

Mothers United

AN IMMIGRANT STRUGGLE FOR SOCIALLY JUST EDUCATION

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Introduction

A FRAGILE PARTNERSHIP

How do Latina immigrant mothers without college education, U.S. citizenship, English literacy skills, or economic resources organize to create change on behalf of their children and their community? What experiences and cultural resources support and sustain their efforts for change, and what stands in their way? This book tells the story of a group of Latina mothers who became activists, researchers, and vocal advocates for their children in a citywide community organizing movement in Oakland, California. The small schools movement aimed to reverse inequities in the Oakland Public Schools in part by giving new roles to parents and community members in the design and creation of new small autonomous schools. At the heart of the movement was a celebrated but fragile partnership between progressive educators and low-income parents of color whose children attended the most overcrowded and underperforming schools in the city. How could a partnership of such unequal parties flourish? How would professional educators come to see low-income Latina housewives and low-wage workers as equal partners in reform, and how would Latina mothers come to see themselves that way? This book explores these questions, charting the movement of five Latina mothers from isolation and marginality to founding parents in a new small school and coresearchers along with the author in a participatory research team called *Madres Unidas* (Mothers United).

The mothers in *Madres Unidas* began their personal journeys in hometowns far from Oakland: in rural El Salvador, Guatemala, coastal Mexico, and one of Mexico's urban centers. With one exception, they immigrated to the United States as young, single women under the age of twenty, and had their first children within two years of arriving in the country. As young girls in their hometowns, they would scarcely have believed they would one day be raising American children, much less that they would become leaders in a movement for new small schools in a U.S. city. They could not

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have imagined how they would become caught up in, and make their mark on, the enduring U.S. struggle for racial equality and justice. Theirs was in many ways an unlikely story, and yet, as this book argues, the mothers drew from their life experience as immigrant women and the cultural resources that sustained them to become agents for change in Oakland. In doing so, they were forced to confront images of “Latina mothers” that sought to limit or neutralize their roles as leaders in reform. These images came from reformers, teachers, politicians, the media, their husbands, and sometimes from deep within themselves—memories of a brother’s words in El Salvador, of dreams deferred, of sacrifices deemed inevitable for daughters, mothers, and housewives. So much conspired to dissuade them from their quest for change that confronting the controlling images became a daily ritual, and as they shared battle stories in *Madres Unidas*, a collective awareness of struggle strengthened their determination to persevere. The controlling images, to borrow Patricia Hill Collins’s words (2000), became sources of mobilization, something to organize against, an invitation for the mothers to reinvent themselves.

Teachers, on the other side of the unlikely partnership, had barriers of their own. For educators in the small schools movement struggling with how to include parents in their plans for reform, Latino parents’ lack of education, poverty, and linguistic and cultural difference were seen as formidable barriers to their “involvement.” The question teachers wrestled with was how to involve parents who most likely lacked the time, motivation, experience, or know-how to engage in reform. Underlying this dilemma were certain assumptions about what motivates and enables people to work for social change. Education and specialized training, skills, resources, and professional experience were seen as natural precursors to participation in school reform. Parents who lacked these things would be difficult to involve. Seeing parents through the lens of deficit, the prospect of involving them as “partners” in reform was inordinately stressful, overwhelming, and perplexing. But what if it were the case that the barriers to parents’ involvement in reform were none of the usual suspects: not their lack of English literacy, not their low socioeconomic status, not their unfamiliarity with the U.S. educational system or their patchy educational backgrounds? What if these same parents were already dynamic change agents with a sharp social critique and cultural ways of responding to structural injustice that had uniquely prepared them to engage in educational advocacy for their children? What if the barriers to their in-

volvement came not, in fact, from their own deficits, but from progressive educators' inability to see them as change agents—from controlling images that closed off the possibilities for change before they had even been explored? In the journey that this book describes, the mothers in *Madres Unidas* raised these questions, first among themselves and later publicly, among teachers at their children's new small school. Some teachers listened. Some change happened.

Many stories were told about the reform as the movement unfolded and began to attract headlines across the county and country. There were stories of a troubled urban school district undergoing a renaissance; of city officials responding to the demands of an organized community; of district leaders, NGO professionals, and teachers collaborating to effect change for Oakland's most disadvantaged children; of philanthropists recognizing the unique momentum of this partnership and infusing it with unprecedented donations. In the midst of this excitement were other stories that did not get told. Backstage stories, stories that countered the euphoric forward momentum of the reform or punctured the reform's ideals of racial equity and inclusion, or stories that simply lacked storytellers powerful enough to be heard, were lost from the chorus of voices that heralded a new era for Oakland's schools. This book, based on more than three years of ethnographic fieldwork, represents some of these backstage stories. Latina mothers, as I will argue, were both the most celebrated and the most vulnerable and excluded actors in the reform. They were praised as the initiators of the reform, the voice of urgency that demanded change, the face of an oppressed community whose fate stood to be reversed by the new small schools. They were positioned in the spotlight as they testified in school board meetings and public actions about the trials their children faced in large, overcrowded schools. But they were also silenced, and nowhere more so than when they sought to define their roles in ways that diverged from the dominant images of Latina mothers, or challenged progressive educators' self-image as inclusive and democratic reformers. The friction of everyday interactions behind the public drama of the reform was not the stuff of newspaper headlines or glossy fund-raising reports, and it was not likely to win more policy victories for Oakland's schools. But it was the site where important changes were being enacted, beyond the reach of public policy, changes in how ordinary people came to see themselves and others as partners in the struggle for social justice.

In telling the story of reform as experienced by the mothers in *Madres*

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Unidas, this book offers both a *testimonio* (testimony) and a counterstory, from the traditions of Latina feminist and critical race theories. As *testimonio*, it represents not an objective account of “what happened” during the reform (if such an account were possible), but rather the reflections and responses of a group of mothers bearing witness to the effects of the events on their lives.¹ Critical race theorists Solorzano and Yosso describe counter-storytelling as “a method of telling the story of those experiences that are not often told . . . and a tool for analyzing and challenging the stories of those in power and whose story is a natural part of the dominant discourse” (Solorzano and Yosso 2001, 475). In contrast to “majoritarian stories,” which recount events from the perspective of those with racial and social privilege, a counterstory recounts the experience of domination and resistance from the perspective of those on society’s margins (Yosso 2006).

