



EXTREME TEACHING AND THE POLITICS OF TEACHERS' WORKING CONDITIONS AT THE PERIPHERIES OF THE MEXICAN EDUCATION SYSTEM

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Abstract

The term 'extreme teaching' refers to a combination of working conditions that appear to make teaching impossibly difficult for indigenous teachers' at the periphery of the Mexican education system. An attention to the reality of teaching conditions 'on the ground' creates a counterweight to the theoretical universalisms of education policy, and more specifically to the discourse of teacher quality that position teachers as autonomous professionals, 'free' to become fully competent if motivated and 'incentivized'. A broad overview of the characteristics of indigenous teachers' experience and working conditions is followed by a discussion of factors inhibiting all-important communication and critical dialogue between teachers. I argue that in the diminished professional environment of extreme teaching the teacher quality discourse and its contemporary policy technologies become particularly dissonant, if not surreal. By way of conclusion I argue that the neo-liberal agenda can be better contextualized and understood by paying greater attention to teachers' working conditions, especially at the margins of education as they become increasingly permeated by its discourses. Such an attention would help avoid a bad fit between policy and reality and help create a more teacher centred agenda for educational change.

Keywords: Teacher quality discourse, neo-liberalism, education policy, working conditions, extreme teaching, educational change

INTRODUCTION

The issue of working conditions influences teachers' experience of their professional lives and will determine to some degree teachers' motivation and ability to achieve meaningful teaching. However, these same working conditions frequently remain unaddressed by education policy and its attempts to improve teaching and learning. As Gitlin said in his study of secondary school teachers: "For too long now, the working conditions of teachers have been overlooked because it is assumed that teaching is a calling, a profession where one would work to overcome school-related obstacles regardless of their nature" (2001, pp. 254-255).

According to Ball (2003), the recent global wave of neo-liberal policies of performativity seem set to consolidate a historical and systemic lack of caring for the subjects of education, for, as Ball states, "performance has no room for caring" (p.224). For an education system to care for its teachers and their job satisfaction, knowledge of their collective experiences would need to inform policy decisions. The consistently high levels of teacher burn-out across developed countries is

evidence that this is not occurring (Macdonald, 1999); rather, evidence reveals that the neo-liberal performativity agenda is translating into increased teacher turnover and higher levels of burn-out and dissatisfaction amongst even the most accomplished of teachers (Lloyd, 2012).

As van den Berg (2002) indicates, lived tensions between expectations (policy) and on the ground working conditions are not merely 'technical' or 'bureaucratic', they reach into the teacher's subjectivity, forcing teachers to re-accommodate their sense of self. On a similar note, Ball (2003) argues that

the particular focus [of neo-liberal reform] [...] is not primarily upon structures and procedures, but upon the re-forming of relationships and subjectivities [...] What it means to teach and what it means to be a teacher (a researcher, an academic) are subtly but decisively changed in the processes of reform (pp. 217-218).

Such reform agendas are therefore both 'conservative' in maintaining the prevailing operational conditions of schools, and 'radical' in their re-thinking of education's subjectivities and relationships.

The 2013 education reform in Mexico appears to be no exception to this general rule with its central and predominant attention to redefining the contractual relationship between the state and teacher (Blanco, 2013; Gil, 2013; Keck, 2015), and by establishing and enhancing teacher evaluation as the preferred mechanism for determining teacher promotion and permanence. Far from a concern to improve teacher working conditions in the broadest sense, the central thrust of the Mexican reform agenda would seem to be designed to undermine the contractual stability that being a teacher has traditionally offered.

In this sense the 2013 reform's targeting of job security responds to international and national pressure to 'flexibilize' the workforce in alignment with neo-liberal political thinking and strategy, and also to the gradual and increasingly strident 'demonization' of teachers as the root cause of Mexico's poor educational achievement (Muñoz, 2008; Bensusán & Tapia, 2013; Blanco, 2013). Characterizations of teachers as unprofessional, lazy, corrupt and ignorant flourish in a context which systematically ignores working conditions. In recent years, for example, the media has roundly condemned a working culture that facilitates teacher absenteeism, yet there is no comparable condemnation of important structural features such as the fact that Mexico has the highest student to teacher ratio of all OECD countries (OECD, 2014).

