own failures, be left behind. It is no stretch to connect the dots to the “no child left behind” narrative of today.

Another version of the literacy crisis narrative is equally toxic. This narrative portrays children who enter school speaking a language other than English as “limited” and lacking, their bilingualism a handicap to be remediated away. The original (and misnamed) Bilingual Education Act (bilingualism was never a goal of this legislation but, rather, linguistic assimilation) targeted children who were both poor and “educationally disadvantaged” by their home language. The word “bilingual” has since been expunged from the legislation, the office charged with its implementation has been renamed the Office of English Language Acquisition, and the language crisis storyline now explicitly invokes another alleged crisis—immigration—leaving no doubt as to whose languages are to be expunged. In the first nine paragraphs of Title III of the current ESEA (No Child Left Behind/NCLB),² the word *limited* appears 11 times, more than half of them alongside “immigrant,” as this excerpt illustrates:

The purposes of this part are . . . to . . . ensure that children who are **limited** English proficient, including **immigrant children and youth**, attain English proficiency . . . to assist all **limited** English proficient children, including **immigrant children and youth** . . . to develop . . . language . . . educational programs [for] **limited** English proficient children and . . . **immigrant children and youth** . . . to provide . . . programs designed to prepare **limited** English proficient children, including **immigrant children and youth** . . . to streamline language instruction [for] **limited** English proficient children, including **immigrant children and youth** . . . to hold [state and local agencies] and schools accountable for . . . adequate yearly progress for **limited** English proficient children, including **immigrant children and youth**. [Part A, Sec. 3102:(1–8); emphasis added]

As Sofia Villenas (2007:419) points out, the term *immigrant*—part of the dominant narrative of “immigrant America” (cf. Lukose 2007)—conveys a sense of “not belonging,” symbolically distancing the children so referenced from the state agencies charged with providing them a quality education.

Although race is elided in this narrative, it is palpable in the backlash politics of which it is part, which have reached hysterical proportions in some parts of the United States. The current situation in Arizona provides a case in point. In April 2010, the Arizona legislature approved Senate Bill 1070 (“Support Our Law Enforcement and Safe Neighborhoods Act”), an anti-immigrant measure that a federal judge later ruled encourages racial profiling and violates federal law (the ruling remains under appeal and is headed for the U.S. Supreme Court). On the same day, the legislature approved House Bill 2281, a ban on ethnic studies (read, Mexican American studies) in public schools, on the grounds that such classes “promote resentment toward a race or class of people” and “promote the overthrow of the United States government” (Hull 2010:para. 8). The latter claim, made by then-state superintendent of public instruction Tom Horne (and directly cited in section 1.15–112 of the bill), would seem preposterous were it not for the fact that he subsequently

ran a successful campaign for state attorney general on a “Defending Arizona!” platform that discursively bonded banned bilingual education–ethnic studies–immigration. The week that S.B. 1070 and H.B. 2281 were approved, Horne instructed school districts to remove teachers with “accents” from teaching English or risk losing their jobs. Meanwhile, under an earlier policy enacted by Horne’s office that harks back to what Patricia Gándara and Gary Orfield (2010) call the “Mexican Room,” English learners in Arizona are segregated for four hours a day in mandated “English language development” classes, where they are prohibited from using their most important learning resource—their mother tongue—and where they receive highly scripted “structured English immersion.” Jim Cummins (2007) describes these kinds of instructional regimes as “pedagogies for the poor”; they are that, but I believe they are even more accurately characterized as pedagogical apartheid.

The New Crisis Narrative: Not “Just” a Story

If you were to google “crisis in education” this moment, you would likely receive notice of as many as a half-million results. In this narrative, the villains are ineffective urban public schools, incompetent teachers, and bullying teacher unions; the heroes are corporate-backed charter schools and fired-up antipublic school reformers. Percolating throughout the narrative is the culture of poverty—dysfunctional families, communities fraught with social ills, and teachers led astray by self-serving (capital-L) Labor. Missing from the narrative is the history of race and class exclusion, public disinvestment in poor students and communities of color, and an underlying neoliberal agenda to privatize public goods.

This is, in fact, the storyline of Davis Guggenheim’s recent film, *Waiting for Superman*, a popularized 21st century *Nation at Risk*. I recently read a review of the film by one of its critics, Lois Lane (aka Michelle Fine), writing for the *Daily Planet* (aka *Rethinking Schools*). Lois/Michelle reports that, following a film preview in which audience members questioned the film’s director, Lesley Chilcott, about the missing subtext, she responded: “This is just a film. We needed to tell a strong narrative about the crisis in public education. . . . We couldn’t dig deeply into other issues like finances or race” (Fine 2010:2).

The problem is, those “other issues” *are* the deep and enduring crisis, and it is never “just” a film, “just” a story. As Lois Lane/Michelle Fine (2010:2) points out, it matters *how* the story is told. Policy narratives have material consequences. This is why our ethnographies—the narratives we write of and with the communities with whom we are privileged to work—are so critically important, perhaps now more than ever when they have been marginalized in official policy discourse about what constitutes “scientifically based research.”

