

Freedom of Education and Financial Sustainability of Waldorf Schools

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ABSTRACT – Freedom of Education and Financial Sustainability of Waldorf Schools. This article analyzes, through a case study, the financing mechanisms of two Waldorf schools in Chile. The results highlight that these schools are founded on socio-pedagogical principles but face financial instability due to their dependence on family contributions. Their participatory governance fosters a sense of community, but self-management limits the planning, sustainability, and expansion of their educational projects. The discussion reveals how these schools face tensions between pedagogical autonomy and financial precariousness, exacerbated by the absence of state support. It underscores the need for inclusive public policies that balance economic sustainability with respect for educational diversity to ensure freedom of education.

Keywords: Alternative Education. Waldorf Pedagogy. Education Financing. Free Schools. Case Study.

RESUMEN – Libertad de Enseñanza y Sostenibilidad Financiera de Escuelas Waldorf. Este artículo analiza, a través de un estudio de caso, los mecanismos de financiamiento de dos escuelas Waldorf en Chile. Los resultados destacan que estas escuelas se fundaron sobre bases sociopedagógicas, pero enfrentan precariedad financiera debido a su dependencia de las contribuciones familiares. Su gobernanza participativa fomenta la comunidad, pero la autogestión limita la planificación, sostenibilidad y expansión de sus proyectos pedagógicos. La discusión destaca cómo estas escuelas enfrentan tensiones entre la autonomía pedagógica y la precariedad financiera, exacerbadas por la exclusión del apoyo estatal. Se plantea la necesidad de políticas públicas inclusivas que equilibren la sostenibilidad económica y el respeto a la diversidad educativa para garantizar la libertad de enseñanza.

Palabras clave: Educación Alternativa. Pedagogía Waldorf. Financiamiento de la Educación. Escuelas Libres. Estudio de Caso.

Introduction

The question of funding for Waldorf schools constitutes a fertile ground for the critical analysis of contemporary educational systems, as it lies at the intersection of privatization processes, the redefinition of the State's role, and the inherent tensions of alternative pedagogical movements. While this issue often warrants, as is frequently the case, a historical analysis that allows for the understanding of the contexts of these pedagogies' emergence (Hofstetter; Go; Riondet, 2018), it also invites a broader sociohistorical perspective. Indeed, the pedagogical movements of the New Education are interesting in that they show how, in their origins, certain initiatives were driven by projects with a social vocation, focused on disadvantaged children. Although these pedagogies were born in many cases with a spirit of social transformation and attention to marginalized childhood, they have been historically reconfigured in contexts of elitization and increasing marketization of the educational system (Whitescarver; Cossentino, 2008). This evolution aligns with the critiques of McLaren (2005), who argues that the neoliberal school models subjects adapted to the demands of capitalism, while proclaiming itself a defender of individual autonomy.

The analysis of funding also offers a current perspective on the school, particularly focusing on the rise of market-driven educational phenomena. Based on Zancajo, Verger and Fontdevila (2025), the need arises to adopt a “glocal” approach (Roudometof, 2016), that is, to study global, complex, and polymorphous dynamics based on their local anchorages, insofar as marketization and privatization are implanted in new contexts and transformed in those where they have already existed for several decades. From the term privatization, different logics can be distinguished. Ball and Youdell (2008) differentiate exogenous privatization — which introduces private actors into the public sphere — from endogenous privatization, which applies logics typical of the private sector to public schools, such as autonomy or management by results (Gunter; Forrester, 2009). The latter is related to marketization mechanisms, characterized by the emergence of free choice, competition among establishments, decentralization, or deregulation (Dupriez; Maroy, 2003; Gingrich, 2011; Lubienski, 2009).

However, Zancajo, Verger and Fontdevila (2025) remind us that analyses on the privatization of education tend, too often, to reduce these dynamics to the sole influence of neoliberalism (Adamson et al., 2016; Ball, 2012). Without denying the centrality of this factor — particularly evident in the Chilean case —, it is essential to identify other logics at play within alternative pedagogies.

The issue of funding, whether public or private, appears here as central, insofar as it reveals the priorities of each pedagogical movement. The example of the United States is illustrative: public Montessori (Debs; Brown, 2017) and Waldorf (McDermott et al., 1996) schools are developing there, but limitations on state funding restrict them. For this reason, to preserve free access and social diversity, voluntarist ac-

cessibility policies have emerged within both the Montessori framework (Debs; Brown, 2017) and Waldorf schools (Lamb, 2012a, p. 84-85). In this same country, some initiatives have attempted to free Waldorf schools from their dependence on family funding, to fully integrate into the public sphere and address issues of socioeconomic inequality and violence (McDermott et al., 1996), allowing access to historically excluded publics. The Urban Waldorf School in Milwaukee expresses this desire to transform the educational climate through the creation of small, supportive school communities, committed to overcoming the structural inequalities of the urban school system (McDermott et al., 1996). However, it is difficult to identify with certainty the factors that enable this transformation: are they due to the Waldorf pedagogy itself, to the collective dynamic inherent to small school structures, or to the conviction of the teachers that change is possible? (McDermott et al., 1996).

