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Lopes Cardozo, M.T.A.

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Bolivian Teachers' Agency: Soldiers of Liberation or Guards of Coloniality and Continuation?

Mieke T. A. Lopes Cardozo
University of Amsterdam
The Netherlands

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Abstract: This paper investigates the problems and promises of teachers' agency associated with Bolivia's current "decolonising" education reform. The Avelino Siñani Elizardo Pérez (ASEP) education reform is part of a counter-hegemonic and anti-neoliberal policy that aims to advance the political project of the government of Evo Morales, with teachers as its most strategic leading card. The article draws on theoretical insights from the Strategic Relational Approach (SRA) and applies this frame to analyse teachers' agency for change in Bolivia's contemporary socio-political context. This framework allows for a critical reflection of current discourses and educators' efforts to decolonize the education system, in a context of political and societal tensions and inequalities. The article argues that the current political discourse and socio-political changes open up some spaces for teachers' agency. However, the reality in rather conservative teacher education institutions and schools, together with teachers' daily struggle for survival, provide serious constraints for teachers to become "committed or transformative intellectuals".
Keywords: teachers; agency; Bolivia; decolonisation; reform; teacher education

El sentido de "agencia" de los profesores bolivianos: ¿soldados de la liberación o guardianes del colonialismo y continuismo?
Resumen: Este artículo investiga los problemas y los potenciales para la agencia de los profesores asociados con la actual reforma "descolonizadora" de la educación en Bolivia. La reforma educativa Avelino Siñani Elizardo Pérez (ASEP) es parte de una política contrahegemónica y anti-neoliberal

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que tiene como objetivo expandir el avance del proyecto político de Evo Morales, con los profesores como su principal apuesta estratégica. El artículo se basa en los aportes teóricos del Enfoque Relacional estratégico (ERE, SRA en este artículo) y aplica este marco en el análisis de la agencia de los profesores para cambiar el contexto socio-político contemporáneo de Bolivia. Este marco permite una reflexión crítica de los actuales discursos y los esfuerzos de los educadores por descolonizar el sistema educativo, en un contexto de tensiones y desigualdades políticas y sociales. El artículo sostiene que el actual discurso político y los cambios socio-políticos abren ciertos espacios para la agencia de los profesores. No obstante, el conservadurismo de las instituciones de formación y escuelas, junto con la lucha diaria de los profesores por sobrevivir, ofrecen serias restricciones a los profesores para convertirse en "intelectuales comprometidos o trasformadores".
Palabras-clave: Profesores; agencia; Bolivia; descolonización; reforma; formación del profesorado

O senso de "agência" dos professores Bolivianos: soldados da libertação ou guardas de colonialidade e continuação ?

Resumo: Este artigo analisa os problemas e promessas que professores Bolivianos experimentam na actualidade associados com a reforma educativa de "descolonização". A reforma educativa Avelino Siñani Elizardo Pérez (ASEP) faz parte de uma iniciativa contra-hegemónica e anti-neoliberal que tem como objectivo expandir o alcance do projecto político de Evo Morales. Os professores assumem nesta reforma uma posição de máximo valor estratégico. Este artigo utiliza conceitos teóricos baseados na Abordagem Estratégica Relacional (Strategic Relational Approach, SRA) para analisar a capacidade dos professores enquanto agentes de mudança no contexto socio-político Boliviano actual. Esta abordagem teórica permite uma reflexão crítica dos discursos em uso e dos esforços levados a cabo pelos professores para descolonizar o sistema educativo num contexto de tensão e desigualdades políticas e socias. O artigo propõe que o discurso político actual e as mudanças socio-políticas em curso oferecem aos professores alguns espaços de agência. Contudo, a realidade de escolas e instituições de formação de professors com uma natureza bastante conservadora, em associação com a constante luta pela sobrevivência que os professores têm de levar a cabo na sua vida quotidiana, constituem restrições sérias para os professores se desenvolverem como "intelectuais empenhados ou transformadores".
Palavras-chave: professors; agência; Bolívia; a descolonização; a reforma; a formação de professores

Introduction - Bolivia's Teachers as Soldiers of Decolonisation?[1]

"Teachers are the soldiers of the liberation and decolonisation of Bolivia"
Quote by Bolivia's president Evo Morales (Ministerio de Educación de Bolivia, 2010b)

[1] I am grateful for the support provided through the IS Academie on Education and International Development, a co-funded research collaboration between the University of Amsterdam and the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. I wish to express my sincere gratitude to Dr. Maria Luisa Talavera Simoni for her continuous guidance, support and *amistad*. I would also like to thank our research assistant Marielle Le Mat for her help with the editing of the references and bibliography of the paper, Antonio Alves Pereira Da Cunha Ferreira and Ramiro Gómez Salgado for their kind help with the translations of the Portugese and Spanish abstracts. Finally, I thank all participants in this research for their generous time and collaboration.

Since 2006, Bolivia has been engaged in a political move that envisions an alternative Bolivian development path and future in which all Bolivians can live well (*vivir bien*). The "Avelino Siñani Elizardo Pérez" (ASEP) education reform is part of the counter-hegemonic and anti-neoliberal policy that aims to advance the political project of the government of Evo Morales, with teachers as its most strategic leading card**.** The reform aims to decolonise the entire education system, and by doing so embraces some of the critiques brought forward in Latin American based coloniality debates (further discussed below). Politically, Bolivian teachers are paradoxically put forward as key drivers of transformation, as the quote by president Evo Morales above illustrates. Yet, at the same time they are also commonly viewed as a rather conservative group in society with resistance to change and reform. This paper focuses its analysis on Bolivia's teachers' agency – their space to manoeuvre – and the consequent strategies they adopt as potential agents of change, focusing on the first six years after Evo Morales was elected as president (2006-2012). In order to critically analyse the (impact of) various political, societal and educational Bolivian discourses on teachers as drivers of change, the study draws on methodological insights from the Strategic Relational Approach (or SRA, adapted from Hay, 2002). Applying the SRA to study the various discourses on the agency of teachers, helps to uncover the dialectics between teachers' perceptions and strategies on the one hand, and the broader "strategic selective context" on the other. The paper also aims to responds to some of the critical education literature that helps to analyse the potential and limitations of teachers as "change agents" and "transformative or committed intellectuals"" (Fischman & Haas, 2009; Giroux, 2003). The text draws on empirical data collected by the author through mostly qualitative methods between 2007-2012during intensive periods of fieldwork.