Debate about how best to improve schools is not well served by this distortion of the factors that limit good teaching and learning in Mexican schools. To this end this article seeks to redress a relative silence around teacher experience by focusing on the working conditions of indigenous teachers in Chiapas. Collectively these conditions give rise to the state of 'extreme teaching' named in the title, a concept derived from the world of 'extreme sports' which require its practitioners to flourish in a landscape which should render the sport impossibly difficult. I will argue that the features of the indigenous teachers 'workscape' explored here are particularly hostile to teacher well-being and professionalism, lending a degree of absurdity to the discourse of teacher quality.

Not least, I will draw on the evidence of non-communication among indigenous teachers to critique the 2013 reforms' professed interest in promoting teachers' individual and collective leadership (INEE, 2015). The reform's ambition to bring

about educational change by cultivating teacher reflexivity and agency within professional learning communities, in the style described by Hargreaves' Fourth Way (see Hargreaves and Shirley, 2009; Harris, 2011), sits uneasily alongside the working conditions of indigenous teachers whose most defining characteristic is, I argue, professional atomization.

To be more precise, this teacher atomization should be understood as a second order characteristic resulting from a number of first order characteristics that have less to do with individual teachers than with the structural, cultural, political, economic, administrative features of the landscape they inhabit. The proposed engagement of indigenous teachers in a collective search for improvement requires of the teacher an ethical and material investment in education that stands in contrast to many of the features of this landscape. Thus we could say that the 2013 reform requires of teachers that they should become exceptional individuals, able not only to overcome isolated obstacles but also to work against the grain of Mexico's social fabric in a selfless pursuit of the common good.

If some features of the diminished school environment are particular to the indigenous or Mexican context, I would argue that an attention to 'extreme teaching' in Chiapas is relevant to the international education community for three reasons: Firstly, there may be many commonalities with other educational realities across latinamerica where political, social and economic conditions often converge; Secondly, as education coverage has expanded across the entire 'developing world', extreme teaching in precarious conditions is becoming 'mainstream' (at least in terms of numbers of teachers employed). This numerical domination of the 'periphery' contrasts with a continued theoretico-political domination of the educational experiences of 'advanced' market democracies. This imbalance of attention needs to be redressed in order to develop viable solutions to the idiosyncratic difficulties that occur on education's periphery. And thirdly, an examination of 'extreme teaching' permits us to see things about education that are obscured by the highly developed rationales and sophisticated practices of the 'western' institutions that often set the educational trends that colonize and dominate education's peripheries.

For example, it is easier to understand Freud's inclusion of teaching among his "impossible professions" in the light of the challenges faced by the indigenous teachers of this study. For Freud the impossibility of teaching is located in the gap between education's need for certainty and uniformity and the uncontrollable, unforeseeable multiplicity of experience (Britzman, 2009). The peripheries of education better reveal this divide between theory (universal) and reality (local), a divide also present – though moderated – in the 'mainstream' classrooms at education's centres. I hope, therefore, that teachers operating within education's 'centre' will be able to recognize some of their own tensions in the lives of these indigenous teachers.

METHODOLOGY

Ball (2003) contrasts an appearance of "hyper-rational" objectivity and a reliance on "simple figures and categories of judgement" with the "complex social processes and events" that education reform attempts to describe and control (p.217). He invokes the imperative to "get behind" the surface of reform to examine the social identity of teachers who have become its objects. In keeping with Ball, this study seeks to de-rationalize and de-simplify reform agenda in Mexico by mapping

elements of the 'workscape' ignored by the smooth surfaces of policy technologies.

This article can be understood as ethnographic in that it attempts to generate an impression of some features of the working life of indigenous teachers. This impression is formed not only through interview, but also from experiences in the field over a period of years. The data derives from a broader case study that documented and analyzed teacher learning and transformation as a result of their participation in a particular training process. This training process (*Being a teacher, being a person: Towards an ethic of the care of self*) consists in three three-day retreats spread over nine months. It is being piloted among indigenous teachers in Chiapas, Mexico.

Teachers participating in the training worked in a variety of settings from single-teacher multi-grade schools in remote communities to the supervisor's office in the regional 'capital', and ranged from beginning teachers to teachers close to retirement. The sample of teachers interviewed reflected this distribution. All names in the sample have been changed to ensure anonymity.