Nevertheless, in the Chilean context, since the military dictatorship, the educational system was reformulated under subsidiary principles, consecrating the freedom of education as a guiding principle, but subordinating it to a logic of competition regulated by vouchers, standards, and performance (Canals et al., 2019; Alarcón; Falabella, 2021). Although regulatory frameworks recognize educational diversity, administrative requirements (such as the adoption of the national curriculum, minimum capital, among others) effectively exclude alternative projects from accessing state subsidies. This exclusion forces them to resort to self-financing, with adverse effects for social inclusion, the stability of teaching staff, and the continuity of alternative educational projects, such as Waldorf schools.

Funding of Waldorf Schools

The Waldorf pedagogy, based on the threefold social order proposed by Steiner, seeks to integrate cultural freedom, legal equality, and economic fraternity (Stahel, 2013). The latter establishes solidarity and mutual support as guiding principles of economic exchange. However, these aspirations face serious limitations when schools must rely on funding mechanisms that are highly dependent on family contributions, leading to practices that undermine social justice.

One of the guiding principles of this educational approach is self-management and the autonomy from the state (Schaefer, 2012; Lamb, 2012b), conceived as necessary conditions for safeguarding pedagogical freedom from external regulatory pressures. Historically, these schools have relied on collegial decision-making structures, in which teachers take on administrative and organizational tasks, thereby reinforcing the ideal of community. Nevertheless, the increasing complexity of financial management, especially since the 1970s, has required professionalization, the incorporation of specialized teams, and the establishment of governing boards that include parents (Götte, 2000; Stehlik, 2019).

This evolution toward a more professionalized system, has brought with it a series of dilemmas. On the one hand, teachers' salary

sacrifices—especially during pioneering phases—are presented as an expression of ethical commitment to the project. However, as Stehlik (2019) points out, in contexts such as Argentina, this disposition has been interpreted by state authorities as a form of excessive devotion, illustrating how the spiritual imaginary of the pedagogy can come into tension with institutional demands. On the other hand, the dependence on family contributions not only introduces vulnerability to economic fluctuations but also tends to reproduce exclusionary logics, by restricting access to those able to bear the costs of participation (Götte, 2000).

Recent international experiences reveal different ways of addressing these tensions. In Germany, Waldorf schools have upheld the principle of non-selection based on social status for decades; however, the reduction of public funding has weakened their ability to grant scholarships, thereby affecting student diversity (Götte, 2000). In Luxembourg, public schools have adopted certain elements of Waldorf pedagogy at no cost to families, a situation that has challenged the country's only private Steiner school, affecting its enrollment and capacity to retain teachers (Stehlik, 2019).

These situations demonstrate the shift of Waldorf pedagogy toward hybrid models, in which institutional autonomy and pedagogical coherence are continuously negotiated in relation to sustainability requirements and public policies. The question of whether it is viable to integrate alternative methods into official school systems without distorting their identity remains open. In this context, the discussion on financing cannot be addressed solely through administrative or accounting parameters, but rather as a space of symbolic, political, and structural contestation, where it is determined who has the right to access a different form of education, under what conditions, and at what cost or sacrifice.

Freedom of Education and Funding of Chilean Alternative Education

In recent years, alternative education has grown significantly internationally (Viaud, 2017; Barrientos-Soto, 2022). Pedagogical models such as Montessori, Freinet, and Waldorf have positioned themselves as responses to the need for innovation in education, with an emphasis on the well-being and coexistence of children, areas insufficiently addressed by the traditional school system to meet families' expectations (Carbonell, 2015). In Latin America, the REEVO organization has documented at least 42 experiences in Chile (Reevo, 2024), although this figure could be considerably higher due to informality or the decision to maintain a low profile in the face of regulatory barriers. This reveals an educational diversity broader than what official figures allow us to visualize.

In Chile, the freedom of education is a constitutional right established in 1874 and currently regulated by the General Education Law, (GEL; Chile, 2009). This law recognizes parents' authority to choose the type of education for their children and grants legal entities the right to

establish and manage educational institutions. However, Article 46 of the GEL sets restrictive conditions, such as the mandatory adoption of the national curriculum and the accreditation of a minimum capital, which excludes many alternative schools from formal recognition and, consequently, from access to state subsidies.

