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EVOLUTION IN FREEDOM? THE MEANINGS OF 'FREE SCHOOL' IN CHILE

by PEODAIR LEIHY, *División Académica, Universidad de Valparaíso, Chile*, HÉCTOR ARANCIBIA MARTINI, *Facultad de Humanidades, Universidad de Valparaíso, Chile* and PABLO CASTILLO ARMIJO, *Facultad de Humanidades, Universidad de Valparaíso, Chile* and JOSÉ SALDAÑA FERNANDEZ, *Facultad de Humanidades, Universidad de Valparaíso, Chile*

ABSTRACT: This article examines the background in which enterprises called free schools, as well as complementary educational activities, have taken root in Chile. Two kinds of recently burgeoning free schools are identified; one supplementing regular schooling with a social justice focus, and another that is a fully fledged alternative to other schooling. The history of freedom itself in Chile is explored from a historical perspective, contrasting somewhat with freedom as it is understood in more developed countries. Parallels to Anglophone free schools such as AS Neill's Summerhill are also discussed, as well as the sociopolitical context in which Chilean free schools continue to develop.

Keywords: Chile, alternative education, freedom, history, alternative assessment, Lefebre Lever Libre y Feliz methodology

This article concerns the development in Chile of what in many Spanish-speaking countries – while defying any consistent labelling – are called 'free schools' (*escuelas libres*). Recent enterprises using this term have begun as small collective initiatives, pooling the pedagogical and auxiliary capacities of families and friends, motivated in large part by dissatisfaction with a less free education system in general. In Chile, two distinct strains of self-styled free schools have arisen, however. One is explicitly informed by political movements, including socialism, anarchism and – albeit often in secularised form – liberation theology. Here, these are termed *social free schools*, in the broad sense of strengthening and improving society's weave. They aim to strengthen academic and life skills alongside mainstream school, deficient though they deem it. A second is more akin to 'free' or 'alternative' schools as developed in English-speaking countries through the middle of last century. These we term *alternative free schools*, alternative in the sense that they offer an outright replacement option to the mainstream.

The article arises from the need to contextualise the recent burgeoning of schools of the *alternative* category, in designing research that does not simply view this as the delayed advent of a foreign concept in Latin America, to be viewed according to a deficit model of its conformity to such traditions

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elsewhere. Particularly, a *Free and Happy Schools* network has emerged, originating in the Greater Valparaíso exurb of Villa Alemana, and pursuing for Chile quite a radically alternative yet in many respects autochthonous approach. This approach contrasts to previous schools more superficially associating themselves with foreign free school movements. Proper consideration is due of cultural and historical meanings of freedom that are far from identical to those posited within alternative free school movements in other countries. Eloquently, England's Summerhill founder AS Neill philosophised of 'freedom, not licence' (Neill, 1966) – juxtaposing the virtues and pitfalls of foregrounding students' individuality; while successfully negotiating that tension may be central in Chilean pedagogical aspirations as well, here we also contend with a heritage of celebrating freedom while sustaining stark inequality, poignantly in education itself.

This investigation focuses on a synthesis of currents informing Chilean alternative free schools, but the motivations and nature of social free schools necessarily warrant more than passing mention. If social free schools connect to the mainstream curriculum by supplementing it, alternative free schools articulate with mainstream schooling (and government oversight) through the development of Ministry of Education 'free examinations' which monitor and control student progression but allow whatever compatible divergence in curriculum and methodology. Before discussing the two forms of Chilean free schools further, they can be put in context with an historical overview of rhetorical traditions of freedom in Chile, and of past schooling movements elsewhere variously laying claim to the trope of freedom.

The meaning of free is rarely free of particular nuance, more so every time it is attached to schools. Free from some former or potential interference, or free to grow on one's own terms? (*Negative* and *positive* freedom respectively, in Isaiah Berlin's useful distinction [Berlin, 1959]). In Chile since 1981, in the middle of a military government, the application of voucher-like markets in education in which families carry public subsidies to whatever school they choose, whether public or subsidy approved (a cutting-edge issue following Milton Friedman's (1980) book and television series, *Free to Choose*), has unlocked self-interested aspirations, at least for parents. The selfsame market framing, however, obscures the student-centred process of growing and being oneself (Appleton, 2002) in favour of an essentially invidious focus on the positional value of credentials (Hirsch 1976).