Table 1. Description of teachers interviewed

Name (alias)	Sex	Age	Mother tongue	Role	Type of School	Number of Interviews
Paula	F	35	Tseltal	Technical Advisor	School supervision	3
Araceli	F	48	Tseltal	Teacher	Complete	3
Marco	F	48	Tseltal	Director	Complete	3
Roberta	F	39	Tseltal	Teacher	Uni-teacher	3
Ariadna	F	42	Tseltal	Teacher	Uni-teacher	3
Iván	M	38	Tseltal	Teacher	Complete	3
Martha	F	27	Tsotsil	Teacher	Tetra-teacher	3
Patrocinio	M	29	Tsotsil	Teacher	Bi-teacher	3
Mariana	F	24	Tsotsil	Teacher	Complete	3
Mario	M	21	Español	Teacher	Uni-teacher	4
Alberto	M	35	Tseltal	Director	Complete	3
Ana	F	30	Tseltal	Teacher	Complete	4
Martín	M	43	Tseltal	Technical Advisor	School supervision	3
Inocencio	M	42	Tsotsil	Technical Advisor	School supervision	3
Jorge	M	31	Tsotsil	Technical Advisor	School supervision	3
Alfredo	M	45	Tseltal	Technical Advisor	School supervision	4
Norberto	M	43	Tseltal	Supervisor	School supervision	1
Sabina	F	38	Tsotsil	Director	Complete	1
Carolina	F	31	Tseltal	Teacher	Complete	1

Note: Where teachers were interviewed four times or once it is because they participated

in a video interview post-training.

Interviews provided a means of understanding the nature of teacher learning and transformation during the training process. In the majority of cases three interviews were conducted – before, during and after – with a view to establish the entry profile of teachers and their subsequent evolution. The first interview sought to generate information about the teachers' problematizations of their role and experience. Subsequent interviews built upon information from the first interview with the view to see how new learning was helping teachers to understand or address the problems identified in the first interview, or to reconfigure their relation to their teacher identity. As part of the attempt to understand teacher transformation the interviews explored teacher experience in general, especially in those aspects of their work they experienced as most difficult. Most of the data drawn on for this article stems from the first interview which included questions such as: "What causes you most anxiety or difficulty in your school at this moment?" and "Could you describe how you feel that your character or personality affects you as a teacher?"

A total of 54 interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed to identify critical moments considered representative of indigenous teachers' lives and learning. Categories were generated from the bottom up and a first compilation of testimony was organized into three fields (Organizational Climate, Leadership, and Vocation). Subsequently, these fields were further divided using the following sub-categories – tolerance, responsibility, solidarity, critical and systemic awareness, and participation.

Whilst data analysis originally responded to the intention of documenting the impact of the training, it became apparent that testimonies also merited being read through the lens of teachers' working conditions. Data pointing to 'extreme teaching' was drawn principally from the fields of organizational climate and leadership. However, given my interest in framing the article from the teachers' perspective (i.e. what does it feel like to be at the 'extreme' end of education), it became apparent that the construction of an overarching narrative organized around the themes of "separation" and "difference" would be a more adequate vehicle for organizing and communicating a psycho-emotional perspective on teacher voice, and also a means of characterizing some central components of 'extreme teaching'.

Interview data was supplemented by data from school visits occurring as part of the training process' networking with schools and teachers, or as part of the interviewing process (most notably where interviews were being filmed). Visits were not supervisory, nor was the physical presence in schools understood to be a 'formal' part of data gathering; rather, this data has been used to enrich teacher testimony and provide perspective.

RESULTS

1. Separation (distance, alienation and ambiguity)

Indigenous teachers commonly referred to themselves as removed from the thrust of the world. They use phrases like "lost in the jungle" or "lost in the mountains" to refer to their existence on the outer edges of the education system. Paula, a technical advisor working out of a school supervision, uses the word "below" both to locate and define it; "there, below", she says, "apathy rules."

Marginality is manifest in the time taken, distance travelled and money spent in getting to their assigned schools. Early in their careers, getting to work frequently involves journeys of up to 12 hours. Accidents on difficult roads, robbery, and assault

make 'commuting' potentially dangerous, especially for women. Where travel times are longest, teachers are away from their homes for 12 days at a time, creating a dramatic work-life schism. A common work cycle will be one weekend 'at home' followed by one week, one weekend, and one week living in the community.

There are significant implications for teachers' work life. Most notably, career paths are equated with the reduction of journey time through a mechanism known as the 'cadena de cambio' (the chain of changes). This longstanding administrative procedure (a structural 'relic' of the education system) shuffles teachers through schools, zones and regions and is governed by a complex set of rules, regulations and personal relations. For teachers, a primary object of moving through the 'cadena de cambios' is to be assigned to a school closer to home, but it may also respond to the desire to leave a problematic school or community.