The paper starts by briefly outlining Bolivia's socio-political context and recent political move towards a politics of change and decolonisation. In the next section on theoretical inspirations, I first elaborate on the critical ethnographic methodological approach and my positionality as a (foreign) researcher in Bolivia. I continue to discuss the analytical lens that draws on the Strategic Relational Approach (SRA), as the paper positions and explores the various perceptions on Bolivian teachers as change agents. With this framework in mind, I then turn to critically reflect on Bolivia's current discourses and educators' efforts to decolonize the education system, with teachers as its most strategic leading card, in a context of political and societal tensions and inequalities. It does so by exploring and connecting the changes and continuities in the strategically selective context of Bolivian teacher education, with the possibilities and challenges for (new) teachers to adopt strategies of reproduction, or rather of transformation.

Bolivia's Socio-political Context of Decolonisation

Being part of a larger Latin American "region in revolt" (Dangl, 2007, p. 7), change and counter-hegemonic transformation are on the tips of policy makers' tongues in contemporary Bolivia, not least when it concerns the role of educators for societal transformation. In line with wider constitutional reforms throughout contemporary Latin America, a new Bolivian constitution was approved in a referendum in January 2009. In Bolivia, the call for a revision of the social contract through a new constitution was due to the deep dissatisfaction of mostly indigenous and formerly marginalised groups within society with regards to fair chances and treatment in society.

There is a divide between (richer) elites in the fertile lowlands who mostly disagree with Morales' socio-economic redistribution and nationalization policies, and the pro-Morales supporters – organized through strong social movements – that predominantly inhabit the poorer and (geographically) higher regions of the country. Historically, education in Bolivia has been tightly linked to the reproduction of class differences as well as open and hidden forms of discrimination

and exclusion, particularly of indigenous groups. Bolivia has a wide ethnic and linguistic diversity with 37 indigenous groups (CEPAL, 2005, p. 9; Nucinkis, 2004, p. 4), and over 70 percent of the population identifying themselves as belonging to indigenous groups (Seligson, Cordova, Donoso, Moreno Morales, Orces, & Schwarz Blum, 2006).

While we can observe some changes taking place since President Morales' installation in 2006, such as a new Constitution as of February 2009, there are also signs of a continuing lack of economic redistribution leading to persisting inequalities and poverty levels (Webber, 2011). These struggles for social transformation in Bolivia—with indigenous movements as active agents—are about economic, environmental, democratic and social justice. However, this is far from a smooth process, as various social groups, including some groups of teachers, disagree with Morales' new nationwide project for change that includes nationalisation of natural resources (e.g. gas), and – at least at a discursive level – an opening of participatory policies. In the words of Gray Molina during a lecture at he University of Amsterdam, "the core of Bolivian democratic politics is about conflict and resolving conflict. Room for contestation is a driver for change" (2009, no page number available). This room for contestation might create a potential to accelerate progressive changes in a context where change is—slowly—beginning to take place, opening up new horizons amid a context of continuing tensions and struggle.

In December 2010, a new education reform proposal was adopted into law as part of these politics of change. This law was named after two leading educators, Avelino Siñani and Elizardo Pérez (whose initials led to the 'ASEP' abbreviation), who were involved in Bolivia's first indigenous education initiative in the highland town of Warisata (Ministerio de Educación, 2010a). Bolivia's "revolutionary" education reform, as its cover page claims, can be viewed in the light of a "new social contract in a Latin American education context" (Streck, 2010), which positions educational praxis as a central aspect of discussions and initiatives to cultivate another – more socially just - world, emanating from the first World Social Forum in Porto Alegre in 2001. Bolivia's current political direction, including the ASEP education reform, respond to the various Latin American debates on "coloniality" (see e.g. Escobar, 2007; Grosfoguel, 2007a, 2007b; Lopes Cardozo, 2011, 2012a; Lopes Cardozo & Strauss, 2013; Mignolo, 2007; Quijano 2007; Saavedra, 2007; Walsh, 2007a). The concept of "coloniality" is used in these postcolonial debates to refer to a prevailing Euro-centric pattern of power and hegemonic forms of knowledge that continued to exist after colonial domination, and has influenced peoples' identities and epistemologies. In Latin America, a "geopolitics of knowledge" perceives European thought as scientific truth, while other epistemes, such as indigenous and Afro-descendent, have long been considered subaltern (Walsh, 2007b).

Bolivia's current education reform is not only rooted in these coloniality – or "decolonization" – debates, but as well in a broader Latin American popular education tradition — that particularly draws on Freire's *Pedagogy for Liberation* and broadly strives for progressive social changes and more egalitarian social relations (Gottesman, 2010). These approaches often entail problem-based learning and critical dialogue, the transformation of teacher-student relations and the incorporation of local or indigenous knowledge in teaching processes. Hence, Bolivia is engaged in political discussions and initiatives with regard to a decolonized education system based on this epistemic dialogue, and imagining an alternative future through embracing the critiques brought forward in coloniality debates.

These debates have a double relevance for this paper. Firstly, Bolivia's envisaged educational transformation is built around the idea of "decolonization", which is inspired by coloniality debates and theories of alternative knowledge. Felix Patzi, a Bolivian sociologist and the first Minister of Education in Morales' government in 2006, was actively engaged in these debates and responsible for the very first drafts of the new ASEP law for decolonising education. Secondly, the insights I

have gained from reading and observing these debates also shaped the development of a critical, reflective and ethnographic methodology as explained in the theoretical section below. This next section then continues to discuss how education, and more specifically teachers' roles, could be analysed in relation to Bolivia's fascinating socio-political context.

Critical Theoretical Inspirations

Methodology, Reflexivity and Positionality

The paper draws from a critical ethnographic research engagement with Bolivian teacher education for more than five years, including ten months of fieldwork in an urban institute (called Simón Bolívar) and a rural teacher education institute (called Paracaya). In Bolivia, these teacher education colleges are usually referred to as "Normales". During these visits, I conducted over 120 semi-structured interviews, and various workshops and focus group discussions at the policy, NGO, institutional and school levels. For the purpose and focus of this article, I draw specifically from (policy) documentation, interviews, focus group discussions and feedback workshops conducted with policy-makers, teacher trainers, and teacher students. Data from interviews, discussions and observations were transcribed with the help of a Bolivian research assistant. The data was organised and coded by the author using the qualitative data analysis software Atlas Ti, and numbers shown after the quotes in the text refer to this system. For this article, I also draw on the outcomes of a survey that was conducted in 2008 with 164 first and third year students at the urban teacher training institute included in this study, and 158 first and third year students in the rural institute (with a balance between the number of first and third year students). The outcomes of these surveys were entered into Excel and helped me to analyse and write about the student and trainer background profiles, and motivations to become a teacher (for an example of the survey question, see Lopes Cardozo, 2011, p. 275).