Educational initiatives in English-speaking countries spared genuine recent authoritarianism have been able to concentrate more directly on developing students' positive freedom (albeit always considering what constraints should be kept or removed), whereas in the Spanish-speaking world a struggle to mitigate the effects of former oppression can facilitate the celebration of negative freedom – providing opportunity where it had not been. Spanish does not observe one complication experienced in English and some other languages formulations of what free means: that in general usage, free means *fee-free* more often than not. Further, in the United Kingdom, free school (associated in North America with alternative schools inspired by Summerhill) has now been co-opted to mean, *free to use state funds in its own way*. In the Spanish-speaking world, the free is not what does not involve fees, yet Spanish accesses a variety of relationships with freedom at least as rich and storied as in any other language. Therefore, when schools in Chile adopt the label 'free school', it both evokes and informs particular meanings. Without doubt, a characteristic feature of what are variously called free, alternative, community and progressive schools is that, while some cite theories and theorists in their very names, in others the connotations of free have been fundamentally open-ended. Here, we contextualise recently emerging Chilean projects first in terms of the country's political, social and educational history, and the present broad configuration of the school system, and then compare the various legacies and challenges that emerge to previous free school projects around the world.

1. Freedom in Chile

So, freedom is a contested term, particularly in Iberoamerica. In living memory, 'Chile libre' (*Free Chile*) was a popular slogan willing the demise of the military government of 1973-1990,[1] while the same government promoted itself as a champion of 'Libertad', or *freedom* – pursuing free-market economics, and celebrating the date of the coup against a socialist-led government that had brought it power with a 10-peso coin depicting the goddess Libertad breaking free from chains. The military government also rehabilitated the sullied legacy of national founder Bernado O'Higgins: a dictator, perhaps, but an enlightened and necessary one, at least according to military revisionism, and therefore, in preference to certain rivals, Chile's principal *Libertador*. Freedom's resonances are not, however, simply split between opposing ideals of popular solidarity and individualism, we shall see.

Born free

All discourse on freedom presupposes the possibility of its absence. '*Indómito*', 'untamed', is a sobriquet historically used by Chileans (including winemaking dynasties, *Indómita* being a prominent brand) who identify with Basque lineages, as a mark of respect also to Chileans generally, who are largely descended from Mapadungun speakers, most iconically the Araucanian Mapuche who were never entirely conquered or absorbed by the Spanish. At least according to Chilean attempts to define a national character, the Basques, prominent among Spanish America's upper classes, historically asserted *universal nobility* as their homeland had never been conquered by the Moors (Eyzaguirre, 1948). Two unbowed peoples, together. Anyway, the freedom and autonomy of those identifying as Mapuche remains a prominent social cause.

In colonial times, apart from the various forms of serfdom imposed on indigenous peoples (e.g. *encomienda* – literally, protection), the Mapuche and Spaniards periodically enslaved one another, gradually building understanding – it is always tempting to read a master-slave dialectic (Hegel, 1807) into this interaction and, of course, miscegenation. Founder of Chile’s first cities Pedro de Valdivia eventually perished against an unpicking of Spanish military tactics learned by his escaped Mapuche servant Lautaro, while Chilean-born Francisco Núñez de Pineda y Bascuñán wrote the [1673]1863 memoir *The Happy Captivity*, covering 7 months as a prisoner of the Mapuche in 1629 and playing with the already established equation of freedom and happiness. By the nineteenth century, liberation was due against Spain, further complicated by the ambiguous annexation of that country within a Napoleonic empire that billed itself as a liberating, enlightening force; in any case, the trope of freedom was boosted. One of the early acts of Chilean independence was the 1811 Law of the Freedom of the Wombs, pronouncing as free all those subsequently born in Chile, including those born to mothers who were slaves. After independence was definitively won, all slaves were freed.

