

THE FREE AND HAPPY SCHOOL: AN OUTSIDER ALTERNATIVE IN CHILE

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ABSTRACT: This article examines the Proyecto Escuelita Libre y Feliz María Lefebre Lever (‘María Lefebre Lever Free and Happy School Project’), which gathers the largest network of schools outside the formal educational network in Chile. Drawing on a qualitative case-study based on in-depth interviews with staff and parents, it highlights the experiences of the community members who have founded this alternative educational network at the margins of prevailing educational formats in Chile. The main findings show how a community of parents and educators dissatisfied with the mainstream educational system have initiated, developed, and expanded a new educational project. The data goes on to describe the main characteristics of this model, and to relay the benefits and disadvantages of being part of an only contingently recognized schooling movement in the Chilean context.

Keywords: Alternative education. Critical education. School choice. Personalized education. Nonformal education.

LA ESCUELA LIBRE Y FELIZ: UNA ALTERNATIVA AL MARGEN DE LA EDUCACIÓN FORMAL EN CHILE

RESUMEN: Este artículo examina el proyecto “Escuelita Libre y Feliz María Lefebre Lever”, el cual reúne a la mayor red de escuelas al margen de la educación formal en Chile. A partir de un estudio de caso de corte cualitativo, basado en entrevistas en profundidad con el personal y los padres, se destacan las experiencias de los miembros de esta comunidad educativa que han fundado esta red de escuelas alternativa al margen de los formatos educativos imperantes en Chile. Los principales hallazgos muestran cómo una comunidad de padres y educadores, insatisfechos con la actual oferta educativa, ha iniciado, desarrollado y ampliado un nuevo

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proyecto educativo al margen del sistema educativo formalmente reconocido en Chile. Los datos describen las principales características del modelo, transmitiendo los beneficios y desventajas de ser parte de este creciente proyecto desarrollado al margen de la educación formalmente reconocida por el Estado chileno.

Palabras clave: Educación alternativa. Educación crítica. Elección de escuela. Educación personalizada. Educación no formal.

ESCOLA LIVRE E FELIZ: UMA ALTERNATIVA DIFERENTE NO CHILE

RESUMO: Esse artigo examina o projeto denominado “Escuelita Libre y Feliz María Lefebre Lever”, que reúne a maior rede de escolas fora da rede formal de ensino no Chile. O projeto está desenhado segundo estudos de caso qualitativos baseados em detalhadas entrevistas feitas tanto com educadores quanto com pais e cuidadores, que enfatizam as experiências de membros da comunidade que fundaram tal projeto como uma rede de educação alternativa ao formato educacional predominante no Chile. As principais descobertas mostram como uma comunidade de pais e educadores que se encontravam insatisfeitos com o sistema de educação tradicional iniciou, desenvolveu e expandiu um novo projeto educacional. Os dados recolhidos também descrevem as principais características do modelo mencionado e apontam os benefícios e desvantagens de fazer parte desse movimento.

Palavras-chave: Educação alternativa. Educação crítica. Escolha da escola. Educação personalizada. Educação não formal.

Introduction

In 2012, in the city of Villa Alemana (Valparaíso Region, Chile), two parents felt that their daughter’s educational needs were not being fulfilled in her traditional school, and asked veteran teacher María Verónica Rodríguez (the child’s grandmother) to educate her in a context where she felt free and happy, and respected in learning at her own pace. It was in this way that the Free and Happy School Project (FHSP) began, along with the Lefebre Lever method. Currently, more than fifty schools in Chile apply this method and possess Lefebre Lever certification. The model falls outside Chile’s voucher-style schooling subsidies, and represents a truly grassroots development.

Since all schooling is in some sense a form of social reproduction (BOURDIEU; PASSERON, 1990), the right of different self-defining communities to educate their children is of interest to society beyond such communities.

For those living within comfortable commute of many schools, all kind of considerations can inform school choice—there may be expectations within a religious or ethnic community to patronize an associated school, indeed some parents may be keen to align with an educational philosophy that is not their own but is seen as advantageous. Parents may differentiate between the attributes of their children and select schools according, and, with differential pricing, some schools may just seem like a better value.

Some families may decide that homeschooling is the best option, at a great expense in terms of time and effort (although, in remote areas, perhaps savings on a school commute offsets this); in many respects, it resembles the private tutoring that aristocratic children once received. For a group of fairly like-minded

parents and extended families, to collaborate in making their own school may be a logical move for those who want to shape their own educational environment, and certainly it is not new.

