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## Voices of Indigenous Youth on Experiences in Boarding Schools: Positive Factors and Limitations

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### Abstract

This article reports research findings on how positive and limiting experiences related to wellbeing within primary and/or secondary boarding schools in La Araucanía, Chile, shape and influence the educational trajectories of indigenous students. The study adopts a qualitative descriptive methodology and involved eight participants. The main results show positive factors that strengthen educational trajectories throughout life in these educational spaces, such as the formation of friendships, harmonious coexistence, and fostering independence. Likewise, the study identifies limiting factors that may hinder educational progress, including factors that can sometimes lead to dropping out of school, such as peer violence, bullying, and the need for emotional support. The main conclusions underscore the urgent need to further study the educational trajectories of children and young people attending these institutions, as these factors may positively or negatively affect the educational outcomes of indigenous populations. In doing so, this research seeks to contribute to reducing educational inequality between indigenous and non-indigenous students and to promoting a sense of belonging and wellbeing in these educational spaces.

**Keywords:** *boarding school, school trajectory, indigenous students*

### Introduction

In the Americas, which are historically colonised indigenous territories, education for the indigenous population has been characterised by a monocultural and assimilationist education systems aimed at whitening indigenous people and transforming them into ordinary citizens through schooling in Western schools and boarding schools (Arias-Ortega et al., 2024). Globally, boarding schools – variously described as student residences or foster homes – have functioned as state-sponsored institutional infrastructures designed to assist indigenous and peasant students, while simultaneously advancing agendas of nationalism, evangelisation, cultural homogenisation, and the erasure of indigenous identities (Commission de Verité et Reconciliation du Canada, 2015; Dillon et al., 2022). This is achieved through hegemonic monolingual education in the dominant languages, such as French, English, Portuguese, and Spanish (Hecht, 2019).

A review of the literature on boarding school experiences in indigenous territories in countries shaped by European colonial expansion, such as India, Australia, Canada, the United States, and several nations in Latin America, shows that, in these specific contexts, such institutions have

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contributed to the production and reproduction of social, cultural, educational, economic, political, and epistemic inequalities affecting indigenous peoples (Suluma & Burnett, 2025). While colonial processes have taken diverse forms and not all countries or education systems share the same historical trajectory, in many settler-colonial and colonially administered societies boarding schools became instruments of assimilation. In these settings, they undermined indigenous sociocultural identities and negatively affected wellbeing through institutionalised racism aimed at integrating indigenous children into dominant national cultures, often suppressing their ties to ancestral territories (Wotherspoon & Milne, 2024). Boarding schools functioned as mechanisms that legitimised cultural destruction and, in extreme cases, genocidal practices, facilitating the systematic erosion of languages, knowledge systems, and community life through discrimination, psychological harm, and physical abuse directed at indigenous children (Bousquet, 2016; Dion, 2016; Bachmann, 2025).

In Latin America, particularly in countries such as Mexico, Brazil, Ecuador, Colombia, Bolivia, and Argentina, boarding schools for indigenous and peasant children and youth have occupied a central place in educational policies directed toward these populations, within the framework of a historically tense relationship between the State and indigenous communities, described as a conflictive interculturality (Giraud, 2010; Calderón, 2022; Calderón & Escalante, 2023). More than mere spaces for educational access, boarding schools have functioned as institutions of social and cultural regulation, aimed at promoting students' incorporation into the normative patterns of the dominant society through the teaching of hygiene habits, behavioral norms, and training in trades linked to economic development (Mólgora, 2022; Mendoza, 2018). In this sense, the boarding school is configured as a device that institutionalizes the separation of students from their family and community environments, fostering processes of distancing from their own epistemic frameworks and cultural references (Sánchez, 2017; Laz & Arias, 2022). Regional literature emphasizes that, in these contexts, recurring issues emerge, such as the denial or subordination of sociocultural identity within the school space, which directly affects students' wellbeing and their experiences of teaching and learning (Ruiz-Lagier, 2014).

Research on boarding schools, particularly in rural and indigenous contexts at the international level, has undergone sustained development in recent decades, questioning the foundations, effects and tensions of the boarding school experience (Guenther & Osborne, 2021; Mander & Lester, 2019). Historically, boarding schools have been positioned as solutions to educational access for geographically dispersed populations, particularly in rural and remote regions (Mander & Lester, 2023). In countries such as Australia, Canada, and New Zealand, boarding schools were established to address the geographic distance between indigenous communities and urban secondary education centres (McCalman et al., 2020). This logistical solution was linked to cultural assimilation projects, where schooling involved early separation from families, languages, and indigenous cultural practices (Benveniste et al., 2020; McCalman & Bainbridge, 2021).

