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Primary school and teacher training in Colombia

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COLOMBIA

María Cecilia Plested-Alvarez and Anja Seifert

Primary School and Teacher Training in Colombia

Abstract

As in other Latin American countries, educational inequality in Colombia is a component of broader social inequality. Despite recent progress, disparities persist between urban and rural schools in terms of infrastructure, teaching quality and shortages of teachers in rural areas. This article critically analyses the structure of the Colombian primary school system and the training of its teachers. Primary school comprises five years and forms part of an eleven-year compulsory education system. According to the Law of the Republic of Colombia, a single school system for primary and secondary education has been established, allowing both state and private schools, colleges and universities to operate. Private institutions can choose their own methodology and infrastructure, provided they respect the minimum standards established in this Law. Recent education reforms have focused on improving equality of opportunity for ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, and multilingualism, with the aim of eliminating educational inequalities. In 2015, the Law on the Chair of Peace in primary and secondary schools was approved, assigning teachers the task of promoting the concept of coexistence. Primary school teachers are part of the system and have the opportunity to pursue higher education studies. In conclusion, further research into these topics is still necessary.

Keywords: Colombian Primary School, Children's Rights, Inclusion, Elimination of Inequality, Teacher Training

1 Introduction

The article presents the structure and development of primary schools and the training of their teachers in Colombia, serving as the foundation of the educational system, and highlights existing areas of tension, including the challenges of addressing heterogeneity, diversity, and other forms of discrimination, particularly against Indigenous and Afro-Colombian groups. Colombia can serve as an example of an education system in South America that is worth systematic analysis. With approximately 51.874 million inhabitants (as of 2022), Colombia, geographically located in the Americas, is one of the most populous countries in Latin America, alongside Brazil and Mexico (Statista, 2024; OECD, 2016). The population composition is characterized by significant plurality, resulting from the mixing of European and African immigrants with the native population, with Afro-Colombian and Indigenous groups forming the most important minorities (Díaz Monsalve et al., 2021; OECD, 2016). In Colombia, as in other countries in this South American region, there is a close connection between origin, as the conditions of growing up in poverty, with violence and discrimination are based on ethnicity and social class. Colombia has a single official public school system, which allows a sector of private schools that differ in methodology, infrastructure, human resources, group sizes, and opportunities to work with multidisciplinary teams, all of which are governed by the same law. In order to better understand developments, it is necessary to know the history. The Colombian school system is divided into four levels, beginning with the non-compulsory but standard pre-school level, which lasts two years (MEN, 1994; Díaz Monsalve et al., 2021). This is followed by the five-year *Primaria* (primary school). Compulsory schooling ends after nine years, but students can attend secondary school and then complete the *bacalaureate* to obtain the *Bachillerato* (completed in class 11). This is comparable to a degree certificate in Western European countries such as the German *Abitur* (completed in class 12). Although school attendance is compulsory, it is difficult for the state to monitor (OECD, 2016). In this context, there have been significant reform efforts in recent decades aimed at enabling more equal opportunities and enforcing the right to education. This has led to successes, such as steadily higher school enrolment rates (Díaz Monsalve et al., 2021). Even though the expansion of primary school education has contributed to raising the literacy rate among young people to almost 99 % (Díaz Monsalve et al., 2021), differences remain between primary school education in rural and urban areas and concerning the schooling of pupils with disabilities and from ethnic minorities (Díaz Monsalve et al., 2021; OECD, 2016), which is an issue for teacher training. The possibilities of training primary school teachers are also presented, which often begin at the teacher training institutions

known as 'Normales Superiores' (see section 6.1). The development of each study objective must be effectively supported by the backing of the educational institutions where they teach.

2 Historical and Political Context

To understand the structure of the Colombian education system as well as the difficulties and challenges it faces, it is essential to consider its historical and socio-political context. The current Colombian education system originated in the colonial era of the 16th century, when European colonialists and missionaries established institutions to teach the indigenous population their religion and language (Díaz Monsalve et al., 2021). Colombia is one of 19 states in North, Central, and South America that have been referred to as Latin America since the late 19th century. In 1870, Napoleon III referred to the region as Latin America, although the term is not without controversy as it evokes the era of colonial power and power relationships (Lehmkuhl & Rinke, 2008). This is because the influence of colonial powers, primarily Portugal and Spain, played a decisive role in the region. Mejía Gutiérrez (2019) analyses aspects of the colonial period and the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Latin America, focusing on the ideological, political, and philosophical mixture that underpins the principles of official education in Colombia. This contrasts with secular and liberal positions, as well as aspects of the colonial, republican, and constitutional order. During this period, Creole ruling elites imposed liberal discourses and education systems in the hope that they would help the new republics to become independent and prosperous. It should be noted that

"The development in the 20th century was marked by the strong continental influence of the USA, the rise of populism in the 1940s and 1950s, combined with social revolutionary upheavals in some countries [...] and recurring political instability due to military dictatorships [...], civil wars [...], frequent coup attempts [...] and changes of government between 1960 and 1990" (Richter, 2013, p. 68).

