Book Review

Reviewed by
Jesus Jaime-Diaz Ph.D.
Teaching, Learning and Sociocultural Studies
Outreach Coordinator *Semillas del Pueblo* Project
M.Ed. Secondary Education Alt Path Program
College of Education
University of Arizona
jesusjaimediaz@email.arizona.edu

Citation
Dyrness, A. (2011). *Mothers united: An immigrant struggle for socially just education*. University of Minnesota Press.
ISBN-13: 978-0816674671
Page Count: 270 pages
Paperback
Price: $22.95

Keywords: *Testimonio***,** Critical Ethnography, *Mujerista, Conciencia, Confianza*

In capitalist structured societies such as the United States of America, the distribution and allocation of resources for education is a scarce reality for immigrant communities. Andrea Dyrness, in *Mothers United: An Immigrant Struggle for Socially Just Education*, illuminates the complexity of an immigrant community's struggle for the socially just education of their children in a school district within the community of Oakland, California. In its exploration of transitioning to a small schools model, this book investigates and exposes how the powers in charge disregard the existing predominant culture of the school district. Dyrness asserts that minoritized immigrant communities have knowledge through *concienzia* that is not recognized as a resource of knowledge within the culture of schooling by mainstream educators. Dyrness testifies to the struggle of community empowerment within the context of the schooling of immigrant children in six chapters: *Separate Journeys: The Road to New Small Schools, Baudelia's Leadership: Claiming Space for Parents in School Design, Contested Community: Negotiating Admission in the New Small School, The Good Parent, the Angry Parent, and Other Controlling Images, Ofelia's Kitchen: A Counterspace for Resistance, En Confianza: Lessons for Educators on Working for Change with Immigrant Communities*.

In *Separate Journeys: The Road to New Schools*, Dyrness offers several examples to define the first chapter. “For educators who did not live in the community and did not send their children to overcrowded schools, the effort to reform these schools was experienced less as an effort to work *with* the community than to do *for* the community” (p. 30). She cautions about what social justice means to educators and community, and the divisiveness that can ensue from a binary difference in relation to the lived experiences of a community versus professional expertise. Dyrness advises mindfulness in relation to deficit views of immigrant communities within institutional dynamics of power in relation to race, ethnicity, class and gender. This becomes evident in how gatekeepers in education lacked a critical empathy in their perception of the community which they served, which was having little to contribute in the development for new small schools. Dyrness argues that disaffected perspectives from different social locations within both parties caused fragmentation in a collaborative approach to the development of new small schools.

Dyrness searches in the next chapter, *Baudelia’s Leadership: Claiming Space for Parents in School Design*. Here she explores the *concienza* of the mothers who united to voice their concerns and ideas in the development of the new small schools. The mothers met in their community to dialogue in preparation to address their concerns in the creation of the new small schools. This chapter informs us about how immigrant mothers struggled to claim space for parents’ voices to be recognized as knowledge by mainstream educators. Dyrness explains that within the context of conflict, the educators implemented the notion of credentials to silence the voices of the community, and positioned themselves as the experts in the eventual decisions made in relation to new small schools. This chapter deconstructs what social justice means in relation to social class differences. Related themes from the previous chapter emerge in, *Contested Community: Negotiating Admission in the New Small School* continues to inform difference in community based on social status and privilege, Again, Dryness suggests that there was minimizing efforts by the educators to recognize immigrant parents concerns and contributions in the schooling of their children. Dryness argues that such treatment was related to status and social class privilege, which the educators enacted to dominate who’s knowledge counted as expert in the schooling of immigrant children. Dyrness observes how teachers and parents had competing views about what community meant in the process of admitting students into the new small schools.

In the privileging of whose voice had credibility, Dyrness examined how social control was enacted in *The Good Parent, the Angry Parent, and Other Controlling Images*. Dyrness affirms that the angry Latinx stereotype was utilized by the educators to silence the parents and solicit their conformity. Thus, the parents legitimate voices and concerns relating to the schooling of their children were tokenized. “the madres soon apprehended that only a certain kind of parent was deserving of new roles, and that parent participation could swiftly be curtailed or invalidated if it did not conform to the teachers’ images of the “good parent”…” (p.109). Dryness observes how there was a strict code of conduct enforced by the educators in order to police expression of legitimate concern through emotion by the parents. Such methods of control imposed by the educators normalized their social class privilege within the context of schooling. Dyrness informs that there was an intentional approach by the school staff to manage and control the parents. “Teachers delegitimized the Madres participation and critique through the censorship of anger and the privileging of professional ‘expertise’ over

the experience of the community" (p.110). She mentioned how this treatment confused the so-called autonomy of the parents as collaborators in the process.

The book ends with two guiding principles for mainstream educators being conscious of working within immigrant communities in relation to educational communal struggle. First, in *Ofelia's Kitchen: A Counterspace for Resistance* Dyrness affirms "In Ofelia's kitchen, the mothers in Madres Unidas created a safe space where they could share stories, interrogate their experiences at the school, and find new ways of being in community that preserved their dignity and wholeness" (p.147). The term *mujerista* emerged as a womanist humor where women critique their existence and confront and voice relations of inequality. In *En Confianza*: *Lessons for Educators on Working for Change with Immigrant Communities*, Dyrness raises awareness in her research how social transformation was enacted through the experiences of the Madres Unidas. She observed that the Madres had to see themselves as different from dominant images that espouse Latina mothers as apathetic and disengaged in the well-being and schooling of their children. The parents carried a wealth of knowledge from their communal struggles that strongly affirmed their identity as experts from their lived experiences. When recognized and validated, this empowered the parents as collaborators and motivated them to learn.

The message Andrea Dyrness imparts through participation action research in conjunction with *testmonio* and critical ethnography, was to give voice to experiences that are usually overlooked in immigrant communities. She affirms that the working poor can come to think of themselves as agents of change when their lived experiences are valued as resouces to be utilized within the culture of schooling. Dyrness asserts that we all must be conscious of our privilege and realize that everyday struggles to survive link people to their full humanization. The common people carry a wealth of experience that they have overcome, which gives them the ability to approach and address issues using a uniquely distinctive lens. She advises that sometimes when you have no choice but to fight for the survival and well-being of your community, the hope in relation to others, is that they see you, and are able to value your humanity and dignity through their own struggles.

In addition to being used as a frame of reference in educational research, qualitative methods such as *testimonio* and critical ethnography require researchers to embody subjectivity in extracting ideologies from action and challenging oppression in order to bring attention to injustice. Dryness (2011), *Madres unidas: An immigrant struggle for socially just education*, should be considered by educational policy makers as a platform to further deconstruct deficit views of Latinx parents as apathetic to the schooling of their children. This study serves as empirical evidence as to the wealth of cultural knowledge that Latinx working poor communities can draw upon in the schooling of their children. However, in order for this to become a reality, educational policy makers need to further conversations about schools building bridges between historically underprivileged communities and having dialogue around who's knowledge counts within the structure of schooling. This will entail problematizing sociohistorical notions of social, human, cultural and symbolic capital, and what tier of society has historically been granted such privileges in relation to pedagogy and curriculum. A call to action by educational policy makers must continue in debunking

ethnocentric deficit views of working poor Latinx communities, and viewing such common people as partners and equal contributors in the schooling of their children.