

# **Aspirations of Higher Education: young Afro-Colombians' narratives**

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This document represents part of the author's study programme while at the Institute of Social Studies. The views stated therein are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Institute.

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## **Abstract**

For decades, studies in Colombia had shown that young people from ethnic minorities and lower socioeconomic backgrounds have the worst results in the Saber test, due to the quality of education they receive in their local schools. This reality puts them in disadvantage when accessing high quality education at the university level. However, despite these inequalities in the education system, some manage to access higher education in cities as Bogota and Medellin, as a way to achieve their aspirations for a “better life”. This research analyzed the educational system regarding its exclusionary structures through the lens of the narratives and stories of five young Afro-Colombians from Chocó between 18 and 23 years old, who manage to leave Chocó. These students’ aspirations respond to habituated aspiration constructed collectively at the local level, driven by the awareness build in the social imaginary of the necessity to find ways to social mobility through education.

## **Keywords**

Afro-Colombians, Chóco, Race, Education, higher education, affirmative action.

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## Abbreviations

ICETEX:	The Colombian Institute of Educational Credit and Technical Studies Abroad
ICFES:	The Colombian Institute for the Promotion of Higher Education
SPP:	“SerPiloPaga”, a Colombian program supporting university studies for youngsters with low economic background and good academic grades.
CRT:	Critical Race Theory

# Aspirations of Higher Education: young Afro-Colombians' narratives

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Research Problem

The Colombian constitution recognized ethnic diversity in 1991 and, at least nominally, granted recognition and protection to ethnic minority communities. For the first time, it recognized black communities - *Comunidades negras*<sup>1</sup> - as an ethnic group. Nevertheless, the inequalities in which these ethnic communities were immersed became more visible with this recognition. One of their biggest challenges was access to education. Many children in rural and disadvantaged regions of the country were outside the educational system. In 1991, the recognition of free education as a right at the primary and secondary levels gave thousands of children in rural areas of Colombia the opportunity to access the educational system. This has been the main objective of the national government for the last 25 years, not only seeking to guarantee free access and improve the quality of primary and secondary education, but also to increase the participation of university studies on the part of young people from ethnic minorities and low socioeconomic background.

Many programs have been implemented with the objective of increasing the participation of disadvantaged young people in high quality university studies, since their lack of economic resources prevents them from paying the tuition fees. Despite this elevated investment, which, in 2015, amounted to USD 50 million in programs like "SerPiloPaga" (a national initiative that intends to grant university scholarships to students from lower socioeconomic background), Afro-Colombians still find many obstacles to attain their higher education aspirations. One of the obstacles is the Saber test, which is a requirement to access university. Recent statistical data from the Ministry of education show that in the last 10 years, students graduated from educational institutions of Chocó not only obtained the worst results at the national level, but are reaching lower and lower ranks every year (see table 1). These results have determined that the students from Chocó are not represented in the best results at the national level, which certainly lowers their chances of obtaining financial aid. Lack of university options is also making these young people aspire to good quality education in cities like Medellin and Bogota, as a way to lead a better life and increase their life chances.

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<sup>1</sup> In the legislation, this term refers to the "group of families of Afro-Colombian descent who have their own culture, shared history and traditions and customs, who demonstrate and maintain awareness and identity that distinguishes them from other ethnic groups" (Ministry of Interior, *Comunidades negras* Department, n.d.).

Table 1 Historical results of the Saber test (ICFES 2015)

ETC Departamental	2015 - %	2010 - %	2005 - %
SANTANDER	49,38	37,46	39,82
CUNDINAMARCA	49,12	40,20	36,51
ARAUCA	46,51	35,21	36,86
NORTE DE SANTANDER	44,40	39,12	39,49
CASANARE	43,37	34,80	32,82
BOYACA	43,16	38,02	35,52
NARIÑO	41,57	38,37	25,00
HUILA	41,20	32,56	35,38
GUAINIA	40,96	45,39	39,64
META	40,69	34,06	35,94
QUINDIO	40,63	34,63	34,05
RISARALDA	39,52	32,71	30,87
PUTUMAYO	39,21	39,52	39,11
CALDAS	36,08	34,71	34,82
VALLE DEL CAUCA	36,07	31,53	16,00
ANTIOQUIA	36,00	30,11	28,56
SAN ANDRES	35,08	25,71	25,37
VICHADA	30,34	24,06	25,63
CAQUETA	29,88	26,29	26,70
TOLIMA	29,30	29,04	29,96
GUAVIARE	27,84	36,27	33,26
CESAR	26,61	24,65	30,04
SUCRE	25,19	22,92	29,96
CORDOBA	24,33	23,70	19,91
ATLANTICO	23,77	24,33	22,36
VAUPES	23,64	22,58	26,17
LA GUAJIRA	22,17	21,23	24,16
CAUCA	20,64	21,55	23,80
AMAZONAS	18,40	17,64	21,48
BOLIVAR	16,74	18,63	16,77
MAGDALENA	14,79	14,68	14,57
CHOCO	9,33	9,98	10,79

This reality turns the transition from secondary education to university into a challenge for many Afro-Colombians in Chocó. In this sense, the present study examines the aspirations of young Afro-descendants who migrate from Chocó to cities like Bogota and Medellin (Colombia) in search for good quality education. Their own voices and narratives - included here in the framework of Critical Race Theory (CRT) - highlight the diverse realities of these young people and how they face social exclusion and discrimination during their educational process. Critical Race Theory “recognizes that legitimating and appropriating the experiential knowledge of people of color is central to understanding, analyzing and teaching about racial subordination” (Solorzano and Yosso, 2002:26)

Along these lines, the current work introduces the stories and narratives of the participants, in order to analyze their experiences along their personal educational pathways. This theoretical framework provides analytical tools to argue that the Colombian educational system is perpetuating the exclusion and stigmatization of ethnic minority communities, since the national educational policy is based on the premise of “equal opportunities for all”. This approach does not recognize the historical exclusion in which ethnic minority communities have been immersed and the different starting points for the members of such communities.

Hence, an analysis of the factors that influence the construction of the aspirations of young Afro-descendants is presented. Some policy makers in the United Kingdom argue that young people from low socioeconomic background tend to have lower aspirations, which diminishes their life chances. Therefore, aspirations need to be included in educational policies (Kintrea et. al 2015:3). However, it is also true that young Afro-Colombians from Chocó live in disadvantaged contexts featured by poverty,

exclusion and poor quality education, all of which reduce their chances of social mobility. However, and despite the lack of opportunities in their territory, a fraction of these youngsters have high educational aspirations. In this sense, the present research demonstrates that the place in which young Afro-Colombians grow up does not constrain, but stimulates, their aspirations for a better life. When it comes to achieving their aspirations, these people are aware of the limitations of the Chocó territory. Thus, many decide to move to other cities in order to access high quality education. In this context, the social navigation concept is applied to analyze the different pathways that these young Afro-descendants take to reach their aspirations in a constantly changing environment (Vigh 2006).

Thus, the present paper introduces the narratives and stories of five Afro-Colombians: Andrés, Paula, Sofía, Jesús and Marvis. As you will find out, this is not a regular research paper, since it has been written in a very personal way, by including the voice and some experiences of the researcher, whose identity intersects with those of the participants as we are all Afro-Colombians from Chocó who have “decided” to study outside our territory. It is our goal to tell a different story on how young Afro-Colombians experience their educational process. By doing this, I intend to subvert reality, especially of those Colombians that still see us (comunidades negras) through the lense of stereotypes. I hope you enjoy this journey as I did when preparing this paper.

## 1.2 Research motivation<sup>2</sup>

My interest in researching this topic started 20 years ago, when I had to face the reality of leaving home with the aspiration of accomplishing a better future. A 31-year-old Afro-Colombian woman, I was born in Quibdó, the capital city of Chocó. I grew up in a predominantly black community in a country where ethnic minorities are excluded and racially discriminated. Chocó is a predominantly black region where 82% of the population recognize themselves as Afro-Colombians<sup>3</sup> and the lack of opportunities is tangible just by walking the streets or talking to children, about their dreams and aspirations. None of the other 31 states has such a big proportion of Afro-descendants.

Since I started primary school, my family reinforced in me the importance of education in order to lead a better life, one that was different from theirs and that of earlier generations. As I grew up, I realized that this was not just my family’s dream. During our free time, my schoolmates and I used to talk about our future, dreams and aspirations, and about what we needed to do in order to succeed. Many families in Chocó (and in many poor communities of Colombia) rely on education to provide their children with a way out of the inequalities and lack of opportunities in which black communities live in Chocó. As a result, and receiving the support and great effort of their parents, many young people decide to leave Chocó to access good quality education. This is particularly true about university studies, which are mainly conducted in Bogota and Medellin, or in other large cities where friends or relatives can receive and help these students.

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<sup>2</sup>This section is based on the RP Proposal presented 3 June 2016

<sup>3</sup>Afro-Colombian and Afro-descendant will be used interchangeably to mean Colombians of African descent.



Following my father's guidance at the time, I left my family and friends at an early age. Thus, I started high school at the age of 11. I talk about my father's guidance because my idea was to leave after graduating from high school, as other members of the community had done before. Nevertheless, when I talked to the participants of this work, I realized that my father's reasons at that moment were certainly valid. I think now that such strategy currently facilitates my option to take postgraduate studies in the Netherlands. The reason behind it was simple: "good quality education". My parents thought that in this way I would have better chances to get a high score in the ICFES exam and, therefore, enter a high quality university.

