

# **TRAINED TO RESIST: TEACHERS LEARNING *LUCHA* IN OAXACA, MEXICO**

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## **Abstract**

Drawing on ethnographic data and interviews with 17 teacher educators and normal school students in Oaxaca, Mexico, this article examines a particular teaching formation rooted in the concept of *lucha*, revolutionary struggle. Participants described how, during their four years at a normal school, they learn, rehearse, and internalize a historical set of revolutionary scripts and strategies, as part of a political role they will perform as teachers. The post-1968 generation of teachers in this study recalled learning to fight in the 1970s and 80s, in an era of great opposition to the Mexican government and national union, while the younger generation described learning how to advocate for themselves so that they can create change in their communities. The study demonstrates how teacher training can explicitly cultivate new teachers' capacities to operate as political actors, in opposition to standardized and apolitical professional models.

**Keywords:** teacher training; activism; resistance; Oaxaca; normal schools

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In 2006, teachers in Oaxaca, Mexico made international headlines when they led a popular rebellion against the local and federal authorities, in opposition to the violent crackdown of a teachers' strike over the summer. Dozens of teachers and activists were killed, and hundreds were injured over several months of insurrection. In 2014, 43 student teachers from a teacher training college (i.e., a normal school) were kidnapped and massacred while traveling around Guerrero state in an effort to organize funds for a strike in October, one that would commemorate the Tlatelolco Massacre in Mexico City in 1968. The tragic story likewise caught the attention of global observers horrified by the deaths of the young *normalistas*—who had just begun their first year at the Escuela Normal de Ayotzinapa—and the massacre caused international concern over the persecution of young teachers. These two incidents illustrate the dangers for educators in Mexico, where students and teachers share a long and storied history of revolutionary mobilization.

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The purpose of this article is to examine how revolutionary thinking is embedded in the teacher education programs at rural normal schools in states like Oaxaca, where *normalistas* and unionized teachers (*sindicalistas*) maintain strongly organized movements as part of their professional endeavors. Building on ethnographic data from a larger study of nearly 50 individuals in Oaxaca, the article hones in on the lived experiences and perspectives of 12 teacher educators and 5 teacher candidates trained or working at normal schools. Through teacher educators' remembrances of the past and current student teachers' reflections on their present training, the participants support the notion that political struggle (i.e., *lucha*) is central to teachers' roles, and perhaps more important than classroom pedagogy; this dynamic is illustrated in the common refrain "The teacher struggling is also teaching." Participants affirmed that teachers ought to be trained in the ideology and praxis of struggle, and further described the need for teachers to learn a variety of strategies to cultivate solidarity with local communities and organizations. According to participants, such skills are an essential aspect of teacher training, because teachers in Oaxaca (and other states in Mexico's rural south) must protect regional autonomy and professional authority, in the face of authoritarian practices and policies. The findings of this study demonstrate how teacher training programs can incorporate models for teacher identity rooted in change agency, activism, and resistance.

### **Theoretical Framework: Teacher Formations**

In a study of a normal school in southern Mexico, Gonzales and Amann (2009) argue that there exists a special curriculum, which student teachers receive as part of their "formation":

Privileged in the curriculum and complemented by the values, rules, celebrations, fiestas, rituals, the habits passed down and transmitted by generations of teachers and supervisors, is another curriculum, not hidden but manifest, that aims to also develop attitudes, practices, behaviors, values and conceptions of the teacher corps. It is a curriculum that, for lack of a better name, could be named the political curriculum of the rural *normales*. It is a particular mode of teacher formation that develops parallel to the official curriculum—a curriculum synthesizing cultural elements, knowledge and customs that conform to an alternative and rural educational politic... [The militant formation was] an ideological transmutation of the state objective of teachers as community organizers... Rural teachers and normalista students reassessed the community vocation of teacher practice to insert it into local resistance movements. (pp. 78-79)

The English translation of *formación*, formation, fails to capture what in Spanish is more clearly a process of "becoming," through the rehearsal and repeated practice of a set of scripts and acts. The teachers in this study all used that word to refer to a repertoire of "attitudes, practices, behaviors, values and conceptions" learned at normal schools as far back as the 1960s and 70s. In particular, the generation of teachers post-1968 recalled participating in these student movements with great pride, and articulated some of the ways an "alternative, rural politic[s]" mobilized them to act as community organizers and agents of local resistance. Likewise, as Gonzales and Amann suggest in their study, interviews with normal school students today suggest *normalistas* continue to draw on a parallel "political curriculum" that favors community engagement and *lucha* (struggle) as essential components

of a revolutionary teacher identity, which Favela (2010) terms a *luchador social*, a fighter for social causes.

To explore this unique formation, I draw on theoretical and empirical accounts of teacher identity and related concepts of teachers' roles and teachers as political actors. These theoretical frameworks provide insights into the dynamic ways teacher identities evolve over time, and cast light on the conflicts that might emerge when teachers take on explicitly political roles. Research on teacher identity likewise demonstrates how teacher identities are shaped through teacher education, as pre-service educators learn a particular teaching formation via curricular, co-curricular, and extra-curricular experiences. As the empirical data will demonstrate, the normal schools continue to train students in a revolutionary identity they will go on to play upon induction into Oaxaca's Section 22, one of the most active and defiant union chapters in Mexico.

### **Developing and Evolving Teacher Identities**

Contemporary research on teachers and teaching, especially studies that examine the concept of *teacher identity* in international contexts, provide evidence that in everyday practice, teachers perform different roles, positions, or subjectivities, and make meaning of their professional work through a variety of cultural, emotional, and cognitive processes (Yuan and Lee, 2015). Lasky (2005) defines teacher professional identity as "how teachers define themselves to themselves and to others" (p. 901), while Walkington (2005) hones in on teacher identity as "based on the core beliefs one has about teaching and being a teacher; beliefs that are continuously formed and reformed through experience" (Walkington, 2005, p. 54). Zembylas (2003) suggests that teachers' subjectivities are "historically constituted," produced through discipline and discourses (p. 113). In this vein, Søreide (2006, 2007) examines the importance of *narratives* in constructing and making meaning of teacher identity in Norway. In one study (2006), Søreide used extensive discourse analysis to identify over 30 "subject positions" in interviews with five female elementary school teachers in Norway, capturing the ways that teachers use narratives to articulate "what it is like to be a teacher" (p. 528). Søreide's studies uncover the "dominant arguments, scenarios and plots" that "frame how teachers can experience and carry out their job" (2007, p. 130).