Imagined Futures

I come now to the second part of my title and the final part of this address: imagined futures in the anthropology of education. As widely circulating as the crisis narrative has been in discourse about public education, it has long been part of our disciplinary discourse as well. As early as 1978, Lambros Comitas and Janet Dolgin, in a retrospective article on the still-young field of educational anthropology, described “both anthropology and education . . . as in a state of crisis.” The crisis in anthropology, they suggested, is

a tired crisis, of growing trivialities and fatigued repetitions . . . anthropology . . . should be able to demonstrate its utility to education not through preaching but through accomplishment . . . [attending] carefully to the real perplexities and predicaments of practicing educators *and* to the expediencies of the educational solution. [1978:173–174]

Virtually all recent CAE presidential addresses have engaged the theory-policy-practice dilemma—what Edmund (Ted) Hamann and members of a recent CAE ad hoc policy committee rightly call the “inconvenient truth” that, just because “we have much to say [about policy] does not mean that we are much heard” by those in power (2007:iv).

I want to suggest that this “inconvenient truth,” rather than discourage us, should galvanize our efforts to set the narrative record straight—as Perry Gilmore urged in her 2007 presidential talk, to speak “fearlessly, courageously and continuously,” not only within our close (and sometimes stagnant) academic circles but also to our local, national, and international publics (2008:111–112). Here, I return to the second sense of circulation—to disseminate, disperse, diffuse, propagate, spread, transmit, and make public—the antonym for which is to hold back or keep to one’s self. In the present moment of hyperbolic and increasingly racist crisis narratives, it is incumbent on us to “make public” the injustices our ethnographic work reveals and to work alongside the antihegemonic projects of insurgent educators, youth, and communities. Taking a cue from the literary scholar and my colleague at Arizona State, Simon J. Ortiz, whose “fight back” poetics stirred a generation of politically inspired Indigenous writers (Ortiz 1980, 1992), we might think of this as “fight back” ethnography.

In this spirit, I want to conclude by taking you on a brief sojourn to a K–5 public magnet school in a city of moderate size in the high mountains of the southwestern United States. Unlike the Superman narrative, educators and parents at this school refuse to buy into a deficit paradigm. Called Puente de Hózhó—*puente de* for the Spanish “bridge of” and *hózhó* for the Navajo “beauty” or “harmony”—this is, literally, Bridge of Beauty School. In a district in which 26 percent of the students are Native American and 21 percent are Latino, the school’s name reflects its founders’ desire to, in their words, “bridge the seemingly unbridgeable gap between the academic achievement of language-minority and language-majority children” (Fillerup 2005:15).

That this is a different kind of school is evident before one even passes through the front door. On each side of the entryway are murals created by students who worked alongside the award-winning Navajo artist and children’s book author Shonto Begay, depicting the Navajo girls’ puberty ceremony (*Kinaaldá*) and the multihued topography of nearby *Diné Bibeeyah* or Navajoland. Throughout the school, the print environment displays vivid images of academic content in Navajo, Spanish, and English (Figures 1–3).

Puente de Hózhó educators argue that the best way to ameliorate long-standing academic disparities is to create an environment in which “diverse languages and cultures would be regarded as assets rather than deficits, as things to be desired and augmented rather than eliminated or suppressed” (Fillerup 2011:149). The school does this by offering a Spanish–English dual immersion program and a Diné (Navajo) immersion program for Native students learning their heritage language as a second language. The Diné teachers describe themselves as teacher-warriors: “We’re fighting for our kids to have the right to learn their language and culture!” (field notes, January 13, 2009).

For the past year and a half, along with my colleague Bryan Brayboy and graduate students Erin Nolan and Kristin Silver, I have been documenting ethnographically the de facto education policies—which are also de facto language policies (McCarty and Warhol 2011)—instantiated by teachers in this school. In English-only Arizona, and yoked to NCLB, Puente de Hózhó educators are creating a radically different policy narrative. I emphasize that this is *not* “feel good” ethnography—a simplistic antidote to the Superman narrative. Rather, it is a story of educators teaching “against the (new) grain” (Cochran-Smith 2001) of standardization and English-only, while, in their words, “holding their breath” that test scores will be “respectable enough to keep the NCLB wolves from the door” (Fillerup 2005:15).

Figure 1.
Student-created mural at Puente de Hózhó School entrance, showing dawn run of the Navajo girls' puberty ceremony (Kinaaldá) (photograph by Teresa McCarty).



Figure 2.
Exterior wall mural of Diné Bideyah (Navajoland) by Puente de Hózhó students and Diné artist Shonto Begay (photograph by Teresa McCarty).