Many may think that those who manage to leave Chocó are privileged people who have the economic means to do it. Actually, young Afro-descendants who, like me, manage to leave Chocó, come from different socio-economic backgrounds. There are wealthy people, of course, who have the economic means to cover the expenses of living in Bogota, which is one of the places with the highest cost of life in Colombia. But there is also a big fraction of people who, not being wealthy, make great efforts and resort to family networks to do it. Many young people from the second group face many difficulties and obstacles to reach their goals, while some simply cannot make the transition to this "non-Ethnic majority" world, and some others have to combine education and work to overcome the barriers. The last national census shows that education is the main migration driver for young Afro-Colombians between 18 and 29 years old in Chocó. However, just 58% of them manage to enroll in an educational institution (DANE 2005a:14). This data shows that a big proportion of these young people do not manage to access higher education institutions due to the obstacles they find along the process.

### 1.3 Research questions

This research intends to highlight the narratives of those young Afro-descendants that, despite the structural inequalities of the educational system and the lack of opportunities in our territory (Chocó), find a way to achieve their aspirations or, at least, make a great effort in that direction. In some cases, this includes the transformation of their aspirations in response to resource availability when they have to face the hostile and unstable environment they live in.

Therefore, the aim of this research is to analyze, through the narratives of young Afro-descendants, how they face and overcome social exclusion and discrimination in their quest for education. In response to this objective, I have raised three questions;

- How do young Afro-descendants construct their aspirations to reach higher education?
- How do the schooling experiences of young Afro-descendants shape their options to reach higher education?
- How do young Afro-Colombians navigate through the structural obstacles and possibilities of the system, in order to achieve their aspirations?

In order to answer these questions, I explored the narratives of young Afro-descendants that have migrated from Chocó to get good quality education, following their own and their families' aspirations in order to lead a "better life", different from that of their ancestors. Just as well, the educational policy in Colombia is contested by analyzing how the education policy affects ethnic communities, since it perpetuates inequalities through the non-recognition of the fact that these communities have a different base line when compared to that of the non-ethnic population. Including their voices will contribute to highlight how they experience the structural inequalities of the Colombian educational system and how they navigate through their options and possibilities to attain their aspirations. I argue that the Colombian educational system perpetuates inequality, in spite of which these Afro-Colombians still shelter the aspiration to reach tertiary education.

## 2. Methodology and methods

"The attraction of narrative is that it corresponds more closely to the manner in which the human mind makes sense of experience than does the conventional, abstracted rhetoric of law". (Winter 1989:2228)

This chapter presents the research design, which includes how I selected the participants and the methods I used to collect the data in order to answer the research questions. Just as well, the limitations of such methods are addressed. My personal position as part of the Afro-descendant community and how it contributes to the research are also underpinned.

The nature of the objectives of this research made it a qualitative one, which relies on the narratives of the participants and their experience throughout their educational process. My own voice and experience lead my reflection on what it is like to be an Afro-descendant who left Chocó to move to Bogota and adapted to a new reality in which the dominant culture is lived through in a different way. In this regard, the present research is deeply rooted in Critical Race Theory, whose proponents argue that voices matter in the sense that there is not just one voice; and that *non-whites* can speak through their stories and experiences, which reveal the structure of racism as it is rooted in society (Delgado 1990:98). The reason why it is meaningful to incorporate people's voices into this type of research is addressed elsewhere by this author, who states that by including these voices one can challenge the assumptions of *the dominant culture* and that, since reality is a collectively built social construction, listening to the stories of others enriches our own reality (Delgado 1989:2439)

In this way, the stories and the voices of the participants are the core of this paper, together with my own personal experience, which plays a key role as it is analyzed through the narratives of the participants. Yet, it is not just a voice that speaks about what I see in the stories and narratives of the participants; it is a voice that talks about the interaction between their stories and mine; this is a narrative "about the others and I" (Ellis 2004:XIX). While I was at University, I always had to read what others have to say about us (Afro-Colombians), always showing from their perspective how

discriminated we were. But I never had the opportunity to read how we experience that reality and what we were doing to fight it. The way we are represented stigmatizes us in the sense that it seems we are sitting and waiting for help. This is an opportunity to show the other side of this reality: the stories and experiences of some members of a minority group telling how they are trying to overcome inequalities and exclusion and how they experience discrimination in their daily lives. These voices can both make other members of the group feel identified with the current reflections and show the *dominant group* the oppression in question and its effects. In many occasions the oppressor does not notice oppression as it is perpetuated (Delgado 1989:2437).

## 2.1 Primary data

Primary data Collection attended the Critical Race Theory, for which narratives and stories are central in the analysis of structural inequality in society. The participants of this research were five young Afro-descendants, four of them from Quibdó, and one from *Riosucio*, a very isolated municipality which can only be accessed through the river by which it is located. These 19-to-23-year-old youngsters had left Chocó after finishing high school and migrated to cities like Medellín and Bogotá, with the objective of accessing higher education in qualified universities. The aim of this research is not to make generalizations, but to deepen into each of the narratives of the participants in order to “identify and analyze those structural and cultural aspects of education that maintain subordinate and dominant racial positions in and out of the classroom” (Solórzano and Yosso 2002:25). This is the reason why the sample is certainly small.

All the primary data were collected through narratives. The meetings with the participants were taken in places where they felt comfortable with. In some cases, the conversation was held in their houses and some of them decided to do it in others spaces as the University of Chocó and a friend’s house. To guide the encounters with the participants I develop a group of questions which objective was to motivated the participants to narrate their experiences through their schooling process and to keep the conversation fluent within the objective of the research. From the beginning, the premise was to encourage participants to tell the stories they felt comfortable with, about their experience in the schooling process and in the task of finding ways to access higher education. Additionally, While the participants were narrating their stories I reflected on my personal experience trying to find meeting points and the interaction between their stories and mine with the objective in mind of constructing a counter story with the narratives and its encounters.

The use of narratives in the research was adequate in the sense that it allows the participants to identify by themselves the stories they considered to be significant. The conversations were recorded and, after each session, analyzed by classifying the information on the basis of the emergent themes that came out of it. The relevant information was transcribed, together with some observations from each of the meetings. After the categorization of the narratives, the transcripts were critically analyzed.

I invite you to come along with me and get inside their narratives. Their names have been changed to pseudonyms, in order to protect their identity. They all gave informed consent about participating in the research and about the use of the information they provide.

### 2.1.1 Making contact with the participants and data collection

I arrived to Bogota-Colombia on a rainy afternoon, with the excitement of doing my field work. This was an opportunity to reconnect with old friends from Quibdó who were living in Bogota for different reasons. At the beginning I had a plan to make contact with the participants through different organizations that advocate for the recognition of Afro-descendant rights, but I found many obstacles to contact them. My first difficulty had to do with the time of the year, since the prospective participants were in a period of University recess. In this sense, it was difficult to gather them in Bogota or Medellin, because most of them had gone back to their home towns. So I had to come up with a different contact plan, because it was going to be impossible to congregate a focus group, which was one of my methods. I decided to use the social media in order to contact prospective participants, and to reach others by snowball sampling.

In order to respond to my research question, field work mostly relied on qualitative data mainly obtained from young Afro-descendants between 18 and 24 years old, who had finished high school in Chocó and migrated to Bogota and Medellin in order to access higher education. Through Facebook and WhatsApp, I initially contacted five young ladies, two of them in Quibdó, and three in Medellin. I decided to continue with the snowball sampling technique and finally contacted 11 participants. The first contact was made through a phone call in which I presented the research objective and my interest in having them participate in the research project. I started field work with a first group in Quibdó, where I carried out the first meeting with the participants.

Being in Quibdó was very helpful in the sense that I found a project which was being executed by the University of Chocó, with the main objective to improve the quality of secondary Education in that department. As the project was related to the topic of my research, I volunteered as a participant in its activities and strategies. This experience provided me with information on the aspirations of young Afro-Colombian students who have finished their secondary school and are starting to work on the options they have in order to access higher education. Thus, I participated in activities with these young people who, through one of the strategies of the project, had won a scholarship to study in any university of the country. Some of these people had obtained very good results in the Saber 11 test, but they couldn't get any financial aid in that moment. However, six months after finishing high school, they found an opportunity through the mentioned project. This experience provided the research with data regarding the way young Afro-Colombians construct their aspirations, this data was obtained during two weeks through informal conversation with the young students in the process of the legalization of their scholarship. Also secondary data was provided regarding quality education of Chocó.

### 2.1.2 Participants' background

**Andres Mosquera** is a 23-year-old man who was born and raised in Quibdó. He is the oldest of two children who are both studying in Medellín. My first impression based on his looks was that “he is *Mulato*”<sup>4</sup>. When we started talking he identified himself as Afro-Colombian despite his lighter skin color, because his mother was black and he grew up within the *Chocoano* culture. He has been in Medellín for two years, where he lives in a house with other boys from different regions of Colombia, who also came to this city aspiring to complete their higher education studies. He graduated from high school in Quibdó in 2009 and started trying to study Systems Engineering. Five years and seven months have passed since his journey started, and finally he is in third semester at a private university.

**Paula Perea**, a 20-year-old girl from Quibdó, is the youngest of three sisters who have all migrated to Bogotá in order to study a career that they could not find in Quibdó. Her mother got a technical degree from a beauty school in Medellín. With this knowledge she came back to Quibdó 20 years ago and established a beauty salon that has paid the studies of Paula and her two sisters in Bogotá. Her older sister did not finish her law studies and is currently working at a beauty salon in Bogotá. Her sister has become a motivation for her, since she wants to have a different life from her mother's and sister's. Also, she feels she has to compensate for the great effort that her mother is doing in order to keep her studying at a private University in Bogotá.

