Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies
2026, Vol.13, No. 5, 68-84
http://dx.doi.org/ 10.66815/ejecs/2709
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ISSN: 2149-1291

Boarding Schools: A Critical Perspective from Mapuche Students In La Araucanía, Chile

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Abstract: This article presents research findings on boarding schools in indigenous settings from the critical perspective of Mapuche students who lived in these educational spaces during their schooling, whether in primary and/or secondary education. The problem addressed relates to the lack of visibility given to these educational settings, which contribute to providing accommodation for students living in geographically isolated areas, without which their educational trajectory would be hindered. The methodology is qualitative with a descriptive exploratory scope, involving nine Mapuche students from La Araucanía, Chile. The main results allow us to argue that boarding schools are key to educational continuity, offering learning opportunities in autonomy, coexistence, and meaningful bonds between students. However, they also constitute spaces that deny indigenous sociocultural identity, limiting its revitalization and contributing to the discontinuity of Mapuche family education. The main conclusions allow us to argue that boarding schools also constitute spaces that reproduce structural inequalities and implicit violence towards the indigenous and peasant children who attend them. This ambivalence requires us to rethink boarding schools from a perspective of social and emotional justice and sociocultural relevance, promoting intercultural spaces that respect the diversity and well-being of students from their own epistemic frameworks.
Keywords: boarding schools, indigenous peoples, public education.

Since the colonial formation of modern schooling systems in the Americas, boarding schools have been widely analyzed as institutional dispositifs through which colonial power has been exercised over Indigenous and rural populations (Arias-Ortega et al., 2026b; Dion et al., 2016; Parsons, 2019). From a Foucaultian perspective, these institutions function as disciplinary technologies embedded in regimes of surveillance, normalization, and subjectification, producing individuals in accordance with dominant configurations of power/knowledge (Del Pino et al., 2026; Foucault, 2013; Nganga et al., 2025; Quijano, 2019). Contemporary scholarship shows that these logics persist in current schooling systems through curricular, pedagogical, and institutional practices that continue to regulate Indigenous

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identities and marginalize Indigenous epistemologies within settler-colonial contexts (Cummins & Chang, 2020; Muñoz et al., 2026; Villarroel et al., 2026).

Complementing this perspective, decolonial approaches conceptualize these dynamics as expressions of the coloniality of power, in which Eurocentric epistemologies are naturalized as universal while Indigenous ways of knowing are systematically marginalized or rendered invisible (Walsh, 2025; Quijano, 2019). Recent empirical studies in Indigenous and intercultural education further indicate that, although schooling continues to reproduce epistemic hierarchies, these structures are also increasingly contested through Indigenous pedagogical resurgence and curricular reconfiguration (Arias-Ortega et al., 2026c; Heyeres et al., 2019; Li & Dayimu, 2025; Muñoz et al., 2026). From this standpoint, boarding schools and residential educational spaces cannot be understood solely as historical formations, but rather as evolving institutional assemblages in which colonial and decolonial logics coexist and are continuously negotiated.

Within this critical tradition, boarding schools are further characterized as sites where epistemic violence and cultural dispossession have historically taken place, expressed through emotional deprivation, physical coercion, and symbolic domination that have contributed to the erosion of Indigenous languages, relational ontologies, and intergenerational modes of education (Benveniste et al., 2015; Finnan, 2022; Lloyd, 2020; Arias-Ortega et al., 2026a). For example, in India, Australia, the United States, Canada, Mexico, Bolivia, Argentina, and Chile, boarding schools for indigenous and peasant populations have been characterized by the systematic pursuit of their cultural assimilation into “white” society based on learning the hegemonic interests, norms, and social values through cultural genocide (Benveniste et al., 2015; Milne & Wotherspoon, 2023; Molina, 2022). Cultural genocide is understood as an intentional and institutionalized process that explicitly seeks to destroy the cultural and spiritual heritage of indigenous and peasant peoples, such as their ways of life and questioning of their own frames of reference, removing their epistemic validity and denying their worldview and cosmogony (Arias-Ortega et al., 2026a; Bachman, 2019; Bousquet, 2016; McCalman et al., 2020). This occurs under the supremacy of "white thinking" in all forms of control, such as subjectivity, culture, and knowledge production, in which their identity and sociocultural well-being are undermined (Commission de Vérité et Réconciliation du Canada [CVR], 2015; Del Pino et al., 2026; Quijano, 2019), with the aim of forcibly incorporating indigenous children into the hegemonic and dominant society. Policy-oriented scholarship, particularly through the concept of cultural genocide, underscores how these processes have been institutionally sustained through state and church alliances aimed at assimilating Indigenous populations into dominant national imaginaries (Bachman, 2019; Bousquet, 2016; CVR, 2015).