Within education, writes Tara Yosso, majoritarian stories often feature Latino/a parents “who supposedly do not care about educating their children” (ibid., 9). Lacking an awareness of structural inequality, majoritarian stories fault Latino communities and students for unequal schooling outcomes.² The small schools movement, as I will show, intended to be a counterstory against such narratives: highlighting inequities that disadvantaged children and families in Oakland’s flatlands faced, and publicly shaming city officials for allowing such inequities to go undisturbed for so long. But even within the small schools movement, as within all social movements, power relations and hierarchies privileged some perspectives and voices and marginalized others. Within the constellation of district actors, professional reformers, community organizers, teachers, and parents that formed the unwieldy partnership of the small schools movement, Latina immigrant mothers were among the least powerful actors. This book features the stories of five of them, who came together along with the author to form a participatory research team as a way of countering the marginality they experienced in the process of planning their children’s new small “community school.” Through their stories, other parents’ stories are featured too, as the mothers in Madres Unidas systematically sought out the stories that had been silenced and brought them to the fore of public debate.

Although a counterstory necessarily disrupts the dominant story, the purpose of this story is not simply to challenge the narrative of reform in the small schools movement or its primary narrators, who considered

themselves allies of Latino parents in the struggle for social justice. Rather, by illuminating the perspective of *Madres Unidas*, this book aims to highlight the alternative possibilities for change found in Latina mothers' organizing on their own terms in "private" spaces, and in their own efforts to confront the barriers standing against them. *Mothers United* draws on a central insight of U.S. third-world feminist theory: that the position of women of color at the margins of society provides them with both a privileged understanding of domination and unique tools or tactics for resisting and outlasting it (Sandoval 2000; Collins 2000; hooks 1990). U.S. feminists of color have pointed out that marginality, the "outsider/within" or "in-between" status experienced by women of color in their daily lives, nurtures political skills and strategies for change that are often not recognized by the white power structure, white feminists, or leftist activists (Sandoval 2000; Collins 2000; Anzaldúa 1987; Hurtado 1989, 2003). Living at the interstices of racism, sexism, and classism, Latina mothers learn to read and respond to shifting currents of power as a mode of survival, and draw on an "eclectic paradigm for political mobilization" (Hurtado 2003, 265). As Chicana feminist Cherríe Moraga wrote in 1981, "Our strategy is how we cope" (Moraga 1981, 1).

The book thus has two parallel aims: first, to describe in ethnographic detail how *Madres Unidas* mobilized for change and the barriers they encountered even within a progressive reform movement, and second, 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. Corresponding to these aims I develop two central arguments. First, in engaging in reform, the *Madres* drew on cultural resources, experiences, and strategies for change that differed from those of professionals in the movement and were not often recognized or granted legitimacy by professionals. The *Madres* found themselves up against "controlling images" (Collins 2000) of what Latino parents could and should do, stereotypical images that prescribed certain paths of involvement while invalidating others. Second, through their work in *Madres Unidas*, the mothers deconstructed these images and supported each other in recasting their roles at the school. I argue, then, that participatory research from a critical Latina feminist lens offers a way to build upon and expand Latina women's own capacities for social critique and transformative resistance, and to extend their strategies for change

from Latina-controlled domestic spaces into the public sphere. In doing so, it disrupts essentializing views of social change movements and activist research methods that leave change in the hands of specially trained “experts.”

In pulling together the Madres’ testimonies of their experience (written reflections, public presentations, and a video documentary we coproduced) with my own ethnographic observations of the reform over three and a half years, the book is part *testimonio*, part counterstory, and part cultural critique of the small schools movement in the tradition of critical ethnography. Critical ethnography, according to Foley, Levinson, and Hurtig (2001), “aims to illuminate the workings of power in a way that may help transform oppressive power relations” (42). Although it has often been posed as separate and distinct from activist or collaborative research (Hale 2006; Foley and Valenzuela 2005), I will argue that my collaboration with Madres Unidas best enabled the cultural critique that is elaborated in these pages. Finally, this book is my testimony: the story of a graduate student researcher who hoped to contribute to a social-change movement, and stumbled upon fault lines I was ill prepared to navigate. As much as the story highlights the fraught partnership between immigrant mothers and progressive teachers, it also spotlights another partnership, equally unlikely, between a doctoral student and a group of Latina moms who had never done research before, who wagered together that research could be a process of both knowledge building and action for change. In the remainder of this introduction, I describe the context of the reform and introduce the major actors who coalesced, and sometimes collided, on the journey to bring new small schools to Oakland. All personal and institutional names in the book have been changed, with the exception of elected officials, whose complete names are given, and three members of Madres Unidas, Baudelia, Ofelia, and Carmen, who are identified by their first names, by their choice.

History of the Movement

Two momentous events set the stage for the small schools movement and the distinct roles that parents and teachers would play in the months to follow. The first was a large community rally, or “action” in the language of organizers, which drew more than two thousand parents, pastors, and teachers to an elementary school auditorium to demand new small schools for the Oakland flatlands. Organized by the Oakland Coalition for

Community Action (OCCA), a grassroots, faith-based group with a long history of organizing the neediest communities in Oakland, the Action for New Small Schools assembled parents of students in severely overcrowded, underperforming Oakland schools and teachers and community members who cared about them to testify before public officials about the trials of large, overcrowded schools. Primarily people of color, largely low-income, and many of them immigrants, this was a group that does not usually feel its power in citywide matters, least of all in educational policy. And yet on this November evening they had captured the attention of the most powerful players in Oakland education: Mayor Jerry Brown, state senator Don Perata, Superintendent Allen Arnold, and members of the city council, the school board, and the Oakland teachers' unions.

In the public spotlight, these officials listened to the testimonies of parents and were asked to publicly commit to supporting the creation of new small schools: by providing funds, policy, and facilities. One by one, the officials answered yes to all of the parents' demands. It was a euphoric moment. In the most surprising turn of all, Mayor Brown led the crowd in chanting, “¡Sí, se puede!” (Yes, we can!). The November action was an unquestionable victory for OCCA and the parents and students of the Oakland flatlands. Not only would it set in motion a chain of events that would lead to new small schools in Oakland, but, equally important, for the first time, many Oakland parents and community members who had previously been ignored by the city felt their own power. It was an experience everyone remembers.

Eleven months later, in October 2000, one hundred people gathered in the library of a local school for another momentous event. The Oakland school board had passed the “New Small Autonomous Schools” policy five months earlier, and on this Tuesday afternoon, the district was releasing the “Request for Proposals” (RFP) for new small schools. Leaders from OCCA and BACEE (Bay Area Center for Educational Equity), a partner school-reform organization, introduced the meeting as a “celebration” of the accomplishments of their organizing. Through the RFP, local groups of teachers and parents—design teams in the language of the RFP—would have the chance to make their dreams of new small schools a reality. The new Superintendent Costas, the new assistant superintendent of school reform, and several reform leaders were on hand to answer questions about the RFP process. The room was abuzz with positive energy, and there was lots of laughter and jokes. But the most striking feature about this

meeting was the absence of Oakland parents—or, more precisely, the absence of parents of Oakland flatland students who would be served by these new schools. In stark contrast to the crowd at the November action, this group was primarily white, and primarily teachers. Although at least two Spanish-speaking parents had found their way to the meeting, no translation was provided, and the Request for Proposals distributed that day was only in English.