In educational terms, the historical ambiguity of the concept of *liberal education* (that suitable for those already, or that which makes them, free?) informed aspects of schools, if only in the sense that this was a predicate of higher education would be established, along French lines, as thorough yet narrow professional training. Prior to reforms in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many schools were established in Chile as throughout the world by entrepreneurial and self-styled educationalists. A state pedagogical institute was organised in 1842, the same year as the Universidad de Chile after the winding-down of a colonial-era predecessor, but both teaching orders of the Catholic church and immigrant communities remained crucial in forming schools according to various projects, and would continue to do so throughout the twentieth century. While many schools positioned themselves as free from organised religion, or much state oversight, or embraced educational philosophies such as ‘muscular Christianity’, there was also an unfulfilled ambition, particularly among liberal reformers, to achieve a *Teaching State* of universal schooling.

Revolution in freedom

The first half of the twentieth century witnessed growing social tensions, sporadic military plotting and a slow democratisation of representative politics. One incisive perspective from the social sciences, dependency theory, which advocated import substitution strategies as a means to break structural disincentives for industrial development in the underdeveloped world was expounded (coinciding with work in England) by an Argentine economist who published on the matter just as he arrived to work at the Santiago-based United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (CEPAL) (Prebisch, 1950). An import substitution policy would result, and also an affirmed notion, however frustrated, that developing countries might work out their own ways of doing things.

In the 1960s, Chilean politics underwent a sea change with the rise of the Christian Democratic Party. Backed enthusiastically by the United States as a bulwark against the popular appeal Marxist revolution enjoyed in many unequal societies, President Eduardo Frei Montalva set about reforming education, agriculture and housing under the slogan 'Revolution in Freedom'. While there had been reform drives for education (most notably by President Pedro Aguirre Cerda from 1938, 'To govern is to educate'), only in the 60s was universal primary schooling approached. Progressive educational practices were little developed. Perhaps an exception that proves the rule is Santiago's St George's College, set up in the 1930s by the US-tied Holy Cross order, initially catering to relatively liberal families within a dwindling British-identifying community. St George's was progressive in approach, incorporating, eventually, the originally Peruvian approach *liberation theology*, lionised in the 2004 film *Machuca* (Hassan et al.), which celebrates social outreach measures before they were quashed by the Pinochet regime.

Meanwhile, an important adviser to Frei was rising star of Latin American education theory, exiled Brazilian Paolo Freire who in Chile published his first full-length book *Education as the Practice of Freedom*. (Freire, 1967) In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1970), Freire would portray liberation as a universal need that united people:

> To say that men are people and as people are free and not to do anything to achieve concretely that this affirmation be objective is a farce To say that men are people, and as people are free, and then not to do anything to achieve concretely that this be objective, is a farce (ch.1).

While wider liberation theology – tied to an indigenism embraced in sub-tropical South America more than the Southern Cone – was of muted influence in Chile, Frei's liberation pedagogy was consonant with the expansion of education at all levels. Freire's real-time influence on Chilean schooling during his stay may be misremembered. While an iconic figure to acquire global cachet, Freire's work in Chile largely concerned adult education and training, particularly in the agricultural sphere. While there are affinities between Freire's work and the rapid expansion of schools and teacher training (including the creation of teaching institutes separate to universities, which became hotbeds of political activity but whose separateness also facilitated firm suppression after the military coup), he had actually left for the United States before the socialist Allende government was formed. Elected with (albeit sceptical) Christian Democratic backing, President Salvador Allende's urgency to accelerate reforms rapidly descended into capital flight, hyperinflation and, apparently, Soviet influence over policy. The ensuing military coup had the tacit support of key Christian Democrats and the United States.

Free choice

During the Cold War, the usage ‘free world’ (or ‘Revolution in Freedom’) ascribed an absence of freedom to Communist regimes without elaborating what was free about this free world. Conversely, claims to freedom by and of Chile’s staunchly anti-communist military regime (1973-1990) were highly developed. The free market and the sanctity of foreign capital were celebrated. With the promulgation of a new constitution in 1980, also asserted was the sovereignty of the family within the state, including in school choice (Bernasconi, 2014), amounting to a Friedmanian voucher system, with public funds transferable to any approved school. While the almost bohemian (in some senses!) libertarianism espoused by Milton Friedman has a utopian dimension, the free choice imposed on Chilean education in practice varied according to the choices different families could afford, perpetuating social stratification rather than dissolving it into an open market (Gutierrez, 2012). One curiosity of this period is the establishment of the fully private *Colegio Winterhill* in Valparaíso’s twin city, Viña del Mar (pursuing ‘a humanist, integral and free vision of the person’ and now presenting itself as remedying the damage to democratic values and human rights [Colegio Winterhill, website in references]). That the military government along with the Catholic Church sponsored its establishment rather colours such claims. Further, Winterhill’s having adhered closely to the national curriculum belies any greater affinity to the Summerhill free school tradition than trying to appeal to the anglophile sensibilities of many Chileans.