Rather than remaining static historical artifacts, boarding schools must therefore be understood as evolving configurations of power that are continually reconfigured across contexts. In Chile, recent institutional changes suggest a transformation in their formal function: contemporary boarding schools increasingly operate less as spaces of instruction and more as residential support infrastructures providing accommodation, care, and logistical assistance for students attending external schools (Del Pino et al., 2026). However, from a governmentality perspective, this shift does not represent a rupture with disciplinary rationalities, but rather their rearticulation through more diffuse and decentralized forms of regulation embedded in everyday educational life.

Despite this growing body of critical scholarship, important empirical and theoretical gaps remain. First, much of the existing literature continues to privilege historical analyses and macro-level policy critique, with limited attention to the micro-level production of subjectivity within contemporary boarding school settings. Second, Indigenous students’ situated perspectives—particularly in the Mapuche context—remain underexplored, especially

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ISSN: 2149-1291

regarding how they experience, interpret, and negotiate these institutional spaces in their everyday educational trajectories. This gap constrains a fuller understanding of how colonial and postcolonial educational logics are lived, embodied, and potentially contested in contemporary contexts. Addressing this gap, this study adopts a Foucauldian–decolonial framework to examine boarding schools as situated dispositifs of power within the Mapuche Indigenous context.

The guiding research question is: What are the challenges of boarding schools in the Mapuche Indigenous context, as experienced and interpreted by students who have lived in these spaces during their schooling trajectories? The objective of the article is to produce a situated analysis of these challenges by centering student narratives, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of how coloniality of schooling is reproduced and/or reconfigured in contemporary residential educational arrangements.

This study contributes to the literature in three ways. First, it empirically foregrounds Indigenous student voice in a domain dominated by institutional and policy-centered analyses. Second, it extends Foucauldian analyses of disciplinary institutions by examining their contemporary transformation into hybrid residential-care infrastructures. Third, it advances decolonial educational scholarship by showing how coloniality persists not only through formal schooling but also through ancillary educational spaces that structure everyday life, care, and subject formation.

The Emergence of Boarding Schools in Indigenous Settings: The Mapuche Case

In Chile, particularly in Mapuche territory located in the Biobío and La Araucanía regions, boarding schools were established to serve the Mapuche population under the auspices of religious orders such as the Bavarian Capuchins, Franciscans, and Salesians, who planned a segregationist school system that separated indigenous minorities from the rest of the population and subjected them to a plan of selective acculturation (Antümilla-Pangikul, 2021; Huaiquián et al., 2018; Villarroel et al., 2026). The first boarding schools of this kind were intended only for the children of chiefs and godchildren of Spanish colonels who settled in Chillán in 1756, and another was intended only for Mapuche women in Toltén in 1877, a process that was carried out mainly by Jesuit missionaries (Noggler, 1972). Later, boarding schools were established in Mapuche territory as part of the Chilean state's pacification process in La Araucanía (Araos, 2022; Correa, 2021). As a result of the boarding schools, there has been a discontinuity in Mapuche family education regarding their own knowledge and educational expertise (Laz & Arias, 2022). According to Huaiquián and Vera (2022) and Pérez (2017), the life experiences of Mapuche children and youth in boarding schools are marked by a cultural clash between two worldviews: the Eurocentric Western perspective and the indigenous Mapuche worldview. Thus, the process of schooling was implemented through evangelization, the imposition of hygiene routines, norms, and behavioral patterns from the Eurocentric Western world, expressed in the dispossession of ancestral clothing, language, culture, and spirituality (Huaiquián & Vera, 2022; Pérez, 2017). This led to a breakdown of identity and abandonment of their own frames of reference among Mapuche children and young people, negatively affecting their well-being (Guerin & Pertl, 2017; Laz & Arias, 2022; Noggler, 1972; Villarroel et al., 2026). In this way, the persistence of behaviors acquired at the family and community level was punished and assumed to be savage. Therefore, schooling focused on teaching the dominant language and culture, training them in trades, so that when they returned to their communities, they would attest to the benefits of adopting white thinking, seeking in this way to ensure that the children and young people of the community acquired

