

Department of  
Education



UNIVERSITY OF  
**BATH**

## **Working Papers Series**

### ***International and Global Issues for Research***

*A Critical Analysis of “In Search of Teacher Excellence:  
How to improve the quality of education for all Colombians”.*

Ruth Allen

No. 2016/4 December 2016

The working papers series aims to recognise the excellent work produced by the large community of graduate students and distinguished associates of the Department of Education at the University of Bath. The series has been designed to create opportunities to disseminate high quality research through our Departmental webpages, in a timely manner. The working papers series aims, in particular, to reflect and contribute to the global standing of the Department of Education as a leader of research in the areas of activity of its research clusters:

*Internationalisation and globalisation of education*

*Educational leadership, management and governance*

*Language and educational practices*

*Learning, pedagogy and diversity*

## Abstract

This article critically analyses the study '*In Search of Teacher Excellence*' commissioned by the Fundacion Compartir, (a private organisation founded by business leaders in Colombia), as a means by which to identify strategies for the improvement of teacher quality. After outlining the study and its proposed strategies, a number of underlying assumptions are identified and examined, including the perceived link between education and economic growth; the use of standardised tests as a proxy for educational quality and the notion that best practices can be transferred effectively from one country or culture to another. The article concludes that unless these assumptions are reviewed and revised, the proposed strategies are unlikely to have a long term, positive impact as they do not address the fundamental issues confronted by education in Colombia.

## 1. Introduction

Each year, senior students from all corners of Colombia prepare to take the National "Knowledge Test" (Prueba Saber 11), as the final step towards attaining the Colombian High School Diploma (or Bachiller). This is no easy task. It is a marathon effort consisting of 8 hours of testing in two four hour sittings on one single day. Not only is it 'high stakes' in that it is a requirement to graduate from school, but it also defines university entrance, access to scholarships and, perhaps more significantly, self-esteem and social standing. For many students it is the end point to fourteen or fifteen years of schooling, their education summed up in eight hours and a myriad of multiple choice questions.

The test is also high stakes for teachers and schools. The Colombian '*Institute for Educational Evaluation*', (ICFES) which designs and implements the test, categorises schools according to their results in the following manner: *Very Superior; Superior; High; Medium; Low; Inferior and Very inferior*. Terms which clearly indicate that results on the test are perceived as representative of school quality. Subsequently, the national media publishes rankings of the 'best' schools and analyses the results to reflect upon the state of the nation's education system.

These reflections are not, on the whole, favourable and so it was in 2013 when the overall results on the '*Prueba Saber 11*' were declared as '*leaving much to be desired*' (Revista Dinero 2013). This, however, was just a taster of the national outcry to be heard at the publication of the results of the more 'prestigious' Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests. At this point, the media were unequivocal and even derisory: '*Colombia would come last if there were a World Cup of education*' (*El Tiempo* 2014/1) and '*Colombia scrapes bottom once more in PISA tests*' (*El Tiempo*: 2014-2). According to the rankings published by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), it was difficult to deny that the results were anything other than negative. Colombian ranked 62 out of 65 on the Mathematics, Science and Language tests, and a 'miserable' 44 out of 44 on Problem Solving.

Student performance on both of these tests, together with the resulting media attention, was not convenient for the incumbent president, Juan Manuel Santos, whose re-election campaign for May 2014 was to run under the banner: '*Peace, Equality and Education*' and whose National Development Plan for 2010-2014 had clearly identified '*Quality Education*' as key to achieving economic growth and subsequently '*Prosperity for All*' (*DNP 2010*). It was not, then, surprising that the 'official' finger of blame was pointed away from the policy makers and towards an easier target: the teachers. Indeed, the then Minister of Education, Maria Fernanda Campo was reported as stating that: '*The bad results in the PISA tests are owed to the quality of teachers,*' (*El Tiempo* 2014/3) and popular opinion expressed by '*many experts*' (according to the national magazine '*Semana*'), insisted that the solution was to be found in reducing teacher autonomy and returning to a stricter use of curriculum guides so as '*to protect the students from the errors and omissions of bad teachers.*' (Revista Semana 2013)

Into this arena, the *Fundacion Compartir*, a private organisation founded by Colombian business leaders, publicly launched the results of a study they had commissioned to design '*a policy for the improvement of educational quality taking into account that the component of the teacher is fundamental to its achievement.*' (Garcia Jaramillo, S Et al 2014:6) This study, entitled '*In Search of Teacher Excellence*' or *Tras La Excelencia Docente*, TLED in Spanish (Garcia Jaramillo, S et

al 2014) was warmly welcomed by the Colombian government, and Santos declared that it would be incorporated as part of national policy in his aim to eradicate inequality and ensure that Colombia becomes '*the most educated country in Latin American by 2025*'. (Fundacion Compartir 2014-1)

The aim of the current paper is to critically analyse the study '*In Search of Teacher Excellence*' (TLED) looking, in particular, at the assumptions upon which it is based. After a brief outline of the study and the proposals made by the authors, this analysis considers the fundamental concepts upon which the study has been constructed including: a focus on the economic, or productive function of education; an emphasis on standardised tests as indicators of educational quality; and the effectiveness of comparison with other countries and cultures.

## **2. Fundacion Compartir: 'In Search of Teacher Excellence'**

The *Fundacion Compartir* is a private organisation founded in 1979 by Colombian business leaders with the purpose of '*generating important resources and investing them in an efficient and transparent manner in favour of the dispossessed population*'. (Fundacion Compartir 2014-2) While initial investments were made in terms of housing and other concrete social projects, the *Fundacion* soon began to focus on business and education with the idea that by developing these areas they would be able to promote employment and facilitate housing acquisition. Since then, their contributions to education have not only been in terms of the construction and administration of schools but have also taken the form of providing recognition to teachers in the public education system through a series of Teachers Awards (the *Premio Compartir al Maestro*) designed to promote innovative projects for the benefit of students and the educational community in general. With the study TLED they aim to '*design a policy to improve the quality of education, taking into account that the component of the teacher is essential to its achievement*'. (TLED 2014:6)

In order to justify why teachers should be identified as the most important factor in the achievement of educational quality the authors begin by citing a variety of previous studies. Most frequently cited in this section is the researcher Hanushek, who, in his 2011 study, highlights the importance of teachers in improving the

academic performance of students and subsequently promoting their '*economic*' success Hanushek (2011). It is perhaps not surprising that other corporate studies such as those carried out by the RAND corporation (2013) and by the Bill and Melinda Gates foundation (2013) are also cited to support the focus on teachers and their effective evaluation as a key factor in student progress.