The Colombian Armed Conflict was marked by peace agreements between different armed groups since the 1950s to the 1990s, leading to the signing of the Final Peace Agreement between the Colombian government and the FARC guerrillas in 2016 (Metó, 2016) under the government of Juan Manuel Santos, which sought to end the decades-long armed conflict. However, the aftermath and consequences can still be felt today (2025) as the effects of drug trafficking and political guerrilla warfare continue to characterise the situation. Despite the unstable conditions, Colombia, like other Latin American countries, managed to reform its education systems in the 20th century with the support of international organisations such as UNESCO (Naciones Unidas Colombia, 2021).

Further important reforms to the Colombian education system were initiated in the 1990s. However, Congress's opposition to the president has hindered progress. For example, the key aim of the Education Reform, presented in 2024, was to democratise society and establish social equality, as well as protection against discrimination and racism. However, the Education Reform was shelved in June 2024, resulting in the collapse of the government's reform project (El Espectador newspaper, 2024). For the government, this statutory education law was one of the top legislative priorities. The initiative aimed to ensure that all Colombians had access to quality education, which is essential for promoting equal opportunities and the country's economic and social development (MEN, 2024b).

3 Children's Rights and Protection Against Discrimination

The 1991 Constitution of the Republic of Colombia (Centro de Documentación Judicial/Cendoj, 2015) enshrines the rights of children. Article 44 stipulates that children have the right to life, physical integrity, health, social security, a balanced diet, a name, a nationality and a family, and that they must not be separated from their family. Children must also receive care and love, education and culture, and the right to recreation and freedom of expression must be respected. In order to promote a deeper understanding of purpose and develop skills such as respect, solidarity, empathy, and discernment, which are necessary for resolving conflict situations peacefully, a new school subject called 'Chair of Peace' was introduced in 2015. This subject refers to education for peace and healthy coexistence, as explained in the Primer Chair of Peace (Cartilla-cátedra-de-paz, 2016). Although school education is formally compulsory and children's rights are considered as universal rights, there are geographical areas where children are unable to attend school due to the difficult security situation. In remote areas, political conflict between different interest groups remains intense and is fought aggressively (paramilitaries and/or guerrillas such as the ELN – National Liberation Army). The educational portal Colombia Aprende (2004), a knowledge network of the Ministry of National Education, offers national and international communities a tool to improve education.

Similarly, the new constitution refers to the right to equality and the associated prohibition of discrimination in Article 13, paragraph 3. It establishes that the state primarily protects individuals in vulnerable situations due to their economic, physical or mental circumstances, and penalises any abuse or mistreatment committed against them (Cendoj, 2015). This aligns with one of the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, as set out in Article 24 (UNESCO, 1994). The Convention

recognises the right of people with disabilities to education, ensuring the full development of their potential, personality, talents and creativity, and their participation in society.

4 Social and Educational Inequality and Linguistic and Cultural Diversity

Prosperity and educational opportunities remain unevenly distributed in Colombia. It is a geographically and culturally diverse country that has undergone increasing urbanisation. Rural migration to urban areas is caused by poor living conditions and violence in rural areas (Radinger et al., 2018), leading to forced displacement to cities. Since colonial times, rural areas have been a place of disadvantage and poverty because a few large landowners continue to wield power and influence over defenceless populations, who are often of indigenous origin (Richter, 2013). It is important to note that this situation of social inequality also occurs in Black and urban communities due to forced displacement and other social factors (Plested-Alvarez, 2013). Colombia has endeavoured to address existing social inequality through educational initiatives (World Bank, 2010). Questions of social inequality and different approaches to education also affect the different linguistic and cultural groups as well as ethnic origins (MEN, 2017).

4.1 Ethnic and Demographic Diversity

In Colombia, diversity primarily refers to linguistic and cultural diversity, addressing issues of inclusion and exclusion. It intends that different ethnic population groups are both demographically diverse and characterised by profound phenomena of disadvantage, which are also reflected in an unequal geographical distribution of the population; however, a “heterogeneous social structure and traditionally sustained pluriculture contrast with a strong class consciousness and an emphasis on regional belonging” (DAAD, 2023, p. 10). According to the United Nations (Naciones Unidas Colombia, 2021), Colombia has a population of 51.609.000 inhabitants and 83 different living ancestral languages. Spanish is the language spoken by 99.2 % of Colombians. In addition, 65 Amerindian languages and two Creole languages are also spoken in the country, as well as Portuguese and Romani. On the islands of San Andrés, Providencia, and Santa Catalina, the locals speak English and Creole in addition to Spanish, which have official status. However, the National Indigenous Organization of Colombia (ONIC) states that 70 languages are spoken in Colombia, including Spanish and 69 indigenous languages. Among them are 65 indigenous languages, two Creole languages (Palenquero from San Basilio

