Transforming pre-service teacher education in Bolivia: from indigenous denial to decolonisation?

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Transforming pre-service teacher education in Bolivia:
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Abstract

In line with a broader Latin American turn to the left, since 2006 Bolivia’s ‘politics of change’ of
president Evo Morales includes a new ‘decolonising’ education reform called Avelino Sinani Elizardo
Perez (ASEP). With the aim to break down deep historical processes of indigenous denial and
exclusion in education, this ‘revolutionary reform’ envisions a radical restructuring of Bolivian society
and a revaluation of indigenous epistemological, cultural and linguistic heritage through education.
Inspired by Latin America debates on coloniality theory and theories of alternative knowledges, and
gereed towards broader socio-political processes of social justice, Bolivia’s envisaged education
transformation is built around four pillars, being: 1) decolonization, 2) intra- and inter-culturalism
 together with plurilingualism, 3) productive education, and 4) communitarian education. The
transformation of pre-service teacher education in Bolivia’s Normales is seen as a crucial step in these
processes of socio-educational change. This paper particularly focuses on the ways in which the new
ASEP Reforms’ first two pillars of decolonisation and inter-/intracultural education apply to pre-
 service teacher education, and how these discourses for change stand in contrast to various
implementation challenges in the teacher education sector, including: a lack of conceptual clarity and
information sharing with educators, long and complex processes of a negotiated teacher education
curriculum and a general shortage of both teacher trainers’ and future teachers’ indigenous language
skills. While Bolivia’s new decolonising education reform is contested by various educational actors,
the paper also highlights how the changed socio-political make-up helps to fuel future teachers’
independent self-identification, cultural recognition and pluri-linguistic potentials.

Introduction

On Friday morning, 24 October 2008, a cold and empty lecture room in the ‘Monobloque’
building of the Universidad Mayor de San Andres in the centre of La Paz slowly starts to fill. A
rather mixed crowd, consisting of primarily Bolivian scholars, policy-makers, social
movement leaders and students, as well as academic colleagues from Brazil, gather for a
chat or finds their seat. Being one of the organisers of the seminar on ‘Decolonisation and
Education: reflections from Bolivia and Brazil’, I get a bit nervous about the absence of our
two main speakers of this morning: the first Minister of Education (MoE) under Evo Morales,
Felix Patzi, and his Vice-Minister at the time, José Louis Saavedra. The seminar is supposed
to begin in about five minutes and I soothe myself by remembering that punctuality is a
flexible concept in Bolivia. To our relief, we see the former Minister of Education coming out
of the elevator wearing sun glasses and a black sombrero, and carrying his notes for the speech he is about to give. Without the second speaker being present, nor responding to our phone calls, we decide to start the meeting. ‘Since 2006, and initiated from within the Ministry of Education (MoE), Bolivia has put a stamp called ‘decolonisation’ on its politics’, Patzi addresses his audience, ‘Decolonising the education in Bolivia means reflecting on both the organisation of education as its contents. A fundamental problem in Bolivian education is the enormous inequalities, since people’s educational opportunities are determined by their race, ethnicity, culture and language, resulting in a separate urban and rural system. Content-wise, decolonisation means we need to change our curricula in order to change our mental constructions that are based on a Eurocentric vision and to revalue the knowledges and conceptualisations of the indigenous populations’. Precisely as the former Minister rounds off his speech and apologises for his early departure due to other obligations, the second speaker enters the room.

In the ex-Vice-Minister’s talk, the limits to the decolonisation approach are added to the debate, since ‘decoloniality does not in itself constitute a proposal. An authentic decolonising proposal can only emerge from those that were actually colonised, the indigenous populations.’ While not in full agreement on all elements of the first speaker’s position, Saavedra presents a corresponding vision of what decolonising Bolivian education would mean in practice. ‘On the institutional level, decolonising education means opening up traditional educational environments, so that the whole community around the school becomes a space for learning. At the curricular level, decolonisation means deconstructing the modern and colonial segmentation of educational disciplines, and departing instead from a holistic comprehension of reality, an epistemology of complexity, which is how indigenous populations see reality. He concluded by stating how ‘most importantly, we need to realise that at the level of human attitudes affection and values are crucial and the main teaching technique should be through dialogue’. Both their views are embedded in the broader Latin American theoretical coloniality debates, and both speeches show the diversity in interpretations of what decolonisation of education actually means.1

Besides illustrating the diversity in interpretations of what a ‘decolonised education’ might look like, these two views furthermore illustrate the difficulty of developing once again a new education reform that does justice to and incorporates the plurinational nature of Bolivian society. This paper particularly focuses on the ways in which the new ASEP Reforms’ focus on decolonisation and inter-/intracultural education apply to pre-service teacher education, as the training of future teachers is perceived by the government to be a crucial step for transformations to take place. It analyses how the justice-oriented political discourses for change stand in contrast to various implementation challenges in the Bolivian teacher education sector, including: a lack of conceptual clarity and information sharing with educators, long and complex processes of a negotiated teacher education curriculum and a general shortage of both teacher trainers’ and future teachers’ indigenous language skills. The paper aims to uncover both the discursive and material aspects that trigger various forms of support and resistance to this new law, and to elaborate the perspectives of various important education actors involved with regards to the governments’ ‘politics for change’.
It tries to reveal how the new decolonising political discourse is being interpreted, mediated and defied by those that have to move these ideas into an educational reality.