The authors justify their lack of focus on socio-economic factors by corroborating research such as that of Rivkin, Hanushek and Kain (2005) who argue that factors such as the effect of a student's family cannot sufficiently explain significant differences in quality between schools. To do this, the authors of TLED analyse the principal differences between models of education in schools of exceptional and poor performance on the 2009 PISA tests. Their method includes a series of statistical associations by which they identify '*residual*' differences between-school performances which they suggest cannot be explained by socio-economic differences. (TLED 2014:52) They then go on to identify those factors which can be correlated to these differences from the additional information provided by the PISA questionnaires. These include: 1) student perception of teacher quality 2) use of standardised assessments and evaluations for accountability 3) school autonomy and 4) school leadership (TLED 2014:57). According to their results, the '*fundamental difference – further than socio-economic composition – between schools of relative exceptional and poor performance is teacher quality as measured by student perception.*' (TLED 2014: 66)

Having established teacher quality as their focus, the authors then revise the '*practices of teacher management in those educational systems that have the highest student performance on international tests*' and construct a framework for the analysis and comparison of the current situation in Colombia. (TLED 2014:6) Specifically, they compare the educational policies and teacher management of Colombia with those countries scoring highest on the 2012 PISA tests. Identified within this category and subsequently used as case studies are: Singapore, Finland, Canada (Ontario) and South Korea. The authors organise their analyses of these systems into six dimensions including: 1) Initial Teacher Training; 2) Teacher Selection; 3) Retention and Promotion; 4) Teacher Evaluation with a view to

continuous improvement; 5) In-service training and 6) Remuneration. They then construct a “*framework of international reference*” (TLED 2014:21) based upon the conclusion that while some differences in practice can be seen, the policies and practices of these four countries do have certain key characteristics in common. In particular, they identify these countries as ‘*having in common the prioritisation of teacher quality for making a great leap towards quality education,*’ (TLED 2014:21) and indicate that while each country may be unique and different, they are very similar in that their policies regarding teacher training, remuneration and teacher evaluation, result in teaching being ‘*one of the professions with the greatest social status, able to attract the best graduates in the country to the profession.*’ (TLED 2014:21). These policies include: effective selection and recruitment policies including remuneration which matches that of other professions such as lawyers and doctors; a homogeneous approach to teacher formation including teaching practice and pedagogical investigation, and an effective teacher evaluation system which focuses on continuous improvement and the recognition of achievement.

Through the subsequent comparative analysis, the authors then show that Colombia stands in contrast to this. The teacher training programs are ‘*excessively ample and heterogeneous*’ (TLED: 2014:24) with few that focus on teaching practice and pedagogical investigation; teacher remuneration is low in comparison to other professions such as lawyers and doctors, and the teacher evaluation system is lacking both in substance and effective implementation. As such, it would seem that Colombia is perhaps typical of Latin America where, according to Gamboa and Waltenberg (2012): teaching is ‘*a low status occupation, making it hard to attract highly skilled individuals to the profession.* (Gamboa and Waltenberg 2012:699)

The authors of TLED use the preceding comparative analysis as a basis upon which to construct their proposals, summarised in the following paragraphs:

1) **Initial teacher training.** Here, the focus is on creating higher quality and more homogeneous teacher training programs by forming new licensing programmes and revising existing programs to ensure that they comply with relevant accreditation standards and requirements. It is also proposed that these standards themselves be revised so as to ensure higher quality.

2) **Teacher Selection.** The authors propose that scholarships be given to those students attaining high achievement so as to attract better quality candidates to the profession while at the same time suggesting that entrance to the profession should be subject to more rigorous requirements. They also propose launching a campaign to improve the image and raise the social standing of teaching as a profession so as to increase its attractiveness to candidates.

3) **Teacher Evaluation.** The proposal is to modify the current evaluation model so as to make it more effective through the use of rubrics with detailed criteria in each of the dimensions to be evaluated (based upon schemes such as that of Charlotte Danielson). They also propose including an element of self-evaluation, peer evaluation, evaluation by students and classroom observations. The need to monitor the attendance and punctuality of teachers is also noted.

4) **In-service Training.** The authors propose i) implementing induction programs for new teachers; ii) ensuring the relevance of training by aligning it more effectively with the needs of teachers; iii) financing and strengthening current in-service training programs; and iv) providing scholarships to outstanding teachers to participate in Masters and Doctorate programs.

5) **Remuneration.** Finally, the authors propose to level the salaries of teachers with other similar professions and establish a system of incentives and recognitions which will motivate teachers throughout their careers.

The study concludes with an estimation of the value of the plan and proposals as to how these funds could be raised. No proposals are made for retention and promotion as, according to their analysis; this is not a problem area for Colombia.

At face value it is difficult to argue that these proposals would not have a positive impact on student performance, and the aim of the current study is not to dismiss these particular strategies out of hand, nor is it to suggest that increasing teacher performance is not a positive goal. Instead, it is to argue that unless more fundamental changes are made at a conceptual level, these particular reforms will

fail to have the hoped for impact. The current study will argue that by focusing on the functional, economic aspects of education and seeing it first and foremost as a vehicle for economic growth, the proposals of TLED are more likely to reinforce than rather than reduce social and economic inequality. Secondly, the authors' use of standardised tests as a means by which to rank and sort performance will also be questioned and criticised as potentially underlining rather than undermining inequalities. Finally, it will be argued that the idea of being able to solve national problems by importing practices from other 'successful' countries is shortsighted and can potentially mask the real issues which need to be resolved.