It can be argued how a critical ethnographic approach aims to respond to some of the claims of Latin American coloniality theorists, by attempting to give a voice to "subaltern peoples", while endeavouring to contribute to "emancipatory knowledge and discourses of social justice" (Madison, 2005, p. 5). Personally I hope to modestly address this by writing about the fascinating, complex and often under-represented case of Bolivia in international debates about the role of education in transforming or reproducing inequalities in society. In one of my interviews, the Bolivian sociologist Saavedra reflected on the process of doing research: "The real validity of the information we collect during processes of investigation ultimately is determined by many factors, including personal ones; if there is no confidence, or even if there is no real solidarity, people will just give us the standard information, or they will tell us what they think we want to hear"(114:19).[2] Indeed, I experienced that building levels of trust and a longer term engagement was crucial for being able to collect, share and discuss insights that are presented in this paper. This sense of solidarity has, I hope, not stopped me from critically looking into the potentials *and* pitfalls of Bolivia's ideologically progressive route, as well as the opportunities and obstacles of teacher education institutes and the main actors within them to either support or resist the (not always) progressive processes of change.

Guided by critical ethnographic approaches to research including (self-)reflexivity, positionality and dialogue (Madison, 2005, p. 9) I aimed to overcome some of the limitations of being an outsider and visitor. I did so by returning to the same institutions various times over a

[2] The numbers indicated after quotes from respondents correspond to the numbered interviews and data analysis process in Atlas Ti. All quotes are translated from Spanish to English by the author and are presented in italics in this text.

period of five years, by closely collaborating with a Bolivian academic supervisor and expert in the field of education, by organizing a series of feedback workshops to share and discuss the research findings in different settings, and, finally by disseminating research findings in Spanish as well as English. This way, I have humbly attempted to engage not only as a visitor but as a "participant" in (opening) the debates on this topic in and beyond Bolivia, in academia, the policy and public domains.

A Framework for Analysing Teacher Agency in the Context of Bolivia

Teachers, and their space for manoeuvre – or agency – are at the core of the analysis of this paper. The analytical framework applied here starts from a meta-theoretical critical realist ontological perspective (Jessop, 2005; Robertson & Dale, 2014). Critical Realism has also informed the work of Hay (2002) on the Strategic Relational Approach (SRA). While the SRA is originated in political science debates, I have adapted the framework to analyse teacher agency, and I build here on former published work (Lopes Cardozo, 2011, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c, 2012d, 2013; Lopes Cardozo & Hoeks, 2014; Shah & Lopes Cardozo, 2014). Basically, the SRA aims to bring the classical sociological debates on structure, agents and agency a step further (for a more complete reflection see Jessop, 2005), by engaging with the dialectic nature of both *strategic actors* and *strategically-selective contexts* (Hay, 2002).

Our adapted version of the SRA enables an analysis of teachers as strategic and political actors, who are located in and might (or not) constantly respond to a strategically selective context. In this model, structures are seen as *strategically-selective*, because the social, economic and political spaces in which actors operate present an "unevenly distributed configuration of opportunity and constraint to actors" (Hay, 2002, p. 381). Action is framed by a constant engagement of actors – in this case teachers – within their environment. At the same time, the model acknowledges that different individuals and groups may have varying opportunities and constraints to do so, due to their levels of access to particular strategic resources (social, political, cultural, economic capital, information) (Jessop, 2005, p. 48-49). Using SRA, teachers' *agency* is defined for this research as their space for manoeuvre, within a strategically selective context framed by discursive and material conditions, in which they develop intended or unintended *strategies* of action in response to such a context (see also Shah & Lopes Cardozo, 2014).

Teachers' agency – and hence their (un)conscious strategies – should be understood within the limits or opportunities of the specific strategically selective context.[3] Hay's (2002) case that actors face an uneven distribution of opportunities, information and constraints – resulting in a strategically selective context – might help to understand the differences in opportunities for rural and urban, male and female, indigenous and non-indigenous teachers in Bolivia. In addition, almost all Bolivian teachers face a fairly low social status, and are located in a complex and changing socio-political and economic reality, where they often struggle with more than one job at the same time for survival of themselves and their (extended) families. By utilising the SRA, his article aims to show how being an

[3] Teachers are, as Giddens stated, 'actors with agency' (Giddens, 1995, in Talavera Simoni, 2011, p. 22). 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), or as 'having a voice' in partly enabling, partly constraining contexts (Delany-Barmann, 2010: 184). Teachers' strategies are hence fluid rather than static and closely linked to their changing perceptions of society and their role within socio-political processes of change (Vongalis-Macrow, 2007, p. 425).

agent of change – or in some cases *against* change – in the education field of Bolivia is a rather complex issue that operates in the dialectical space between contexts and agents.

The SRA recognises the importance of both material and discursive realities (Jessop, 2005). This article focuses on the discursive aspects that relates to teachers' agency, while at the same time acknowledging teachers' material realities (in terms of low salaries, little pedagogical support, a lack of educational material about the new ASEP reform). The focus of this paper lies on an analysis of the discourses of various actors working in the Bolivian education field on teachers' agency as agents of change, and how these perspectives inform teachers' strategies accordingly.

Having set out the overarching theoretical and methodological framework for this paper that is inspired by an application of the SRA, I now turn to locate this study in relation to some of the relevant debates in the academic literature on teacher agency. To analyse teachers roles as (potential) agents of change, I found it useful to draw from a (neo-)Gramscian understanding of educators as "public intellectuals" (for a more in-depth engagement with a Gramscian analysis of Bolivian teacher education, see Lopes Cardozo, 2013). Following Gramsci, education institutes are sites of conflict and negotiation in which both state and civil society actions come together and are mediated. Teachers are, therefore, neither completely resistant nor fully cooperative to adopt policy reforms coming from the Bolivian state (Talavera Simoni, 2011, p. 19). I find it specifically useful to draw on: 1) the idea of "teachers as transformative intellectuals" (Giroux, 2003), and 2) the notion of "teachers as committed intellectuals" (Fischman & Haas, 2009). Both of these frames are particularly relevant to help understand the highly politicised reality in which Bolivian teachers are located. In addition, seeing teachers either as transformative intellectuals, or as committed intellectuals, has a direct resonance with the discourses used by teachers, their trainers and policy-makers in the Bolivian context, as my analysis below will highlight.

