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ENGLISH ABSTRACT

Future Teachers and Social Change in Bolivia: Between Decolonisation and Demonstration

Introduction

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). Bolivia's political shift is part of a larger Latin American turn to the political left. Through a new Plurinational constitution, the Bolivian government adopts a radical discourse-for-change, which is exemplified by the recent approval of the new decolonising education reform. Teacher education institutes – or 'Normales' – according to the new government are perceived to be crucial spaces in the quest to bring about educational change, and should ideally work as a jump start for the country's new route to development. By focusing on the new 'revolutionary' government of Evo Morales, the thesis explores 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.

Methodology and theoretical inspirations

The research is based on a nine month critical ethnographic fieldwork study, which has been focused on an urban and a rural 'Normal'. It employs a primarily qualitative methodology, and draws from an interdisciplinary body of critical literature. The design and analysis of this research has been theoretically inspired by Gramsci's work on cultural hegemony, as well as critical pedagogy literature – including Paolo Freire's work on education for liberation – as critical pedagogy sees education as an instrument to battle structural forms of marginalisation through the empowerment of agents of social change. The study presents a multiscalar analysis of the present Bolivian socio-political and educational context – or the 'politics of teacher education' (Dale, 2000; 2005) – and draws from the Cultural Political Economy perspective on education (CPE/E, Robertson forthcoming), in order to bring forward a nuanced picture of teacher training institutes as heterogeneous spaces of struggle and contestation, or 'strategic selective contexts' (Hay, 2002a).

Bolivia's new reform – decolonising education

As one of its first political acts, the Morales government immediately decided to create a new Bolivian-owned and 'revolutionary' education law to decolonise the education system, which carries the names of two historical indigenous educators: *Avelino Siñani* and *Elizardo Pérez* (the thesis accordingly refers to the 'ASEP' law). On the one hand, Bolivia's new education reform, like the former Intercultural and Bilingual Education reform of 1994, aligns with the global discourse of quality *Education For All*. It differs, however, in promoting a decolonised, inter- and intracultural, productive and communitarian education system, an approach that is unprecedented. Hence, the ASEP reform is both unique and contested. With regard to the area of teacher education, ASEP is different in the sense that rather than shortening teacher training, reducing teachers' salaries and downgrading teachers' societal roles – as we see in many countries

around the globe – Bolivia is instead increasing teachers' training programme from three and a half to five years, the government is pushed by teachers' unions to increase wages and president Morales claims teachers to be '*the soldiers of liberation and decolonisation*' (Ministerio de Educación de Bolivia, 2010d).

This new revolutionary reform is, however, not uncontested either, as challenges for its implementation linger and various oppositional groups openly question its legitimacy and relevance. Due to a lack of clear conceptualisations, guidelines and curricula to accompany the recently approved policy plans, Bolivia's education system is in an impasse. Structural socio-economic and educational inequalities (urban-rural, lowland-highland) persist despite a rhetoric of change, which perpetuate ongoing tensions in Bolivian society. This situation highlights the need for a social justice oriented education approach.

A discursive shift – towards a social justice teacher education ideology

The study recognises the value of Latin American coloniality debates in their aim to understand and at the same time deconstruct historical structures of injustices. These debates are helpful theoretical tools to understand Bolivia's interpretation of 'social justice' in its current political discourse – as a way to *vivir bien* (live well); this broad conceptualisation includes environmental justice; social equality and respect for diversity; political/democratic representation for all; and an equal economic system to the benefit of all Bolivians – instead of serving the economic interests of foreign actors. Drawing from Frasers' (2005a/b) feminist theory of a three-dimensional conceptualisation of social justice, I argue how, at the *discursive level*, the new ASEP Reform indeed strives for more justice in terms of economic redistribution, cultural recognition – and a revaluation of the heterogenous indigenous heritage – and political representation. As a consequence of these changing political discourses, the policy approach to teacher education similarly shifted towards a social justice orientation. The discourse of the ASEP policy relates to the literature on Social Justice Teacher Education (SJTE), both in its socio-political goals of redistribution, recognition and representation and in its pedagogical approaches that emphasise critical reflection and action research. The state's new vision of decolonising and inter-/intracultural education demand that Bolivian teachers become critical and reflexive public intellectuals. The 'research methodology' that is incorporated in the ASEP reform becomes particularly apparent in Bolivia's 'PDI' course (*Practica Docente e Investigación*), which aims to apply the SJTE criteria of critical thinking and reflexivity through action research methodologies (Price, 2001; Zeichner, 2009). The analysis of the actual implementation of the PDI course, nevertheless, illustrates a limited system of guidance and support for student teachers during their internships and research periods, resulting in an untapped potential for critical reflection and socio-political critical awareness and actions.

