

# A qualitative inquiry on teachers' concerns about decentralization and privatization in one school in Guatemala

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*In this paper we describe a qualitative research project conducted at a public elementary school in a rural community in Guatemala. From analysis of interviews with teachers and the school administrator, we found that a key concern of participants was how they viewed the increasingly problematic relationship between their local educational processes, federal government policies and the broader forces of globalisation. To understand these issues, we employ a theoretical framework that draws from the, often competing, assumptions of global neoliberalism and the capability approach. The teachers interviewed for the project suggest that the Guatemalan government was attempting to implement a program of educational privatization that was incommensurate with the needs and interests of their daily lives as teachers in a small rural community. We argue that the issues and problems raised by the teachers are not only indicative of local or even Guatemalan national issues but illustrate global educational concerns and their incumbent problems.*

*[Key words: Globalisation, Teachers' Work, Capability Approach, Neoliberalism, Guatemala]*

In this article we examine the concerns of a group of teachers at a rural school in Guatemala. During interviews the teachers expressed a deep concern about the direction of education in their country and how it was impacting their lives as teachers and the lives of their students. Of primary concern was their government's attempt to decentralize the administration of schools, which they read as a move to privatization. Privatization is a global strategy situated in neoliberal development policies to assure a market-based approach to economic growth and delivery of social services (Steger & Roy, 2010). The teachers responded with a critique of the situation and by constructing a sense of autonomy and agency through various social actions. In our analysis we articulate these differences through the application of neoliberalism and the Capability Approach as theoretical constructs that helped us to situate and make sense of the teachers' concerns.

Privatization has become a central strategy of governments across the planet to deliver a wide range of social services such as health care, water and education. These policies are nowhere more vigorously pursued than in Latin America, which accounts for almost one quarter of all privatization efforts (Megginson, 2000). In education privatization has been pursued as pressure for economic adjustment is applied to debtor nations by the international Monetary Fund and the World Bank (Henales & Edwards, 2002). On a global scale such policies may erode the democratic citizenship ideals that have historically formed many of the goals and purposes of national education (Torres, 2002). Moreover, efforts to privatize national education systems tend not to live up to the achievement expectations touted by proponents (Carnoy, 1998).

## **Globalisation and Education**

To understand the broader implications of the teachers' concerns and actions concerning decentralization and privatization, we have turned to the idea of globalisation as an overarching analytical framework for our study. In general, Globalisation refers to the set of economic, political, cultural and communicative practices by which the world is becoming, at least theoretically, inexorably interdependent (Outhwaite, 2006; Stiglitz, 2003). While globalisation is complex and there is no consensus on its overall meaning or effect on modern society and education (Held & McGrew, 2000), there are a few issues that are pertinent to our study. A primary concern with globalisation is that it homogenizes cultural, political and economic traditions and destroys and supplants local alternatives (Pieterse, 2009). In the field of education, neoliberal economic policies are viewed as forcing education into the ideologies of accountability and privatization, and losing social justice and humanitarian perspectives (Kellner, 2005).

Although there is no general agreement about the extensiveness, or contemporary form of globalisation, it serves as a useful umbrella concept for considering a wide-range of education issues that seem to have a broad transnational reach. In particular, the concept helps us to understand the ways in which educational actors, particularly in developing countries such as Guatemala, negotiate their own interests along with external supranational pressures that are being placed upon them. Guatemala, for example, is an international debtor nation that in 2002 owed at least \$6.5 billion, much of it to global monetary entities such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) (Edwards, 2002). Monetary assistance from these organizations is tied to expectations that the receiving country will participate in a range of economic, social, and political reforms, with educational reform among them. Because of this financial assistance, Guatemala is expected to engage in reforms that are consistent with policies imposed on many debtor nations across the globe. Global agencies such as the World Bank or the IMF tout schooling as crucial for developing national stability and security, enhancing economic development, alleviating poverty, and encouraging equality. Particularly in the last twenty years, the goals and purposes of education for any given nation proposed by these international agencies have been homogenized around these issues. Consequently, it has become difficult to discern major differences

in the policy and practice of education between states at various levels of development (Spring, 2006).

We can say with certainty that globalisation is not just one thing. To build our theoretical terrain we turn to two perspectives that will allow us to consider the possibilities of education in a globalizing world, and how these become articulated at the local level in Guatemala. The two perspectives are the neoliberal discourse and the capability approach (Sen, 1999). Both theoretical constructs are useful for this study because they are constructed to address similar concerns but from very different principles and ethical commitments.

