

Mothers United: An Immigrant Struggle for Socially Just Education.

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Andrea Dyrness, Associate Professor of Educational Studies at Trinity College, and author of *Mothers United: An Immigrant Struggle for Socially Just Education*, offers readers a seat at the table with five Latina immigrant women who come together in weekly meetings as *Madres Unidas*. This group, centered on conducting participatory research, comes into existence in response to the tensions that arise during the small schools reform movement in Oakland in 2000. These reforms aimed to engage committed educators with parents to create community-based schools as an alternative to over-crowded, poorly maintained traditional schools and to shift control for decision-making from centralized administrators to teachers and parents. But these alliances also laid bare the ways power and privilege led to the marginalizing of parents.

As these *madres* begin to debrief on their frustrating and frustrated participation in school reform, they find they have multiple questions and concerns about the new, purportedly community-based school, United Community School (UCS). Dyrness comes to the project as an ethnographer and doctoral student interested in the burgeoning school reform movement. She initially offers herself as a translator, and this position might best describe her role throughout the book. Through the relationships she develops with some of the women on the UCS design team, she raises the idea of a parents' research team to document their experiences in the design process. Participatory research offers the Latina women a methodology that engages their questions as the focus for research into the social change of which they were a part.

In conversations with one another and Dyrness, the moms come to realize they have the tools to pose critical questions about reform and to effect change that impacts themselves, the school, and their community. In telling their story, Dyrness's book explores two related arguments: the *madres* utilize personal and cultural resources in strategic ways, though the professionals involved in the reform movement often view them as deficient; the *madres* use their collaborative work in *Madres Unidas* to respond to these deficit perspectives and by doing so critique and resist such power relations. Dyrness successfully explores both of these arguments and demonstrates the inter-connected nature of social critique, reform, and solidarity. In fact, her arguments illustrate the intimate nature of social reform and the role of the heart in sustaining the intellect throughout such work. The kitchen table is both the literal place where they met and a transformative space where the women came to understand themselves and their work in new ways. This communal space offers the women what Dyrness refers to as "*confianza, convivencia, and testimonio*." These Latina women, immigrants into the United States who are well aware of the racial, class, gender, and linguistic boundaries placed on them, create with one another a sense of trust and community that encourages them to share their stories. In doing so, the mothers find ways to energize their ways of being and knowing, and to name the forces at work in their lives and their community.

Dyrness develops these strands of personal resources, marginalization, and transformation in chapters that begin with an overview of Oakland's school reform movement including its various stakeholders and continues with a more traditional ethnographic study of Whitman Elementary School as a way to contextualize the need for school reform. As the work on UCS continues, Dyrness shifts the narrative focus onto one particular *mamá*, Baudelia, who will come to represent the ways parents are being included in the reform effort but only in prescribed roles assigned them by other change agents in Oakland and at UCS. Because Baudelia takes on a leadership role within the group and at the school, her voice and story become an obvious focal point for Dyrness. Only in later sections of the book do readers get more comprehensive stories of the other *madres*. This later inclusion is one limitation of the book since readers might benefit from these deeper portraits of the moms as they engage with specific aspects of the work.

As the tensions become clearer, Dyrness utilizes the Latina immigrants' research and voices to highlight

key concerns about issues, including: the admissions process at UCS; questions of what constitutes a community and who decides; and the ways parents are seen as deficient or suspect. In later chapters, Dyrness allows readers to visit Ofelia's kitchen to further demonstrate the ways personal relationships sustained the research project of *las mamás*. Another chapter demonstrates the research acumen and personal vindication they develop as they share their data in a variety of forums. Dyrness ends the book by offering the work of the mothers as an exemplar of community development efforts possible through the combined threads of research and activism.

Throughout the book, Dyrness's own *testimonio* to the work of these *madres* and her work with them frames their activism through the lenses of critical race theory and U.S. third-world feminism. Reading the women's experiences through these theories, Dyrness shows how they use their stories, and the stories they collect from others, to understand and more fully participate in community development through UCS. The collective immigrant women of *Madras Unidas* develop a research agenda that allows them to use the tools of qualitative research—developing research questions, conducting interviews and focus groups, theorizing about and analyzing data—in order to understand the small school that they have been a part of founding and then to ensure that this school remains true to its original mission.

Through their participatory research process, the mothers found ways to resist and re-articulate a vision for the school and how best that vision could be nurtured and sustained. This recursive and collaborative research process is described by Dyrness and allows for her analysis of and larger argument about participatory research and its emphasis on the production and uses of knowledge. As Dyrness makes clear, she may have provided research tools to the moms in this collaborative, but they are the ones who ultimately determined how and for what purposes these tools might be used. This becomes a central part of her book's argument: participatory research creates the kind of "counterspace" that allows individuals to not only articulate a sense of critical consciousness but also allows them to advance social action.

Dyrness's work impacts readers because on many levels she remains in the role she originally had with the *madres*: she is their translator. She offers their words in both Spanish and English, and then contextualizes all of their words within the realms of theory and for a larger audience. But at its core, this book is authored by the five Latina mothers because Dyrness remains focused on allowing them to narrate their experiences and reflections as they participate in the work of building a school. The arguments Dyrness has offered never veer far from the voices of the immigrant women; we come to care about and follow their lives closely. Thus, this book decentralizes the role of ethnographer and casts our eyes, ears, and intellects toward the *madres* at the heart of the story. While many ethnographies include the heavy presence of the ethnographer, this one positions readers beside the women and by doing so demonstrates how research can bring personal stories to the forefront at the same time that it illustrates how power infiltrates and distorts even the best intended agendas.

This book ultimately offers a compelling example of ethnographic, participatory research that would interest readers in a variety of fields. Certainly, educators and others, including anthropologists, educational anthropologists, and those with an interest in urban education, immigrants in education, and/or parental involvement must read this book. For those who hope to do community development work including teachers, community organizers and others who work with low-income parents of color must read this book as a cautionary on the ways we position ourselves and others when we seek to do good. For doctoral students, the book provides a strong model for how ethnographic research can be combined with participatory research. At the same time, the book provides additional insights into the lives of women, particularly for Latinas/os, in the multiple and often conflicting roles they would assume as mother, community activist, and caretaker even as they seek to understand and articulate their own sense of identity outside of such labels. Those with an interest in women of color feminism will find the book provides an accessible treatment of these theories and how they can be used as an interpretive lens.

As readers follow the mothers of *Madras Unidas*, the love and respect they have for one another becomes clear as Dyrness shows us their work and the multiple ways they support one another. The sense of solidarity, which she describes throughout the book, provides the immigrant moms with the strength they need, in Ofelia's words, to "keep going" despite personal hardships and struggles to be recognized and respected as knowing and knowledgeable members of the school community. Ultimately, Dyrness and the *madres* help readers understand

that change efforts are endeavors best undertaken when heart, mind, and the desire for change are given equal seats at the table.