**Jesus Hinestroza** is a very enthusiastic 19 year old male from Riosucio. He is doing his third semester of odontology at a very small University in Medellín. In our first meeting, I could not stop thinking about how I would have liked to have his enthusiastic attitude about living away from home when I was his age. In our second meeting he invited me to his small apartment where he lives since he got to Medellín 2 years ago. He was cooking an “arroz con todo” a very typical dish in Chocó which is basically rice with cheese, *longaniza* (a traditional sausage), chicken, and vegetables. It is a very typical meal for students because it is very easy to cook and the ingredients are cheap. He immediately started to talk about how he had to learn to cook when he first got to Medellín and many other things he has had to learn in order to adapt to his new life. For example, he related how the extended family was a very important resource back home, but being in the city made him understand he was there by himself and had nobody to count with.

**Sofia Cordoba**, from Quibdó, is a 20-year-old student of 7<sup>th</sup> semester of law at a private University in Medellín, which has grown very fast in the last few years because of the low cost of its tuition fees. It has a high Afro-descendant enrolment rate, convoking people from all the regions of Colombia due to its accessibility based on the requirements to get an admission. She has a brother who is also studying in Medellín, which has put a lot of pressure on the family's economy because of the cost of living in the city. Like Andrea, all the participants in this research living in Medellín have come to this city with the

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<sup>4</sup> Originally, this term was used to refer to people with mix between blacks and whites. Currently, it is of common use by the people from Chocó to refer to anyone who has lighter skin color.

aspiration of enrolling in a public University such as the Antioquia University, which has high quality standards and affordable tuition fees for lower socioeconomic background students. Nevertheless, enrollment is very difficult because of the high standards of the Saber test.

The oldest of three children, **Marvis Perea** is a 20 year old male student who takes his family role very seriously: in every comment he made it was clear that he is a leader for his brothers and that he has to go back to Quibdó, to help his father with those that come behind him. He is studying finance in a Public technical institution in Medellin. When he finished high school he had to confront his father because he did not agree with Marvis' moving to Medellin to study. His father wanted him to stay in Quibdó to study in the Public University of Chocó, in order to become a teacher like him. For more than a year, he lived in Medellin without the support of his father, in order to demonstrate that it was worth it. During this time, and in order to pay his expenses, he managed to find support in other members of the family.

### 2.1.3 Meeting points of the narratives

While four of the participants were born in Quibdó, Jesus was born in Riosucio. Nevertheless, they all finished high school in public institutions of Quibdó. It is interesting to highlight that three of the participants were raised by single mothers, who are said to have played an important role in motivating them to continue studying. As a matter of fact, one of these mothers is currently studying at university to become a business administrator. Although two of the participants had an outstanding high school performance, none of them got the necessary Saber test score to receive a scholarship. However, two of them had benefited from affirmative action programs: Paula received a discount in the tuition fee of her first semester at university, but she lost it because she could not maintain the minimum academic average grades. She also related how she had to make a big effort to catch up with the academic level of her class mates, which made it more difficult for her to keep up with her grades. This was also related by Andres, who blamed the education he received in Chocó: by saying “in physics class they knew things that they had learned in 10<sup>th</sup> grade, which I never learned at school”.

Table 2. Background characteristics of the participants

	<b>Andres</b>	<b>Paula</b>	<b>Jesus</b>	<b>Sofia</b>	<b>Marvis</b>
<b>Primary Caretakers</b>	Mother (M) Aunt (A)	Mother	Mother (M) Father (F)	Mother (M)	Father
<b>Parents' Level of education</b>	M: University A: University	Technical	M: University F: University	M: University	University
<b>Employment status of caretakers</b>	M: employed A: employed	Own business	M: employed F: employed	Temporarily Employed	Employed

	<b>Andres</b>	<b>Paula</b>	<b>Jesus</b>	<b>Sofia</b>	<b>Marvis</b>
<b>Academic performance</b>	Outstanding high school student	Average student	Average student	Outstanding student	Average student
<b>Affirmative action participation</b>	None	First semester tuition fee discount	None	ICETEX scholarship	None
<b>Higher education institution type</b>	Private University	Private University	Private University	Private University	Public University
<b>Time elapsed before entering University</b>	4 years	6 months	6 months	1.5 years	2 years
<b>Current Location</b>	Medellin	Bogota	Medellin	Medellin	Medellin

## 2.2 Secondary data

Although most of the data used in the present research correspond to qualitative information, quantitative data were used to show the enrolment rates and the attainments of Afro-Colombian students. Thus, secondary data on the access of Afro-descendants to the educational system were obtained mainly from governmental reports, ethnic group statistical information from the last (2005) national census and documented reports of programs and laws that regulate the educational system, all of which were analyzed in order to identify patterns of exclusion and discrimination. I also consulted empirical studies on the construction of the identity of Afro-Colombians and Afro-descendants in Colombia, the visibility of these communities along the history of the country, and their presence in the educational system, especially regarding higher education.

## 2.3 Reflexivity on my position

When I started to consider the possibility to do my research *about* and *with* members of my own community, I had many questions in my head regarding whether it was advantageous or disadvantageous to be a 31-year-old Afro-descendant woman from Quibdó that actually experienced the issues in question. Nevertheless, I cannot attach myself to a single identity, because I am a black woman with a mix of identities. I am *Chocoana* because I was born in Chocó and raised within this culture, but I left Chocó at a very young age and lived in Bogota for almost 15 years, which changed many aspects of my life. This positionality has allowed me to understand that “recent discussions on insider/outsider status have unveiled the complexity inherent in either of them, the boundaries between which are not so clearly delineated” (Merriam 2000, 1). This dichotomy was evident to me when I

started to make contact with my prospective participants. Quibdó is a relatively small town and when Afro-descendants leave their territory they create a community in the host city. In this community you get to know everybody or you are connected through some friend to all the members. In two cases, the prospective participants that knew me from before somehow started to put barriers in order not to participate. Finally, one of them said that he did not feel comfortable talking to me because of the friends we had in common.

During the interviewing process I realized how the participants were aware of my insider/outsider status. Because of this I had to face challenges regarding my insider status. In some of my questions I had to work harder in order to get an answer because they would say things like “you know how...”, “you have experienced...”. Hence, I had to modify my questions about the issues that had no answer, thus making sure they explained their stories and narratives to me as if I was an outsider, in order to avoid the power relation between the researcher and the participants.



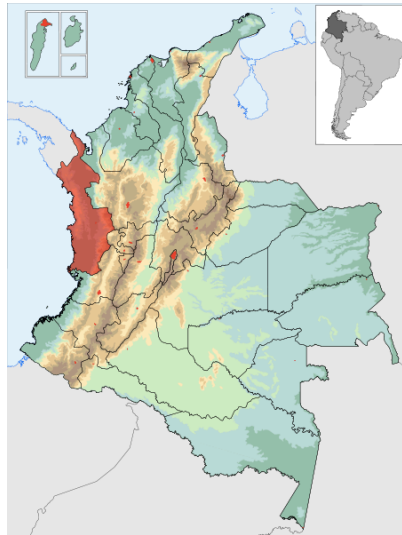
### 3. Contextual discussion: What are we escaping from?

*"I never liked education in Chocó because it seems very poor to me and it is not focused on what I really wanted. I had several friends who were already studying in the UTCH and when they spoke they didn't have coherence in what they said" (Andres Mosquera).*

Colombia is a country with a diversity of cultures and ethnicities. In the last census, more than 14% of the population identified themselves as members of an ethnic group. According to this information 10% recognized themselves as black or Afro-descendant, the latter being the most representative ethnic group in the country (DANE 2005b:27). A big discussion has taken place because of the poor visibility of ethnic groups in the last census due to the lack of self-recognition of a proportion of the Afro-descendant communities. Many factors influence this problem, including racism or racial discrimination, which stigmatizes Afro-Colombians. This has generated identity problems in the Afro-Colombian population, who probably do not want to be ethnically identified in order to avoid discrimination. Nevertheless, this does not mean they do not suffer the consequences of racial discrimination, since this is based on skin color (García 2013:11).

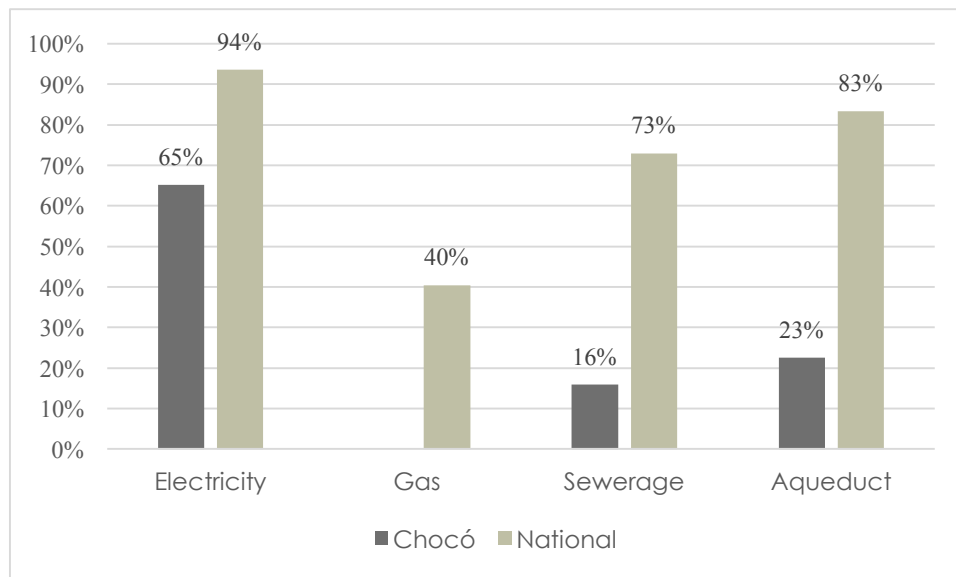
According to the last national census, Afro-descendants are more numerous in the department of Chocó, 82% of whose population identify themselves as members of this group. Chocó is a very rich territory in the sense of having abundant natural resources due to its privileged location on the pacific cost of Colombia. Moreover, it is the only department covering territories on both the pacific and the Caribbean littorals. In the past, this land was attractive for Spanish colonizers who, in the 16th century, brought African slaves to work in the gold and platinum mines. After slavery abolition, the Afro-descendants stayed in these territories and made a home of them. In this regard, it represents a very interesting and significant source of information regarding the way Afro-descendant communities live and how they face exclusion and social discrimination. As Chocó is the only Department in Colombia with a majority of African descendants, its population responds to different dynamics from those faced by Afro-descendants living in spaces where they are minority at the local level. Chocó is where I was born, and when talking to its people you can perceive the pride they feel about being "Chocoanos"<sup>5</sup>, which has certainly shaped our identity. This is something you can identify when young people talk about their aspirations. They are aware of the lack of opportunities, and that has made them aspire to leave the territory in order to escape from it. But they also want to help Chocó to overcome exclusion and attain better opportunities for all its inhabitants.

