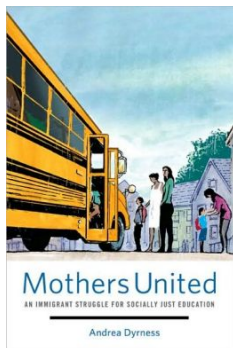


Professional Book Review

Dyrness, A. (2011). *Mothers United: An Immigrant Struggle for Socially Just Education*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press. 254 pp., ISBN: 9780816674671. \$22.95

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This volume has two primary purposes: (a) to describe how Madres Unidas (Mothers United) organized themselves for educational change for their children and how they encountered barriers even within a progressive reform movement and (b) to describe how participatory research empowered the mothers' personal transformative agency and resistance. Author Andrea Dyrness succeeds with both of her goals.

Dyrness spent several years working with, researching, and encouraging the women of Madres Unidas in their efforts to work with the Oakland Coalition for Community Action (OCCA), the Bay Area Center for Educational Equity (BACEE), school personnel, and other parents to bring the small school reform movement—as articulated by Deborah Meier (1995)—to their community in Oakland, California. The book is the result of her extensive research, her experiences in solidarity with the mothers, and the participatory research that the mothers themselves conducted.

One of the most powerful messages of the book for multicultural educators is that progressive reformers—school administrators, teachers, or community activists—can have a very different concept of social justice than those whose needs they claim to represent. Dyrness describes the experiences of the mothers as they attend countless meetings, advocate for their children and their community, conduct focus group interviews, and generally pour themselves into the hope that the new United Community School would create better educational opportunities for their children. By doing so, she upends the common perception that it is those outside the progressive movement who provide the greatest barriers to parental involvement and voice for educational change. Instead, it is often the majority White, female, and idealistic teachers and administrators who, perhaps unintentionally, perpetuate controlling images of Latino parents as either angry and uncooperative or uninvolved and unable to contribute. They tend to see the small school reform movement as an opportunity for their own professional development and collaboration. The parents of Madres Unidas, on the other hand, view the movement as an intensely personal need based on their own experiences with overcrowded and under-funded schools.

The two groups also have competing views of what education in community should look like. The mothers' view, consistent with the Latino concept of *educacion*, "is communal in orientation, emphasizing respect and responsibility to the community, rather than simply the individual acquisition of skills and knowledge" (p. 92). In contrast, teachers and administrators saw the parents' role as advocating with the district, i.e., adding more political weight to the movement, rather than addressing specific aspects of school life. Dyrness records repeated occasions when well-intentioned attempts to give parents leadership opportunities were sabotaged "by a cultural value system that prioritized professional expertise over relationship building" (p. 87).

Some of the most compelling portions of the book addressed Dyrness's second goal: to demonstrate how participatory research can empower personal and societal transformation. Originally, the members of Madres Unidas met regularly for the purpose of learning how to conduct research in order to uncover what constituents wanted for their new school. Ofelia's kitchen, their meeting place, soon became "a sacred space: a place of healing, affirmation, and a site of resistance" (p. 146). The women established a deep *confianza* (trust and confidence) with one another. This *confianza* enabled them to undergo immense personal transformation, to find their own voices, to see themselves differently, and to enact the change in their communities that they longed to see. Dyrness rightly connects such participatory research to the concepts of Paolo Friere (2005) in that it seeks both personal and structural change and has the potential to radically alter who does research and why. The very process of the research lent credibility to the mothers' critique of the status quo at the school and provided opportunities for their critique to be heard.

Mothers United artfully combines the best aspects of the common concerns of multicultural educators. We tend to relish the personal stories of the marginalized since they help us to enter into their experiences, enriching our own limited perspectives. Dyrness is unapologetic in her solidarity with and love for the mothers; she views every situation that they encountered through their eyes and allows her readers to see with them as well. Through her rich, thick descriptions of each of the mothers' backgrounds and struggles, she grants them the dignity of their unique personalities. Sensitive readers will especially appreciate the fact that whenever she quotes one of the mothers, she uses Spanish first and then translates into English. Even such a simple act honors the mothers by allowing their voices to express themselves in the language of their hearts.

At the same time, multicultural educators want more than just stories; we appreciate works that have a solid foundation in well-known theories and research. Here, Dyrness excels as well. She relies especially on the works of bell hooks (1990), Sofia Villenas (2001, 2005), and Charles Hale (2008), among others. Everything she relates about the experiences of Madres Unidas confirms and reinforces the literature of multicultural education.

Finally, multicultural educators want resources that will further genuine change in education to benefit all children from all groups. Through their research, Madres Unidas discovered that “even the most progressive social movements can and do reproduce patriarchy, racism, and other structures of social inequality” (p. 215). This discovery, along with the narratives shared by Dyrness to illustrate it, adds both richness and depth to the ongoing conversations about how to effect genuine change in American schools. *Mothers United* should be added to a list of recommended books for multicultural educators to read, enjoy, and absorb. It definitely has the potential to challenge and transform.

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