

## Turbulence in Bolivia's normales: Teacher education as a socio-political battlefield

Mieke T. A. Lopes Cardozo

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**Abstract** In line with broader politics of change at the national level, the Morales government aims at a radical restructuring of the governance mechanisms for the teacher education sector and a socio-political redirection of its curriculum, as teachers are perceived to be potential agents for decolonization and for developing social justice—or *vivir bien* (to live well). Morales' policies are not uncontested, and the tense socio-political state of affairs and political power plays are reflected in Bolivia's normales, teacher education colleges. They have become a socio-political battlefield where political affiliations, union strategies, and historically embedded institutional cultures all influence the way new generations of teachers are trained, and the way former and current policy initiatives are mediated and adopted. Given the complex and historically embedded socio-political context of struggles and tensions at and around the institutional level, the government still has a long way to go to change the continuing habits of the normales and to put its government's new ideals of transformation and decolonization into practice.

**Keywords** Bolivia · Teacher education · Decolonization · Institutional governance · Socio-political conflict

In May of 2010, after a morning of meetings in the Teacher Education Department of the Bolivian Ministry of Education (MoE) in La Paz, I walk down the stairs and see a group of protesters in front of the gate (Fig. 1). “The police have arrived to make sure they do not enter the building”, a staff member assures me, as he sees me taking the picture. “For weeks in a row these teacher education applicants have been coming here to protest. They were not accepted, and now they even bring their mothers along to help them yell. But they do not understand that we do not need everyone to become a teacher—we will have too many!”

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M. T. A. Lopes Cardozo (✉)  
Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research (AISSR), University of Amsterdam,  
Plantage Muidergracht 14, Room 2.10, 1018 TV Amsterdam, The Netherlands  
e-mail: mlopecardozo@fmg.uva.nl



**Fig. 1** Young people and their parents protesting at the MoE, La Paz

As I am interested in hearing the opinions of these applicants and the reasons they and their mothers are continuing to agitate for a position in one of Bolivia's teacher training institutes—the normales—I decide to follow the crowd. While we are walking along, one of the mothers explains, “These young people got very high marks on their entrance exams, *senorita*, they have already been struggling for three months now”. Dynamite explodes; we have to stop as we cannot hear each other for a few seconds. A young man continues, “We have 430 postulantes [applicants] here, who should have been accepted and allowed a position in the normales. And the situation is the same at the national level. These demonstrations are also continuing in Oruro, in Cochabamba, in Santa Cruz, all over the country”. The crowd gathers in the square where a young woman starts to address it: “How long do we have to continue this struggle? When are they going to take us seriously? We were standing in front, and they have punched us in the stomach. We will stay the whole year if we need to!”

Since Bolivians see education as one of their few options for escaping a life of economic insecurity, entering one of Bolivia's teacher education institutes, informally called normales, becomes the main driving force behind peoples' strategies of demonstration, protest, and hunger strikes. The number of applicants for the normales is increasing quickly. At the beginning of March 2010, 56,000 people took the entrance exam, for only 7,500 available spaces at the normales (“No más cupos para las normales”, 2010; “Educación eleva a 9000 los cupos para normales”, 2010). In 2011, the situation grew even more tense, as the MoE released alarming figures: around 20,000 normales graduates were currently unemployed, with 7,000 more graduating that year, and 24,000 students currently enrolled (“Aguilar: lío de las normales está zanjado”, 2011). Bolivia will soon face huge unemployment rates among these new teachers. Still, this situation does not stop young people from taking the entrance exam over and over again. Some whose scores are high enough but are not accepted, driven by a sense of desperation, take serious measures to enforce their “right” to teacher education by crucifying themselves, or sewing their lips together (“Aguilar”, 2011).

However, once they are inside the normales, many future teachers encounter a less than ideal training environment, as I will show in this article.

Bolivia's current socio-political situation cannot be simply explained by looking at those who are and are not in favour of the current government of President Evo Morales, installed in January of 2006. (In a recall referendum in August 2008, two thirds of voters chose to continue the government and Morales was elected to a second term in December 2009). Many of these young protestors, for instance, simultaneously favour his political project for change and fiercely protest the measures taken in the education sector, in this case the limited spaces available in the normales. This contrasting reality concerns many of Bolivia's educators, who face a very complex political situation in which various stakeholders play powerful roles. The tense socio-political state of affairs and the political power plays are also reflected in the normales, making them a socio-political battlefield where political affiliations, union strategies, and historically embedded institutional cultures all influence the way that new generations of teachers are trained, and the way former and current policy initiatives are mediated and adopted.

With the recent change of government, and Morales' politics of change, Bolivia is experiencing a new political direction, which is closely related to a broader Latin American turn to the "New Left" (Rodriguez-Garavito, Barrett, and Chavez 2008). Once Morales was elected at the end of 2005, one of his first political steps was to do away with the former "foreign" education law of the 1990s, and to create a new Bolivian-owned reform programme for decolonizing education. "The transformation of Bolivian education has to start with changing the normales", an MoE departmental director of teacher education told me in an interview in May of 2010. But changing Bolivia's teacher training institutes as a first step in transforming and decolonizing the education system is by no means an easy undertaking. While research on Bolivian (teacher) education tended to focus on the exclusionary nature of many normales in terms of linguistic and cultural issues (see, for instance, Speiser 2000, pp. 228–229), I aim to take the discussion a step further, by describing both a detailed list of institutional challenges, and a changing political and societal context and possible niches for change at the level of the normales.