Map 1 Location of Chocó



For Chocoanos, Chocó is a paradise full of happiness in which we are family to our neighbors and classmates. But this does not erase the lack of opportunities and the way our people suffer. In 2015, 50% of the population lived in poverty and 17% in extreme poverty, while the national figures were 27.8% and 7.9% respectively (Dane 2016:3). With regard to public utilities, the last census (2005) indicates that 65% of the population have access to electricity (in some places this service is provided during just a few hours a day), 15.9% to sewerage system, and 22.5% to an aqueduct (Dane 2010a). In the meantime, the national figures for these utilities are 93.6, 73.1, and 83.4, respectively (Dane 2010b). This data shows the social disparity with regards to the number of households having access to public utilities.

Graph 1 Access to public utilities<sup>6</sup>



<sup>6</sup> Own elaboration base on Dane 2010a, 2010b.

Regarding education, this department has the worst performances in the ICFES-Saber 11 test, which is given to students at eleventh grade, before entering University. This score is used by many universities as an admission filter which, in many ways, constitutes a way to exclude. In the case of Chocó, we not only have the worst results, but also worsening scores over the years. This constitutes one of the obstacles that young Afro-descendants are facing in their territory. Many authors have concluded that the students from lower socioeconomic background, as is the case of Colombian ethnic minorities, have limited chances at all to continue their educational process or to be admitted in qualified higher education institutions. Also common place among researchers is the notion that the educational system is perpetuating such disadvantages in these communities (Sánchez and Otero 2008:2). In order to understand in deep how the entire educational system operates, the next chapter addresses this issue.

### 3.1 The educational system: Mapping our schooling reality

The right to free education in Colombia was recognized by the national constitution in 1991, which assured free public education for children between five and fifteen years old. The entire system was regulated through the Law of Education (Law 115 of 1994), according to which the formal educational system is divided in four levels. The first level comprises three years of preschool, only the last of which is compulsory and a prerequisite to access the next level. The second level is a 9-year cycle, covering 5 years of primary school and 4 years of secondary school. The entire cycle is compulsory and is taught with no charge in every public educational institution. The institutions that do the teaching at these levels have to establish their own curriculum covering 9 areas defined by the law and making up 80% of the curriculum (Republic of Colombia, 1994)

The third level is a two year period of Middle Education, after which the students graduate, so that they can access the last level, which is higher education. The duration of the studies at the last level varies depending on the type of education we choose: technical, 1.5 years; technological, 2 to 3 years; and university, which is 4 to 5 years. In Colombia, this level of education is regulated by law 30 of 1992. In 2015, there were 32 public institutions at this level, wherein the students have to pay a tuition fee. In some cases, tuition varies depending on the economic level of the students and their families; in other cases, there is a standardized fee which is low compared to the cost of private universities. Nevertheless, for many students it is impossible to pay these tuition fees. In order to address this issue, the government has implemented financial programs through the Colombian Institute of Educational Credit and Technical Studies Abroad – ICETEX for its acronym in Spanish – in order to grant loans to these students. These loans have low interest rates, but in many cases their requirements are difficult to fulfill.

For many years, this was the only available mechanism for students from low socioeconomic background to access higher education. It is very telling in terms of equity that in Colombia 53% of the richest quintile can enter university, while in the poorest quintile only 9% of youngsters can take this

step (OECD 2016:260). In terms of equity, Colombia has a long way to go in order to guarantee the access and completion of higher education. Since 2014, education has become one of the four pillars for the National Development Plan, which “assumes education as the most powerful instrument of social equality and economic growth in the long term, with a policy that aims to close access and quality gaps in the education system, be they between individuals, population groups or regions, thus raising the country to high international standards and achieving equality of opportunities for all citizens” (Republic of Colombia 2014:1). In this regard, the Ministry of Education has launched the program “SerPiloPaga”<sup>7</sup> (SPP) the main objective of which is to grant scholarships to the best high school students from low socioeconomic background. In 2015, 11.000 scholarships were granted, representing the upper 2% of the students that took the *Saber 11* test in that year (Ministry of Education, Government of Colombia 2015).

This program has enhanced the possibility for many students to access higher education in the best universities of the country (in 2015, there were 38 private and public universities accredited for their quality, which is one of the requirements to access the scholarship), an opportunity that did not exist before. Nevertheless, from my point of view this programs continue to exclude based on the way the students are selected. First, because of the way the exam is given. The test is standardized in a country where, as I mentioned before, curriculums and quality vary depending on the region and its resources. Also, it is important to mention that this program only gives the opportunity to 2% of the more than 500.000 students graduated every year. And what happens with the education of those that did not get a good result in the test, or those that did not fulfill the socioeconomic requirements but still want to enter university but do not have the economic resources? (Lopez 2016). It is clear that with the economic level of Colombia and its limitations we cannot afford to guarantee free education for all at once but we can think of strategies that gradually increase access to higher education. But even in the case of “Ser Pilo Paga”, some strategies can be put in place in order to optimize resources. The government has spent 50 million U.S dollars in the last year supporting 10,000 students’ tuition fees for their first semester of university at a very high cost, because most of those students decided to go to private universities, where the fees are higher. Despite the fact that the government is beneficiating these universities, they are giving no counterpart by, for example, lowering the cost of tuition fees for this kind of students. In this way, more students from low socioeconomic backgrounds could benefit from this strategy.

Also, one of the major critiques to this program are the *Saber 11* test results, which are used as a requirement to obtain the scholarship. This is problematic in the sense that the its results show the inequalities in the quality of education, as mentioned by Barrera-Osorio et al: “Students in rural areas have worse performances than in urban areas; and students from lower socioeconomic levels have worse performances than those of higher socioeconomic level” (2012:9). This gives less possibilities for these students to obtain a scholarship for entering a public university where the tuitions fee is more affordable.

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<sup>7</sup>Translation from Spanish “To be smart pays”

I have shown how the system works and the options that students in Colombia have to access higher education. Now I will focus on how the educational system works in Chocó and the options that Afro-Colombians living in this territory have to access higher education. In the last 10 years, the improvement in the Colombian enrolment rates is undeniable, especially at the primary level. At the secondary and university levels, the data shows there is still a long way to go, the latter level being the most critical one. Nevertheless, the educational policy makers have been concentrated in enrollment and in putting children and young people into school, but less attention has been given to an important aspect: quality. It is problematic to conceptualize education as a right in the sense that it cannot be seen just as a matter of assuring access, but of examining the kind of education that is being taught. In many rural communities and zones where ethnic communities live there is lack of qualified teachers and the infrastructure is not in proper conditions. In these circumstances, it is very likely that the outcomes of the process measured with the *Saber* test are not going to be as desired. Along these lines, it is problematic that the universities still rely on the results of the standardized test to assess the eligibility of potential students because this procedure is likely to prevent low socioeconomic background youngsters from continuing their educational process.

On the other hand, in the case of the Afro-descendant communities of Chocó, our aspirations of higher education are constrained not only by the individual outcomes of the educational process as measured by the *Saber* test. It is also important to analyze other factors such as the quality of the education offered by the institutions in this territory. As it is shown in table 3, in 2013 Chocó had a lower university enrolment rate than its bordering departments. In addition, none of the programs offered in the region has received quality accreditation. In 2014, *Universidad Tecnológica del Chocó* was ranked as one of the worst public education institutions in Colombia. Also, the career options are very limited, since it offers 20 bachelor degrees out of which 50% are related to education, because teaching is the main source of employment in Chocó. This brings us to a really interesting point that calls for further research in the realm of the quality of education in Colombia. In analyzing the current literature for the causes of the poor outcomes in primary and secondary education, it can be observed that less attention is paid to the correlation between the quality of education that teachers received in their educational process and the quality of education they give. What is important to highlight here is that some studies show that those students that enroll in university programs related to education are those who get the worst scores in the *Saber* test (see graft 3) (Barrera-Osorio et al. 2012:13).