The unfulfilled nineteenth century ambition of a ‘Teaching State’ (*Estado Docente*) was replaced by a ‘Subsidising State’ (*Estado Subsidiario*: Cea Egaña, 1982; Nef, 1999), inspired by the interplay between the Catholic Church and its host polities (including negotiating fiduciary status with modernising governments), in the 1980 constitution chiefly drafted by conservative doyen of canon law and scholastic argument Jaime Guzmán. Particularly, perpetuated by constitutional law finalised at the very end of the military government, the Ministry of Education continues to have strong control of a core ‘curriculum’ – with schools permitted to develop additionally their own ‘programmes of studies’, but few outside the fully private sector taking the initiative to do so (Cox, 2011). Nevertheless, the principle of school choice laid down at this point would facilitate elements of later alternative free schools, as well as fire the remedial dimension of the social free school, to which we will return after a comparative overview of free school movements as emerged in the English-speaking world.

Chilean public investment in schooling has been generally growing since the 1990s (World Bank 2016; reliable figures went missing in the 1980s, during which the economy grew little and there was scant public investment). Much of this followed a considerable expansion of participation in fee-free, state (or, more accurately capturing the unevenness, *municipal* – the term *de-municipalización* is often used for negotiating the level of autonomy of subsidised institutions) schools to reach universal attendance by the turn of the millennium (and obligatory attendance to 18 years from 2003). At the same time, 15-year olds from underprivileged background are four times more likely than their peers to perform poorly according to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), among the worst in the monitored Americas (OECD, 2016).

Changes within the system bear tabling, tracing first an overall expansion concentrated in the subsidised sector, and then expansion of the subsidised sector from marked flight from the state sector to the subsidised. Also evident is a loss of student numbers in the fully private sector explicable chiefly through the conversion of many such schools to subsidised status (see Table 1).

The phenomena of social free schools providing supplementary education and new, small alternative free schools are off the radar of such aggregate data, but indicate other ways of responding to underinvestment in public education than subscription to the subsidy model promoted since the 1980s. The flourishing of the subsidised sector clearly reflects an ongoing tendency in exercise of parental choice. Primary and secondary student numbers in the fully private and subsidised sectors combined overtook those in state schools in 2005. Nevertheless, school student protests would explode in 2006 across both the subsidised and state sectors (e.g. BCN 2012). So, radical protests at the paradigm came from the students, at the same time parents continued buying into subsidised choice. Such grassroots social unrest, however, would from 2011 be incorporated into mainstream politics by charismatic university student politicians who successfully positioned themselves as social activists, without their advocacy yet bringing structural change (Mayol, 2016, 45; 149ff.).

2. Anglophone free schools

If Viña del Mar's Winterhill arguably puts anglophile style over the substance associated with free schools inspired by Summerhill, the student-centred focus of the Anglophone free school movement is still a source of inspiration in the backstory of Chile's new alternative free schools. In contrast to the heavy, sometimes sinister rhetorical dynamics of freedom in Chile, the winsomeness with which the term is used in English is encapsulated in the punning aphorism *freedom isn't free*. A contingent idea, being a return on societal investment and a social contract, rather than any ideal type. Even when *freedom fries* was coined

TABLE 1. Enrolments by sector, in thousands (Chilean Ministry of Education)

Year	1996	2002	2016
Fully private	309	306	278
Subsidised	1063	1314	1942
Public ('Municipal')	1810	1859	1275

in Washington when France withdrew support for the US War on Terror, the term bore a sense of humour much lighter than Chilean *libertad* could ever permit. To rehearse the emergence of the North American free school movement and what has become of it is useful for comparative purposes given the early stage of Chilean free schools. At this point, we will skip back in time to discuss the concept of alternative free schools as would emerge in the English-speaking world.