This article discusses the institutional governance of teacher education in Bolivia, showing how the normales constitute a tense socio-political battlefield. I draw from a five-year 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 with people at policymaking agencies, NGOs, institutions, and schools; see Lopes Cardozo (2011) for an overview of all the respondents. My collected interviews, and notes on discussions and observations, were transcribed with the help of a native Spanish-speaking research assistant in Bolivia; I then organized and coded them using the qualitative data analysis software Atlas Ti.

Applying purposive sampling, I explore two cases of normales: the urban Simón Bolívar in La Paz and the rural M. A. Villarroel in Paracaya, Cochabamba. Simón Bolívar serves as the main case study and Villarroel as a secondary case, adding information to the primary one. I chose these cases because of their different ideological points of view and attitudes regarding the new regime's education plans. During my first and last fieldwork periods I also visited four other teacher training institutes in different parts of the country. Although the scope of my research is limited to only two out of 27 normales in Bolivia, it does provide new insights into the policies and practices of this rather under-researched field.

To interpret and analyse this data, I built on earlier studies conducted in the field of Bolivian teacher education, as well as an interdisciplinary body of theoretical insights. The most prominent among these are the Cultural Political Economy of Education (CPE/E)

perspective developed by Robertson (forthcoming), Fairclough's (2005) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), and debates on Latin American "coloniality", including the work of Grosfoguel (2007a, b), Mignolo (2007), Quijano (2007), and Walsh (2007). Importantly, CPE/E takes the cultural turn seriously by also examining the role of semiosis, which in this case refers to discourse, identity, reflexivity, and historicity. Closely linked to the Latin American coloniality debates I discuss below, CPE's epistemological stance emphasizes the contextuality and historicity of knowledge claims (Jessop 2005), at the same time stressing the materiality of social relations, and the constraints that agents face (Robertson, forthcoming). The CPE/E as developed by Robertson enables us to disentangle and disclose the complex and contradictory ways in which many elements—discourses, ideas, and imaginaries, and actors and institutions, as well as material capabilities and power (resources, aid, information)—are mobilized to strategically and selectively advance an imagined (decolonizing Bolivian) economy and its material reproduction; within this environment education is now being re/constituted in particular ways.

CPE/E helps to analyse and understand the various material and discursive dimensions of the complex and turbulent spaces in and around Bolivia's normales. It makes a case for understanding the teacher education institutes from a multi-scalar, interdisciplinary, and historically informed approach. Inspired by CPE/E, I apply elements of Fairclough's (2005) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), for several reasons. I aim to understand the "politics of knowledge", the knowledge-power relations that influence teacher education policies and practices, and also to reveal differing ideas about "the ideal Bolivian teacher" and to explore teachers' identities. Fairclough acknowledges the causal powers of both structures and agency, and the potential of human agents (in this case trainee teachers and instructors) to transform or reproduce existing structures (of teacher education in normales). I applied CDA to unravel the various perceptions of the influence that the new regime's ideological discourse and policy developments have on teacher training.

I begin by providing a concise overview of the historical developments of Bolivia's teacher education arena that have paved the way for the current tense situation in and around the normales. I next detail the current status of Bolivian teacher education. I then discuss the various institutional struggles and problems, building on the idea of "bad governance" in the normales that is apparent in the few studies conducted so far. This analysis reveals the continuing institutional and beyond-institutional obstacles and opportunities to the envisioned transformation of these institutes, as part of Bolivia's wider politics of change.

### **Historical developments in Bolivian teacher education: From foreign imposition to endogenous development?**

Teacher education in Bolivia began in 1909, in Sucre, when a Belgian missionary established the first teacher training school. Between 1910 and 1948, the Belgian mission expanded, creating a dual urban-rural system, with different and less successful normales in rural areas (Talavera Simoni 2009, p. 67). During the 1930s, alternative forms of indigenous education and teacher training were developed, particularly in the highland village of Warisata. When the state realized that establishing local authority over schooling was inconsistent with its policy of (cultural) assimilation, the indigenous education initiatives were forcibly closed down (Regalsky and Laurie 2007, p. 235; Taylor 2004, p. 8; UNNIOs 2004, p. 12). The Warisata school was closed not only because the elite feared indigenous education, but also because the first disputes were arising between rural and

urban groups of teachers (Talavera Simoni 2009, p. 75). In fact, the ongoing cleavage between the mostly urban normalistas (teachers trained in normales), who advocate for a unified system, and the predominantly rural normalistas, who advocate for indigenous forms of education, originates from the 1930s and 1940s.

After the 1952 National Revolution, the 1955 Reform, referred to in Bolivia as the 1955 *Código*, aimed to assimilate indigenous people—by then called *campesinos*—into the dominant culture, and reinforced the divisions between urban and rural in the education system (Drange 2007; Regalsky and Laurie 2007, p. 235; Taylor 2004, pp. 9–11). Similarly, the educational reforms of 1969 and 1973 promoted one national language—Spanish—and culture. The 1955 *Código* also established that the state had to guarantee employment once a teacher obtained the national teacher's title. Since then, teachers' promotions have been guided by the *escalafon*, a five-level seniority scale which unions have defended vigorously ever since (Talavera Simoni 2011). They must take exams to move into the first three categories, and are automatically promoted to the other two, the final being “al merito”. New teachers can register for the *escalafon* after they have completed their compulsory first two years of working “in the provinces”. Once they have their official title, they receive their salary and social welfare benefits from the state. Starting in the 1960s, (future) teachers organized to press for a lower passing grade for the entrance exam. Thus we see the strong historical roots of the current demonstrations and hunger strikes by applicants, who try to push the MoE to let them enter the already full normales.