### ***Boarding Schools and Wellbeing***

Critical scholarship conceptualises boarding schools not merely as organisational entities, but as socio-political institutions that have frequently reproduced structural and epistemological inequalities, particularly for Indigenous students (Lester & Mander, 2020; Guenther & Osborne, 2021; O'Bryan & Fogarty, 2020). Empirical and longitudinal research in Australia demonstrates that boarding significantly influences students' social and emotional wellbeing and educational pathways. The transition to secondary boarding is especially demanding, as students must

simultaneously adjust to new academic and residential contexts (Rutherford et al., 2020). A sustained misalignment between institutional expectations and community realities has been linked to attrition, school mobility and experiences of symbolic exclusion (Benveniste et al., 2020). Furthermore, separation from family and community affects not only emotional wellbeing, but also identity formation, belonging and cultural continuity.

The literature identifies a range of enabling conditions that shape boarding experiences and student wellbeing. Protective factors include trust-based staff–student relationships, a strong sense of belonging, and culturally safe spaces that foster identity affirmation and academic self-efficacy (McCalman et al., 2020; Whettingsteel et al., 2020; Parsons, 2022). Structured transition support and the development of adaptive coping strategies during the first year are associated with improved mental health and adjustment (Mander & Lester, 2019, 2023). At the institutional level, resilience-building initiatives grounded in culturally responsive, whole-of-school frameworks further enhance wellbeing (Benveniste et al., 2020; McCalman & Bainbridge, 2021). Conversely, international scholarship identifies constraints on wellbeing, including first-year homesickness and emotional distress, peer insecurity and bullying, and identity tensions arising from cultural distance and disconnection from Country (Mander & Lester, 2023; Fredrick et al., 2021; O’Bryan, 2021). Systemic limitations embedded in public policy—such as inadequate funding and ethical tensions in the provision of boarding—may also curtail schools’ capacity to create genuinely protective environments (Guenther & Osborne, 2021; Van Beek, 2024). Collectively, this body of evidence indicates that wellbeing in boarding contexts is shaped not solely by individual attributes, but by relational, cultural and structural conditions.

The contribution of this article lies in providing situated and contemporary empirical evidence on the experiences of Indigenous students attending boarding schools in La Araucanía, a field that remains underdeveloped in both national and international scholarship. By articulating educational trajectories with dimensions of wellbeing, belonging, and subject formation, the study expands the understanding of boarding schools beyond indicators of performance or retention, offering a multidimensional interpretation of how these spaces shape educational opportunities and contribute to the reproduction—or transformation—of inequalities in indigenous contexts.

### ***Boarding Schools in Chile***

Our study examines the Mapuche case in Chile, where Indigenous and peasant children were historically sent to boarding schools with the stated aim of improving their living conditions and countering discrimination (Arias-Ortega & Villarroel, 2024). While Mapuche families did not perceive participation in boarding as incompatible with their sociocultural identity or spiritual and communal wellbeing, grounded in their own epistemic frameworks (Reuca, 2010), these institutions frequently operated through asymmetrical power relations and racist practices that undermined Mapuche identity and social wellbeing (Sepúlveda et al., 2018). The systematic suppression of language and culture was often internalised by families as a protective response to past discrimination; however, this dynamic also contributed to processes of intergenerational trauma (Arias-Ortega et al., 2024).

In Chile, boarding schools are understood as educational spaces where children and young people from rural geographically isolated areas live during the school year to support their academic progress. In this context, the origin of boarding schools as public institutions can be traced back to