### 3. Economics and (in) equality

According to the World Bank (2011), Colombia has a solid and stable economy with a large domestic market and a rich natural resource endowment. It is considered to be an upper middle income country whose growth in 2013 (4.7%) was above the regional average (3.7 %). Indeed, it has recently overtaken Argentina to become the 3rd largest economy in Latin America. Nonetheless, as the authors of TLED recognise, Colombia is '*one of the most unequal countries in Latin America and the world.*' (TLED 2014:6) In 2012, Colombia's GINI coefficient (where 0 represents perfect equality, and 100 implies perfect inequality) (World Bank -2 Accessed 2014) was, at 53.5, only slightly below that of 2010 (55.9) when it was ranked as being the 10th highest in the world (CIA Accessed 2014). Therefore, although Colombia's economy is growing and the country can claim to be "*a robust free market economy*' where '*Investor confidence and commercial ties with major world economies are on the rise*', (Colombian Embassy - Washington Accessed 2014) the promise of "*Prosperity for All*" is still far from being achieved. Within this context, the Fundacion Compartir indicate that although there are many paths to equality, a '*good quality education for all is the most efficient way to achieve it.*' (TLED 2014:6).

While recognising the costs of the proposals they make, the authors claim that it would be '*difficult to imagine a more profitable inversion of public resources ... taking into account the considerable impact that it would have on economic growth and on the equality of opportunity for all Colombians.*' (TLED 2014:7) Here, words such as '*efficient*', '*profitable inversion*', '*public resources*' and '*economic growth*'



leave no doubt as to the predominant field of discourse of the authors, all of whom, it turns out have backgrounds in economics or industrial engineering, as opposed to education. In choosing these individuals as the experts to carry out the investigation, it would seem that the priorities of the Fundacion Compartir are clear; education is at the service of the economy rather than vice-versa.

The use, throughout TLED, of terms related to economics and the competitive comparison with other countries indicates that the authors are promoting (or preaching) 'the education gospel' (Grubb and Lazerson, cited Lauder et al 2006: 5), a rhetoric which is now considered 'common sense' and which indicates that a nation's prosperity depends upon its having a 'highly skilled workforce with the knowledge, enterprise and insights required to attract the global supply of high skilled, high waged employment.' (Ibid: 5) There is an assumption that the ends of education are primarily functional, designed to increase the individual's and the country's economic potential. The idea is that if a quality education can be made available to all, the playing field of employment prospects will be levelled and each individual will benefit from their own "employability". It is assumed that an increase in educational quality will lead to an increase in economic growth which in turn will lead to '*Prosperity for All*'.

Unfortunately, there is much to suggest that while prosperity may indeed be promoted, it is more likely to be acquired by the few than by the many. In other words, while for some the relationship between education and the economy may result in a virtuous circle of growth leading to prosperity; for many it is likely to remain vicious, a circle linked more to poverty than progress. Shields (2013), refers to critiques which identify current models of formal schooling as providing the means of '*reproducing and expanding an inherently unjust system*' (Shields 2013:31) by serving capitalists interests in '*preparing students for a lifetime of exploitative wage labor.*' (Bowles and Gintis, cited Shields: 33) In terms of the current situation in Colombia, Rincon Villamil (2010) argues that the functional perception of education as preparation for work is a significant factor in the propagation of social inequalities and, as such, an obstacle to intergenerational mobility. He argues that by framing education from this perspective, the less favoured social groups are led to believe that success within the system will lead to increased social mobility, while in reality,

they are “*simply converted in efficient market employees*’ (Rincon Villamil 2010:47) trained to slot into their role in the production line. This “*intention to develop labor skills rather than form intellectual agents* (Bourdieu cited Rincon Villamil:41) means that while they may no longer be the traditional ‘peasants’ of colonial Spain, the people are still subjugated to a ruling (economic) elite, their knowledge and skills employed to the benefit of others. Not only is this unlikely to eradicate inequality it may, in fact, destabilise or derail progress in the future when those who have been ‘promised’ prosperity through education find themselves ‘*unemployed or locked into low wage work*’ a situation which could lead to ‘*high levels of frustration, if not social unrest.*’ (Lauder et al 2006: 65)

As mentioned earlier, Colombia has a solid and stable economy with a large domestic market and a rich natural resource endowment; however, the resulting benefits are not distributed equally throughout its population. In contrast to the assumptions of TLED where improving teachers and education is set out as being as a significant factor in the promotion of socio-economic equality, Stromquist (2006) paints a picture of a country where this is unlikely to be successful, a country where poverty is “*not a question of stubborn pockets of uneducated or untrained people but .... rather inherent in the social and economic structure of the region.*” (Stromquist 2006:967) A more detailed description of this social and economic structure is given by Acemoglu and Robinson in their book “Why Nations Fail” (2012). Here, the economic structure of Colombia is defined as “*extractive*”, that is to say, characterised by institutions which ‘*extract incomes and wealth from one subset of society to benefit a different subset*’. (Acemoglu & Robinson 2012:70) This is in contrast to ‘*inclusive*’ economies where “*economic institutions require secure property rights and economic opportunities not just for the elite but for a broad cross section of society* (Acemoglu & Robinson 2012:69). Colombia and its Latin American neighbours, are, according to this analysis still suffering from the fact that “*the extractive political and economic institutions of the Spanish conquistadors in Latin America have endured, condemning much of the region to poverty* (Acemoglu & Robinson 2012:108). They argue that the differences in political and economic structures apparent between, for example, North and South America, are a result of the fact that the colonies set up in Latin America were essentially feudal in nature.

Unlike the United States where historical influences led the colonists to establish an open, pluralistic political system, the colonists in Latin America, first under the auspices of the Spanish King, then in their own rights as citizens of independent republics, used their political power to subjugate the indigenous population, and to set up economic institutions which protected their own private property and wealth at the cost of others. As a result, inequalities in Colombia are deep-rooted, ingrained into the political, economic and social institutions, a fact which is perhaps dismissed by the authors of TLED in their failure to take into account the inequalities inherent within the highly segregated education system established within the country.