During Bolivia's period of military rule (1964–1982), the division between the urban and rural education systems was further reinforced, and the basic institutional structure of today's normales was established. In 1975 the educational Banzer law was passed, along with the 1975 law for normales. During military rule both autonomy for universities and teacher union activities were abolished. Teacher training was aimed at increasing and preserving national security and the creation of “a nationalist state, order, work, peace and justice” (Lozada Pereira 2004, p. 49).<sup>1</sup> Banzer's law provided much of the foundation for the structure of teacher education as organized under the 1994 reform; the training lasts for six semesters, and is offered in both urban and rural normales, with a concentration of decision-making power at the MoE—a power structure that continues to the present.

Since the 1990s, and with the return of democracy, education policies in Bolivia have shifted from historically homogenizing and modernizing types of schooling to a more emancipatory form of education. In line with the wider global push for Education for All since 1990, these policies aim at providing relevant education to all citizens. The Intercultural and Bilingual Education Reform of 1994 was an important attempt to overcome the exclusionary and homogenizing forms of schooling. It was an innovative reform at the time, receiving international attention and funding. But the reform process was complicated, lengthy, and only partially successful. A policy approach that stresses intercultural and bilingual education must be connected to all the elements of daily life, including the media, street signs, etc., and not rely only on elementary education, if it is to develop fully (Albó 2002, cited in Taylor 2004, p. 29; Van Dam and Salman 2003, p. 25).

The reform's design and implementation process were soon criticized for failing to include genuine participation by Bolivia's education actors, and for being “imposed” by foreign actors. Many teachers resisted the envisioned pedagogical and managerial changes in their daily practices, and they did not receive appropriate support. Parents often perceived education as the way out of poverty (and often still do), and therefore preferred that

<sup>1</sup> This is my translation of the Spanish original, as are all the quotations from Spanish-language sources.

their children learn Spanish, the “modern” language of business. Furthermore, social movements, including teachers’ unions, felt left out during the creation of a reform they saw as largely “imposed” and “neo-liberal”, because of the strong interference of international financial organizations (Contreras and Talavera Simoni 2003, 2004; Speiser 2000; Van Dam and Salman 2003). In fact, this view was confirmed in the majority of my interviews with representatives of teacher unions and other teachers and teacher instructors. Especially in Bolivia, the sense of the need to protect “the national” against “the international”, as stated in the 2006–2010 National Development Plan, has recently strengthened. Since Morales came into office in 2006, this tendency has led to the World Bank and IMF being excluded from decision-making and financing mechanisms, at least for the education sector.

The actual implementation of the 1994 Reform, therefore, resulted in an almost assimilationist approach to culture, offering intercultural and bilingual skills to indigenous peoples but allowing the indigenous populations and Mestizos (those descended from a mix of Spanish and Indigenous ancestors) to communicate only through mestizo cultural norms and language (Spanish).

Teacher education reform was neglected during the first years of implementation of the 1994 reform. This resulted in several mostly short-term national and international reform initiatives targeting the lack of quality in the normales over the past decade. The normales faced a slow and difficult transformation process, particularly because they had “established practices far removed from the teaching and learning processes” (Contreras and Talavera Simoni 2003, pp. 22–23). In 1998, the first large-scale evaluation concluded that none of the institutes had understood or implemented the 1994 curriculum. At the end of the 1990s, the MoE, working with the Indigenous Education Councils (CEPOs), the GTZ (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit), and international consultants, started the project called P-INSEIB (Proyecto de Institutos Normales Superiores de Educación Intercultural Bilingüe), which targeted eight normales to become bilingual institute of teacher education (Delany-Barmann 2010, p. 187; Von Gleich 2008, pp. 95–97). The projects were later supported by GTZ, UNICEF, and Denmark’s Danida. Evaluations of the project’s progress have been relatively positive, with regard to the capacity development of instructors and development of more relevant curricula (Von Gleich 2008, p. 101), but my recent interviews with involved donors revealed that the longer-term impact has been limited because of reorganizations and staff replacements.

The 1990s saw the emergence of new “indigenous” discourses that aimed to restore the value of indigenous cultures, languages, and rights; they were taken to the political arena by emerging political movements, including the political party of Evo Morales. After the democratic victory, intellectuals in the new government under Morales developed a new political direction inspired by Latin American discourses on “coloniality” (see, for instance, Grosfoguel 2007a, b; Mignolo 2007; Quijano 2007; Walsh 2007) for the entire education sector, including teacher education, slowly working towards a new hegemonic policy discourse (Fairclough 2005, pp. 931–932). These debates are connected to the global rise of social (including indigenous) movements, together with wider processes of economic and cultural globalization that opened up alternative ways of looking at political, theoretical, and epistemological approaches (Saavedra 2007). Debates on the coloniality of societies and education systems aim both to understand and deconstruct historical structures of injustice, and to construct a future that is equitable and socially, politically, and economically just.