Freedom of education, although enshrined as a civil and political right (Bernasconi et al., 2021), can be invoked both to justify innovative pedagogical proposals and to consolidate a competitive market model. This model is based on voucher funding, which standardizes performance and penalizes educational practices not aligned with official criteria. In this context, the so-called endogenous privatization (Ball; Youdell, 2008), understood as the adoption of private logics within the public system — such as management by results and school competition —, has progressively eroded the public function of education, displacing the emancipatory meaning of freedom of education toward its instrumental use.

From a human rights perspective, freedom of education complements the right to education, which guarantees accessibility, acceptability, and adaptability (Comité DESC, 1999 en Bernasconi et al., 2021). However, the Chilean model, by prioritizing economic freedom, has contributed to the segmentation of the system, evidencing inequities in access, high costs for families, and indebtedness (Alarcón; Falabella, 2021). Similarly, Sandoval (2021) highlights that the LGE, by emphasizing principles such as autonomy and diversity, also transforms labor relations: the proprietors act as employers and the teaching staff as a workforce, which reinforces structural asymmetries.

These conditions severely affect alternative schools. Carrasco (2022) observes that the Chilean state has neglected the educational rights of students attending such schools, while Sepúlveda (2023) warns that these experiences are undervalued and marginalized in the educational debate. Thus, the analysis of Waldorf school financing makes it possible to highlight how current conditions distort the original meaning of freedom of education, shifting it from a tool for pedagogical diversification toward a mechanism functional to inequality. The current model restricts the sustainability of alternative projects, forcing them to subsist outside the formal system.

Based on this set of tensions, the present article proposes to analyze the financing mechanisms of two Waldorf schools in Chile, considering their conditions of sustainability and relations with the State. The aim is to understand how these projects, anchored in ideals of pedagogical freedom and self-management, confront the limits of a system that demands homogeneous standards, pressures toward profitability, and restricts support to those models that do not align with its dominant logic.

Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative approach with a multiple case study design (Yin, 2014), which allows for a holistic, interpretive, and contextualized approach to the study phenomenon, focused on the

meanings that actors attribute to their own experiences (Neiman; Quaranta, 2006). This choice responds to the objective of understanding how financing models in Waldorf schools in Chile are configured and sustained, from the perspective of their educational communities. The logic for case selection is based on the potential to produce significant learning and the possibility of analytical generalization (Stake, 2005), rather than on statistical representativeness.

Two Waldorf schools from the south-central region of Chile were selected, considering criteria of contextual variability (urban and rural), stage of institutional development, and explicit commitment to their pedagogical principles. This strategy sought to explore both the common challenges and the particularities in their mechanisms of financial sustainability, internal governance, and ties with the State. Furthermore, a historical link was identified between both cases, given that one of the founders of the first project also participated in the founding of the second, which adds relational density and pedagogical continuity to the analysis.

Case 1: Free school founded in 2014, in a medium-sized city in the south-central zone of Chile, aimed at families seeking an education alternative to the ministerial system. It began as a small school that later transformed into a non-profit foundation to obtain legal personality. It is surrounded by vegetation and has varied infrastructure, including play spaces. Furthermore, it has generated a strong sense of belonging through “*mingas*” (a traditional form of collective community labor) for space organization and has fostered a local consumption economy, promoting family entrepreneurship through exchanges and commerce.

Case 2: Educational project started in 2019 by three teachers in a coastal city, who invested in infrastructure and materials to develop workshops based on Waldorf pedagogy. They subsequently constituted themselves as an educational foundation. The school is in a rural area, and the limited accessibility has become an opportunity to strengthen the community, with the teachers taking responsibility for student transportation. The infrastructure includes an extensive playground that encourages outdoor activities and play.

Both schools orient their pedagogy toward characteristics specific to the region and the trades historically developed there, with the aim of fostering a positive transformation of the local environment. These features are consistent with the principles of Waldorf pedagogy, which, according to McDermott et al. (1996), promotes a holistic view of child development, pedagogical continuity, interdisciplinarity, and strong family involvement.