In this segregated or 'bifurcated' system (Stromquist 2006:975), children of elite families attend high quality, highly resourced, (usually bilingual) private schools while the remainder are enrolled in an under-resourced, under-valued public system. The lack of reference to this highly segregated education system within TLED is at best naive and at worst, negligent as it ignores the fact that graduation from one of the country's elite private schools is likely to be a much clearer marker of success than any one-off test result. Not only are students from these schools more likely to have a greater quantity of schooling (more hours in the school day), a higher quality of resources (both physical and human), and undoubtedly a greater set of socio-economic advantages (a fact which can be assumed if their parents can afford the usually high fees). They are, as a result of their attendance to these schools also likely to acquire the type of cultural and social capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Apple, 2006) needed for success within a system dominated by a particular social elite. One illustration of this can be seen in the fact that the great majority of elite private schools in Colombia are bilingual, with many offering not only the Colombian Bachiller but also the International Baccalaureate Diploma or the American High School Diploma. As a result, the ability to communicate in English, French or German (amongst others), at a high level of proficiency, is a clear marker of social status and educational background. This not only gives these students a significant advantage in today's globalised world but also marks their membership of an exclusive social group, (similar to the impact of speaking with 'received pronunciation' in the UK). This is, therefore, typical of the situation described by Stromquist who observes that although education in Latin America may indeed help *'individuals obtain better jobs and salaries'*, the *'bifurcated'* nature of its educational

systems, *'brings disproportionately higher rewards to the wealthier social classes'* (Stromquist 2006:978). Added to this is the fact that *'the wage differential between public and private is substantial enough to foster a migration of the best qualified teachers toward the private system'* (Stromquist 2006: 969), suggesting that the reforms to improve teacher excellence in the public system may subsequently result in a 'brain drain' away from those who would most benefit.

Acemoglu and Robinson (2012) also note that: *'The key to understanding why South Korea and the United States have inclusive economic institutions is not just their pluralistic political institutions but also their sufficiently centralised and powerful states.'* (Acemoglu & Robinson: 2012:76). Again, this stands in contrast to Colombia where the lack of sufficient centralised control means that *'there are significant parts of the country where (the state) provides few public services and almost no law and order'*. (Acemoglu & Robinson: 2012:76). They observe that although there are parts of the country which function well, with *'high levels of human capital and entrepreneurial skill,'* there are other parts of the country where the institutions are highly extractive *'even falling to provide a minimal degree of state authority'*. (Acemoglu & Robinson: 2012:76).

An anecdotal illustration of the lack of controls and regulations in Colombia was seen recently when reports indicated that following reforms allocating funds to schools according to the number of students enrolled, the authorities found that over 145,000 'ghost' students had been registered throughout the country. (El Tiempo 2012) An assumption that no-one would ever check, had led to unscrupulous authorities inventing non-existent students so as to fraudulently claim the related funds. Simply improving the quality of teachers in this type of system is unlikely to be sufficient. While reforms may be put in place to effectively select and train teachers, and while they may even be given economic incentives to work far from the urban capitals, a lack of sufficient centralisation with its corresponding controls and regulations will mean that any positive impact is not likely to endure. Indeed, this lack of control perhaps explains why simple punctuality and attendance are considered key factors of the teacher evaluation system (difficult to evaluate someone if they are not actually there).

This issue is clearly recognised by the authors of TLED in that they refer to the characteristics of the Colombian educational system as being more often 'de facto' than 'de jure'. They explain that " *when responding to the questions necessary for characterising the case of Colombia, it is imperative to make a distinction between what is contemplated by the law (de jure) and why really occurs in terms of the management of teachers in the country (de facto)*". (TLED: 230) In fact, the authors find significant differences between the 'de jure' and 'de facto' answers in all of the six dimensions except selection and retention and promotion. Despite this, they do not indicate how their own proposed reforms would be monitored in order to guarantee effective implementation.

Finally, the world of economics is a world driven by numbers, a world in which a country and its unique characteristics are reduced to a set of figures such as Gross National Product; GINI coefficient; rate of economic growth and inflation. Taking an economic perspective on education seems to have a similar effect. It is assumed that the quality of a country's education and the achievement of its students can be reduced to a limited set of numbers: the average scores on a standardised test. The authors of TLED assume just this, using the results of the PISA tests as the sole indicators of a country's education quality. Unfortunately, as Hugh Morrison, cited Zhao (2014 Loc 3662) observes, ' *there are very few things you can summarise with a number, and yet PISA claims to be able to capture a country's entire education system in just three of them.*' With this approach, the danger is that, ' *the wider social, cultural, demographic and economic conditions which directly and massively influence the educational performance of a country's students are ignored*' and ' *an entire education is reduced to a limited test of key competencies*' (Feniger and Lefstein 2014:2). This next section considers how these assumptions undermine the potential impact of the proposed reforms.

#### **4. The trouble with testing.**

In TLED the authors clearly formulate their proposals based on the idea that test results are a proxy for educational quality. They use an analysis of the 2009 PISA test results, to identify ' *the principal differences in the educational model of schools of exceptional and poor performance.*' and also define ' *teacher quality*' as the ' *value*

*added to learning, in terms of their contribution to improvement in the performance of students on standardised tests*'. (TLED 2014:20) They also make reference to Hanushek, citing his claim (made for the US) that *'if between 5 and 10% of the worst teachers can be replaced for others of average quality; the country would obtain points on the PISA tests comparable to those of Canada and Finland'* (Hanushek cited in TLED 2014: 20). Here, the words *'worst'* and *'average'* clearly expose the deficit model of teachers which the authors are assuming as a basis for their proposal (ironic when their aim is to increase the prestige of teachers). The use of the pejorative term *'worst'* even seems to imply that all teachers are *'bad'* and all we can hope for is to replace the worst of them.

In a similar way, when identifying the projected impact of their proposal, the author's assumptions are framed entirely within an economically motivated, test based accountability system. They claim that by 2040, as a result of the proposed reforms, Colombian students could be attaining scores on the PISA test similar to those of Finland, Singapore, South Korea and Canada. Assuming a relationship between improvement in student performance and individual productivity, they estimate that their proposals to transform teacher performance will produce *'an increase of between 16 and 32% in the salaries of the country's high school graduates. Given the number of students, the present net value of this improvement is equivalent to between 40 and 98 billion pesos in 2013'*. (TLED 2014:43) thus emphasising the perceived causal relationship between test scores, educational equality and national economic success (the education gospel). However, a number of studies have shown that these assumptions are, at best, erroneous, and at worst, dangerous.