“Decolonization is at the centre of political debate in Bolivia and the wider Latin American region”, said Felix Patzi (2008), a Bolivian sociologist and the first Minister of



Education in Morales' government in 2006. Patzi was responsible for the very first drafts of the new Avelino Siñani Elizardo Pérez (ASEP) law for decolonizing education, which is clearly inspired by regional debates on coloniality. According to this decolonial perspective, Bolivia's education system has historically been exclusionary and eurocentric. This view has led to the current political perception that "a revolution in education" is needed (MoE 2010).

As one of its first political acts, the Morales government decided to replace the 1994 Reform and create a new Bolivian-owned and "revolutionary" education law to decolonize the education system. The ASEP acronym is composed of the initials of two educators who played historically important roles in advancing indigenous education: Avelino Siñani and Elizardo Pérez. Rather than dismissing the intercultural and bilingual education initiatives of the 1990s, the ASEP law builds on these discourses and takes them one step further, to a "full decolonization" of Bolivia's education and society.

### **Bolivian teacher education today: An exceptional case**

Bolivia's new ASEP education reform, which forms a strategic part of the Morales government's "politics of change", aligns with the global discourse of quality Education For All. It differs, however, in promoting an education system that is decolonized, inter- and intracultural, productive, and communitarian. This approach is unprecedented anywhere. Building on debates in Latin America and beyond about education for liberation, including the well-known work of Paulo Freire (1970), and related to the notion of *vivir bien*, in its Article 3.14, the law encourages personal development and a critical awareness of reality "in order to change it" (MoE 2010). Variations on this concept of living well, or *vivir bien*, are also adopted in other leftist-oriented Latin American countries. In Venezuela, for example, *buen vivir* is aimed at "supreme happiness" and forms an integral part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century socialist political project (see, for instance, Griffiths 2012, p. 1).

Bolivia substantiates its unique contemporary approach in the teacher education sector where, unlike many reforms in mainstream teacher education around the world, the education of future teachers is prioritized and extended, while teachers' salaries have increased significantly over the past few years. This is in response to the fact that teachers—and particularly their training—have not always been at the centre of the reforms taking place in Latin America (Speiser 2000, p. 28). Given the failures in implementation of the 1994 Bolivian reform, the new ASEP law emphasizes the need to begin the reform at the level of the normales.

Rather than being shortened, Bolivia's teacher education period has been extended from 3.5 to 5 years, as of 2009. These five years include 1,000 hours of study per year, equalling 60 credits annually. The first two years aim at general training, with 360 hours dedicated to a chosen specialization. The last three years focus fully on that specialization. The teacher training institutes are still called normales in daily speech, but are now officially named the Escuelas Superiores de Formación de Maestros y Maestras. The normales are usually large institutions with over 1,000 students. Currently, pre-service teacher education in Bolivia is provided in 27 normales, as well as in 20 smaller-scale academic units serving those living in more remote areas. Teacher education in Bolivia is public and funded by the national treasury. According to the 1997 regulations for normales, each institute has three organizational 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” (CNE 2006). The new law sets out these primary 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 2010, Article 33). The new curriculum includes such topic areas as traditional medicine, and “food and nutritional security”, in line with the extended role that teachers play in their communities. The new curriculum also has a clear political agenda: it expects future teachers to “decolonize politically”, as they are trained in their first and second year in subjects including “cosmovisión”, “political ideology”, “decolonization”, and “communitarian mathematics” (“Maestros aprenderán medicina tradicional e ideología política”, 2010).

Over the past few years the (envisaged) role of the Bolivian government has changed considerably from the way it was described by Regalsky and Laurie in 2007 (pp. 239–240): as “a foreign power that has spoken a foreign language and has given urban answers to rural problems with schools functioning to legitimate the state criollo hispanicizing hegemony through its hidden and explicit curricula”. With ASEP, the MoE has designed a counter-hegemonic project for decolonization, which aims at social justice—or to *live well*—for all Bolivians, and recognition and inclusion rather than an expulsion of indigenous values, knowledges, and languages. In that sense, the new ASEP education reform can be considered a “revolutionary reform”, one that seeks not only to produce genuine improvements in people’s lives, but also to build the political capacity of the population (Rodríguez-Garavito et al. 2008, p. 24). While Bolivia’s new constitution and the ASEP reform work to address historical social injustices, especially the marginalization of indigenous populations with regard to economic distribution, political representation, and socio-cultural recognition (Fraser 2005a, b), the decolonial ideas are certainly not uncontested. In particular, a large group of urban trainers included in this study expressed their concerns about these new education plans, much in contrast to the generally supportive attitudes of their rural colleagues.

### The story so far: Poor governance in Bolivia’s normales

In general, and despite the huge numbers of candidates waiting to enter them, normales have quite a negative status in Bolivian society and literature. Many of the problems of normales currently being observed and discussed are similar to those mentioned by the Belgian missionary who founded the first school in Sucre over a century ago. They include “the minimal preparation of the applicants, a low level of ability among teacher trainers, and a lack of teaching materials” (Rouma 1931, cited in Del Granado Cosío 2006, p. 5).