better standards of living, eliminating the "bad" aspects of indigenous and rural life (Arias-Ortega et al., 2026b).

In Chile, boarding schools currently have different types of administration. Some are managed by the National School Assistance and Scholarship Board (JUNAEB, by its Spanish acronym), others on the Ministry of Education, and some on non-governmental organizations. In general, the purpose of boarding schools is to provide social and economic assistance to indigenous and rural students from seventh grade through high school (Junta Nacional de Auxilio Escolar y Beca [JUNAEB], 2009). Boarding schools seek to ensure the educational continuity of children and young people by providing accommodation and meals. In addition, at least according to JUNAEB, these spaces provide educational and psychosocial support and offer recreational spaces for students in specially equipped facilities (JUNAEB, 2023). However, upon reviewing the regulations and description of these educational spaces, it is clear that there are no specific guidelines on the sociocultural development of students within their own frames of reference. In this vein, there is also a lack of knowledge and understanding about boarding schools, which are educational spaces that operate in isolation and are almost invisible in society. It is therefore necessary to advance in the construction of situated knowledge that can provide evidence of how these educational spaces have been restructured and redefined as a strategy that makes it possible to reverse the educational gaps between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples, based on the experiences of those who inhabited these educational spaces during their schooling.

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative research design (Fortin, 2010) grounded in a constructivist and interpretive epistemology, with the aim of understanding how Mapuche students make meaning of their lived experiences in boarding school contexts in La Araucanía, Chile. This design is appropriate because it allows the exploration of situated, relational, and context-dependent knowledge, recognizing that social reality is co-constructed through interaction, experience, and narrative meaning-making (Archibald et al., 2019; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Escobar, 2014). From this perspective, knowledge is not treated as objective or detached, but as emerging from lived experience and sociohistorical positioning, which is particularly relevant for Indigenous educational contexts.

The study included nine Mapuche students from the La Araucanía region who had experienced boarding school life during their formal schooling. All participants were adults at the time of data collection and voluntarily agreed to participate. A purposive sampling strategy was used, selecting participants based on their relevance to the phenomenon under study, specifically: Indigenous identity (Mapuche), lived experience in boarding schools, and extended exposure to these institutional environments (Fortin, 2010). This strategy ensured information-rich cases capable of providing in-depth narratives of their educational trajectories (see table 1).

Table 1

Characterization of Participants

Students	Sex	Years in boarding school	Levels of education
Student 1	Female	9 years	Primary and secondary
Student 2	Female	9 years	Primary and secondary
Student 3	Female	9 years	Primary and secondary
Student 4	Male	9 years	Primary and secondary
Student 5	Male	4 years	Secondary

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http://dx.doi.org/ 10.66815/ejecs/2709
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ISSN: 2149-1291

Table 1
Continued

Student 6	Male	9 years	Primary and secondary
Student 7	Female	4 years	Secondary
Student 8	Male	9 years	Primary and secondary
Student 9	Female	4 years	Secondary

Data were collected through in-depth narrative interviews focused on participants' lived experiences in boarding schools (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Narrative inquiry was selected because it enables participants to construct and communicate meaning through storytelling, allowing access to how experiences are interpreted, organized, and embedded within sociocultural and historical contexts. This approach is particularly relevant for examining power relations, identity formation, and institutional experiences in Indigenous educational settings. All interviews were audio-visually recorded with participant consent and later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2023), supported by Atlas.ti 9.0 software. Reflexive thematic analysis was selected because it allows for a systematic yet interpretive identification of patterns of meaning across qualitative datasets, while acknowledging the active role of researchers in knowledge construction. The analytical process followed six iterative phases:

