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Educating for Poverty Relief: The Case of Fe y Alegria

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This chapter briefly discusses the organizational experience of *Fe y Alegria* (henceforth, FyA) as a network of schools managed by the Society of Jesus, chiefly in Latin America but also Africa. Both authors are organizational sociologists, and we wrote the chapter in that capacity. FyA is of relevance for us as organizational studies scholars, not because of its pedagogical approach, nor because of its eventual links to a Jesuit pedagogical project. Moreover, our main objective is not to contribute to studies in pedagogy (which is not our main field of inquiry), but to open a dialogue. Throughout, we will speak about what surprised us. The fact that it might not surprise scholars from other traditions is, eventually, the open door for dialogue.

We initially approached FyA as a remarkably big network of schools. In our capacity as management scholars, we tried to uncover the administrative principles guiding what was –and still is– an impressive organization in terms of its geographical scope and its size, as measured by the total number of employees. However, we were soon drawn by the relevance of FyA’s educational project. That is when we started approaching FyA as a network of schools purposively built to tackle poverty. Or, put differently, at some point in our journey researching FyA, we started understanding FyA’s educational endeavor as being about liberating the individuals, their context, and the wider society in which they are immersed.

We discovered that any approach to FyA as either (only) a pedagogical endeavor, or as a Jesuit educational project is incomplete. Obviously, others knew this already, namely FyA. However, as organizational studies scholars, this allowed us to reframe the case of FyA and rethink a network of schools in light of its overarching purpose. This chapter is, therefore, an informed description of what we might call *an intellectual journey*, a journey in which our interests as researchers somehow changed in the face of grand-challenges like those characterizing FyA’s operational context: poverty, violence, and extreme forms of inequality. That said, this chapter discusses the continuous quest of FyA to fulfill its purpose by the means of educating the poor while adapting to new forms of poverty.

The chapter is structured as follows. We start by a brief review of our intellectual journey into what we call ‘purposiveness in education’. We then review the positioning of FyA vis-à-vis

the grand-challenge of poverty. More specifically, Paulo Freire's (2000/1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*—which ended up inspiring part of FyA's pedagogy— will be discussed in light of the theoretical debates surrounding the possibility (or not) of solving grand-challenges. The second part of the chapter leverages data retrieved from FyA, namely interviews, historical sources (based on FyA's archives), and ethnographic observations. The analysis of these qualitative sources shows that FyA's educational project is underpinned by shifting understandings of poverty (meaning that FyA does not operate around one understanding of poverty) and by the absence of educational performance criteria.

The outcomes of our research on FyA are counter-intuitive. On the one hand, we expected a common understanding of poverty to guide the strategic action of FyA and its educational project. On the other hand, the irrelevance of performance measurement criteria for FyA puts into question dominant governmental (as per in Foucault) approaches to education.

Therefore, the chapter contributes to two contemporary debates. First, it brings to the fore the role of educational organizations for approaching grand-challenges (like poverty), something that has been largely overlooked within organizational studies literature. Second, the chapter discusses the relevance of humanist education, centered on the individual, and not on the functional outcomes of education (e.g., school rankings or exam results). This debate is made even more crucial given the mounting pressure on Jesuit schools that rely heavily on State funding, a challenge that also affects FyA. The adoption, for financial reasons, of State-led educational projects has put into question the distinctiveness of some Jesuit institutions. This will bring the chapter back to the beginning of our discussion: What is the ultimate objective of education? FyA's emphasis on educating individuals capable of transforming themselves, their closest contexts, and their wider communities, will allow us to discuss what a Jesuit inspired (and, therefore, humanist) educational project could look like.