Mario, a multigrade teacher at the beginning of his career, was encountering difficulties with his unruly group of 40 students from 1st to 6th grade. Having tried both the 'flexible friend' and 'tough teacher' approach, he seems resigned to defeat and admits that he doesn't know "what they [the children/the community] want or expect" from him. He laments a generalized disinterest in education and feels deeply his solitude as the lone representative of education's orders: "by myself, by myself, by myself! Killing myself [with effort], and they don't do anything! That is tiring". Mario is speaking from Mexico's educational 'underworld', the one or two-teacher primary schools at the farthest reaches of the school network. A characteristic feature of education in Chiapas, multigrade schools account for 69.7% of all primary schools (INEE, 2010).

Mario's testimony perfectly captures the condition of 'extreme teaching' which is lived as geographically and culturally separated from the thrust of education's orders. Being the lone teacher in that distant and hostile community was a situation to be endured, a means to access a more worldly future. "What other people say to me is that I won't always be there [...] I will be able to get to a school where I really will [...] be able to work how I want [...] That not all my years of teaching will be spent there, there, there! No!" (Mario).

In the case of Paula, distance from her own children is a definitive condition of her experience of teaching. Paula, a single mother, is separated from her children for days at a time and so pays a high price for being a teacher. She remarks on the irony of dedicating her life to other people's children, whilst her own children are brought up by their grandparents. Her working obligations clash painfully with her ideal of motherhood. If teaching puts food on the table, it also radically removes her from a dedication to her children whom, she says, "I have, practically speaking, abandoned [...] the only people who are seeing them grow up and fulfilling the [parental] duties are my parents [...] So it's this, perhaps, that doesn't allow me be happy as a person" (Paula).

Teachers with families pay a high psycho-emotional toll for their fractured existence, and the loss of a stable home does not appear to be compensated for by coming significantly closer to something else—to colleagues, to a community, to a deep sense of vocation; rather, teachers occupy a 'no man's land', neither fully engaged with a home life, nor fully engaged with the professional life which takes them way. Evidence of the messiness of a 'nomadic' existence (replete with alcoholism, infidelities and absenteeism) is juxtaposed with an ideal of family closeness that has a significant place in Mexican culture. In effect, these teachers spend much of their lives structurally

separated from the ingredients of a 'normal' life and its domestic rhythms.

As opposed to the ideals of family and profession, images of teachers at home or at work are frequently distopic. Alfredo, a teacher with over twenty years experience, reflects on a ruinous life as a philanderer, drunk, and shirker. He describes himself as mediocre, and evokes the image of a stunted, leafless tree to describe his working life. Alfredo's alienation from a deep sense of professionalism is shared across the sample through a common anxiety around professional competence. Paula, for example, suspects that "deep inside us we feel that we are lacking something [professionally], but we don't know what". Paula describes how this doubt is accompanied by a paralysis preventing constructive engagement with professional enhancement. Mariana, a young teacher just beginning her career, has already come to the conclusion that her colleagues do not have the "personal or professional capacity to talk about or to solve things as a team". And Ana, a mid-career teacher, remarks on her own inability to talk in staff meetings for fear of ridicule, as if she has remained in a permanent identification with the condition of 'novice':

My problem is that I can't express myself freely with my colleagues. What I think, and more what I feel. Or even more in the elaboration of a project. It's very hard for me [...]. I have this fear that they will make fun of me –'you don't know' or something [...] and I think this is an obstacle for my advancement as a professional ... (Ana).

Ana's fear of exposure as 'unknowing' is common among the teachers interviewed, and high degrees of insecurity frequently hinder teachers from fully embodying their professional identity. Unsurprisingly, the feeling of being out of their depth is generalized amongst the teachers interviewed. Defensive positions and survival strategies abound. Ana held back from participating in staff meetings for fear of being ridiculed. Alfredo, whilst acting as school supervisor, feels he lacked the moral authority required to enter into dialogue with staff and hides behind regulations. Norberto lacks the courage and clarity required to confront staff. And Sabina has come to see the issue of "self-esteem" among her staff (and herself) as central to the difficulties experienced in her school:

I believe that in general here at the school what we are lacking is confidence [...]. For example, in the case of the teachers, [confidence] in what they teach and in who they are. In my case, as director, [confidence] in what I say and in being understood by them [the teachers] (Sabina).

Worse than the material scarcities and geographic instability is a lack of professional authority and value among indigenous teachers. For Sabina the most important thing she learnt in the reflexive training around which the research took place, is that she, as a person and as a professional, has value.