1) Familiarization with the data: All researchers conducted repeated readings of transcripts to gain an overall understanding of the narratives
2) Initial noting and memo writing: Preliminary analytical memos were produced to document emerging meanings related to boarding school experiences
3) Initial coding: Meaningful segments of text were systematically coded, focusing on experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of boarding school life
4) Code refinement and codebook development: Codes were compared, discussed, and organized into a structured codebook containing definitions and illustrative excerpts
5) Theme generation: Codes were clustered into broader analytical themes capturing patterns across participants' narratives
6) Review and refinement of themes: Themes were reviewed iteratively to ensure coherence, internal consistency, and relevance to the research question.

The entire process was iterative and dialogical, involving continuous comparison among researchers to enhance analytical rigor. To ensure methodological rigor, the study followed established criteria for qualitative quality: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Credibility was enhanced through collaborative coding and iterative discussion among researchers. Dependability was ensured through transparent documentation of the analytical process using Atlas.ti. Confirmability was supported by maintaining an audit trail of coding decisions and reflexive memos. Transferability was addressed by providing rich contextual descriptions of participants and their educational trajectories, allowing readers to assess relevance to other Indigenous or residential schooling contexts.

In line with qualitative methodology, the study does not aim for statistical generalization. Instead, it seeks analytical and theoretical transferability, offering conceptual insights that may inform understanding of similar boarding school contexts in Indigenous and

settler-colonial settings. The value of the findings lies in their capacity to generate interpretive depth and contribute to theoretical debates on schooling, coloniality, and Indigenous student experience. Ethical procedures included informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and data protection in accordance with the Singapore Declaration. The study was approved by the ethics committee of the researchers' institution. The study has been approved by the Ethics Committee of the Catholic University of Temuco, Document Code: CEIUCT04120010/24.

Results

The reflective thematic analysis generated seven central themes that articulate the lived experiences of participants in boarding school contexts. These themes emerged through an iterative analytical process consistent with Braun and Clarke's (2023) framework, as detailed in the methodology section, and reflect recurring patterns of meaning across participants' narratives.

The first theme, well-being and personal development, captures participants' perceptions of emotional, psychological, and identity-related growth within boarding schools, highlighting tensions between autonomy development and institutional constraints. The second theme, *family and emotional bonds*, refers to the construction, disruption, or absence of affective relationships, emphasizing the role of peer and institutional interactions in shaping emotional well-being. The third theme, *violence, harm, and punitive practices*, reflects narratives describing disciplinary mechanisms, symbolic violence, and their emotional and psychological impacts. The fourth theme, *living conditions and material environment*, addresses the material, economic, and infrastructural conditions that structure daily life and shape students' lived experiences within boarding institutions. The fifth theme, *education, inequality, and social mobility*, captures how participants interpret their educational trajectories in relation to broader processes of social stratification, opportunity, and reproduction of inequality. The sixth theme, *sociocultural and community context*, highlights the role of cultural belonging, social relations, and Mapuche identity in shaping inclusion, recognition, and educational experience. Finally, the seventh theme, *conflict and social control*, refers to the forms of discipline, regulation, and conflict management that structure coexistence within boarding school environments and influence interpersonal dynamics among students and institutional actors. These themes illustrate the multidimensional nature of boarding school experiences, encompassing emotional, material, relational, and structural dimensions of student life. Table 2 presents the distribution of themes, including the number of subthemes identified and their relative frequency within the dataset.

Table 2

Thematic Categories

Thematic category	**Subtopics**	**Percentages**
Well-being and Personal Development	12	21%
Family and Affective Bonds	11	19%
Violence, Harm, and Punitive Practices	10	17%
Living Conditions and Environment	9	16%
Sociocultural and Community Context	7	12%
Education, Inequality, and Social Mobility	6	10%
Conflict and Social Control	3	5%
Total	**58**	**100%**

Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies
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http://dx.doi.org/ 10.66815/ejecs/2709
Copyright 2026
ISSN: 2149-1291

The reflexive thematic analysis identified seven interrelated themes that structure participants' narratives of boarding school life. These themes reflect recurring patterns of meaning across emotional, relational, material, sociocultural, and institutional dimensions of experience.