Today, the list of problematic areas is much longer. A 1999 study on the quality of teacher education by the Medicion de la Calidad (cited in Lozada Pereira 2004, p. 166) indicated that in some rural institutes only 3% of the students were performing at a “satisfactory” level, while at the “best performing” urban institute only 28% of students were rated as “satisfactory”. In 1999 the MoE reported on the poor sanitation and maintenance of buildings, a gap between administrative and curricular developments, the fact that students and instructors did not participate in making institutional policy and developing curriculum, and a general lack of trust in the largest urban institute (MoE 1999, pp. 15–18, 21–22). In 2002, an external evaluation report of those normales administered



by universities again reported institutional inefficiency, time wasted by administrative staff because of lengthy reporting procedures, and inadequate infrastructure (Concha et al. 2002, pp. 22, 27). However, these universities had no prior experience administering normales (Contreras and Talavera-Simoni 2003, p. 23).

From 2000 onwards, the government initiated a programme through which the administration of some normales was taken over by both public and private universities. This kind of link between teacher training institutes and universities is part of a wider global move, with exceptions such as Mexico (Tatto 2007, p. 161). These reform initiatives aimed at eliminating the historic monopoly that normales graduates held within the teaching community. However, they were met with fierce resistance at the institutional level of the normales. The university administration of several normales became a strong trigger for internal institutional tensions and battles, as both unions and non-academic instructors considered the “invasion” of academia to be an unwanted development (see also Lopes Cardozo 2011, pp. 152–156). Eventually, in 2005, after a series of strong protests from student teachers and a group of normalista instructors, all normales were again placed under the authority of the MoE.

A 2004 UNESCO report on Bolivian teacher education described a situation that could be called poor institutional governance:

The administrative processes are bureaucratic, [...] vulnerable to corruption and old-fashioned. [...] The conflicts in the country, particularly in the cities, result on the one hand in indifference and on the other hand a strong resistance [in the normales]. As a result, traditionally the necessity for a rational and engaged organization or the feeling of being part of a wider [national education] project have been ignored, [...resulting in] strikes, demonstrations and mobilizations. (Lozada Pereira 2004, p. 147)

More recently, a MoE staff member responsible for the teacher education sector stated that “Pre-service teacher education is a concern of everyone, considering its impact on society. Despite this societal importance it is not being transformed fast enough because of the many and complex variables involved. [...] Generally speaking, transformation is a long and arduous process” (Del Granado Cosio 2011, p. 11). The fact that institutional and educational change takes time is more widely acknowledged in the literature and, in the case of Bolivian normales, is reflected in the institutional obstacles to change, which I discuss below.

### **Current institutional problems in Bolivia's normales**

This analysis of the main contemporary obstacles to the envisaged processes of decolonization and transformation at the two institutes included in this study is based on respondents' perceptions and my own observations and analysis. It adds novel insights and issues to those already observed in reports by the MoE (1999), Lozada Pereira (2004), and Del Granado Cosio (2011).

#### **Insufficient institutional infrastructure**

One of the problems that both staff and students mentioned most frequently during interviews is the inadequate facilities in the urban and rural institutes included in this study. As Lozada Pereira observed eight years ago (2004, p. 177), most normales still lack many

necessary facilities, including boarding school spaces and ICT facilities. They also need to catch up in the maintenance and renovation of existing buildings, and have too few adequate classrooms and no climate control inside the classrooms: it is very cold in the highlands in winter and very warm in lower regions in summer. Students also complained about insufficient sports/playground facilities, lack of good daycare facilities for the children of students, and inadequately equipped libraries. A number of normales have received limited external (donor) support to improve their facilities and the MoE plans to invest in improving the infrastructure of several normales (“No más cupos para las normales”, 2010). Like his predecessors, the current minister has made some efforts to improve this situation, because people see appropriate infrastructure as a requirement for good quality (teacher) education. However, the director of the MoE’s Teacher Education Department told me, “the mere fact that the state cannot provide the basic materials to its [student] teachers, such as textbooks and libraries, is another form of social injustice because it prevents the equitable access of all people to knowledge”. Thus, insufficient infrastructure in Bolivia’s normales remains a pressing issue.

### Normales as islands

Close cooperation between teacher education institutes and the wider (school) community is key to good quality teacher education, as perceived both within the ASEP reform and in the critical pedagogy literature on teacher education for social justice (Liston and Zeichner 1990; Price 2001; Zeichner 2009). While the new ASEP law is focused on a communitarian and cooperative (teacher) education system, the reality in most normales is quite different. Like earlier researchers (Del Granado Cosío 2006, p. 47; Lozada Pereira 2004, pp. 122–123; MoE 1999; Von Gleich 2008, p. 99), I found a lack of connection between the normales and their local and departmental environment: the local community and community organizations, schools and school networks (*nucleos*), school directors, school boards, and parent committees. An MoE official who has been closely involved in the design of the new law argued to me that Bolivia’s normales tend to have an “institutional attitude with no links at all to their environment. They are islands, and therefore we propose an institutional transformation to an intercultural institutional attitude”. Of course some clear exceptions exist: the normal school in Warisata has long connected to its surrounding environment and continues to do so, for instance by including community representatives on committees for institutional decision-making.