and the Creole of the islands of San Andrés, Providencia and Santa Catalina), the Roma-Gypsy people as well as Colombian sign language (ONIC, 2021). Plested-Alvarez (1987) remarks that it is necessary to recognise and promote the teaching and learning of ancestral languages in Colombia, as these are the mother tongues (L1) of their communities. A person acquires a second language (L2) when they learn a language after acquiring L1. In July 2013, Colombia's Congress approved the Bilingualism Law, which was published in the *Diario Oficial*. Referring to this, it can be reiterated that it is essential to examine the national linguistic map and ask the specific question: Who is bilingual in Colombia? (Plested-Alvarez, 2013). This is particularly important for tribal and Creole indigenous communities in Colombia, as well as for foreigners living in a family environment with a different mother tongue and for foreign-born Colombians who are bilingual. Law 115 of 1994, based on article 67 of the Constitution, states that one of the purposes of education is "the study and comprehensive criticism of the national culture and the ethnic and cultural diversity of the country, which form the basis of national unity and identity". The Ministry of National Education also emphasises the importance of promoting the acquisition of at least one foreign language from primary school (MEN, 2000, p. 3).

4.2 Dealing with Disability and Inclusion

Colombia has ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2007) and has committed to promoting inclusive schools. The right to education and access to educational institutions is a crucial social and civil demand in Colombia, not only for the first years of study, but also for professional and university pursuits. The topic of inclusion, which is understood here in a broader sense, and encompasses various dimensions of heterogeneity such as disability, migration, social background, and gender (MEN, 2022), addresses the question of how the reforms in the Colombian education system contribute to dealing with current problems and challenges (United Nations, 2007). Additionally, the UNESCO-defined children's rights are also considered universal rights in this sense. The United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2007) analysed that almost 4 million people with disabilities currently live in Colombia, which corresponds to about 8 % of the total population. 45.3 % of the people affected are men, and 54.7 % are women.

According to Colombian legislation, people with disabilities are defined as people who have physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory deficiencies in the medium and the long term. The interaction with various barriers, including attitudinal barriers, can prevent their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others (Cendoj, 2015).

The illiteracy rate in Colombia is 5 %, which is high compared to the rate of 17 % for people with disabilities (Konrad Adenauer Foundation, 2023). Overall, the situation is improving: the literacy rate among young people under the age of 24 has risen to almost 99 %, which is mainly due to the expansion of solid basic education (Díaz Monsalve et al., 2021). Decreto 1421 aims to implement Article 24 of the Constitution (Decreto 1421, 2017). Similarly, there are a few studies that have specifically dealt with issues of special educational needs in Colombian primary schools (MEN, 2022) or with the training of teachers for inclusive education from an international or comparative perspective (Reina-Zambrano, 2014). In the field of research, studies have been conducted on today's primary schools and teacher training from a national perspective; however, there are only a few older works by German researchers on the Latin American school systems (Richter, 2010; Richter & Oelsner, 2015). In response to recent political and social changes and challenges, Colombia has adopted and implemented reform initiatives to improve the quality of primary education and teacher training (Brutti & Sánchez Torres, 2022; MEN, 2022; Richter & Oelsner, 2015). The Saldarriaga Concha Foundation (Laboratorio de Economía de la Educación/LEE, 2023) asks whether Colombian primary schools can be questioned, particularly in terms of how areas of tension concerning disabilities, linguistic diversity, and cultural diversity manifest themselves. Theoretical and political approaches to diversity and inclusion are important topics in Colombian schools and teacher training (LEE, 2023). Additionally, various professionals work in interdisciplinary teams at expensive private schools, including psychologists, social workers, and therapists such as occupational therapists and speech therapists.

4.3 Multilingualism and Migration

Colombia is an important country of immigration and emigration in South America. In the mid-nineteenth century, the arrival of the first Germans to the country took place with the signing of the 'Treaty of Friendship, Commerce, and Navigation' in 1854 between New Granada and the German cities of Lübeck, Bremen, and Hamburg (Tratado de Amistad, Comercio y Navegación, 1892). However, the period of greatest apogee for German immigration to Colombia occurred during the first decades of the 20th century, when the main settlement areas for the German population were Bogotá and Barranquilla. The term 'German-Colombian' refers to individuals of German descent who have immigrated to Colombia, as well as Colombians with German ancestry. They represent the third-largest group of Europeans in Colombia after Spaniards and Italians (Constaín, 2011)