Well-being and Personal Development

Regarding the Well-being and Personal Development thematic category, it is composed of 12 subthemes (codes) derived from a systematic analytical process (Step 1–Step 4), which included initial open coding, axial grouping, refinement of conceptual categories, and interpretive synthesis. These subthemes capture students' internal, emotional, and moral development, particularly identity construction, autonomy, self-regulation, and resilience. This category represents 21% of the recurring content in students' narratives.

Across the analytical process, autonomy emerged as a central axis of meaning construction, particularly in relation to boarding school life as a structured environment that fosters self-regulation and decision-making. Participants consistently associate this experience with personal growth and academic development. In this regard, one testimony states:

> [Boarding school helped me], I think, greater development in all areas, because when you are very attached to your parents, it is difficult to develop, because they always see you as someone small, they don't let you express yourself and develop (SF2, 2:45).

In the same line, independence is described as a learned condition rather than a gradual transition, as boarding school life accelerates responsibility-taking processes. As expressed in the following testimony:

> Thanks to boarding school, I was able to develop and become independent. It helped me get out of my parents' comfort zone. By becoming independent, I can make better decisions. My thinking grows faster. You have to be alone and do your things (SF1, 1:24).

Similarly, another participant adds:

> Boarding school helped me to be independent from a very [young] age; not being close to my family prepared me, I can be in another place on my own, I adapt to the circumstances in which I find myself (SM5, 4:22).

In addition, participants highlight that the structured environment contributes to academic organization, particularly through time management practices that persist into higher education. One testimony states that:

> Compared to other people [who were not boarders], I focused a lot on academics. I studied much more than my classmates and spent many more hours in the study room, which helped me in higher education (SF9, 134:190).

Overall, Step 1–Step 4 analysis indicates that autonomy, discipline, and self-management operate as core mechanisms through which boarding school experiences are retrospectively constructed as enabling personal and academic development.

Family and Affective Bonds

The Family and Affective Bonds category (11 subthemes, 19% of recurrence) was constructed through iterative coding and comparison of emotional narratives during Step 1–Step 4 analysis, particularly focusing on attachment, separation, and coping strategies. Findings

show that emotional distancing from family is a recurring outcome of boarding school life, often accompanied by adaptive psychological mechanisms oriented toward academic focus. One participant states:

> I became very closed off from academics; that was my defense mechanism. I tried to avoid it; to pretend I wasn't at boarding school . . . That helped me with my grades; I did well; I had habits SF9, 5:19).

At the same time, institutional caregivers emerge as substitute emotional figures, partially compensating for parental absence. One testimony states:

> The aunts [inspectors] created a bond with us; they were always present, which is incredibly valuable. Suddenly, we felt alone, and the aunts were there and advised us (SF3, 3:43).

This reconfiguration of affective ties also includes experiences of emotional asymmetry among students. Another participant explains:

> There is a strong emotional part, I had classmates who would say "my mommy is making me some delicious chips", they would come home every day (…) I never had that, it has meant not being so sensitive, being a child of rigor (SM4, 6:17).

Nevertheless, peer-based affective networks appear as a compensatory mechanism, generating emotional support structures among students. They mention:

> One of the mechanisms I was able to develop was my interpersonal relationships, by forming close and trusting friendships, they allowed me to create an emotional support network, which helped me feel accompanied, share my worries and express my emotions (SF7, 5:12).

Violence, Harm, and Punishment

This category (10 subthemes, 17%) emerges from Step 1–Step 4 coding cycles focused on institutional power relations, disciplinary practices, and subjective experiences of harm. Participants report both peer-based and institutional forms of psychological harm. One testimony states:

> I was not cared for, either mentally or physically. The comments made by this group of girls were directed at my physical appearance, and that greatly affected my mental health. The way they [the boarding school staff] handled the situation was not appropriate (SF9, 5:179).