the government of President José Manuel Balmaceda (1886 to 1891), who developed and implemented various educational reforms aimed at enlightening the people through the establishment of schools, colleges and public boarding schools throughout the country (Araya, 2024). It was through this initiative that the Barros Arana National Boarding School was established in 1902, aimed at being the leading educational institution, whose purpose was to educate students from high socioeconomic backgrounds with high grades, who were considered the best students in the country, and who were certain to have successful academic careers (Internado Nacional Barros Arana, 2010). Over the years, during the Eduardo Frei Montalva administration (1964 to 1970), more than three thousand new schools were built, doubling attendance for low-income students, which reduced illiteracy from 16% to 11%. With these structural changes, boarding schools ceased to be places of privilege and academic excellence, accessible only to the best pupils. Currently, in Chile, the boarding school system consists of two types: Subsidised Boarding Schools run by the Ministry of Education, where students live and spend their time after school hours; and the Student Housing Programme managed by JUNAEB, which provides accommodation and meals to students within a host family, while they attend an external educational establishment. However, in recent years, the number of boarding schools has decreased significantly. For example, there were 345 boarding schools in Chile six years ago, but by 2023 this number had fallen dramatically to 188 (JUNAEB, 2023), this is a result of the defunding of these spaces, which has forced them to close. Across the country, the persistence of boarding schools is characterised by their location in the regions of La Araucanía (59), Los Lagos (20), Biobío (19), Coquimbo (17) and Maule (15), divided between municipal (101) and private (61) boarding schools (Narváez, 2024). The goal of these boarding schools is to help students achieve their academic goals and provide access to education for young people in vulnerable situations.

Our interest in boarding emerges from sustained engagement with questions of educational equity, Indigenous education and the relationship between schooling and community. This research is informed by prior work in educational settings serving culturally and linguistically diverse communities, as well as by professional experience in contexts where schooling operates at the intersection of policy, identity and structural inequality. These experiences have shaped our concern with how institutional arrangements—including boarding—mediate students' wellbeing, belonging and educational trajectories.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### ***Subjective Wellbeing Theory***

The study is based on the theory of subjective wellbeing to understand the factors that facilitate and limit the boarding experience, in relation to assessments of satisfaction and quality of life by the subjects themselves (Ruggeri et al., 2020; Brito et al., 2022). The theory of subjective wellbeing focuses on the subject's internal evaluation, based on cognitive judgements and affective reactions, of their own life as a whole (Ruggeri et al., 2020). According to Satorre (2013), subjective wellbeing refers to the way in which people interpret and experience their own lives, integrating both cognitive assessments and emotional responses that emerge when reflecting on their existence. In this case, students' subjective wellbeing related to their boarding experiences is examined. Subjective wellbeing is understood as a multidimensional construct encompassing positive affect, engagement in meaningful or motivating activities, and overall life satisfaction. Within boarding contexts, these dimensions shape students' experiences and adjustment.

The importance of subjective wellbeing has led to its inclusion in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as one of the most important factors for the sustenance and prosperity of society, from a psychosocial perspective (Idemudia & Adedeji, 2023; Casanova & González, 2016). Understanding wellbeing involves considering three areas: psychological, cognitive and socio-economic. The psychological perspective focuses on the emotional balance of individuals' internal factors and their experiences in the external environment. The cognitive perspective concerns the interpretations and constructs each person generates based on their way of conceiving the world, and on how they understand and agree with the Western sociocultural framework, which establishes how the subject should be and develop (Brito et al., 2022). In socio-economic terms, wellbeing is conceived according to the social and cultural matrix of each society. In this perspective, studies by Casanova and González (2016) and Ruggeri et al. (2020) argue that in order to achieve high levels of wellbeing, it is necessary to ensure that individuals have a positive perception of their life development, which is related to satisfaction with their productivity and access to greater economic resources, access to health, education and higher levels of achievement reflected in social mobility, aspects that come into tension during the boarding experience.

## Methodology

The question guiding this research is: How do positive and limiting experiences related to wellbeing within boarding schools shape and influence the educational trajectories of indigenous students in La Araucanía, Chile?

The research was grounded in the phenomenological paradigm, with the aim of understanding the lived experiences of indigenous young people who completed their primary and/or secondary education at boarding schools. In this way, their voices are used to understand and explain their objective accounts and experiences, which allows for the study of the structures that receive and shape subjective experience (Fortin & Gagnon, 2016). In line with the above, the study takes a descriptive qualitative approach, which allowed us to describe social phenomena by considering the subjective meanings and understandings of the context from the voices of participants who have experienced their academic path in boarding schools.