It has certainly happened throughout Chilean history, and, since 1980, the Chilean government has made voucher-style funding available to whatever school agrees to and meets a suite of state oversight measures, including adherence to a national curriculum. To forego voucher subsidies in order to minimize oversight is a particularly bold move. FHSP has taken such a step, and must negotiate the education system's recognition of the learning of its students from the system's edges.—This study uses interviews and observations to explore the establishment of the first Free Happy School, considering particularly:

- What are the parents' or guardians' motivations and expectations for getting involved in an educational project that is outside the formal school system in Chile?
- What pedagogical foundations of FHSP contribute to the collective re-thinking of education? And finally,
- What are the perceived tensions in terms of developing this educational project outside of the traditional school system?

The Chilean Context

In 1813, a milestone of Chile's independence process was the consolidation of Santiago's leading boys' schools, run by religious orders within a single Instituto Nacional. Since 1833, education in Chile has been explicitly formulated as a function of the State, with the coexistence and, to some extent, coordination of education state and private (initially mostly tied to Catholic religious teaching orders). Modifications have been legion; over the 20th century, ten major educational reform packages were introduced (DONOSO, 2005). The changes are rung so fast, their actual impact is hard to evaluate. Often, specific contingencies, and short-term ideological interests appear to trump any pedagogical consistency.

To understand the foundation of the current educational policy in Chile it is necessary to go back a few decades to the irruption of the civil-military dictatorship led by General Augusto Pinochet from 1973-1990 (MORENO-DOÑA; JIMÉNEZ, 2014). Often held up as an object lesson in *neoliberal* reform, the pillars of market competition (including voucher subsidies) and decentralization aimed at greater efficiencies (ESPINOZA; BAROZET; MÉNDEZ, 2013; APPLE, 2006; PLANK; SYKES, 2003). Public schools passed from the State to unevenly run municipalities, with the Ministry of Education being responsible for overseeing curricular matters (OLIVA, 2010). The education budget was reduced to half of what it had been (RIESCO, 2007).

As of 1990, with the peaceful return of elected government, new education policies aimed at alleviating entrenched poverty were implemented, and positive changes could be observed mainly due to coverage and budget increase. In this post-dictatorial period, market orientation would only consolidate, leaving Chile today as one of the countries with the highest percentage of non-State schooling in the world. In 1981, 78% of primary and secondary students in Chile were enrolled in public schools, while in 2016, this number had dropped to 38.2% for public primary schools and 35.4% for public secondary schools (MINEDUC, 2021). Notwithstanding, a steady increase in overall secondary school participation, particularly during the 1990s, the social segmentation is notable (VALENZUELA; BELLEI; DE LOS RÍOS, 2014).

The enrollment process, in the case of private establishments, allows schools to select their students based on parent interviews, academic evaluations, personality, and academic records, weighing up, among other things, students' previous performance (OECD, 2010). School vouchers have permitted and, in terms of rational choice and organizational maximization, actually encouraged schools to seek the best performing

students (CONTRERAS; SEPÚLVEDA; BUSTOS, 2010; HSIEH; URQUIOLA, 2006). Characteristics-blind vouchers fail to price and subsidize the at-risk component of the most needy students, and make them more attractive (MIZALA, 2008). In effect, lower-income students tend to attend public schools, middle-income students attend partially-subsidized schools, and high-income students attend private schools. The 59.6% of public school students come from an unprecedented wave of migrant families, preponderantly from elsewhere in Latin America (MINEDUC, 2018).

If the voucher system has allowed freedom to choose, the choices narrow with the descent in socioeconomic status (CONTRERAS; SEPÚLVEDA; BUSTOS, 2010). Chile is one of the OECD member countries with the highest differences in academic performance between students in urban and rural areas, as well as having some of the highest indicators of repeated and failed grade levels (SANTIAGO et al., 2017). The results from the PISA 2015 test confirm longstanding socio-economic differences in academic performance. Private school students average 46 points (around 10%) more than those who attend public schools, and both groups are poor in achievement when respectively compared to private and public schools elsewhere (OECD, 2018). Indicators regarding school environment are similarly inauspicious, with 67.5% of 16 year-old students perceiving medium to medium-high levels of aggression in their school context (AGENCIA DE CALIDAD DE LA EDUCACIÓN, 2012). Furthermore, 45.5% of sixth grade teachers (with 12 year-old students) state that they have observed students bullying or harming other students. The correlation demonstrated between school violence and poor academic performance in Chile is the strongest among Latin American countries (TRUCCO; INOSTROZA, 2017), although it would seem improbable that data has been collected evenly across the region.