With the recent change of government, and Evo Morales’ politics of change, Bolivia’s context is marked by a new political direction, which is closely related to a broader Latin American turn to the ‘New Left’ (Rodriguez-Garavito et al., 2008). These transformations are also referred to as ‘socialism of the XXI Century, plurinationality, interculturality, direct and substantive democracy, revolucion ciudadana, endogenous development centered on the buen vivir of the people, territorial and cultural autonomy, and decolonial projects towards post-liberal societies’ (Escobar, 2010: 2). Bolivia has a wide diversity, determined by its geographical variety and its multiethnic population; by its many different languages and cultures; and by its biodiversity and rich resources. Depending on the source, Bolivia has between 34 and 37 official languages and indigenous groups (Morales, 2004: 244; Taylor, 2004: 25; Delany-Barmann, 2010: 181; Albó, 2005; CEPAL, 2005: 9; Nucinkis, 2004: 4). However, not all these languages enjoy the same amount of power; the four largest languages are Spanish; Quechua; Aymara; and Guaraní. A ‘Democracy audit’ taken in 2006 showed that 71% of the population identified themselves as belonging to indigenous groups (Seligson et al, 2006). In the 1992 census, in contrast, few Bolivians identified themselves as indigenous, showing a change in self-conception over the last decade (Drange, 2007), a process that continues to date, also among Bolivia’s future teachers (Lopes Cardozo, 2011).

Soon after Morales was elected President at the end of 2005, one of his first political steps was to do away with the former ‘donor-driven’ education law of the 1990s, and to create a new Bolivian owned reform for decolonising education. The new ‘revolutionary’ education law carries the names of two emblematic historical educators who started to develop a model of indigenous education in the 1930s: Avelino Siñani and Elizardo Pérez (and is therefore called the ASEP law). The ASEP reform’s close engagement with the idea of decolonisation has its roots in the ideas of coloniality theory. ASEP re-imagines education for, among other concepts, critical analysis and ‘vivir bien’ – to live well enough – a Bolivian interpretation of an alternative development model including a social justice oriented education based on recognition and inclusion rather than an expulsion of indigenous values, knowledges and languages. Many Bolivians see ASEP as an articulation of the Plurinational Constitution’s and National Development Plan’s more general goals (see for instance a reflection on the National Development Plan in Yapu, 2009: 51-52). Together these initiatives offer a new definition of citizenship, as education is an important factor in forming students’ relationships with the world around them. ‘The transformation of Bolivian education has to start with changing the Normales’, a Ministry departmental director of Teacher Education stated, in an interview in May 2010. However, changing the Normales, Bolivia’s teacher training institutes, as a first step in transforming and decolonising the education system is by no means an easy undertaking.

I draw from a four year long qualitative research engagement with Bolivian teacher education, including various fieldwork visits of around nine months in total. During these visits, I conducted over 120 semi-structured interviews and discussions at the policy, NGO, institutional and school levels. 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. This study focused its data collection in two cases (purposive sampling): the urban Normal ‘Simón Bolívar’ (La Paz) and the rural Normal ‘M.A.Villarroel’ in Paracaya, Cochabamba. The urban Simón Bolívar forms the main case study and the rural institute Paracaya a secondary case. Although the focus of this study on only two of the twenty-seven Normales in Bolivia cannot paint a generalisable picture of the whole Bolivian teacher education system, it does aspire to contribute to a better understanding of this under-researched field.

The paper starts by providing a brief outline of the theoretical inspirations for this research. It continues to give a concise overview of the historical developments of Bolivia’s teacher education arena that have paved the way for the current push for transformation, from a more exclusionary and donor-driven system to a Bolivian-owned and unique teacher education approach today. The second part outlines the main characteristics of the new ASEP Law, and then turns to discuss the specifics for the field of teacher education, for as far as these emerging plans have been developed. Then, I elaborate on the anticipated obstacles for the execution of the ASEP law and its new education pedagogy and curriculum. Finally, the paper highlights how the current socio-political context triggers some potential niches for transformation in terms of future teachers’ indigenous self-identification, cultural recognition and pluri-linguistic potentials.

**Theoretical inspirations**

This study draws on an interdisciplinary body of critical literature. Acknowledging the critical realist recognition of the importance of both the discursive and the material, the Cultural Political Economy (CPE) approach developed by Jessop and colleagues at Lancaster University takes ‘the cultural turn’ in political and economic research seriously (Jessop, 2004: 160). A relevant interpretation of CPE for the field of education is provided by Susan Robertson, and carries the name ‘cultural political economy of education’ (CPE/E) (Robertson, forthcoming). From a critical pedagogical perspective, Robertson reminds us how education is ‘a key site of cultural production and social reproduction’ (Ibid.).iii

Similarly rooted in a critical realist ontology, and being closely related to Jessop’s work on CPE in its dialectical understanding of discursive-material relations, Fairclough’s (2005) version of Critical Discourse Analysis is a well-fitting tool for understanding (lack of) institutional change in Bolivia’s Normales. Fairclough’s (2005) interpretation of CDA helps to critically examine institutionalised beliefs, policies, practices as well as personal discourses, and as such helps to understand the ‘how’ of social justice in (teacher) education (North 2008).

The importance of the cultural and discursive domains of Bolivia’s counter-hegemonic project is reflected in Latin American debates on coloniality. Patzi, the first Minister of Education under the Morales government who was introduced at the start of the paper, was responsible for the very first drafts of the new ASEP law for decolonising education, which is clearly inspired by regional debates on coloniality. A growing number of
academic debates on education in Latin America deal with issues such as coloniality and ‘other’, ‘alternative’, or ‘indigenous’ knowledges (see e.g. Escobar 2007; Grosfoguel 2007a, 2007b; Mignolo, 2007; Quijano 2005; Walsh 2007). These debates are connected to the global rise of social (including indigenous) movements, together with wider processes of economic and cultural globalisation that opened up alternative ways of looking at political, theoretical and epistemic approaches (Saavedra, 2007).