Disciplinary practices appear as structured mechanisms of control embedded in everyday institutional life. One participant states:

> At that boarding school, they demanded good grades. If you got a failing grade in the semester, you couldn't use the ping pong table . . . When the boarding school director found out about our grades, she kept us locked up studying all afternoon. If you misbehaved or made a mess in the dormitories, they made us copy “I must not misbehave” over and over again. I ended up with about 98 pages copied from a notebook, and if you didn't have them ready by the afternoon, they gave you more the next morning . . . (SM5, 4:73).

The Step 1–Step 4 interpretive process indicates that violence is not episodic but structurally embedded, operating through symbolic, verbal, and disciplinary normalization.

Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies
2026, Vol.13, No. 5, 68-84
http://dx.doi.org/ 10.66815/ejecs/2709
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ISSN: 2149-1291

Living Conditions and Environment

This category (9 subthemes, 16%) was constructed through iterative classification of material and spatial conditions affecting daily life in boarding schools. Participants describe both enabling and limiting material conditions. One testimony notes:

> That hour [the time allotted to studying] taught us independence and how to do everything on our own. We had space to study, recreational areas, computers, a gym (SM6, 5:85).
>
> Collective living arrangements are simultaneously framed as support and constraint: It wasn't a personal room, I was with other people, but it was still a roof over my head, food, all of that was a source of well-being where we were able to stay for four or nine years and be well off, so to speak (SF7, 8:61).

Basic needs provision is also recognized as part of institutional care:

> They kept us fed and well heated so we wouldn't be numb. At the boarding school, they instilled in us the idea of believing in God and giving thanks for our food before dinner and before breakfast (SF3, 3:47).

However, infrastructural limitations remain central. One testimony notes:

> We needed a gym, because we had a court, but it wasn't covered, so when it rained, we didn't know what to do because it was the only option we had (SM8, 8:127).

Another adds:

> Improve bathrooms, more infrastructure, have a space to play, because sports allow for well-being and happiness (SM4, 4:117).

Overcrowding and lack of privacy are also emphasized:

> The room was full of bunk beds, it was a large area where there were only bunk beds and we all slept together . . . they had lockers where we kept our belongings, but there was no privacy, we were all together (SM6, 16:34).

Sociocultural and Community Context

This category (7 subthemes, 12%) reflects Step 1–Step 4 thematic grouping related to cultural recognition and institutional engagement with diversity. Findings show limited institutional integration of Indigenous and rural cultural identity. One participant states:

> As far back as I can remember, no . . .it's not like they supported cultural background" (SM4, 4:130). Institutional openness is instead more visible in religious domains: "Just as they supported the issue of religion . . . the principal of the Collipulli boarding school accompanied the students to a . . . I don't know, a [religious] service within the city of Collipulli (SM5, 5:158).

Participants nevertheless emphasize the importance of recognizing students' sociocultural trajectories:

> Knowing each student's history [their language, culture, where they come from, who they are, what they could be], makes them feel valued . . . many can also feel like. . . diminished (SM8, 8:233).

Education, Inequality, and Social Mobility

This category (6 subthemes, 10%) reflects Step 1–Step 4 interpretive coding of education as both opportunity and structural compensation. Participants frame boarding schools as mechanisms that enable educational continuity in rural contexts. One testimony states:

> I didn't have a schedule to study . . . and it's like now I have one applied . . . that helps my well-being since I know I have a certain schedule to be able to study (SF3, 3:89).

Boarding school is also described as a structural alternative to geographic exclusion:

> [Boarding school] is an opportunity, especially in rural areas, which cannot access . . . I left home when I was little . . . and I was a boarder until my senior year . . . that's what boarding school means, it means an alternative to be able to study (SM4, 120:135).

Conflict and Social Control

This category (3 subthemes, 5%) emerges from Step 1–Step 4 coding focused on governance, regulation, and disciplinary rationalities. Participants describe structured routines as formative:

> That helped me establish routines, develop study habits, manage my time better, and be responsible for my own learning . . . something that has greatly benefited me today (SM5, 16:17).

Collective labor practices are also highlighted:

> They still had to make the bed, they had to help sweep, they had to do everything . . . we all did it together, regardless of the person's age (SF2, 69:75).