Teachers' identities begin to take more concrete form in their pre-service training, when participants learn and rehearse various skills and dispositions related to professional practice. Teacher education programs draw on a variety of frameworks—such as government policies, economic agendas, and social imperatives—to build pre-service teachers' coursework and training, in preparation for particular kinds of work (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Loewenberg Ball & Forzani, 2009). Education reforms "build and distribute pedagogical identities," (Davis, 2002, p. 19) transforming teachers' training and work through professionalization measures that reconfigure how teachers conceive of themselves within the nation-state or global context. More recently, some researchers have examined the potential for teacher education programs to take on critical perspectives related to equity and social justice (e.g. Boylan & Woolsey, 2015).

Rosaen and Schram (1998) call new teacher cohorts "discourse communities," in which teachers' conversations foster meaning-making and identity construction. Goodson and Choi illustrate this point, showing that teachers' "life histories" and collective memories frame how teachers make sense of their experiences: "Biographical studies following a life history approach capture not only personal experiences but also the systemic contexts in which the lived experiences are located" (2008, p. 24). Teachers with comparable life histories can form distinct "families" that share certain beliefs about the profession, as in Goodson, Moore and

Hargreaves' study on teacher nostalgia (2006). In that study, the authors discovered how an older generation of teachers shared longing for the past, a yearning that both defined their identities and their relationships to other (particularly younger) teachers. Mapping the biographical and generational dynamics of particular teacher families can also surface *teachers' beliefs* (Fives and Gill, 2015; Tatto, 1998) about the proper performance of their professional duties.

### Teachers' Political Roles

Within the body of research on teacher identity, some studies explore the idea of *teachers' roles*: “patterns of individual or collective behaviours in given social contexts” (Mazawi, 1994, citing Biddle, 1979, p. 497). In a study on teachers in Trinidad and Tobago, George and Quamina-Aivejina (2003) examine how new reforms challenge the existing images of teacher, and offer new conceptualizations of the teacher's role. The authors contend that, “Teachers' perceptions of their roles are likely to be shaped by their core beliefs and images of teaching” (p. 191), and they cite Britzman (1986) to claim that “myths about teaching are... ‘culturally provided ways of seeing the teacher's world, and guidelines for interpreting the teacher's stance’ (p. 452)” (George & Quamina-Aivejina, 2003, p. 195). Britzman's argument suggests that a teacher's role is informed by myriad scripts for the profession, and mediated by a teacher's own experiences, beliefs, and particular context. In other words, an examination of “role” allows researchers to map teachers' conceptual landscape (Samuel & Stephens, 2000; Welmond, 2002) and the related scripts for professional duties and dispositions in specific national or regional contexts.

In a study on Palestinian teachers, Mazawi (1994) notes that, in order to understand why teachers mobilize action individually and collectively, their identities must be analyzed within specific political contexts. Indeed, teachers occupy medial positions within societies, making them potent political actors at various scales of social organization (Carlson, 1987). Ginsburg, et al (1992) argue that “through their daily activity and historical struggles educators are engaged in reproducing, resisting, and transforming existing power relations and resource distributions” (p. 419). In a related article, Ginsburg and Kamat (2009) argue that regardless of whether teachers “choose” to be political, teachers are always engaged in macro, micro, and meso political processes, ranging from the conflicts within their schools or departments to the contestations over global and national reforms. Indeed, teachers' roles around the globe are shifting as new professional scripts for teaching coming emanate from agencies at international levels, as well through grassroots organizing by teacher unions and associations (Compton & Weiner, 2008). New professional scripts often draw on efficiency, technical proficiency, and standardization to promote productivity at the individual and national level, framing teachers as part of larger market interests and processes (Berman, Marginson, Preston, McClellan, & Arno, 2003). Maguire (2010) links such scripts to neoliberal trends in global education policy, like increased certification practices, formal evaluation procedures, and state control of hiring and firing. “Global-neoliberalism is influencing what it means to teach and be a teacher,” (Maguire 2010, p. 65) and results in suppressed local and regional *vernaculars*— “the localised and sometimes distinctive ways” teacher scripts are configured in national settings.

### Teachers as Revolutionary Actors

Some theorists articulate a vision of teachers as revolutionaries, equipped with skills and capacities to enact social change through actions both in and outside the classroom. Paulo Freire's work, which began in Latin America but has had widespread influence on educational

discourse globally, casts teachers as “cultural workers” (1998) who promote revolution through dialectical practices with disenfranchised or minoritized communities. Giroux (1985) and McLaren (2010) expanded the notion of critical pedagogy, arguing that teachers are transformative intellectuals who can empower students in the classroom and defend schools and public education through revolutionary action. Critical pedagogues raise *conscientization* by illuminating power structures and ideologies that underpin everyday life, so that learners (both students *and* teachers) can practice and cultivate skills to enact social change (Freire, 1970). Through praxis—the process of reflective action for transformation—educators can work towards revolution on a variety of social scales, in effect teaching to transgress (hooks, 1994).

An emergent body of research about teacher activism in the United States and abroad interrogates how teachers may engage in a variety of social and political struggles against the forces of neoliberal reform, and argue that teachers must embrace their sense of individual and collective agency to resist assaults on their authority and autonomy, and efforts to privatize education. A 2008 volume edited by teacher unionist scholars Lois Weiner and Mary Compton, documenting dozens of accounts of teacher activism on an international scale, reveals how teachers can operate as “agentive professionals” (Buchanan, 2015), rebelling against global education reforms that emphasize discourses of managerialism, credentialism, and marketization (Hall and McGinity, 2015). Such recent studies in teacher unionism suggest continuity between older studies of *teacher militancy* (Bacharach, Bamberger, and Conley, 1990) and current activist trends around the globe.