Present day processes of social transformation in Bolivia are not just about an economic redistribution of wealth (and educational and work) opportunities among different classes, it is also very much about struggles for cultural recognition and political representation of large and varying groups that for so long have been excluded and discriminated against in Bolivian society. I find Nancy Fraser’s comprehensive understanding of social justice useful for interpreting and understanding the contemporary socio-political strategies in Bolivia. Fraser (1995: 82-86) defined two types of remedies to social injustices including: ‘affirmative remedies’ – correcting the outcomes without changing structural frameworks; and ‘transformative remedies’ – correcting outcomes by restructuring the underlying generative framework. Rather than an affirmative multicultural approach, or what Hale (2002) termed a form of ‘neoliberal multiculturality’, Bolivia’s current ‘politics of change’ with, at its core, the new ‘revolutionary and decolonising’ education law, are hence about a struggle for transformative social justice. Based on historical developments of gender (in)justice, Fraser (2005b) provides a three-dimensional normative framework of social justice, which includes the concepts of redistribution, recognition and representation (2005b: 300, 305). This social justice framework analytically distinguishes three interlinked dimensions: the socio-economic dimension (linked to redistribution); the cultural dimension (or recognition); and the political dimension (of representation). In line with Fraser’s arguments, more socially just education would need a combination of both redistributive and recognition approaches (North, 2008: 1187). In the next section, these theoretical inspirations will be employed to analyse the historical and present governance of Bolivian teacher education.

History of the Normales – towards a Bolivian-owned teacher education system

The beginning of Bolivian teacher education was ‘foreign-driven’, with the first Normal created in Sucre in 1909 by a Belgian missionary. The Belgian mission expanded as they created a dual urban-rural system between 1910 and 1948 and set up different and less successful Normales in rural areas (Talavera Simoni, 2009: 67). During the 1930s, alternative forms of indigenous education and teacher training were developed, particularly in the highland village of Warisata. When the state realised that establishing local authority over schooling was inconsistent with their policies of (cultural) assimilation, the indigenous education initiatives were forcibly closed down (Regalsky and Laurie, 2007: 235; Taylor, 2004: 8; UNNIOs, 2004: 12).

Under the command of Víctor Paz Estenssoro an alliance of armed farmers and workers, organised in unions and political parties, took over power from the military forces during the national Revolution in 1952. The highland region became the ‘centre of the
country’, where modernisation and development processes were concentrated (Molina, 2008: 6; Talavera Simoni, 2011). Although the 1952 Revolution meant a first step towards full citizenship for indigenous groups in Bolivia, the dominant criollos of Spanish decent and the urban middle class mestizos created an exclusionary society with no space for indigenous participation in economic, political and social life. However, pressure from working class and indigenous groups ensured general voting rights, together with national education and healthcare systems (Kohl and Farthing, 2006: 35-36, 47).

After the 1952 National Revolution, the 1955 education reform (in Bolivia referred to as the ‘1955 Código’) aimed to assimilate indigenous people – by then named campesinos – into the dominant culture, and reinforced the divided urban-rural education system (Regalsky and Laurie, 2007: 235; Oranje, 2007; Taylor, 2004: 9-11). The 1955 Código also established that the state had to guarantee employment once a teacher obtained the national teacher’s title. Since then, teachers have had to subscribe to the escalafon, which is a seniority or grade scale that has been one of the main objects of defence of union struggles ever since (Talavera Simoni, 2011). During military rule, the urban-rural divided system was further reinforced, and the institutional basic structure of today’s Normales was created. In 1975 the educational ‘Banzer law’ together with the ‘law for Normales of 1975’ were launched. Both university autonomy and teacher union activities were abolished. Teacher training was aimed at national security and the creation of ‘a nationalist state, order, work, peace and justice’ (Lozada Pereira, 2004: 49). Banzer’s law laid many of the foundations for the structure of teacher education as organised under the 1994 reform; the training is 6 semesters long, organised in both urban and rural Normales, with a concentration of decision-making power at the MoE – a power structure that continues to date.

Since the 1990s, and with the return of democracy, education policies in Bolivia have shifted from historically homogenising and modernising types of schooling to a more emancipatory form of education. In line with a wider global push for Education For All since 1990, these policies aim at providing relevant education to all its citizens. The 1994 ‘Intercultural and Bilingual Education Reform’ was an important attempt to overcome exclusionary and homogenising forms of schooling. It was an innovative reform at the time, receiving both international funding and attention. The reform process was, nevertheless, complicated, lengthy and only partially successful. An ideology of Intercultural and Bilingual Education (Educación Intercultural Bilingue - EIB) cannot fully develop if only rooted in an educational policy and limited to elementary education – instead of in daily life, such as media, street signs etc. (Albó 2002 in Taylor, 2004: 29; Van Dam and Salman, 2003: 25).

The reform’s design and implementation process was soon criticised for a lack of genuine participation from Bolivia’s education actors, and for being ‘imposed by foreign actors’, including the World Bank and the IMF as important and influential donors. Many teachers resisted the envisioned pedagogical and managerial changes in their daily practices, and they did not receive proper support. Parents often perceived (and often still see) education as the way out of poverty, and therefore preferred their children to learn Spanish, the ‘modern’ language of business. Furthermore, social movements, including teachers’
unions, felt left out of the creation of a largely ‘imposed and neo-liberal’ reform (Van Dam and Salman, 2003; Contreras and Talavera Simoni, 2003, 2004; Speiser, 2000). During the first years of implementation of the reforms, teacher education reform was neglected; over the past decade it has been limited to several (short term) national and international reform initiatives targeting the lack of quality in the Normales.