### **Neoliberal Discourse of Education in a Global Society**

A neoliberal discourse puts into practice the dictates of neoliberalism. A discourse is a socially and/or culturally maintained and propagated set of parameters by which we talk about and understand social life (Harvey, 1996). A discourse provides the concrete linguistic codes and assumptions that frame our understanding of particular phenomena. A neoliberal discourse is one framed within the broad parameters of neoliberalism. In our investigation we will take the definition of neoliberalism as an “economic doctrine that sees the market as the most effective way of determining production and satisfying people’s needs” (Stromquist, 2002, p. 25). A discourse neoliberalism is used to define the goals and purposes of education within these particular parameters. In the contemporary global context neoliberalism includes assumptions that education is central to economic development and social stability (Burbules & Torres, 2000; Hill, 2007). The discourse of neoliberalism is a set of powerful ideas that, when put into practice, place pressure on governments to reform their educational systems so that they assume certain kinds of accountability, reduce central governmental oversight of education, and support reforms that encourage the privatization of education (Ward, 2011). For example, this statement on the front page of the education section of the World Bank (nd) Web site begins:

Education is central to development. It empowers people, strengthens nations, and is key to the attainment of the millennium development goals. Already the worlds largest external financier of education, the world bank is today more committed than ever to helping countries develop holistic education systems aimed both at achieving education for all (EFA) and building dynamic knowledge societies that are key to competing in global markets through Education for the Knowledge Economy (EKE).

The World Bank suggests a rather simplistic and optimistic relationship between education, economic development, and poverty reduction that ignores the long history of scholarship that problematizes this relationship (cf. Leach & Little, 1999; McMahan, 2001). As a global discourse on education we should be able to see these basic assumptions within educational policy and practice in the Central American region and in Guatemala.

At the policy level, if one does even a quick perusal of statements related to education put forth for Guatemala and the larger Latin and Central American region by any entity with an international or global agenda, one can see an emergent neoliberal discourse (cf. Partnership for Educational Revitalization in the Americas (PREAL), 2003; Task Force on Educational Reform in Central America, 2003; The World Bank, 1999, 2003). In these documents, education is seen as a way of increasing human capital: it is an investment similar to financial and natural resource capital that will produce economic returns for workers, companies, and countries. In a report prepared for the 1998 Santiago Summit of the Americas, The Caribbean/Latin American Action organization stated, "The critical factor for competing within [the] changing global economic arena is a human resource pool with technical competence and adaptive learning skills" (1999, p. 372).

Joel Spring (2006) is concerned that a neoliberal market focused education leads to the "education security state". He argues that countries that have adopted a western style education often have done so in response to a real or perceived external military or economic threat. What was once a rich educational heritage that included spirituality, ethics and cultural integrity is diminished or cast aside for a curriculum that favors areas amenable to economic and military development and security, such as science, engineering, and math.

### **Capability Approach**

The capability approach was developed in the long-term work of Nobel laureate economist Amartya Sen. Sen's work in global economics challenges standard economic units of analysis based solely on market-based economies and gross national product. Sen (1999) argues that social, economic and political development should be viewed as the development of human capabilities that enhance freedom and the ability to construct meaningful fulfilling lives:

Development can be seen ... as a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy. Focusing on human freedoms [or capabilities] contrasts with the narrower views of development, such as identifying development with the growth of gross national product, or with the rise in personal incomes, or with industrialization, or with technological advance, or with social modernization (Human Development and Capability Association, 2005).

Given the importance of local cultural dynamics, freedom and fulfillment must be defined and pursued within the context of local and regional cultural, political, social, and economic dynamics (Nussbaum, 2000; Sen, 1999). There cannot be a universal method to achieve these goals.

The capability approach relies on three interrelated concepts: functionings; capabilities; and, agency. Functioning refers to basic and essential states of being such as being nourished, clothed, and literate. In some sense a functioning can be considered a basic human right (Nussbaum, 2000). Capabilities refer to the various combinations of

functionings that are possible for an individual to pursue. Agency is the real ability or freedom one has to pursue and actualize potential capabilities (Crocker, 1992).