Breaking with Tradition

If Chilean schooling has greatly evolved, it does form an overall tradition that is in communion with the idea of education systems honing a society's values.—In Latin America, mass schooling is arguably one of the more 'Western' conceits (Sarzuri-Lima, 2011).—One internationally influential book published in Chile was the exiled Argentine Domingo Faustino Sarmiento's *Facundo: Civilización y Barbarie* (1845), which advocated for transformation of Argentina through building European-style cities, attracting European immigrants and widening public education. In Chile, the appeal of wider education was viewed as entirely analogous to an industrialization that never really came to a country more suited to mineral exportation than manufacturing. In 1909, the essayist Tancredo Pinochet Le-Brun urged:

The school and the factory are the two levers we have in our hands, the two formidable levers that must make the transformation of Chile, which must give the country its moral wealth and material wealth. p.13

Nowadays, noting that bad schools are like factories, or prison, or the military are clichés—schools promise order and efficiency, but theirs are actually unenlightened traditions. At the risk of repeating such shallow piety, we use the term *traditional schools* here not least as its currency emerged in the interviews for this study.

There is no shortage of work earnestly denouncing the traditional, hierarchical, mainstream school (APPLE, 1971; FIELDING; MOSS, 2011; GIROUX; PENNA, 1979; JACKSON, 1990; FREIRE, 1990; ECHEITA SARRIONAND; SANDOVAL MENA, 2002). Theorists puzzle over how the school remains a conservative force in an ever-changing world (MORIN, 1999; JAY, 2003; VALLS, 2000), its rigid curriculum impeding reflection on

student wellbeing and the nature of knowledge transmission (DELEUZE; GUATTARI, 1994). A crowded, costed dynamic limits the pedagogical imagination (CONTRERAS, 2003), and naturalizes the legitimacy of *'the educational model'* as if there were only one. With school completion becoming the norm over the final decades of last century, such a dominant model actually draws on the radical behaviorist proposition of depositing a set of representations in the minds of rapidly diversified student bodies (FUENTES, 2011), amply promoted by US foreign policy in Cold War Latin America (LEIHY et al., 2017). In that content, codes and appearances of the dominant culture prevail, with Latin America vicariously venerating the white and European, plumbing its own heteronormative, sexist, and conformist depths, and deprecating other values and cultural characteristics (DA SILVA, 1999; DE SOUSA SANTOS, 2010).—Questioning such structures is increasingly fashionable in Chile as elsewhere.

For four decades, the Chilean government has supported school choice as a source of efficiency and family responsibility.—A variety of newer school projects called Free Schools are marked by taking the emphasis off 'official' recognition, including State funding, and heighten awareness and recognition of learning itself (DOIN, 2012; GONZÁLEZ-RODRÍGUEZ; RAMOS ABARCA, 2013). Such projects allow reconsideration of educators' (including parental) roles (HARGREAVES, 1996; IMBERNON; ANGULO, 2005). More space is afforded to the *learning by doing* posited by social constructivism (VYGOTSKY, 2001), where the students build up their own knowledge bases, as well as multiple types of intelligence (GARDNER, 1996; 2011), and the social (BANDURA, 1987) and individual (SCHÜTZ, 1972) contextualization of knowledge.

The Free and Happy School Network and the Lefebvre Lever Project

FHSP, according to its mission, has the objective of transforming educational spaces into places with inclusive environments, promoting respect and kindness, with a maternal, fraternal, and emotional pedagogical relationship with students. Likewise, FHSP educators are referred to as educational midwives or mediators. They may not necessarily have training or a university degree in pedagogy, as educational establishments recognized by the Chilean State require. Whoever is interested in being part of this educational project must obtain an FHSP diploma, which allows them to work as a 'mediator.' The founder of FHSP directs the training program, along with mediators who work in the founding school, which directly concerns this study. Although those who desire to work in a school with this method are required to complete the diploma program, which takes place outside the university system, it does not operate following the logic of an educational franchise, as it privileges the autonomous development of each school, and the perspectives of the educators and families within it. Those who have completed training (with now more than 500 people certified with Lefebvre Lever diplomas) are invited to incorporate themselves into a collaborative network of good educational practices in order to continue expanding and grounding the FHSP philosophy.