The emergence of new ‘indigenous’ discourses that aimed at a revaluation of indigenous cultures, languages and rights started already in the 1990s in the broader Latin American region, and was taken to the political arena by emerging political movements, including the political party of Evo Morales. Various efforts have been undertaken since the beginning of the 1990s to further indigenous participation in policy development and implementation in the field of education, and particularly in EIB. Even though EIB was and is perceived by some critics as an extension of neoliberal structural adjustment policies, according to Gustafson (2009: 4-8, 253-265), ‘EIB served as a networking and communicative vehicle, facilitating the movement of leaders, resources, symbols and new practices’ – and this way served as a political instrument for part of the indigenous movements. The Indigenous Education Councils (CEPOs) played an important role in ‘cultivating a position in defence of EIB’ (Gustafson 2009: 264-265). After a democratic victory in 2006, intellectuals in the new government under Morales developed a new political direction inspired by Latin American ‘coloniality’ discourses (discussed above) for the entire education sector, including teacher education, slowly working towards a new (counter-)hegemonic policy discourse (Fairclough, 2005: 931-932). This historical process has led to the current political perception that ‘a revolution in education’ is needed (MoE, ASEP law, 2010). Rather than dismissing the Intercultural and Bilingual education initiatives of the 1990s, the new ASEP law builds on these discourses and takes them a step further, to a ‘full decolonisation’ of Bolivia’s education and society.

Cleaning up the snakes breeding place: decolonising the Bolivian education system

The most recent available statistics show a situation that is both promising and alarming for the future of Bolivian education. Bolivia is likely to achieve the EFA literacy goal in 2015, according to UNESCO’s Global Monitoring Report (2011: 80). Over the past decade (1999-2008) there has, however, been little change in the (net-)enrolment, survival, drop-out and repetition rates in primary education, as around 94% of Bolivia’s children are enrolled in schools and approximately 80% of them continue to complete their primary education (UNESCO, 2011: 60). Thus, there are still Bolivian children that miss out on education, or fail to complete their educational career once in school. These educational inequalities in Bolivia can be attributed to factors including ethnicity, gender, urban/rural descent, geographical location and wealth. This challenging context forms the background to which the new ASEP law has to be implemented.

The first proposals for a renewed education sector were born in the educational commission of the constitutional Assembly from mid 2006 onwards (Gamboa Rocabado, 2009: 67-69). This resulted in a long process of consultation and approval that continued
throughout the period of this research, until the ASEP law was finally approved in congress on 20 December 2010. Morales’ first Minister of Education, Felix Patzi, was one of the creators of the first versions of what now constitutes the ASEP law for decolonising education. In his controversial efforts to create a decolonising education system, Patzi pushed for diminishing the role of the Catholic church in education, or for an end to a ‘Catholic Doctrine’ in Bolivian education, which resulted in fierce protests from Catholics and evangelicals alike (Postero, 2007). The approved version of the ASEP law still refers to a ‘secular, pluralistic and spiritual’ education model, as it ‘promotes mutual respect and coexistence between peoples with different religious backgrounds’ (Article 3.6, ASEP law, 2010b). While some see a danger of worsening tensions between different ethnic and religious groups (see below), Article 3.12 stresses the need to ‘promote peaceful coexistence and the eradication of all forms of violence in education, for the development of a society based on a culture of peace, with respect for individual and collective rights for all’. The division between rural and urban Normales, according to Patzi, ‘reflects the differentiation between Indians and whites’. Therefore, he asserted during the seminar on decolonisation mentioned before: ‘decolonisation, as we defined it at the Ministry of Education, in practice means unifying educational institutions into one system, to put an end to ethnically defined separations’. Building from debates in Latin America and beyond of education for liberation (including the well known work of Freire, 1970), Bolivia’s new education law stipulates a ‘liberating pedagogy’, as it encourages personal development and a critical awareness of reality ‘in order to change it’ (Article 3.14, ASEP law, MoE, 2010).

These new policy lines for a decolonised education system are embedded in the ancient indigenous, and primarily Andean spiritual values, or cosmovisión. This concept of cosmovisión for instance came up during an interview with an indigenous social movement leader: ‘The law Avelino Siñani is telling us that the indigenous wisdom (their cosmovisión) is the strength of Bolivia. It is the essential basis of Bolivia, and the discourse of President Evo says the moral base of Bolivia is with the indigenous peoples’. Indeed, the ASEP law refers to an education that ‘develops knowledges and expertise from the worldview [cosmovisión] of indigenous peoples, peasants and afro-Bolivians, in complementarity to universal knowledges, to contribute to the integral development of society’ (Article 3.10, ASEP law, 2010b). More specifically on this cosmovisión, Article 3.13 specifies that education should build from and promote the ethical and moral values of the plural society, including for instance ‘ama qhilla, ama llulla, ama suwa’ – do not be lazy, do not lie or steal, and ‘suma qamaña’ or the earlier mentioned notion of ‘vivir bien’ (to live well). Bolivian education, then, is based on ‘the values of unity, equality, inclusion, dignity, freedom, solidarity, reciprocity, respect, complementarity, harmony, openness, balance, equal opportunities, social and gender equity in participation, welfare, responsibility, social justice, distribution and redistribution of social goods and products to live well’ (Article 13.3, ASEP law, 2010b). At a discursive level, the law thus covers all three dimensions of Fraser’s conceptualisation of social justice, including distribution (the economic dimension of justice), recognition (the cultural dimension of justice) and representation (the political dimension of justice) (Fraser, 2005a; Fraser, 2005b). With regard to ‘gender justice’, similar to the gender-equity emphasis
in the former 1994 Reform, the current government gives considerable (discursive) weight to issues of gender.\textsuperscript{vi}

More specifically, the reform is built around the following four pillars, as identified by the Bolivian MoE: 1) decolonisation; 2) intra- and inter-culturalism along with plurilingualism; 3) productivity; and 4) communitarian education. While the government uses these four categories, the data of this study shows there are various interpretations of each pillar. These views differ between the various respondents included in this study (e.g. teacher trainers, in-service teachers, indigenous movement leaders and unions) as well as within the MoE, as became clear from the two perceptions reflected at the meeting discussed in the introduction. This conceptual vagueness lowers the prospects for creating a strong new curriculum, at least for the moment. This paper particularly focuses on the first two first pillars, as these have been most clearly conceptualised and as such – at least discursively – have influenced the current design of teacher education programmes and (developing) curricula.