In the capability approach education must be viewed, not for its utilitarian potential to provide workers for a particular kind of economy, but for its ability to enhance human capability in the form of personal and collective agency that offers individuals and communities the ability to be creative in developing meaningful and fulfilling social, economic and political systems (Keuning-Arens & Amin 2001; Walker, 2005).

In our study, neoliberalism and the capability approach serve as related and, at times, competing frameworks for analysis. Rather than using one perspective as an explanatory tool, in concert they act as a set of ideas that will be used as point and counterpoint in our interpretations of how teachers made sense of their daily lives and struggles within the broader context of education in the Guatemalan, Central American, and global contexts.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The purpose of this study was to examine how the teachers at a rural school in Guatemala made sense of their government's recent efforts to decentralize education in their country. It is worth noting that the research began as an exploratory qualitative inquiry into the ways that teachers made sense of their literacy practices and more generally their daily lives as teachers. However, statements made by the participants allowed the researchers to shift focus and examine broader issues related to globalisation and privatization in their lives as teachers. Since the study was focused on the meanings teachers generated, qualitative research methods were appropriate for collecting, organizing and analyzing information.

The research question that guided this study was: How do the teachers at a rural school in Guatemala understand the global importance of their government's efforts to decentralize education in their country?

### **Roles and relationship of the authors**

The authors of this article developed a unique relationship during the collection and analysis of data that requires some clarification. The second author of this paper had lived in this town in Guatemala for eighteen months prior to conducting the research. While living there she developed a relationship with the teachers at the school and was asked to conduct seminars on literacy teaching and learning with the faculty and administration. She also talked with teachers; observed classes, school assemblies, and parent meetings; and participated in community meetings in an effort to understand the Guatemalan educational system. The first author served as a distant methodology consultant who communicated by email with the second author during the data collection procedures. The first author offered suggestions for focused observations, interview questions or potential interpretations of this information. Both researchers agreed upon authorship for this paper.

## **Participants and the School Context**

The seven teachers who participated in the study were five women and two men who taught at a public elementary school on the outskirts of a large city in the mountain highlands of Guatemala. It was a rural school that served a primarily agricultural community, but had more resources than many rural schools due to its proximity to the city and regional government offices. In this school, most of the children were from indigenous (Mayan) families who lived in poverty or low-income situations.

Guatemala recently ended a long 36-year armed conflict with a set of Peace Accords that were signed December 29, 1996. During that conflict, atrocities were committed by the government that followed a scorched earth policy against the, primarily indigenous populace. The memory of that difficult time is still fresh in many Guatemalan's minds, and, as of 2001, all of the Accords have not been fully implemented (Salvesen, 2002). Many Guatemalans do not trust the government or feel neutral toward it (Salvesen, 2002). A central commitment of the Guatemalan government, as reinforced in the Peace Accords, is the provision of public education. However, this school reflects many of the problems and issues faced by schools, especially rural schools, in Guatemala (cf. Gorman & Pollitt, 1992). Consequently, the educational system in general has suffered and rural areas have seen high levels of dropouts, absenteeism, and grade repetition (Gorman & Pollitt, 1992). Although the situation in Guatemala is improving, there are still significant barriers to attaining and maintaining even basic literacy (Gorman & Pollitt, 1997).

## **Data Collection and Analysis**

Qualitative modes of inquiry were appropriate for this study because of the emphasis on the meanings teachers held about issues they faced in their teaching (Merriam, 2009). Individual formal and informal interviews (Seidman, 2006) were conducted in Spanish with all seven of the teachers. The second author also attended faculty and community meetings and met with teacher union representatives. In all cases, she recorded the conversation and then translated and transcribed the audio recordings verbatim. To maintain confidentiality the name of each participant was substituted with a pseudonym.

Our analysis of the transcripts diverged from the grounded theory assumptions that often guide the analysis of qualitative data. Rather than creating categories and themes that exhausted the data, we were struck by statements that stood out from the majority of the data. Acting as detectives we employed various strategies to make sense of the statements that, at first, seemed odd or out of place (Tobin, 2000; Kaomea, 2003). Through a close reading of the data we used social theoretical perspectives to make sense of these statements and deepen our interrogation of the interviews (Madison, 2005).

## **Ethical considerations**

The researchers understand their positions as outsiders to the ethnic, regional and national contexts of their participants' lives. The history of western white researchers in indigenous communities has a long history of abuse (Tuhiwai-Smith, 2012). Following Tuhiwai-Smith's recommendations, we conducted an inquiry on issues and concerns that were of importance to the local community. The second author received permission from the participants who felt that it was important to have their story told.