The study is set in the Araucanía region, located in southern Chile. This region is notable for its high levels of social inequality and multidimensional poverty (CASEN, 2023), with a vast percentage of the population being indigenous and living in rural areas (INE, 2024). It is also the region with the highest number of boarding schools in the country (59) with the primary focus of providing continued education to students from rural and hard-to-reach areas. Thus, La Araucanía has low levels of human development and high school dropout rates, which position boarding schools as a key tool for educational inclusion. The participants in the research were eight former boarding school students. The study sample is non-probabilistic and intentional. Participants were recruited via the snowball sampling method, that is, a process in which one participant recommended another participant to us. The inclusion criteria for participants considered for this study are: 1) Being indigenous and/or rural higher education students who have attended boarding schools at either the primary or secondary level; 2) being over 18 years of age, and 3) voluntarily agreeing to participate in the study.

**Table 1. Characterisation of Participants**

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Sociocultural background</b>	<b>Years in boarding</b>	<b>Boarding school management</b>
Female 1	22	Farmer	12	Municipal
Female 2	22	Indigenous	10	Municipal
Female 3	21	Indigenous	12	Municipal
Female 4	22	Farmer	12	Municipal
Male 1	22	Indigenous	10	Municipal
Male 2	21	Indigenous	10	Semi-private
Male 3	20	Indigenous	12	Semi-private
Male 4	20	Indigenous	12	Municipal

Source: Created by the authors

Findings were gathered through semi-structured interviews that focused on boarding school experiences they consider to have had a significant influence on their development throughout their life cycle (Fortin & Gagnon, 2016). The information analysis technique used was reflective thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2023), which allows qualitative data to be analysed, identifying patterns and their meanings in order to inform the various research topics. Operationally, this involved six phases: 1) A thorough familiarisation process was carried out with the information collected, which involved multiple readings, the preparation of analytical notes and a reflective record of the initial impressions of each participant's account. 2) Initial codes were generated, identifying segments of meaning relevant to the research question and recognising both semantic and latent levels around the actual school trajectories experienced by indigenous and rural students in boarding schools. 3) The codes were grouped into emerging themes, developing conceptual maps and preliminary narratives that organised the patterns of meaning. In this way, the positive factors and the factors that limit school trajectories in these educational spaces emerged; 4) The themes were reviewed, evaluating the internal coherence of each theme and its consistency with the corpus as a whole, which led to the redefinition, merging or discarding of some of them; 5) Themes were defined and named based on actual school trajectories, specifying the central concept of each one, its limits and sub-themes, and selecting illustrative excerpts; and 6) The analysis was drafted, articulating the topics as interpretative narratives, supported by empirical evidence and the researcher's explicit reflective position, ensuring epistemological coherence and methodological transparency.

The study complied with the ethical criteria set by Singapore regulations and was approved by the Ethics Committee of the research team's institution.

## Results

The research results emerge from a reflective thematic analysis of the participants' testimonies, which allows us to answer the research question: How do positive and limiting experiences related to wellbeing within boarding schools shape and influence the educational trajectories of indigenous students in La Araucanía, Chile? From this analysis, one central category and two subcategories emerge, which are presented in table 2.

**Table 2. Central Theme, Actual Experiences of School Life in Boarding Schools**

Subtheme	Recurrence	%
Positive factors	144	77%
Limiting factors	44	23%
Total	188	100%

Source: Created by the authors.

### **Positive Experiences in Boarding Schools**

The sub-theme entitled 'positive factors in boarding school education' refers to the elements and experiences that have a favourable impact on the academic performance of boarding school students. This involves understanding the specific journey experienced within the education system, with its progress, difficulties and achievements. This translates into greater opportunities for educational continuity and a positive impact on the actual academic trajectory of resident students. This sub-theme consists of eight codes, presented in Table 3.

**Table 3. Positive Factors of Studying in a Boarding School**

Code	Frequency	%
Coexistence	33	23%
Friendship	25	17%
Independence	24	17%
Adaptation	17	12%
Support network	16	11%
Companionship	16	11%
Time management	9	6%
Conflict resolution skills	4	3%
Total	144	100%

Source: Created by the authors.

**Coexistence.** This refers to the coexistence established by students in boarding schools with peers of the same age group and with education professionals who share the same educational space. Thus, in this educational space, social relationships based on respect and collaboration between peers are built. One participant notes: *"You have to learn to live with people who come from different places, because we are taught different things from one home to another. You have to learn to live with different people, different ways of thinking and different tastes"* (FS3;01:44). These words provide insight into a key aspect of boarding school life associated with the daily coexistence of students from diverse backgrounds. This diversity is expressed on multiple levels (territorial, familial, cultural, ethnic, social, and attitudinal) and poses challenges in building bonds and relationships within the school-residential space. In this way, the boarding school functions not only as a place of residence, but also as an educational space in itself, where students develop learning skills for their actual school trajectory.

