The Able Bendiciones of Latina Mothers: A Foreword

While reading María Cioè-Peña's manuscript in order to write this Foreword, I found myself crying. The testimonios of these immigrant monolingual Spanish-speaking Latinx mothers made me feel deeply – sometimes sadness, sometimes anger, most of the time admiration for their unwavering support of their children, children who have been labeled as disabled and as English language learners by a school system. In these pages, Cioè-Peña makes us listen to these mothers, and in so doing, she cracks all the myths that have been built around poor immigrant mothers as ignorant, unengaged, uncaring.

For me, education needs to be a conversation with people whose existence is valued. But in this book, Cioè-Peña makes obvious that the education system has considered these mothers and their children as non-existent, unknowing and damaged. School educators have not held any meaningful conversations with these mothers who are themselves educators too, of their children at home. This is perhaps the first lesson contained in this book – that these mothers exist and that they are mothering their children, not as disabled and monolingual, but as able bendiciones, as very capable bilingual blessings.

In the Preface, Cioè-Peña tells us that she has been like a 'museum curator'. In establishing a true conversation with these mothers as equals, Cioè-Peña brings to life pieces of the mothers and their children that have been made invisible. Rooted in the Latin *curare* of the word *curator*, María approaches this study with pastoral care, caring for the mothers, their children and also her readers. With the ability gained from years of involvement in descriptive inquiry processes, Cioè-Peña shares these mothers' testimonios in ways that bring out our emotions. But in so doing, they heal us, curándonos of the fragmented visions of bilingual dis/abled children and their mothers. Reading this book becomes a catharsis, as we shed notions that educational professionals and scholars have often given us about these children and these mothers. These mothers and their children re-exist through their accounts.

This is not a book about mothers, but a book *with* mothers. In many ways, Cioè-Peña inverts the relationship that has always put so-called

professionals first, silencing those who are receiving services, especially if they are mothers of racialized bilingual poor children. Cioè-Peña starts elsewhere. By putting these mothers and their children at the center, she changes the locus of enunciation of who tells the story of their children.

Schools are quick to categorize and label. Some children are labeled as disabled, others as English language learners. But what happens when children are labeled as both? The inability of schools to consider the whole child results in not supporting children holistically. Cioè-Peña describes how when many of these children are placed in classrooms for disabled children, they are then often taken out of bilingual classrooms, robbing them of opportunities to use their bilingualism constructively. Education systems refuse to see the whole child. By taking up the mothers' visions, this book rebuilds these children, reconstituting what has been deconstituted and made destitute - their humanity.

In contrast to the education systems that categorize them, these mothers see their children holistically, beyond singularities of vision. They see them as differentes, but not as disabled; they see them simply as having very little problemitas. They recognize the emotional and physical toll that mothering a disabled child takes, and they recognize the vacío and emptiness of being in abusive spousal relationships. But these mothers are fierce about their children coming first, about moving heaven and earth for them.

These mothers' testimonios reinforce the importance of bilingualism for their children and families. Spanish is important for the mothers' lives for reasons that go beyond those given in the scholarly literature. Yes, they tell us. Spanish for identity is important, and even for the opportunities it might provide in the future. But most important for these mothers is the role that Spanish plays in their lives as undocumented Latinas. They fear deportation, and they want their children to speak Spanish in case they are forced to live in a Spanish-speaking country in the future. In the present, they want to ensure that their children can speak to their other siblings, other children who are living in their countries of origin. Spanish is not simply for the heart, or for future possibilities; it is important for the lives of these mothers in the present.

Cioè-Peña's book takes us for a spin. Not only does she invert the relationship of authority in the act of educar, giving mothers, and not simply professional educators, their rightful place. She also makes clear that the act of educating is reciprocal, that is, children do not just learn from adults; adults learn from children. And the act of educar extends beyond the walls of the school and the home to the community and is done in community. These acts of reciprocal and extended community education are especially evident in the mothers' testimonios as they share their mothering experiences with language. The mothers teach their children to read and write Spanish, something the schools are not doing. Beyond the home, the mothers take their children to community

activities such as Spanish language catechism. At the same time, these Spanish-speaking mothers educan their children as they work through schoolwork and tareas in English. We find the mothers often asking their children for help in these endeavors, asking them, for example, whether what they're saying is the way it is said in English. We see the mothers finding help not only for their children, but also for themselves – from tutors for their children that cost them dearly, from the translator on the phone as they work with their children, from their other children, from these children themselves. The mothers are quick to recognize that their children help them as they help them, and that they are learning with the children.

The mothers' act of educar is not reduced to language. They see education as more expansive. They teach their children to develop caring relationships with others and with God, as well as self-care. In fact, these mothers feel that their children are limited only by labels of disability that cloud the lenses of professional educators. Their vision of their children is that they are the same as all others; the children are limited only by school practices.

Important lessons about motherhood, disability, bilingualism and undocumented status are learned here through the mothers' testimonios. In particular, these accounts speak to teachers of children labeled as disabled and English language learners. They provide them with a different lens, a motherhood lens of care and unconditional love which shifts these children's deficiencies to strengths and possibilities. The mothers' testimonios move our labels, as we are led to really see the children with their abilities and their dynamic bilingual use. The mothers' descriptions of themselves and their children question so-called expert knowledge, and they remind us to look closely at the children in their fullness as they act. These testimonios substitute absences by plenitudes, disabilities by abilities, limited English by competent bilingualism; they spark possibilities, as we see these children emerge as able bendiciones for all.

> Ofelia García The Graduate Center City University of New York