

Article

Childhood Play as a Socioemotional Ecology: Understanding Emotional Well-Being in Sociocultural Contexts

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Abstract

Emotional well-being has become a central concern in contemporary educational research, particularly in contexts shaped by social and cultural diversity. However, dominant approaches to educational assessment continue to prioritize cognitive outcomes, often overlooking the affective dimensions of children's everyday experiences. In this context, play emerges as a key yet underexplored process through which emotional well-being is constructed in childhood. This study aimed to analyze the role of play in the configuration of emotional well-being in sociocultural educational contexts from a sociocultural and relational perspective. A qualitative multiple-case study was conducted in two rural schools located in Mapuche territories in southern Chile, involving students, teachers, caregivers, and Mapuche knowledge holders (kimches). Data were generated through semi-structured interviews and focus groups and analyzed using inductive coding procedures supported by qualitative data analysis software. The findings indicate that play operates as a socioemotional ecology through which children participate in collective forms of life, construct relationships, and experience emotional well-being in interaction with others, territory, and culturally meaningful practices. Three interconnected dimensions emerged. First, play was experienced as a relational, territorialized, and culturally situated practice sustained through participation, collective interaction, and intergenerational transmission. Second, emotional well-being emerged through enjoyment, companionship, belonging, and opportunities for social participation. Third, well-being appeared as a situated experience dependent on access to meaningful spaces, material conditions, cultural repertoires, and opportunities for play. Participants also identified tensions associated with technological change, the reduction in free play opportunities, and transformations in community life, while highlighting the potential role of schools in revitalizing culturally significant play practices such as *palín* and *linao*. These findings suggest that emotional well-being is not simply an individual psychological state but a relational and sociocultural accomplishment emerging through participation in meaningful play practices. The study contributes to interdisciplinary debates on childhood, emotional well-being, intercultural education, and sociocultural approaches to development by proposing the concept of play as a socioemotional ecology.

Keywords: play; emotional well-being; childhood; sociocultural education; socioemotional development; interculturality

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1. Introduction

Emotions are not experienced solely as individual psychological states, but as socially and culturally situated processes shaped through participation in everyday relationships, practices, and forms of coexistence. Contemporary research in cultural psychology and socio-cultural approaches to emotion has increasingly emphasized that emotional experience is produced within historically situated systems of meaning, interaction, and social participation (Mesquita & Walker, 2003; Rogoff, 2003). From this perspective, emotions are learned, negotiated, and expressed through participation in collective life, particularly during childhood, when family, school, peer interaction, and community practices play central roles in emotional socialization.

Within these processes, play occupies a particularly significant place. Beyond its recreational dimension, play constitutes a social practice through which children establish relationships, negotiate participation, learn forms of coexistence, and engage with culturally organized ways of inhabiting shared spaces. Research in developmental and educational psychology has consistently shown that play contributes to cognitive, social, and emotional development by facilitating interaction, cooperation, symbolic elaboration, emotional regulation, and peer participation (Vygotsky, 1978; Goncu & Gaskins, 2007; Lester & Russell, 2010). However, much of this literature has tended to conceptualize play primarily as an individual developmental activity or as a pedagogical resource, paying comparatively less attention to the sociocultural and territorial conditions through which play practices acquire emotional meaning in children's everyday lives.

This limitation becomes especially relevant in culturally diverse and Indigenous contexts, where play practices are deeply connected to community participation, territorial experience, intergenerational transmission, and collective forms of life. In these settings, emotions, well-being, and social relationships are not configured exclusively through individual experience, but through culturally situated forms of interaction and belonging. Nevertheless, educational and psychological research has only partially explored how play practices participate in the construction of emotional experience in Indigenous school contexts, particularly in Latin American and Mapuche educational settings.

In the case of Mapuche communities, childhood play practices have historically been intertwined with territorial mobility, relationships with nature, collective participation, oral transmission, and community coexistence. At the same time, contemporary school contexts are traversed by processes of cultural transformation, urbanization, digitalization, and reconfiguration of everyday childhood experiences. These tensions make play a particularly relevant space for observing how emotional experiences, forms of participation, and intercultural relationships are negotiated in everyday school life.