A Search for Purpose in Education

It is often forgotten that modern educational systems serve a purpose beyond the formal dimensions of education itself. Ever since Luther, arguably one of the founders of modern educational systems (Strauss 1978), thought of mass education for children in the 16th century, education has always entailed objectives that go beyond the mere technical dimensions of

learning. The ideal of *educating the masses* has always been of relevance in modern educational systems. In the case of Luther's education project, the overarching objective was the catechization of Christianity. As Strauss (1978) described, Luther's educational project attempted a balance between, on the one hand, the Reformation project centered on individual conscience and its free relationship with God; and, on the other hand, the need to inculcate in children the fundamentals of religion as per a religious authority's precepts. For Luther, true conversion to Christianity could only occur during the early years of the individual's life. This justified the right of local authorities to overcome the parents in case they did not educate their children according to the true precepts of religion (Strauss 1978).

Between Luther and the 19th-century liberal belief that education was the best way of attaining the ideal of freedom, the Jesuits established a network of schools whose plan of studies –the *Ratio Studiorum*– formalized pedagogy. Unlike Luther's educational project, which was mostly a decentralized and non-formalized endeavor, the network of Jesuit schools was formalized and centralized through the *Ratio Studiorum*. This allowed the Jesuits to develop a common identity, even though they managed hundreds of schools scattered throughout the world. The *Ratio* most likely had an impact on modernity impossible to determine historically. For instance, the *Ratio*'s role in the dissemination of mathematics eventually contributed to the development of the modern emphasis on putting numbers into every dimension of reality and, subsequently, the dissemination of a specific form of scientific inquiry. As Ashworth (1986) put it, “[t]here is one order that stands out from all others as the scientific order without rival in seventeenth-century Catholicism, and that, of course, is the Society of Jesus” (p. 154), which turns the Society of Jesus into perhaps “the first true scientific society” (p. 154). The Jesuits can thus be said to have acted as a conduit for new kinds of knowledge. This was especially so for 16th-century mathematics; the Jesuits made their presence felt in the fields of cosmography, navigation, optics, and astronomy (O'Malley, Harris, Bailey & Kennedy 1999).

The rationalization of knowledge was already imprinted into modern culture when, in the 19th century, the liberal project brought education to the fore as the fundamental means towards the development of individuals capable of governing themselves, and, henceforth, contributing to the development of liberal democracies (Fawcett 2014; Freedon 2015; Rosenblatt 2018). Again, education was seen not as the mere formal training of a specific set of skills and technicalities, but as a means towards something greater. In the case of the liberals' educational project, the

overarching objective was progress. This same objective would be shared by all sides of the political spectrum, underpinning the development of vast educational networks covering the territorial limits of the State/Population (see Ross [2015], for an account of the relevance of the *Commune of Paris* revolt in the massification of children's education). Therefore, education evolved into a governmental technique, as per in Foucault's (2009) understanding of government as being about the conduct of the individual and the conduct of the population. Such governmental approach to education, with its disciplinary emphasis (Foucault 1991/1975), would be the hallmark of State-led education networks developed throughout the 20th century.

The development of State education networks, in conjunction with the persecution of Catholic religious orders, paralleled the gradual diminishing of Jesuit education networks. In many Western countries, the Jesuit network of schools had historically been the main provider of education, namely scientific education (as an example, see Malta Romeiras [2019] for a discussion of the role Jesuits played in Portuguese scientific education). However, the development of State networks of schools led to the gradual disappearance, in many countries, of some Jesuit schools, being that those which survived were mainly either totally private or funded through the State and as part of the State network. In many circumstances, the latter saw their identities being threatened by the piecemeal introduction of educational projects often irreconcilable with Jesuit identity.

Notwithstanding, such developments did not occur equally across all countries in which the Jesuits had a presence. It is in such a context that FyA emerged as an educational project.

Fe y Alegria

FyA was founded in Caracas, Venezuela, in 1955, by Fr. Jose Velaz, S.J. His ideal was rather simple: achieve social change through education. In that sense, there was not much difference between FyA's foundational purpose and that of existing networks, namely State-funded ones. However, FyA had a preference for contexts of extreme poverty and marginalization. Furthermore, FyA strongly believed that an alternative to the status quo can be realized. Inspired by Freire's (2000/1970) *pedagogy of liberation* and his ideal of utopian education, FyA's mission is to use education of the poor as a way to realize an alternative vision for society. Hence, FyA seeks to anticipate the future and create a decisively different world. In a

nutshell, FyA's mission is as religious as political. In this sense, one could argue that the utopian character of FyA's project is aligned with the educational projects inspired by liberal and progressive State networks of schools.