And so it happened that the parents who were there to demand that the city provide their children with new small schools were not there to find out how these new schools would be created. Moreover, this seemed to everyone present a perfectly normal and acceptable state of affairs. To everyone, perhaps, except for one Spanish-speaking mother who could not understand the meeting. Why were there no other parents there to celebrate the victory of the RFP? Was this in fact a victory won *by* the parents *for* the teachers?

As both a grassroots-driven community organizing movement and a professionally driven educational reform, the small schools reform highlights the tensions surrounding the meaning of “community” and “participation.” There was no question that it was the crowds of parents and community members in dramatic public actions that was attracting public attention and signaling the community’s prominent role in this movement. But as the district’s RFP meeting reveals, teachers were also promised ownership of the new small schools, in ways that implicitly contradicted the reform’s community-based roots. The small schools movement embodied two potentially conflicting goals: it aimed to answer an urgent community need for new schools and greater participation in those schools, while also offering educators greater professional autonomy and an invitation to “dream” again. It would accomplish these twin goals through a “partnership” of both teachers and parents, supported by professional reformers and organizers, working together for supposedly shared interests. The movement thus brought together two distinct constituencies to collaborate in the creation of new schools: professional educators who helped design and later taught in the new small schools, and urban parents who lived in the community and sent their children to the new small schools. The tensions between professional autonomy and community participation were everywhere apparent, but seldom publicly addressed. Instead, as I will show, a parallel discourse of celebrating the community roots of the

reform coexisted with a discourse of doubt, concern, and misgiving about the ability of parents (at least these parents) to be equal partners in school design and reform.

From its inception, the movement for new small schools in Oakland was framed by its supporters as being fundamentally about a new relationship between schools and their communities. Unlike most reforms, they argued, this reform arises from and is driven by the community. OCCA organizers and BACEE staff like to trace the history of the movement to a group of Latina mothers from a large elementary school in Oakland, who began meeting at a Catholic church on Saturdays while their children were in catechism. The “Washington moms,” as they came to be known after the name of the school, met to discuss what they could do about the problems at their children’s school. Gradually, they realized that most of the school’s problems stemmed from its large size, and particularly from the overcrowded building. They began to see the need for small schools.

The problems of Washington School, it turned out, were not unique, but part of a troubling citywide pattern that disproportionately affected Oakland’s flatland neighborhoods. The movement for small schools was quickly framed as a movement for equity. Organizers of the movement drew a map that graphically illustrated the disparities in size and academic achievement between schools in the flatlands and schools in the hills. The hills schools, which ranged in size from 246 to 374 students, boasted dramatically higher academic indexes than the flatlands schools, which ranged in size from 490 to 1,400 students. Unspoken in the map, but known to almost everyone in Oakland, was that the flatland neighborhoods are overwhelmingly made up of people of color, while the hills residents are predominantly white. Mirroring national patterns, the schools with the most overcrowding and the poorest achievement records were the schools with the highest concentrations of Latinos and other students of color.³ The map asked, “Is this fair?”

As the Washington moms discussed the problems at their children’s school, an OCCA organizer working with the mothers read *The Power of Their Ideas* by Deborah Meier. This book, which quickly became the progressive teachers’ bible, tells the story of the creation of new small alternative schools in New York City’s East Harlem. Serving an inner-city population of mostly low-income kids of color, the small schools became hugely

successful, and national icons of reform in urban education. The OCCA organizer shared the book with the Washington moms, and the seeds for a small schools movement in Oakland were planted.

When asked about the roots of the movement, key leaders mention both the Washington moms and Debbie Meier's book. The significance of both of these elements symbolizes what they believe is unique about the Oakland movement: the pairing of an urgent need in the community with a demonstrated educational reform solution, the coming together of community organizing and research-based school reform. On the one hand was a body of research showing that small schools could boost achievement for minority and low-income students, and lead to more equitable outcomes (Fine and Somerville 1998; Meier 1995). On the other was a critical mass of parents and teachers determined to change Oakland education. To bring these two together, OCCA organizers invited school officials and parent leaders on a trip to New York to visit some of the small schools there. The trip is regarded as a watershed event in the lives of the organizers and in the life of the movement. OCCA's director says the movement "got legs when we went to New York. That's when it became real, people saw it. People came back you know, just full of energy . . . and that energy never got lost."

New York thus became a model for Oakland organizers, along with the reform example of Debbie Meier. It was also the impetus behind OCCA's partnering with a local school-reform organization, in what was to become another unique aspect of the Oakland movement. The Bay Area Center for Educational Equity (BACEE), part of a national, university-affiliated network of restructuring schools, was sponsoring its own reform work in local schools along similar lines of the small schools in Harlem. The partnership with OCCA seemed a natural next step for both organizations.

The Partnership

The partnership between a grassroots community-organizing group and a research-based school-reform organization, unique among urban reform movements, represented in the minds of participants the coming together of "what the community wants" with "what research says is best," or the merging of "political will" with "educational expertise." As a BACEE staff member wrote early in the partnership, "The collaboration between

OCCA and BACEE has created an *educationally informed political will* serving to reform an entire system” (emphasis added). In this view, each organization brought something the other lacked and needed in order to achieve reform that would be sustainable and citywide. But the juxtaposition of “political will” and “educational expertise” deserves close examination, because it has important ramifications for how the reform played out and, in particular, how “parents” and “community” were constructed in the reform. Because OCCA represented parents and the community, and BACEE represented professional educators, an analysis of each organization’s goals and perceived roles lends insight into the respective roles ascribed to professional expertise and “the community” in the partnership for new small schools.

OCCA

OCCA is a federation of forty congregations and neighborhood-based organizations representing forty thousand families in low-income and moderate-income communities in Oakland. Founded in 1977 by Jesuits inspired by the teachings of Saul Alinsky, the organization has become the largest civic organization in Oakland. OCCA is part of a growing national movement of faith-based organizing.⁴ It is an affiliate of the Pacific Institute for Community Organizations (PICO), a nationwide network of congregation-based community organizations representing one million families. As a PICO affiliate, OCCA draws on an established method of faith-based organizing that has been well documented by Richard Wood (2002). I will elaborate on OCCA’s organizing method in later chapters, but here I will highlight those aspects of its method that allow OCCA to represent the “political will” of the city, and that brought OCCA to spearhead the campaign for new small schools.