Giroux's (2003) idea of rethinking teachers' roles as transformative intellectuals, instead of mere messengers of a system, is interesting. Often, policy-makers display little confidence in teachers' intellectual and moral abilities, and they tend to ignore teachers' roles in preparing active and critical citizens. Giroux, while writing mostly about the United States context, therefore argues that teachers should join public debates, engage in self-critique and collectively organise to struggle for their rights and status in society. In Bolivia, we can see a history of resistance among teachers – either through individual efforts or collective organised unions. Here, historically embedded attitudes of resistance, as well as critical and reflective attitudes and socio-political aspirations, become important incentives for a teacher to act or to remain passive; to support, passively follow or resist Morales' new ASEP education policy lines, sometimes regardless of their more general political support to the political party of Morales, the *Movimiento Al Socialismo* (MAS).

Following from what Fischman and Haas write (2009, p. 572), Bolivia's political discourse that portrays teachers as soldiers of change falls within the "all-powerful "heroic-teacher" or the all-knowing "superconcious-critical-teacher" of the [Narrative of Redemption]". These authors propose to view (and educate) teachers as "committed intellectuals" rather than teacher-superheroes as they take the idea of teachers as organic intellectuals a step further. These teachers-as-committed-intellectuals can engage individually or collaborate with colleagues in committed actions for social justice "as an integral part of the always contradictory and conflictive on-going process of conscientization and educational change" – rather than following a romanticized "Dangerous Minds" film script of the successful, often lonesome, teacher-hero who turns a bad student/classroom/school/neighbourhood (or Bolivian state, for that matter) into a "good" one (Fischman & Haas, 2009, p. 572).

With this framework in mind, I now turn to critically reflect on Bolivia's current discourses and educators' efforts to decolonize the education system, with teachers as its most strategic leading card, in a context of political and societal tensions and inequalities.

Bolivian Discourses on Teachers as Actors of Change

The data of this study confirms that many actors in the education field, including policy makers, teacher trainers, student teachers and teachers themselves, *perceive* educators to be potential or actual agents of change. These perceptions, however, also show that not all teachers are able or willing to be(come) change agents. This section first introduces the voices of three Bolivian educators, who are operating in slightly different settings or having different roles, and with rather different perspectives on teachers as change agents. Secondly, drawing from empirical data and a review of available studies on Bolivian education, I sketch the "strategically selective context" of Bolivian teacher education, by briefly outlining the political discourse on the role of teachers, as well as the structural and institutional context of the Normales.[4] I then continue to discuss the perspectives on teacher agency according to teacher trainers and teacher students in relation to this educational and broader socio-political context. As highlighted in the theoretical section above, building on an SRA framework, the analysis will aim to understand contexts in relation to the strategies of actors involved, and vice versa.

Meeting Elisa, Bernardo and Dilma

Based on the work of Gramsci, Baud and Rutten rightly emphasise the important role of individuals in processes of social change: "The history of the Zapatistas or al-Qaeda would have been different without Sub-comandante Marcos or Osama bin Laden" (Baud & Rutten, 2004, p. 6). Similarly, Bolivia's recent historical developments would have probably looked different without the political career and election of Evo Morales as president. On a lower scale, the classrooms and streets of Bolivia would look differently without the strategies of Elisa (a teacher education student), Benardo (a teacher trainer) and Dilma (a primary school teacher and union leader). Below, I briefly introduce these three Bolivian educators whom I got to know while working in Bolivia. These teachers' ideas and respective (absence of) strategies with regard to the current socio-political state of affairs are inherently interrelated to the strategic selective context in Bolivia.

Elisa[5] is a 32-year-old female student teacher at the Simón Bolívar. She is studying to become an English teacher, because on the one hand she "wants to teach children to become good and useful citizens for the country", while on the other hand she perceives learning English as an opportunity "to travel and communicate in other countries". She was born and raised in the city of La Paz, has Spanish as her mother tongue and identifies herself with the Aymara culture. She was formerly trained in linguistics and has worked as a management assistant. She is also a mother of a daughter (6) and a son (4), and she currently works as a private English language teacher after her busy schedule of classes in the Normal. She struggles to combine her family with her study and work, and depends on her mother for childcare, as her husband works long days as well. She is not well informed about the new ASEP law, but she thinks it is crucial that teachers "do not discriminate on the basis of colour or culture". Because she has little knowledge on the ins and outs

[4] In Bolivia, Normales are the teacher education institutes that prepare both primary and secondary level teachers for their profession during a 3.5 to 5 year programme.

[5] The names of these respondents have been changed to ensure their anonymity.

of ASEP, she feels concerned about the implications of the new policies for her future job, but she has no clear stance for or against it.

Benardo is a 60-year-old teacher trainer in Pedagogy at Simón Bolívar. He was born in a rural village where he learned to speak both Quechua and Aymara. As a strong supporter of Morales' new policy lines, he identifies himself with Bolivia's plurinational culture. He graduated from the René Barrientos Normal in Oruro in 1968 and has served as an educator for more than 40 years, in different parts of the country. He formerly worked as a consultant for international organisations such as UNICEF, and he currently is lecturing both in the Simón Bolívar, at a University in El Alto and in La Paz. Guided by the ideology of the new ASEP law, in the Normal he follows an individual strategy to change and improve teacher education "ideally into a scientific community of teacher education". He feels restricted by the institutional environment, which only partly supports the new policy ideals. Also, he has a critical attitude towards the urban unions' position of resistance. He explained: "Education does not belong to God, nor to Aristotle or Karl Marx. Education belongs to the population, it is a social issue, an issue of social change, against discrimination and racism. Education is like oxygen. It allows me to live well (*vivir bien*)".