Zhao (2014) critically analyses the relationship between test scores, educational quality and economic success using the example of China, and the desires of the US to emulate its success on test scores as a means by which to demonstrate that a focus on such scores, is more likely to diminish rather increase the quality of education. He recognises that while adopting techniques and traditions from 'successful' countries such as China may help to increase the standing of the US on international tests, such a focus may lead the country to lose what has made it modern: its *'creativity; entrepreneurship and genuine diversity of talents.'* (Zhao 2014 Loc 765) In other words, what may be lost could be much more valuable than what

may be won. This opinion echoes that of Baker (2007) who, compares the PISA scores of various countries with alternative indicators of success and concludes that there is *'no connection between high test scores and how well a nation does at achieving wealth, growth, democracy or quality of life.* (Baker 2007:106) Baker warns that *'the fixation with test scores also harms the nation by diverting time, attention and resources away from American's real educational problems'*. He identifies these problems as: *'too few minorities graduating from college, the run-down schools in the nation's inner cities, misdirected parental interference in schools and the lack of parental and administrative support for teachers'*. (Ibid: 104) Zhao observes that *'unless PISA scores are the ultimate goal of education there is no reason to admire, envy or copy China'* (Zhao 2014 Loc 3916) while Stewart (cited in Zhao 2014 Loc 3626) ridicules the focus on PISA scores as the ultimate goal of education by likening the situation to events in the fairy tale: "The Emperor's New Clothes'. From this perspective, the test scores are like an invisible cloth, without substance and woven of imaginary threads, but the authorities are too afraid to dismiss them for fear of finding themselves to be losers in the international arena.

While the specific problems faced by US may be different from those of Colombia, Cruz (2006) also questions the wisdom of a focus on standardised tests within the Colombian context observing that the use of a standardised and universalised evaluation which does not recognise diversity, results in *'elitism and privilege'* it *'reduces and condemns, trivialises the complexity of a school built with cultural and ethnic, rural and urban differences, with different models and concepts, endangering its existence.'* (Cruz 2006:145) Nonetheless, the authors of TLED not only place their study firmly within the context of standardised tests and rankings but also use those tests as part of their strategy. As mentioned earlier, their definition of an excellent teacher is someone who *'adds value'* to student performance on tests. In order to achieve this 'teacher excellence', they set out a proposal for selecting potential teachers which depends almost entirely upon an individual's score in the national Pruebas Saber. They note that *'successful countries recruit future teachers in the highest third of the entrance exams'* and that *'The contrary occurs in Colombia where students with the lowest averages on the state exam are those who enter or choose the teaching profession'*. (TLED 2014:259) The authors suggest that the Prueba Saber 11 and the subsequent Prueba Saber Pro (taken at the end of an

undergraduate course) should be used as '*instruments of selection*'. (TLED 2014:263). To attract high quality candidates they propose a '*massive*' program of scholarships (or rather loans which will be written off on successful completion of the course) which would be awarded to those candidates whose scores are in the highest third of the Prueba Saber 11 and who have been admitted to an accredited teacher training program.

There are a number of issues here, not least of which is the notion that high scores on a standardised test can be considered a reliable indicator of quality teacher potential. Of course, if the aim of education is to achieve high test scores, then this may well be the case (good test takers may well be able to teach others how to become good at taking tests). However, if the aims are beyond this, and education means more than success on a test, relying on specific scores may well mean that some excellent potential teachers are eliminated from the process. Yeh (2009) refers to the conclusions of a study carried out by the same OECD into teacher quality. According to this study '*teacher quality involves multiple characteristics: a commitment to keep searching for more effective instructional methods, communication of warmth, use of humour, patience, perseverance, and efforts to develop pupil's self-esteem even when confronted by negative student attitudes and behaviour.*' (Hopkins and Stern 1996 cited in Yeh 2009:220) Although someone taking the Prueba Saber 11 may well benefit from humour, patience and perseverance (if only to get through the 8 hour exam), it is difficult to see how their test score may be indicative of the presence or absence of these qualities. Measuring teacher potential in this way may be convenient and in keeping with what would seem common-sense (who would deny that teachers should be high quality?) but it clearly ignores the complexities and demands of a profession which is reliant both on cognitive and non-cognitive skills.

Once within the profession, the testing proposed within TLED does not stop. The authors suggest implementing '*concursos*' or competitions for teachers to win scholarships for masters or doctorates, thus consolidating the series of competitions already in place to rank and sort teachers for access to specific teaching posts and to gain extra points on the '*escalafon*' (teachers' pay scale). Again, this seems to be somewhat short sighted. By setting up competitions as a motivational tool where the



'winners' get to choose their teaching assignment, the system is clearly providing a channel by which 'successful' teachers are able to move from less attractive to more attractive assignments. Teachers who partake in professional learning are therefore less likely to do so in order to improve their current situation but more to find an escape route from difficult or disadvantaged schools.

Zhao (2014-2) sums up the impact of such a test-based accountability system in the US demonstrating the impact it has had on teachers and teacher quality by indicating that after 10 years of a system which *'reflects in every way the blue-collar conception of teaching as an occupation .... the result is very low teacher morale, plummeting applications to schools of education, the need to recruit too many of our teachers from the lowest levels of high school graduates, a testing regime that has narrowed the curriculum for millions of students to a handful of subjects and a very low level of aspiration.'* Zhao (2014-2) Rather than increase the quality candidate pool for teachers and raise their social prestige, the system seems to have emphasised the deficit model of teachers and lowered their social standing; quite the opposite of the hoped for result. This particular phenomenon may be explained by the observations of Angrist and Guryan (2008) who note that rather than attracting the 'best' candidates into the profession, *'testing has acted more as a barrier to entry than a quality screen'* tending to discourage otherwise qualified individuals from applying for jobs. (Angrist and Guryan 2008:500)