Table 3 University enrollment rates and number of accredited programs<sup>8</sup> (OECD 2016:262)

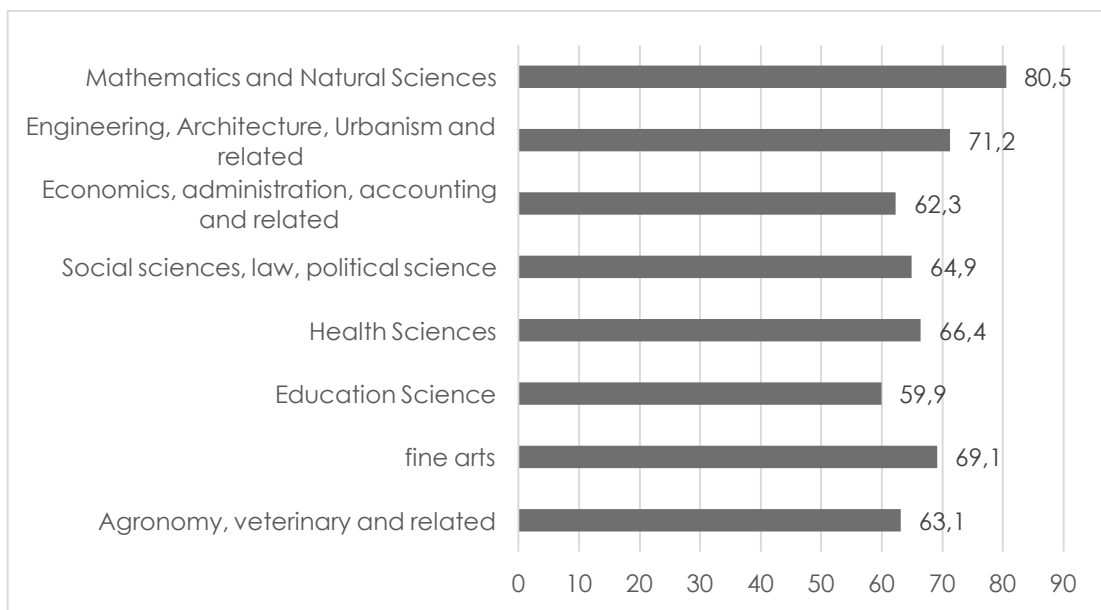
DEPARTMENT	NET ENROLMENT RATE	ACCREDITED PROGRAMS
Colombia	<b>45.5</b>	<b>813</b>
<b>Antioquia</b>	49.5	191
<b>Bogota D.C</b>	92.5	280

<sup>8</sup>Author's elaboration based on OECD 2016

DEPARTMENT	NET ENROLMENT RATE	ACCREDITED PROGRAMS
Chocó	<b>23.8</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>Risaralda</b>	51.3	25
<b>Valle del Cauca</b>	37.0	75

In the case of Chocó, these teachers are trained in a university where the quality of education has been put in question. As mentioned before, there is need for more research on this issue, but from the little information that can be found, I see a pattern that is perpetuating the educational disadvantage of Chocó. It is an inequality cycle that needs to be broken in order to address social justice and to stop education from playing contradictory roles, as noted by Jeffrey et al. (cited in Majumdar and Mooij 2011:4). “[education] ...as a resource that, in principle, can provide marginalized children and adolescents with certain freedoms, but that may also draw them more firmly into systems of inequality”

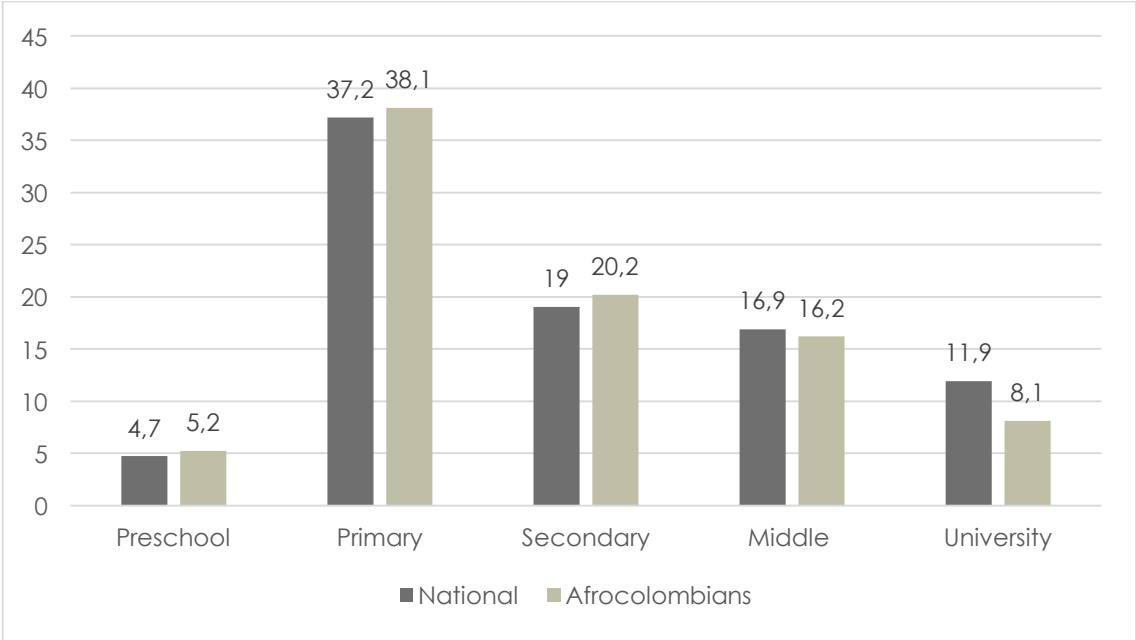
Graph 2 Average Saber test according to type of career (Barrera-Osorio et al. 2012:73).



The transition between high school and university is the interest of this research. To focus on this transitional period, it is presenting the narratives of young Afro-descendants in a way that provides an understanding of the factors that influence their aspirations and how they navigate their social terrain to achieve it. I have shown in this section that the access to higher education in Chocó is constrained by the quality of the education that we receive in primary and secondary school and, therefore, by the results in the *Saber* test and the career offer available at higher education institutions.

This reality shows that Afro-descendant communities do have access to the initial stages of the educational system (primary and secondary), where they are in the same situation or better than non-Afro-descendants (see graph 3). And this can be explained by the reliance of Afro-Colombians on education as a way to find ways to get out of systems of inequality and exclusion. However, at the higher educational level there is disparity that needs to be addressed.

Graph 3 Percentage distribution of Educational Attainment by Afro-Colombians (Garcia 2013)



	Preschool	Primary	Secondary	Middle	University
National	4,7	37,2	19	16,9	11,9
Afro-Colombians	5,2	38,1	20,2	16,2	8,1

In this regard, the national government created the Inter-sector Commission for the Advancement of Afro-Colombian population in 2007, with the aim of reducing the barriers that hinder the development process of the Afro-Colombian population, which contribute to their exclusion and marginalization. In 2009, this commission presented a diagnosis which revealed a big gap in terms of education, employment and socioeconomic development of the Afro-Colombian population as compared to the rest of Colombians. Under this analysis, education was found to be one of the factors that perpetuated the disadvantages of these communities. As stated above, the drivers of these realities are educational quality and opportunities to access higher education, which are lower than those of other population groups (García 2013:46). At the university level, the problem of access adds to the quality of the institutions we can afford and the readiness of these Universities and the system in general to receive students from ethnic minority groups. In this regard, there are not much data specifying the universities

which Afro-Colombians attend. Nevertheless, the data suggest that in a country where high quality universities base the eligibility of potential students on a standardized test and on their payment capacity. Many students do not fit one or both of these parameters, so they are left out and have to make the most of their resources by entering novel universities which lower their standards in order to attract students, or where quality simply is not a priority.

In 1964, the President of the United States, Lyndon B. Johnson, said “it was an impossible and unjust race for development, between a white child who is educated in the best schools and can compete in a modern society, and a black child, whose irremediable destiny is to attend tertiary schools. They are precisely those invisible barriers that perpetuate discrimination circles and poverty” (cited in García 2013:46). This is very problematic in a country where the education in territories with presence of ethnic minority groups is poor in quality and the institutions offering these services are scarce. But also where qualified education has put in place the barriers discussed above. Knowing this reality, the government has implemented affirmative action programs in order to address inequalities in the access to higher education.

### 3.1.1 Affirmative action in higher education

Affirmative action is an “attempt to promote equality of opportunities in a social context marked by pervasive inequalities, one in which many institutional practices work to impede a fair assessment of the capabilities of those who are working-class, women or people of color”. Affirmative action, however, cannot be understood as a matter of “preferential treatment” for those who benefit from it (Harris and Narayan 1998:5). In Colombia some initiatives have been implemented to increase the chances of Afro-Colombians to access higher education. One of the barriers that this ethnic group has faced is economic in nature, since many of us cannot afford to pay a tuition fee or the expenses of moving to the capital. For example, ICETEX<sup>9</sup> has introduced a program through which a loan is assigned to the student, such that it can be condoned through exchange for social work after they finish their studies. This loan covers tuition and a subsidy for living expenses during the entire career, with the possibility of one additional year for the degree project (ICETEX 2016).

This program has given academic opportunities to many Afro-descendants who would otherwise be unable to access higher education. Nevertheless, these programs have some detractors in the Afro-Colombian community, in the first place because there are many requirements to participate, which continues to be exclusionary. Also, this kind of program is not well defined and integrated in the national education policy, which brings along funding instability and unclear allocation of resources. In fact, this made the loan unavailable during the years 2007 and 2008. In addition, every year they have to receive a growing number of applications, for which there are not enough resources. In 2013, 15,896 young

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<sup>9</sup>Colombian Institute of Educational Credit and Technical Studies Abroad (Instituto Colombiano de Crédito Educativo y Estudios Técnicos en el Exterior)



afro-descendants aspired to obtain one of these loans, but only 3,500 were able to get it (García 2013:50).

The second concern with this initiative is that, since the loan can only be condoned after the students graduate, many beneficiaries do not finish their studies because they were not able to catch up with the academic level or failed to adapt to a new urban reality. However, they still have to pay all the money they received plus the interest, thus ending the process worse than they started, without education and with a debt.