Dilma is a female primary school teacher, urban union activist and ex-leader of the La Paz teacher federation, and a University student in her fifties. She clearly supports a collective strategy of resistance to the government policies, including ASEP, and continuingly battles in defense of teachers' rights to "increase teachers' salaries and their retirement conditions". From a Trotskyist perspective, she believes that until radical structural socio-economic transformation has taken place, changes in the classroom will only be of a very minor significance, as it needs to be part of a "total transformation". "Change", Dilma said, "needs to start at the basis, and we, as a union, need to guide this popular basis". I observed an interesting divergence between the hybrid identities of Dilma-as-union-leader and Dilma-as-school-teacher: one afternoon she loudly escorted a massive crowd of teachers through the city centre, firing dynamite and fiercely resisting tear gas attacks as she continued to shout slogans in the megaphone; the next morning I saw her rubbing hand cream into the hands of the children in her classroom, while gently stimulating them to present their work in front of the class. Reflecting herself on her role as a teacher, she said "in this chaotic situation we find ourselves in, which also affects the children and their families, we as teachers have to be the first soldiers in the process of social transformation". Unintendedly and perhaps paradoxically, she used the same terminology to talk about teachers as "soldiers of change" that the president she disagrees with would use a few years later, during the inauguration of the new ASEP law.

These initial introductions reflect how on the one hand teachers' individual and varied motivations and identities are important aspects of their strategies as educators, while on the other hand they are clearly limited in terms of what they can achieve at an individual basis. I will come back to discuss these and other teachers' perspectives and experiences, but first let me sketch the strategic selective context of Bolivian (teacher) education.

Bolivia's Political Discourse on Teachers' Roles

The following quote from the Bolivian ASEP law (Ministerio de Educacion, 2007) illustrates why education should foster social justice in the Bolivian context: "Education is in and for life, with dignity and social justice assuming work like a vital necessity and an integrative and balancing relationship with the cosmos and nature, to live well (vivir bien)." This idea of *vivir bien* is a central concept in the National Development Plan, the Constitution and the ASEP education reform. The new constitution further stipulates how teachers are expected to engage in community life by undertaking (action) research to "solve productive and social problems" in the community, to "promote scientific, cultural and linguistic diversity", and to "participate side by side with the local

population in all processes of social liberation, in order to create a society with more equity and social justice" (New constitution, 2008, Art. 91, p. 20). The aforementioned Latin American coloniality debates are helpful theoretical tools to understand this Bolivian conceptualisation of social justice. Based on document analysis of published and unpublished versions of the ASEP Reform and interviews with policy makers and others involved in the reform process, I have identified the Bolivian conceptualisation of social justice in education as "the process of transformation through decolonisation of the education system in order for all Bolivians to "*vivir bien"* (live well)" (Lopes Cardozo, 2011). Following from Morales his claim that teachers are the soldiers of the liberation and decolonisation of Bolivia presented at the start of this paper, Bolivian teachers are thus expected to support this process of change towards *vivir bien*. We already saw this reflected in the words of Benardo above.

According to Article 33.1 of the new ASEP law (2010a), "Objectives of Teacher Education", within the state's new vision teachers are essential actors in transforming Bolivian society. The law stipulates how teachers should be trained to become "critical, auto-critical, reflective, proactive, innovative professionals and researchers, who are dedicated to democracy, social transformation and the integral inclusion of all Bolivians". Bolivia's teachers face a complex context of a rural/urban divide of the education system, the divergent unions' positions that teachers do or do not agree with, their personal socio-economic situation and opportunities to climb the social ladder, family pressures, the desire to remain faithful to political affiliations (either pro- or contra-Morales) and a lack of democratic alternatives; Morales is perhaps not the best, but for many certainly the only option.

Teacher Education: A Rather Conservative Institutional Context

Before further exploring perspectives of educators themselves, we need to situate those in the "strategic selective context" of Bolivia's teacher education system (for a more detailed account, see Lopes Cardozo, 2011, 2012a, 2012c, 2012d). Bolivian teachers are trained in the institutional context of 'Normales', which cater for both primary and secondary level pre-service training, and range in size from a few thousand students in urban contexts to a few hundred in more remote and rural areas (for more detailed information, see Lopes Cardozo, 2011, pp. 114-115). Since 2013, and hence outside of the period this article focuses on, first attempts have been undertaken to organise large-scale in-service teacher trainings through the so-called PROFOCOM programme, but further studies would need to shed light on the scope and impact of these trainings.

When entering the teaching profession, teachers join an automatic system of salary promotion (the "*escalafon*"), which has since its installation in the 1950's been fiercely defended by Bolivia's teacher unions. A small percentage of every teacher's salary is also automatically sent to her or his respective union (to the urban or rural union depending on teachers' work location). Bolivia's teacher unions play an important and contradictory role in the educational political arena: the rural union is politically more in line with the Morales government and has participated more actively in de design process of the ASEP law, while the urban union – and specifically the Federation in La Paz – adopts a more critical stance towards the ASEP reform and organised regular protest against policies coming from the Ministry of Education.

The data shows that it is generally perceived that Bolivia's Normales, are "conservative islands" where continuing structures of corruption, discrimination and traditional teaching styles continue to exist. In addition, and related to teachers insufficient material reality, there is a continuous lack of a sufficient infrastructure, sanitary facilities and educational material in the majority of the institutes. In line with the outcomes of Delany-Barmann's (2010, p. 197) research in 2005, during my fieldwork I found that in many cases students' voice in the classrooms of Normales

was limited to individual or group presentations, that often literally reproduced the content that was provided on photocopied texts. In the absence of textbook material in most of the classrooms, the photocopied material forms the textual basis for many of the classes in both Normales, this way supporting one or several independent and well-earning photocopy-shops on the institutes' premises. The texts included documents prepared by the trainers and photocopies made of (parts of) books on educational content, pedagogy, didactics etc. Besides these photocopies, the blackboard is used to transfer content into students' notebooks. These rather traditional and reproducing teaching techniques – also known as "banking education" (Freire, 1970) – obviously do little to engage critical thinking and expression of the voice of these student teachers. Hence, even though the current policy prescribes a progressive vision of critically thinking and operating teachers, in the reality teacher education most often still follows a routine manner of banking education, which means that teacher students *attend* classes rather than actually *learning* their new profession (Bonal, 2007).

In contrast to these continuing structural institutional constraints, my study illustrates how Bolivia's new socio-political situation also opens up new possibilities for processes of transformation, including a growing societal and political recognition of indigenous culture and languages. These transformations in the socio-political realm had a visible effect on teachers' identities. On example was the obvious change in ways of dressing, where an increased number of female teacher students and trainers, specifically in the rural Normal, would wear indigenous clothing (*polleras*). In addition, a number of students reported to have changed their surnames back into the original indigenous versions, as surnames had often been "westernised" or "enspanished" for reasons of "modernization". These changes in being able to visibly (re-)identify with being part of a certain indigenous social group, for some student teachers meant a change in the way they perceived and approached their job as a (future) teacher. At the urban Normal, for example, there was a genuine interest and demand from teacher students to join the newly opened specialisation to become an *Aymara* language teacher (one of the indigenous languages).