Like most alternative education experiences in Chile, most prominently Montessori and Waldorf franchises, FHSP uses official curricular content in plans and programs corresponding to each academic year level. It is the methodology that differs, formulated according to six fundamental pillars: 1) *respect for biology*, concerning the individual learning rhythms, and biological and emotional needs of each child; 2) *responsible co-rearing ('co-crianza')*, wherein the school and family life are harmonized; 3) *all-encompassing ('transversal') and permanent philosophy*, understood as an opening towards different ideas, analysis and discussion, without preconceptions or predefined objectives; 4) *investigation according to whatever strikes one's fancy*, applying the scientific method to everyday happenings; 5) *neuroeducation*, understood as the development of learning processes through the expression and interconnectedness of emotions; and 6) *complementary therapies*, with techniques for the management of emotional balance and health sought out and built into daily activities.

While the FHSP approach has its affinities with other 'alternative' educational systems in Chile, what distinguishes it is how it both reflects grassroots changes in family choice and has been established at the margins of the education system, beyond the usual framework of State recognition. Some of the FHSP methodologies and orienting principles go against the underpinnings of education's legal framework in Chile. For example, the toilet facilities are not separated according to gender, a standard directive of the education ministry (and, of course, a preponderant enough practice in the United States to have become a focus of sexual identity protests).

Another notable element that prevents State recognition concerns the teaching staff. According to FHSP, the 'mediators' do not necessarily require university training in pedagogy. Indeed, FHSP goes so far as to question the tendency of university teacher training to reproduce traditional forms of education, which go against the essence of the project. The Lefebvre Lever method establishes its own orthodoxies in that regard, and accredits them with its own diploma. While Free and Happy Schools do not enjoy State recognition, they can, nevertheless, operate, using a legal loophole originally designed to formalize recognition of prior learning. Once a year, students can take an evaluation in a designated public school to validate their level of education via the modality of free exams .

Free and Happy Schools are present in fifty centers in different regions of the country, and can be analyzed according to their articulation with and freedom within the Chilean educational context.¹ Currently, it is one of the most significant organized school projects outside the network of public and private schools recognized by the Ministry of Education.

The Free and Happy School of Villa Alemana: Pioneers

The founding Free and Happy School, where the study was carried out, is in Villa Alemana, an inland dormitory community serving the region's major business centers of Viña de Mar and Valparaíso. Residents are primarily middle class.

The school staff is composed of five mediators. Among these is María Verónica Rodríguez, founder of the Lefebvre Lever method adopted by all schools in the network. Two mediators, in addition to giving classes, assumed the responsibility of planning and coordinating daily activities, publishing them ahead of class on a private Facebook account. Once the school day is completed, they upload photos and videos of all the activities undertaken daily with the aim of keeping parents continually informed, and thereby strengthening co-rearing. Informal social networks are integral. There is an open-door policy, where the families of the children can take part in activities during the school day as, mandatorily, active participants—thus learning processes within and beyond school are held in harmony.

The total enrollment of the school at the time of the study was 22 students whose parents were paying a monthly fee of approximately US\$ 150. This fee is well below that charged by other projects, that identify as alternative and also receive State recognition. Considerable income comes into the school through annual training towards the diploma in the Lefebvre Lever method, provided by members of staff. While this is a boon for the founding school, other schools subscribing to the network have their own fee structures and income streams.

The activities of the FHSP were carried out in a one-level residential house that was not originally designed as an educational space, and indeed is quite similar to the middle-class homes from which the children come. It consists of two exterior spaces, one that faced the street and another interior, destined for recreational activities. There is a mixed student bathroom, and a kitchen. Inside, there is a space for carrying out academic

activities and alternative therapies. Some activities are done with the children altogether and others in two groups, which were divided by age range and are each the responsibility of one teacher. Additionally, there is a small room for meetings and for storing educational materials. The teaching staff has a room with a bathroom.

Methodology

In this study, we explore the meanings and experiences that parents and teachers attribute to their participation in FHSP, using a phenomenological qualitative method. That is, from a case-study methodology (STAKE, 2013), a narrative is gleaned of the participants' significant experiences with respect to the educational project (ROULSTON, 2014).

Sampling

Interviewees were drawn from the parents/guardians and/or members of the staff. The sample in this study consists of eleven participants (Table 1). All members of the school staff were interviewed (three full-time and two part-time mediators, and one administrator), including one who was also a parent, along with three other parents. One of these parents also administers another school that is part of the national FHSP network. Given the school's size (22 students), the interviews have gleaned a robust portrait (at least from an adult perspective), and overlap of elicited themes suggests a degree of content saturation. There is an unabashed intimacy in the study, consistent with the grassroots nature of the school's beginning.