As most migrants come to Colombia from Spanish-speaking countries, the newly arrived children have no difficulties with Spanish as they already speak

it. Due to the recent political crisis in Venezuela, numerous Venezuelans live in Colombia. Even though many immigrant families already speak Spanish with their children, they are not hindered by language barriers. Besides, some migrant families grow up in Colombia without Spanish as their first language. Different linguistic groups and indigenous ethnicities with their respective cultures often go hand in hand with social inequality and different approaches to education (Plested-Alvarez, 2013). Most students in public schools from social-economic levels 1, 2, or 3 (lower socioeconomic levels) live in the countryside, in remote villages, rural regions, and suburbs of big cities such as Medellín, Bogotá, Barranquilla, Cali, and other larger cities in Colombia. The law 142 of 1994 defines socioeconomic stratification, as specified in Article 14, numeral 8, as the classification of residential properties within a municipality is based on the factors and procedures established by law. Socioeconomic stratification is a tool for geographic targeting. Article 102 of this same law establishes that residential properties to which public services are provided shall be classified into a maximum of six socioeconomic levels or strata as follows: 1) low-low, 2) low, 3) medium-low, 4) medium, 5) medium-high, and 6) high. Strata 5 and 6 co-finance the less fortunate with their taxes. The economically disadvantaged live in the countryside in remote villages, rural regions, and suburbs of large cities such as Medellín, Bogotá, Barranquilla, Cali, and other larger cities in Colombia (Transparencia y acceso a la información pública, 2024). Therefore, attending a school without adequate equipment, staff, digital media support, new materials, and sufficient rooms for all classes depends on the financial capacity of each family.

5 Primary Schools in Colombia

In Colombia, primary school is intended to provide a basic education for all children. This initial stage of education is crucial as it enables children to develop critical thinking skills, solve problems, work in teams and communicate effectively. It also fosters responsibility, respect for others and cultural diversity (MEN, 1994). Great efforts have been made to improve early childhood education and primary education, as well as the education system as a whole. "Over the past two decades, the Colombian education system has undergone a fundamental transformation. Access to education has been a priority, with ambitious policies to expand enrolment at every level and bring education services to every corner of the country" (OECD, 2016, p. 17).

For the authors, education is generally considered to be an enduring process of personal, cultural and social improvement based on a holistic view of human dignity, rights and duties. Education is a civil right and a government

priority in Colombia (OECD, 2016). School attendance rates in Colombia are now very high: 93 % of children of the relevant age attend primary school and 93 % of these complete it. Furthermore, 77 % of young people proceed to lower secondary education and 48 % advance to higher secondary education (UNICEF, 2024). Approximately 9.3 million students are enrolled in the education system, from preschool through to middle school. Students are distributed relatively equally between men (49 %) and women (51 %), and mainly attend establishments in the official sector (79 %) and in urban areas (76 %).

According to the projections of the National Population and Housing Census carried out by DANE (Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística, 2018), Colombia's population was approximately 48 million people in 2018; this means that 1 in 5 Colombians was enrolled in preschool, basic, or secondary education (LEE, 2020).

Although (formal) literacy rate is generally high, the literacy rate in Colombia reached 95.6 % in 2020 (Statista, 2020). Even though children's rights are formally recognised, many children still sit with their mothers or parents on the city streets selling sweets, or cleaning car windows at intersections, among other non-school activities. It shows that not all children attend primary school on a regular basis. In some cases, poor families also lend out their children for begging services and the children become victims of sexual exploitation (OECD, 2016; Statista, 2020). Violence in the family and outside the family, including at school, is also often part of growing up as a child in Colombia. Children and families in areas of violence and conflicts face threats and death, as well as "exclusion from the education and social system"; also, educational opportunities in zones of conflicts or for displaced children are limited or non-existent (OECD, 2016, p. 25). In Colombia, lessons are organised into shifts. Morning classes typically run from 7 a.m. to 12 p.m., while afternoon classes are held from 1 p.m. to 6 p.m. Municipal schools tend to have large class sizes. The interior is rather bare, with a few books. Nevertheless, decorating the interior is always of interest (Radinger et al., 2018).



Figure 1: Classroom Equipment, Colegio San Juan in Medellín (taken by Seifert, A.)

Two classes often use the classrooms together for morning and afternoon lessons. However, even if only a few resources are available, it is possible to decorate them or display the results of project work.

5.1 Curriculum for Primary School

According to Law 115 of 1994, a single curriculum applies to all Colombian schools, whether public or private (MEN, 1994). The entire pedagogical process is covered by eight topics. The difference lies in the depth of knowledge, didactic material, and methodological strategies provided at each level or year group. This strengthens their applied knowledge and expands their understanding of the various disciplines and thus also of the school and family environments. According to Article 3 of Law 115 of 1994, educational services will be provided by state institutions. Likewise, individuals may establish educational institutions, provided they adhere to the relevant rules and regulations of the National Government (MEN, 1994). The curriculum is organised into four main sections: Programme Planning (general information), Curriculum Context (information specific to the curriculum), Curriculum Expectations (what students are expected to learn), and Teacher Support (how students

can achieve these expectations). The overview below illustrates the curricular structure of the five-year primary school programme (MEN, 2017; MEN, 2022).

In Colombia, school begins with preschool (Preescolar), followed by the five-year primary education and grades 6 to 11, which form the Baccalaureate level. Generally, a school comprises primary, secondary, and high schools. However, especially in the countryside, there are primary schools that are separate from the baccalaureate and may be located in a different neighbourhood or municipality (MEN, 2024a).