Some researchers have examined the ways teacher activism might be incorporated into teacher education programs, or what exactly comprises “activism” in relation to being a teacher. For instance, Montaña, López-Torres, DeLissovoy, Pacheco and Stillman (2002) explore the impact of participation in teacher activist groups on teachers who were trained in the UCLA Teacher Education Program (TEP), whose mission is to “develop transformative educators working for social justice.” Zavala and Henning (2017) similarly explore how teacher education programs should do more to provide new teachers with a “political education,” i.e., concrete skills as “community organizers” engaged in transformative praxis both in and outside the classroom. This aligns with the call by Bartell, Cho, Drake, Petchauer, and Richmond (2019) for teacher educators to emphasize agency and resilience in their courses, and to provide pre-service teachers specific strategies for addressing inequities and oppression.

In sum, research on teachers’ identities, roles, and political actions highlights that what it means to be a teacher in a particular time and place is clearly linked to collective histories, personal biographies, and political dynamics. The interplay between these forces produce unique and localized formations of teacher identity, some of which emphasize revolutionary thinking and activist sensibilities. Such formations can best be mapped through qualitative and ethnographic research, drawing on teachers’ lived experiences and memories.

### **Methods and Data Sources**

This study focuses on how and why teachers in Oaxaca learn political roles as part of their teacher training at normal schools. To best follow this line of inquiry, I spent eight months in the capital city of Oaxaca, over the course of nine site visits in a five-year period, utilizing the hallmark methods of ethnographic research described by Wolcott (2008): experiencing, enquiring, and examining. Experientially, I observed interactions between and amongst teachers, student teachers, teacher educators, union officials and local citizens, across sites like the *zócalo* (public square), union offices, universities, schools, and other formal

and informal gatherings around the city, including dozens of rallies, marches, and demonstrations.

My enquiries ran a spectrum of speech events, from informal conversations to formal interviews drawing on a semi-structured protocol. Following IRB approval for human subject research, I interviewed 50 people, including schoolteachers, union officials, professors, and pre-service teachers, and I used a snowballing sample that allowed me to interact with a variety of actors as my field relations evolved. This article draws on interviews with 12 teacher educators and 5 normalistas from that study. All fieldwork and interviews were conducted in Spanish, and I framed my encounters with others as jointly constructed discourse: “meanings in discourse are neither singular nor fixed...terms take on specific and contextually grounded meanings within and through the discourse as it develops and is shaped by speakers” (Mishler, 1986, 64). My interviews and conversations aimed to jointly construct meaning through the use of questions and dialogue, and I probed for stories and narratives since storytelling is central to meaning-making (Mishler, 1986). Some of the open-ended questions used in this protocol included: “What kinds of training have you had? What do teachers do inside the classroom? What do teachers do outside the classroom? What do you think is the purpose of being a teacher?” My last strategy for gathering data was archival research, examining various kinds of texts such as newspaper articles, flyers, banners, and films about the teachers’ movements.

**Table 1: Participants**

Name ( <i>pseudonym</i> )	Role	Gender	Age ( <i>at time of interview</i> )
Alfredo	Teacher Educator	M	54
Anita	Teacher Educator	F	46
Carmela	Teacher Educator	F	42
Daniela	Normal School Student	F	21
Esteban	Teacher Educator	M	47
Fabiola	Normal School Student	F	21
Gonzalo	Teacher Educator	M	49
Graciela	Teacher Educator	F	41
Lucia	Teacher Educator	F	48
Maria	Teacher Educator	F	50
Mercedes	Normal School Student	F	21
Rodolfo	Teacher Educator	M	60
Servando	Teacher Educator	M	52
Sinue	Normal School Student	M	20
Teresa	Teacher Educator	F	48
Tomás	Teacher Educator	M	49
Victor	Normal School Student	M	20

Moving into the data analysis stage, I transcribed my interviews and uploaded them into the qualitative program Dedoose, along with field notes and scans of archival material. My initial review of data tagged themes and captured segments that resonated in the voices of the teachers. I printed all my data, coding by hand and engaging in “constant comparison” (Ryan and Bernard, 2000) of participants’ interviews, notes and recordings of demonstrations and speeches, and archival data. Concept mapping strategies (Creswell, 2007; Wheeldon & Faubert, 2009) such as mind maps, tables, and diagrams helped me visualize the data, and

writing memos and vignettes (Saldaña, 2009) allowed me to elaborate on codes and construct narratives based on the life histories I heard in my interviews. These exercises helped me capture the cultural schema and conflicts teachers experienced, and to discern common narratives (Rubin & Rubin, 2005) of teachers' lives, honing in on the ways teachers saw themselves in relation to their profession and country. In this vein, I deployed a *critical discourse analysis* that examined the everyday beliefs of the participants, the semiotic codes and metaphors embedded in the texts I analysed, and the ideologies that underpinned participants' actions and utterances (Wodak & Meyer, 2009).

For this article, I re-analyzed interviews from 12 teacher educators and 5 normal school students (see Table 1), keeping in mind two related questions. First, I considered, "How do teachers understand the purpose of teaching in this particular context?" Second, I asked, "What training did these individuals receive in their teacher education experiences, in order to play particular roles?" These framing questions allowed me to dig deeper into the ways teachers make sense of their training and professional identities.

Throughout the study, I considered how my own positionality influenced my data collection and analysis. While my insider knowledge as a Spanish-speaking former schoolteacher with Mexican heritage facilitated my access to various actors and agencies, I was nevertheless an outsider from a large American research university studying the teachers' movements. Understanding the local context of Oaxaca allowed me to build trust and make meaning of what I was witnessing, but being a foreigner also provided me opportunities to ask hard questions, challenge assumptions, and seek clarity from my participants.

### **Context: Revolutionary Teacher Formations in Mexico**

A historical overview of teachers' roles in Mexico, with a focus on national and regional formations focused on "revolution," is essential toward conceptualizing the political curriculum teachers learn as *normalistas*. Indeed, teachers in Mexico have been discursively linked since Independence to competing and shifting conceptions of Mexican nationhood; as the nation sought to become a stable territory during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, teachers were instrumental in bringing top-down secular reforms to the disparate and remote communities that loosely connected the nation. Rural teachers, *maestros rurales*, possessed considerable symbolic capital as apostles and guides in the *pueblos*; government reforms sought to bring teachers into the fold of the State apparatus, recognizing their critical potential as nation-builders, secularizers, and embodiments of modernity (Dominguez & Ita, 1987). Normal schools became important national sites for developing secular education and mobilizing the idea of a *maestro normalista* that symbolized a modern Mexico (Jimenez, 1987).