FyA sees itself as a social movement engaged in "popular education" (Freire 2000/1970), aiming at emancipating the more than 1,500,000 children, adolescents, and adults who attend the circa 2,500 schools daily (Fe y Alegria 2016). These students can then potentially change their local context and, *a fortiori*, the wider society in which they are immersed.

FyA is nowadays governed by a Federation, known as the *International Federation of Fe y Alegria* (FIFyA, for its Spanish initials). Founded in 1986, the FIFyA is an organization that associates the independent national nodes of FyA around the world. Currently, these independent national nodes represent 21 countries (16 Latin American, 2 European, and 3 African) and benefit over 1,500,000 students through rather different educational programs. These educational programs that FyA offers are related to formal and technical-vocational initiatives that look for improving the quality of life in the social contexts.

In terms of structure, the FIFyA has a complex organizational structure that brings together 21 independently-operated national nodes into one Federation. Each of these national nodes has local autonomy to run its own organizational structure, to design its own strategic plans, and has its own finances and human resources. However, in order to strengthen actions, position the brand in the education market, and fulfill the mission of helping those in most need, the FIFyA promotes cross-sectional programs between national nodes. The *International Federation* has a board of directors of four people nominated by the 21 National Directors, one International Coordinator, and a federative staff of around 18 people (at the time of our study, years 2014-2017). Although, the FIFyA groups all the national nodes, neither the *Federation* nor the Coordinator have decision power on the national nodes functioning.

That said, FyA is remarkable for its lack of centralized decision-making mechanisms and a formalized educational project. Each national node, or even each school, is fully autonomous to determine what best suits the needs of those they serve. This *functional autonomy* is FyA's distinctive approach to the grand-challenge of poverty. We expand below.

Grand-challenges are extremely complex societal problems of varied nature and which require collective action (Ferraro, Etzion, & Gehman 2015). Examples of current pressing grand-

challenges are the environment, artificial intelligence and autonomy, migration, and poverty. These grand-challenges are complex, originate uncertainty, and –more importantly– do not have a straightforward solution. Many have studied responses to grand-challenges, namely organizational responses. There are examples of such studies on the environment (Ansari, Wijen, & Gray 2013; Schüssler, Rülting, & Wittneben 2014; Wittneben, Okereke, Banerjee, & Levy 2012), migration (Gümüşay 2018; Kornberger, Leixnering, Meyer, & Höllerer 2018), and poverty alleviation (Battilana & Dorado 2010; Dorado & Ventresca 2013; Mair, Martí, & Ventresca 2012).

FyA's own history is of utmost importance to understand how education has been approached as an eventual solution to the grand-challenge of poverty alleviation. FyA grew through a bottom-up process: local schools emerged from the local communities and not as the result of centralized planning. Local communities, sometimes led by the parents, determined if a school was needed, built it, maintained it, and managed it with the support of FyA and the various religious orders that joined the movement. This bottom-up approach is fundamental to properly grasp FyA's identity and particular *way of doing things*. As FyA expanded into different countries and regions within those countries, its bottom-up approach crystallized into what is known as *functional autonomy*: each school, each community, and each country became fully autonomous in regards to pedagogy and strategic priorities. The autonomous character of each national FyA was somehow exacerbated by local legal and political contingencies – each country in which FyA operated had its own development goals and national educational strategies. Moreover, all of these countries developed their own State networks of schools, often located across the road of already existing FyA schools. This is a trajectory that we already described in relation to the Western context.