### Exclusive or “fixed” teaching professions

Linked to the problem of institutional isolation is the issue of “fencing off” both the training positions in normales and the wider teaching profession exclusively to graduates of normales. Tatto (2007, p. 14) refers to “untouched monopolies” of teacher training institutes in various contexts, while Lozada Pereira (2004, pp. 44–45) describes a kind of “inbreeding” among the Bolivian teacher training institutes because of instructors’ “fixed positions”. Many Bolivian educators, and especially their unions, strongly defend the 1995 Código and escalafón, which established teachers’ labour rights and the “fixed profession”: that the teaching profession would be open only to normalistas. An MoE official and several instructors claimed that in order to change this situation, teachers would need to let go of the protection that secures them a job for life. But the teachers’ unions still strongly

defend the escalafon, and the new ASEP law acknowledges the main principles of the 1995 document.

However, parents have strong complaints against the escalafon and the almost automatic promotion to higher scales for teachers, because they think teachers are not evaluated and stimulated to improve their teaching (Gamboa Rocabado 2009, p. 60). In line with parents' arguments, Yapu (2009, p. 32) states that the *inamovilidad docente* or fixed teaching profession often reduces educational quality, "because low-performing teachers cannot be suspended or removed". Bearing in mind the difficulties of opening up this historical structure, there is a need to rethink Bolivia's escalafon system of automatic promotion, and to link promotion scales more closely to training opportunities for in-service teachers in both urban and rural areas, as well as to a system of evaluation and guidance.

### Corruption

Corruption, or "political favours", is another institutional problem that is mentioned in earlier studies and continues today, exemplifying the image of Bolivia's normales as a socio-political battlefield. Lozada Pereira (2004), for example, states that "old practices of corruption and political and union discretionary attitudes" existed in the normales (2004, p. 168). And Concha et al. (2002, p. 60) observed a huge divergence in salaries for people in different posts in the normales, based not on the qualifications of staff members but more on "discretionary estimates".

Another way of presenting the issue is lack of trust at the institutional level (MoE 1999). Critical voices both inside and outside the normales continue to complain about ongoing "friendship politics", or the veto power of the unions to keep certain candidate instructors out of the system. Examples are not limited to instructors who "stayed in not because they are capable, but because of their connections". "Politics" also influence the (mal)-functioning of the student federations that are supposed to be elected and organized at the institutional level of each normal school, but are often absent or malfunctioning. According to a teacher student in the urban normal school:

The Trotskyite teachers created their own political student party, like [Instructor X]. [Instructor X] approached some of us, and I got involved. But I just listened and observed, I did not have a say [ni voz ni voto]. And the director, he was creating another student party. When this party gets elected, the director can expect to have no troubles with them.

The idea that student federations have ties with the management staff was also shared by other students during a group discussion at another normal school in the city of Santa Cruz: "When a student "front" [party] that is supported by the management staff wins the elections, it is obvious that the director tells them what to do, and they do not consult the base". Another student explained that this resulted in few students actually voting during elections, or those who do making "neutral" decisions, since "it does not matter who wins. Whoever wins the elections will quickly forget about the rest of us. I do not feel represented at all".

An "institutionalization process" was recently initiated to improve the transparency and institutional quality by re-accrediting all staff members. This process provides potential room for improvement as it aims to make appointments of instructors more transparent and based on years of experience. What seems to be absent, however, is a selection process based on instructors' demonstrable qualifications, rather than political affiliations or the qualification points they gain automatically based on their years in the profession.

## Discrimination

Another sensitive and relevant issue is discrimination and exclusion. For instance, a rural teacher trainer told me, “there is discrimination for sure, although you might not see or hear it. There is discrimination based on people’s [indigenous] surname, and their social status”. Most discrimination and exclusion, both in normales and in schools, is related to what could be termed ethnic and class discrimination. In addition, several female student teachers complained about discrimination based on gender. In interviews they shared their fear of being treated badly as young female teachers in new environments. Besides, the divided rural and urban school system in some cases leads people to think and speak in terms of “they and us”, creating grounds for separation instead of unity, and contradicting the aims of the new law. The mere fact that there are still two teacher unions, one urban and one rural, with obviously differing points of view, contributes to this segregated system. Clearly, there is a serious need to overcome the deep structures of discrimination in Bolivia’s (teacher) education system, particularly considering the current goal of *vivir bienpara todos* (to live well for everyone), without discrimination (MoE 2010).

## Traditional teaching styles

That traditional teaching styles are still used in normales has been an issue of great concern since the 1994 reform project (Concha et al. 2002, p. 42; Lozada Pereira 2004, p. 147). One urban student said, “we need more activities in class; the classes of Instructor Y make us fall asleep”. Indeed, when I observed classes taught by this particular instructor, I saw her using few teaching techniques beyond questioning and answering, often with the same students replying, and having them copy material from the blackboard. One urban student used the term “anti-pedagogical”; it perfectly expresses the negative views that most students I interviewed shared about the traditional and ineffective teaching techniques used at the normales.

In addition to the student critiques, an MoE official confessed that there is “not enough attention to the training of instructors, whose practices are traditional” and based on a “conductivist” pedagogy. The conductivist or “behaviourist” teaching techniques have their roots in the reforms by the military regimes (1964–1982), and were modeled on education theories on behaviourism developed in the United States in that period. In Bolivia, these reforms used rewards and punishments to “model” desirable behaviour, and their teacher-centred approach focused on memorizing and copying contents (Talavera Simoni 2011, pp. 10, 147).