‘Decolonisation’ can be seen as the main pillar. The official explanation of decolonising education is ‘putting an end to ethnic borders that influence opportunities in the area of education, work, politics and economic security, where no one is privileged on the basis of race, ethnicity and or language. It also means not favouring conceptualisations of the Western world as if they were universal, yet valuing the knowledges, skills and technologies of the indigenous civilisations, both of the Amazonian and Andean regions’ (Congreso Nacional de Educación, 2006). Specifically, ASEP rejects parts of the ‘colonial’ education reform of 1994, which was developed in Bolivia with cooperation from international donors and consultants. However, supporters of the law see ASEP as a continuation of an emancipatory educational process, that started with the intercultural and bilingual reform of 1994. Others – such as the La Paz’ teacher union – perceive it as a mere copy of the 1994 reform with some ‘indigenous additions’. However diverse the interpretations and reactions to this reform, it is clearly a response to the need for a Bolivian-owned reform, since, as the former section showed how different groups of actors believe the 1994 reform was created – or ‘imposed’ – without enough genuine participation of civil society and teachers.

ASEP’s second pillar builds on the 1994 reform’s use of the concepts of inter-culturalism and bilingualism. The new form of inter-culturalism is linked to the notion of intra-culturalism. Rather than a narrowly-defined (American and European) notion of multiculturalism (Delany-Barmann, 2010: 186), or what Hale (2002) called neoliberal multiculturalism, the ASEP reform builds on Latin American social science and educational literature on the concept of ‘interculturalism’ and has developed the interrelated concepts of inter- and intracultural education. While inter-culturalism offers students skills in relating to other cultures, intra-culturalism engages reflection and growth of one’s own identity. Intraculturality is defined in Article 6.1 as ‘promoting the restoration, empowerment, development of and cohesion between the cultures of the nation and indigenous peasant, intercultural and Afro-Bolivian populations for the consolidation of the Plurinational state, based on equity, solidarity, complementarity, reciprocity and justice’ (MoE, 2010b). The law
continues to state how the national curriculum incorporates the various knowledges of the
different worldviews’ (cosmovisiones) of these nations and communities. Secondly,
interculturality is defined as ‘the development of interrelationships and interaction regarding
the knowledges, skills, science and technology belonging to each culture, which strengthens
their own identity but also an equal interaction between all cultures in Bolivia and with the
rest of the world’ (Article 6.2, ASEP law, MoE, 2010b).

As the most practical part of ASEP, plurilingualism exemplifies the inter- and intra-
cultural process: students will learn the native language local to their area, Spanish and
(optionally) a foreign language (most often this will be English). Depending on the context of
the school, the first language of instruction will either be Spanish or an indigenous language
(in cases where more languages are spoken by different students, a communitarian
committee will decide upon the language(s) of instruction). In addition, all students have the
right to learn a foreign language and all teachers will be taught sign language (article 7, ASEP
law, MoE, 2010b). Finally, with regard to the third and fourth pillars of productive and
communitarian education, there is still quite some vagueness as in how to interpret these
conceptual pillars (for more information on these pillars please see Lopes Cardozo, 2011).

Bolivian teacher education today – a unique approach

Bolivia substantiates its unique contemporary approach in the teacher education sector
where, contrary to global mainstream teacher education reforms, the training of future
teachers is prioritised and extended instead of shortened. In terms of teachers’ rewarding
system, salaries have increased significantly over the past few years, but remain relatively
low according to Bolivia’s teacher unions who continue to see this at the core of their
struggles (see also Talavera Simoni, 2011). In response to the fact that teachers – and
particularly their training - have not been at the centre of the reforms taking place in Latin
America (Speiser, 2000: 28), and based on the failures of the implementation of the Bolivian
1994 reform, the new ASEP law emphasises the need to start the reform at the level of the
Normales. Rather than being shortened, Bolivia’s teacher education period is extended from
3.5 to 5 years. The teacher training institutes are still called Normales in daily speech. While
the institutes changed names recently, and are now officially referred to as Escuelas
Superiores de Formación de Maestros y Maestras, I will continue to refer to the ‘Normales’ in
this paper in line with the common use in Bolivia. These Normales are large institutions with
usually more than a thousand students. Presently, pre-service teacher education in Bolivia is
provided in 27 Normales, as well as in 20 smaller scale Academic Units (UAs) that are created
to serve those living in more remote areas. Teacher education in Bolivia is public and funded
from the National Treasury. According to the regulations for Normales of 1997, each
institute has three organisational levels: a consultative, an executive, and an operational
one.

The new system is defined as ‘unified, public, free of charge and diversified. [It is]
unified with regard to the professional hierarchy, pedagogical and scientific quality without
the division between an urban and rural system, [and] diversified in the sense that it
responds to the productive, economic, socio-cultural and linguistic characteristics of
indigenous populations of each region in the Bolivian territory’ (Congreso Nacional de Educación, 2006). The new law sets as its main objectives for teacher education to: train critical, reflexive, self-critical, innovative and research oriented professionals, who are committed to democracy, social transformations, and the full inclusion of all Bolivians in society’ (MoE, ASEP Law 2010, Article 33). The new curriculum includes subject matters such as traditional medicine, and ‘food and nutritional security’, in line with the extended role for teachers in communities. The new curriculum is also being developed with a clear political agenda, as it expects future teachers to ‘decolonise politically’, as they are trained in their first and second year in subjects including ‘cosmovisión’, ‘political ideology’, ‘decolonisation’ and ‘communitarian mathematics’ (La Prensa, 22-12-2010).

While Bolivia’s new constitution and the ASEP reform work towards addressing historical social injustices, especially concerning the marginalisation of indigenous populations with regard to economic distribution, political representation and socio-cultural recognition processes (Fraser 2005a, 2005b), the decolonising ideas are certainly not uncontested. In particular, a large group of urban trainers included in this study showed their concerns about these new education plans, much in contrast to the generally supportive attitudes of their rural colleagues. There exist, in short, varied responses towards the new reform plans, resulting in a list of challenges for effective implementation in practice.