However, punitive collective control is also evident:

> If a classmate stole . . . they would punish us and keep us locked in the study room . . . or if some of us arrived wasted [alcoholized], even in those days, or smelling of marijuana, they would punish us all, we all fell together (SM5, 74:68).

Finally, participants also identify spaces of adaptation and belonging within institutional structures:

> As I was saying, they apply cultural aspects or they see them, they let you do it . . . I feel that in this way it contributes to the well-being of the person . . . the boarding school helps you to integrate into that (SM8, 84:108).

Across themes, boarding school experience emerges as structurally ambivalent: it simultaneously enables educational continuity and personal development while reproducing disciplinary, emotional, and symbolic tensions within Indigenous student trajectories.

Discussion and Conclusions

The findings of this study reveal the complex and ambivalent nature of boarding school experiences among Mapuche students in southern Chile. Across the seven identified themes, boarding schools emerge simultaneously as spaces of educational opportunity, personal development, and social support, while also functioning as institutional environments marked by disciplinary regulation, emotional tensions, and limited cultural recognition. This duality is central to understanding their contemporary role in Indigenous and rural educational

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ISSN: 2149-1291

trajectories. A key finding is that boarding schools are perceived as enabling structures that support educational continuity in rural and Indigenous contexts, particularly through the development of autonomy, discipline, and study habits. This aligns with international research highlighting residential schooling as an important infrastructure for educational access in geographically and socially marginalized communities.

However, the study also demonstrates that these developmental gains are inseparable from processes of emotional separation and the reconfiguration of affective bonds. While students often describe increased independence and resilience, these outcomes are simultaneously shaped by emotional distance from family, institutional dependency, and the partial substitution of familial care with institutional relationships. This extends existing empirical literature by showing that autonomy in boarding schools is not merely an individual achievement but a relationally constructed and emotionally negotiated process. A second major finding concerns the coexistence of care and disciplinary control within boarding school environments. Although participants recognize supportive relationships with peers and staff, they also report punitive practices, collective sanctions, and symbolic forms of violence. This confirms established scholarship on schooling as a disciplinary institution, while extending it by demonstrating how such logics persist within contemporary residential arrangements that operate as hybrid care–education infrastructures rather than purely instructional spaces. A third significant finding relates to the limited institutional recognition of Indigenous sociocultural identity. The absence of structured intercultural practices contrasts with the presence of dominant religious frameworks, suggesting selective and asymmetrical forms of cultural recognition. This provides further empirical evidence for ongoing debates on intercultural education in Latin America and other settler-colonial contexts.

From a theoretical standpoint, the findings both confirm and extend existing conceptual frameworks. First, they confirm Foucauldian analyses of schooling as a disciplinary dispositif operating through surveillance, normalization, and subjectification (Foucault, 2013). The presence of structured routines, collective punishment, and behavioral regulation illustrates the continued relevance of disciplinary power in residential educational settings. Second, the study extends decolonial theory by showing that coloniality is not only reproduced through formal curricula but also through everyday residential life, including spatial organization, affective relations, and mechanisms of cultural recognition and exclusion. Boarding schools thus function as contemporary sites where colonial and decolonial logics coexist and are continuously negotiated. Third, the findings challenge overly deterministic interpretations of schooling as exclusively oppressive by revealing spaces of agency, adaptation, and relational care. Participants describe meaningful peer relationships and supportive interactions with institutional actors, suggesting that boarding school life is also shaped by practices of solidarity and emotional reciprocity. This complexity resists binary interpretations of boarding schools as either emancipatory or oppressive. From the perspective of subjective well-being theory (Ruggeri et al., 2020; Sikarwar, 2026), the findings support the view that boarding schools contribute to dimensions such as autonomy, personal growth, and environmental mastery. However, these dimensions are deeply embedded in structural constraints and relational asymmetries, particularly in Indigenous contexts where well-being is socially and culturally situated.