Table 1. Interview features

Code	Gender	Time involved with the project (years, months)	Researcher interviewer
SA1	Male	4.6	1
SS1	Female	4.6	2
SS2	Female	3.6	3
SS3	Female	0.2	2
SS4	Female	0.3	2
SS5	Male	0.4	1
PS1	Male	4.6	1
P1	Male	1.6	1
P2	Female	2.6	1
P3	Female	2.6	2
P4	Male	2.6	3

SS: School staff; SA: School administrator; PS: parent and school staff member; P: parent.

Source: Own elaboration from project data.

Data Collection and Analysis

During a period of one month, three of the researchers collected data through semi-structured interviews (of between fifty and ninety minutes' duration) and participant observation (passive participation). Studying the founding school provided access to the perspectives of founders and leaders of the Free and Happy movement, who also impart the diploma course in the Lefebre Lever method.

For the semi-structured interviews, relevant literature was consulted in order to develop the instrument. Special attention was taken so that the questions would not guide the answers. Each of the interviews began with questions aimed at creating a climate of trust, and gathering general information. All interviews were conducted where classes are usually held and were digitally recorded, and transcribed by the researchers. To protect the anonymity of the participants, the following codes were used: P (parents or guardians), SS (school staff), and PS (parent and member of the school staff). At the end of each interview, each participant was asked if there were any comments or relevant topics they wanted to add that had not been previously discussed. *NVivo 12* was used for the categorical analysis, which was established based on the content of the interviews, and the proposed theoretical framework. As advocated in Morse et al. (2002), a rigorous range of strategies was followed in the research process to ensure accuracy: interviews were developed by three researchers; independent field observations took in the whole of the school day over different days during a period of one month; interviews have been cross-analyzed; field observations, and notes were collected to supplement interview data; and visual and textual documents published by the school and freely available on the web were examined (es-la.facebook.com/escuelalibrefeliz.cl/).

Research ethics protocols were fully considered and observed during the entire research process. These included informed consent; the possibility of being in contact at all times with the responsible researcher; the right to withdraw from the study at any point; and the guarantee of general confidentiality and anonymity (agreed exceptions are the father and grandmother whose quotations appear first and second, and explain the school's origins).

Findings

The findings are organized into three sections: *Clashing with the school system*; *When we feel, we learn*; and *Let the dogs bark, the caravan rolls on*.

Clashing with the School System

What happens when parents whose children reach the age of compulsory schooling familiarize themselves with the diverse educational projects available, yet feel that none of the options responds to their needs and expectations? Typically, such families must choose the available educational center that best suits the family, or at least adapt to the one that is the *least* inadequate. An unwillingness to make such compromises explains, in large part, the origins of the Lefebre Lever method. The parents who asked this question initially were those of the granddaughter of the movement's founder and director of its pioneering school.

The school began with my daughter. We hadn't found a space that was aligned with our parenting style. We weren't looking for a place boasting academic success, where they are taught English from day one, or computation. There were many nice-looking projects, but none of them seemed like they could adapt to the style of parenting that we were practicing. And that's how the space arose (PS1).

Here, meeting the needs of families and communities that feel neglected by the traditional education system falls to new initiatives. Chilean education is largely defined by market choice according to preexisting

options. State schools provide education whose limited appeal is widely reflected in diminished parental demand. While providing universally accessible education, they are hamstrung by that very role. Provision according to formulated standards dulls proactiveness, with many schools persisting with often homogenous, centralized projects, and with scarce space for management on a local level. In this case, longstanding subsidized and fully private schools also lacked appeal to a family with a strong sense of its own child-rearing style.

The school's founder takes over:

When I was walking with my granddaughter to her seventh day in a traditional kindergarten, one that we had found to be least risky, [...] my granddaughter was crying because she had seen that the day before the teacher wouldn't give her a red balloon. There were tons of red balloons [...]. The professor had given her a blue one because it was the first one she grabbed. She had asked for the red, but the teacher insisted that she had already grabbed the blue one. This event, which from our perspective had caused a crisis, really, left my granddaughter crying on the way to school..., so I made the decision. I called my daughter on the phone and I called my son-in-law on the phone and I say to them 'Guys, what if we don't send my granddaughter back to this kindergarten?' and they said to me, 'Mom, but what would we do?' I opened a new school for her and that was it. They said, we trust you.—They already knew, it wasn't anything new, they already knew that I'd been thinking about this idea (SS1).

The grandmother not only perceives schooling options as distant from the family's culture and values, but has even gone so far as to assess how 'risky' they are; an image consistent enough with market thinking, but with the market failing stringent expectations as to a child's physical, and emotional nurturing.