While most of the classroom observations in the teacher education institutes and primary schools confirmed the banking education referred to above, here I want to share one alternative example. This example is representative for a (still relatively small, but potentially important) number of classes in which forms of dialogue and interaction were stimulated. In one instance during my last visit in May 2010, a first year urban male student was evidently used to speaking up in class. Clearly in favour of the current governments' 21st Century socialist orientation, he commented on the role of teachers in Bolivia's current "Boom", that "led to the current immersion in socialism, for which we as teachers are going to fight." With a strong voice, he carried on: "we are already doing so in our "practicas" [internships]. [We work] for the construction of "the new man", as Che Guevarra called it, to break down the deprivations caused by the capitalist man. With a high moral, we as teachers are bringing forward the socialisation and revaluation of <u>all</u> of our knowledges" (105:4). In contrast to most of classes I observed and the teacher students I met in 2007 and 2008, this future teacher was evidently aware (and supportive) of the ASEP reform, and was using a language that would probably not have been adopted prior to the introduction of Bolivia's current political discourse. His teacher trainer also allowed for and even stimulated these discussions, being a supporter of the ASEP law himself. However, while this example shows how the new socio-political context created by Bolivia's social movements and the Morales government seems to open some new perspectives on teachers' agency for change, this particular example still represents the exception to the rule in a generally conservative teacher education environment. Based on this as additional data collected for this study, it seems fair to conclude how the ideological political discourse and its proponents define teachers as active "soldiers for liberation and decolonisation", while the reality in and beyond the Normales is less favourable to bring such ideas to live. Hence, instead of simply blaming the

majority of teachers (including teacher students) for a lack of commitment and vocation, I argue that the structural constraints of the pre-service teacher education system largely fails to address and stimulate teachers' motivations to provide good education and become actors of change (Lopes Cardozo, 2011, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c, 2012d, 2013).

Perspectives on Teacher Agency from Teacher Trainers

Benardo, the senior trainer at Simón Bolívar who was introduced above, explains how current forms of teacher education have to change drastically: "Currently teachers are prepared to become conservative actors, they are prepared only for their work within the four walls of the classroom" (9:32). Benardo also sees the low level of education of those students that enter the Normal as a result of the reproduction of a "system that has represented a certain model of the state for a long time. But now, reality is different. A wound is bleeding now, and we need a different type of teachers, and different trainers" (108:10).

These quotes accurately reflect on need for change in the Normales. But, how do trainers see their own roles as agents of change? Benardo explains: "as a trainer in pedagogy I try to train the new teachers with a capacity to read their reality, the socio-cultural reality, so that they can engage in a dialectical relation with it. Now it is time to reflect, to change, and to search for new politics and new pedagogies" (108:3). According to an urban colleague of Benardo, "we talk with our students about values, about the role of education in our society, and about their role as permanent actors in change processes. We are training future teachers, so that they can make a change in society. If not, they have no reason to be here in the Normal" (48:25). In the rural institute, a senior trainer reflected how, in order to become an agent of change himself, he would start with "critically analysing my own reality, to think about what kind of citizens this country will need, how we can make use of our human and natural resources. In order to do this, we as educators, we have to be committed to the new movement, the new political changes. I will think about how to train our new teachers in such a way they construct a reflective educational praxis themselves, so that education can become the engine of change of this society" (43:20). Clearly in support of the new government policies, this trainer also stated how "for me, the biggest satisfaction of being a teacher trainer is when your students after some years are able to engage in the same reflective processes, and have become active subjects, people who can innovate, who can make a change" (43:14).

During the course of my five years of fieldwork, the director of the rural teacher education institute – and member of the rural (pro-reform) union – exchanged the countryside surroundings for the concrete blocks of the Ministry of Education in La Paz. Here, we met again: "Do you remember that when I was still the director of the Normal, we had sent some texts elaborated by trainers and students to the Ministry?", he asked as I nodded in confirmation. "We [at the Ministry] are now recollecting this information, these experiences of changing our mentalities, and this is essential. For a long time, teachers have been trained to fulfil the goals of the neoliberal project. What we need is a cultural-intellectual *Pachakuti*, a return to the older times, and we need a radical change of attitudes and commitment, a decolonial attitude" (107:5).[6] These quotes follow the new governments' ideological discourse of a decolonised and communitarian education system, and while some of them portray trainers' *ideas* on *future* strategies, or recently started tactics, they still provide some evidence of the willingness of a small part of trainers to bring the ASEP reform about.

In contrast, and representing a majority view for urban teacher trainers, one of Benardo's urban colleagues sees less hope for Normales to become institutes that train agents of change. He reflects on the current situation as follows: "You see [first name of author], in Bolivia we continue

[6] *Pachakuti* is a traditional Andean ritual and phase of change.

with a state of egoism. We have not opened our eyes to the rest of the world". Complementing this rather negative view of educators' apathy in the Normales, a former socialist politician, Normal director during the University administration and current academic sees "teachers as the most conservative force in Bolivia". Based on his long-term experience in the education sector, he is sceptical about the possibilities for teachers to be(come) agents of change, as: "for decades, teachers have struggled for their secure job positions, their welfare arrangements. They have a lot of privileges to defend" (23). Teachers therefore have, in his view, resisted political processes of change since their unions "have made their institutes untouchable to changes. Change cannot enter the Normales, change cannot be implemented, because there is no evaluation system for teachers" (23). This links to a sense of institutional inertia, the "fixed profession" that automatically promotes teachers according to years of experience without an adequate evaluation and support system (the earlier mentioned *escalafon*), as well as the relatively powerful position of the unions when it comes to (withholding) transformation in the Normales and wider education system.

Interestingly, both the hopeful and the less hopeful teacher trainers highlighted in this section, all relate their reflections on the (im)possibilities of teachers to be(come) actors of change to the broader environment. Coming back to the SRA framework, we can observe how the hopeful trainers perceive the current ASEP policies, and to some extend the (slowly) changing socio-political context, to enable more space for teachers to act as change agents. At the same time, the less hopeful trainers argue how a sense of apathy and continuing conservatism – both in the Normales and in schools – are holding back teachers from embracing an attitude of transformation.