Leaving aside earlier developments such as the (originally, fee-) *Free School* founded in Guildford, Surrey in 1509, or the Virginia *free schools* advocated by Thomas Jefferson, and notwithstanding that being free of fees fomented in such institutions an inclusiveness otherwise impossible, AS Neill's Summerhill School in Sussex from 1921 can been seen as establishing a blueprint for what free schools would mean. Under Neill's 'freedom, not licence' philosophy, what we now call student-centred and -led learning (including the right to be left alone without close supervision) is properly a form of engagement rather than simply an accommodation of whatever the student wants. Summerhill and its ilk are necessarily somewhat expensive and boutique scale, generally attracting wealthier parents. The bourgeois, if *bourgeois bohemian* (Brooks, 2000), milieus from which such free schools arose invite consideration of age-old ideas about freedom and education. Since classical times, the 'liberal arts' have played upon an ambiguity between these being what free people should study in societies with people who were not free, and that these arts free the mind. Since Aristotle, arts of the un-free were also recognised – with the terms *illiberal* and *servile* in periodic favour (Hadot 2006). In contrast, freedom at Summerhill combines both practising and producing one's freedom through schooling.

Interest in Summerhill and Neill's writings eventually became fashionable in parts of the North American 1960s counterculture – perhaps more the older, 'square' left than the hippies themselves, but as part of the movement nonetheless. Important writers on education and other social issues such as Paul Goodman took part. The term Free Schools – and extensive meditation on the difference between freedom and licence – would mark the movement, with a common interest in a greater level of freedom for children (Appleton, 2002). To some extent, the idealism of the free schools movement in North America would follow in this spirit, and grew with the relative massification of whatever counterculture.

Programmatic pedagogies structuring and to some extent codifying that freedom, developed in Continental Europe and anglicised and northamericanised by cosmopolitans and émigrés, would also become major brands (e.g. Montessori, Steiner/Waldorf). More independent examples typically have worn the personalities of their founders proudly; for example, Australia's Preshil (established 1931) is officially the Margaret Lyttle Memorial School, being subsequently shaped for half a century by founder Lyttle's namesake niece. By the late 1970s, however, much of the free schools movement (and language) had morphed into an 'alternative' model especially alert to a niche alongside mainstream educational choice, particularly by accommodating students unsuited to it. *Alternative schools* accepts an officially sanctioned modicum of difference – much like 'alternative lifestyles' are those to be tolerated but not exactly endorsed, or 'alternative music' became a marketing term for whatever style was promoted as non-mainstream. Community schools, following on from the renaming of public junior colleges as community colleges in the early 1960s, would be another label.

While socially ambitious, free schools were not revolutionary in a partisan sense (although Goodman also called for a complete overhaul of values termed the Goodman, 1970). In contrast, however, inherently activist 'freedom schools' had meanwhile been established in the early 1960s within the foremost African American civil rights movement, particularly active in Mississippi mid-decade and gradually absorbing considerable influence from Paulo Freire and, like liberation theology, were motivated by grand social change.

More recent times have seen Nordic (Bunar, 2008; Wiborg, 2010) use of 'free school' for some strains given government funding and some agreed level of discretion to apply their own methods, soon embraced in the United Kingdom (Hatcher, 2011). For our purposes, such a use of free school may be a red herring, as, like the US 'charter schools' more unambiguously stress, freedom in governance is the main bone of contention, rather than necessarily reflecting the independence associated with a free school movement marked, for better or worse, by parents paying. The older Anglophone traditions, that parallel more recent developments in Chile echo, in social free schools, the US Freedom Schools project and, in alternative free schools, the Summerhill approach.

3. Social free schools in Chile

Various forms of community education have always existed in Chile, with the term 'free school' applied in Spanish (at least retrospectively) to such activities in Mexico and elsewhere since the beginning of the last century (sometimes confusingly when examining documentary evidence, given free school's concurrent use for some secular law schools). What we call social free schools here, however, refer particularly to developments since the school students took to the streets in 2006 to protest the schooling system. This 'Penguin Revolution' (named after the school uniforms inspired by 19th-century French republican, and religious, fashions) took Chile by surprise – while mass pot-banging (*cacerolazo*) is a traditional form of protest through South America, it had not been seen since the height of the 1980s recession (Leihy and Salazar, 2012; protesting the wider political rather than economic situation under the military government, however, was little tolerated), and in 2006 was happening during primary export-driven sustained economic growth that would actually not slow until the 20-teens.