From these initial worries and needs, the new school project would take shape. The spontaneity and support of those who make up the educational community are valued.

It is to be called 'Little School' ..., and as this school is very free, it will be called 'Little Free School,' and then someone says, and Happy, so it will be called 'The Little Free and Happy School.' And we called it The Little Free and Happy School. And then we filled the name with meaning (SS1).

It is a method that has been developed as we go. We didn't start the other way around, trying to write it down and then trying to apply what we wrote. No, first we applied the method and then we wrote it (SA1).

In the process of giving content and structure to the method, concepts associated with freedom and happiness become particularly relevant. Before, SS1 refers to the possibility of implementing significant actions without prior stipulations (compare this to the Universal Human Right of a 'prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children' [Art. 26]), much less limitations imposed from outside the school community, based on transposed norms. SA1 relates the gratification that comes from having the power to develop activities that align with the students' interests, without having to take on previously, let alone externally, determined positions or behaviors. From this position, there is evidently a strong contrast with the Chilean school system, characterized by overly structured activities and spaces, in the context of a massive and impersonal education. It is an education that generates submission in some, opposition in others, and, in the majority of cases, the loss of spontaneity and meaningful actions, causing a disconnect from the specific rhythms, and necessities of each child.

When we recognize that content, activities and life itself come in waves, not being linear, we can save our schools. Traditional schools work with a linear education; students arrive at 8:00, they go outside at 9:00, they play until 9:15, they have language class, then math, followed by history, they have music class, those who sing well go to choir and those who already have guitar skills go to band practice. But when you break this cycle and everyone sings, everyone dances, everyone builds, everyone does science... you've broken the linearity, you've broken the established paradigms of equal education for all, rather an education for all that recognizes inequalities (SS1).

As a translator's note: whereas in English 'equal' is almost invariably positive and 'inequalities,' bad, the Spanish '*igual*' and '*desigualdades*' can also convey 'same' and 'distinctivenesses,' respectively—the ambiguity is a kind of word play. Broad strokes of policyspeak can promote equality, but the intimacy of teaching and learning allows an appreciation that difference and differential treatment are valuable, too.

In developing the FHSP enterprise, participants have neither overlooked nor critically dissected the curricular contents stipulated by the State. Rather, differences can be observed in the methodology used when teaching the content versus the highly structured way it is taught within the current Chilean school system (SELIGMAN, 2012).

The Lefebre Lever educational project is a methodological proposal that aims to transform educational spaces into places of kind coexistence where curricular content is transmitted through meaningful, and hopeful experiences for society (SA1).

Converting an educational space into a meaningful place of learning, where differences are valued, and collaborative and inclusive learning is promoted, constitutes a challenge for the teachers that they take on optimistically.

I am looking for a different way, and this is what is interesting in the end for the teachers..., being able to find different ways of teaching (SS5).

When we Feel, we Learn

Although there still is no complete consensus regarding the definition or the measurement of wellbeing in school contexts (COLEMAN, 2009), it would seem that happiness, one of the components of wellbeing, would be of great importance for a FHSP mediator, and closely linked to learning. Likewise, different authors have focused on identifying and measuring wellbeing in schools as a fundamental condition for learning processes, at the same time defining education as a source of individual and social wellbeing. From this perspective, this project perceives an educational space as a meaningful, close, intimate, and healthy space, where family gatherings occur, thus demonstrating the importance of how each child and their family nourish the community. Therefore, one of the fundamental pillars of this educational community is what are referred to as complementary therapies, understood as spaces within the daily routine (*e. g.*, yoga) that aim to link socio-emotional processes with learning processes in the context of treating each other well.

The first thing that caught our attention was the complementary therapies. The way in which the topics of the Ministry of Education curriculum were incorporated into the therapies. Because these are practices in our family—meditation, yoga—then we saw that they all were incorporated into one project (P1).

Despite growing evidence surrounding the positive effects of the consideration of social and emotional learning in educational contexts (BRIDGELAND; BRUCE; HARIHARAN, 2013), most traditional educational establishments remain crowded, with high numbers of enrolled students, and competitive achievement adding to the intensity. In contrast, developing emotional ties to content in order to achieve learning is considered essential by the members of the FHSP project. The Lefebre Lever pillar of respect for biology promotes the value of emotional expression, physical exploration, and play:

We base our work on Attachment Theory and foremost believe that, without a sentimental connection with the boys and girls, learning is almost impossible. In other words, the greater the emotional connection, the greater the cognitive development (SS2). Emotional connection is the great bridge that allows us then to construct this method exactly as we had imagined it (SA1).