Structural obstacles and opportunities for transformation in the Normales

The Normales, as '*complex and emergent sites of struggle and contestation*' (Jessop, 2005: 28), are positioned on the verge of ASEP's transformation from a policy discourse into an educational reality. Part III of this book explores how the current government's 'politics of change' are played out in the socio-political battle field of pre-service teacher education institutes, where structural obstacles to transformation remain in existence and several power struggles take place – particularly between the Ministry of Education (MoE) and the (urban) teachers unions. The

historically embedded institutional cultures and political strategies of the different stakeholders involved are not necessarily creating an enabling environment for governments' policies; several continuing structural institutional obstacles to change have been identified, including insufficient institutional infrastructure, traditional teaching techniques, discrimination, corruption, strong hierarchies and a lack of democratic institutional governance or engagement of the Normales with the wider community. However, this thesis also highlights the various potential spaces for transformation, as designers and proponents of the ASEP reforms finally see a turn around of deep historical injustices for the majority indigenous population. Considering that ex-union and indigenous movement members currently take up relatively high positions in the MoE, and a changing strategy of dialogue of the rural teachers' union, these developments might indicate a potential opening towards more dialogue between the parties involved over the systematic issues of conflict in the education sector (e.g. salary issues, pension arrangements, reform implementation and so forth). The outcomes of this study illustrate a generally supportive attitude of the management staff in the rural case and a more critical attitude in the case of the urban Normal towards the ASEP reform project, a position that is also reflected in the respective rural and urban teachers' unions. As we cannot view Normales as homogenous nor passive agents, we need to acknowledge the internal diversity of opinions both within and around the urban and the rural institute. Part III further elaborates on why a new ASEP *hegemonic* fix has not yet emerged and certainly has not yet been institutionalised.

The missed potential of future teachers' identities and motivations

Part IV of this thesis focuses on the identities and motivations of teacher students and their trainers. I argue that there is a need to rethink the existing idea of a homogenising, reproducing and passive Bolivian teacher. While the majority of teachers continue to come from lower classes and consequently see the teaching professions as an important way out of poverty, in contrast to the general negative view in Bolivia, the interviews and survey results of this research reveal a more nuanced picture of how both urban and rural students, besides economic reasons, also expressed various kinds of pedagogical-vocational and socio-political related reasons for entering the teaching profession.

Furthermore, this study found that there is a changing teacher student profile marked by two important contextual developments. Firstly, a lack of job opportunities leads to an increased age and, in many cases, wider experiences of students who enter the Normal. Without ignoring the fact that this situation brings difficulties for trainers who are used to training inexperienced youngsters, I argue that there lies a potential benefit with regards to training a group of older, highly skilled and more experienced students. Secondly, a growing societal and political recognition of indigenous culture and languages stimulates students to develop a growing awareness and acceptance of their own ethno-cultural and linguistic background. Due to these processes of 're-ethnisation' and 're-identification' students develop a greater awareness and self esteem in relation to their formerly often discriminated cultural-ethnic background. Nevertheless, teacher education institutions – as well as national level policy-makers – seem to both miss and misunderstand the opportunity behind these developments, as teacher education hardly pays any attention to the students' developing identities.

Teachers' strategies as agents for or against change?

Part V illustrates how, in line with the new government's idea of an ideal Bolivian teacher, many actors in the education field, including teacher trainers, student teachers and teachers themselves, *perceive* educators to be agents of change. Even though quotes from teacher students do not directly appear to align with the current government's ASEP discourse, and many still have very little knowledge of the ins and outs of the ASEP reform, they do express a wish for bringing change, reflecting their under-utilised vocational and socio-political motivations (mentioned above). However, for as long as the majority of practices witnessed at the two Normales included in this research continue in the routine manner of banking education, and an in-service system of training and support continues to fail to stimulate teachers to engage in innovative and transformative ways of teaching, we can hardly blame Bolivia's educators for sticking to their strategies of survival and routine, in the absence of clear, supported and awarded alternatives. Without ignoring the continuity of traditional and non-transformative practices in Bolivia's Normales, we should stay away from the simplistic conclusion that Bolivia's educators are therefore a conservative crowd. Building from insights on the importance and interrelatedness of structures, agents and agency, I aim to open up debates that place the blame for a low quality education and a low-committed teaching force on teachers, by arguing that we need to understand the causes of these developments in the wider structural context of (pre- and in-service) teacher training and support, as well as the broader socio-political and economic environment.

Conclusion

The present Bolivian attempts to reform the education sector are part of a broader effort to install a counter-hegemonic state ideal, which should provide a sustainable alternative to the more exclusionary forms of state that Bolivia has experienced previously. So far, both at a national level, as well as at the institutional level of the Normales, this new hegemony has not yet been institutionalised. This thesis shows how it is questionable whether the revolutionary policy discourse, including Morales' ambitious vision of Bolivia's teachers as the '*soldiers for liberation and decolonisation*', provide a helpful utopia in Bolivia's quest for an alternative and decolonised society. The answer to this questions is two-fold: on one hand, the new and 'extended' policy image of teachers as change agents, their continuously increasing (yet still relatively low) wage, a discursive policy commitment to social justice oriented goals and a prioritisation of (pre-service) teacher education are exceptional and promising developments for Bolivia's teaching profession and education system, considering a global education policy move in the opposite direction. On the other hand, empirical findings question the degree to which Bolivian teachers can effectively design their strategies as 'liberating teachers', in a context of continuous structural impediments in and around the Normales; and whether they are informed and involved enough in policy design and implementation to adopt such strategies for change envisioned by the government. Bolivia's fascinating developments urge for more research in order to further understand the continuing struggles of Bolivia's future and present teachers, who find themselves positioned 'between demonstrations and decolonisation'.