It is a story of educators, parents, and children acknowledging the pain and suffering of the past, the forced severing of heritage language and culture, and the domesticizing narratives of current policy regimes. Prominent in every classroom is the song script *Shí Naashá* (literally “I Walk About” but translated culturally and historically by teachers as “I’m Alive”; Figure 4). The song is both a constant reminder and a commemoration of the Navajo people’s survival and return to Diné Bideyah from a federal concentration camp where thousands were incarcerated and perished from 1863 to 1868. Teachers speak of their work as a reversal of past practices—including their own. As one Diné teacher acknowledged when we asked if her children spoke Navajo:

When I was a young parent, I really didn't know what it meant . . . to value the language that you were raised in . . . we were just barely getting over the shame of being Native American . . . that we were minorities and we were not of value—we were just healing from that. . . . I think working as a bilingual teacher here at Puente de Hózhó really opened my eyes to how important my language and culture are. [interview, January 12, 2010]

This is a story of de facto education and language policy in action, of educators turning the crisis narrative on its head. It is a story of a school community that, in its everyday practice, aims to conquer what Luis Enrique López (2008) calls the “subaltern condition” of bilingualism, Indigeneity, and difference.

I should add that it is also a story of academic achievement by white mainstream standards. With the second-highest minority enrollments in the district, Puente de Hózhó students consistently outperform their peers in English-only programs. Over its 11 years of existence, the school has consistently met or exceeded mandated “adequate yearly progress” benchmarks. “That became our unofficial goal,” the district bilingual–ESL director and school cofounder writes—“to score high enough on [standardized tests] to appease the powers that be” (Fillerup 2005:15). That the school is providing an important community service is evident from its waiting list, which tops 150 students each year.

There is much more to say about the school and the ethnographic work under way there, but I will close with the vision of our partner teachers, not on imagined futures but what they call “real-world” ones:

[At Puente de Hózhó] English is taught, . . . Spanish is taught, . . . Navajo is taught . . . and that really is how the world is. . . . There are many different languages spoken and there are many different types of people . . . and when the children leave the classroom they know out there, there will be children speaking [different languages] and it's OK. It's OK to be different, and . . . that is what . . . the spirit of the school is. [teacher interview, January 12, 2010]

Interrupting the Crisis Narrative

To circulate is, in one sense, “to make public,” and in so doing we fight back against the paralyzing crisis narratives of our times. In a recent theme issue of *AEQ* on “activist educational anthropology,” Bud Mehan suggested that to “engage the [anthropological] imagination” (actually he said “sociological,” being a sociologist himself), we need to turn our attention “to documenting attempts by educators to construct social equality” (2008:78). In so doing, we interrupt the crisis narrative in public policy and in our discipline. To this I would add—as Bud's, Sofia's, and so many “fight-back” ethnographers' work attests—that we must link our critical ethnographic documentation to working in alliance with those local insurgent efforts.

Fight back!

Notes

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Ilene Ryan, Dawn Trubakoff, and Irene Tsosie. I also express sincere appreciation to Diné linguist Irene Silentman for her linguistic expertise and assistance in translating the “Shí Naashá” song script. Finally, I am deeply grateful for the support of the CAE membership; it was an honor to represent you and our organization as CAE’s 31st president.

1. The culture of poverty has resurfaced prominently in academic discourse as well, as exemplified by the recent publication in the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* of a special issue entitled “Reconsidering Culture and Poverty” (Small et al. 2010). Announcing that “Culture is back on the poverty research agenda” (Small et al. 2010:6), the special issue received a congressional briefing and a *New York Times* write-up. Although the authors are careful to distance themselves from a “blame the victim” stance, arguing for a more nuanced treatment of culture by positing such constructs as “frames” (perceptions based on individuals’ prior experiences and understandings), mental repertoires, symbolic boundaries, and personal narratives, their work has been taken up in public discourse in troubling (but not unexpected) ways. The *New York Times* article, for instance, headlined “‘Culture of Poverty’ Makes a Comeback,” opens with a 1952 photograph showing an African American youth darting between deteriorating urban housing in a debris-strewn alley while two small children sort through trash nearby. “The study of urban blight has long been influenced by political fashions,” the photo caption reads; “now, after decades of silence, . . . scholars are . . . conceding that culture and persistent poverty are enmeshed” (Cohen 2010:1–2). Citing a Democratic lawmaker present at the congressional briefing, the article goes on to note that the “cultural roots of poverty” shape “how lawmakers choose to address poverty issues” (Cohen 2010:2; for a transcript of the briefing, see AAPSS 2010). To reiterate the point: The arguments on which policies are based—perhaps most tellingly those “made public” by elite organizations such as the AAPSS—construct ways of thinking about the subjects of those policies that have material consequences. That this work recirculates damaging images of children of color—albeit unintentionally—is cause for frank and critical self-scrutiny of the role of the academic enterprise in reinscribing the crisis narrative and its material consequences.

2. The reference here is to the former Bilingual Education Act, now the English Language Acquisition, Language Enhancement, and Academic Achievement Act, Title III of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education 2001).

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