Revolutionary nationalism emerged as a means for unifying the nation after bloody civil wars in the 1910s, adopting socialist values that underpinned how the nation imagined itself in a variety of cultural *materiel*, including school textbooks and public murals (Vom Hau, 2010). Revolutionary education focused on rural development as a primary means of bringing marginalized classes into the national fold, with *maestros revolucionarios* bringing the revolution to proletariat masses (Vaughan, 1987). The global context during and after World War II dramatically altered the national landscape, with revolutionary nationalism becoming institutionalized by a powerful official party that would come to dominate Mexican politics for the rest of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Sheppard, 2011). Though the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI) continued to trumpet revolutionary nationalism as the central tenets of Mexican governance, its policies reflected the hegemonic aspects of modernization in the postwar era, such as bureaucratization, the rejection of socialism and communism, and a move

toward professionalization within capitalist markets (So, 1990). In the 1940s, forced unionization of teachers into the PRI-aligned *Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de Educación* (SNTE) created a wide schism that sparked democratic teacher protests in 1958, crystallizing the differences between revolutionary and institutionalist visions of teacher and nation (Loyo, 1979)

In the 1960s, the Mexican government embraced professionalization measures that would, in effect, “[lower] the curtain on the era of the militant teacher” (Ruiz, 1993, p. 437), in favor of the *maestro profesionalista*, officially trained and in service to the State (Street, 1997). Government expansion of the higher education system provided new post-secondary options that disrupted the traditional pathways between primary education and the normal school system, causing a downturn in the previously high status accorded to normal school graduates (Arnaut, 2004). University-trained teachers and professionals in urban settings supported reforms that would dismantle the stronghold of the rural normal schools over teacher training in Mexico (Elizondo, 2000). Structural differentiation of the profession also diversified professional conceptions within the *teacher corps*, with some teachers taking on supervisory, coordinating, or supporting roles that did not require or match the *normalista* identity that, by this decade, had become increasingly militant and anti-establishment (Arnaut, 2004, p. 11). President Lopez Mateos continued to push modernization reforms such as the expansion of the rural education system and the dissemination of free textbooks sharing a compulsory national curriculum (Meyer & Sherman, 1995, p. 657). The reforms also emphasized training teachers to work in the professional setting of a classroom or school, rather than the streets or villages, as had been the norm since the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Elizondo, 2000), thereby moving attention from teachers’ social and political activity in the community, to technical mastery of classroom pedagogy and practice (Mancilla, 2014).

Throughout the decade, social movements called on the revolutionary tradition that had underpinned the massive union movements of the past; in particular, teachers who had been part of the *Movimiento Revolucionario del Magisterio* (MRM) mobilizations in Mexico City in 1958 continued to participate in political movements in and outside the capital (Foweraker, 2002). Blacker-Hanson (2004) has shown that some of the union’s leaders returned to their home states, like Guerrero, to work with sectional leaders and students at radical normal schools like Ayotzinapa, where 1958 leader Othon Salazar had been trained as a *normalista*. Salazar collaborated with normal school students throughout the 1960s, waging battles against local bosses and elites, and built alliances with workers and peasants to mobilize. Dissident politics became further popularized as the nation reeled from the shock of the 1968 Tlatelolco Massacre, a watershed moment that fundamentally changed how the Mexican public conceived the nation, the State, and their own rights as citizens (Krauze, 1997). The death and injury of hundreds of activists at the hands of government authorities darkened the celebrations and raised profound questions about democracy in Mexico. Tensions between the public sector, the middle class, and PRI exploded, with the student movements in the capital becoming popularized as a movement against government authoritarianism and a rallying cry for democratic governance (Rosen, 2008).

Massive oppositional movements in the 1970s reflected a widespread rebellion against the authoritarianism of the PRI (Torres, 1991; Bayer, 2004), leading President Echeverria, as he took the helm of the nation in 1970, to revitalize Mexican nationalism by calling for a “democratic aperture,” in which teachers would play critical roles (Civera, 1997). The further expansion of the public education system in the 1970s symbolized the government’s effort to reclaim legitimacy and its revolutionary image (Torres, 1991, p. 167), but activists’ deaths at the Corpus Christi Massacre in 1971 contributed to increasing radicalization of social

movements (Bayer, 2004). Some coalitions, including those led by teachers like Lucio Cabañas, used radical militancy to challenge the elite, bourgeois State housed in metropolitan Mexico City (Elizondo, 2000). Cleavages within the state/ union/ party apparatus began to emerge in the late 1970s, as the PRI promoted “deconcentration” reforms aimed at dismantling some of the overlaps between the state’s offices of public education and the union (Ornelas, 2000).

In December 1979, scores of local teachers’ movements surging around the nation formally merged into the *Coordinadora Nacional de Trabajadores de Educación* (CNTE), a dissident caucus within the union. The teachers’ groups in attendance took on the mantle of the “combative tradition” famously deployed by democratic teachers in 1958, dissident students in 1968, and militant *normalistas* of the 1970s (Pelález, 2010; Foweraker, 2002). The CNTE provided a mechanism for this “teacher front” to manifest massive mobilizations that drew on a “national strategy of *lucha*,” capitalizing on the confluence of discontent across political classes, tensions between the union and state education agencies, and the success of the Chiapas mobilization of the late 1970s (Yescas & Zafra, 1984, p. 12-13). Embracing socialist traditions, democratic rhetoric, and the defense of public education, the CNTE fought for a distinct vision of Mexico that rallied against the bourgeoisie and advocated for the nation’s subaltern classes (Navarro, 2011). The vigorous participation of Oaxaca’s Section 22 galvanized the CNTE’s movement and growth (Yescas & Zafra, 1984); using marches, rallies, strikes, blockages, and stoppages, Oaxaca’s teachers rallied colleagues and communities in their call for union democracy. In 1986, thousands of Oaxacan teachers marched about 400 miles from Oaxaca City to the national capital over the course of several weeks. The image of these rural and dissident teachers, some in indigenous dress, captured the national imagination, with Oaxaca’s “combative teachers” becoming iconic of the “collective rebellions” occurring throughout the union (Yescas & Zafra, 1984, p. 19). The teachers’ movements culminated in 1989 with the formal acceptance of the CNTE as a dissident caucus within the SNTE, and a change in the top leadership of the union.