Challenges to implement the ASEP reform in practice

In this section, I highlight four important challenges for wanting to turn the revolutionary ideas of the decolonisation and inter-/intra-education pillars into a reality. Firstly, not everyone welcomes the new politics of indigenous revaluation into the classrooms, which historically have functioned as way into ‘modern society’. The new ASEP education law aims to include historically marginalised and indigenous people by supporting their cultural logics, and as such it aims to strengthen ‘recognition’, or Fraser’s cultural dimension of social justice. However, some of these people are much more interested in engaging with the cultural logic that they have learned to engage with for centuries, often referred to as ‘modern’ or ‘Western’ culture, or what Sleeter terms the hegemonic ‘culture of power’ (2009). An ex-minister of education and academic in La Paz explained that through Bolivia’s process of colonisation, a cultural, political and economic hierarchy came into being, which has been a strong force in society ever since. The current state of consciousness of Bolivia’s indigenous population imagines their future as part of the modernising approach to development rather than the coloniality approach. Teachers and academics explained that students and their parents are interested less in the decolonisation project and rather in the project identified as ‘colonial’ by the Morales administration, which offers personal economic success through engaging in ‘colonial’ hierarchies, such as (Spanish) language, geography/migration and ‘modern’ cultural norms.

The project for decolonisation is hence unwanted by some, as it is seen as an imposition into their lives. Indigenous parents simply want to make sure that their children grow up to have a better life than they have had. Similar to parents’ opinion in the 1990s,
this often means focusing on Spanish in school rather than their indigenous language, as well as supporting migration to the cities and effectively contributing to indigenous assimilation into ‘modern’ culture. True dignity, which has been a central part of the indigenous demands in Bolivia, must be tied to significant improvement at the material level. Postero (2007: 22), based on the work of Fraser, convincingly argues how Morales’ followers thus not only want their president to enact a politics of recognition, but also a politics of redistribution.

Secondly, there is a lack of conceptual clarity and information sharing with educators. While the government maintains that the ASEP reform was not exclusively designed by experts and officials, numerous teachers described the opposite. Respondents confirmed that rather than honest teacher ownership and reform design through participation, they felt that the ASEP law has again been imposed from above. While the government defines participation as central to the process of decolonisation, its own analysis of decolonisation, to some extent, calls into question its own actions. This relates to what Jansen describes as an aspect of ‘political symbolism’, using ‘participation’ as a process of legitimisation of policies, rather than an instrument aimed at successful implementation (2001: 207). While emphasised at the discursive level of the ASEP law, Fraser’s third political dimensions of social justice (representation) in practice does not work very smoothly yet. In this sense, the process of national level frame-setting has been only partly successful, as only the representatives of the rural union and the Indigenous Education Councils (CEPOs) feel genuine engagement with the new law, while many of the (mostly urban) teachers experienced a lack of involvement in decision-making processes (Fraser 2005a).

For most of the teachers the simple lack of knowledge about the new reform is a pressing issue related to their opposition. While teachers are generally aware of the new discourse, there is no clarity about the meaning of the concepts embedded in the reform. The definitions of ASEP’s pillars remain vague, especially in regard to the classroom. Moreover, as the reform’s opposition is quite passionate, its reasoning has some appeal for the teachers. Indeed, some teachers have access only to oppositional sources of information and know very little about the full process or contrasting points of view. Conversations with La Paz teachers revealed that this stark opposition to reform has led them to participate in protests.

Thirdly, another major challenge is the need to create a universally accepted curriculum as part of the ASEP reform. This process is ongoing at the time of writing, and an interesting area for future study. Even if the curriculum is adapted to be locally relevant, according to a MoE official, there is a lack of capability among indigenous groups to ‘systematise’ their cultural heritage.\(^1\) In addition, many are concerned with the lack of knowledge of indigenous

\(^1\) However, as was pointed out before by the former Vice-Minister Saavedra in the introduction, a decolonised education system would not necessarily follow a ‘Western’ or ‘modern’ approach to structuration or ‘systematisation’ in separate academic disciplines. Therefore, a more ‘holistic comprehension of reality’ might call for alternative ways (through communitarian learning or dialogue) to ‘systematise’ language and/or knowledge.
languages of teachers, in regards to full implementation of the plurilingual character of education. There are not enough teachers able to teach (in) native languages. Another complicating factor is that some of the indigenous languages have an oral tradition, which supposes a problematic relationship between the use of Spanish and those languages in the classroom and requires alternative teaching strategies that most teachers are not familiar with.

Fourthly, there is the question whether ASEP fosters unity (as it is intended) or creates stronger social divisions. The ASEP law, in its (discursive) approach, aims to overcome any form of discrimination, considering the current goal of *vivir bien para todos* (to live well for everyone) without discrimination (Article 1 of the ASEP law, MoE, 2010b). As with any type of essentialism – or simplification of the cultural and ethnic complexity – the current approach carries the danger of ‘idealised indigenous-ness’ and the demonisation of everything non-indigenous. Moreover, the strategic use and emphasis on Andean culture implies another serious danger, of what Postero calls *andinocentrismo*, or Andean-centrism (2007: 21), which forms a *cosmovision* that is rather alien to the various (but numerically small) indigenous groups in the low land and Amazonian regions of Bolivia. With regards to the idea of ‘reversed discrimination’, instead of the historically marginalised position of indigenous groups, in turn some now fear exclusion and discrimination for those groups that do not necessarily feel part of the decolonising, communitarian and productive education plans: urban middle class citizens, people that do not identify as indigenous and people from outside the Andean region. The media play a critical role in criticising the new law as an ‘ethno-centric and racist intent of the indigenous movements to impose ideologias indianistas [Indian ideologies] in the cities’ (Gamboa Rocabado, 2009:57), as a majority of Bolivian daily press and television channels are controlled by private enterprises that have little trust in Evo Morales and the MAS (Howard, 2010: 186). According to the opposition of the new ASEP law, it is too focused on rural areas. Communitarian education, in their view, is less relevant to the individualised environment of the cities. What follows is the question of whether this ASEP law is then as inclusive in its application as it – at least discursively – aims to be. Still, there is an urgent need to overcome the deep historical structures of discrimination against indigenous peoples in Bolivia.