Data Collection Technique

Data collection was carried out between 2021 and 2024 through semi-structured interviews and analysis of documentary sources (Verd; Lozares, 2015). The selection of cases and participants was done using intentional sampling with theoretical criteria, aimed at maximizing the

informational richness of the studied phenomenon (Patton, 2014). Inclusion criteria were defined as: (a) Waldorf schools with at least three years of operation; (b) non-profit financial self-management; (c) location in rural or semi-urban areas. Projects still in the design phase, homeschooling, or those operating within the framework of formal education with state funding were excluded from the study. Initially, 10 semi-structured interviews were conducted with actors from the educational community (teachers, proprietors, founding families), distributed across two Waldorf schools in the south-central macrozone of Chile. Subsequently, a second phase of triangulation (Flick, 2004) was developed through interviews with teachers from three other Waldorf schools, located in the same area of the country. The logic of saturation was reached when new interviews did not provide substantially different information regarding the main categories already identified (see Table 1).

The interview guide was developed by the research team in collaboration with a teacher experienced in Waldorf pedagogy, with the aim of capturing the participants' experiential knowledge while considering social, political, and economic contextual conditions (Denzin et al., 2017). This guide was validated by four external expert reviewers. Complementarily, institutional materials (websites, social media) were reviewed, and holistic descriptions of both projects were elaborated.

The project was approved by the Ethics Committee of the sponsoring university, and all participants signed informed consent forms.

Table 1 – Participants

Description	Role	Label
Interview case 1	Student's family	Family C1-1
Interview case 1	Student's family	Family C1-2
Interview case 1	Student's family	Family C1-3
Interview case 1	Teacher	Teacher C1-1
Interview case 1	Teacher	Teacher C1-2
Interview case 2	Student's family	Family C2-1
Interview case 2	Student's family	Family C2-2
Interview case 2	Teacher	Teacher C2-1
Interview case 2	Founding Teacher	Teacher C2-2
Interview case 2	School Administrator ¹	School Administrator C2
Triangulation Interview School A	Teacher and Founder	Teacher Triang-A
Triangulation Interview School B	Teacher	Teacher Triang-B
Triangulation Interview School C	Teacher	Teacher Triang-C

Source: Prepared by the authors

Data Analysis

The corpus was composed of the complete transcriptions of the interviews and the documentary records of both cases. The analysis was developed using the constant comparative method (Glaser;

Strauss, 2017), utilizing the Nvivo 14 software. In the first stage, data condensation and open inter-case coding were performed, from which emergent categories linked to financing strategies, ties with the State, participation mechanisms, and the sustainability of the pedagogical project were constructed. (Open Codes: contextualization; financing model; resource management strategies; organizational learning; decision-making in management; impact on project development; gaps between reality and the ideal; development projections, role of the State). Subsequently, an intra-case analysis and then an inter-case comparative analysis was carried out, following the logic of theoretical and literal replication (Yin, 2014). This strategy allowed for the identification of recurring patterns and significant contrasts between the experiences, considering not only institutional conditions but also the trajectories and discourses of the actors (see Table 2).

Table 2 – Phase Two of Coding

Case	Category Names	Files	References
Case 1	Sociopedagogical Foundations	5	22
	Participatory but Reactive Governance	5	84
	Commitment-Based Funding Model	5	40
	Limited Projections	5	47
Case 2	Sociopedagogical Foundations	4	22
	Participatory but Reactive Governance	5	38
	Commitment-Based Funding Model	5	75
	Limited Projections	6	64
Case 3 triangulation		1	108
Case 4 triangulation		1	38
Case 5 triangulation		1	46

Source: Prepared by the authors

Finally, the triangulation data provided elements for greater credibility and confirmability of the final categories, as well as depth in the understanding of the phenomenon. Consequently, this process led to the configuration of four final categories that we present below.

Results

Projects initiated with a socio-pedagogical base

The Waldorf schools analyzed emerge as community responses to a shared dissatisfaction with the Chilean educational system, particularly in its most standardized and performance-oriented expression. Their creation is driven by teachers and families seeking a meaningful education, centered on holistic development, attuned to students' lived, emotional, and territorial context.

The idea is to have an alternative form of education, with a different perspective on the human being—something that simply did not exist in the region [...] they wanted something that would contribute more to society itself, to the formation of the human being. (Teacher C1-2)

This pursuit connects with what Apple (2000) and Viaud (2017) have described as forms of resistance to the neoliberal educational model, which standardizes processes, fragments knowledge, and subordinates educational purposes to criteria of efficiency. In the Chilean case, this translates into a highly segmented school system that prioritizes standardized accountability over community ties or alternative pedagogical approaches. In both cases, Waldorf pedagogy appears as a referential framework that provides coherence to the foundational principles of these schools. In the first case, its adoption was gradual and arose as a response to community discussions about the need for a school that viewed the child as an integral being, including their spiritual dimension:

Here we also have a curriculum, but it is linked to the child's developmental stage [...] it never loses sight of that, of the child as a human being. (Teacher C1 - 1)

In the second case, the project initially arises as a craft school for vulnerable youth, and Waldorf pedagogy was incorporated as a means to recover local heritage knowledge, establishing a bridge between social needs and an educational proposal with philosophical and aesthetic roots.