If teachers are separated from embodying an identity rooted in a mutually supported competence, similarly, they have become separated from their indigenous roots. It is no small irony that teaching has often required teachers to absent themselves from the practices and rhythms of agricultural life that make up a significant part of indigenous identity. Comments made by some community members on one visit to a school reflect a view of the indigenous teacher as 'other', as someone who no longer belongs. Mariana's ambiguity around her students is

typical. She appears culturally sensitive, and is aware of the misfit between the national curriculum and the indigenous world, but, paradoxically, she is frustrated by her students' ambitions of getting married, having a family, and cultivating the land. Mariana's lamentations, like Patrocinio's exhortations to parents to help their children 'become somebody' through education, present us with a vision of education's elitism. If education professes the spirit of equality, this is the equality of opportunity (to become somebody) and not an equality 'being'. Indigenous teachers in this situation are both separated from their context by their professional status, and professionally bound to bring about that context's separation from itself by lifting its population into the freedoms of 'modernity'.

2. *Difference (conflict, mistrust, and fear)*

Teachers interviewed had been caught up in the strike action against the 2013 education reform. For Sabina, believing that her only recourse as school director was the strict application of regulations with striking teachers, it represented a tough challenge. Maintaining this position came at a cost and in hindsight she feels that she overplayed her hand, entrenching the divisions between herself and her staff:

... it was a trial by fire that they [her staff] put before me, because they entered into a very rebellious phase, in response to which I had two possible paths to follow: or I [...] applied the rules or I let everything go and let them do what they wanted, no? What I did was to follow the rules, so I think I was very rigid – a position that didn't contribute anything to the work place. On the contrary, I think we went through very tough situations, very negative (Sabina).

If Sabina subsequently modulated her reaction and smoothed out some of the differences with her young teachers, her testimony illustrates the divided response of the teaching body to the government reform agenda.

This climactic situation is indicative of a permanent condition of low-intensity conflict among teachers. Indigenous schools are rarely the expression of collective purpose, and have become sites of 'sectarian' conflict between two factions, one aligned with the longstanding *Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación*, and the other with a breakaway teachers' union, *la Coordinación Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación*. Teachers' testimonies attest to the non-communication, contrariness, boycotting, intimidation and sabotage permeating relations between the two factions.

Whilst at education's 'centres' teacher identity tends to be mediated by an overriding appeal to professionalism, vocation, and service, in Chiapas we witness the teacher as a political animal in the raw. The 'fact' of politics, and in particular the dynamics of resistance or capitulation, impregnates the lives of indigenous teachers, creating a world within a world, a parallel script situated within the more institutional considerations of hierarchy, or the educational considerations of pedagogy, or the governmental considerations of policy implementation. To work within this politicized culture requires ongoing risk management and negotiation of allegiances. Mariana, for example, is particularly troubled by what she defines as the 'ideological' struggles transecting schools. She pines for a more collegiate work environment, one in which teachers form a cohesive unit and colleagues might be trusted rather than feared.

Paula repeatedly uses the word '*confianza*' (meaning both 'trust' in the other

and 'self-confidence') in relation to her professional experience. 'Confianza' in herself and in her professional relations is what Paula most desires to cultivate. Her testimony, however, reveals a fundamental mistrust of her professional relations, and a free-floating anxiety around her need to feel accepted by colleagues. Her question "What can I do so that they will accept me?", lurks behind her actions and the permanent possibility of rejection feeds on her professional vulnerability, carrying with it the threat of humiliation.

Paula recounts a school visit in which she feels that her 'overseeing' presence was resented by its teachers, who declared on her arrival that they needed to be elsewhere and were unable to receive her. As they drive off in their shared car she is left to fend for herself on the side of the road in a rural community in Chiapas - a gesture whose hostility is hard to ignore. Resistance to her institutional 'authority' overlaps with resistance to her 'person' and to her physical manifestation in their territory. In interview she recounts how the humiliation of this rebuff led her to refrain from school visits for eighteen months. Although she has taken to visiting schools again, she remains sensitive to signs of rejection that lurk within the codes of professional and personal civilities. Paula clearly feels herself to be an unwelcome and irrelevant interloper at the periphery, and her right to be there implicitly questioned:

Sometimes I get dispirited because I feel that I am not accepted in [the school at] Lagunas, and if there is not complete acceptance whatever I say is not going to matter to them, even if they are listening [...] or half taking notes [...] [Later they will say], "the technical advisor came but I can't even remember what she said". So it's that that gets me down, that there isn't acceptance, or any desire to change (Paula).