**Attempts for institutional change - the newly created Aymara course**

While Bolivia’s new decolonising education reform is contested by various educational actors, the changed socio-political make-up of Bolivian society helps to fuel future teachers’ indigenous self-identification, cultural recognition and pluri-linguistic potentials. The fragment below from my fieldwork diary illustrate how, amidst continuous institutional challenges – including inadequate buildings and materials, isolation from its surrounding community, forms of corruption, discrimination, traditional teaching styles and generally a rather conservative outlook on the part of the teacher training staff (Lopes Cardozo, 2011) – there are also initiatives that inspire change in the institutional context of the Normales, as is exemplified below by Ramiro’s and his new classmates’ experiences in the newly started Aymara course, one of Bolivia’s largest indigenous languages.
During the first hour of the Aymara course I observed how the trainer made efforts to engage the students in active forms of participation. Still, he told me during the class, it is hard to have everyone engage at the same level, as some students had a more passive knowledge of the Aymara language than others, and they had to practice their pronunciation to become more confident in the discussion. In order to do so, the trainer demonstrated an Aymara word, wrote it down on the blackboard and students, all seated in a big circle and would repeat the pronunciation one after the other. I was the last person in the row and with great anticipation the students awaited my turn, which received a good laugh. Ramiro, formerly a student in the English teacher training course, seemed a different person in his new class since he changed ‘careers’. Compared to his rather shy attitude in the English classes I had seen him in so far, he had now developed into the class representative and one of the most well spoken Aymara students: ‘Aymara is my language, and I am proud of it’.

During the second part of the class the trainer gave me the floor and excused himself, as he was very busy and would take advantage of me taking over the students so he could catch up with other work. During the discussion with the students, Ramiro and his classmates reflected on the difference between their class and other courses in the Normal: ‘We have a very special group, because we have all very consciously chosen to become Aymara teachers. We organise things together, like these Aptapi’s [tradition of a shared meal in the Andes], we do them more often. Also, we decorated our classroom, we painted ‘Do not discriminate, we are all the same’ on the wall’.

When the sun started to set and the cold Andes wind entered through the thin classroom windows, one student put on some music and others started to unpack their contributions to the Aptapi. In the middle of the classroom floor, a colourful carpet was filled with different types of yellow, white, pink and black dried potatoes, corn, dried fish from the Titicaca Lake, white cheese and boiled eggs. While we ate, the music varied from Bolivian folk songs to Hip Hop, reflecting the diverse cultural influences these future teachers identify with. However, it was only when Los Kjarkas started to play, that the students got up to dance the Bolivian Tinku dance.

Afterwards, Ramiro drove some of his colleagues and I back to the centre of the city in his taxi and, while managing the busy traffic effortlessly, he mentioned ‘I am really happy I am now with my new colleagues in the Aymara course. It is still not easy, and we still feel isolated within the Normal. Most of our trainers, not the one of today, but many of them they do not even speak Aymara fluently. They do not give us the best trainers. And there is no culture of speaking Aymara in the Normal, so we also continue in Spanish most of the time. So it’s hard, but at least we try’. This story reflects the difficulties of bringing transformation into the Normales, where deep historical institutional structures continue to exist and often form barriers to such new initiatives. On the other hand, the changes in indigenous students’ cultural, linguistic and ethnic self awareness and confidence are promising developments that show a slowly emerging change in a long Bolivian history of ethnic discrimination and exclusion. In this sense, these initial changes – such as the Aymara course – instigated at the institutional level of the Normales, provides an example of how a decolonised and decolonising teacher education system might look. Nevertheless, the structural obstacles
present in the Normales that were mentioned above do not necessarily provide a welcome or enabling environment for such ‘decolonising’ initiatives to successfully be implemented.

**Concluding reflections – out with indigenous denial, in with decolonisation?**

‘One state has died, and one state has been born. The colonial state is no longer, and the national state has arrived, bringing hope, for all the people of the world’ (BBC, 2006). These are Evo Morales’ dramatic words as he was inaugurated ritually as the first indigenous leader of Bolivia in the ancient site of Tiahuanacu in January 2006. Hope is often mentioned in relation to processes of change. This hope-change nexus becomes particularly relevant in highly unequal societies, such as Bolivia, where historically marginalised groups struggle with high hopes for a better future. The ideas brought forward by the Latin American coloniality debates clearly inspired the views of the first Minister and Vice-Minister of Education under Morales that were presented at the start of this chapter. In this line of thought, the reform agenda envisages going against ‘Western’, ‘European’ or neoliberal ideas that, until now, have dominated many education systems worldwide. Escobar (2010) describes how in many cultural-political mobilizations in Latin America at present, including Bolivia, a political activation of relational ontologies is at stake. These relational ontologies are mostly brought forward by indigenous peoples and Afro-descendents, and ‘can be differentiated from the dualist ontologies of liberal modernity in that they are not built on the divides between nature and culture, us and them, individual and community; the cultural, political, and ecological consequences of taking relationality seriously are significant; relationality refers to a different way of imagining life (socio-natural worlds)’ (Escobar 2010: 4). This idea of relationality was also reflected in the speech of ex-Vice-Minister Saavedra that was mentioned at the start of the paper, as Saavedra described how a decolonised education entails an alternative ontological view of the world or ‘a holistic comprehension of reality, an epistemology of complexity, which is how indigenous populations see reality’.