What we want is to provide social value to people who today are not familiar with Waldorf pedagogy — and how beneficial it would be for so many of those children to enter a completely different system! (School administrator C2)

Pedagogical autonomy, understood as the capacity to define the aims and means of the educational project without being subordinated to external standards, emerges as a guiding principle. However, this autonomy is strained by the constraints of the endogenous privatization model (Ball; Youdell, 2008), in which the State allows certain pedagogical freedoms only as long as they do not involve public funding. Thus, the emergence of these schools in Chile can be read as a gesture of educational self-determination, but also as a symptom of a system that fails to provide answers to certain social groups. Their founders not only claim the freedom to teach but also demand the material conditions necessary to sustain that right.

Financing Based on Family Contributions

The schools studied are founded as non-profit projects, sustained by strong participation from families and teachers, which reflects the principles of community and co-responsibility promoted by Waldorf pedagogy (Schaefer, 2012; Stehlik, 2019).

It is the original premise of Waldorf pedagogy that schools are non-profit institutions. Therefore, all income is directed toward education; there is no enterprise here disguised as education seeking to generate profit. What we want is to provide education, and for that, we need financial resources. (Teacher E-A)

However, the financing model adopted, focused almost exclusively on family contributions, exposes a structural fragility that stresses its autonomy. Since their origin, these initiatives have depended on personal investments and the voluntary work of their founders, evidencing a form of initial capital that does not come from

the State nor from institutionalized sources, but from the affective and moral economy of their communities:

That severance pay I invested here; I still haven't recovered it, I hope to recover it someday. (Teacher C2-2)

This type of investment—characteristic of what Laval and Dardot (2015) refer to as “*gift economies*”—can strengthen the sense of belonging, but it also establishes a precarious logic, dependent on the changing economic capacities of community members, without state support or access to subsidies, since the Waldorf curriculum does not conform to the official standards of the Ministry of Education:

100% of the funding comes from the parents' monthly fees [...] we do not receive any subsidy from the Ministry of Education because the Waldorf program is very different. (Family C1-1)

It is, therefore, a system of community-based financial self-management, in which the schools continuously implement fundraising strategies (such as raffles, bazaars, and bartering) that, while strengthening the community fabric, fail in becoming stable sources of income. The direct involvement of families in these tasks reinforces the idea of the school as a collective project, but it also shifts economic and organizational burdens onto them that, in other contexts, would fall on the State.

This model, although coherent with the principle of economic fraternity of Waldorf pedagogy (Stahel, 2013), confronts what Bak (2023) describes as a paradox: autonomy without resources ends up undermining the ideal of educational justice. The lack of public policies that legally recognize these alternatives produces an exclusion by omission, where the State, without prohibiting these projects, leaves them without material conditions to sustain themselves. In this framework, obtaining legal personality as a foundation constitutes a step towards formalization, allowing, at least in theory, access to public or private resources. However, the interviewees acknowledge that legal procedures, formal accounting, and project presentation require technical capacities that are not always available:

It must be sustainable, the key is financial sustainability, and Waldorf pedagogy doesn't have specialists in that either, much less schools. (School Administrator C2)

This situation exposes a contradictory dimension of the principle of self-management: while autonomy is promoted as a value, the need for technical and financial support that allows that autonomy to be sustained over time is made invisible. As Stehlik (2019) states, Waldorf schools must face the dilemma of either depending exclusively on their communities or engaging in dialogue with the State, risking in the latter case an eventual loss of pedagogical sovereignty.

The testimonies show that funding directly affects the working conditions of teachers. The lack of competitive salaries, the flexibilization of contracts, and the initial voluntary work reflect a high degree of commitment, but also of precariousness. This was exacerbated during the pandemic, when several families were unable to continue paying fees, forcing salary adjustments. This episode was perceived by the

communities as a learning experience, leading to greater formalization and financial organization:

In that sense, the pandemic brought lessons—learning to become more organized administratively. Not so much relying on verbal agreements [...] but putting it in writing as a signed agreement. (Teacher C1-1)

This financing model reinforces a central tension: the desire for autonomy and community versus the need for stability and educational justice. As long as differentiated public support mechanisms are not developed, these schools will continue to operate in a logic of survival, highly dependent on the commitment and economic availability of their members.