**Friendship.** 'Friendship' refers to the emotional bonds that develop between children and young people at boarding school as a result of living together in the same educational environment for some time. Friendships are formed among a group of individuals with whom one "gets on well" and spends time sharing similar tastes and interests. In this context, one participant states: *"Friendships, skills learned such as managing schedules, personal hygiene, habits, problem solving and forming bonds, as I currently live with my boarding school classmates, which is nice because it feels like family"* (MS1;01:09). This quote shows how the boarding school experience goes beyond the academic, becoming a space for comprehensive education. This is because the students' voices highlight the formation of meaningful friendships, which not only fulfil an emotional function but also structure their daily lives, positively influencing their actual school careers. In addition, the account highlights the development of practical skills essential for independent living, such as time management, personal hygiene, habit formation, and problem-solving.

**Independence.** Independence corresponds to the ability that boarding students achieve to make decisions in complex situations in everyday life, reflected in the extent to which subjects can make decisions for themselves without depending on others. As one participant stated:

*My experience was good; thanks to that, today I consider myself an independent person, I managed to study on my own, do my own things, control my emotions, because you are there with your fellow students, but it's not your family, so it was a good experience that helped me grow, so to speak (FS4;01:40).*

The student refers to her experience, specifically emphasising that she had to learn to be independent, which also helped her to control her emotions. In this way, in general, the students recognise the independence they have acquired as a key element of boarding school, as they were forced to depend on themselves, both in carrying out their chores and studies and in fulfilling their daily responsibilities to avoid complaints and/or punishments.

**Adaptation.** Adaptation refers to one's ability to adjust to new experiences or adversities that arise during the course of their life. One participant states: *"Well, the issue of adaptation, moving from my home to another, clearly allowed me to adapt better, just like here (Temuco), moving from my home to another city, so it was like it allowed me to be more 'independent'"* (FS1;01:09).

Adaptation processes involved students, leaving their homes overnight and settling into a boarding school, sharing their daily lives with strangers for the four years of secondary school. The testimonies reveal that moving from a family environment to a shared space (where students live, study, eat, and build collective routines) required a profound personal transformation, in which they had to develop autonomy, social skills, and coping mechanisms to integrate into this new context.

**Supported Network.** Regarding 'support network' participants generally highlighted meaningful interpersonal relationships, where one person can count on another who is genuinely interested in their overall wellbeing, as factors that facilitate the development of their actual trajectory, since these are bonds characterised by support and containment in different dimensions of life, whether academic, emotional, social or psychological. One participant expresses:

*I feel that it was enriching to be able to share and learn about many people's experiences, as well as to form bonds and ties that remain to this day. So, I think that was something that the boarding school gave me: friends that I still have today. It's something I value greatly about the boarding school. (FS3; 01:21).*

These words highlight the importance of developing meaningful relationships in students' personal lives, especially in a boarding school setting. In this environment, relationships of camaraderie and friendship not only fulfil an emotional function, but also become fundamental forms of support that make the actual school experience more bearable and positive.

**Companionship.** Companionship refers to people accompanying and supporting each other. In this sense, one participant expresses: *"I also focused on the emotional aspect because, although being with other people helped me feel better and feel accompanied, when they were not present, their absence was clearly noticeable and that also made me feel more alone"* (MS1;01:25). These words clearly reveal the centrality of the emotional dimension in the boarding school experience. The student highlights how the presence of others plays a restorative role, generating feelings of companionship, support and wellbeing. However, this also highlights the other side of this emotional bond, referring to the intensity of absence when these ties are not available. From a critical perspective, this account allows us to reflect on the fragility of certain emotional supports in contexts where interpersonal relationships become essential for sustaining daily life. Emotional dependence on frequent peer bonds in boarding school contexts can function as an adaptive strategy in the face of uprooting from home, but it can also expose students to states of vulnerability when those bonds fail. From this perspective, the oscillation between feeling accompanied and feeling alone reflects an ambivalent experience, in which boarding school can be both a place of emotional care and a place of profound loneliness.