Meaningful emotional ties require deep, close, permanent, and daily connection, which implies structuring educational projects on a human scale, where each member of the community can be in contact with others and, in this way, establish supportive, and trusting relationships. In this regard, the community only considers viable those educational endeavors tailored to their number of students.

The school director has an idea of how many children we can have... , or how many the teacher can hug, so, for three or four mediators, well, eighteen children is enough (PS1).

Emotional ties and learning processes are not limited to the dynamic of daily classes, but also extend to relationships with the parents, and their children outside school. Co-rearing compatible with the school philosophy is an explicit commitment parents required of parents.

Co-rearing can be understood, at least from our perspective, as from the home and for the home, or, in other words, what is practiced here is also practiced at home. For example, if *here* there are no guns, then *there* there are no guns. You can't have a double standard (P2).

It is from the perspective of co-rearing that the open-door policy of FHSP can be understood: parents can participate at any moment, contributing to activities. At the same time, it enables them to get to know and be a part of the project, as well as to harmonize school and home dynamics.

Well, the parents here, we can come whenever we want. I can even stay during an activity. I can say 'Today, I'd like to stay here.' It's not like I have to leave my son at the door and then come back at the permitted time. No, the only requirement is that, if the dad or mom stays, the dad or mom has to participate in the activity like everyone else, not as an external observer (PS1).

This reciprocal tie between school and family blurs the line between the two:

This is already part of our family. We have always felt this way. In fact, the school has even helped us to make certain decisions as a family. It has given us the strength and encouragement, right here, to make our own decisions (P1).

Let the Dogs Bark, the Caravan Rolls On

Being a project outside the network of establishments recognized by the Ministry of Education generates certain suspicions from people who have heard of the FHSP, but are not directly involved. However, parents report that suspicion and resistance dissolve once they observe the children's positive development:

So you start telling people... the truth is that they start seeing the children... My mom, for example, who is super Catholic, she told me this isn't a school, but then, when she saw that Pedro was reading last year, when he was in kindergarten [...] My mother was impressed. 'Mom, yes, it is a school.' So, they start loving it as much as me (P2).

There are people who, when we tell them that we decided to send our children here, they questioned our decision, because it's easy to question something that you're not familiar with. But, in the close circle of our family, everyone shares the same opinion (P3).

As the project is not recognized by the Ministry of Education in Chile, it is able to function under a decree of the General Education Law that allows for 'free teaching.' Whether a course is approved and recognized officially depends on students completing course content, which is examined periodically in a designated school within the public network. This dependency generates various tensions, which come to a head when the time comes for the students to take exams.

It also happens in one of the schools, because they assigned us to two schools [for examination]..., in one of them they are quite unaccepting of us. They make you wait a lot, they just throw documents at you. They don't really agree with it (P3).

In this external evaluation process there is a lack of uniformity in applicable criteria:

The other thing was that, for example, in the school that treated them badly, they gave them the exams for a block of days in a row. So, I find that it was really overwhelming for a child to take those exams every day. In other words, they all finished in one week. Not like in the other school, where they took one exam a week (P1).

The evaluation procedures are not defined in advance, leaving the decision in the hands of the designated examiner at each school.—Some conditions are perceived as mistreatment, given that they do not consider the particularities of the students who are part of the project. For instance, in their FHSP school, the children are not evaluated in the traditional way, with grades after assessment; the mediators carry out evaluations by watching videos of collaborative daily activities. This difference in ongoing evaluation processes is not contemplated by traditional school teachers.

When they've gone to sign the children up for the free exams there has been mistreatment. For example, the schools separated us. Here we try to keep the whole group together and, in the end, some were assigned to one school and others, to another. They caused a problem given that, in the beginning, we could keep the group together. They told us that a mediator could go with a signed letter from all the families to register the children, and then they gave the order that, no, each family had to go to do it. And that's when they started causing problems for the parents as well. They told them they couldn't go to the schools where the others were, because, according to them, there weren't any spots there (P1).

The school not only experiences difficulties related to the accreditation process of the courses, but also with requirements issued by the Ministry of Education that are incompatible with this educational project. For instance, at the house where the activities take place, the bathrooms are gender-neutral, which fails to comply with the technical norm of separate gender-specific bathrooms. Since it is inconsistent with the FHSP vision to differentiate spaces by gender, such technicalities prevent recognition as an educational center, depriving the families of State subsidies for their schooling, and transportation.