Based on the 1991 Constitution, it was determined that Colombia is a secular country with freedom of religion, as stated in Article 24. According to the constitution, the right to religious education is warranted. The educational institutions shall establish them without prejudice to the constitutional guarantees of freedom of conscience, freedom of religion, the right of parents to choose the type of education for their minor children, as well as the constitutional requirement that no one may be forced to teach religious education in state institutions (Constitución Política de Colombia, 1991/2013).

As MEN (2017) states, there are nine mandatory and basic areas for achieving educational objectives following the curriculum and the institutional education project, according to Law 115, in its article 23:

1. Natural sciences and environmental education,
2. Social Sciences, History, Geography, Political Constitution, and Democracy. Chair of Peace and School Democracy,
3. Art education,
4. Ethics and Human Values Education,
5. Physical education, recreation, and sports;
6. Religion*
7. Humanities, Spanish, and foreign languages,
8. Mathematics,
9. Technology and Computers.

* Paragraph. Religious education shall be offered in all educational establishments, observing the constitutional guarantee according to which, in State establishments, no person may be forced to receive it.

Table 1: Colombia School System – Synthesis (MEN, 2017)

Age	School Level	Grade	Related Teacher Qualification
23 or more	A PhD requires a minimum of three years of study and re-search. The master's is only two years. To deepen the field of knowledge of the undergraduate or a specific research topic in the field	University	Master's or PhD in one subject related to the professional title in the area and interest in the field that she/he would like to teach after graduation.
18 or more	Higher education (Educación Superior)	University	Undergraduate university studies for primary school teachers as part of the system provide the opportunity to pursue higher education.
17 16	Secondary school (Educación Media)	10-11	Secondary teacher: Professional or Licenciado. It means a subject-oriented university degree with an additional qualification in pedagogy.
15 14 13 11 -12	Lower secondary school (Básica Secundaria)	6-9	Lower secondary teacher: Licenciado or Professional, which means a subject-oriented university degree with an additional pedagogy qualification.
10 9 8 7 5- 6	Primary school (Primaria)	1-5	Primary teacher: Normalista (grade before Bachelor) or Licenciado (graduate of university with pedagogical qualification). A regular professional
5 4 3 2	Kindergarten Pre-primary education (Preschooler) Daycare or community mothers**		Pre-Primary teacher: Normalista (grade before Bachelor) or Licenciado (graduate of university with pedagogical qualification)

Note. ** Community mothers (Madres Comunitarias) are women heads of families who are trained for the care of little girls and boys (Departamento Nacional de Planeación/DNP, 2024). Plested-Alvarez translated the direct information of Law 115 of 1994

Additionally, five challenges from preschool, primary, and secondary education to high school are focused on:

1. Reduce inequalities
2. Recognize teachers
3. Create peace through education – Chair of Peace and School Democracy
4. Build comprehensive social agreements
5. Strengthen long-term financing

This integrated process is offered to the child through pedagogical and relaxing socialization experiences, promoting holistic development in the biological, cognitive, psychomotor, socio-affective, and spiritual aspects (MEN, 2017; Díaz Monsalve et al, 2021).

5.2 State Primary Schools

In Colombia, there are co-educational (mixed-sex) and mono-educational (single-sex) schools. Many schools have an all-female ratio and operate as girls-only schools. The Primary School comprises grades one to five and the Baccalaureate preparation begins in grade six. In most cases, a primary school combined with the Baccalaureate (grades six to eleven) is located on one campus (Richter, 2013). Until the year 2000, classes were huge, with up to 55 students due to the large number of children; now the classes are smaller. Today, small classes have learning groups of 25-30 students, while large classes have 35-40 students. State schools usually have poorer equipment and simpler buildings than private ones. In recent years, some schools with a social impact have been built, such as the Great State School in Commune 13 or Commune 8 in Medellín. However, most state schools have poor equipment. It has been criticised for decades that only a few children from lower socio-economic backgrounds have the opportunity to study.

A distinction can be made between city schools and village schools, which are run by the state. Classes in city state schools have an average of 40-50 pupils. In rural areas, classes are often smaller or mixed age, as there are only a few pupils in many small village schools who are taught together (Richter, 2013). The journey to work for teachers in the village is sometimes very arduous and dangerous for both them and the students and can only be travelled by donkey or boat. There are no year groups in village schools; however, due to the small number of pupils, multigrade classes are used, i.e., mixed age groups and departmental lessons are offered, as in the past.

Many schools in the countryside only offer primary education, not secondary education. Alternatively, children, for example, may only attend school every other day because the distances are too far and the roads are too dangerous.

In Leticia, the capital of the Department of Amazonas in the south of Colombia, in the jungle or the coffee zone, there are many tiny schools in the countryside. As there are no buses, the children are driven to school on a motorcycle, sometimes with three people on it, on impassable paths. In the jungle near Leticia, the only large town, children typically attend primary school every other day, then later switch to a school in Leticia. The state school system is based on Calendario A and the private school system is on Calendario B. The A-Calendar applies everywhere in South America, with a rhythm that follows the school year, which begins after a long break over Christmas and New Year's Day, typically at the end of January and ends at the end of November. Holidays are also available during the Easter season and in mid-June for eight weeks, similar to summer holidays (MEN, 2018).