The Latina mothers who met every Saturday at St. Isabel’s Church while their children were in catechism illustrate a core feature of OCCA’s organizing model: the church as a community gathering place, a place to assess the concerns of the community, and a natural organizing base. The roots of the small schools movement at St. Isabel’s also illustrate how OCCA begins with local concerns to build citywide campaigns. The primary method of culling the concerns of the community is through “one-to-ones”: individual, face-to-face meetings between OCCA organizers

or parent leaders and community members, usually parishioners or congregants in OCCA member congregations. These meetings, described as “a deliberate process of relationship building,” are to learn the needs of the community, identify potential leaders, and enlist their participation in OCCA organizing activities. Martha, an OCCA organizer since 1998, sums up the organizing process this way: “It means going to people’s houses and sitting down and listening to their stories. And then getting them to a meeting.”

When enough of the same concerns start turning up in different parts of the city, OCCA mounts a citywide campaign. Only after months or years of organizing can OCCA confidently present city officials with a specific agenda for change. In citywide actions, such as the action for new small schools described earlier, OCCA members confront public officials in a planned, strategic way and make concrete requests that the officials have the power to grant. The legitimacy of OCCA’s demands is always backed up by numbers: the number of community members who participated in one-to-ones, the number of people who came to the action, the number of families OCCA represents. This last number is always cited at the beginning of each action or meeting during the “credential,” as a reminder to those in attendance (especially public officials) of the political power of OCCA. It was this organizing model that allowed OCCA to confidently say of the small schools agenda, “This is what the community wants.”

In framing Oakland’s small schools reform, OCCA looked to the New York small schools for hope, as an example of what was possible. But OCCA leaders also recognized that Oakland’s context was different from that of New York and required a special role for community organizing. OCCA leaders wanted Oakland’s small schools reform to be different from New York’s in some fundamental ways, and these ways hinged on new roles for parents and the community in the design and functioning of the new small schools.

Martha was one of the OCCA organizers who had gone to New York, and she explains OCCA’s role this way: “OCCA has insisted that parents be involved at every step and at every level of the school, and that is different from what they did in New York. In New York it was all directed by teachers, because teachers initiated the schools according to their visions of pedagogy. And they created a lot of choices for the parents. In New York, the parent is like the consumer of educational services and they’ve got a great menu. And they told us when we were there, ‘Here the parents are

working-class, a lot of parents have two jobs, they don't have time to be on committees. That's not what the parents want, the parents want to be able to trust in the school, so they can leave their kids there and know that the teachers will teach them well. That's what the parents want.' That's what they told us very brazenly and I remember when he said that, Lucy [an OCCA parent leader] and I were like: 'Well, in Oakland it's not going to be that way.' So it's like a contradiction, because here we are using District 4 as a model, but in District 4 it was all teacher-led, and what we want here is a much greater role for parents."

In entering into the partnership with BACEE, OCCA assumed the responsibility of "making sure that parents are at the center of the new schools." OCCA's director explains it this way: "small schools [are] a vehicle [for creating] a place where parents can have real power and can own their schools and have a sense of . . . that connectedness that they are truly invested in the education of their kids." One of the goals of the movement, for him, was to create "an understanding and a culture where parents and community feel like these are really *our* schools."

At the same time, OCCA recognized that opening small schools was a new kind of organizing and demanded a level of educational expertise that OCCA leaders did not have. Joining up with BACEE was a way to take a community-initiated reform to a broader, more systemic level. "BACEE are the educational experts," OCCA organizers frequently said. As Martha explained to some parents, "They [BACEE] have studied all the reform efforts across the country." "We need them. We're not educators," said Laura, another organizer. "BACEE is indispensable. We totally need BACEE," said Martha. "It really is the kind of partnership where it really couldn't happen without either party.

"What are our roles? It's sort of like, the work we do, we go out, it's like plowing the ground, tilling the soil, you know, creating that readiness, that hunger, reawakening people's imaginations and the ability to dream, you know, and getting people to trust again . . . So it's like we're out there working the soil, and planting seeds, and then, as they start to grow, they really need to be cared for, and that's sort of where BACEE comes in. You know, because if you don't have what BACEE has you're gonna end up with a bunch of crappy schools." In this analysis, the community provides the hunger for change, while reform experts provide the solutions. OCCA and BACEE staff alike described BACEE's role as providing technical assistance and professional development. BACEE was seen as a repository of

knowledge about school reform; as one staff member said, BACEE brought “a wealth of ideas” about what it takes to create a different kind of school.

The BACEE–OCCA partnership was also frequently described as a marriage of theory and practice. Erica, a former teacher at Washington who became the Small Schools Coordinator for BACEE, explained: “BACEE had always kind of had a theory around small schools and had not really found a way to do the work [before partnering with OCCA].” Erica was working with the group of moms at Washington who were attempting to start a new small school at the time BACEE joined up with OCCA. “At that point [BACEE] came in and sort of became the voice of research and theory and, you know, experience with small schools, and was a nice marriage for the community voice, which brought the urgency and the heartfelt, you know, ‘this is what we want for our kids.’”

As a regional affiliate of the Just Schools Network (JSN), BACEE was part of a school-reform movement that began in the early 1980s. Founded in 1984 by a university professor, the Just Schools Network connected new and restructured schools around a set of common principles emphasizing personalized teaching and learning to stimulate intellectual engagement. However, the principles did not directly address issues of equity and community involvement, which were paramount in Oakland. In the late 1990s, under pressure from Bay Area affiliates, JSN added a tenth common principle, dubbed the “democracy and equity” principle. This principle stated that “the school should model democratic practices,” and “the school should honor diversity and build on the strengths of its communities, deliberately and explicitly challenging all forms of inequity.”

Addressing inequity had been a focus of BACEE for some time, and community organizing was gradually seen as a necessary tool for this. For BACEE, partnering with OCCA was part of an emerging recognition that “the community must be engaged for reform to be sustainable.” As one BACEE staff member put it, “This was the community piece we were missing.” BACEE’s director explained, “Our theory of action includes connecting school reform to the issues that the community cares about. Can there ever be equitable school reform without organizing the voices that are least heard? I think not.”