Despite the difficulties that the participants' experience, they are optimistic about the collaborative development of the school, and the growing membership of the Lefebre Lever network:

As far as it will go, if we make it to the last year of secondary school, we make it to the last year of secondary school. You can never predict how things will end up (SS2).

We want to continue as far as we can, as far as we get. [...] if secondary school is possible, then bring on high school, hey. The director's idea is even being able to form a university. It's her dream and she's started putting things together and I believe that, at some point, she might do it. And I think there are many parents who are working toward this (PS1).

Our plan is that they make thousands of Free and Happy Schools in Chile because, if we can't change the system, we will go on modifying it little by little. Many Free and Happy Schools will start transforming education, without special decrees, without special laws, it will start transforming the ethic of educational coexistence, and of life (SS1).

Discussion

Family Motivations

Parents report strong motivation in building a school outside the national system. Given the current framework of Chilean education, feelings of discomfort and dissatisfaction among parents and teachers are neither new nor surprising. Parents and students' demands, unsatisfied by the State system, have been met, and altered by a greater supply of private schools generally. In the case of this study, the distance between the educational project sought out, and what was on offer was addressed with what, at first, resembled *ad hoc* homeschooling. From there, in 2012, the Free and Happy School network has grown exponentially and deliberately, and is responsible for a progressive increase in the numbers of students schooled outside of the officially recognized mainstream Chilean schooling mode. This project has grown by interpreting and accommodating parents needs that schools based on traditional education (BERNSTEIN, 2003) and even alternative projects have neglected. This experience is especially relevant because it calls into question structural elements of the school system. Questioning the nature of hegemonic modalities makes it possible to search for new educational alternatives (POGGI, 2002; 2009).

Rethinking Foundations

Participants from the various roles within this project query the centrally structured logic of the mainstream, one that is insensible to local realities. The same can be said about the logic behind individual evaluations that promote competitiveness over collaborative work and solidarity. Participants report disagreement with rigid administrative and school management systems that impede the implementation of programs of tailored interest and exploration of diversity.

A corollary of this study is the need to rethink Chilean schooling's function in advancing social cohesion. If public education is not able to satisfy citizens' needs more fully, the private education market will continue to strengthen on the negative basis of flight, of not only monetary but also human, social, and other capitals, with attendant social fragmentation. Unequal societies display shortcomings and excesses that ultimately place ongoing demands on public spending (PLANK; SYKES, 2003). FHSP aims towards human-scale, positive-sum horizons, rather than the scalable business models and accumulation of prestige that have guided much of Chile's privatization. At some point the public value of such community initiatives deserves greater recognition.

Ongoing Tensions

In a Chilean education market that is largely conducted by bargaining State oversight for subsidies, FHSP absents itself from many restrictions by not taking State monies. It is an outsider approach, which is, undoubtedly, part of its charm. By encouraging and relying on strong family participation, the approach mobilizes demands on parental time that many forms of employment would not permit; in many ways, that is a new kind of market force. As a marquee issue around the world, school choice is the right to educate how families see fit; the obligation to participate as much as possible in the education process, and understand their children's development of talents and interests is a step further. This in itself is an interesting tension; while young children may idolize their parents and those close to them, it is possible that they will react differently as teenagers. The fluid, enterprising nature of FHSP is compelling, in a Chilean society that may be outgrowing pressures based on material gain and status seeking.

Final Considerations

The early development of FHSP demonstrates new drivers in Chilean school choice. The initiative to create a school from scratch guided by knowledge and intuition of children's needs and family capacities differs from business-like educational expansion, predicated on the availability of State subsidies.—This makes for an interesting case for observation with regard to public policy accommodations; the project has been defined not by government recognition of the universal value of the educational function, but by the galvanization of small communities around family networks. The bird's eye view of international comparative metrics, such as those administered by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, tend to find Chilean education lacking in consistency, albeit more engaged in such exercises than many countries. Such *deficit* modeling has its value. Modeling the *disconnect*, however, between one-size-fits-all curriculum and how people learn is a more artisanal task in which the intimate scale of FHSP might inform, from the fringes, how societies in general raise their children.

Authors' Contributions

Problematization and Conceptualization: Arancibia H; Leihy P; Saldaña J; **Methodology:** Arancibia H; Leihy P; Saldaña J; **Analysis:** Arancibia H; Leihy P; Saldaña J; **Writing:** Arancibia H; Leihy P; Saldaña J.

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Note

1. See the following websites: www.lefebrevolver.cl/ll/; www.facebook.com/RedLefebreLever.LibreyFeliz/; ceteci.lefebrevolver.cl/.

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