Such stand-offs are omnipresent in the testimonies, and at every level 'authority' is experienced as uncomfortable. Authoritarian excess is a common response to this tension. Sabina, Alberto and Inocencio are all school directors whose management has been over-regulatory in an effort to stem a possible epidemic of absenteeism and abuses. Alberto described his own evolution with respect to his 'management' of teachers':

... before I applied the rule-book to anyone involved in misconduct. But I came to understand that that isn't the way. That violence should not be met with violence. Rather, you have to be understanding with them, talk to them, because all human behaviour has its cause, which is something that I didn't know before... (Alberto).

Flexibility in the exercise of authority is problematic where the 'other' is feared and the professional ethics and vocation of teachers are not trusted. Alberto's reference to the idea of 'violence' and 'counter-violence' to describe the provocations between teachers and authorities is telling, evoking Foucault's (1980) permanent provocations of power. The complexity of 'policing' education's peripheries is present in Alfredo's attempt to find 'workable' means of countering the threat of 'anarchy' and to 'persuade' teachers to inhabit the orders of schooling. An alternative response to the permanent provocations of teachers' agendas is a strategic abdication of 'policing'. Judging from Paula's account of her work culture, her boss (Norberto) resorts to this strategy ("You are you, you can do what you want"), and practices an ethical relativism and professional atomization that con-

tradicts the collectivism of union discourse.

The prevalence of excessive force *and* excessive leniency point to an organizational environment short on meaningful collaboration. The silence of Ana, the seduction of Paula, the regulatory knee-jerk of the school directors, and the leniency of Norberto, are evidence of a work culture stripped of constructive dialogue. Sabina is clear that what she most needs as a school director is to find the balance between firmness (policing), and flexibility (listening), and we can infer from her self-analysis the existence of a desire to inhabit a dialogue between two 'ethical' equals.

DISCUSSION

In their analysis of the 2013 reform Brach and Zorrilla (2015) state that "autonomy in relation to school management can be seen as one of the most attractive and transcendent benefits to be introduced" (p.35, my translation). Reforms that propose school autonomy are rooted in the notion of the school as a relatively stable composite of different actors united around a shared goal and capable of constructing and coordinating an agenda for educational change that situates the school as "a centre for significant decision making in the system" (*ibid.*, my translation). And yet the closer we get to teacher experience, the more obvious it becomes that conditions of extreme teaching on the ground are not amenable to the sort of dialogue and decision making the government is demanding of teachers as it hones its discourse on teacher quality.

The contrast between centralized education policy and local reality is more keenly felt by indigenous teachers who face an enormous inequality of conditions when attempting to implement policy. Teachers in this study made constant reference to the misfit between national policy and indigenous realities. Alfredo, a school director, points to the gap between the experts who create policy and the teachers in charge of its implementation:

What has been missing, I think, is participation. A proposal [for education] that comes from below. Because, normally, it is made from above, elaborated by researchers and 'hot shot' academics. But they haven't taken into account our experiences, our life story, our needs, what work we do do as subjects. What is missing in education is that they take us into account, yes, our experiences, experiences grounded in our strengths, and also in our needs (Alfredo).

So whilst agreeing with Bracho and Zorrilla's positive assessment of the reform's autonomy principle, it would seem imperative to critically qualify our enthusiasm in the light of the evidence that points to the continued existence of 'extreme teaching' in what can be understood as a parallel universe to education policy.

Looking at this evidence on balance, I would especially argue in favour of paying greater attention to the professional atomization of teachers and to those features of the 'workscape' that undermine meaningful peer to peer communication. Such communication has been identified as both "the path and the obstacle in the process that leads to ... self-realization in teaching" (Esteve 1994, p.150; for the importance of communication see also Abraham, 1975; Amiel-Legibre 1980; Vonk, 1983; Bullough & Baughman, 1997; Giles & Wilson, 2004). Esteve claims that

the continuing development of teachers must suppose the constant availability of

a network of communication that should not be reduced to the area of academic content but, in addition, also include the methodological, organizational, personal and social problems that continually introduce themselves within teaching situations (*ibid.*, p.152, my translation).

Three notable conditions work against communication in indigenous education: teacher mobility, political polarization, and professional fragility. Most extraordinary of the three is teacher mobility. The administrative mechanism, which moves teachers around the school system like pieces on a chess board, generates radical instability in schools and teachers' lives, and hinders effective communication. The colloquial description of the teacher as a 'mochila veloz' (or 'flying rucksack') gives expression to the fleeting and unsettled quality of teachers' lives on the periphery of education. Thus, educational policy whose object is school improvement comes into radical conflict with a political-administrative status quo that undermines the necessary collegiality on which school improvement would depend.