1.1. *Play and Emotional Well-Being*

The study of emotional well-being has moved from approaches focused on intrapsychic dimensions to perspectives that recognize its relational, situated, and dynamic nature (Diener et al., 2010; Fredrickson & Joiner, 2018; Revord et al., 2021; Wong & Cheung, 2024). From this approach, emotional well-being is not reduced to the absence of discomfort, but involves the ability of subjects to experience positive emotions, regulate affective states, establish meaningful relationships, and actively participate in their social environment (Ryff, 1989; CASEL, 2020). In the last two decades, the study of children's emotions and well-being in primary education has been booming, motivated by the growing acts of bullying and school violence, in person and virtually, which have been publicly known (Cabello et al., 2019). In these studies, it has been observed that emotional well-being influences academic performance and the reduction in childhood anxiety (Buitrago et al., 2019).

On the other hand, emotional well-being in childhood has been recognized as a consequence of their play. In fact, Article 31 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child

explicitly states that play in childhood is essential to their integral development, which includes emotional well-being (UN, 2013). In this framework, play in childhood has been identified as one of the main natural contexts in which the capacities that allow them to face adverse situations resulting from toxic stress are developed (Yogman et al., 2018), such as acts of harassment and violence to which they may be vulnerable (Cabello et al., 2019). Studies have shown that playing in childhood in safe conditions with people with whom they have an affective and significant relationship such as parents, siblings, and friends, enriches the child in their socio-emotional, linguistic, cognitive, and self-regulation skills (Yogman et al., 2018).

From a psychological perspective, symbolic play and free play have been associated with the development of executive functions, self-regulation, and social skills (Yogman et al., 2018), all of which are fundamental dimensions of emotional well-being (Whitebread et al., 2017). In particular, play allows children to rehearse social roles, negotiate rules, face conflicts, and experience cooperation, thereby contributing to the development of key socio-emotional competencies for their adaptation to educational contexts. In this sense, the concept of emotional well-being contributes to recognizing that children experience positive emotions, such as joy, and negative emotions, such as sadness, which affect their integral development as a person (Wong & Cheung, 2024).

However, one of the most relevant contributions of recent literature is the understanding of play as a relational practice in which emotional well-being is built through interaction with others. Indeed, when children practice traditional games among peers, with children of different origins, in spaces of freedom of recreation and with people responsible for their care, who accompany and guide them in their process of socialization and application of the rules of the game, emotional well-being, healthy coexistence, respect for social and cultural diversity and the promotion of cultural values that are included in traditional games are encouraged (Medeiros et al., 2026). In this sense, play not only allows the individual expression of emotions but also configures spaces of recognition, belonging, and social inclusion (Rimascca et al., 2025).

This relational nature of play acquires special relevance in educational contexts, where the dynamics of interaction between peers directly influence the emotional experience of students. Studies in school contexts have shown that play fosters collaboration, intergenerational interaction, and the construction of shared norms, serving as an alternative space to the individualistic logics of academic work (Alonqueo et al., 2017). However, these dynamics can come into tension with school structures that prioritize individual performance, time control, and the standardization of activities, limiting opportunities for meaningful interaction, all of which have been evidenced in research involving indigenous participants (Alonqueo et al., 2017; Fabian et al., 2024; Molina, 2015).

1.2. Play, Culture, and Emotional Well-Being in Contexts of Social Diversity

Understanding play as a socio-emotional practice requires incorporating its sociocultural dimension, as in its practice, children also learn rules and self-regulation (Vygotsky, 1978), together with other peers and/or people who are part of their family and/or community (Rogoff, 2003). Also, because it has been observed as a cultural practice, present in various societies, which enhances the bond between children and caregivers (Yogman et al., 2018), and in the case of people living in vulnerable sectors, it can be a tool to promote their emotional well-being (Medeiros et al., 2026). In this sense, Diener et al. (2010) evidenced in a study that people from vulnerable sectors, with low incomes and material shortages that include basic services such as electricity, for example, in the *Maasai* African indigenous people, presented a high level of subjective and emotional well-being, showing themselves to be happy. In the same way, children can manifest their happiness in their games and these are free of the amount of income or material resources they have,

that is, strictly speaking, children's play does not depend on the market but on the child's willingness to play (ONU, 2013; Poblete et al., 2020). For this reason, childhood games are in themselves an activity to promote social justice (Medeiros et al., 2026) in contexts of social, cultural, linguistic, and territorial diversity.