The attitude of resistance to changing these “traditional” practices can therefore be explained by ideological, political, and economic motivations, but certainly also by the working practices in which this older generation of educators were trained (Talavera Simoni 2011, p. 187). Training and support for instructors is important if they are to change their traditional, and increasingly unpopular, teaching styles. While some efforts were made in the context of the 1994 reform (see also Lozada Pereira 2004, pp. 140–141), and more are planned under the ASEP law, this is still an area of concern. The instructors, already overburdened, are not likely to accomplish this easily, as they have neither adequate (economic) incentives nor sufficient in-service support to innovate.

## Apathy and institutional inertia

I asked an MoE official, “If you were the director of a normal school, what would you change?” She promptly replied, “At this moment there is nothing I could change, because of the union influence and politicking, so I would not have the authority to change

anything. [sigh] Like here, I actually have little authority to change [...]”. This response reflects a sense of apathy or perhaps futility among instructors who feel they have little room for manoeuvre to change what could be called “institutional inertia”. The following two quotes from student teachers provide some evidence that this situation continues. One said, “What we need is to have our instructors trained and updated. They are very conservative in their teaching and they do not motivate us to learn, which in turn makes us passive”. Another continued, “This instructor is knowledgeable, he knows many things, but he does not know how to get them across. He is very disorganized and does not have good teaching methods”.

Reinforcing this passive and conservative attitude among a group of instructors is their lack of communication with and engagement in decision-making matters, because the management style in the normales is centralized (Lozada Pereira 2004, p. 147), hierarchical (Concha et al. 2002, p. 59), and vertical, with little contact between management staff and instructors. One reason instructors are unwilling to change relates to the lack of economic incentives; one said, “No one wants to do more work for free”. Another reason was lack of trust in the politics at both the national and institutional levels, as another explained: “I do not trust any of the laws in this country to begin with, because, as you can see, the normales have always remained as they were”.

Several of the people I interviewed explained the unchanging character of the normales by pointing to the influence and often resistant attitude of teachers’ unions. Regardless of the ways that power relations change because of institutionalization processes, the unions seem to remain relatively powerful at holding back the transformation of the normales. The picture of Bolivia’s urban and rural unions involves more nuance, however. While the teacher unions, especially the urban one, are portrayed as resistant to government reform, the situation has changed since 2006, as the rural union has entered into a dialogue with the MoE about the new reform.

While the federations do recognize the important role that unions play in safeguarding teachers’ working conditions, they also create a barrier to change in the normales and in the schools. As one rural instructor explained, “it is not in their interest to change the education system”. In the eyes of an urban student teacher, real change in the normales must start with changes in the attitude of those instructors who are closely linked to the union: “They organize their marches because they want higher salaries; they do not care about the quality of the education. Some instructors here are better at motivating us to become a *sindicalista* [unionist], than to become a dedicated teacher”.

This reveals a more generally supported idea: of a trade-off between those unionized educators who are struggling actively for better pay and benefits—often a very legitimate struggle—and those who are more concerned about quality education out of a sense of vocation. Hence, the argument is that a relatively large proportion of the instructors have adopted an attitude of inertia, for various reasons, including the top-down management style, the lack of incentives, and the lack of trust. While this seems to show that “Normales do not contribute to the processes of change”, as one instructor said, I also encountered reform initiatives aimed at finding potential niches for change.

### **ASEP’s “new teacher education”: Potential niches for transformation**

Although it is too early to see clear and tangible results of the new teacher education system under the ASEP law, the changing socio-political context, including Morales’ politics of change and the ASEP reform project, do open up new spaces for change in the

normales. An interesting outcome of this analysis is the difference between the urban and rural institutes in how they accept, and approach, the ASEP reform plans. In 2007, the majority of staff in the rural normal school had already responded positively to these plans, and continued to engage with this project by organizing, and participating in, workshops and meetings both inside and outside the institute. This new and positive attitude towards an education reform, which the rural union supports, is a promising development, offering better prospects of successful implementation. In contrast, the ASEP plans were received with less enthusiasm in the urban normal school, particularly at first in 2007. This attitude, however, has changed slowly over recent years, as I encountered less open resistance to the new reform plans. Critiques in 2010 were directed less at the content of the law and more at the lack of support for the speedy introduction of the new teacher education curriculum.

Bearing in mind this more general distinction between the acceptance of the new law in the urban and rural institutes, I also found, in both institutes, considerable variation in the attitudes of individual instructors towards the (new) reform project. One rural instructor described the situation this way:

Indeed these politics of change exist, but it depends very much on the commitment and background of each instructor, because each of us has different experiences. For instance, I have worked in indigenous contexts, in mining contexts, in urban and rural regions, with children, youngsters, and adults, and parent committees. So I realize we need a new type of teacher who can respond to all of these [needs]. But other [instructors] did not have much experience, or stayed in one place for 15 years, and this will not help them in understanding why we need these politics of change.

This interpretation might help to explain why a group of urban instructors with little knowledge of other contexts, and supported by their union's position, assumes that the new law is made to fit these other contexts and does not apply to the urban one.