Since the 1990s, Section 22 has maintained a defiant stance and continued to mobilize regularly, in favor of professional gains as well as in the name of political and social causes, which have shifted to take on larger social forces such as global educational policies, and the increasing criminalization of social movements. The 2006 rebellion in Oaxaca symbolized the ongoing tensions between the revolutionary teacher corps and Mexico’s authoritarian tendencies; over the last decade, the teachers’ movement in Oaxaca has refocused its energies to resist national education reforms informed by the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) and World Bank (Aguilar, 2015). The movement specifically rebelled against reforms requiring teachers to submit to national professionalization examinations and universal evaluations adopting the same rubric across the country (Bocking, 2018; de Ibarrola 2018). Along with these professional struggles, the massacre of the 43 *normalistas* from Ayotzinapa in Guerrero state, as well as ongoing assaults against teachers in states like Oaxaca, animated teachers from both the CNTE and SNTE, as well as the general public, to rally against “the crisis of governability, of political representation, and more so the crisis of dehumanization and the banality of evil” (Poncela, 2015, p. 62). Various studies have demonstrated that, while teachers and students do offer critiques of unionist or *normalista* movements, their general sentiment is that they must continue the *lucha*, maintaining the legacy of revolutionary struggle against a corrupt and authoritarian Mexican state (Bracho, 2019; Howell, 2017).

## Findings

In this section, I will use participants' voices to explore how normal schools inculcated in teacher educators a professional identity rooted in *lucha*. I will first look at the experiences of teacher educators as they reminisced on their teacher training and revolutionary mobilizations in the 1970s and 80s. I will then turn to the present, drawing on the voices of normal school students to illustrate how that political curriculum has sustained over time, and the ways young people understand the roles of teachers in Oaxaca today.

### *“Everything was Political”: Memories of the Past*

Interviews with 12 teacher educators suggest that, in the wake of the Tlatelolco Massacre, rural and revolutionary scripts that had been the tradition at the *normales* for decades became revitalized by the radical politics sweeping Latin America and indeed the world post-1968. In this sense, the participants in this section comprise a “teacher family” who share a generational set of experiences that have shaped their beliefs about what it means to be- and *become*- a teacher. As their stories will illustrate, teachers in this family believe in the common maxim in Oaxaca, “*El maestro luchando, también está enseñando*,” meaning that a teacher’s struggle is also a pedagogical act.

In recollecting their experiences at normal schools in Oaxaca and neighboring Chiapas, all the participants specifically highlighted the influence of Marxist thought on their political convictions. At a time when Marxism was in vogue both nationally and abroad, *normalistas* commonly read communist and socialist texts, discussing the distinct ways Karl Marx, Lenin, and Trotsky visualized revolutionary struggle. Maestra Teresa, a teacher coach in northern Oaxaca state, felt that poor and rural students like herself were inspired by the anti-capitalist critiques they read: “All this historical materialism and dialecticism influenced us. We began to learn about other countries, other organizations, and wanted to know more.” Maestro Tomás, also a teacher trainer, likewise felt personally compelled by the Marxist texts he encountered at his normal school and stayed up many nights talking about them with his roommates. “When you have 400 students living together, all of whom come from humble and poor origins, you begin to think in a distinct manner. The normal schools became seedbeds of critique, of questioning, of reflection, places to read Marx, Engels, Lenin, Che Guevara. It was the right environment for it.”

While *normalistas* did take classes about pedagogy, many teachers suggested that most of the real learning occurred outside the classroom. Maestro Tomás recalled that

We learned, not from the teachers, but rather from the collective student body. You learned strategies, how to organize, to respect hierarchies, to make gains, to brigade, to go to markets or different regions, to interact with people in these spaces, and explain the reasons for your struggle (*lucha*)... We organized our own courses, to make bombs, to make posters and banners, our own pamphlets, we learned it all there.

Teachers trained at the normal schools saw classroom learning as secondary to their primary training as revolutionary actors at the normal school, where they learned, rehearsed, and internalized scripts and acts associated with *lucha*. Maestro Gonzalo, a teacher educator, also remembered that classroom time had little to do with his learning to be a teacher:

The [normal] school was liberal, and we read the politics and ideology of famous people like Fidel Castro and Che Guevara, Marx and Lenin,

philosophers who explained a certain way of life. There were Maoists too... Everything was political, and we didn't really go to class very much. Our work was to go out to the countryside, to go sensitize the communities, to politicize them, talk to them and explain what our country was living through at that time.

Exposure to revolutionary thinking inspired *normalistas* like Gonzalo and Tomás to travel to the rural communities to educate others and “politicize” them as an act of uplift. The co-curricular aspect of the learning, learned from working with other students in the school's movements, trained pre-service teachers in Oaxaca to actualize “a certain way of life,” one that would cast light on the injustices and inequities citizens endured during the post '68 period.

Going on brigades (*brigadeo*) was one of the most common ways *normalistas* engaged in a revolutionary teaching practice. Traveling within and around the state in small brigades with fellow students, *normalistas* visited communities and talked to people about the class struggle and the movements being waged. “We would go on brigades and say to the communities, ‘Don't let yourself be deceived. Don't let yourselves be repressed.’ We would explain the reasons for our political struggles,” said Maestra Graciela. Teachers took with them reading by a variety of anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist writers and drew freely on them as they extemporized on the value of their own mobilizations and the greater evils to be challenged. Maestro Alfredo, who grew up in Chiapas, felt particularly compelled to go on brigades, “seeing how society and the government was robbing people and *pueblos* of their lands and resources so that they could pursue their own government projects, using lies and tricks to deceive people.”

Brigades gave student teachers the opportunity to rehearse a set of pedagogical and political scripts that empowered them to stand up for their own causes.