In this way, two community-based organizations decided together that they were going to change the face of Oakland public education. BACEE brought the wisdom of past reform efforts and a set of principles about how to create schools that work, while the organizing of OCCA ensured

that the reform would answer the needs of the community. Enter a new superintendent, who arrived in Oakland promising “reform, renewal, and renaissance.” George Costas was charismatic, enthusiastic, and experienced, and he raised the hopes of BACEE and OCCA leaders that they might have a third partner in the Oakland Unified School District. The new assistant superintendent of school reform, hired specifically for the small schools reform, put it this way: “OCCA is the engine, the District is the legs, and BACEE is the brains.” What would drive the success of the movement, he said, is the parents, the community. But BACEE had the knowledge about school reform, and the District would provide the infrastructure to carry it out.

The Oakland Renaissance

When Superintendent George Costas took over the Oakland schools in March 2000, he inherited one of the most troubled urban districts in the country. School board member Dan Siegel later wrote in a public memo that before Costas arrived, “the District was mired in failure, corruption, incompetence, and neglect. An attitude of institutionalized racism prevailed. People within and outside the District acted upon the explicit or implicit understanding that since the majority of our students are low-income African American and Hispanic children, failure was both predictable and acceptable.” Reflecting this sentiment, a headline in the *San Francisco Examiner* on July 15, 2000, read, “Lousy Test Scores No Surprise in Oakland.” The article reported that in the latest round of standardized testing, Oakland students were among the lowest performing in the nation. Data from the California Department of Education show that roughly three-quarters of Oakland’s fifty-six elementary schools received an Academic Performance Index (API) ranking of 5 or less, classifying them as “low-performing” by the state’s performance measure.⁵

George Costas arrived in the superintendent’s office like a knight in shining armor. He was uniquely positioned to harness the grassroots organizing and reform work that had begun and lead the Oakland schools in a renaissance. As an Oakland native himself who graduated from Oakland public schools, Costas had the respect of the community. He often said that as a student he had hated school and that both his parents were dropouts. This struck a chord with parents who were frustrated and disillusioned with the city’s schools and tired of being told that their kids were “bad

kids.” Costas showed himself quick to collaborate with community partners who were pushing for change. As one OCCA organizer said, “Costas truly supports us. I mean, he really gets it.”

But Costas’s special affinity was with teachers. Perhaps because he credited teachers with having turned his own life around, Costas understood the critical importance of good teachers in changing the life chances for struggling students. As Oakland’s new superintendent, attracting new and talented teachers to the district was one of his top priorities. Oakland faced a particularly severe shortage of qualified teachers when he arrived in March 2000. Hundreds of posts were filled by temporaries on emergency credentials. Demonstrating his commitment to changing this, one of Costas’s first moves in office was to authorize a three-year, 24 percent salary increase for teachers. That decision, coming on the tail of the school board’s unanimous vote to approve the New Small Autonomous Schools policy, seemed to signify the dawn of a new era for Oakland teachers. Oakland, so long a neglected backwater in public education, was finally becoming a place to be. As one reform leader commented, “There was nowhere to go but up.”

Costas embraced the small schools reform for many reasons, but to him the most exciting part about it was the opportunity to reawaken the creative energy of teachers—as he put it, to get teachers who were burned out by the system to “start dreaming again.” A district flyer announcing the release of the Request for Proposals for new small schools asked, “Have you ever dreamed of creating your own school?” The flyer was put in all teachers’ mailboxes in advance of the special meeting to introduce them to the RFP. It is no surprise, then, that the teachers who packed into the school library that fall afternoon were bubbling over with enthusiasm and anticipation. Costas knew many of them, and greeted them with hugs. It was a friendly, collegial atmosphere. Teachers were right to believe that Costas respected them, and that they were at the forefront of a major district change effort. They were right to believe that they were the wood party in this reform.

Teachers

Who were the teachers who were drawn by the call to start their own new schools? In some ways, they were like teachers everywhere; in other ways, they were a very distinct group. Demographically, the teachers who

responded to the district's Request for Proposals for new small schools mirrored teachers across the state: they were overwhelmingly female, and overwhelmingly white. California's teachers that year were 70 percent female and 75 percent white; within Oakland Unified, the figures were 70 percent female and 50 percent white, with African Americans and Latinos comprising a much larger share of the teaching staff than statewide (30 percent and 10 percent, respectively). Among teachers who completed surveys at the RFP release for new small schools in Oakland (fifty-nine total), 81 percent were female, and 68 percent were white.⁶ The thirteen teachers who formed the design team and teaching staff for United Community School (UCS), where *Madres Unidas* took shape, exemplified these demographic patterns to an extreme: all were women, and all but two were white. Another factor made them similar to urban teachers across the country: few of them lived in the neighborhood where they taught, and even fewer had children in the local public schools. The same survey at the district's release of the Request for Proposals revealed that of fifty-nine teachers hoping to start new schools, only eight, or 13.6 percent, had children enrolled in Oakland public schools. Teachers, then, were not motivated by self-interest or concern for their own children or communities.

Instead, a passionate commitment to social justice and equity characterized the teachers who assembled to design new small schools for Oakland's flatlands. A pervasive idealism infused small schools meetings, teachers' writing in proposals, and their interviews. For both veteran teachers who had endured years of frustration in underfunded public schools and newer teachers who often faced the worst teaching conditions, new small schools represented the chance to finally enact their dreams about what education could be. The language of "dreaming," actively promoted by Superintendent Costas and other reform leaders, was pervasive in teachers' talk about new small schools. Dreaming allowed teachers to temporarily ignore—and transcend—the realities of inequality that had plagued their schools thus far.⁷ As one teacher on the UCS design team explained to me, confessing that their team had proposed a design feature that would be logistically difficult, if not impossible, to achieve, "We were told, 'Dream. What would your ideal be?'" Many of the teachers had seen their ideals deferred for too long to pass up this invitation. As we will see in chapter 1, laboring within the overcrowded multitrack year-round school had been a frustrating exercise in futility, and teachers longed for a clean slate to try out their reform ideas.

But beyond transcending the constraining conditions of existing schools, teachers saw in the new small schools the opportunity to live out their ideals for a more just, equitable, and democratic society. “I’ve never really given up on my sixties ideals,” said one retired teacher, explaining his motivation to join a design team for a new small school. “I still feel it’s possible to create a society that’s much more equitable, and I’ve been trying to do that. So, something about a vision of an equitable society. And being a part of, being a part of a movement.” Linda, a teacher on the UCS design team, said, “The greatest thing is that this thing came out of the need for a more just and equitable education for kids here in Oakland, who were in overcrowded schools, so it’s kind of like continuing that legacy.” She explained that the teachers on her design team identified with each other because they shared “[the] same ideals . . . I mean, that’s why we’re doing this. Same interests in, our theme is social justice, and we had one meeting where we all went around and shared about our histories, our personal histories, and the level of activism that there is and has been in this group is really, really, incredible.” These are teachers, she said, “with the same kind of vision about a just society.”