Narrowing the concept of effective teacher qualities to that which might be measured on a test and subsequently discouraging candidates from applying for teacher training programmes is not the only potential disadvantage of a test based accountability system. Another, potentially more damaging issue, is the negative impact test scores and competition have on the capacity for peer group collaboration. The system proposed by TLED in which teachers participate in competitions for teaching posts and promotions, together with the practice of measuring quality through test scores, consolidates the notion of 'positional competition' within the profession, not only in terms of student credentials, but also those of the teachers. Teachers are forced into a situation of mutual competitiveness where collaboration with peers is not seen as being in an individual's nor even a school's best interests. At best, this may prevent one individual from supporting

another as in the example given by Yeh (2008) where one teacher may avoid mentoring another for fear of being outshone. At worst, it could lead to dishonesty and corruption on the scale described by Zhao (2014) where 178 principals and teachers from schools in Atlanta, Georgia, were involved in a conspiracy to 'improve' student test scores through cheating. (Zhao 2014: Loc 266). As will be seen in this next section, a temptation towards corruption is certainly not one which would be beneficial within the current context of Colombia.

## 5. Lost in translation

Feniger and Lefstein in their study "*How not to reason with PISA data*" (2014) coin the term "*Pisa Reasoning*" to make reference to the line of thinking which claims that "*superior test performance is evidence of superior policies*". They indicate that this, in itself, is built upon a central "*Policy and Structures Assumption*" which holds that "*global variation in students' educational performance is primarily attributable to national educational policies and structure*". (Feniger and Lefstein 2014: 2) From this perspective, all a country has to do is adopt or imitate the policies and structures of its more successful peers and all of its educational (and subsequently economic) problems will be solved.

Unfortunately, the context of Colombia is significantly different to that of the four countries used as case studies and, as such, it is questionable whether implementing their policies and structures will have the desired effect. In this section, key contextual characteristics of Singapore, Finland, Canada and South Korea are compared to Colombia so as to demonstrate the problems inherent in assuming that the same strategies might have the same results in another context. While there is clearly an irony in referring to "success" in terms of PISA test results after having criticised their use as a proxy for educational quality, the exercise nonetheless demonstrates the potential weakness of the "*policies and structures assumption*" as a foundation for improvement.

Seth (2012) equates success in the education system of South Korea to the "*unbridled social demand for education*" (Seth 2012: 13) which has characterised the country since 1945. This demand he claims is owed, not only to a "*Confucian*"

cultural heritage in which education is valued “*both as a means of personal self-cultivation and as a way of achieving status and power*” (Seth 2012:14) but also to the influences of world war II and “*the collapse of the colonial regime of Japan which broke down the old social order ... and removed the barriers that had limited higher education to a hereditary elite*”. (Seth 2012:14) Added to this, tight state control meant that South Korea was able to effectively implemented policy to establish “*universal and uniform basic education*” which “*eliminated the sharp disparities between regions and social classes that often characterised developing nations*”. (Seth 2012:15) Unfortunately, as noted earlier, state authority in Colombia is weak and centralised control is an optimistic idea rather than a concrete reality meaning that such an effective implementation of policy throughout the country is extremely difficult to achieve.

Effective state control is also characteristic of Singapore, where, in contrast to Colombia, ‘*persistent political leadership and alignment between policy and practice*’ (OECD 2010:160) are identified by the OECD as key to the country’s success. Another characteristic identified in Singapore is the ‘*culture of continuous improvement and future orientation*’. (OECD 2010:160) This again contrasts with Colombia where, according to Hofstede’s analysis of cultural dimensions, the culture is “*normative*’ and people “*exhibit great respect for traditions, a relatively small propensity to save for the future and a focus on achieving quick results.*” (Hofstede: Accessed 2014). An education system cannot be changed overnight and without consistency, coherence and long term commitment, the strategies are likely to stagnate.

In the case of Finland, success is put down in part to a “*political consensus to educate all children together in a common school system*” (Reay 2012:596) a consensus which is clearly far from being achieved in Colombia. Other factors identified by Reay include: an expectation that all children can achieve at all levels; collective responsibility and the ‘teaching excellence’ which subsequently becomes the focus of TLED.

Significantly, ‘*trust*’ is seen as significant both for Finland and for Canada where ‘*a climate of relative trust and mutual respect*’ is considered key. (OECD 2010:65)

Unfortunately, as noted earlier, teachers in Colombia are far from having the respect enjoyed, particularly in Finland where teaching is regarded as a '*noble, prestigious profession ... driven by moral purpose rather than material needs.*' (Sahlberg 2010:1) Simply increasing salaries and embarking on a public campaign to reach this is unlikely to be effective in a country where "*corruption*" is seen as the most problematic factor for doing business (The World Economic Forum 2013:158) and where the World Bank identifies not education, nor the development of human capital as a priority but the need to increase transparency, accountability and the effectiveness of institutions. (World Bank 2011)

## **6. Conclusion**

The current study has identified a number of assumptions and flaws in the conceptual framework of TLED including the narrow, potentially negative impact of the functional, economic perspective of education; the flaws inherent in a test based accountability system which reduces quality education to a series of number and the idea that practices successful in one context may translate successfully to another. While the specific reforms outlined in the proposal may, indeed, have positive elements, the idea that they will have a substantial, long term impact is doubtful unless some of these fundamental concepts are reviewed.

It is important to note that the current study is limited in that it is theoretical rather than empirical. True conclusions as to the effectiveness of these reforms could only be drawn from their implementation in a controlled situation, a situation which is not likely to occur in the current context. Also, while it has been argued that teacher excellence cannot be measured by standardised tests, it has not been within the scope of this study to fully explore alternative indicators and therefore the definition of what success in a school might look like remains unclear. At the same time, there is potential for further exploring what successful teachers might look like by further analysing the 'student perceptions' of teacher excellence as referenced in the PISA questionnaires; a database which is used by the authors of TLED to justify their focus on teachers but subsequently ignored throughout their study.

There are also limitations in that by setting out to examine the broader framework of the Colombian education system, there has been a certain assumption that all schools within the private sector share similar characteristics and that these are significantly different from those in the public sector. In actual fact, there is a wide range and variety of school types in both sectors and, undoubtedly, some private schools which are less 'successful' than their public counterparts. Identifying appropriate indicators of school success and carrying out case studies on schools which achieve them would be an interesting further study.