Teacher Students' Perceptions on Being an Agent of Change

How do the student teachers themselves see their agency to be(come) agents of change? From survey data collected in 2008, it became clear that around one-third of both urban and rural students, when talking about their motivations to become a teacher, mentioned the words "change", "progress", "improvement" and "development". While we should bear in mind how particularly these "written-down" answers tend to be rather "politically correct", they still reflect an interesting discourse adopted by these students, about both societal and educational changes and improvements, as illustrated below. These quotes are derived from teacher students' responses to a survey conducted in the urban and rural Normales, with first and third year students, in August and September 2008. They responded to the open question: "Why do you want to become a teacher?"

Student teachers' motivations as agents of change.

- "I want to teach the children and youngsters, who form the future of Bolivia, I want to awaken them from their sleepiness, that was caused by colonialism and capitalism" (24-year old male urban student)
- "I want a different, equal and unified Bolivia, because I have the opportunity to incentivize changes. I want to develop critical and reflective persons. It makes me feel happy to see a child with (realistic) dreams" (26-year old female urban student)
- "Education in Bolivia is subordinated, and society reflects this education system. I want to contribute to this educational change, to improve our society" (21-year old male rural student)
- "Unfortunately, the bad economic situation in our country has created a more economic interest in the teaching profession, rather than a vocational one. I need to be part of an improvement of education, for changing this nation" (21-year old male urban student)

- "I want to share knowledge that is helpful for our society, in an equal way, without discrimination, to help to unify my country on the basis of my ideology"
  (25-year old female rural student)
- "This country needs people who can make a difference, who can change this colonising education system that has been oriented at only a few"
  (22-year old male urban student)
- "I feel that the changes in our lives come with a revolution in my country, not with arms, but with a change in attitude of the new generations. This can only be reached through study. So, yes, as a teacher I can help in this process"
  (26-year old male urban student)

Interestingly, these quotes do not so much have a direct resonance with the current government's discourse, most probably because many of the teacher students, including for instance Elisa, in 2008 still had very little knowledge of the details of the ASEP reform. Still, in their idealistic and hopeful comments they do express a wish for bringing change, reflecting a potentially interesting but largely "unused" vocational and socio-political motivation (Lopes Cardozo 2011, 2012a, 2012c, 2012d).

This idealism was also clearly expressed by a female teacher student at the urban institute, who was determined that she could make a difference as a teacher, "We will be able to change things. It only takes one to make a change, is what I tell my students. Like Mahatma Gandhi, he made a big change, and John Lennon, with his music he had his way to change, and in Bolivia there are so many men who did a lot as well" (18:13). While situated in a completely different context, I find it useful to draw from Moore's (2008) study on how pre-service teachers in New York would sometimes have "illusions of grandeur" to the effects they will have beyond their classrooms, as they have no clear idea (yet) of what types of opposition they might face and they are unsure how to go about achieving this. Moore (2008, p. 206) therefore argues that teacher education programmes need to provide a better informed definition of social justice understandings in their subject teaching, as well as a better understanding of the ideological nature of schooling and science, and the role of teachers within them. The new outline of the Bolivian ASEP teacher education curriculum includes subject matters such as political ideology, which could potentially include these types of discussions, but further research would have to highlight how, and in what ways, this results in practice. In addition, as the data presented above has shown, these curricular changes would need to be supported with training for the teacher trainers. Obviously, this would look very differently from such an endeavour in a context like New York, considering the highly politicised nature of Bolivia's decolonising rationale of the ASEP reform, and the resistance towards this political line felt by many (mostly urban, but also rural) teachers.

Not all students have these "illusions of grandeur", as they also reflected on the challenges of becoming an agent of change. Elisa, who was introduced in textbox 1, in a group interview with two other female students talked about the difficulties young, female teachers face in order to really make significant changes in schools. "Making a difference is difficult. Just because we are young, and female, they think we don't know. Because of the colonial times, the *Aymara* parents are very closed, they are not open to any type of innovation, they won't let us" (16:71). Hence, when new teachers start their teaching career in schools, the "illusions of grandeur" often quickly disappears. "With a lot of enthusiasm, we see new teachers arriving in the schools in the provinces", an ex-trainer now working in a donor organisation explains, "it is very rewarding to work with this group of people. But the bad thing is that after a while they become tired, and their work quality diminishes. That is why a good school director is so crucial, when she/he provides good opportunities to develop, these young teachers normally continue to function very well, they have the highest possibility to make a change" (77:11).

A graduated teacher student from Simón Bolívar had worked for two years in a rural school, "where I really learned how to teach" (111:1). On her return to work in a school in El Alto, she experienced the same situation as her colleague, in that she was appointed a position for a subject matter that she had not been trained for. When asked if she felt that the Normal had prepared her well for the job, she responded: "They give you the content knowledge, in an isolated way. When we were leaving the Normal to go and work, me and my colleagues found out we were missing many things. Only in the first years in the province did we really start to develop" (111:8). This teacher was not alone in feeling unprepared when leaving the Normal. In accordance with views of other in-service teachers, she reflected how this situation obviously does not contribute to improve the low quality of education in remote areas, let alone her confidence and agency to act as a *soldier of change*.

While the general perspective of students on their teacher education experience is not quite positive, I found it especially interesting to see some changes occurring throughout the course of the fieldwork in terms of increased active participation of students. During a fieldwork visit in May 2010, in which I shared my preliminary findings in order to discuss them and receive feedback, I encountered several examples of open forms of "voice" in two feedback discussions with first and second year students in the urban Normal. In their open and critical reactions to both my findings, as well as the intentions of my research, it was obvious that they had become used to posing these types of critical questions. The same first year male student quoted above, whom I did not meet in my earlier visits as he was not yet enrolled, questioned me about the rationale behind my research. He continued by reflecting how:

> "we are all children of the working class. Part of the problem now, apart from that our cultural and ideological roots have been taken away, is that we have been educated with a very low quality. What we know, is perhaps more because of our own efforts. Without wanting to offend you, we just learned from the book Open Veins of Latin America, how Holland was one of those colonisers. I sometimes get very angry with those outsiders coming to look at us as if we were animals in a zoo. And then they are astonished about our culture, about our Pachamama, without even understanding what is the Pachamama" (105:6).[7]

What this quote shows, is a more critical understanding and expression of the marginalised position many Bolivian "working class" citizens – a group to which most Bolivian teachers would belong – have encountered for a long time. If we interpret this teacher students' articulation from the lense of coloniality, there is a sense of frustration with having been treated unequally within Bolivia's national context as well as beyond it. This echoes the current political line of the Morales government to create decolonised and "Bolivian-owned" policies that (in discourse at least) would be inclusive of all citizens.