Given the sincerity with which these teachers wanted better opportunities for the families of Oakland’s flatlands, many were surprised at how difficult it was to achieve the kind of collaboration and community involvement they envisioned on their design teams; how, in spite of their best intentions, parents were still often angry and disillusioned about the school design process. As Erica, the small schools coordinator for BACEE, said, “the [teachers] that are coming forward are some of the most well-intentioned people in the district, you know, people that have wonderful relationships with parents.” The contrast between the ideals and intentions of educators in the small schools movement and the realities of parent participation on design teams was one of the greatest paradoxes of the reform. It would take the persistent involvement of determined parents to push the translation from good intentions to more equitable relationships.

Enter the Ethnographer

I entered the small schools movement as a doctoral student in the spring of 2000, at the peak of excitement surrounding the passing of the New Small Autonomous Schools policy. As a graduate student with personal roots in the Bay Area, I was motivated by an idealism of my own: a conviction that

research could contribute to social change, and that academic researchers could work in partnership with local activists to benefit the community. I hoped to conduct an ethnography of the movement that would be both useful to movement organizers and acceptable to my dissertation committee. I strongly believed in the importance of the small schools reform as a movement for equity and social justice, as it was framed by movement organizers, and I wanted to lend my research to their goals. To that end, I approached the leadership of OCCA and BACEE to gain permission for my research and seek their input into its direction. OCCA staff directed me to meet and build rapport with parent leaders first before attempting any formal research. So, at their suggestion, I began attending local organizing committee meetings in the neighborhood that became the focus of my research. I joined the design team of parents and teachers who were planning a new small school, and I offered my services as a translator. Nearly all of the parents at these meetings were Spanish-speaking Latino immigrants, and although some of the teachers and OCCA organizers spoke Spanish, translation was spotty and haphazard. I began translating and interpreting informally for a group of parents, and soon was asked to translate formal documents for both teachers and parents.

It was through my role as a translator that I gained “access” and eventually earned the trust of parents and teachers on the design team for United Community School. My own racial and cultural identity placed me in a unique position with respect to the teachers, who were 90 percent white (all but two), and the parents, who were predominantly Spanish-speaking immigrants from Central America and Mexico. As a bilingual, bicultural Central American Latina who is racially white and class privileged, I had multiple poles of commonality and difference with both teachers and parents. My role as a graduate student from a prestigious school of education gave me an “in” with teachers and access to meetings and information about the reform that parents did not always have. It was in this capacity of “translation,” not just from English to Spanish and vice versa, but from the world of education research and reform to the world of Latino immigrant parents, that I first felt the need for a participatory research project that would involve Latino parents as partners in research. But it would be a year of painstaking ethnographic research and relationship building before a participatory research project would be possible.

During my first year of research, I gathered data through the methods of participant-observation, interviews, and examining key documents and

newspaper articles on the small schools movement. I attended as many city-wide meetings on small schools as I could, including school board meetings, district workshops, citywide and neighborhood actions, and local organizing committee meetings. I interviewed key players from both partner organizations and the district to learn their goals for the movement and their views of the roles parents were and should be playing in the reform. In the fall of 2000, I began attending the weekly design team meetings for United Community School (whose name was still undecided), then meeting at Whitman Elementary School. One of the most overcrowded schools in the district, Whitman Elementary was designated “high priority” for the creation of new small schools, and was recommended for my research by OCCA and BACEE because of its strong parent leadership that had been active in OCCA’s organizing. At the time of my research, the school enrolled roughly 1,400 students in grades K-5, of whom 77 percent were Latino, 10 percent Asian American, 9 percent African American, and 3 percent Caucasian. Seventy-seven percent of its students were designated limited-English-proficient, and 86 percent were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. The school had some of the lowest achievement scores in the district.

It was on the Whitman design team that I met and got to know Baudelia, Ofelia, and Carolina, three of the mothers who later helped form *Madres Unidas*. Baudelia, a mother of three in her late thirties, had been active in citywide organizing and was somewhat of a public figure in the small schools movement. Recognized as an articulate, fearless, and tireless parent who could both speak up to powerful officials and listen to the concerns of less confident parents, Baudelia had leadership skills that were lost on few. In a testament to her outgoing nature, she welcomed my presence at design team meetings from the start, and soon allowed me into her confidence, sharing the latest developments from the school and the trials, frustrations, and breakthroughs she experienced as she fought to keep parents at the center of school planning. It was in no small part owing to Baudelia that I came to see a participatory research team with parents as an increasingly possible and necessary response to the politics of exclusion.

Madres Unidas

On a late Friday afternoon, a group of women are seated around a small kitchen table in animated discussion. Half-empty cups of coffee and the

remnants of Ofelia's famous enchiladas are surrounded by notebooks, papers, and pens on the table before us. The sounds of children playing in a nearby room intermingle with the mothers' excited voices as they discuss last night's meeting at the school and the latest affronts to parents. Finally, after much venting, the question is raised, "What do we *do* about this?"

Here Baudelia takes out a sheet of paper she has typed up (in her spare time, she says) called "Preliminary research plan." She proceeds to read the following out loud to the group (in Spanish; I offer the translation):

Justification. Based on our own experiences and previous needs in a large school, and our participation as parents in the organization of a new small school, we are motivated to carry out an in-depth research study, with the goal of arriving at a positive conclusion after learning the causes and effects of each of the problems.

General objectives. (1) To get to know and analyze the most pressing problems of parents, teachers, students, and community within the school. (2) To get to know and compare the academic progress of each student in all major subjects in the bilingual program.

Specific objectives. (1) To learn the history of the new small school and its origins. (2) To identify the main problems in the school and their causes. (3) To learn what role parents are playing within the school. (4) To discover the differences between United Community School and Whitman. (5) To determine the level of interest and enthusiasm of parents in participating in the school. (6) To find out what is the relationship between parents and teachers.

Baudelia then reads a list of a proposed research activities, resources, and possible outcomes. When she finishes, the group around the table breaks into spontaneous applause. Amelia, the first to speak, asks in admiration, "How did all of that occur to you?" The mothers agree that Baudelia's ideas are all wonderful. Carmen, laughing, says, "I would have proposed exactly the same thing!" Then, reflectively, she says that this is where she could tell that Baudelia "has studied" (translated roughly as having gone to school). She says, "I realize how important school is, and I have missed out."