**Time management.** This refers to how a person uses their time to achieve goals, whether short-term or long-term. One participant said: *"You learn to manage your time better and it becomes a routine so that you can study and achieve the right balance"* (FS4; 01:22). This statement underscores a central theme in the experience of students in boarding school contexts: the development of autonomy and self-regulation. The participant reveals a practical and personal learning process, where students, in an environment of relative independence, are forced to organise their time efficiently to meet academic demands. From this perspective, it is possible to infer that routine, far from being seen as an imposition, is a life tool that allows students to maintain their study times, organise their daily lives and achieve their academic goals. From a reflective point of view, this shows how boarding schools not only act as a physical place of residence but also as a formative environment that promotes the acquisition of key skills for academic and future life.

**Conflict Resolution.** This theme concerns young boarders identifying a problem, taking logical steps to find desired solutions, monitoring and evaluating their implementation. In this regard, one participant states: *"It taught me that problems should be discussed with others in order to get another point of view and not just my own, so that I could talk about the situation that was happening"* (MS2;01:19). This account demonstrates a fundamental socio-emotional learning associated with the importance of dialogue and openness to other perspectives as a tool for dealing with problems. Thus, the participant recognises that, in the context of boarding school, they learned not to face difficulties in isolation, but to seek support from others, valuing interpersonal communication to better understand the situations they experienced.

### **Limiting Factors in Trajectories at Boarding Schools**

The sub-theme of factors limiting actual academic performance at boarding schools refers to the conditions, unmet needs and adverse experiences students face during their schooling that negatively impact their educational journey. These factors can manifest themselves in emotional deprivation and lack of support, difficulties in adapting to the boarding school regime, feelings of

isolation or uprootedness, as well as experiences of inappropriate treatment or excessively rigid discipline, among others. These elements act as barriers that restrict opportunities for comprehensive development and can impact the permanence, performance and projection of the actual educational trajectory of young boarders. This subcategory is made up of the following codes (see Table 4).

**Table 4. Limiting Factors in the Trajectory at Boarding Schools**

Category	Frequency	%
Need of emotional support	14	32%
Need of psychological help	9	20%
Lack of recreational activities	5	11%
Behaviour issues	4	9%
Violence	4	9%
Restricted outings	3	7%
Bullying	3	7%
Lack of recreational spaces	2	5%
Total	44	100%

Source: Created by the authors.

**Emotional Support.** Emotional support refers to the search for comfort, affection and companionship from someone who cannot find a trusted figure with whom to share their feelings. This need arises when there is no support network, whether it be a significant adult, a peer or a close authority figure who can provide security, understanding and emotional closeness. This can intensify in vulnerable contexts, such as life in boarding schools, thus affecting the psychological wellbeing and personal development of the individual. A female participant expresses:

*I feel that there wasn't much attention emotionally, because in this case the teachers were the authority figures we had. I don't know if they understood how we felt, but they didn't show much empathy either. I never felt confident enough to go to a teacher and say, 'You know, I'm sad' or 'I feel bad' or things like that (FS3; 01:26).*

This account highlights a structural lack of emotional support in the boarding school context. The student expresses how difficult it is to be understood or supported by those in positions of authority. In this case, she is referring to the staff, which suggests an emotional distance between the adult caregivers and the girls in their care. Despite these adults being responsible for accompanying them in their daily lives, they failed to create a safe space for listening and developing emotional trust. The account reveals the absence of bonds of trust, the need for emotional support, and the inadequacy of emotional accompaniment in institutional contexts. This reality in boarding schools raises questions about the type of training, role, and emotional presence of the adults responsible for student residential institutions. When adult figures are not emotionally accessible or unwilling to validate students' feelings, a logic of distance, silence, and repressed restraint takes hold.

**Psychological Support Needs.** This theme refers to the lack of specialised professional mental health care for people experiencing emotional distress, anxiety, stress or other internal

conflicts that affect their wellbeing and daily functioning. This need becomes evident when there is no access to psychologists or other professionals trained to provide support, guidance and appropriate treatment. In boarding schools, this absence can have a negative impact on students' academic performance, mental health and overall development, especially in times of crisis or emotional vulnerability. One participant mentions that: *"There should be an adult to whom you can talk, someone who is there and can help. They should be a professional, because the staff sees things differently or calls the parents"* (MS1;01:17). These accounts express the lack of an adult or professional to turn to when facing personal problems, someone with whom to express oneself and confide.

**Lack of Recreational Activities.** This theme refers to the absence or scarcity of opportunities to participate in activities essential to people's physical and mental wellbeing, such as dancing, sports, and theatre. For example, one participant states:

*I feel like that's missing, given that you spend many hours at boarding school, all week long, and I think there were times when there was space to do that, and yet, at most, I think they sometimes did recreational workshops, for leisure, but I think it was only once that I heard that they did that"* (MS3;01:11).