## **RESULTS**

Our critical ethnographic perspective informs the results of our analysis. We suggest that the teachers' actions and thoughts were consistent with the Capability Approach and operated in conflict with or in opposition to a neoliberal discourse on globalisation. Rather than responding only to community, regional or national forces, the teachers were engaged in a negotiation of local needs and perspectives with global influences. The capability approach favours the local articulation of agency and autonomy in response to local needs (Alkire, 2002). In contradistinction, Neoliberalism requires the universal development of human resources within capitalist market driven ideologies.

### **The Strike**

The narrative that emerged from our analysis begins with a teachers' strike. Beginning January 22, 2003, 60,000 teachers in Guatemala went on a strike that paralyzed large segments of the country. The *Miami Herald* reported on the strike:

For more than a month academics have faced off with police as teachers have occupied government offices, blocked major highways and border crossings, and created human barricades at the entrances to seaports and airports, including the capital's La Aurora International airport. (San Martin, 2003)

For these teachers the strike was a watershed event, and they were very proud of the fact that they were able to participate in such a large-scale social action. The teachers say that they went on strike for a variety of reasons, and that only one of them was a raise in pay. Unfortunately, however, the teachers felt that the media and government tried to portray them as striking only for the self-serving goal of raising their salaries. The teachers tell a very different story.

A central concern of the teachers was the health of the children. The teachers asked for an expanded food program to help meet the nutritional needs of their students so they are prepared each day for learning:

The snack that is provided to the children is insufficient. It lacks quality, nutrition, vitamins. In our country, the large majority of our students are in extreme poverty and suffer from malnutrition and one way the government is supposed to help solve the malnutrition problem is to provide food at school. (Gabriela, interview, 5/15/2004)

The teachers were in a constant struggle to appropriate and maintain decent up to date curriculum materials that accurately reflected life in Guatemala. One of their requests was for more and better textbooks: “We asked that they [textbooks] be sent on time at the beginning of the year and that they have better content about the reality of Guatemalan life. The textbooks are deficient in their content. They don’t reflect life here in Guatemala” (Lucia, interview, 5/17/2004). In general, the teachers’ concerns were not so much about higher pay but primarily about adequate educational resources for their children and for reasonable and adequate working conditions for themselves.

The strike and its eventual outcome is an example of the profound disillusionment that these teachers felt with their government’s support of education and the direction they saw it going. One teacher was asked what pushed them to strike, and she said that it was because the government was trying to privatize the education system: “The privatization of education. The government began moving towards what teachers viewed as privatization and they oppose this. We complained and said no to it” (Sebastien, interview, 5/15/2004). Each one of the teachers and the administrator expressed a deep distrust of governmental policies and actions. One teacher indicated that the teachers felt the government will not keep its word, “It is certain that they [the government] won’t do what they say they will. Unfortunately, that is the situation here in Guatemala, but they don’t do what they say, the government” (Lucia, interview, 6/1/2004).

At the core of the teacher’s suspicion is the sense that the government had a hidden agenda for the teachers and the students in the public education system. Since the public system mainly served the poor, the teachers felt that schools were intended to produce politically and economically docile and compliant individuals who could fill the labor needs at the bottom of the economic opportunity ladder. The school director stated that:

The purpose of the national programs is to form people with a passive thought pattern who only live in the present with the idea to conform and especially to form people for manual labor. Not people who think intellectually. (Marta, interview, 5/12/2004)

From their perspective, the teachers exercised their collective human agency in an effort to provide adequate educational services for the poorest children in Guatemala. Anand & Sen (1996) suggest that the root of the capability approach lies in what people can do, rather what governments or other entities are doing. The focus, then, is on agency, and the will of the people to make positive change in their own environment. As a form of citizenship, teachers respond to local political issues and conditions in an effort to link their ethical commitments with their teaching about citizenship (Myers, 2007). Yet, the teachers in this study are aware that their actions are in conflict with the broader political forces from outside of their own country and that local political struggles become manifestations of global politics (Torres, 2002). It is here that we begin to see how the teachers’ ideas and actions carry a global significance. They felt that their political and social action had been subverted, manipulated or ignored, leading

to disillusionment over their government's commitment to public education, as well as their own ability to foment substantive educational change. This disillusionment and suspicion of governmental policies and intentions carries over into other elements of their daily lives as teachers.