"No, no!" Baudelia immediately counters. "It's not about that. We're all equals here. I have ideas, but you have ideas, too." The women debate

the importance of being educated, but agree that they all have important experience to contribute.

This scene characterizes many of our meetings, which took place in Ofelia's kitchen every Friday for nearly a year. Baudelia, who had been a social worker in Guadalajara, Mexico, before immigrating to the United States, was the most educated member of the group, and often took the lead in proposing research activities. The other mothers greatly admired her ability with words, her experience in social work and activism, and her confidence in dealing with school staff. But Baudelia also played a leadership role in encouraging the other mothers and affirming their right and ability to contribute, regardless of their level of experience or education. It was this quality that made her a natural leader and helped create the atmosphere of mutual respect, *confianza* (trust), and *convivencia* (living together) that made Madres Unidas possible.

Madres Unidas began meeting a week before the new small school opened.⁸ The group consisted of five immigrant mothers: two from Mexico, two from El Salvador, and one from Guatemala. All but one of them had been active on the design team for United Community School and had children in the new small school. We had shared impressions, observations, and frustrations after many meetings at Whitman Elementary School. This collective experience formed a natural basis for a participatory research project. When I approached Baudelia and Ofelia with the idea of forming a parent research team, both were immediately enthusiastic. Ofelia, an energetic and outspoken young mother from El Salvador, offered her home as a meeting place. The mother of two children in first and second grades, Ofelia worked full-time as a housecleaner and nanny for a wealthy San Francisco family, and still found time to be a parent leader on the UCS design team. Like Baudelia, Ofelia was frustrated with the process on the design team and eager to see parents included more meaningfully in school planning. She saw the research as a natural extension of her work in organizing the new small school: "Las dos cosas, o sea están juntas, porque es lo mismo, Madres Unidas es como algo que queremos hacer para mejorar la nueva escuela . . . Y todas estamos aquí porque nos interesa el futuro de nuestros hijos, y queremos algo mejor para ellos, y para nuestra comunidad" (The two things, I mean, they're together, because it's the same thing, Madres Unidas is like something we want to do to improve the new school . . . And we're all here because we care about

the future of our children, and we want something better for them and for our community).

Other mothers in the group had less experience with organizing and were motivated by the desire to learn, to develop themselves in new ways, and to be in community. Amelia, a mother from Guatemala with a son in first grade and an older daughter in high school, worked as a housecleaner for several families in nearby suburban Orinda. Amelia explained, “Lo que a mí me llamó la atención [fue] la investigación, porque yo no sabía que era investigación. Quería saber cómo se formaba, qué significado tenía, y eso fue lo que más me motivó” (What caught my attention was research, because I didn’t know what research was. I wanted to know, how do you do it, what does it mean? And that was what most motivated me). At Ofelia’s urging, Amelia had participated in the meetings at Whitman to plan the new small school, and was slowly becoming more involved. In spite of being what she considered to be a shy person, she saw the importance of being involved at the school for her son: “[Los padres] representan a la escuela de sus hijos, y debemos de dar una participación . . . Nuestros hijos se sienten orgullosos que nosotros estamos en esta investigación, no sólo por nosotros sino por ellos” ([Parents] represent their children’s school, and we should give our participation . . . Our children feel proud that we’re doing this research, not just for us but for them).

Carmen, Ofelia’s sister, was also charting new territory in joining the research team. “Para mí la investigación fue algo que me pareció muy importante cuando me dijeron, pero al mismo tiempo pensaba que una madre normal como yo que siempre estaba con mi niño, pensé que no iba a poder” (For me, research was something that seemed very important when they told me, but at the same time I thought that a normal mother like myself who was always with her son, I thought I wasn’t going to be able to). A self-described housewife (*ama de casa*), Carmen was not working when *Madres Unidas* began, but had volunteered in school classrooms for more than ten years, first for her niece and later for her son. When her older son reached junior high school, Carmen and her husband were so dismayed with the conditions in his public school that they decided to pull him out and sent him to El Salvador to finish school there. Carmen’s youngest son, Alex, was now in preschool, and she hoped to send him to the new small school. At the encouragement of her sister and the rest of us, Carmen joined the research team.

The final member of the group, Carolina, was a young single mother

from Nayarit, Mexico, who worked as a waitress in a local restaurant. Her son Paco was starting second grade at UCS. Carolina was an animated participant in the Whitman design team meetings, and I always appreciated her cheerful commentary afterwards and whenever I saw her at the school. She joined the research team at Ofelia's invitation, eager for the chance to keep company with other parents and to learn things that would help her son's school. She later said, "Yo tampoco no sabía nada de investigación. Para mí era como algo, como un trabajo, que tenía que cumplir, y de allí también sacar muchas ideas buenas que nos ayuda para nosotros mismos y para los demás padres" (I didn't know anything about research either. For me it was like something, like a job that I had to carry out, and from there also get a lot of good ideas that could help us and the other parents).

Participatory research, in the words of Patricia Maguire, is "a process of collective, community-based investigation, education, and action for structural and personal transformation" (1993, 157). Although the process is often instigated by an outside researcher, ideally the research question or problem is defined by the community.⁹ In *Madres Unidas*, the research problem we collectively chose to explore grew out of the year we had spent together on the design team before the participatory research began. Most broadly, the problem addressed the role(s) that parents were playing in the new small school and the ways these roles were being defined (and limited) by school staff. We wanted to start by examining the history of school and recording the experiences of parents and others who had participated in its development. Another goal was simply to understand how the reform was working at UCS. If UCS was a story of reform, what exactly was this reform and how was it being put into practice? This was the question most compelling to the mothers, who, as parents who had participated in planning the school, were desperate to understand their experience and figure out how closely the school was adhering to its vision.

In gaining support for the participatory research project from the leadership at BACEE, OCCA, and UCS, I invoked the goals of the small schools movement. If the reform was coming from the community, why shouldn't the research and evaluation also come from the community? Involving parents as researchers was another way for parents and community members to take ownership over the new small schools. Initially, the idea sold. In collaboration with BACEE, I wrote and obtained a grant to fund the parent research as part of a larger evaluation of the reform. Although conflicts would arise later as to the nature, purpose, and prod-

ucts of the research, in the beginning we felt we had a rare window of opportunity to follow the parents' own desires.

Madres Unidas met weekly in Ofelia's home for the first year of United Community School. We planned and carried out focus groups with parents, teachers, and students, and individual interviews with the principal, parents, and OCCA organizers. With the grant I obtained, we were able to buy a video camera and hire a video instructor who taught the mothers how to use the video camera. We recorded most of our research activities and watched videotape together as a means of evaluating our performance and analyzing what we learned. We also recorded several of our own meetings. One product of this research was a video documentary, *Madres Unidas: Parents Researching for Change*, produced in 2003 and intended to speak to a broader audience of parents, teachers, and activists than my dissertation would reach.