This participant highlights the lack of extracurricular and sporting activities. The lack of recreational activities prevents boarding school students from taking breaks from their academic work and from discovering their skills and interests.

**Behavioural Problems.** In relation to 'behavioural problems', these refer to behaviours expressed by a cruel or aggressive individual towards another, whether to intimidate or fight. In this perspective, one participant states:

*When I had problems with theft, I would resort to a more stern, firm and confident tone, as I wasn't going to blame someone for no reason. I've even come to blows when someone stole my chip and memory card; after he left, I found him. I spoke to him calmly, and when he denied it, I hit him"* (MS1;01:14).

These words reveal a particular way of managing conflicts in the boarding school context, where physical violence appears as a reaction to situations of injustice, in this case, theft. The student begins by stating his intention to act firmly and without making unfounded accusations, which shows a sense of personal justice; however, the conflict quickly escalates into physical aggression when he does not receive a satisfactory response. The account highlights the absence of effective institutional channels for conflict resolution and the lack of adult mediation or emotional support in volatile situations.

**Violence.** The issue of 'violence' refers to the manifestation of conflict or confrontation between individuals characterised by aggressive and harmful behaviour, whether physical, verbal or psychological. This situation involves disputes that are difficult to resolve peacefully and, in many cases, can escalate to the use of physical force and violence. Violence not only affects the people directly involved but also has a negative impact on the social and emotional environment in which it occurs. In this regard, one participant states: *"Fights, problems with drugs and their consumption, just marijuana, no other drugs. Problems with theft from lockers; if the padlock was left open, they would steal from it and immediately get into a fight with punches and kicks"* (MS1;01:10). The account reveals a conflictive context within the boarding school, where fights and drug use, specifically marijuana, emerge as recurring problems that affect the coexistence and safety of the students. The mention

of thefts from lockers, especially when they are left unlocked, reveals a dynamic of mistrust and vulnerability in the young people's personal space. Furthermore, the rapid escalation of conflicts into physical violence highlights the absence of effective mechanisms for peaceful conflict resolution.

**Restricted Outings.** The issue refers to a person allowed a certain number of hours each day to run errands or leave the boarding school for a short period. One participant said:

*The boarding school is well equipped, but it would have helped me to have more freedom, like more hours. They only gave me one hour to go shopping for things that were far away. They gave us limited hours and then took that away (MS1; 01:23).*

It is possible to see that the boarding school system has inherent contradictions. Participants recognise that being 'well equipped' ensures basic conditions such as beds, hot water, and adequate spaces for sleeping and eating, elements that make up an infrastructure that facilitates their stay. However, it is a space that does not necessarily promote the development of socio-emotional skills such as emotional self-regulation, empathy, social awareness and conflict resolution in young people in boarding school contexts. In this way, boarding schools tend to be contexts that do not fully guarantee dialogue, support or social justice, as their emphasis is more on regulating and disciplining young people's behaviour, in accordance with rules established unilaterally.

**Bullying.** Bullying refers to intimidation or harassment by one or more individuals from a specific group, whether verbally or physically. One participant stated:

*There were times when I was at boarding school and I received quite offensive comments from other girls there, and as I was quite shy, I didn't know how to deal with the situation, so it ended up being quite a painful experience (FS1; 01:13).*

This account reveals experiences of verbal harassment and emotional abuse within the boarding school, which had a negative impact on the student's personal experience. Her shyness and difficulty in addressing these offensive comments placed her in a vulnerable position, intensifying her suffering and isolation.

## Discussion and Conclusions

Chilean rural boarding schools prioritise academics over socio-emotional and cultural wellbeing. For Indigenous and rural students, this can weaken connections to family, community, and cultural identity, affecting both belonging and holistic development. In this context, boarding schools risk undermining both cultural continuity and the holistic development of students, despite their stated educational aims.

International research on boarding schools shows a common tension between academic performance and holistic student development, especially for vulnerable populations. Our findings align with this pattern but highlight a distinctive Chilean context: in rural boarding schools serving Indigenous and geographically isolated students, the emphasis on academics intersects with broader territorial, cultural, and historical inequalities. Here, students' daily lives, relationships, and cultural continuity are largely mediated by the institution, magnifying the effects of a narrow academic focus on their wellbeing.