The above shows differences between schools in urban and rural regions. In addition to the unequal distribution of wealth between a wealthy, predominantly white or mestizo upper class in urban areas and the poor, rural (predominantly indigenous) population, schools in Colombia suffer from inadequate equipment, a lack of materials and buildings that are dilapidated or in need of renovation (Richter, 2013). However, the claim to a basic education in primary school is laid down for all children, regardless of their origin and gender. Basic education is the educational cycle that states and guides children and adolescents from early childhood to the last years of adolescence. It spans the initial pre-school level to the secondary level. The concept of basic education as the foundation for all children and the guarantee of essential skills that everyone should possess is central to this discussion. It includes teaching the knowledge and skills essential for every person to function effectively in contemporary society, equipping each individual to exercise active citizenship, continue training at a higher level, and have access to the labour market.

Resources for primary education are materials that guide the development or strengthening of scientific and social competencies and skills associated with critical and historical thinking in children, adolescents, and young people in elementary and secondary education. As presented by Sáez Martínez (2017), the differences between rural and urban schools do not lie in the curricular structure, since the Colombian school system is national. These differences are due to the availability of economic resources for infrastructure, teacher salaries, and the logistical feasibility of various educational approaches. Also, the process, means, methodological approach, and training that teachers receive to work in this type of centre are particularly different.

Pupils who have studied in rural schools say that sharing a classroom with pupils of different ages was a great enrichment for them. When a rural school is closed in a town, a social imbalance is created, affecting families and the town. Mainly because they will have no other study option for their children

(Soto Arango, 2014). In addition, schools in poor neighbourhoods in cities often suffer from the same situation as schools in rural areas. This means a single teacher for several school levels in the same classroom, or a teacher must take charge of an entire group to teach them all subjects.

5.3 Private Primary Schools

In addition to the state schools, many private schools are located within the cities, such as church schools and international private schools, also referred to as bilingual schools. Private schools are administered by non-governmental entities such as religious institutions or educational companies. These schools are primarily financed by tuition fees and donations (Herzner, 2019).

Private education enjoys greater autonomy in determining its methodology and educational philosophy (Herzner, 2019). This allows for greater flexibility in pedagogical methods and education approaches. Those schools typically follow their calendars, which are based on the European school year. For example, in Germany, where the school year features long summer holidays and shorter Christmas holidays. In Colombia, private schools are primarily located in urban areas; "in 2014, only about 5 % of students attending fully private schools were in rural areas [...]. Students in private schools also tend to have a higher socio-economic background, although some low-cost private schools cater to disadvantaged groups" (OECD, 2016, p. 138). The classes at the private schools are smaller, typically ranging from 15 to 20 children, with a possible maximum of just over 20 children, depending on the specific private school. In some cases, the language quality of teachers who teach foreign languages or practice a foreign language, such as English, differs significantly in terms of pronunciation and language register from those who teach foreign languages in large classes at state schools, compared to those at private schools. Additionally, many state and private primary schools have school uniforms, typically one for regular lessons and another for physical education. In addition to international schools and specific schools offering German, English, Canadian, Italian, and French curricula, among others, which have a connection to the country, there are many denominational primary schools, especially Catholic schools, some of which still operate as single-gender schools, separated by gender.

Immigration to Colombia consists mainly of people from countries where Spanish is spoken in everyday life and in education. There are four German schools in Colombia (in Bogotá, Medellín, Cali, and Barranquilla) where school fees range from 500 to 1,000 euros (in Bogotá) (Botschaft der Bundesrepublik Deutschland in Bogotá, 2018), and are therefore aimed at affluent parents who are orientated towards the German primary and secondary school system. This provides a link between Colombia and Germany and prepares students from

primary school level for migration to Germany, either to continue their studies or to find employment. There are also other private primary schools, such as French, Italian, and international schools, where the IB degree can be pursued. Many parents want their children to be able to study at an elite university or prestigious institution in the USA or Germany. If you study in Colombia, it should be at a prestigious university, not just anywhere. After Brazil, Colombia has the highest proportion of Latin American students attending universities in Germany. The German educational system seems attractive from a Colombian perspective. Additionally, Colombia has four German schools, and a bilateral migration agreement exists between Colombia and Germany for work migration (Bundesministerium des Innern und der Heimat/BMI, 2025).

6 Primary Teacher Education Programmes in Colombia

There are various types of higher education institutions and universities in tertiary education, like 'Normal Schools' (Escuelas Normales Superiores) as well as (public and private) teaching colleges and universities, and correspondingly, different ways to enter the teaching profession through a degree programme.

