

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Andrea Dyrness. *Mothers United: An Immigrant Struggle for Socially Just Education.* Minneapolis: University Of Minnesota Press, 2011. 264 pp. \$69.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8166-7466-4; \$22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8166-7467-1.



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For too long, Latinas/os have been blamed for the educational inequalities that plague our schools. Politicians, pundits, and sometimes even school officials perpetuate cultural deficiency perspectives that assume Latina/o parents do not participate in their children's schooling and that they do not value education. Similarly, there has been a long practice of researchers entering into Latina/o communities with a mission to supposedly understand, report on, and help the people. These naysayers, teachers, and researchers are often far removed from the classrooms and communities that they profess to describe. Instead, their frameworks and approaches have contributed to misrepresentations, exclusionary practices, and asymmetrical relationships that further inequality in our schools and society. Working within Chicana/Latina feminist approaches, Andrea Dyrness's *Mothers United* offers an important corrective for understanding and contesting these neocolonial relationships.

Committed to social change, Dyrness completed ethnographic and participatory action research during a three-year period with a group of Latina immigrants who formed Madres Unidas as part of their struggle for a small school in Oakland, California. Drawing on participant observations, focus groups, interviews, and reflec-

tions from her collaborators, Dyrness's analysis concentrates on what she refers to as the "backstage stories." These are counternarratives that challenge majoritarian accounts about Latinas, and they are testimonies on the women's experiences of exclusion and resistance. At the crux of *Mothers United* are what Dyrness describes as two "fragile relationships"—one between primarily progressive, white, middle-class teachers and working-class immigrant Latinas, and the other between Dyrness and the parent organizers. By weaving together these stories, *Mothers United* has two aims: "to describe in ethnographic detail how Madres Unidas mobilized for change and the barriers they encountered within a progressive reform movement; and to illuminate how participatory research methods, as practiced by Madres Unidas, created a "counterspace" that supported the mothers' agency and transformative resistance at their children's school" (p. 5).

Guided by the concept of internal neocolonialism where the colonial relations of the past are reproduced within the United States in new forms of power and control, much of *Mothers United* details how seemingly well-intentioned teachers and administrators in the movement for a small school engaged in exclusionary practices that not only hindered authentic, nonhierarchical partic-

ipation of parents but also hurt students and the larger movements for more just schools. Dyrness presents convincing examples of these unequal relations that are most apparent in a disjuncture between theory and practice between the school officials and the parents. As she reveals, academic theories and journals on small schools motivated the progressive administrators and teachers in her book to design such a school. They proposed a school that emphasized social justice curriculum, teacher autonomy, and parent participation. However, when it came to community interactions, the school principal and teachers tended to think about these concepts abstractly. Thus, while teachers framed the design for a new school as a desire for increased parent participation, they worked on the school's proposal *without* parents, held structured meetings that attempted to control parent involvement, and often ignored parents or labeled vocal parents as "the problem." Parents were often talked about and expected to participate as consumers. Even the teachers' emphasis on social justice was framed abstractly as a topic of study or something students learn to do in their communities. They did not see the exclusion of parents as *unjust*. Similarly, the concept of autonomy was applied to the teachers—who in the current era of scripted and standardized education understandably wanted control over how they taught. However, parents were seen as infringing on teachers' autonomy. Such exclusion and the privileging of school officials' perspectives in this case study exposes the contradictions behind theories and practices and how concepts can be co-opted and used against the very community that users purport need social justice.

Rather than conclude her book with these exclusionary practices, Dyrness follows the practice in Chicana/Latina studies of also documenting the everyday and collective forms of resistance demonstrated by Latinas, such as Madres Unidas. She invites readers into their "counterspace," which is one of dialogue, trust, and re-

lationships where personal experiences are valued. Together, the women form friendships as they gather and share their participatory action research on the movements for small schools. Thus, while school officials attempted to silence them and constrain their involvement, Madres Unidas became a group of vocal advocates who used their research to legitimize their critiques of schooling and the dynamics that unfolded at their school.

Dyrness has written an important book that will appeal to general audiences, educators, policymakers, and academics. The women's narratives are compelling, and Dyrness clearly conveys their growing camaraderie as they engage in multiple forms of resistance around the kitchen table and public spaces. These dialogues and the friendships that form are inspiring.

Those of us committed to producing community-centered and activist research will especially appreciate Dyrness's methodological approach. To me, this is the most significant contribution of her book. I recently used *Mothers United* in a graduate-level course on Chicanas/os-Latinas/os and education, and the class of teachers and PhD students was motivated to foster the types of relationships and research that she details. Along with devoting a chapter to participatory research and social change, throughout the book Dyrness illustrates the possibilities of participatory research for transformation.

Mothers United serves as a powerful example for enacting the community and social justice lived by Dyrness and the five women who collaborated on this research. These types of relationships of trust and respect are needed to counteract neocolonial perspectives *and* interactions too often epitomized in teacher-parent and researcher-researched relationships reproduced within our educational system.

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