Through their co-curricular learning as part of the student movements, *normalistas* learned to educate communities, build networks, and connect with allies at other schools and in *pueblos* all over the region. *Normalistas* reveled in this newfound sense of identity, and their own experiences with social injustice and economic inequality inspired them to share “the good word” of revolution with the rural communities. In recalling this aspect of his training, Maestro Servando brought up how Mexico's *maestro rural* archetype influenced his view of education:

Yes, [it was] like the Maestro Rural... The rural teacher, the teacher that goes to the communities, and works there, putting himself on ranches and farms, that was our student way of thinking, and that's how we worked in the rural communities, and people saw the changes we made... we helped people by offering a new way of subsistence that was pedagogical and ideological. Education outside the classroom. And I believe that is the politics of the teacher corps and remains that way.

Servando directly linked his understanding of teachers' work to the rural tradition of teachers as protectors of the marginalized *pueblos*, as political advocates, and community organizers. For him, working with communities outside the classroom was “the work”: it served a pedagogical function separate (and perhaps more important) than learning in the classroom. Rural normal schools provided an ideological training that cast knowledge about revolution as “subsistence” in the face of scarce resources in the impoverished *pueblos*, where

teachers saw themselves as *compañeros* [comrades] in the shared struggle. Maestro Esteban elaborated on this point:

Historically, the teachers have always been united with the causes of the disadvantaged. If you look at Mexican history, in the 20s through the 40s teachers worked hard to mobilize community development, and there was an educational policy promulgated by the State that tended toward the idea of a teacher as a leader. By tradition, the teacher has always assumed the role as a director, a fighter, of being on the side of those who have less... Later, in the 40s the policies change, the change of government and what is happening at the international level with the Second World War. The meaning of education changed. Before the 40s, they said the education was socialist... but that tradition is cut off, although it's resurged at certain moments.

Esteban suggested that the traditions of teachers as community organizers remain an important part of teachers' "DNA" in Oaxaca. Though the PRI shifted toward conservative governance in the 1940s, Esteban asserted that the combative elements that had been fundamental to revolutionary nationalism and notions of teacher identity in the early days after the Mexican Revolution still resonated in the national imagination.

In sum, teachers' memories of the 1970s revealed that revolutionary values found fertile ground at the rural normal schools in Oaxaca and Chiapas, where the young teacher trainees, most from rural *pueblos* themselves, acquired a conceptual language for understanding their own political and economic plights. The *lucha* students learned at the rural normal schools cultivated in them a sense of loyalty to the communities, and teachers like Maestro Rodolfo came to believe that advocacy for the *pueblos* was a teacher's obligation: "[A teacher] has to fight for the pueblo, in any part of the world. I say that because the ideology that a teacher ought to inculcate is that of *lucha*, and above all, defense..." Maestra Anita affirmed that point, and made a case for teachers as change agents: "The teacher ought to be someone who can generate conscience, generate critique, who can open the minds of subjects... Once we understand that, what are the possibilities for changing things?"

As we will see in the next section, many features of the political curriculum described by teacher educators continue to manifest in the contemporary experiences of *normalistas* in Oaxaca. Most significantly, normal school students affirmed the notion that a teacher must play a political role, in solidarity with the *lucha* of marginalized communities, yet offer nuanced critiques of how the ongoing struggle has strained public support and affected local communities.

### ***"Learning to Shout": Normalistas Today***

When she was a young girl, Daniela would tell her parents that she wanted to become a teacher: "But my parents didn't like that part, of putting yourself at risk, they'd say, the teachers are seen poorly, they talk bad, they close streets, they block, march, and don't teach! That's what they teach you... to block!" Despite her parents' protests, Daniela pursued the profession, and gained admission to a large normal school uptown. On the day that she registered, Daniela and her mother noted a demonstration on the steps outside the school, and saw several girls laying in tents, looking as if they had not slept in days. "And so I said to my mom, is this what I am going to do? I said to her, this... no! And my mom said, well, this is what you wanted!"

Though humorous, Daniela's tale reveals the ways that the perception of teachers in Oaxaca, decades after the teachers' movements first began in the 1970s and peaked in the 80s, had shifted toward the notion that teachers occupied purely political roles in society. Moreover, the sense that teachers *only* performed these political aspects had created for some

families an aversion to the teachers, a belief that their focus was entirely on actions on outside the classroom. Nevertheless, for Daniela, the training she received at the school was thrilling, giving her the dispositions necessary to wage battles on a wide range of causes, skills she wanted to apply when she entered the profession and was posted in a faraway *pueblo*. She smiled as she described how at her first march, she “learned to shout,” gaining confidence as she chanted political slogans: “at first I said I won’t shout, I was embarrassed that people or my friends will see me... but then I felt something euphoric, some anger, that I needed to get out.”

All five *normalistas* in this study described seeing their political mobilizations at school as training, either directly or indirectly, for the political roles they would perform as teachers, where they would likewise be expected to participate in marches, camp out at various locales, chant slogans, take over buses, block highways, and lead brigades. Indeed, the students described normal schools as “a nest” for the teachers, or as a “mini-section,” i.e., a miniature version of Oaxaca’s Section 22 union chapter, in which they learned to perform the role of a combative teacher. One of the ways *normalistas* first learned of their political roles was at orientation sessions in August, before the first day of school. According to Fabiola, a fourth-year student, “before you begin, the student group has a meeting, and they say, you know, part of what you are here to do is to learn, and you also are here to fight (*luchar*). To this.” In this way, the orientation session functioned as an introduction to the political curriculum of the normal school, operating alongside the academic components. In the days that followed, first-year students would select a representative to the larger student political body, and begin organizing a march for October 2, in honor of the Tlatelolco Massacre. This is notable considering that in 2014, the 43 *normalistas* massacred in Guerrero were all first-year students traveling around the state to gather funds for their October 2 march. Through organizing around that date, new *normalistas* are symbolically initiated into politics, through this first rite of passage at the normal school. Over their four years at the normal school, students continue their participation in a statewide organization linking all of Oaxaca’s normal schools, and regularly attend local and regional manifestations focused primarily on the needs and demands of the student body, but also in relation to assorted political, social, and cultural causes.