As a way to address this issue, some universities have programs that aim to help Afro-Colombian students enter the university with special discounts and enrolment assuring mechanisms. This, in turn, counteracts the poor quality education they receive in their home towns, which does not allow them to compete in equal terms with the rest of students. In the case of *Universidad Externado*, where I graduated as a social worker, I studied the entire career with a discount they offer to Afro-Colombians in order to encourage their interest and academic participation. I remember a friend of mine saying “I would like to be black, so I could access that discount, cause I deserve it as much as you do.” At that moment, 10 years ago, I felt I had no answer for her. But this expression showed me the “color-blind” thinking embedded in most of the nonblack population of Colombia, who are against affirmative action arguments (Parker 1998:48). My friend did not actually need the program’s support, but she felt we were the same and we deserved to have the same opportunities and treatment, while instead (she considered) Afro-Colombians were receiving preferential treatment at University, which was not actually true. This affirmative action at *Universidad Externado* in Bogota was trying to give a disadvantaged community a real chance to access this institution. Thus, affirmative action should be understood as an “attempt to promote fairness and equal citizenship by affording the members of marginalized groups a fair chance to enter significant societal institutions” (Harris and Narayan 1998:14).

This kind of argument from those who are against affirmative actions show a hidden racist and exclusionary discourse which is embedded in our society and seems “normal” for most of the nonblack population (Ladson-Billings 1998:11). In Colombia these discourses are tangible in the lack of sensibility with the racial struggle we have undertaken for decades. Looking back after all these years of reflection, it is clear that without those initiatives that have also been established in universities such as National University, Javeriana University, University of Antioquia and Pedagogic University, among others, many Afro-Colombian students would not have had the opportunity to access a high quality university.

This chapter has presented how the educational system works, the options that we as Afro-Colombians have to access the university level and how the government has tried to address these inequalities. Despite these efforts, there is still a long way to go. Just as well, I have presented a critical discussion on how the educational system excludes Afro-Colombians, because the rationale behind the educational policy is “equal opportunities for all”, which is color blinded and does not recognize the

multicultural and inclusive discourse that the state promulgates on paper. I have shown how the problem of the universality of education has to do with its embracing all children and young people in a homogenous category, which leaves behind particular realities shaped by race, gender, ethnicity, class and spatial location (Okwany 2010:151). Also, I have analyzed the first affirmative action that has been implemented in Colombia, by saying that these strategies have expanded the possibilities to access high quality education for many Afro-Colombians, although they are still exclusionary.

In the following chapters I will present the stories and narratives of the participants, in order to analyze, from their perspective, how they experience exclusion in the educational system and the rationale behind their aspiration for higher education.

#### **4. Aspirations, “education is the way”**

This chapter presents an exploration of the way the young Afro-descendants who participated in this research have shaped their aspirations of getting higher education and which factors influence this construction. Aspirations are understood here as “desires to achieve something in the future, with the implication that they will drive actions in the present” (Quaglia and Cobb as cited in Kintrea et al. 2015:3). To conduct this exploration, I have used the conceptual framework proposed by Zipin et al., in which they used three logics for analyzing the complexity of aspirations. While the first one is based on Bourdieu’s concept of doxa, the second and third ones respectively correspond to habitus and agency. This conceptual framework is used to understand the rationality behind the higher education aspirations of young Afro-descendants from Chocó, which plays a very important role in the culture Chocó. We rely completely on education as a driver of social mobility.

In exploring, with the participants of the research, the origin of their aspiration to leave the territory and access high quality education, they all agreed that they cannot think of a particular moment when they started considering to leave Chocó in order to go to university. As Paula said, “we have always thought that we have to study in order to succeed in life” (by “we”, she meant she and her family). But, why leave? This is something that we do not question, in the sense that if we have the means, we do it; and in many cases, people find ways to navigate through the options they have in order to achieve this aspiration for higher education. And the reasons why we do not question the project of leaving Chocó can be explained by what Appadurai calls culture: “It is in culture that ideas of the future, as much as those about the past, are embedded and nurtured” (Appadurai 2004:29). The idea that *Chocoanos* have of education as the only driver of social mobility is embedded in our culture through the legacy of those first Afro-descendants that managed to study and thus gained access to spheres where *comunidades negras* are otherwise restricted.

The aspiration for higher education has been passed from generation to generation. It has been reinforced not only in the family but also at school, where in some cases, as Paula mentioned, “they

talked to us about how important it is to continue studying after we finished school; they also showed us in which universities in Bogota and Medellín we could study”. This could be seen also in talking to the participants about their idea of education. They all said that “education is everything if they want to be someone in life”. And responding to this belief, they do everything they can in order to study and reach the highest possible level of education. Every *Chocoano* to whom you may talk will recognize this quote by Diego Luis Córdoba: “By ignorance we descend to servitude; by education we ascend to freedom”<sup>10</sup>, Diego was one of the first Afro-descendants from Chocó who took college studies and advocated for the consolidation of Chocó as a department while he was a congressman. Before this, Chocó was an appendix of Antioquia. After him, other members of the black communities of Chocó started to see that education allowed reaching similar spheres and followed the pathway he had shown.

In the specific case of Afro-Colombians, many authors highlight how education becomes very significant in the aspirations of the parents for their children. Education has been a family project for Afro-descendants in Chocó since the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Agudelo stated that “the strategic objective of the family project became education for children, understood as the best guarantee of social mobility” (2002:33). This trust in education proper of *Chocoanos* is due to the particular characteristics of life in Chocó, which make it very different from the education concept of other Afro-Colombians. Since we are majority in our territory, we can easily access its decision making instances. This does not happen in any other department with presence of Afro-descendants, because they live in a white supremacy world that does not easily give them chances to access these instances. This particular feature has led us to consider education as a way to access such spheres and improve life chances.

To analyze how the participants construct their aspirations and what factors influence them, I used the conceptual framework proposed by Zipin et al., which identifies three aspiration logics, the first of which is built upon Bourdieu’s concept of Doxa. What he proposes is “that, through discourse and practice, certain beliefs and assumptions circulate powerfully across diverse settings of everyday life, thus constituting underlying logics that seem more-or-less unquestionable for many” (2013:231). This author argues that such convictions obtain a taken-for-granted significance in which no one questions the reason for doing what is believed to be convenient. In the narratives of my participants, aspirations for higher education are embedded in the discourse as a way to reach a better life and increase their life chances to succeed. Thus, this logic puts negative pressure on the agent in the sense that lack of success is interpreted as lack of attitude and aspirations (Ibid). As the author explains, this is problematic because young people from low socioeconomic backgrounds that do not reach the desired social mobility blame themselves for not being able to accomplish it. Andrés referred how it was his fault not to enter the public university because he did not put enough effort in secondary school in order to obtain a good result in the *Saber* test. It is an implicit belief that hard work will always lead to success, so when it does not happen, people get frustrated and blame themselves as responsible for “failure”.

The second logic to take into consideration corresponds to habituated aspirations. This logic is based

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<sup>10</sup> Translation by the author

on what Bourdieu calls *habitus*: “[a] system of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures” (Bourdieu 1990:53). In this sense, habituated aspirations are structured by the practices embedded in a particular socio-cultural setting. These aspirations act as a strategic calculation in relation to what people can aspire to, based on their structural conditions and those of their family and community (Zipin et al. 2013:234). In the case of the participants of this research, they are the second generation to go to University in their families, except for one of the mothers, who is currently studying, since she has the economic means to do it. The fact that their parents have attended college supports and convinces them that they can manage to access higher education and succeed. Brown (2011: 13) suggests that for those young people whose family does not have any higher education history, it is more difficult to aspire to go to university since, based on their habitus, they cannot see the advantage of doing it. Thus, habituated aspirations are based on the analysis of the real possibilities that people have. These aspirations are more deeply felt and internalized than those based on the populist believe that tells young people what they should aspire to.

This kind of aspirations is more difficult to identify because they are rooted at subconscious levels. Nevertheless, while exploring the aspirations of the participants, habituated aspirations are often shown as a second option in case they cannot reach their *doxic aspirations*. In the current interviewing process, when asking the participants to go back to the moment when they finished high school, for them to talk about their aspirations in that moment, they said that they wanted to study in public universities as *Universidad de Antioquia* and *Medellín* in the city of Medellín. This was so not only because of the education quality they offer, but also because they could not afford to pay the tuition fee of private universities, which, because of their better quality also charge higher fees.

Following this line of reasoning, what can be concluded from the narratives of the participants is that *habitus* does not shape or lower their aspirations to reach higher education, but only their attainment. And the rationale behind this is that we are culturally challenged by the other members of the community to get out of the unequal structures we live in. For their part, habituated aspirations do not challenge, but reinforce these inequalities.

The third logic corresponds to emergent aspirations, namely those shaped “by new practices, meanings and values” (Gale and Parker 2015:92). This kind of aspiration is more difficult to identify through interviews, because it is emerging in the lives of young people while their “present becomes future” (Zipin et al. 2013:236). In most cases, it is difficult to determine the origin of the aspirations that young Afro-Colombians related. However, from my point of view they are interrelated, so one aspiration can reflect more than one logic. I do agree with the authors in the sense that these logics are relevant in order to analyze the construction of aspirations as analytic concepts. However, the concepts are interrelated to the point that classifying an aspiration in one or another logic implies ignoring the rest.

Another important factor to take into consideration when analyzing young people’s aspirations is the influence of the place where they grew up. As it was described before, Chocó is a department with an

elevated poverty index, where the quality of education is constraining access to high quality education in cities like Bogotá or Medellín. Some scholars have argued that dwelling places are determinant in the construction of aspirations. Indeed, there is an assumption in the UK policy that young people from low socioeconomic background tend to have lower aspirations than those with privileged backgrounds (Kintrea et al. 2015:3). It is true that the place where young Afro-Colombians live can have a negative effect on their aspirations, by lowering their expectations. However, this lack of opportunities can make some people more resilient and determined to thrive. The participants of this research show that, despite the difficulties, the lack of opportunities and the low quality education they received in primary and secondary school in Chocó, they still aspire to reach high quality education even at the post-graduate level.