Likewise, the omnipresence of polarized 'blocks' of teachers (in the form of the official and unofficial teachers' unions) marginalizes communications that are not mediated by ideology and concerned with political struggles. Teachers pressed between the state, the union and the community are expected to absorb and contain these competing interests. Whilst they appear to do so, the loss of meaningful professional communication and collaboration is a high price to pay.

The third obstacle to communication is the fragility and alienation within teacher identity. Poorly educated, unprepared for leadership in the new, dynamic and dialogic classroom, and usually motivated by a stable salary rather than a teaching vocation, the 'average' indigenous teacher identity is constructed above a professional abyss. These are teachers self-conscious about their awkward writing, spelling mistakes, and spoken Spanish. For such teachers, the true communication of difficulty that could push against a culture of silence and toward professional development would perhaps be the expression of themselves as somehow 'outside' education, as culturally and experientially alienated from modern schooling. This alienation is qualitatively different from the 'western' teacher having difficulty in a particular subject, or suffering a crisis of confidence or classroom discipline. Indigenous teachers face an ontological crisis of legitimacy, not only regarding their own 'performance' as teacher, but also the insertion of schooling within indigenous communities. Whilst Paula, Mariana, and Ana communicate a yearning for collegiality, for the possibility of trust, acceptance and participation in a meaningful collective experience, they nevertheless have succumbed to silence. Non-communication, professional isolation and stagnation are easier to swallow when the communication of radical difficulty would throw so much of teachers' assumed identity into the air.

Whilst diverse studies in Spain, England, Australia and the United States draw attention to the good social and professional relations between colleagues (Marchesi, 2007; Hargreaves, L.; Cunningham *et al.*, 2007; McKenzie, Kos *et al.*, 2008; Liu & Ramsey, 2008), the present study corroborates the difficulties that Latinamerican teachers face in the negotiation of their school relations and professional identity, difficulties that partly stem from a reform agenda that over-instrumentalizes teachers' work, ignoring the "irrational" elements that define the role and are rooted in cultural, ethico-moral and political considerations (Tenti Fanfani, 2005). Goodson, speaking from a European context has the following to say about the

tendency to over-instrumentalization:

The assumption is held that the clear enunciation of objectives, backed by a battery of tests, accompanied by accountability strategies, and confirmed by a range of financial incentives and payments by results, will inevitably raise school standards. The teacher is positioned as a key part of this delivery system, but technical aspects of teacher professionalism are stressed, rather than the *professional biography*—the personal missions and commitments that underpin the teacher's sense of vocationalism and caring professionalism (Goodson, 2007, p. 137).

According to Goodson, what he calls “the personality of change” is all too often seen as the “stumbling block” of real reform, rather than as a crucial “building block” (*ibid.*, p.138).

It should be no surprise, then, that this research reveals evidence of a disengaged and hyper-cautious teaching body uncomfortably straddling the gap between policy and reality. Whilst the themes of separation and difference are consistent with existing studies of teacher vulnerability (see Kelchtermans, 1996; Bullough & Young, 2002), what stands out is the intensity with which work conditions press in upon these indigenous teachers. Whilst, for example, a conflict between home and school life is a commonplace for teachers, the requirement that teachers remain away from home for up to two weeks contains a violence of sacrifice in its work-life imbalance not experienced by the teacher at the centre. In this politico-administrative culture the work of teaching takes on new meanings, perhaps characterized by a profound lack of caring that extends from top to bottom of the Mexican education system. Similarly, a recent study of teacher experience within the neo-liberal policy paradigm points to how teachers frequently come into conflict with an ‘uncaring’ policy imposition (Ball, 2014). Ball refers us to tensions between educational ‘visions’ that occur in the United Kingdom in the following terms:

Two regimes of truth are in opposition here, two systems of value and values. One produces measurable teaching subjects, whose qualities are represented in categories of judgement; the other is vested in a pedagogy of context and experience, intelligible in a set of collegial relations (p. 92).