In contexts of social and cultural diversity, emotional well-being cannot be analyzed exclusively from universal categories, but must be understood in relation to the cultural frameworks that shape the experiences, values, and forms of socialization of the subjects, as is the case with indigenous peoples who have experienced their colonization (Fabian et al., 2024). In this sense, traditional games have been widely recognized as carriers of cultural knowledge, as they integrate knowledge about the territory, history, social relations, and values of communities (Bishop & Curtis, 2001; Poblete et al., 2020). However, in schools, in general, the sport of Western culture is encouraged, overvaluing it over the games known by the inhabitants of a territory ancestrally occupied by an indigenous people (Fabian et al., 2024). Consequently, the problem in indigenous communities, such as the Chilean Mapuche people, arises because play has been and is part of the daily practices of the family and the community, constituting a space for experiential learning where physical, social, emotional, and spiritual dimensions are articulated (Alonqueo et al., 2017; Manquilef, 2011; Poblete et al., 2020).

In the case of the Mapuche people, games in childhood have been described as practices that contribute to the formation of the person (Manquilef, 2011; Poblete et al., 2020), integrating educational knowledge linked to the natural environment, community life, and cultural values (Alonqueo et al., 2017; Huencho et al., 2024; Manquilef, 2011). From the Mapuche worldview, through games, family education called *kimeltuwün* can be reinforced, with which a person is formed with values of service to the family and the community, as well as valuable knowledge for survival in the territory known for experiences housed in social memory (Poblete et al., 2020; Quilaqueo-Rapiman et al., 2023). According to Quilaqueo-Rapiman et al. (2023), *kimeltuwün* is the Mapuche family educational action, sustained by existing knowledge in the social memory built from own and shared experiences. In this way, in the Mapuche people, as well as in other indigenous peoples, games not only favor the development of skills but also strengthen the sense of belonging and cultural identity, configuring specific forms of well-being that cannot be understood from exclusively Western frameworks (Diener et al., 2010; Fabian et al., 2024).

However, the historical processes of colonization, compulsory schooling, and curricular standardization have generated the invisibility of these practices, displacing traditional games with Western or digitized forms of play (Fabian et al., 2024). This phenomenon has led to acculturation among indigenous peoples (Zhagui-Brito et al., 2022), influenced by globalization and modernization, which bring changes in social and cultural practices, including knowledge, sports, and games that replace local games (Nugraha et al., 2024). Consequently, the transmission of knowledge and cultural continuity is disrupted, generating tensions in the experience of children in intercultural educational contexts.

These transformations have direct implications for emotional well-being. The loss of playful practices within the territory and the community can affect forms of social interaction, reduce opportunities for meaningful bonding, and weaken identity construction processes (Fabian et al., 2024; Huencho et al., 2024; Nugraha et al., 2024; Poblete et al., 2020). At the same time, the incorporation of forms of play in primary school education, under the concept of *gamification* (Araya et al., 2019; Zhagui-Brito et al., 2022), mediated by digital technologies, has reconfigured playful experiences, unanchored from the cultural context, transferring the student to a virtual educational environment (Zhagui-Brito et al., 2022) and which also promotes more individualized dynamics and generates anxiety (Araya et al., 2019). However, technology has also been positively evaluated for the

teaching of the indigenous language, as a way to maintain language learning and carry out intercultural education (Zhagui-Brito et al., 2022).

In the educational field, using games as gamification with the use of technology and a tool for achieving curricular objectives can have positive effects on children's motivation, but it can also limit the potential of play as a space for emotional expression, social interaction, and cultural construction. Evidence shows that spontaneous and natural childhood play contributes to emotional regulation by allowing children to process complex experiences, reduce stress and anxiety levels, and develop coping strategies in challenging situations (Lester & Russell, 2010; UN, 2013; Yogman et al., 2018). Likewise, play facilitates integration between emotion and cognition, promoting significant learning in social interaction contexts and emotional well-being, as observed in New Zealand (Fabian et al., 2024). In addition, emotional well-being, characterized by a strong charge of positive emotions, constitutes a significant and developable psychological and social resource in the person (Revord et al., 2021; Wong & Cheung, 2024). In particular, resources such as friendship and knowledge stand out and can be projected into the future with a long duration (Revord et al., 2021).

For all these reasons, play can be understood as a socio-emotional ecology, in which processes of emotional regulation, social interaction, and construction of meaning converge. However, this ecology is not neutral; it is mediated by institutional, cultural, and material conditions that shape the possibilities of experiencing well-being in educational contexts. Consequently, the analysis of play in childhood in contexts of social and cultural diversity requires an approach that integrates its emotional, relational, and cultural dimensions, as well as the transformations that they undergo in contemporary contexts. Despite advances in the literature, there remains a gap in understanding how these dimensions are articulated in the configuration of children's emotional well-being, particularly in studies that incorporate multiple actors and educational contexts. This gap is especially relevant in the framework of education systems that seek to move towards more inclusive and culturally relevant approaches, where the incorporation of emotional well-being as a central dimension of learning requires considering situated practices such as play, capable of articulating the individual, the social, and the cultural in the educational experience.