Like the teacher educators in this study, the *normalistas* also described how their training prepared them to be agents of change, in solidarity with the communities they would serve. *Normalistas* described going on brigades or trips to rural communities as part of their training and engaging in manifestations (like blocking highways or commandeering busses) as they organized for and with the *pueblos*. When asked about why she participated in these actions, Fabiola recalled a student meeting and someone saying, “You all have a commitment to society because you are educating children.” She explained why she agreed:

For the Oaxacan teacher, we say, Yes, I have to teach well, I need to deliver my material well, know how to plan, know the necessities of the students in order to learn, and their difficulties, how to help them. But also I need to know my promise to the society, to defend rights, to defend myself, to defend children, to defend my facilities, all of it.

Fabiola’s focus on “defense” echoed the ideas of the post-1968 generation, who drew on Marxist thought to explicate their *lucha* against authoritarian policies and institutions. Her comments also demonstrated that she attempted to balance the competing professional and political aspects of the job, viewing both as important, though not necessarily equal.

Other *normalistas* expressed some concerns that the political role could dominate over the pedagogical role. For example, Mercedes, a third-year student, noted:

I agree with that idea of *lucha*. When you enter [the normal school] you are filled with the political. With the academic, there is a certain disequilibrium; it is the political in which the normal is enmeshed... You have to participate, and not everyone is actively participating; it's expected of you. We are like the little children of Section 22.

Mercedes pointed out that in the normal schools, one's political participation is not always an act of conviction. Like Section 22, which requires unionized teachers to participate in political activities as part of their professional obligations, normal school students are expected to show up and be present in the *normalista* movements. In spite of her critique, Mercedes agreed that such political socialization is a necessary part of teacher training, so that the teacher is ready to work in the communities: "A teacher has to understand that learning doesn't just happen in school, but rather the whole community... The school is not just a school, it is a space of interaction, where the community can participate and create a space of humanization."

Victor, a second-year student at a rural normal school, also critiqued sustained mobilizations as more of an obligation, and would prefer to see the struggle change tactics. Nevertheless, he believed that teachers must be engaged in *lucha*, but should focus on local issues and actions: "There are often injustices in the *pueblos*. One friend of mine received a scholarship at a school and the director stole it, and the teacher went to fight for her. It's small, but it's an example of how small actions can lead to big changes." Victor felt that in sustaining wide-scale mobilizations, such as blockages, teachers end up hurting the communities more than the actors or agencies they resist. "I think people are fed up," he asserted. "The last thing they want is that teachers manifest or block.... If we really want to fight for the pueblo, and uplift the pueblo, we should find other forms of *lucha*. Sooner or later, people will say, we've had enough." Though Victor offered a sharp reproach of particular tactics, his comments suggest he still views struggle as an essential part of his professional role.

The students in this study offered various rationales for their *luchas*. While some were related to the micro-politics of funding or personnel at the normal schools, the *normalistas* also pointed to regional, national, and global dynamics that required them to rise up politically. For example, Fabiola noted that new education reforms minimize the rich cultural diversity of her state:

Oaxaca has a grand linguistic diversity, Zapotec, Chinameco, Chatino, Mixteco, Triqui, and the reform give more importance to English and Spanish. Why not instead of English, we give classes in their mother tongue? You have to ask yourself, what is the point of that? In doing so, you can create an arrogant student who thinks that by speaking English he is superior to his own people. And with that you lose family unity and also cultural unity.

Fabiola lamented how a curricular focus on teaching English would challenge the continuity of regional languages and cultures, ultimately creating generational schisms by denying young people mastery of their mother tongue. Her comments indicated a strong desire to protect local traditions in the face of global trends. In a similar vein, Sinue, a third-

year student, argued for regional exceptionalism: “[The government] wants to standardize education, but that can’t be done because we are not the same, Oaxaca cannot be Monterrey, that state is very industrialized. We need to look at the conditions of each state, the social, economic, and political conditions.” Sinue recalled arguing with a teacher from the northern part of the country, and telling him that, “You have one form of educating, and I have another form of educating. Education is not universal.” His remarks, like Fabiola’s, revealed a powerful belief that part of a teachers’ duties is to not only honor the unique regional identity of Oaxaca, but to fight for its preservation.

One important concern that both the older and younger generation shared was a continuing threat to normal schools, newly galvanized by educational reforms proposed by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Maestra Teresa noted that the OECD

wants to recommend to strengthen early training of teachers... that means dismantling the normal schools... they want to establish a system of rigorous standards for all the normal schools, that means that the normal schools will be subject to certification, which implies federal oversight and evaluation and determination of whether or not the school is meeting those standards, and the school won’t be certified to train teachers.

Maestra Teresa’s concern about new global reforms were reiterated in *normalistas’* interviews. Both generations feared that new reforms would delegitimize the particular form teacher training there, in favor of standardized professional models aligned with what Maguire (2010) has called the “global teacher.” The students described mobilizing in solidarity with other normal schools throughout Oaxaca and neighboring Chiapas as the schools faced decreased funding and support from public monies. The sense that the *normalista* formation was under assault thus motivated many participants in this study to keep up the fight.

## Discussion

The lived experiences of the participants in this study reveal a “dominant argument” (Søreide, 2007) in relation to being a teacher in Oaxaca: that a commitment to struggle- *lucha*- can be learned, rehearsed, and taught, as part of teachers’ training. At normal schools, whether in the 1970s or today, *normalistas* receive a political education that provides them ample experience as community organizers, in recognition that Mexican teachers witness many kinds of inequities and injustices and need strategies to act upon them. The older generation in this study clearly identified that their own experiences growing up in rural or marginalized locations cultivated a sense of revolutionary resistance, at a time when the general Mexican public was still working through the aftermath of Tlatelolco. *Normalistas* learned strategies for political struggle that defined their sense of what it means to be a teacher; their *lucha* for freedom and dignity was linked to a sense of solidarity with the *pueblos* they lived in or served. The older generation also made specific links between their struggles in the 1970s to historical precedents; Maestro Esteban, for example, talked about the “tradition” of teachers as directors, fighters, and leaders as far back as the Mexican Revolution.