6.1 Escuelas Normales Superiores

To work at a primary school, a 'Normalista qualification' is sufficient, and attendance at the Colombian Normal School (Escuela Normal) is required. Báez Osorio (2005) presents the processes that generated the Colombian Normal Schools and the training of teachers in the 19th century. The first 'Normal School' in Colombia was established in Bogotá in 1822 by the Law of August 2, 1821, which stipulated the education for girls in convents of Catholic nuns. That Normal School was directed by the Franciscan father, Fray Sebastián Mora, applying the Lancastrian method. Later, other higher regular schools (Escuelas Normales Superiores) were established and defined as educational institutions to train teachers for preschool and elementary school education. For several decades, the Francisco de Paula Santander Higher Normal School in the municipality of Málaga, in the State of Santander, has been the best of the 137 institutions of this type in Colombia (Báez Osorio, 2005). It is an official educational institution committed to the Comprehensive Training of Baccalaureates, with a focus on deepening education and developing high-quality, ethical, personal, and professional teachers. It provides excellent services in Preschool, Basic Primary, Basic Secondary, Middle, and Complementary Training. One example is the Colegio Maria Auxiliadora in Copacabana. This Escuela Normal specialises in education, which means that pedagogy is taught as a four-hour main subject from year 8 on. From year 10, weekly work placements

in a street children's project are additionally added (Báez Osorio, 2005). Furthermore, upper school students could work in the kindergarten and primary school areas of the school, which are located on the same campus. Apart from this, German is taught as a foreign language at Escuela Normal Superior Maria Auxiliadora (2024). Legally, Normal Schools were established through political decisions regarding the role of public education in shaping citizens' social identities. This involved training teachers to work in schools across the country. Unlike public schools and universities, the focus is less on educating the elite and more on fostering a community-oriented approach.

Some teachers first work as 'Normalistas' and later acquire a bachelor's or higher qualification in their subject field at a university. The reason for this is that graduates of the Normal Superiores schools or technical studies have a greater chance of entering the official school system of Colombia as teachers with at least a bachelor's degree in education. In addition, the bachelor's degree in education encompasses a broad range of disciplines, from pedagogy to didactics, with pedagogical training and research at its core.

6.2 Universities and Pedagogical Teaching

The establishment of the Higher Normal Schools marked the beginning of teacher training for preschool, primary, and secondary school educators. To this day, the Higher Normal Schools in Colombia play a crucial role in the education of girls, boys, and young people in both rural and urban areas. This has strengthened the idea of basic education through professional teacher training processes. However, issues of social inequality and differing educational approaches also affect the various linguistic, cultural and ethnic groups. From elementary and primary levels, as outlined in the Curricular Bases for Early Childhood and Preschool Education (MEN, 2017), to secondary and university education, social background remains a decisive factor in determining access to educational opportunities. The demand for inclusive education (LEE, 2023; MEN, 2022) is of great importance and has been a focus for several decades. Therefore, it is fundamental to consider cognitive and social-emotional skills in teaching. Colombia has over 80 universities, of which around 34 are state universities, such as UNAL (Universidad Nacional de Colombia) in Bogotá, with other regional campuses throughout the country; UdeA (Universidad de Antioquia) in Medellín, with nine regional campuses throughout the Antioquia department; The Universidad del Valle in Cali has nine regional headquarters in the department, and the Universidad del Atlántico has three campuses in Barranquilla and two regional headquarters. Almost 20 of the private universities are church universities, such as the University of Los Andes in Bogotá or EAFIT in Medellín. Many universities can only offer bachelor's degree programmes, not a master's programme. "The Colombian education

system has fundamentally transformed over the past two decades. Access to education has been a priority, with ambitious policies to expand enrolment at every level and bring education services to every corner of the country” (OECD, 2016, p. 17).

The creation of universities in these territories took place in two different stages: the first from 1580 to 1768, characterised by the total control of the church over education, and the other phase from 1768 to 1826, which began with the expulsion of the Jesuits and signified the attempt of the civil sector to control and intervene in education (Uptc, 2013).

The first university to be founded in the New Kingdom of Granada, in Santafé, was the Santo Tomás University of Santafé in 1580 (subject to inspection and surveillance through Law 1740 of 2014 and Law 30 of 1992 of the Ministry of Education of Colombia), then the Javeriana University in 1621, the University of San Nicolás de Bari in 1694, which main objectives were to teach for the formation of clerics and lawyers (Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia/Uptc, 2013).

The Central University of the Republic (UCR), the centre of higher education, was created in the late 1820s, with campuses in Bogotá, Caracas, and Quito. The Central University of the Republic in Bogotá is therefore considered the predecessor of the National University of Colombia (Uptc, 2013). In 1950, the Pedagogical University of Colombia was established, with a universal professional focus on teaching and education. This university followed the German model of a single-professional pedagogical institution.

6.3 Relevant Challenges

Heterogeneity, difference, diversity and inclusion are important topics that define schools and teacher education in Colombia. The primary objective of education and teacher training systems is to address the educational requirements of a “linguistically, culturally, and geographically diverse population” (OECD, 2016, p. 136) for the greater good of society. This involves appreciating indigenous languages and cultures, raising their profile, and addressing the power relations behind them.