Following this line of thought, it is not that the place constrains the aspirations of young Afro-Colombians, but their realization. Young people from Chocó are aware of the limitations of their territory, and it is this awareness what makes us shelter higher aspirations in order to lead a better life. This argumentation is supported by the fact that all the participants in the research mention that one of the causes of the poor socioeconomic situation experienced by *Chocoanos* is the low quality of their education as compared to that of the rest of the country. In the narratives of all the participants they made reference to their having to move out of the territory in order to study and thus have the possibility to get better jobs and better possibilities to succeed. This sets a point of reflection on the actual pathways that these young people have to follow and navigate in order to attain their aspirations. These narratives will be discussed in the following chapter.

## 5. Navigating a system of inequality

“Social navigation... encompasses both the assessment of the dangers and possibilities of one’s present position as well as the process of plotting and attempting to actualize routes into an uncertain and changeable future” (Vigh 2009:425).

During this journey, something that has really touched me is the pride behind the stories of the participants about the way they have managed to accomplish their aspirations of higher education. In some cases they have had to negotiate with their families and navigate through the options they have, constantly adapting in order to respond to obstacles. They all arrived in their host cities with a dream and a very clear plan to follow. Yet, only one of them has managed to follow the initial plan and was admitted at University after the first attempt. The other participants have been constantly adapting to new realities and available options.

In order to analyze this changing and unstable environment, I have resorted to the Social Navigation concept, introduced by Vigh to illustrate the way young urban men in Guinea manage to survive in a country affected by conflict. He defined social navigation as:

“Attentiveness to the way in which agents seek to draw and actualize their life trajectories in order to increase their social possibilities and life chances in a shifting and volatile social environment” (Vigh, 2006: 11).”

What the author wants to illustrate is the way in which young people act in relation to the constantly moving structural forces that surround them. He calls it “motion within motion”, in the sense that social structures result from multiple factors that are also in continuous movement and development. This means that the agent needs the ability to “adapt” and “read” these constant changes in the environment (Scott 1998 cited in Vigh 2009:425). In the present research, social navigation is a valuable analytical tool, inasmuch as it considers an implicit series of variable goals and aspirations, which is one of the aspects considered in this analysis. It is not just a way to analyze the way young people move in the present, but how they do it with regard to their future aspirations.

Marvis lives in a family house with a Cousin who offers him the opportunity to live with her, so he can diminish living expenses. He says with a smile in his face that he is very thankful to some members of the family who have helped him accomplish his aspirations to study in Medellín. He graduated from high school in 2012 and then realized that his aspirations were very different from those that his father had for him. He is proud to have “won the fight” with his father, as he calls it, but he says he never imagined all the obstacles that he has had to face in order to accomplish his dreams.

The first obstacle that *Chocoanos* have to face once they get to the big cities is the admission exam at the public University. In addition to the poor results in the *Saber* test, they have to take this admission exam, which focuses mainly on the weak areas of the educational institutions of Quibdó, such as math,

physics and chemistry. Because of this, they have to take courses to prepare for this exam. In some cases, they take the admission exam two or three times, what makes them waste time by staying in the city for a year or more, to finally not get the admission in most cases. Then, they have to start thinking of a private university in which the admission is not complicated but the cost of the tuition fee is much higher.

Marvis arrived to Medellín in January of 2013, with the plan of getting a spot in the University of Antioquia in order to study Economics. At this time of the year, the admissions were closed, so he decided to start a technological career, in order to do something while he waited. He took the admission exam to the public university twice, but he failed to pass in both occasions. At this point, he had already spent a year and his plans were not coming through. He decided to move to Bogota, where his mother lives, because his father took away his economic support, arguing that he had already spent one year without any result, and he was not going to pay for him to do nothing. In Bogota he registered at a private university, with the idea of making an arrangement with the university in order to pay the tuition fee in monthly payments during the semester. The university did not accept the arrangement and in this way he completed almost two years without the opportunity to study as he aspired.

With all these obstacles and inconveniences he was afraid that if he had to go back to Quibdó, he would have to study to become a teacher, as his father wanted. With this feeling, he went back to Quibdó for the vacation period, where his father encouraged him to start at the University of Chocó. Desperate, and knowing that this was not what he dreamed, he decided to talk to an aunt and uncle for them to help him convince his father that he deserved another opportunity. Two years after the beginning of the journey, and with the support of his uncle, he moved back to Medellín, where he had to consider other study options. Finally, in 2015 he was admitted at *Instituto Tecnológico Metropolitano (ITM)* to study a technological career in financial engineering. Currently, he is doing the third semester of six, and he seems very proud of finally having managed to study at this level, after all the obstacles he has had to overcome.

As Marvis, Andrés, Jesús and Sofía had to negotiate and navigate through many obstacles that stood on the way. This makes me think how the quality and outcome of the schooling process constrain your higher education possibilities, as one of the participants said: "If I had got a better ICFES score, I would have found more open doors and I would not have committed so many mistakes in seeking higher education". Also, it is very clear that the educational system at the higher education level excludes young people from lower socioeconomic background who do not have the means to pay a private university. The participants of this research who live in Medellín failed to access public Universities because of their academic outcomes. Then, after reorganizing their plans, they entered private Universities that, being relatively new, have not received any quality accreditation.

This is very telling in the sense that, as discussed in the previous chapter, the aspirations of these young Afro-Colombians to move to Bogota or Medellín had the original purpose of reaching high quality education. Many argue that the quality of education in Chocó is very low, but after all the obstacles

they found in the city, some of them finally got into new small universities, the reputation and quality of which has been put in question, to the point that in some cases they are in lower positions than the University of Chocó. Also, it is important to highlight that, despite the fact that all the participants are the second generation that attends university in their families, one of the parents has lower expectations about their child. This is so because of habitus driven aspirations, in the sense that he is a teachers graduated from the University of Chocó and they live in a city where teaching is the main source of employment. Also their economic situation does not facilitate their affording to send a child to attend University in Medellín.

## 6. What it means to be Afro in a Colombian university

*Racism: "a system of ignorance, exploitation, and power used to oppress African-Americans, Latinos, Asians, Pacific Americans, American Indians and other people on the basis of ethnicity culture, mannerism, and color" (Marable 1992 cited in Solórzano and Yosso 2002a:24)*

I have shown how these five Afro-Colombians have navigated and tried to overcome the structural inequalities of the educational system by making a great effort to reach their educational aspirations and attain good quality education out of Chocó. As it was stated before, just one of the participants, Paula, had the chance to attain good quality education at her first attempt in Bogota. Nevertheless, she has had to face constant racial discrimination. Since this research focuses on young Afro-Colombians, the race factor is crucial in the analysis and understanding of structural inequalities. Critical Race Theory scholars that have introduced it to the field of education argue that it represents an analytical tool to deconstruct the influence of race and racism on the educational trajectory of Afro-descendants, and to discuss white supremacy.

Thus, Critical race theory draws attention towards three main aspects: First, racism is embedded in the United States society, thus becoming a normal cultural feature of their people; second, a central role is attributed to counter-storytelling, in order to challenge the dominant discourse and as a way to give a voice to marginalized groups; third, CRT strongly criticizes liberalism in the sense that it promulgates a colorblind stance in law and policies, thus ignoring the inequity, oppression and lack of opportunities in which disadvantaged communities have been immersed, which cannot be addressed if race is ignored (DeCuir and Dixson 2004, Ladson-Billings 2010).

Many scholars have criticized CRT based on the observation that it concentrates on race, leaving out the analysis of factors such as social class and gender. However, authors like Kimberle Crenshaw have worked on structural intersectionality of race, class and gender to analyze violence against women of color in the United States (1991). So it appears to be true that in the analysis of the effects of race and racism on the educational experiences of disadvantaged communities, race cannot be separated from other factors of oppression, as is the case of, for example, social class.



By introducing Critical Race Theory (CRT) into the field of education, and after analyzing the educational system in Colombia, it is possible to undertake an analytical deconstruction of the inequity of the system. The role of race/ethnicity is important for the discussion implied in this research. However, this variable was not introduced by the researcher into the conversation with the participants, in order to see to what extent they were aware of how race has affected or influenced their experience in the educational system. The idea to highlight this issue is based on my personal experience since the moment when I first came to Bogota from a department where the majority of the population is black. I had never felt direct discrimination before coming to Bogota, and I was not aware of how this new reality could affect my aspirations.

In the first interview with Paula, the experience of discrimination turned out very quickly, when we were talking about their process of adapting to their new life in the capital city. She mentioned how she felt discriminated by their class mates at university, where most of the students are from out of Bogota. The class mates demonstrated that they did not value her knowledge. It was obvious for her in different moments in class that they did not give importance to any comment she made. Only after a teacher or another classmate had said it would they take it seriously. She relates how this became obvious one day that she had an assignment where she had to make an interview and she decided to interrogate a congressman that represented minority groups. When she presented the interview, one of her classmates said "He had to be representative of minorities to have time to attend your interview" Paula continued and explained the situation by saying "It is as if we were less than them". The stereotypes according to which people of color are less capable and intelligent subtly manifest in private discourses, in ways that the perpetrator often does not notice his/her racism (Solórzano 1997:10).