In the case of Mexico's ‘extreme teaching’ we see an even more stark oppositions—on the one hand pressure is building incrementally to produce an entrepreneurial teacher identity wholeheartedly committed to continual and relentless improvement of student learning (as determined by standardized testing). And, in contrast, we have a teaching body whose value and values are rooted in a ‘culture’ of (self-) survival amid particularly hostile socio-economic and working conditions. Pedagogic or learning concerns have historically remained secondary to the weight of teachers’ circumstances. As long as a need for ‘survival’ remains a prominent feature of teacher experience the discourse of performativity risks being subsumed within this culture as teachers adopt a simulated ‘performative’ response as a new necessity of survival (Ball, 2003).

Perhaps of most concern, however, is the possibility that the longer teachers’ working conditions remain sidelined in the policy debate, the easier it will be to blame teachers for education’s failings. As Moore (2012) points out, one of the ‘side-effects’ of neo-liberal policy agendas, with their emphasis on the importance

of teacher quality, competency and leadership, is that as 'teacher power' becomes emphasized structural, political, administrative, social and cultural conditions recede from the spotlight. Likewise, the discourse of school autonomy can also be confused with the discourse of teacher responsibility, and it is not so difficult to imagine a situation in which the government denies responsibility for education's failings to the degree to which it has supposedly devolved significant decision making to teachers. How can such devolution of decision making be realistically taken up by an unconfident and lone teacher facing a group of 50 primary students of all grades in an isolated community 12 hours travel away from their home?

The work of giving voice to teacher experience and of returning the educational debate to the issues beyond teacher quality and competence is one of the ways in which we can insist that the government take up its share of responsibility for educational failure and for educational change. Gil's (2013) image of the education system as a dilapidated bus on a pot-holed road is a useful analogy here. As Gil argues, this article hopes to shine a light on the figure of the teacher (the driver) without losing sight of the pot-holed road (Mexico itself) and the dilapidated bus (the education system). Hopefully, the sketches of 'extreme teaching' presented in this article will serve as a reminder of how the teacher is situated and how their possibilities of action and transformation are contingent on a multitude of factors, many of which beyond their immediate control. At a time when the political and policy pressure on the teacher is being turned up, it is important to constantly remind ourselves of the features of teacher experience that are so easily sidelined as anti-teacher rhetoric becomes an accepted feature of 'cultural' life in Mexico.

Whilst it is true that teachers are guilty of abusing the system, I would argue that the system has also abused the Mexican teacher, especially those teachers at the periphery. If it is all too easy for the general public to become outraged by tales of parasitic teachers leeching off the state, and to resonate with the stereotyped portrayals of teacher, we must simultaneously ask if we would accept the small print of their working lives? In the case of indigenous teachers (and probably many others), the acceptance (or tolerance) of their extraordinary working conditions would seem to be largely based on the compensation of a stable salary, and this in turn acquires its importance in relation to Mexico's economic inequalities, which will often mean that the job of teacher is one of a very few possibilities for escaping poverty and economic insecurity.

Might it eventually turn out to be the case that the 2013 reform's flexibilization of the workforce will remove the only effective incentive for recruiting teachers to the periphery? Were this to occur, the government would perhaps be obliged to reconsider the give and take of the social contract that mediates relations between teachers and the state. One of these reconsiderations might involve an active recognition of the multiplicity of factors that determine what happens or doesn't happen in a classroom, or in a school, and to cease to lean so heavily on teachers, at the same time as beginning to address those structural features conditioning teacher experience.

CONCLUSION

Evidence of separation and difference within indigenous teachers' lives points to the existence of what I have termed 'extreme teaching' within the indigenous education system in Mexico. The implications of 'extreme teaching' on teaching iden-

tity concur with the conflicts identified in van de Berg's (2002) review of teacher subjectivity. Indigenous teachers on the periphery of Mexico's education system struggle to respond to student needs, to occupy the role of leadership, to understand professional competence, to find the balance between public-professional responsibility and bureaucracy, and to articulate the 'big changes' of reform agendas within chronically fragile circumstances.

From this ground, non-communication among indigenous teachers was singled out as an example of how structural features of the educational landscape stand in opposition to teacher quality. To counter this situation among indigenous teachers, work would need to be done to address how collegiality and communication might be fostered. To do so would require a holistic reform agenda capable of formulating and addressing serious and difficult questions about the politics and administration of education, and about how teachers can be adequately supported to collectively confront a hollowed out teacher identity. To attend to this patchwork of issues, and to listen to teachers' talk about their lives on the periphery, requires acknowledging the complexity of education and the nuances of teachers' experience. This sensibility to the local stands in opposition and resistance to the universalizing tendencies in dominant educational discourses and the notion of 'expertise' that drives much of the policy borrowing that occurs within and between nations.

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