### **Juntas Escolares and the Privatization of Education**

According to these teachers, a leading cause of the strike was distrust of a government initiative on school reform called "Juntas Escolares" (School Groups or Educational Associations). On March 20, 2003, the President of Guatemala issued the Government Accord 92-2003 to establish Educational Associations that would be used to decentralize the management of the national educational system (Ministerio de Educación, 2003a). These associations were to be made up of parents without teacher representation and have the primary responsibility for administration of the school buildings and resources (Parades, 2003). The parents could participate in the hiring and firing of teachers and the administration of financial resources associated with the school snack, school supplies, and teacher salaries. "The Educational Associations will work in an organized form to help the decentralization of the economic resources needed to provide benefits to the support services of current and future public educational centers" (Ministerio de Educación, 2003b).

Earlier that month, the Ministry of Education announced that it had been studying the prospect of decentralization of the national educational system for a while, examining how the schools could pass the administration and management of schools to the parents of school children in order to improve educational quality. Answering criticism of the plan, the Minister of Education said that the parents wouldn't be given authority to administer the schools without the necessary financial supports. The Educational Reform Consultation Group (*Grupo Consultivo de la Reforma Educativa*), who had been working with the government to plan and carry out the necessary educational reform, said that the decision of the President to create this law was unilateral and nonconsensual, and argued against it (Parades, 2003). According to the teachers, the Juntas were intended to go well beyond the decentralization of educational decision-making. The teachers indicated that they had already been working on a program of decentralized decision-making by forming community groups composed of parents, teachers, and administrators that would collaboratively manage the school. The teachers all mentioned that they welcomed the parental involvement aspect of the Juntas but worried that the government's intent exceeded this expectation and was, in fact, a move to privatize the education system in Guatemala.

The risk is the arriving at privatization because we work here with the families and parents help us to improve the conditions of the school. For improvement there is no problem. The problem is when the parents don't have much education and they think they are in control. But afterwards "Very good" says the government "you are in control" but afterwards the government isn't going to give more help, and we have privatization. (Sebastien, interview, 5/15/2004)

The teachers felt that the purpose of the Juntas Escolares was to put into place the infrastructure for the local management and financing of each school, because the government conceptualized the groups as official legal entities.

It is the first step towards privatization. The Junta will be legally responsible for the running of the school if the government refuses to pay. They will have to provide everything because the Junta is an official, legal entity that takes on the responsibility of providing what the school needs. (Ana, interview, 5/12/2004)

The teachers believed that the Juntas would be ultimately responsible for raising school operating funds, which would include paying for teachers' salaries, school space, curriculum materials and food. For the teachers this meant nothing less than the dismantling of public education and the abrogation of the government's responsibility for providing free education for its citizens.

A union representative that they used during the strike to provide information to the community gave the second author a pamphlet. The front panel of the pamphlet illustrates the union's feeling towards the Juntas and their projected negative effect on public education. It features a hand-drawn Godzilla-like lizard eating a building labeled "Escuela Pública" (Public School) and typed text that translates to say:

On March 23, the President of the Republic and the Minister of Education released and published the 209-2003 Agreement that is creating the decentralization of the system of educational administration, a system which seeks to form an educational association made up of solely by parents in every new and existing school. This agreement appears to not only respond to the demands of neoliberalism, but is also a retaliation or revenge by the government against the National Teachers Union that, during the 52 days, revealed before the national and international public opinion the educational crisis of our country and the inability of the executive branch to resolve said crisis through discussion and negotiation.

The teachers use the word privatization to question a more benign and even acceptable concept, decentralization. They were in favor of decentralizing school management and allowing more autonomy and authority for local communities to make educational decisions, yet they felt that the government was using the issue of decentralization to push an agenda of privatization.

The government wants to get rid of their obligation to provide education. There is a simple document, the constitution, which says that the education system is the responsibility of the government. Decentralization is good; it's what everyone wants, but abandonment of governmental responsibility is bad. (Marta, interview, 5/12/2004)

A basic tenet of neoliberalism is privatization, which defines education within narrow parameters of monetary gain (Ball, 2012). This appears in educational discourse and practice as the definition of students as products or as human resources or as the funds provided by international, national or local agencies. The outcome is a narrowed version of education in which students and teachers have been reduced to monetary outcomes (Davies & Bansei, 2007). Such neoliberal forces have become a central force in educational reform in Latin America as many countries are moving to or being

forced by global financial institutions to retool their centralized systems in favor of a decentralized organization (Fischman, 1997).