The majority of universities only offer regular subjects in teacher training that are taught in schools, such as history, English, mathematics, and politics, but no separate ethnologically oriented subject that deals with the country’s own history and indigenous population. Moreover, the Faculty of Education of the UdeA, e.g., offers a bachelor’s study about the Pedagogic of Mother Earth (Pedagogía de la Madre Tierra). The objective is to train teachers who understand the culture of these communities and achieve greater educational progress with the culture of the indigenous people. Another programme for teachers is health education, which also fits well with the teaching profession.

These studies also refer to making power relations visible in the context of postcolonial studies (Saldarriaga-Vélez, 2018). Social inequality is relevant both at school and at university.

For many families from social levels 1 and 2, it is quite impossible to send more than one child to university. It happens that students who travel from the villages to their university study centre, in order to be on time have to get up at 3 a.m. and can only come every other day because their families cannot afford meals and bus tickets every day. At state universities such as UdeA, many gifted children from these social levels study as the first generation after successfully passing the entrance exam. They are very interested in education and want to 'climb the social ladder' and change society. Public higher education in Colombia is a very attractive option for many young people who want to continue their studies after high school due to the high costs in private higher education, because in Colombia, the regular school-leaving certificate does not serve as an admission to a university (Univérsate S.A.S., 2025). The Colombian Institute for the Evaluation of Education (ICFES) is an autonomous entity linked to the Ministry of National Education of Colombia (MEN). It offers activities for evaluating education at all levels and supports the MEN in conducting state examinations. In addition, it conducts research on the factors that affect educational quality to offer information to improve it. The ICFES exam allows the student to demonstrate that he or she has achieved the knowledge, skills, and abilities in basic as well as secondary education subjects. ICFES also validates the Baccalaureate degree for people over 18 who have not obtained it in a regular study process.

Generally, at public universities, campus life is very lively and with critical positions in the face of right-wing political visions. University protests are a way of rejecting decisions and actions that deteriorate the situation of public universities in the country from the state. The semester includes 16 weeks, irrespective of stoppages or demonstrations. Therefore, if needed, the semesters are lengthened to comply with the officially established weeks. University activities are often stopped for weeks and months due to political manifestations. It extends the study time and semester schedule for lecturers (Sandoval, 2020). Universities also hold seminars at various times of the day to accommodate students who usually work. Seminars are held from 6 a.m. until 8–10 p.m. due to employed students. In teacher training programmes, doctoral students, lecturers and other employees without a full-time contract or professorship often have work activities in the mornings, from 7 a.m. to 12 p.m., before going to the university to organise their courses or undertake further training. In recent years, teacher training has undergone reform through educational policy control measures and student initiatives on campus (Saldarriaga-Vélez, 2018). There are ongoing academic debates on gender-based violence, disability and

inclusion in diverse families, among other topics, to help schools and teacher training institutions address the various forms of discrimination, particularly against indigenous and Afro-descendant groups (Cárdenas-Santillana & Aguilar-Bobadilla, 2015).

Access to education and educational institutions is an important civil and social demand in Colombia. There is a university entrance test that regulates access to universities and degree programmes, which is limited. From 2018 to 2020, this led to numerous demonstrations by students, who complained about limited educational opportunities and demanded greater equality. Police intervention against students led to violence in universities. Several students were shot in the process. Two notable examples are the cases of Dilan Cruz, an 18-year-old demonstrator who was shot by a Mobile Anti-Riot Squad agent on 23 November 2019 during one of the largest waves of anti-government protests in Colombia in recent decades, and Lucas Villa, a 37-year-old student leader of Sports and Recreation Sciences at the Technological University of Pereira who was shot by a group of hitmen on 5 May 2021. Dilan and Lucas participated in national strikes motivated by the conservative policies of President Ivan Duque at the time (Redacción BBC News Mundo, 2019).

7 Conclusion

In Colombia, as in other Latin American countries, socioeconomic inequality translates into educational inequality, which is associated with poverty, violence and discrimination based on ethnicity and racism, as well as inclusion. The 1991 Constitution enshrines children's rights and protection against discrimination. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has also been ratified, and efforts are underway to achieve inclusive education.

It is important to note that the literacy rate among young people under the age of 24 has risen to almost 99 %, particularly as a result of the expansion of solid basic education. This law (Law 115 of 1994) establishes the only educational system by law, which means that the curriculum configuration for primary education is regulated by legislation. It also enables the coexistence of public and private schools as well as colleges up to university level. Higher Normal Schools in Colombia have played a crucial role in educating girls, boys and young people in rural and urban areas, as well as the training of teachers. Recently, in response to political and social changes and challenges, reform initiatives have been adopted and implemented to improve the quality of primary education and teacher training in Colombia.

Socioeconomic inequality, however, continues to shape educational opportunities. Law 142 of 1994, which regulates domestic public services, defines

socioeconomic stratification as the classification of residential properties within municipalities. This system of stratification remains an important mechanism for geographic targeting and helps explain persistent disparities between rural and urban primary schools, as well as between public and private institutions. Despite significant educational reforms in recent decades, inequities in access and quality persist.

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