The experiences of *normalistas* today continues in that tradition, with students still receiving a political education that operates as a core component of their teacher education programs. Young *normalistas* “learn to shout,” i.e., to advocate for themselves and manifest

their personal sense of justice or dignity via activism. Mercedes identified schools as sites of struggle, but also as sites of interaction and humanization, and argued that this fact behooves new teachers to participate in political mobilizations as part of their training. Thus, like their predecessors, the younger generation understands the teacher's role to be a *defender*, a revolutionary figure who has power to protect both his or her own rights as well as those of children, communities, and even the school sites where they learn and work. The new generation also emphasized the role teachers play in protecting cultural diversity and linguistic traditions; Sinue's comments that "I have another form of educating" was specifically in response to the neoliberal reforms the CNTE has mobilized against over the last decade. In this sense, new teachers today are trained to see their work as part of a global struggle to defend teacher authority and autonomy.

While the objectives and purposes of mobilization may vary across generations, the participants in this study clearly identified that teacher identity in Oaxaca is grounded in the principle that that *lucha* is a pedagogical act. This particular "vernacular" for being a teacher (Maguire, 2010) underpinned teachers' beliefs that it is their professional duty to maintain an oppositional stance against a variety of social, political, and economic forces. Indeed, for the participants, the word *lucha* provided a powerful referent for what it means to be a teacher; the term is primarily operationalized through *normalistas'* collective socialization into a powerful student movement, where they learn to identify existing power relations (Ginsburg, et al, 1992) and practice strategies to transform them. The older generation of teachers in this study drew explicitly on Marxist revolutionary thought as they explained their resistance to the authoritarian and corrupt tendencies of the Mexican State apparatus in the 70s and 80s, and generally recalled their teacher training as being most impactful through activities outside of the classroom. In contrast, the *normalistas* today made few ideological connections as they explained their struggle, and critiqued the long-standing tactics used by student and teacher organizations, but nevertheless asserted that new teachers must be prepared to perform political roles as part of their training.

The findings of this study thus confirm that teacher training in Oaxaca's normal schools is an explicitly political activity, as opposed to the professional socialization that is often depoliticized in teacher education programs in the United States. *Normalistas* primarily learn the political role through co-curricular and extra-curricular activities—less so in the academic content of their courses—and see themselves as learning a particular teacher formation suited for the realities of working and living in marginalized communities enduring poverty, hunger, corruption, discrimination, and oppression. Participants' narratives revealed earnest beliefs that their training cultivated in them strong capacities to be agents of change, whose impact can be felt at the local level of schools or *pueblos*, as well as at the global scale as part of teacher movements resisting universal reforms.

### Implications

This study focused on the experiences of individuals trained at normal schools, and examined how their teacher training emphasizes the importance of political struggle and resistance as a facet of teacher identity. The study's findings are limited given the small sample, yet provide strong indication that normal schools provide a specific form of training that is rarely found in other contexts. Given the constraints of this article, it was not possible to also explore how students trained at other public or private institutions, such as the UPN, experience political socialization (or not) as part of their teacher training. More research is needed to map out if teachers trained at those institutions are less inclined to take on political

roles, especially since, as their normal school counterparts, they will likely end up as members of Oaxaca's Section 22, thereby required to participate in the union's various mobilizations.

In spite of limitations, the study offers important implications in regard to teachers as agents of change. The first is that normal schools, while offering a curriculum within the classroom, also provide co-curricular and extra-curricular components that can cultivate within teachers a sense of their political agency. Studies by de la Garza (2016) and Slater, et al (2016), which focus on teachers' experiences in Mexico, Guatemala, and Costa Rica, provide insights into the ways rural teachers in Latin America articulate a vision of justice and leadership, but the studies do not specifically examine teachers' pre-service training. Further research ought to examine whether normal school training offers a more militant or revolutionary model in these countries, and others like Colombia, where normal schools are increasingly subject to closure (Velandia, 2016). This study suggests that the normal school model cultivated in teachers a capacity to draw on a wide repertoire of strategies for addressing social and political problems; further research examining the formation of teachers at normal schools could shed more light on their value as training grounds for change agency.

Relatedly, as Zavala and Henning (2017) have argued, pre-service teachers need field experiences in which they can practice the tenets of social justice praxis and community organizing. The authors cite the movements in Oaxaca as a strong example of teachers engaged in ongoing, reflective action rooted in the belief that the lines between school and community are blurry at best. In other words, teachers must be trained to see how the rhetoric of social justice and equity, which have become commonplace in teacher education programs in the United States, can be linked to specific actions in and outside the classroom. The participants in this study demonstrate that Mexico's normal schools have found a way for pre-service teachers to learn *lucha* and sustain solidarity over the long term; new teachers around the globe must also learn such "pedagogies of solidarity" (Carter Andrews, Richmond, Warren, Petchauer & Floden, 2018) grounded in field experiences that allow them to rehearse and practice those pedagogies in meaningful ways.

Last, this research demonstrates that, although conceptions of being a teacher change over time, historical and alternative scripts can survive in contemporary institutions, sometimes in competition with other "professional" formations of being a teacher. The participants in this study saw their training at normal schools as unique, rooted in historical narratives of resistance and *lucha*, in opposition to more technical models ill-equipped for the realities of being a teacher in states like Oaxaca. In other regional or national contexts, researchers might compare how competing visions of teachers' identities manifest in distinct teacher training programs; such interrogations could illuminate how politicized teacher identities are learned in particular regional or institutional settings, and the degree to which government agencies support or challenge such formations—especially as global reforms promote a "global teacher" model (Maguire, 2010) detached from context or specificity.

In conclusion, since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, government policies in Mexico have attempted to modernize the conception of the teacher through professionalization measures and policies, but the rural, revolutionary, and community-organizing formation learned at the *normales* continues to sustain in regional bulwarks like Oaxaca, Chiapas, and Guerrero—states with some of the strongest commitment to the dissident CNTE. In this sense, there is a generational through-line between the rural and revolutionary traditions of teachers in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, and the *normalistas* preparing to be teachers in the 21<sup>st</sup>. This is ever-more important in the context of the political violence visited upon revolutionary teachers in Oaxaca and the *normalistas* of Ayotzinapa. This study finds that "teacher beliefs" such as

*lucha*—a commitment to being a revolutionary agent of change—can sustain over long periods of time, especially when rooted in historical traditions of mobilization or when facing contemporary persecution by an authoritarian regime.

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