Two interrelated changes in the Latin American context have begun to challenge FyA's mission and purpose. First, the manifestations of poverty have changed significantly since FyA's foundation in 1955. Second, due to the need for donor-funding as an alternative to State funding, FIFyA –which was originally founded to unite the movement– centralized an increasing range of activities. To source funds from mainly Western public donors, such as the *European Union* or *World Bank*, and private donors, such as corporate foundations, program managers in Madrid created global *federative programs* and oversaw the implementation of these donor-funded educational projects in Latin American schools. These two shifts put upfront in FyA the need to

fulfill its purpose by the means of educating the poor while adapting to new forms of poverty. The strategic review occurring in the last six years is the main source of data for this chapter.

Methodology

We adopted a qualitative process approach (Langley, Tsoukas, & Van de Ven 2013). The data spans the 30 months of FIFyA's strategic review process (October 2014 to April 2017). Using ethnographic techniques (Spradley 1980; Van Maanen 1988), we (a) observed strategy meetings, (b) conducted interviews in 6 countries, and (c) collected organizational documents. Combining various data sources allowed us to follow and appreciate the minutiae associated with the evolution of FIFyA's strategic review process (Langley et al. 2013; Zilber 2014).

Ethnographic observations were suitable for our research because they allowed us to engage with the unfolding –over time– of both the strategic review process and of how those participating in it made sense of varying contextual pressures (Hernes 2014). Ethnographic observations are a good complement to interviews because they allow us to avoid retrospective biases (MacKay & Chia 2013). We observed strategy meetings held in Peru, Colombia, and Paraguay during 2016 and 2017. Notes of all meetings were taken (Spradley 1980), and recordings were partially transcribed into Spanish with quotes translated into English.

We also conducted *semi-structured interviews* with a broad range of FyA respondents, from National Directors to local school teachers. To gain a preliminary understanding of FIFyA, we began with four semi-structured pilot interviews with long-standing members. We then visited local schools in five countries where FIFyA operates: Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Paraguay, and Spain. We also visited FIFyA's headquarters in Colombia. The interviews focused on (a) the strategic review process, (b) the autonomous structure of national nodes and their relationship with the Federation, and (c) narratives concerning the contexts of marginalization and deprivation.

We gathered *organizational and public documents* produced by FIFyA from 1980 to 2017 to triangulate evidence and to construct a timeline of events and processes, some of which were collected in the archives of the *International Federation of FyA* in Bogota, Colombia. Additionally, we also collected over 100 public documents related to FyA's history and operations in different countries.

Data analysis was inductive (Corbin and Strauss 2008) and what steered our interest was understanding how members of FyA were involved in a continuous quest to fulfill its purpose by the means of educating the poor, while adapting to new forms of poverty. We divided our analysis into three stages. First, we analyzed the memos and notes taken during and after strategic meetings and interviews. We imported this data into NVivo to create an integrated database. Second, we codified the remaining of our data and triangulated our sources (Denzin 1997). Last, we established relationships between the codes and grouped them into categories.

Findings

Our findings show that FyA's strategic review and subsequent understanding of its educational project are underpinned by shifting understandings of poverty. This means that FyA does not operate around one common, global, and centrally defined understanding of what is poverty. Unlike multinational NGOs which define poverty on economic grounds or in a more multifaceted perspective, FyA's analysis unveils the importance of opening room for all definitions to co-exist harmoniously. Furthermore, our findings also reveal that the lack of a centrally defined educational project is concomitant with the absence of educational performance criteria. The latter is coherent with the intuition that centrally defining performance criteria might compromise the potential of the organization to locally integrate and adapt its operations. Put differently, the pressure for *functional autonomy* might be in stark contradiction with the temptation of centrally defining strategic objectives and establish common educational and performance goals. We expand below.

A Continuous Quest for Fulfilling Purpose: Reaching an Open Definition of Poverty

During the strategic review of the FIFyA we researched, FyA's National Directors were asked to imagine their mission and strategy going forward. The poverty problem they sought to confront could no longer be defined by "the lack of education in rural areas only", as commented by one FyA National Director. Furthermore, two changes occurred, as argued by another National Director: "the State's network of schools now covers many of the places in which FyA traditionally operated and many of those places cannot longer be classified as being poor".

The FIFyA, which started as an entity that could bring all autonomous national FyAs together, began by approaching the alleviation of poverty through global and standard programs.