Participatory Governance and Internal Tensions

The results show that these schools operate under forms of collaborative governance, where the participation of teachers and families in school decision-making is promoted. Inspired by Steiner's principle of social three folding, these educational communities have developed organizational structures oriented towards self-management and horizontality.

In both cases, pedagogical decisions are the responsibility of the teaching team, while administrative and financial decisions are channeled through non-profit foundations established by teachers and some parents or guardians. The final decisions on resources, however, fall to the pedagogical team, prioritizing educational needs:

The teachers provide the guidelines, saying, "Well, we need to build two classrooms next year" [...] they are the ones who set the main guidelines, and the administration team is the one who, in some way, figures out how to implement these plans that require resources. (Teacher Triang-C)

In this organizational scheme, the teaching staff performs multiple functions that exceed traditional pedagogical work, assuming tasks typical of management, accounting, communications, and administration, as reported by several interviewees:

We said, "everything that is pedagogical is ours, and everything that is financial is also ours." So, these are like committees that we are on, and what do we do there? Sometimes it's your turn. This year it was my turn to manage a bit along with another colleague; we do it for a couple of years and then we rotate. (Teacher C1-2)

This model departs from the hierarchical logics that typically govern conventional schools and aligns with a community ethic based on co-responsibility and collective commitment. However, self-management generates significant internal tensions. In times of crisis—such as those experienced during the pandemic—the participatory structure had to adapt quickly to ensure the continuity of the project. In one case, the teachers had to assume full control of school governance, displacing families who had made financially unsustainable decisions:

From the initial group, the administration passed to the parents, and these parents didn't make many good decisions [...]. We teachers took sovereignty; we decided to become a foundation. (Teacher C1-1)

These experiences show that horizontal governance can be weakened by the lack of strategic planning and by the time constraints and

limited cultural capital of families and teachers to participate in organizational matters.

Economic decisions, such as salary adjustments or the organization of fundraising campaigns, are debated collectively in extended meetings. While this reinforces the sense of community, it also slows down decision-making processes and can hinder organizational sustainability:

The foundation has a board of directors [...]. Therefore, yes, resources are discussed and distributed and organized in agreements, like in a community. (Teacher C2-2).

The initial informality of financial management, with practices such as unregulated cash payments and bartering, gradually gave way to progressive formalization, especially after legal incorporation as a foundation. However, this has not necessarily been accompanied by administrative professionalization. Accounting, for example, is often the only outsourced function, while the rest of the tasks continue to fall on the teachers:

Before becoming a foundation, it was like this: the parents managed the monthly fees [...] but it was chaotic. After the educational foundation was established, the foundation took over [...]. There is also an external accountant now. (Family C1-1).

Despite these limitations, they value the participatory model and consider that direct involvement in management matters strengthens the sense of belonging and enables decision-making more consistent with the pedagogical project. However, this self-management can reproduce forms of organizational precariousness that, paradoxically, hinder the continuity of the educational project.

From a theoretical perspective, these forms of governance can be interpreted through the concept of endogenous privatization (Ball; Youdell, 2008), insofar as the absence of state funding forces educational communities to assume functions that correspond to the public apparatus. The participatory governance observed in these Waldorf schools constitutes both a strategy of resistance and a source of tension. It allows for the preservation of pedagogical autonomy and community values, but also reveals the risks of forced self-management in contexts of structural defenselessness. The sustainability of the model will largely depend on its capacity to articulate democratic participation with institutional stability.

Limitations of financial self-management and teacher labor precarity

Despite the aspirations for growth, both in terms of enrollment and infrastructure, the available resources impose limits. These institutions express the will to preserve their reduced scale, in coherence with their pedagogical project, but recognize that financial sustainability largely depends on the increase in students and new sources of income.

Regarding finances, I would say that I could illustrate it with the number of children per class—if we had 15 children per class. Also, in financial terms, [if we had] a better structure. I believe that would clearly provide us with solid salary support. (Teacher C2-2)

This paradox reveals a structural tension between the ideal of small schools, founded on close relationships and personalized processes, and the economic need for scale to cover fixed costs:

We are highly constrained because, perhaps, we would like to take in more children, but of course, even though there would be income from those children, it still wouldn't be enough, as more teacher hours and additional assistants would be required. (Family C2-2)

Likewise, the schools face a dilemma when trying to reconcile their commitment to social justice and access with the need to charge fees to cover their expenses. As one teacher explains:

We always wanted the school to have a certain social responsibility. So, we didn't want to charge the way traditional Waldorf schools do. (Teacher C1-1)