In many respects, this social free school movement can be understood primarily as mutual aid arising in response to and defence against the aforementioned long history of confounded freedom. That is, against an unusual form of freedom that encouraged economic striving but severely limited many other forms of expression. Certainly, media coverage has stressed parallels to the resurgence in recent years of various forms of social activism. To some extent, this abrades the innocent connotations of student-centred learning. Moreover, associations with the work of Paulo Freire generally ignore his deeply religious orientation, and his primary interest in the education of teenagers and adults' conscious of theory, rather than the young children to serve whom Chilean free schools have initially formed.

If these initiatives are often affiliated to political groups, in style they are highly focused on students rather than disseminating ideology. In style, they typically harness social media, and display a sense of humour that is self-effacing towards the earnest images of socialism and anarchism; a popular trope is *lucha libre* – literally, 'free struggle', but also the colourful Mexican show business wrestling. In the Valparaíso region, many initiatives have taken root.

For example, the *escuela libre* network *La Otra Educación* ('The Other Education', website in references), which seeks to spread and 'consolidate alternative network of education' and, it is actually additional to other schooling, and thus seeks to influence public policy debate. Other 'strategic objectives' include the development of self-expression, critical thinking and community involvement – all common criticisms of the trajectory of Chilean education (Gutierrez, 2012).

At government level, Chile's devotion to such projects as PISA was surely as instrumental as sustained GDP growth in the country's gaining full OECD membership in 2010. Yet, it is with stagnating and sliding progress measured in necessarily quantitative comparative terms (of course, often decried as neo-liberal metanarratives in their own right) that these initiatives are able to gain a broad legitimacy. Social free schools support student learning in key areas such as literacy and numeracy, but also broaden the limited co-curricular offerings of many schools; that is, constructing a Freirean 'liberation pedagogy' around the normal curriculum. They are, then, very different to the 'shadow education' (Bray, 1999) trends that have intensified in East and South Asia and their diasporas, designed at boosting the ability to excel under the official curriculum and high-stakes examinations in particular. Rather, the social free schools aim to provide education complementary not only to what schools manage to teach, but also to what is included in the curriculum. It is against the broad success of these free schools as much as against mainstream schooling, that Chilean alternative free schools distinguish their own approach.

4. Alternative free schools in Chile

Apart from social free schools, and sometimes conceptually overlapping with them, instantiations more reminiscent in style of Anglophone free schools have to some extent taken hold in Spain and Latin America over past years, often following optimistic returns from military rule. Having discussed the history and context of freedom and schooling, we now turn Chile's recent wave of Free and Happy Schools as a leading variant of free schools as a full-blown alternative, rather than complementary, form of education.

For the alert educationalist, the term 'Free and Happy School' may immediately recall the brief September 1973 article 'The free and happy student' by seminal US behavioural researcher BF Skinner. If September 1973 was a low ebb domestically for the United States, with the oil crisis, the quagmire in Vietnam and Richard Nixon under pressure to confess over Watergate, in Chile, it saw the violent replacement of an elected government, however dysfunctional, by a military junta. The title is ironical; as throughout his work, Skinner explicitly attacked the thinking of Free Schools movement figures including Paul Goodman (recently deceased, but not before, in the 1971 essay 'Freedom and Autonomy', brutally mocking Skinner's modest and instrumental valuations of *Dignity and Freedom* [Goodman, 1971[2]]). The ideological differences between the two old men might be by the bye for Chile, were Skinner's essay not efficiently disseminated in the Spanish-speaking world by US-affiliated channels in Mexico as 'El estudiante libre y feliz', arriving within months to a Chile in lockdown, critical social scientists and educators systematically purged.

Yet the conscious origin of the Chilean term Free and Happy Schools is rather more innocent. In an email interview, founder María Verónica Rodríguez Gutierrez narrates:

> We decided to put it 'Free and Happy' because if it were only called Free School it was going to evoke the traditional concept in Chile of the Free Schools (strengthening outside of formal school for groups of kids). When we said 'We'll call ourselves the Free Little School' someone said 'Oh, how happy', and then was born 'Free and Happy School'. This name, then, coincides with the visit of a friend from Nicaragua who says 'You are more than a Free Little School . . . you're also happy ones'. That day, we all said: *Free and Happy*. Then we patented the brand *Free and Happy*.