According to yet another FyA National Director, “at the beginning, these programs functioned well as most schools shared Velaz’s representation of poverty in terms of ‘*where the asphalt ends, where there is no potable water, and where the city loses its name*’”. For many decades, Velaz’s inspirational representation symbolized the exclusion and marginalization of rural populations. Throughout the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, Latin American State-led networks of schools were limited to urban areas. Hence, Velaz’s statement endowed the movement with a coherent sense of purpose, namely, to provide education in places where no one else –including the State– was present.

However, in this new landscape, some National Directors became critical and started to see these programs as out of touch with their specific cultural, socio-economic, and political reality. As argued by one FyA National Director, “we all are FyA, but we are not ‘operating’ the same poverty problems”. In a similar line of reasoning, another FyA Director commented: “‘*Where the asphalt ends*’ is still there for some, but not for all of us.” The strategic review unveiled the external conditions affecting a common definition of poverty for FyA members. This originated long discussions between local FyA players and FyA’s International Federation.

As the strategic review moved forward, FyA members expressed clearly a growing mismatch between where FyA was operating, what poverty meant, and new forms of poverty identified. The need to unveil other forms of poverty –as being experienced by FyA schools– became one of the main focuses of attention. For instance, in one school that we visited, the local principal explained to us that their main challenge was to prevent sexual violence targeted at girls. In yet, another visit to a different school, teachers told to us that the school was the only place in which the children could feel safe from gang-related violence. These emerging forms of poverty and social exclusion were a new challenge for FyA: its educational project required the development of a *new definition of poverty* that provides a common purpose to all members.

The redefinition of poverty unfolded from the search for new ways of experiencing poverty. Discussions started to unpack the relationship between exclusion and poverty. As one FyA National Director put it, “social exclusion and poverty are siblings”. In several discussions, National Directors also pointed to the need to embrace education for excluded actors, such as people with special needs. Interestingly, when arguing about the best approach to find new ways of poverty, National Directors agreed that the ways of defining poverty should follow a bottom-

up approach. Such a view of how a new purpose should unfold was coherent with FyA's foundational identity. The strategic review was therefore open to different members, such as principals and all those working for FyA's national offices.

This participatory bottom-up process showed two things. First, new understandings of poverty can co-exist as long as they make sense as a coherent whole. For instance, all exclusion-related ways of poverty make sense as long as they can be connected to dimensions of social poverty. Second, the gradual rupture with previous understandings of poverty implies the creation of spaces that foster experimentation. As an example, FyA put forward what is called *initiatives*, in which actors from across the network can come together and define activities for tackling poverty based on their own particularities. As such, initiatives aim to break dominant narratives and make possible different definitions of poverty that co-exist as the purpose of FyA.

The Absence of Educational Performance Criteria

By organizing its activities around initiatives that aim at locally integrating the multiple understandings of poverty and social exclusion, FyA also brings to the fore important questions surrounding the centrally defined performance criteria which characterize so many of nowadays educational systems. The pressure for locally integrating overarching notions of poverty, together with the *functional autonomy* of the various national FyAs, seems to be in stark contradiction with the temptation of centrally defining strategic objectives and establishing common educational and performance goals.

The case of Fe y Alegria calls our attention upon the relevance of education as a means towards the eventual solution of grand-challenges. Apart from the debate on the possibility of solving grand-challenges, the main contribution of our case is the emphasis FyA puts on incorporating the changes in the problem to remain an important actor. Here, we evidenced that FyA is not about the disciplinary; instead, it is about the understanding of (a) the social contexts where poverty occurs and (b) the role individuals play in society in order to change their realities. Following from the above, an educational network (to the best of our knowledge, the biggest non-governmental network of schools in the world) that is focused on grand-challenges, namely poverty alleviation, represents a call for action. More specifically, grand-challenges require solutions that are unknown and often inexistent. Tackling issues like poverty alleviation, or any other major societal issues, requires forms of education that go way beyond traditional

understandings of pedagogy. These problems are complex and they “cannot be removed from their environment” (Grint 2014, p. 243). Furthermore, these problems contradict some of our modern assumptions “precisely because we cannot know what to do” (Grint 2014, p. 243). In that sense, educational systems focused on functional outcomes are not the most appropriate to prepare individuals for highly complex realities as contexts of extreme poverty and new forms of marginalization tend to be.