Finally, while at least part of the answer undoubtedly lies in transforming the institutions of Colombia into 'inclusive', 'high-trust' entities, it is again not within the scope of this study to consider country-wide political or socio-economic reforms. Nonetheless, there are two areas, which do seem to be worth considering and which could increment the possibility of strategies such as those proposed in TLED having a positive impact.

Firstly, the authors of TLED note in their analysis of schools with exceptional and poor performance, that they discount the impact of school leadership not because it is not significant but because the self-reporting upon which the PISA questionnaires rely is not a 'useful indicator'. (TLED 2014: 66). However, at various points throughout the study, reference is made to facts which do, indeed, indicate that school leadership is of considerable importance. For example, it is clear from the authors' analysis that school leadership is the key factor for success (or failure) in the implementation of teacher evaluation systems. They also note that school leaders are key to the effective management of human resources and, in particular, the effective assignation of teachers to appropriate vacancies. Significantly, they also observe the positive impact of proactive school leadership and their importance in creating a healthy school climate. (TLED 2014:192) Unfortunately, this area is not immune to the lack of trust mentioned earlier, with many teachers taking the view that '*the better the relationship between the Director and the teacher, the lesser the institutional control*'. (TLED 2014: 203) Related to this is the tendency of school leaders to play a political rather than a pedagogical role, focusing on administration and ministerial policy rather than on students and their learning. This would all suggest that a focus on strengthening school leadership is necessary if any of these

proposed reforms are to be successful. To implement the reforms without ensuring institutional capacity to monitor their effectiveness through appropriate pedagogical leadership would undoubtedly create a further gap between 'de jure' policy and 'de facto' reality.

Finally, to see a real change within the system it seems that '*a complete turn-around would have to be generated in all social structures*' so as to put people first. (Rincon Villamil 2010:47). Ironically, Colombia would not have to go too far to find theories and proposals to make this happen. Another example of the inconsistencies in the system can be found in the fact that by law, every ten years, the Ministry of Education requires that a National Ten Year Education Plan (*Plan Nacional Decenal de Educacion* PNDE) be developed. In 2006 this plan was developed, with, according to the authors, the participation of '*more than twenty thousand citizens from all corners of the national geography and belonging to diverse sociocultural classes*' (PNDE). According to the website, the '*primordial objective*' of this plan is that it be converted into a social pact for the right to education.' As such, the plan highlights that education should be seen as a fundamental right rather than simply an economic investment (Shields 2013) and indeed, its objectives include "*forming the student as a citizen in a process of development of personality, respectful of the rights, responsibilities and cultural diversity in all its manifestations*" (PNDE 2006). Economic discourse, while present, (the document refers to education for *work* as well as for *human development*) does not predominate. Unfortunately, this plan and its related goals, proposals and actions are frequently sidelined in favour of more high-profile politically and economically motivated projects meaning that while attempts are made to align the plan to government proposals, (PNDE 2010) the inconsistency of focus has undoubtedly contributed to the fact that while '*gratifying developments*' have been made since its inception, there has also been '*worrying stagnation and slow evolution resulting in an average progress of 56.7%.*'"

There are, however, success stories as can be seen in the example of the '*Fundacion Escuela Nueva*', a pedagogical model designed by Vicky Colbert, Beryl Levinger and Oscar Mogollon in the seventies with a view to improving the quality and effectiveness of schools through the components of curriculum, classroom, community training and monitoring of management. Such has been the success of

this model in rural schools that it has received international recognition with evaluations showing 'systematically, that the students of New Schools obtain better academic achievement than students in conventional schools'. (FEN 2014) It would seem then, that rather than looking across the world to countries and cultures far removed from their own, the 'powers that be' would be much better served to look to their own and recover, via the PNDE and other local projects, the priorities and, more importantly, the perspective which may indeed provide the means by which to 'improve the quality of education for all Colombians'.

## References

BUNDRETT, M & RHODES, C (2011) *Leadership for Quality and Accountability in Education*. London: Routledge

ACEMOGLU, D & ROBINSON, j (2012) *Why Nations Fail*. New York: Crowd Publishers.

ANGRIST, J & GURYAN, J (2008) Does teacher testing raise teacher quality? Evidence from state certification requirements. *Economics of Education Review* Vol 27 483-503

APPLE, M (2006) *Producing Inequalities: Neo-liberalism, Neo-conservatism and the Politics of Educational Reform*. In Lauder, H; Brown, P; Dillabough, J & Halsey, A (Eds.) *Education, Globalization and Social Change*. (2006) Oxford: OUP

BAKER, K (2007) *Are international tests worth anything?* *Phi Delta Kappan* Vol. 89 (2) 101-104

BILL AND MELINDA GATES FOUNDATION (2013) *Ensuring fair and reliable measures of effective teaching*. Available from: [http://www.metproject.org/downloads/MET\\_Ensuring\\_Fair\\_and\\_Reliable\\_Measures\\_Practitioner\\_Brief.pdf](http://www.metproject.org/downloads/MET_Ensuring_Fair_and_Reliable_Measures_Practitioner_Brief.pdf). Accessed 01/09/14

BOURDIEU, P (1986) *The forms of capital*. In Lauder, H; Brown, P; Dillabough, J & Halsey, A (Eds.) *Education, Globalization and Social Change*. (2006) Oxford: OUP

BROWN, P; LAUDER, H & ASHTON, D (2011) *The Global Auction*. Oxford: OUP

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/rankorder/2172rank.html> Accessed 12/09/14

CRUZ, A (2006) La 'revolución educativa: transcurso, resultados y perspectiva. *Análisis Político* Vol. 57 126-152

DEPARTAMENTO NACIONAL DE PLANEACION (DNP) (2010) Plan Nacional de Desarrollo 2010-2014 Available from: <https://www.dnp.gov.co>. Accessed 01/10/14

EL TIEMPO (2012) Available from: <http://www.eltiempo.com/archivo/documento/CMS-12210402> Accessed 23/09/14