There is a particularly Chilean sense of humour in the denouement; first inspiration, then market strategy. Publicity promotes *La rEvolución* (*sic*) *Educativa Libre y Feliz*, 'The Happy and Free Education rEvolution'. While the pun is no fresher in Spanish than in English, the vision of revolution and the practicality of evolution combine as defining features.

In terms of accessibility, the School is neither expensive by fully private standards nor affordable to the majority of Chilean families, including in its environs. In 2016, the fees were 100,000 pesos (US$135) per month, with one student receiving a full scholarship effectively subsidised by the community. While this is less than half the fees at most fully private schools, it also represents 40% of the minimum full-time salary (around $310). Given that around three-quarters of Chilean wage earners receive less than double that minimum wage [Durán and Kremermann 2015], the school is within the comfortable means of only a small part of the population. Furthermore, the capacity to offer scholarships is inhibited by the overall small scale.

The first such school, operating initially at primary level with a handful of students, is named *Escuela* (or, diminutive, *Escuelita*) *Libre y Feliz Maria Lefebre Lever* after a journalist, poet and spiritualist from nearby Viña del Mar and the grandmother of the school’s founder. With links to education at all levels, a distinct *Lefebre Lever Libre y Feliz*® methodology is promoted, with the school offering teacher training through short courses, in 2016 reporting 36 schools following the methodology. While school names often commemorate, if not the founder themselves, someone inspirational figure, in explicitly promoting the method, parallels are invited to successful styles of school such as Steiner.

While Lefebre (1902-1972) was not an educationalist, she was known for hosting a literary salon welcoming of different politics (an old tradition among upper-class Chilean women), and the adoption of her name reflects an ongoing boom in Latin America of ‘esoteric’ practices such as meditation and yoga, in past times accessible mostly to the wealthy. This aesthetic extends through curricular incorporation of philosophy, the study of nature and complementary therapies (one of the more extant components of indigenous culture in Chile’s central zone is herbal medicine). Other stated principles are that ‘Qualifications do not exist’ (although the academic qualifications of some teachers are listed), and that programme evaluation is conducted through observation. The analytic truth that ‘every year the age of participants rises’ elegantly states both the extent of the student-centredness and the idea of a school and its personnel aiming to grow organically (Escuela Libre y Feliz María Lefebre Lever, website in references). Students are supervised in a single room, with further space outdoors and weekly excursions based around investigation. Regulatory compliance centres around gated levels of ‘free examinations’. These examinations are conducted according to loose guidelines based on the state school curriculum at the level of each student’s *comuna* (a sub-municipal administrative district) of residence, and therefore results can be difficult to compare directly. Contemporaneously with the school’s beginnings, the Ministry of Education has developed these free examinations to recognise and support educational attainment and progression for those of whatever age outside mainstream schooling. The freedom afforded by free examinations allows for deviations more in the direction of student-centred alternative education.

5. Conclusion: from marea rosa to buena onda?

Since the end of last century, Latin America has seen, in different ways, more left-wing governments and indeed more democratic structures. To be sure, the *marea rosa*, or ‘pink tide’, of left-tinged Latin American governments has been at its mildest in Chile, where the military-era constitution has ensured a high level of conservative congressional representation. Nevertheless, popular dissatisfaction has grown with the success of relatively left-wing politics in addressing popular demand for better education, particularly under the nominally socialist Presidents Ricardo Lagos and Michele Bachelet, as well as the conservative Sebastián Piñera. It may be speculated that the Free and Happy School movement bypasses, where possible, engagement in the state's impasses in demonstrating progress and goes its own way, and therefore instances a dimension of the 'privatism' fostered in Latin American education, and Chile especially (Brunner, 1990; Habermas, 1975).

Perhaps more important than the efficacy of free examinations designed at least largely for the recognition of prior learning in adults is the very fact that the Chilean government has facilitated this new style of school – which will submit to the exams, while maintaining that 'qualifications do not exist'. In many ways, this represents a genuine undermining of the terms of the subsidising state, in favour of what could tentatively be called a more *permissive* state (tentative not least because the social transformations underway are not simply throwbacks to the Western 'permissive society' of a half century ago). Here, the families are not simply exercising their right to choose (between state-vetted options) but creating an idea of education themselves. Where the voucher element of subsidies sought to strengthen education through the wisdom of market forces, it is by foregoing such subsidies that new choices that genuinely depart from the 1980s blueprint emerge.