2. Materials and Methods

This study was conducted within an interpretive qualitative framework that understands emotions, meanings, and social practices as socially and culturally constructed through everyday interactions. From this perspective, play was approached not as an isolated behavior or developmental activity, but as a situated social practice through which children and communities produce meanings, relationships, and forms of participation within specific cultural contexts. To examine these processes, a qualitative multiple case study design was adopted (Stake, 2020). Multiple case studies allow researchers to explore complex social phenomena within their natural settings while preserving the particularity of each case and facilitating the identification of shared patterns across contexts. This approach was especially appropriate for investigating how play practices and experiences of emotional well-being are configured in culturally diverse educational environments.

2.1. Context and Participants

The research was conducted in two rural elementary schools located in Mapuche Indigenous communities in the commune of Padre Las Casas, in the La Araucanía Region of southern Chile. Both schools are situated within the Nagche territorial identity, one of the historical and sociocultural territorial groupings of the Mapuche people. The selected cases were considered typical of rural Nagche communities characterized by the coexistence of Mapuche and non-Mapuche populations, intercultural educational dynamics, and

strong connections between community life, local cultural practices, and schooling. In this sense, the study adopted a multiple-case study design focused on cases that were representative of the sociocultural characteristics commonly found in this territorial context.

Purposive sampling was used (Vasilachis, 2006; Ruiz, 1996), specifically a criterion-based strategy aimed at selecting participants who could provide diverse perspectives on the phenomenon under study. Given the exploratory nature of the research and the inclusion of multiple participant groups, recruitment was guided by the principle of information richness rather than statistical representativeness. Data collection continued until sufficient diversity and recurrence of themes were observed across participant groups, allowing the identification of stable interpretative patterns related to play, emotional well-being, cultural transmission, and community participation. Four groups of key actors were organized as follows:

- (a) Eight primary school students: 4 children between 10 and 13 years; 4 girls aged 9 and 12 years, who provide direct and lived experiences of play and emotional well-being.
- (b) Two teachers: one of them is 38 years old and has 14 years of professional service; the second teacher is 58 years old and has 30 years of professional service; both act as mediating agents of the educational process and privileged observers of school dynamics.
- (c) Four parents or caregivers who provide intergenerational and family perspectives on play. Two are women; one is 37 years old, and the other is 43 years old. Two are men; one is 31 years old, and the other is 51 years old.
- (d) Four kimches (Mapuche wise persons): 2 men, one aged 57 and 62; 2 women, aged 85 and 49. They contribute with cultural and educational knowledge of the Mapuche indigenous context.

2.2. Information Collection Techniques and Instruments

(a) Individual semi-structured interviews were applied to teachers, parents, and kimches, aimed at analyzing the following:

- (1) Childhood play experiences (own and observed);
- (2) Meanings attributed to the game;
- (3) Relationship between play, emotions, and development;
- (4) Transformations of play in contemporary contexts;
- (5) Links between play, culture, and education.

The use of semi-structured interviews made it possible to balance thematic consistency with the flexibility necessary to capture situated narratives (Bisquerra et al., 2014; Stake, 2020).

(b) Focus groups with students: 2 focus groups were developed with basic education students, one for each school, aimed at exploring:

- (1) Current gaming practices;
- (2) Emotional experiences associated with the game;
- (3) Dynamics of interaction between peers;
- (4) Perceptions of game changes.

The focus groups facilitated the observation of processes of collective construction of meaning, particularly relevant to the analysis of play as a relational practice, as they created an environment of trust among the children to talk about the topic with the researcher, who was unknown to them (Flick, 2022). The interviews and focus groups were recorded in audio and later transcribed, constituting a textual corpus for analysis. The transcription considered the fidelity to the discourse of the participants, safeguarding the semantic richness of the narratives.

2.3. Analysis Plan

The analysis was developed using an inductive approach, supported by systematic procedures of constant coding and comparison, assisted by qualitative analysis software such as ATLAS.ti. v. 23.2 Although the analysis incorporates procedures inspired by grounded theory (progressive coding, constant comparison, memos) (Andréu et al., 2007), the study is not presented as grounded theory in the strict sense, but as an inductive qualitative analysis aimed at generating substantive interpretative categories (Bisquerra et al., 2014), coherent with the objective of understanding the phenomenon in its sociocultural complexity (Quilaqueo & Quintriqueo, 2017).