EL TIEMPO (2014-1) Available from: <http://www.eltiempo.com/estilo-de-vida/educacion/colombia-quedaria-de-ultima-si-se-hiciera-un-mundial-de-educacion-/14141175> Accessed 05/06/14

EL TIEMPO (2014-2) Available from: <http://www.eltiempo.com/estilo-de-vida/educacion/colombia-en-el-ultimo-lugar-en-nuevos-resultados-de-pruebas-pisa/14224736> Accessed 05/06/14

EL TIEMPO (2014-3) Available from: <http://www.eltiempo.com/archivo/documento/CMS-13248995> Accessed 05/06/14

EMBASSY OF COLOMBIA (2014) Available from: <http://www.colombiaemb.org/node/1328>

Accessed 06/09/14

FENIGER, y & LEFSTEIN, A (2014) How not to reason with PISA data: an ironic investigation. *Journal of Educational Policy* DOI 10.1080/02680939.2014.892156

FUNDACION COMPARTIR (2014-1) Available from: <http://fundacioncompartir.org/front/media/> Accessed 15/06/14

FUNDACION COMPARTIR (2014-2) Available from [www.fundacioncompartir.org](http://www.fundacioncompartir.org) Accessed 02/04/14

GAMBOA, LF & WALTENBERG, F (2012) Inequality of opportunity for educational achievement in Latin America: Evidence from PISA 2006-2009 *Economics of Education Review* Vol. 31 694-708

GARCIA JARAMILLO, S; MALDONADO CARRIZOSA, D; PERRY RUBIO, G; RODRIGUEZ ORGALES, C; SAAVEDRA CALVO, JE (2014) *Tras La Excelencia Docente: Como mejorar la calidad de la educación para todos los Colombianos*. Available from: [www.fundacioncompartir.org](http://www.fundacioncompartir.org) Accessed 02/04/14



GREENWALD, R; HEDGES, L & LAINE, R (1996) The effect of school resources on student achievement. *American Educational Research Association* Vol. 66 (3) 361-396

HANUSHEK, E (2011) The economic value of higher teacher quality. *Economics of Education Review* Vol. 30 466-479

HANUSHEK, E The economics of school quality. *German Economic Review* Vol. 6 (3) 269-286

HOFSTEDDE, G (2014) <http://geert-hofstede.com/colombia.html> Accessed 03/10/14

LAUDER, H; BROWN, P; DILLABOUGH, J & HALSEY, A (2006) Introduction to Education, globalization and Social Change. Oxford: OUP

OECD (2010) Strong performers and successful reformers in education: Lessons from PISA for the United States Accessed 14/10/14 Available from:

<http://www.oecd.org/edu/school/programmeforinternationalstudentassessmentpisa/>  
Accessed 01/10/14

PND (2010) Plan Nacional Desarrollo Available from: <https://www.dnp.gov.co/Plan-Nacional-de-Desarrollo> Accessed 15/10/14

PNDE (2006) Available from: <http://www.plandecenal.edu.co>. Accessed 12/09/14

PNDE (2010) Articulación entre las propuestas de gobierno del presidente Juan Manuel Santos y los lineamientos del plan nacional de educación 2006-2016 Accessed 25/10/14

RAND CORPORATION (2013) Teachers matter: Understanding teachers' impact on student achievement. Available from: <http://www.plandecenal.edu.co>. Accessed 1/10/14

REAY, D (2012) What would a socially just education system look like? Saving the minnows from the pike *Journal of Education Policy* Vol 27 (5) 587-599

REVISTA DINERO (2013) Available from: <http://www.dinero.com/edicion-impresa/caratula/articulo/los-mejores-colegios> Accessed 09/09/14

REVISTA SEMANA (2013) Available from: <http://www.semana.com/nacion/articulo/resultados-pruebas-pisa-en-colombia/367355-3> Accessed 05/06/14

RINCON VILLAMIL, O (2010) Análisis de la política educativa actual en Colombia desde la perspectiva teórica de Pierre Bourdieu Available from: <http://dialnet.unirioja.es/descarga/articulo/3681094.pdf> Vol. 4 (8)

RIVKIN, S; HANUSHEK, E; KAIN, J (2005) Teachers, schools and academic achievement. *Econometrica: Journal of the Econometric Society* Vol. 73 (2) 417-458

ROBINSON, J (2013) Colombia: Another 100 years of solitude? *Current History* Available from: <http://dialnet.unirioja.es/descarga/articulo/3681094.pdf>

ROBINSON, J (2005) A normal Latin American Country? A perspective on Colombian development. Available from: <http://scholar.harvard.edu/jrobinson/publications/normal-latin-american-country-perspective-colombian-development> Accessed 12/09/14

SAHLBERG, P (2010) The secret to Finland's success: Educating teachers. *Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education - Research brief* Available from:

<https://edpolicy.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/publications/secret-finland's-success-educating-teachers.pdf> Accessed 01/11/14

SETH, M (2012) Education zeal, state control and citizenship in South Korea *Citizenship Studies* Vol. 16 (1) 13-28

SHIELDS, R (2013) *Globalization and International Education*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

STROMQUIST, N (2006). What poverty does to girls' education: The intersection of class, gender and policy in Latin America. In Lauder, H; Brown, P; Dillabough, J & Halsey, A (Eds.) *Education, Globalization and Social Change*. (2006) Oxford: OUP

WORLD BANK (2011) International Bank for Reconstruction and Development and International Finance Corporation country partnership strategy for The Republic of Colombia for the period FY 2012-2016. Report No 60620-CO Available from: <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/colombia> Accessed 09/09/14

WORLD BANK (2014) Available from: <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.GINI> Accessed 05/09/14

WORLD ECONOMIC FORUM (2013) The global competitiveness report 2013-2014 Available from: <http://www.weforum.org/issues/global-competitiveness>

YEH, S (2009) The cost-effectiveness of raising teacher quality. *Educational Research Review* Vol. 4 220-232

ZHAO Y (2014-1) *Who's afraid of the big bad dragon? Why China has the best (and worst) education system in the world*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass (Kindle Edition)

ZHAO, Y (2014-2) Available from: <http://www.livingindialogue.com/time-give-yong-zhao-responds-marc-tucker/> Accessed 15/10/14