In this regard, there has been an intensive advocating process for the recognition of black communities in Colombia, held by a small group of students in the 80's. It bore fruits in 1991, with the recognition of Colombia as a multicultural and pluriethnic nation and the recognition of the *comunidades negras* as an ethnic group for the first time in history. It started with a transitional article in the constitution and ended up with the enactment of Law 70, which gave *comunidades negras* living in rural areas the right to determine collective titles for their lands (Wade 2009). However, 25 years later, we can see that there is still a long way to go in this process. This lack of recognition and visibility is related to what Gloria Ladson-Billings addressed by saying that the curriculums in school maintain white supremacy, since they "mute and erase the voices of African descendants as a way to save the dominant culture authority of power" (2010:18). In this sense, nonblacks do not know the stories and narratives of these communities, which makes the struggle of their members even more difficult than it already is.

I asked her what she does in those situations and she answered: "I let them think what they want, I do not generate discord with them". The same answer I got from Marvis when he mentioned that sometimes in Medellin he had to listen to people calling him names for being Afro-descendant. He said "*me hago el loco*" This is an expression that means that he does not pay attention and ignores the comments. This made me reflect, because I had never thought about it, but it is very common. We

have been historically discriminated and this is something that happens so often that we decide to ignore it and not waste time arguing. Now that I think about it, I remember my first year at a private school in Bogota, where I had to face daily acts of discrimination from my classmates and when I told my father about it all he said was “you have to be confident of who you are and not pay attention to what they say”. He reinforced all the time “*no pares bolas, ellos son los ignorantes*” – “don’t pay attention they are the ignorant”.

We have to recognize that racism is embedded in our society and non-black citizens consider it to be normal. And these structures of discrimination are more tangible for Afro-Colombians from Chocó when they go out of their territory. However, it is interesting to analyze the reason behind the attitude that we assume in the host cities in relation to acts of discrimination. Talking to the participants, and from my own analysis, I agree that in the process of “adaptation” to a “white world” and among the struggles and navigation in order to reach goals and aspirations, we can see the lack of legitimization and recognition of our community as an ethnic one. We have been made invisible for hundreds of years, during which there has not been any recognition of the contribution that these communities made to the construction of the nation we are today, through both labor and the blood of those who died in the battlefields, fighting for our independence.

This kind of reality that shows discrimination in the university context in Colombia reveals several issues for analysis. First, universities are institutions where the multicultural discourse has not been incorporated as a policy to address exclusion. Hence, they continue to reproduce exclusion through their internal dynamics. College being a place where all cultures and ethnicities meet in a favorable environment for learning and construction of knowledge, it should promote spaces where members and non-members of different minority ethnic groups could enrich their knowledge about reality by discovering there are other realms different from the dominant one (Delgado 1989:2415).

In the second place, it is true that Colombia has improved the inclusion of some affirmative actions in order to expand coverage with equity. However, if these institutions do not change their internal structures for ethnic minorities to be made visible in both the curriculums and college structures, these programs will never have any equity and social justice impact. In the third place, and based on the narratives of Paula and most of the participants, it is important to highlight how the students’ coping capacity has allowed them to overcome discrimination by focusing on their final objective, which is to graduate from university. Nevertheless, the participants of this research are still in the process to get a professional degree and it is impossible to assure that they are going to make it. They are perfect examples of those who have been able to overcome the structural inequalities of the educational system by accessing higher education. However, the right to education is still thwarted by a system that is trying to include *new agents* in educational institutions, but keeping the *old structures* (Caicedo et al. 2008:87) in which black communities are permanently excluded, discriminated and made invisible.

Finally, it is also important to highlight that this process of recognition is very incipient when compared to the process that indigenous communities in Colombia had followed. There are still some things that are not well defined in the normativity in question. Something that is urgent to elaborate is the definition of who is to be considered black. The actual normativity relies on local organizations to certify who is and who is not. These organizations have taken a very liberal position in this regard by certifying it to everyone that asks for it. This has generated some problems, especially regarding the affirmative actions that the government has implemented to address inequalities. In relation to the scholarships and educational discounts for ethnic communities, there have been some complaints, especially in cases of people that do not have dark skin but have Afro-Colombian descent. Two years ago, a student from Chocó traveled to Cali, one of the main cities of Colombia, to study at a public university. Once she got the addition, she applied for a discount in the tuition fee which was specially assigned to members of ethnic communities. But, surprisingly, she did not get it because “she didn’t appear to be black”, that was the response that she got from the university, since she has a lighter skin, and despite her self-recognition as Afro-Colombian. On the contrary, many others who do not have Afro-Colombian descent can access these few initiatives, thus detracting the real objective of affirmative actions.

In my personal case, I came to Bogota with the purpose of entering a high quality school in order to be better prepared and thus obtain a good result in the *Saber* test. This, in turn, was expected to facilitate my access to a good quality university that my parents could afford. Due to the constant acts of discrimination - none of my class mates wanted to establish any contact with me - I decided not to continue in that particular school. In consequence, and due to lack of time, I had to move to another school with lower quality standards, which was the only one to admit me in such condition. After two years of being there and at the end of high school I performed well in the *Saber* test, which gave me the option to apply to a qualified university. However, I never knew how this navigation and adaptation was going to affect my final aspiration to a “better life”. However, these acts of discrimination helped me shape my character and define what I wanted to do in life. I decided that I not only wanted to tell a different story with my acts, but also with the voices and stories of others who cannot do so. This is a way to honor my culture and my roots. Yes, there are innumerable structural forces and power relations that have excluded us, but also here comes the strong force of young people that want to change the imaginaries and narratives that others have casted upon us “*Chocoanos*”.

## 7. Conclusions

The objective of this research was to analyze, through the narratives of young Afro-descendants, how they have faced and overcome social exclusion and discrimination in their quest for higher education. In response to this objective, the present research was based on the counter stories of five young Afro-Colombians from Chocó, as an illustration of how prominent race and racism are in the Colombian educational system. However, it is important to highlight that even though these are their experiences, - and experiences about race and racism are not all the same – they transcend to those of many other young Afro-Colombians from Chocó. These narratives show the situation and reality that Afro-descendants live through in a country whose constitution and laws recognize ethnic diversity and where the education policy presents a discourse of equality for all citizens. However, I have shown that the educational system with the neoliberal discourse of equality of opportunities for all does not recognize the different contexts in which ethnic communities live, nor the different starting points that have to be considered in order to address inequality and reach social justice on the contrary it perpetuates inequality.

Despite the lack of opportunities affecting Afro-Colombians from Chocó, education is a very important pillar in the construction of the aspirations of young Afro-Colombians and the conception that they have of a better life. This conceptualization of education as the most important driver of social mobility is rooted in our culture. This aspiration for higher education has been passed from generation to generation since the first *Chocoano* reached this educational stage in the 1940's. Diego Luis Córdoba was the first *Chocoano* African descendant who graduated as a lawyer and managed to develop a political career. He demonstrated that through education Afro-descendants could access technical or administrative positions, spaces that were formerly denied to Afro-descendants. Diego Luis Córdoba left his mark on all *Chocoanos* and became immortal with the statement: "By ignorance we descend to servitude, by education we ascend to freedom". This naturally builds awareness in the social imaginary of the necessity to build a way of upward mobility through education, thus generating more opportunities for Afro-Colombians. The *Chocoanos* community is by far the minority group with the most interest in accessing higher education in the country. This allows concluding that aspirations of higher education are mainly rooted in the habitus of these communities through their collective history of struggle against inequalities.

This study reveals that the Afro-descendant community of Choco has the largest number of members with higher education across regions with significant presence of Afro-descendant population. However, at all levels it has the lowest levels of quality, with a sustained trend to increase the gap in the comparative table of all Colombian departments.

The *Chocoanos* face many obstacles when accessing higher education institutions, but they find ways to navigate through the options and constraints of the system. One of the obstacles is related to poor quality education offered in the territory in primary and secondary education and also in the university of Chocó, which is qualified by the Ministry of education as one of the worst institutions at this level.

This reality has pushed many students to leave the territory as a way to find an option to access high quality education at the university level. However, when they arrive to cities as Medellin and Bogota, they find a reality which is very different from what they have experienced in Chocó, where black communities are majority.

These students find an educational system that does not recognize the ethnic diversity and that excludes them through a selection process in which Afro-Colombians have lower options to access high quality institutions and curriculums. This is so because universities still rely on standardized tests for the admission of the prospective student (Solorzano and Ornelas 2002:220). In Colombia, this is based on the result of the *Saber* test, which also reveals the poor quality education that Afro-descendant students receive in primary and secondary education. This data also shows how the schooling process constrains their options to reach higher education by lowering their chances of reaching high quality universities.

These inequalities have been addressed by a few affirmative actions which have been put in place by some universities in order to increase the admission rates of Afro-Colombians. However, the data show that these affirmative actions are not accessible for many members of black communities, who continue to be excluded of the system. Also for those who can access university, their right to education is thwarted by structures in which minority ethnic groups are permanently excluded, discriminated and made invisible. This young people encounters with These affirmative actions have not represented any transformation in the structures of inequality in the system.

On the other hand, this study opens a door for further research on the quality of education in Chocó, which is related to the quality of the teachers that are incorporated into the system. Barrera-Osorio et al. argue that the students that enroll in careers related to education are those who got the worst performance in the *Saber* test, since these careers have lower standards for the admissions (2012:13). In turn, the University of Chocó is classified as one of the worst of the country in terms of education quality and 50% of the careers it offers deal with education. This shows a correlation between the quality of education of the teachers in Chocó and the quality of education that *Chocoanos* are receiving in primary and secondary school.

Finally, there is lack of studies in Colombia regarding the trajectory of members of black communities in the university. This study intended to highlight the experiences of those young Afro-Colombians that leave Chocó to access high quality education at the university level and the challenges that they face in the process. There is need to replicate this type of studies at a larger scale, so that they become policy recommendations for education at the national level by including the perspective of ethnic minorities and by recognizing the different starting point of these disadvantage communities in order to guarantee equity and social justice.

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