In addition, while being a challenging and insightful experience as an ethnographer, I also realised that this openly critical attitude of a few of the students in particular showed their desire for active engagement and critical reflection. I had a similar experience with a rural trainer, who was well aware of how the results of a (foreign) study could be used at the central level of the Ministry of Education, with potential funding consequences for their institute. Delany-Barmann describes a similar experience of Bolivian students' suspicion towards external researchers, as students were aware that such research observations "might come back to them in the form of policy" (2010, p. 197).

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[7] *La Pachamama* is widely recognized in Bolivia as a highly spiritualized and honored Mother Earth, which has a reciprocal relationship with humans.

The above reflections on an increased level of critical thinking and dialogue in *some* of the Normales at the end of the fieldwork period are still exceptional in a rather dominant conservative institutional context. Yet, these changes did take place in a period when the ASEP Reform proposal was developed into an official policy, and when the broader socio-political context provided more space for a representation of voices that had been marginalised for so long.

To summarise this section, many teacher students had a rather idealistic view of themselves as future "actors for change" in an educational, as well as a social sense. Still, and relevant to the SRA perspective that connects contexts to the agency of actors, a number of students and young teachers also reflected critically on the limited space that they (will) really have in their future job to "change things". It was mentioned how permanent teacher formation throughout teachers' careers could improve the opportunities for teachers to be actors for change. In line with the new government policies, both trainers and students referred to "changing attitudes" as an important step towards a new (decolonised) society, illustrating the importance of the discursive level of social change.

Finally, let me come back to how the stories of Elisa, Bernardo and Dilma relate to the notions of teachers as transformative (Giroux, 2003) or committed intellectuals (Fischman & Haas, 2009). Perhaps obviously, we need to recognise the heterogeneity of Bolivian teachers, and realise how their respective histories, identities, material realities and motivations all influence the way they see and enact their roles in society. Elisa seems to suffer from the effects of a conservative teacher education programme she has been enrolled in. Together with a lack of information on the reform and her daily struggle to feed her children, make it unlikely to become either a transformative or committed intellectual in the short run. Dilma, in a certain way, takes Giroux's idea of the front-line transformative intellectual very seriously with her leadership role in the teacher unions' demonstrations. And Bernardo, while embodying the role of a champion for the ASEP reform, extends from only ideological ideas into actual strategies to work with teacher students. He might be called a committed intellectual, because of his attempts to train new teachers to change, rather than reproduce an unequal and exclusive education system.

Conclusion

This paper discussed the agency of Bolivian teachers to respond to the current socio-political context that requires them to become "soldiers of change". The paper illuminates a rather unique political discourse that centres on Bolivia's "revolutionary education reform" (2010). It shows various processes of re-articulation, appropriation, negation, and rejection of this new "decolonizing" education policy discourse by various educational actors, while mainly focusing on perspectives and strategies of teacher trainers and teacher students.

Bolivian teachers see themselves confronted with processes of change and continuity in their personal lives, work situation and wider society. Drawing from an adapted version of Hay's Strategic Relational Approach (2002), we can understand Bolivian teachers' life and work as embedded in, and dialectically related to, a tense and discriminatory "strategically selective context". Hence, it is unfair to exclusively hold Bolivian educators responsible for the failures of political reform initiatives, as they face numerous structural constraints, including a low social status; long work hours in multiple jobs to support their families; and a lack of proper pre-service and in-service training and support.

In the literature that deals with Bolivian education "before Morales", there seems to be a shared opinion about the paradoxical and ambiguous roles of educators in reproducing the structures of a hidden curriculum; strengthening instead of withstanding the ongoing *castellanisation* (or loosely translated as enspanishment) of education (see for instance Regalsky and Laurie, 2007, p.

232). In other words, "those that have been forced to memorise the world are not likely to change it"; rather, they are more likely to reproduce reality (Cochran-Smith 2004, p. 206). Gamboa Rocabado writes how even under the new Bolivian regime, "for many public policy specialists and reformers, it is nowadays still unthinkable that indigenous groups and farmers can actually be historical actors of change" (2009, p. 70). The data presented in this article illustrate that there is a need to rethink this homogenising, reproducing and passive idea of the Bolivian teacher.

From a (neo-)Gramscian perspective, we should consider that education is *not* a mere apparatus of the state and that educators are strategic subjects (Talavera Simoni, 2011), or even potential transformative (Giroux, 2003) or committed intellectuals (Fischman and Haas, 2009). However, when we apply a Strategic Relational Approach to study the strategic selective context of Bolivian teacher education – which is dialectically related to teachers' agency and strategies – we can observe that in the specific socio-political and economic setting of Bolivia, there is a rather limited space for manoeuvre available to educators to actually take up these roles as actors of change. And while the current political discourse of the ASEP reform does seem to open up spaces for those "committed intellectuals" to step on board the train towards a "decolonised society" where its citizens can live well (enough), the structural and conservative (pedagogical, institutional and political) traditions provide a serious constraint for many teachers to actually become "transformative intellectuals". This Bolivian case study therefore shows the incredible importance of the strategic selective context in which teachers find themselves, and the ways in which they are enabled to negotiate and navigate that context. Bolivia's colonial history, geopolitical situation, and continued "coloniality" need to be added to any meaningful analysis of teachers as committed and transformative intellectuals. Future studies on the further implementation of the ASEP reform and accompanying teacher training and support will need to shed light on Bolivian teachers' agency to be(come) "soldiers of liberation", rather than reproducing reality as guards of continuation.

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About the Author

Mieke T.A. Lopes Cardozo
University of Amsterdam
mlopescardozo@fmg.uva.nl
Mieke T.A. Lopes Cardozo is an assistant professor in International Development Studies and Education at the University of Amsterdam. She is the coordinator of the 'IS-Academie' co-funded research project of the University of Amsterdam and the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. She coordinates a Research Consortium on Education, Social Justice and Peacebuilding in collaboration with the University of Sussex and the University of Ulster, including a research partnership with UNICEF on Peacebuilding Education and Advocacy. Her research is focused on education policy and practice in relation to development and social justice, (inter)national education and peacebuilding policies, teacher education and teachers' agency and roles in transforming or reproducing inequalities in society. She conducted research on teachers and social change in Bolivia (2007-2012). Other research areas include the role of (non)formal peace education in Sri Lanka, the role of female education leaders in the Islamic context of Aceh, Indonesia and the relation between education policy, teachers roles' and young people's agency in Myanmar.

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