According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2024), comprehensive education involves the development of (a) know-how (participating productively in group interactions), (b) knowing how to learn (cognitive development), (c) knowing how to be (emotional, affective, and spiritual growth), and (d) knowing how to live together (collective responsibility and socio-emotional skills). Our findings show that, in the Chilean boarding school context, “knowing how to learn” tends to dominate institutional practice, while the remaining dimensions are weakly institutionalised. From the perspective of subjective wellbeing theory, this imbalance is problematic because wellbeing includes not only cognitive achievement but also positive emotions, life satisfaction, meaning, and belonging. What is new in our study is the empirical demonstration that, in Chilean rural boarding schools, academic progression may coexist with fragile experiences of belonging and limited socio-emotional support, producing a disjunction between formal success and lived wellbeing.

However, the boarding modality introduces a crucial difference: whereas day schools concentrate primarily on instructional time, boarding schools regulate students’ extended daily lives, including care, coexistence, and affective routines. Therefore, when socio-emotional and relational dimensions are underdeveloped in boarding contexts, the effects are not confined to classroom experience but permeate the entirety of students’ everyday life. This constitutes a specific contribution of our study: it shows how a system-wide academic orientation acquires deeper consequences in residential settings, where the institution assumes partial responsibility for students’ comprehensive development.

While policy discourse promotes comprehensive and balanced development, participants’ accounts reveal that institutional practice narrows this vision, privileging academic performance as the primary indicator of success. Our contribution lies in evidencing how this narrowing operates in boarding schools and how it shapes students’ subjective assessment of their own trajectories. Academic advancement does not necessarily translate into enhanced subjective wellbeing when experiences of recognition, cultural affirmation, and meaningful relationships are insufficiently supported. While our findings resonate with international and national evidence regarding the predominance of academic logics, they extend this knowledge by illuminating how such logics function within Chilean rural boarding schools. The study fills a gap by showing that in residential educational settings serving rural and indigenous populations, the prioritisation of academic achievement not only limits comprehensive education but also reconfigures students’ lived trajectories as formally successful yet affectively and relationally constrained. This distinction clarifies the specific contribution of the Chilean case to broader debates on boarding education and subjective wellbeing.

From this perspective, subjective wellbeing (understood as the cognitive and affective evaluation that people make of their own lives) is strained when actual school trajectories do not favour positive emotional experiences, a sense of life satisfaction, or meaningful connections. The absence of spaces that promote pleasant emotions, meaningful participation, and recognition of subjective needs limits the possibility of students feeling satisfied with their educational experience, reducing the truly comprehensive nature of the education that the system declares as its goal. Boarding schools continue to prioritise academic and social development while largely neglecting students’ emotional, ethical, and personal growth. There is also a complete lack of socioculturally relevant education, despite most students being of Indigenous descent.

Although boarding schools provide basic material needs—food, shelter, study schedules, and coexistence—they fail to meet students' emotional needs or offer culturally relevant psychosocial support. This shortfall affects personal maturity and educational continuity. Our findings show that, despite these resources, students often experience loneliness, insufficient support, and a lack of professional guidance, undermining their ability to cope. From a subjective wellbeing perspective, material provision alone does not ensure wellbeing, as negative emotions directly reduce life satisfaction and hinder adaptation to boarding life.

From this sense, psycho-emotional wellbeing emerges as a critical dimension insufficiently addressed within boarding school trajectories. Drawing on Ryff's (1989) model of wellbeing and Ryan and Deci's (2000) account of emotional needs, autonomy, affection, recognition, and emotional security are central to holistic development. However, participants reported limited trust in school authorities and, in the absence of friendship networks or family support, experienced profound feelings of isolation. As Sánchez and Escobedo (2019) argue, the absence of psychological care in educational settings fragments support, leaving students vulnerable to bias and disruption in their educational trajectories. Consequently, the lack of emotional support in boarding schools affects not only students' immediate wellbeing but also the sustainability and success of their academic trajectories.

The progress and challenges of boarding schools must be considered through a comprehensive educational lens. Rural students often face cultural and emotional dislocation when moving to urban contexts, highlighting the need for stronger inclusion and support. While boarding schools ensure educational continuity, they struggle to foster psycho-emotional wellbeing and adequately prepare students for life beyond school. Addressing these gaps is essential for boarding schools to serve as spaces that support holistic, inclusive, and sustainable educational trajectories.

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