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

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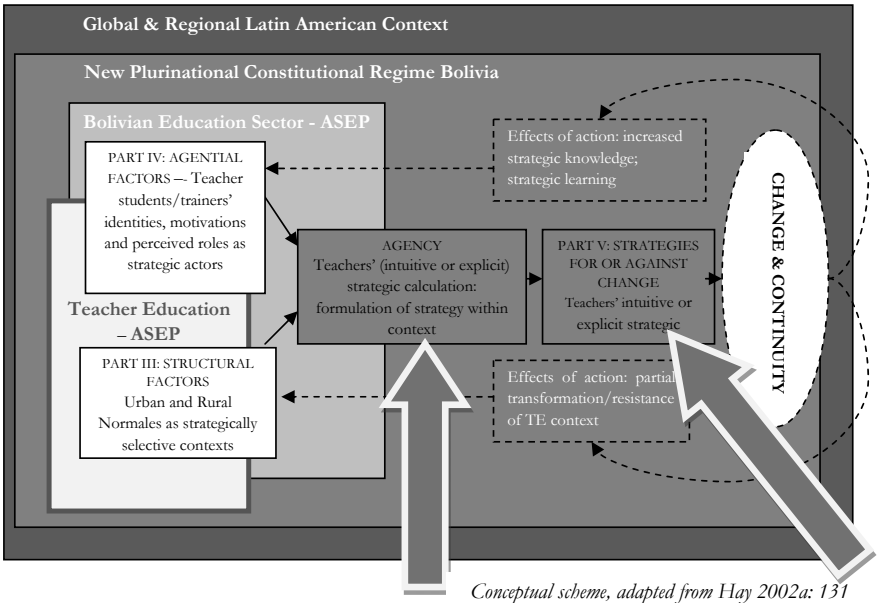
PART V

AGENCY, CHANGE & CONTINUITY



Conceptual scheme, adapted from Hay 2002a: 131

The final part of the thesis particularly aims to shed light on teachers' strategic actions as potential actors for or against change. The strategic function of education in processes of social change has historically been recognised and used (or even abused) for (geo)political strategies all over the globe: during colonial times in divide and rule tactics; in new independent countries, as an instrument for national integration and homogenisation; as an instrument of modernisation – and later marketisation; and more recently as a breeding ground for massive political revolutions in the Arab world. Tabulawa's (2003) work illustrates how the idea of educators as change agents has also been adopted in ideologically different debates. Education sectors in 'peripherical' states received massive flows of foreign aid, as part of a widespread modernisation and later on a democratisation project. In many countries in the Global South, a Western type of education was

expected to bring about the necessary transformation into modern states based on '*Western values and entrepenuerial attitudes*' (Tabulawa 2003: 22). From a completely different perspective, the idea of teachers as change agents has also been adopted in critical pedagogical debates about SJTE, as elaborated in chapter 2. Drawing from Gramscian thinking, in order to bring about change, teacher trainers and teachers alike therefore '*must abandon their role as lackeys of the ruling hegemony and take upon themselves the responsibility to act as 'organic intellectuals*'' (Yogev and Michaeli, 2011: 316).

Teachers are, as Giddens stated, 'actors with agency' (Giddens 1995 in Talavera Simoni, 2011: 22). Teachers' material conditions as well as their ideas, discourses and perceptions are reflected in their identites, motivations and strategies. We can thus speak of an interlinked relationship between teachers' identities and their agency (Moore 2008: 595). Teachers' agency has been defined in various ways, including as '*gaining control over ones behaviour*', '*the power to act purposively and reflectively*', or as '*the conscious role people play to bring about social change*' (Moore, 2008: 589). Some authors use the term 'voice' instead of 'agency', referring to how teachers '*make specific choices based on their own histories and their evolving professional lives',* while they are being *'constrained'* or *'shaped'* to some extent by their surrounding contexts (Delany-Barmann, 2010: 184). The importance of teachers' agency in relation to broader socio-political processes of change is discussed by Vongalis-Macrow. She argues how teachers '*are not only engaging in the reproduction of structural change aligning to globalization-driven reforms to their work and practice, but also, in adapting and reacting to new structural conditions, they are transformed through their actions*' (Vongalis-Macrow, 2007: 425). Teachers' strategies are hence fluid rather than static and closely linked to their changing perceptions of society and their role within it. Moore argues that SJTE should encourage teacher students' identity formation and 'critical agency', meaning the '*degree to which pre-service teachers adopted an identity as agents of change […] to promote social justice*' (Moore, 2008: 594). Teachers' identities and their agency can thus be viewed as complementary 'co-constructions', eventually affecting processes of social change' (2008: 607).

Studying teachers' resistance to reform implementation is a pressing issue globally (Achinstein and Ogawa, 2006; Tatto, 2007). In order to overcome teachers' resistance to change, genuine participation of (future) teachers in policy-making processes is indispensable (Auala, 2005; Kosar Altinyelken, 2010). Collectively organised in unions, teachers can act in response to educational changes (such as reforms) and societal changes.[142] Vongalis-Macrow (2007) signals how, in light of the the crisis in the teaching profession (see also chapter 1), teacher agency is being narrowed down – or 'reterritorialised' – in many parts of the world. In addition, teachers' individual roles and responsibilities are promoted at the expense of collective teacher action and voice, hence downplaying the power of teacher unions (Vongalis-Macrow, 2007: 428-432). Consequently, it is important not to exaggerate the role of teachers in these processes of (social and educational) change, since their agency and strategies are often constrained by the strategic selective and multiscalar context they live and work in. Feminist and post-structuralist scholars in the field of education similarly emphasise the limits to agency; they challenge the idea that actors have access to power as a kind of commodity. In this perspective, empowered individuals or groups indeed have the ability to disrupt oppressive policies, practices and perspectives. They

[142] Education International, the international organisation representing teacher unions worldwide, struggles for the right to collective forms of teacher autonomy and teacher agency. Teacher unions, and in Bolivia especially the urban one, often focus more on issues of redistribution, and a fair rewarding system and status, than on recognition and the socio-cultural aspects of education.

cannot, however, completely and continuously overcome unequal power relations, nor escape from their position in a social order (North, 2008: 1192). Besides, it depends very much on (future) teachers' own motivations to become a teacher (McDonald and Zeichner, 2009: 603), teachers' (future) material conditions and the way teacher training stimulates or prescribes the future tasks of a (n ideal) teacher, in how far teachers can and will be engaged in struggles for social justice (Grant, 2009: 655).

Teachers, thus, can potentially act as agents in processes of change, be it as progressive, conservative or oppositional agents for/against change. The last part of this book aims to contribute to analysing and explaining how, and why, Bolivian teacher training institutions, policy makers, teacher trainers and (future) teachers – purposefully or unintendedly – design their strategies to *actively support*, *passively follow*, *passively resist* or *actively oppose* the broader goals of Morales' new regime.