The emergence of alternative free schools in Chile, developing their own curricula and indeed educational philosophies, has in many ways an avant garde quality in a system in which, overall, parents are striving to find the most advantageous education. The very focus on freedom and happiness goes against the competitive energies and efficiencies that any subsidising state has sought to incentivise – where freedom takes (in Berlin's sense) the negative form of choice and finding a place, rather than positive self-actualisation.

At the same time, the alternative free schools movement is not immune to the dynamics of a class stratification; apart from the fees levied, while the compact of experimental educational approaches and new age practices draw on levels of cultural capital that have typically filtered down the social classes. Many parents heavily invested in a mindset of education as a market for social mobility can be expected to avoid divergent approaches out of risk aversion, for all that the Chilean consumer behaviour is fashion conscious. While most Chileans have come to identify as middle class (Barozet and Fierro 2012), viewing education primarily as a form of upward mobility is, like funding consumption on credit, is in cognitive dissonance there.

Another, not incompatible observation would be that, inasmuch as it resembles the Summerhillian strain of free schools, the Free and Happy School withdraws or protects the educational experience from the political environment in which it is typically exposed, championing instead a freedom matched with happiness. Much as many Chileans sympathise with industrial action taken by teachers to gain fairer pay and conditions in the state sector in particular, strike action is a great inconvenience to busy, stressed parents – whereas some parents 'outsource' education to non-striking private schools, the Free and Happy Schools explicitly cultivate and expect parental input in kind rather than just fees. This accords with a prized value in Latin American life: the 'good wave' of sociable easygoingness, or *buena onda*. The relative stability of centrist governments since the return of electoral democracy in 1990 may indeed rest on being attuned to such a sensibility (Mayol, 2016, 150), rather than the riding any revolutionary *marea rosa*. From such a lens, rather than redolent of social changes or a catch-up to the 'open society' the English-speaking world enjoyed through the second half of the Cold War, to some degree, it can be seen as an alignment of education to values that are far from outré in Chilean society. If free examinations reflect an historical Chilean passion for technocratic forms, through their so far loose and localised application, a moderating *buena onda* finds its way in.

Nevertheless, without doubt, there are parallels between communitarian values in Chile in recent years and the counterculture of the 1960s in the advanced economies, such as complementary therapies – in that respect, Free and Happy schools may reflect only an intensification and modernisation of conceits such as Winterhill's long-fashionable assertions of fostering democratic values and human rights. Just as there is something bourgeois bohemian about freer forms of education elsewhere, it reflects a suite of Chilean phenomena such as *abajistas* ('slummers') and *cuicuma* ('shabby chic'). Nevertheless, all of that may be overthinking what is chiefly a movement concerned with supporting and resourcing student-centred education. While the Free and Happy School may, then, indulge parents' right to choose how their children are educated, this is far from the hands-off commodification of education so often denounced in Chile (Merino, 2012). If there is a link between instrumentalist educational competition and social and economic aspirationalism in Chilean schooling, alternative free schools appear to pursue a different kind of distinction. To that end, spreading brings the *Free and Happy* movement greater acclaim, but diametrically less of rareness's prestige. Ultimately the movement indeed appears to be less the intervention of a revolution – so often misadjusted to Latin American contexts – more an evolution drawing on a continuous negotiation of what freedom means.

6. Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

7. Notes

[1] Consider the mounting levels of irony in the 'Cuba libre' cocktail originally dating from the Spanish American War: Free from Spain? From US clientism? From Castro? From Soviet influence? From embargo? From globalisation?

[2] Coincidentally, despite 'worthy education' (*educación digna*) being an international Hispanic student protest slogan, in Chile 'dignity' is arguably the one keyword more

problematic than *libertad*, forever associated as it is with the abusive sect *Colonia Dignidad*.

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Correspondence
Peodair Leihy
División Académica
Universidad de Valparaíso
Chile
Email: pete.leihy@uv.cl