In this context, for example in case 1, the question arises as to what would be a "fair fee" that allows access to be guaranteed without compromising the project's viability. This reflection becomes complex when considering that the family incomes of many communities do not allow them to assume high monthly fees:

It was very difficult to determine the amount, at what value was fair for them, for us it was very difficult, year after year it was very difficult, if I'm not mistaken, we started charging around 95 thousand at the beginning. (Family C1-1)

The search for new funding sources has been limited. Despite the efforts made, their low institutional visibility has restricted their ability to access alternative funds. However, the two cases agree on the need to diversify income to avoid relying exclusively on family contributions:

I feel it is essential that contributions be diverse — that they don't fall solely on families — because if they do, we could end up with monthly fees of 300.000 pesos or more [...] and clearly, 300.000 pesos per child in a school is an amount that not even 5% of the population, or perhaps even fewer, could afford." (Family C2-2)

The scholarship system has been difficult to sustain over time, with a logic of flexibility prevailing instead, based on particular situations. In the words of a mother:

I understand that there are families who contribute a greater amount of money, somewhat adapted to their economic situation [...] however, all families contribute financially. There are no scholarships; it's not a project that is currently able to offer them. (Family C2-1)

Financial precarity directly affects the pedagogical dimension. The availability of resources conditions the possibility of implementing certain curricular activities or hiring new specialized teachers. A teacher reflects:

Ultimately, we have to adapt to those resources, instead of the resources adapting to our needs. So, we are always in a permanent state of: okay, we have money to pay one more teacher, what are we going to decide to teach the children? It's either movement, or it's English (Teacher C2-1)

Also, the self-managed system has had an impact on working conditions marked by flexibility and low incomes. Many teachers, especially in the initial stages of these projects, worked without formal contracts. Although this has improved over time, the conditions remain unstable:

I mean, the minimum a teacher is paid for one day of work per week is 100,000 pesos, for two days 200, for three days 300, for four days 400, and for five days 500 [per month]. (Teacher C2-1)

Nevertheless, the legal regularization through the constitution of foundations has progressively favored contractual formalization, compliance with labor regulations, and organizational strengthening:

When we established ourselves as a foundation, it was a key moment [...] because before that, payments were made under the table, in cash. There were no social security contributions, nothing at all — it was as informal as it gets, completely off the books. (Teacher C1-1)

Despite this precariousness, the teachers show a high emotional, pedagogical, and organizational involvement. The sense of belonging and collective commitment is presented as a symbolic capital to sustain the schools, even in contexts of high uncertainty. This category therefore reveals the contradictions between community-oriented ideals, economic sustainability, and working conditions. Beyond business logic, the interviewees conceive resource management as a collective, solidarity-based, and ethically founded act, although it does not exempt them from structural vulnerabilities.

Discussion

A first perspective leads us to situate our results within the framework of global political trends. Indeed, a strengthening of neoliberal reforms is observed, marked by growing expectations in terms of efficiency and profitability of school funding. In the context of budgetary austerity, education tends to be redefined through performance logics (Gerrard; Savage; O'Connor, 2017). In this framework, fundraising becomes a common practice, but it faces the reluctance to accept that private donations compensate for the progressive withdrawal of the State (Body, 2017).

Complementing this global perspective, at a more local scale, it invites an examination of the specific dynamics of each national context. Here, the aim is to understand the evolution of Waldorf schools, situating the position they occupy—central or marginal—within the dominant educational networks (Miller; Oelkers, 2023), and to observe how their pedagogy aligns—or does not—with the evolution of educational policies.

From a contextualized perspective, it is possible to affirm that the experience of Waldorf schools in Chile is inscribed in a structural paradox between freedom of education and institutional precarity. As documented by Rowe & Perry (2022), the emergence of alternative educational projects is marked by the displacement of state responsibilities onto private subjects, particularly middle-class families who assume the dual role of consumers and managers. This logic, while allowing for greater community participation, reinforces the structural inequalities of the educational system and makes the conditions of existence for these projects precarious.

In continuity with this analysis, the cases studied align with what Viaud (2021) calls economic bricolage: a form of funding characterized

by fragmentation, uncertainty, and dependence on family networks, informal donations, or self-managed activities. This modality, far from ensuring sustainability, keeps the schools in a liminal condition, without access to public resources and highly vulnerable to economic crises.

As indicated by Götte (2000) and Stehlik (2019), this fragility also affects pedagogical continuity and teacher retention, particularly in educational projects with moderate fees and located in provinces. In this light, bricolage can be understood as an analytical category for interpreting sustainability strategies as forms of social creativity in contexts of state exclusion. In terms of governance, our evidence aligns with Sierra-Huedo et al. (2023) regarding the potential of horizontal leadership to strengthen organizational learning. However, this potential is constrained by the limited time, training, and resources available to the actors involved, particularly the teaching teams who assume multiple responsibilities. The ideal of co-responsibility, if not accompanied by adequate material conditions, can lead to overload and informality for them (Vidal; St-Onge, 2023).