But our formal research activities and products were only the skeleton of our work together. The heart and lifeblood of Madres Unidas, what sustained our engagement in research and action at the school, was the *being together*—in Spanish, *convivencia*—the relationships built through the sharing of daily struggles and victories, which extended, for many of us, beyond the scope and time frame of our formal research. During the years of my research, the mothers' lives and families were stung by tense marriages, alcoholism, drug abuse, illness, divorce, accidents, and death. We attended funerals and vigils together, weathered personal and national tragedies, and mourned the death of a child's classmate in a hit-and-run accident outside the school. But there were also birthday parties, first communions, and baby showers, full of laughter and pride. These contrasts, I came to realize, the collective responses to the "sadnesses as well as joys" of life (González 2001), were the source of the mothers' resilience and *sobrevivencia* (survival and beyond). I came to recognize the mothers' ways of building community as an integral part of our research process, dissolving the artificial distinction between research and everyday life, and offering a sharp critique of school practices that aimed to exclude personal experience and relationships from processes of school planning and reform. As I learned from the mothers, I was led to Latina feminist theoretical perspectives as a way to understand their efforts for change.

A Latina feminist framework, like other race-based feminisms (hooks 1989, 1990; Collins 2000), draws attention to the everyday lives of Latina women as the place where oppression and inequality are experienced and

resisted daily (Delgado-Bernal 2006; Villenas 2001).¹⁰ Chicana/Latina feminist scholars have highlighted the “everyday resistance strategies of Chicanas/Mexicanas that are often less visible, less organized, and less recognizable” (Delgado-Bernal 2006, 116). Countering deficit views of Latino parents, these scholars have shown that Latina mothers are already involved in making change in everyday life, by nurturing resistance to oppression at home with their children—using the home and familial cultural practices to resist oppressive structures outside the home (Delgado-Bernal 2006; Villenas 2006b, 2001). In the informal and marginalized spaces of the domestic, Latina women interrogate their experiences with hostile institutions and find ways of being in the world that preserve their dignity and wholeness. Latina/Chicana feminist thought, according to Villenas (2006a), is about “excavating” this “resilience, *sobrevivencia* [survival and beyond], knowledge and acts of improvisation” for the struggle for social change. *Mothers United* draws on these theoretical perspectives to illuminate the mothers’ critique of the small schools reform and the ways the mothers, through their research, created an alternative space that promoted personal transformation and enhanced their own capacity to make change in their lives.

In the chapters that follow, I draw liberally on the mothers’ analysis of their research activities, from their written reflections and our group discussions, along with my own ethnographic observations, to illuminate their critique of reform at United Community School and their own visions for change. Chapter 1 begins by providing some ethnographic context for the scenes that follow, describing the conditions at Whitman Elementary School and the motivations of teachers, reformers, and parents for participating in the movement for new small schools. I aim to show that teachers and parents brought vastly different motives and frames of reference to the reform process, which set the stage for later conflicts in school planning and design. Chapter 2 provides a close-up look at the Whitman Elementary design team as they organized to plan their new small school. I profile Baudelia and describe in detail her efforts to claim a role for herself and other parents in the design process. Baudelia’s organizing, which sought to draw upon parents’ personal experiences and reflections in the school planning process, was gradually marginalized by teachers who had other views of parents’ roles and subscribed to different sources of legitimacy and authority. I argue that teachers’ failure to recognize parents’ experience as resources led them to reproduce neocolonial relationships

between white professionals and parents of color. Chapter 3 explores competing visions of “community” that surfaced in the planning of the school’s admissions policy, as teachers and parents negotiated the difficult question of who should get into the new “community school.” Profoundly different values and understandings of “community” caused friction between teachers and parents, but they were never openly addressed. Whereas teachers constructed “community” in the service of their educational goals, the mothers in Madres Unidas articulated a view of community derived from the Latino cultural concept of *educación*, which prioritized reciprocal relationships as the basis for all learning and school reform.

Chapter 4 turns to a central theme of the book, controlling images of Latino parents, and examines how these became both sources of control and sources of mobilization in the negotiation of parents’ roles in the school’s first year. While teachers attempted to use controlling images to limit the subject positions of parents and punish parents who transgressed accepted roles, Madres Unidas recognized and resisted these dynamics through their research and work at the school. In a dramatic example of this resistance, Baudelia resigned from her position as cochair of the school’s leadership council. Chapter 5 takes us inside Ofelia’s kitchen to examine the space that nurtured our work together. I profile Ofelia and illustrate her hosting of the group as part of her commitment to the home as a site of healing and resistance, and a base for community change. Highlighting key concepts from Latina feminist thought that were core aspects of our group, including *confianza* (trust), *testimonio* (testimony), and *convivencia* (living together), I examine how Ofelia’s kitchen became a counterspace that supported personal and collective transformation and enabled public acts of resistance at the school.

While the safe space of the home nurtured our work together, it was the mothers’ planned actions at the school that best expressed their visions for change. Chapter 6 explores the mothers’ efforts to take the lessons from their research into the public realm, educating teachers and parents through two major research products: the public presentations on their research to teachers and the parent center they founded at the school the following year. I highlight Carmen and Amelia, two mothers most visibly transformed in their roles at the school, as examples of new leadership that Madres Unidas made possible. In telling the story of the mothers’ hard-won changes, I describe how professionals both obstructed and supported the process. This chapter reveals the difficulties Latino parents face in

earning legitimacy as change agents, and ends with some lessons for educators who wish to work collaboratively with immigrant parents.

The final chapter steps back to reflect on the value of participatory research as a form of activist ethnography and some theoretical and practical challenges it presents for researchers who wish to support social-change movements. While collaborating with Madres Unidas as coresearchers allowed insights into and impacts on school change that would have been unattainable for me as a lone ethnographer, it also brought conflict from movement organizers who saw it as an intrusion on their own change efforts. This conflict, I argue, reveals much about the barriers facing the least powerful actors in social-change movements. In strengthening Latina women's capacity for critique and resistance, a *mujerista* vision of participatory research unsettles dominant assumptions about social change, and makes space for new voices and visions on the path to reform. If the small schools movement privileged the perspectives and discourses of professional educators, participatory research provided a way for Latina mothers to "talk back" (hooks 1989), and, in their words, new visions of community, justice, and rights are sketched.