While this particular urban institute can be characterized as a rather conservative "strategically selective context" (Hay 2002), it is also subject to change. In 1999, the MoE (1999, p. 20) reported that instructors were generally not willing to invest in their personal and professional development, but this situation has been changing slowly over the last few years. Bearing in mind the apathetic attitude among many instructors, it also became clear from conversations with urban instructors and directors that some instructors take extra courses or are engaged in collective or individual research projects, encouraged by the team of directors. The academic director of the urban normal school hopes that "the new law will finally give us the resources to create and generate the knowledge we get from the research we undertake. We should publish [our findings] in a participatory way, with students and instructors [working] together". The new curriculum will pay more attention to research and innovation. The new teaching techniques in the normales will be focused on research projects, with the aim of developing new knowledges. Here I deliberately use the plural term "knowledges", referring to the Latin American thinking on coloniality, and the need to reclaim and produce various kinds of knowledges, instead of legitimizing only the Eurocentric paradigm (see, for instance, Walsh 2007). From a positive perspective, the new "curriculum in the hands of a good teacher can be a hotbed for innovation, which will be created and recreated by the teacher-investigators, because the normales will become research institutes as well" (Del Granado Cosio 2011, p. 11).

In accordance with the studies by Lozada Pereira (2004) and Concha et al. (2002), but also considering the normalista arguments against external administration by universities, I argue that closer cooperation between normales (as independent institutions) and universities could be a potential way to improve both teaching and research/evaluation in the



normales. The fact that several instructors are currently involved in further studies and research projects, with either the universities or other training institutes, is a welcome development and could perhaps open avenues for further cooperation, joint research, and dissemination between normales and research institutes or universities. In short, Bolivia still has a dire need for change, innovation, and “a more positive, non-violent, but creative and open experience of teacher education”, as the sociologist José Luis Saavedra so neatly stated it in an interview.

### **Concluding reflections: Old habits meet new ideals**

The Morales government aims to radically restructure the governance mechanisms for the teacher education sector, and to redirect its curriculum for socio-political reasons. This new political direction seems to mirror a growing acknowledgement of, and pressure for, a genuine transformation of Bolivia's teacher education system, in which teachers are perceived to be potential agents for decolonization and social justice—or *vivir bien*.

Some initial changes are already visible. However, I have shown how historically embedded institutional cultures and the political strategies of the different stakeholders are not necessarily creating an environment that is enabling political transformations to take place. From a CPE perspective, the normales can be viewed as “complex and emergent sites of struggle and contestation” (Jessop 2005, p. 28). From their institutional position on the verge of ASEP's transformation from an ideological policy into an educational reality, they have to mediate opposing power relations. Furthermore, the “jammed” or “broken” government mechanisms that the Morales government encountered at the national level also influence the normales, in particular some of the mechanisms of corruption and lethargy that form potential barriers to processes of transformation (e.g., decolonization, liberation, innovation).

Drawing on Fairclough's (2005) theoretical consideration on institutional change through the lens of critical discourse analysis, this hierarchical and top-down management style, together with the centralized authority and powerful interference of the teachers' unions in Bolivian normales, is part of a historically developed “fix” for Bolivia's teacher education arena. Bolivia faces real changes in the political arena and developing changes in the socio-cultural realm, where being indigenous is no longer unacceptable. These wider socio-cultural and political changes affect the teacher training “fix”. According to Fairclough (p. 935), “the implementation of a successful strategy is a matter of operationalizing “new representations and imaginaries—new discourses and narratives—in new ways of acting and being and new material arrangements”. In this sense, most people do not see the earlier “fix”, which originated from the 1994 reform narrative, as viable, particularly since Morales came to office and a new “Bolivian owned”, rather than “foreign imposed”, fix became the new policy imaginary.

A niche for new ways of acting has opened up through the willingness of the rural teachers unions, and linked to that the rural normal school included in this study, to open dialogue and to contribute to the new plans for a decolonized education system. Yet, recalling Tatto's (2007) assertion, we cannot view normales as homogenous or passive agents. It is therefore important to acknowledge the internal diversity of opinions both within and around the urban and the rural institutes, as well as the management staffs' attitudes towards the ASEP reform project: supportive in the rural case or critical in the urban one. Hence, a new ASEP counter-hegemonic fix has not emerged and certainly has not yet been institutionalized. It is still too early to observe deep transforming effects in the organizational structures of the normales, and the inertia of many normales is a serious obstacle.

Despite the institutional challenges I have identified, many young aspirants continue to struggle to enter the normales—and thus a lifelong system of relative security. At the same time, instructors and staff members fiercely defend their positions, to keep them as they are. Once inside, students are often disappointed by the quality of the education they receive. Over the past decade, several reform initiatives have targeted this lack of quality, with universities temporarily administering several normales in the period 2000–2005, followed by the recent process of institutionalization to reorganize the normales and their staff. Bearing in mind the tensions around these projects, I also see possible niches for change in them, as both national and institutional politics have (re)focused their attention on opening up opportunities and stimulation for instructors to improve their knowledge and teaching techniques. I have also identified ASEP’s stronger emphasis on research as a cross-cutting training element as a beneficial development, one that could potentially open up opportunities for new forms of collaboration between normales and universities or research institutes. Bolivia’s normales are set in a context of both historical and current turbulence and tensions. While the current socio-political climate and policies potentially open up niches for transformation, it will take time and serious investments to challenge the “old habits”—or barriers to institutional change—and put into practice the “new political ideals” of transformation and decolonization.

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## Author Biography

**Mieke T. A. Lopes Cardozo (The Netherlands)** is an assistant professor at the Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research at the University of Amsterdam. She is the coordinator of IS-Academie, a research project co-funded by that university and the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. She teaches BA- and MA-level courses on international development studies, and on education and international development. Her research focuses on the areas of teachers, teacher education, critical (multicultural) education, and education in relation to conflict/peace.