The envisaged result is a transformative restructuring or deconstruction (Fraser, 1995) of Bolivia’s education system, together with the revaluation of ‘original’ or indigenous knowledges (Walsh, 2007) and values through education. According to the work of Fraser, during processes of transformative remedies (such as the ASEP law) disrespect – particularly for the indigenous population – is redressed by transforming the underlying ‘cultural-valuational’ structures. Through transformatory remedies to social injustice, existing group identities and differentiations can be destabilised and the self-esteem of currently disrespected groups is often raised, while ‘everyone’s sense of belonging, affiliation and self’ would change (original italics Fraser 1995: 82-83, 87). This is at least partly the case in Bolivia, where my research shows how tensions rise between indigenous and non-indigenous citizens from the different low-land, high-land or central regions of the country, while indigenous identities are more openly ‘adopted’ by Bolivia’s future teachers, reclaiming their cultural and linguistic heritage, including surnames and ways of dressing in formal settings.

A new (counter-)hegemonic government discourse is taking shape, while at the same time it is being interpreted, mediated and defied by those that have to move these
ideas into an educational reality. Teachers’ interpretations, or ideas, matter when we realise that most changes in policy are often preceded by changes in ideas (Hay, 2002a). This appears crucial when applied to Bolivia, particularly in the education field, where different political ideologies and the recent ‘discursive turn’ from interculturalidad to inter-/intraculturalidad and descolonización (Howard, 2009) play strong roles in the way people – including teachers – identify themselves and the world around them. Considering the amount of uncertainty and resistance among a considerable part of Bolivia’s teachers, the Bolivian government needs to take Fraser’s third dimension of social justice (representation) more seriously, in its attempts to engage Bolivia’s teaching force in the new reform process.

The Bolivian (teacher) education sector has entered a process of recontextualisation (Fairclough, 2005: 931-932), as different strategies are developed by various actors and at different scales to enforce or resist the new discourse and related ASEP policy initiatives. Considering the amount of resistance to the ASEP law, it is unfair and perhaps too early to speak about a new hegemonic discourse of decolonising education. Nevertheless, the MoE and other proponents of the law are developing strategies to disseminate and implement parts of this new law. In terms of the operationalisation of these new discourses (Fairclough, 2005: 931-932), the indigenous discourse together with the decolonisation discourse has materialised in written policy texts of the National Development Plan, the new Plurinational constitution and the ASEP Reform, and some first initiatives at the institutional level are taking place – such as the newly installed Aymara course. Drawing from the Cultural Political Economy perspective on education (CPE/E, Robertson forthcoming), we need to view Bolivia’s teacher training institutes as heterogeneous spaces of struggle and contestation, in which potential new spaces for transformation do appear.

A wide range of tensions and critiques are triggered by the fundamental contradiction of a state-led ‘imposition’ of Bolivia’s decolonising and endogenous path to development, which is perhaps not perceived as legitimate or appropriate by the entire population. Or, as formulated by Postero (2007: 20), it might be a misleading utopia to portray indigenous people, and Morales’ project for decolonisation as the new answer to neoliberalism and global capitalism. Nevertheless, Postero argues, the idealist utopian visions based on Andean culture employed by Morales’ government effectively negotiate spaces for socio-political transformation, as they derive from traditional (indigenous) narratives to create a widely accepted perception of appropriate and possible forms of social change – even within the rather conservative spaces of the Normales, as the Aymara course example showed. However, as this paper shows, this effective strategic essentialist strategy carries the danger of reverse discrimination for those who do not identify with being indigenous, as well as a form of Andean-centrism (Postero, 2007: 1) or rural-centrism. In conclusion, there is still a long way to go to finally do away with the deep structures of indigenous denial in Bolivian education and society, and to effectively realise the decolonising and inter-/intracultural intentions within the complex educational reality in the Normales in Bolivia.
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These quotes are based on fieldwork notes and the 'Memorandum of the International Seminar', that can be retrieved from [http://educationanddevelopment.files.wordpress.com/2009/02/memorandum-del-encuentro-internacional-sobre-descolonizacion-y-educacion.pdf](http://educationanddevelopment.files.wordpress.com/2009/02/memorandum-del-encuentro-internacional-sobre-descolonizacion-y-educacion.pdf)


In short, the CPE/E helps us to disentangle and disclose the complex (and contradictory) ways in which discourses/ideas/imaginaries (such as development, knowledge or decolonisation), actors/institutions (such as the nation state, international organisations, as well as sub-national educational institutions including the Normales) and material capabilities/power (resources, aid, information) are mobilised to strategically and selectively advance an imagined (decolonising Bolivian) economy and its material reproduction, within which education is now being re/constituted in particular ways (Robertson, forthcoming).

Regalsky and Laurie (2007: 242) argue that education since the 1955 reform only intensified ethnic boundaries between different groups in Bolivian society. Moreover, the teaching at that time was teacher-centred, based on memorisation techniques and especially relevant to an urban context (Drange, 2007).

This title is inspired on an idea from a Bolivian researcher, who in an interview stated that if colonisation is a snake, the Normales would be its hotbed.

See UNESCO’s GMR website, [http://public.tableausoftware.com/views/PageFourNew/Pg4Dash?embed=y&:toolbar=no&:tabs=no](http://public.tableausoftware.com/views/PageFourNew/Pg4Dash?embed=y&:toolbar=no&:tabs=no)

A number of constitutional articles for instance refer to gender equity, including 8, 11, 14, 15, 26, 48, 58, 78 and 79 (relating directly to education), 104, 147, 172.22 (gender equity in parliament), 210, 270, 278 and 402. Similarly, the ASEP education reform includes Articles 3.13, 4.2, 4.6, 5.7 and 10.5, which all directly refer to the importance of gender equity.