The absence of clear-cut solutions for the issues that drive FyA’s educational shift allows us to reflect on the role the liberal arts and humanities can play in education for the 21st century. Many have recently called for a revival of humanities and liberal arts education. As an example, Morson and Schapiro (2017) discuss how the modern obsession with the homogenization of human behavior and societal issues made us forget the role ethics play. Morson and Schapiro also highlight how homogeneous accounts of social reality neglect the local context and, therefore, tend to be short of a proper understanding of highly complex societal phenomena.

Our findings show the continuous quest of FyA to fulfill its purpose by the means of educating the poor, while adapting to new forms of poverty. Through FyA, we found that a meaningful construction of purpose is a joint process (Cunliffe 2002; Hersted & Madsen 2018), which unfolds and for which one cannot, confidently, pre-determine the outcomes of the said process. Grand-challenges such as poverty cannot be defined under a dominant or exclusive narrative. On the contrary, the definition of this type of problems should account for different views to understand how they complement each other and potentially explain underplayed factors. In this joint process, different people represent an embodied and embedded view of reality that carries ideologies, expectations, and memories (Cunliffe 2003; Bakhtin 2010). By acknowledging that poverty is not a standardized phenomenon, FyA players imbue the organization with a sense of purpose locally integrated and capable of constant renewal.

Our case shows that a “problem” (poverty) does not have only one meaning and that there is no gain in finding ultimate definitions. Throughout the different events that took place during the strategic review we observed, poverty meant different things depending on which questions were asked and to whom you asked them. This implies that a real sense of “purpose” only emerges when the meaning is able to carry collective constructions that are continuously shaped by a multitude of voices (Hersted & Madsen 2018). As there is no ultimate definition, but a large

number of voices dialoguing, the meaning of “poverty” is not imposed nor labeled by FyA actors. This makes the search for purpose a constant and collective endeavor.

Concluding Remarks

One meaningful point that can be learned from FyA’s case in its quest for purpose is the need to constantly understand how actors are experiencing the “here and now” (Cunliffe 2003). For example, the solidification of Father Velaz’s representation of poverty –*where the asphalt ends*– stopped the organization from grasping external changes. This had the potential to disrupt discussions around varied forms of poverty that go beyond the economic. The potential absence of a constant interrogation of the “here and now” eventually prevented the organization from identifying pressing issues.

Therefore, the case of FyA shows that when dealing with grand-challenges, complementary actions must be deployed. When actors co-construct meaning from difference, the world is perceived under several interconnected views (Bessant 2018). As a result, responses for poverty are not one act performed by several actors but a set of comprehensive and coordinated strategies performed to address the problem from different flanks (George, Howard-Grenville, Joshi, & Tihanyi 2016). In our case, actors addressed poverty through a diverse portfolio that offered responses for some poverty-related issues. It is through the complementarity of actions that one can achieve a common goal, while addressing several causes simultaneously.

Eventually, grand-challenges may be solved (George et al., 2016). Through the case of FyA, we can suggest that purpose is a never-ending quest: its meaning is open to debate, it may change and is the result of collective constructions. FyA’s case brings to the fore the relevance of education in such processes. Education, as understood by FyA, is a means to provide small wins that, when grouped, might generate change in society.

The transposition of such insights into the realm of pedagogy is no novelty. For instance, the previous insights are in accordance with Edmund Burke’s (1770/1999) notion of *moral imagination*. An education that fosters moral imagination allows the students to imagine alternative ways of life. However, such education can only flourish if humanities and critical reasoning are at the core of the pedagogical project (Nussbaum 1997), and thus the project understands that centrally defined solutions are not capable of tackling highly complex problems that always manifest themselves locally.

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