Given the international readership, these findings make a substantive contribution to the global literature on boarding and residential schooling by providing empirically grounded insights from a Latin American Indigenous context that remains underrepresented in comparative education research. In North America (United States and Canada), the study contributes to ongoing debates on residential schooling, Indigenous reconciliation, and the intergenerational impacts of institutional education on identity, emotional well-being, and

cultural continuity. In Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand, it speaks directly to discussions on boarding education for Aboriginal and Māori students, particularly in relation to cultural safety, identity preservation, and institutional care within historically colonial education systems. In Europe, where boarding schools are often associated with elite education or rural access, the findings offer a critical counterpoint by showing how residential schooling can also operate as a mechanism of social reproduction, emotional dislocation, and cultural marginalization.

Across these contexts, the study advances international scholarship by reframing boarding schools not merely as educational infrastructures, but as complex socio-emotional and cultural environments that actively shape identity formation, belonging, inequality, and well-being. This reconceptualization contributes to a broader comparative understanding of residential education within diverse historical and geopolitical configurations of schooling and power. In this sense, the findings suggest that improving boarding school systems requires moving beyond access-oriented approaches toward frameworks that integrate relational justice (Doyle, 2025), ethics of care (Murphy et al., 2026; Sousa et al., 2026), and culturally grounded understandings of well-being (Li & Dayimu, 2025; Osborne et al., 2019). This entails strengthening intercultural practices, reducing punitive disciplinary logics, and ensuring meaningful recognition of Indigenous epistemologies and identities. Well-being in these contexts must be understood holistically, encompassing emotional, cultural, spiritual, and territorial dimensions of life, as articulated in Indigenous conceptualizations of relational well-being.

Limitations and Future Research

This study is limited by its small sample size and its focus on a single Indigenous group and regional context, which restricts statistical generalizability. However, the aim of the study is analytical and interpretive rather than statistical inference. Future research should expand comparative analyses across Indigenous contexts, incorporate longitudinal designs to examine long-term effects of boarding school experiences, and include the perspectives of educators and institutional staff to enrich triangulation. Further studies should also explore gendered dimensions of boarding school life and examine the psychological and emotional trajectories associated with residential education.

Conclusion

Overall, this study demonstrates that boarding schools in Indigenous and rural contexts operate as ambivalent institutional spaces where processes of educational opportunity, social protection, and structural inequality are simultaneously produced. On the one hand, these institutions function as enabling infrastructures that ensure educational continuity, particularly for students from geographically isolated and socioeconomically marginalized communities, fostering forms of autonomy, discipline, and personal development that extend into higher education trajectories.

On the other hand, the findings reveal that such developmental gains are inseparable from institutional arrangements marked by disciplinary governance, emotional dislocation, and cultural marginalization. Boarding schools emerge as sites where care and control intersect, generating tensions that shape students' affective experiences, identity formation, and sense of belonging. In this sense, well-being is not a linear outcome of institutional support but a contested process produced within asymmetrical power relations and culturally selective forms of recognition. The study highlights that Indigenous students' experiences are mediated not only by educational structures but also by the absence or partial presence of culturally

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responsive practices, particularly regarding language, identity, and epistemic recognition. This absence reinforces the need to critically reconsider the cultural assumptions embedded in institutional care models.

In conclusion, advancing equity in boarding school contexts requires moving beyond their framing as purely compensatory educational mechanisms, toward an understanding that integrates academic opportunity with cultural sustainability and relational justice. Developing educational policies that are simultaneously inclusive, culturally grounded, and sensitive to the emotional lives of students is essential for addressing the structural and symbolic dimensions of inequality identified in this study.

Declarations

Authors Contributions

KA: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Formal Analysis, Data Curation, Writing- Original Draft, Writing-Review & Editing, and Project Administration.

VV: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Formal Analysis, Writing – Review & Editing, and Supervision.

All authors contributed to the interpretation of the findings, critically reviewed the manuscript, approved the final version, and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

Funding Details

This work was supported by the Agencia Nacional de Investigación y Desarrollo de Chile (ANID). FONDECYT Regular Project [grant number 1240540], NCS2025_021 and Postdoctoral project [3260937] ANID.

Ethics statement

This study was conducted in accordance with established ethical standards for research involving human participants. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study and provided informed consent prior to their participation

Data Availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Acknowledgment

The authors sincerely thank the participants in this study for their time, engagement, and valuable reflections, which made an important contribution to the development and completion of this research.

Disclosure Statement

No financial interest

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