The teachers in this study were struggling with two very similar and competing ideas, decentralization and privatization. Decentralization was viewed as a positive development because it would provide schools and their communities the autonomy and authority to make decisions for their children. One teacher linked this autonomy to providing a critical education for the children that prepared them for a life in their community and foregrounded critical engagement with their government:

Well I think all of the teachers, we have a goal and our goal is, especially, that the student realizes his living conditions, and that the student knows the different reasons why there is a lot of poverty, a lot of inequality, injustice... Therefore, our goal is that the child learn to understand himself and his life not that he just goes to classes every year. No, he should learn to defend himself in his life. (Claudia, interview, 6/3/2004)

However, she contends that the government's educational policies, especially the Educational Associations, are more concerned with using education to produce docile labourers, and privatization is viewed as a method for achieving this goal. The teachers, on the other hand, view decentralization as a way to provide children with an education that is tailored to their daily lives, needs and interests.

The situation as I see it is incorrect, because every place, every department, every municipality, every community has to have their own different system of learning... it would be best if we develop the curriculum for every region of the country where we are teaching classes. (Ana, interview, 2004)

The problematic of decentralization or privatization has a parallel in global educational strategies. The discourse of decentralization as providing local autonomy appears in the recommendations of various agencies involved in education in Guatemala, such as PREAL and the World Bank, and is the goal of the Ministry of Education. For example, a World Bank (1999) report on education in Latin and Central America suggests that:

many of the regions central governments formally recognize the autonomy of local and regional authorities and subsequently have transferred to them the responsibility for delivering social services to their local communities. This decentralization has the potential to increase responsiveness and accountability of service providers and to improve service delivery in all social sectors.

In this statement decentralization can be seen as a tool to enhance human capabilities by focusing on the needs and desires of local communities.

However, it is exactly the potential influence exerted by these outside entities towards decentralization that arouses the suspicion of some of the teachers. One teacher argues that:

We're speaking badly of the government, but they don't give us the opportunity to speak well of them. Our country can't survive without foreign help; these foreign interests are pressuring the government to make privatization occur. (Carlos, interview, 5/18/2004)

The differing ideals guiding decentralization and privatization can be seen in such initiatives implemented in Chile. Parry (1997) argues that decentralization of some government services in Chile provided for more local autonomy. However, the initiatives to privatize education increased educational inequality and accomplished nothing to raise educational achievement (Carnoy, 1998; Torche, 2005).

## **DISCUSSION**

In our contemporary society it is almost impossible to decouple teaching, learning and classrooms from the broader concerns of life in a global society. Bottery and Wright (2000) argue that schools and teachers around the world have adopted a narrow vision of education in which teachers are either puppets of a utilitarian, centralized and bureaucratized educational system, or they are competing for students, money and prestige in a free market version of decentralization. The forces at play here are both ideological and concrete and intertwine in the daily lives of teachers. The ideological discourse of neoliberalism situates the very common sense understanding of schooling and how it is thought about, discussed, and conceptualized into the sphere of globalisation. Similarly, governments and local educational entities, particularly in developing countries, are pressured to reconfigure education to meet the demands of a global economy (Day, Fernandez, Hauge, & Moller, 2000).

As we consider the ideas and actions of the Guatemalan teachers, we are better able to formulate a perspective on the intersection of neoliberalism, the capability approach and education. For the most part we see the teachers at this school as resisting or deeply suspicious of educational policies and ideologies that emerge from neoliberal perspectives. The teachers who participated in this study showed an awareness that their lives as teachers and their roles as stewards of education and advocates for children was impacted by two intersecting forces: governmental policies and pressure from interests outside their country to privatize their education system. For them this meant that forces outside of their communities, for which they lacked little or no redress, were exerting undue pressure to manage education in ways that would not allow them to develop a meaningful education for their children, or achieve humane working conditions for themselves. The teachers resisted and worked towards a general set of interests that included local autonomy and control over educational decisions, and education for the broader purposes of developing the capabilities of individuals and their communities.

