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Future teachers and social change in Bolivia: between decolonisation and demonstration

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PROLOGUE

Conducting 'fieldwork research' over different periods during the past four years in Bolivia as a young, Dutch female has been a daring, exiting, challenging and rewarding experience. When I first set foot on Bolivian soil in June 2002, the country made an everlasting impression with its extreme climates and landscapes, politics being played out in the streets, a chaotic infrastructure and high altitude together with an incredible variety of peoples and cultures. The daily battle against poverty and struggles for social justice were then, as they are now, highly visible in the streets of Bolivia's large cities and small villages. It was during this travel that I decided to focus my further studies on understanding these structures of inequality and people's struggles against it. Inspired by critical thinkers such as Freire and Sousa Santos, it is my conviction that education – and particularly educators – *can* pursue a 'practice of freedom', and make a difference towards more just societies. This thesis is dedicated to understanding the potentials, difficulties and limitations to Bolivian teachers being agents of change, with a particular focus on the role of teacher education institutes.

This thesis positions the case of Bolivia in a wider context of counter-hegemonic tendencies to processes of globalisation and neoliberalism, and focuses on the opportunities and challenges in working towards (or against) social change and justice within Bolivia's teacher education schools and its inhabitants: the teacher students and trainers. The research follows a multiscalar, interdisciplinary and historically informed approach (Dale, 2000; Dale, 2005) that aims to uncover Bolivia's 'politics of teacher education', by posing questions that reach beyond the education sector and the national state level. Since the inauguration of Bolivia's first elected indigenous president Evo Morales in 2006, the Bolivian government has proposed a new political ideology of '21st century socialism' which is aimed at radical transformations of Bolivia's politics, economy and society – so that all Bolivians can '*vivir bien*' (live well). Education is a crucial sector to bring about these transformations, and teachers are envisioned as strategic political 'actors of change' in Bolivia's new route to development.

Positioning this particular case study alongside other cases of social transformation (particularly in the Latin American context), the more general goal of this thesis is to understand the role of teacher education institutes and actors in underpinning, or opposing, emancipatory education and processes of societal transformation. By focusing on the new 'revolutionary' government of Evo Morales, the thesis intends to explore how, and to what extent, Bolivian pre-service teacher education institutes and actors develop strategies for, or against, the societal transformation that is envisaged by the new Bolivian Plurinational constitutional regime. Based on a four-year long empirical engagement with Bolivia's unique context, it tries to unravel the potentials, complexities, contradictions and pitfalls inherent in teachers' combined role as educators and potential socio-political agents for, or against, transformation.

Informed by insights from critical pedagogy, as well as Bolivia's new discursive engagement with education for transformation, the study departs from the assumption that social justice oriented teacher education, by stimulating reflexivity, critical thinking and socio-political engagement of future teachers, has the potential to contribute to the broader socio-political goals of respect for diversity and social justice. The research does not aim to 'measure' these

contributions; instead it wishes to provide a better insight into the possibilities and challenges when forming future teachers as agents of (educational and societal) change. The knowledge and skills required from teachers in the Bolivian state's new vision of decolonising and inter-/intracultural education demand that Bolivian teachers become critical and reflexive public intellectuals – an expectation that is seemingly in contrast to the low status and acknowledgement Bolivian teachers are still faced with in their daily lives. In line with a global 'crisis in the teaching profession', the teaching profession in Bolivia has neither a social recognition nor a suited economic compensation. In addition, teachers have a lack of proper support in either their pre-service or in-service teacher education system.

This thesis seeks to understand these and other structural-institutional aspects of the governance of teacher education, as well as the agential features of Bolivia's teacher education system, in the context of a revolutionary transformation of Bolivian society. At the structural level, it explores the power relations and mechanisms in the teacher education institutions and beyond, so as to analyse the various obstacles to, and potentials for, transformation and innovation of these institutes that is envisaged by the current government. In addition, the study endeavours to appreciate the agential dimensions, including the motives, identities and strategies of Bolivia's future teachers and their trainers in coping with a highly tense and changing landscape. This book aspires to take the reader through a fascinating journey on the struggles of future teachers amidst revolutionary politics, demonstrations and decolonisation in Bolivia.