Beyond the economic and organizational aspects, a third level of analysis highlights the strategic dimensions of these projects. This involves examining how certain pedagogies have managed to build a true pedagogical brand (Oelkers, 2024), developing a coherent organization, both economically and in terms of training, dissemination, and institutionalization. This entails considering the position these pedagogies occupy within the educational landscape. Oelkers (2024) considers that the pedagogies of Steiner and Montessori hold a singular position: Steiner embodies a solitary figure, both spiritual and educational, while Montessori becomes an emblematic figure of child-centered currents. These models correspond to an idealized alternative education, whose practices, subject to institutional restrictions, are never applied in a “pure” manner. This finding invites an analysis, in each context, of which elements of these pedagogies are retained and implemented.

In this strategic and critical framework, the autonomy of these projects is situated between two poles: the creation of their own norms (Castoriadis, 1997; Straume, 2016) and subjection to external restrictions (Schaefer, 2012). In this sense, the Chilean Waldorf schools embody a fragile autonomy, constantly negotiated with the economic, social, and cultural demands of the environment. The results show that freedom of education has allowed the emergence of these schools, promoting a differentiated educational offering aligned with the demands of certain families. Despite its potential, this freedom is conditioned by a system that prioritizes standardization and competition between establishments. Ultimately, this attitude reflects an almost spectral relationship, in which these free schools appear to have no real existence within the educational system (Sepúlveda, 2023). For example, their inability to access state resources derives directly from the legal require-

ments that limit their integration into the formal system. This fact positions them as unsubsidized institutions, forcing them to rely exclusively on private financing mechanisms.

In line with this logic of negotiated autonomy, the concept of self-management becomes central. For Pérez-Rueda (2022), this implies a form of social organization that challenges the power logics of capitalism. Nevertheless, he recognizes that many self-managed centers survive precisely thanks to the gaps in the neoliberal model they criticize. This questions the transformative scope of these experiences when their action is not linked to broader social struggles or forms of inter-institutional articulation (Orellana-Fernández et al., 2023).

In closing, it can be stated that the principle of freedom of education in Chile, while legally guaranteeing the possibility of creating differentiated educational projects, does not ensure structural conditions of equity or sustainability for their development. The Waldorf schools analyzed demonstrate that this freedom operates in a constant tension between pedagogical autonomy and institutional exclusion, sustained by mechanisms of economic bricolage and community self-management. Far from representing a fully recognized alternative, these projects remain on the margins of the system, forced to adapt to neoliberal logics that weaken their transformative potential. Ultimately, the analysis reveals a central paradox: freedom of education, without public policies that recognize pedagogical diversity and guarantee access to equitable resources, becomes a mechanism that legitimizes inequality and perpetuates precarity. This observation calls for a reconsideration of the role of the state, not as a guarantor of uniformity, but as a facilitator of a plural, just, and truly inclusive educational ecosystem.

Conclusions

The results of this case study show that self-managed Waldorf schools in Chile operate in a permanent tension between the pedagogical autonomy they seek to maintain, and the structural restrictions imposed by the current educational system. Although freedom of education is legally guaranteed, in practice these institutions face several barriers: lack of public funding, almost total dependence on families, teacher labor precarity, and difficulties in obtaining official recognition. Their sustainability largely rests on the logic of economic bricolage and community commitment, which contributes to reproducing inequalities and forms of educational exclusion. One of the central findings is the ambivalence of self-management: on the one hand, it allows for horizontal organizational models, high teacher involvement, and family participation; on the other, it exposes the schools to a structural fragility that limits their capacity for planning and continuous improvement.

From a methodological standpoint, the triangulation through interviews with various actors made it possible to contrast perceptions and practices, broadening the understanding of the model's strengths

and vulnerabilities. However, the exclusion of the students' voices constitutes a limitation that should be addressed in future research.

In conclusion, this research provides evidence on the way alternative schools operate on the margins of the Chilean educational system and questions the effective scope of the principle of freedom of education in contexts marked by inequality. Rather than being tolerated exceptions, these experiences can represent spaces for pedagogical innovation and social experimentation. Recognizing their existence requires moving towards more inclusive regulatory and financing frameworks, capable of valuing pedagogical diversity without imposing curricular homogeneity or market-driven logics².

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Notes

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