### **Agency and Social Action**

What we found in our study is that the teachers were able to launch an intellectual critique and large-scale social action against these neoliberal perspectives on education. Both the critique and the social action, while an act of resistance against the neoliberal discourse of development and education was, more importantly we think, consistent with the ideals of a capability approach. For the teachers, education should be about developing human capability. They went on strike primarily to argue for an

education for their children that was not simply about meeting demands for a narrowly defined utilitarian version of education but about enhancing their students' capability, that is, their practice of freedom. Freedom, flourishing, and fulfillment are the central purposes of education in the capability approach (Unterhalter, 2005).

In the case of these teachers, their issues and concerns are parallel with those of the capability approach, and served as a grass roots alternative to the global neoliberal discourse on education and development. The capability approach comprises a set of ideas, principles and values that can be used to construct an alternative vision of education and human development on a global scale. The teachers' ideals were consistent with the social interests embedded in the capability approach. In the teachers' vision, education is not to be used as a tool for developing human capital for a narrow version of economic development, but must serve broader and deeper interests of human fulfillment, agency and freedom. Anand and Sen (1996) have indicated that agency and social action are key elements of the capability approach.

People enter the moral accounting by others not only as people whose well-being demands concern, but also as people whose responsible agency must be recognized. (p. 204)

### **The Role of Supranational Entities in Education**

What remains unclear is the role that government or outside interests such as the World Bank should play in an education that proceeds from the principles of the capability approach. Many critics of World Bank policies suggest that World Bank Policies have asserted a large influence on education in debtor nations. The power of the World Bank is exerted in demands for educational reform in return for financial assistance and in control of prevailing discourse on education (Girdwood, 2007). This influence forces education in these countries to be linked to the development of human capital for economic development, and decentralization and privatization are the preferred method for achieving these goals (Jones, 1997).

In our study the teachers articulated this tension as that between decentralization and privatization. The teachers were clearly against privatization and in favour of decentralization, but how and where the line is drawn is difficult to determine. In the United States of America (U.S.) educators are facing similar issues. Privatization is not so much an entirely private form of education, like private schools, but more of a governmental approach oriented to market and consumer choice policies (Giroux, 1999). For these teachers in Guatemala, privatization is a concern that the government will tilt too far in the direction of private interests and abrogate its public responsibility for providing education for its citizens, a right, they argue, that is guaranteed in the constitution.

What the teachers seem to be experiencing is the overall effect of globalisation on education. From their inception, systems of education have had a strong national character often used for constructing a coherent national identity, patriotism, and enhancing economic productivity (Green, 1990; Spring 2006). Thus, systems of

education provided some sense of national stability and a sense that the state was fulfilling one of its primary obligations. However, Green (1997) argues that globalisation and the tendency toward supra-national and transnational organizations, such as large NGO's, transnational corporations, and international monetary institutions, have destabilized the fundamentally national character of educational systems. Instead of a strict national influence, education systems must negotiate the imperatives of larger regional and international organizations (Sultana, 1995). Decentralization is a reform strategy with deep national roots, whereas privatization resists or works outside national influence, responsibility, and redress.

## CONCLUSION

The teachers who participated in our study showed a clear distrust of their government's policies, intentions and actions regarding education. But given our theoretical orientation, we find that the concrete target may not be the government *per se*, but that the ideological framework of the government's actions and the teachers' perceptions are situated in global policies and practices. In the teachers' concerns we are able to see the overarching neoliberal issues of decentralization, privatization, accountability and social stability. On the other hand, we can also understand the teachers' agency and their struggles on behalf of their students, themselves, and their profession as situated in the global development perspective of the capability approach. The entire system, from government policies to teachers' collective social action, is situated in the ideals of globalizing society. What at first blush appears entirely local, or at the most regional, comes into global focus when examined through perspectives, such as the neoliberal discourse and the capability approach that foreground global issues.

As researchers and educators we feel it is important to bring this global focus to our work, as it is clear that local issues, concerns and decisions are becoming more and more influenced by and dependent on the ideas and policies of a global society. Bringing such a perspective can help educators in any country more clearly focus on the pertinent issues they face and the effective strategies they will employ to address them. We have found that a dual theoretical approach offers ways of thinking about education in the context of student, teacher and community agency and how these can be fostered to take action in defense of a humane and fulfilling education. In this particular Guatemalan context, the teachers are engaging this promise by participating in social action and working in the interests of their communities and their students.

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