1. Initial coding (open coding): An exhaustive reading of the corpus was carried out, identifying significant units of meaning (quotations) and assigning emergent codes close to the language of the participants. This stage allowed us to capture actions, experiences, and meanings associated with play and emotional well-being.
2. Focused coding: The initial codes were grouped into higher-level analytical categories, organized around key dimensions of the phenomenon:
 - (a) Emotional function of the game;
 - (b) Relational dimension;
 - (c) Cultural dimension;
 - (d) Contemporary transformations;
 - (e) Institutional mediations.

This stage allowed us to move from the fragmentation of the data to its conceptual structuring. In this framework, a systematic process of comparison was developed between (a) types of participants (students, teachers, parents, kimches)¹; (b) types of game (traditional, contemporary, digital); (c) contexts of interaction (family, school, community). This procedure enabled the identification of patterns, divergences, and tensions, strengthening the interpretative validity of the analysis. Finally, the categories were integrated into a comprehensive analytical structure, aimed at explaining how play shapes emotional well-being across contexts of sociocultural diversity, considering conditions, mechanisms, and results.

To ensure the quality of the study, rigorous criteria typical of qualitative research were considered (Lincoln & Guba, 1985): Credibility: triangulation of sources (diverse actors) and coherence between data and interpretation; Transferability: dense description of the context and participants; Dependence: explicitness of the analytical process; Confirmability: use of empirical evidence to support interpretations.

The study was conducted in accordance with ethical principles of research involving human subjects: (a) informed consent of the participants; (b) protection of anonymity and confidentiality; (c) responsible use of information. In the case of participants belonging to indigenous communities, principles of cultural respect and contextual relevance were considered, recognizing the situated nature of shared knowledge.

3. Results

The results section presents the findings derived from the analysis of childhood play experiences and their relationship with emotional well-being in sociocultural educational contexts. From an inductive approach, the analysis allowed the identification of recurrent patterns in the discourses of the different participating actors, as well as tensions and variations associated with the sociocultural contexts in which these experiences are situated.

Results are organized around two main analytical axes. First, it addresses the experiences of play in childhood in relation to emotional regulation, the construction of bonds, and the sense of belonging in the school space. Second, it examines the culturally situated character of play, along with the transformations and tensions that emerge in its

reconfiguration in contemporary educational contexts. This organization seeks to account for the complexity of the phenomenon, considering both the experiential dimensions of play and its sociocultural conditions of production, without assuming a priori a single explanatory structure, but allowing the relationships between these dimensions to emerge from the data.

The analysis showed that participants consistently described play as a collective and relational experience embedded in everyday forms of coexistence rather than as an isolated recreational activity. Across the interviews, children, parents, teachers, and kimches rarely defined play in terms of formal rules or specific games. Instead, they referred to shared experiences of participation, interaction, mobility, and coexistence with others in school, family, and community spaces.

Students frequently associated play with being together and occupying common spaces collectively. One student explained that “we play with our friends... some children from different grades” (FG), while another stated that “we all play together... we gather there with many others” (FG). Similar descriptions appeared repeatedly across the interviews: “sometimes everybody mixes together” (FG); “we meet in the football field with children from other grades” (FG); “We used to call out to each other. Back then, there were no phone calls; we would shout, ‘Come on, let’s play!’ Then several children from the neighboring families and surrounding areas would get together and play” (FG).

These narratives suggest that the experience of play was organized less around the activity itself than around the possibility of participating in a shared social environment. In this sense, belonging emerged not as a secondary effect of play, but as one of its central organizing conditions. At the same time, this collective dimension was repeatedly emphasized across generations.

Child and Adult memories reinforced this collective dimension “(...) my parents play, my uncles play, everyone plays (...)” (FG). Parents and kimches frequently described childhood play as inseparable from broader forms of community coexistence. One participant recalled that “we got together with the neighbors and cousins” (P1), while another explained that “friendships were made there” (P1). A kimche stated that “all the children played together because there were many families nearby” (K4), while another remembered that “we spent the whole afternoon outside with other children”/“sometimes two or three cousins gathered there”, spending “about two hours” playing together in the afternoon (K2). “(...) my brother, my sister, my mother, and my aunts were all there. Then they would organize games among themselves (...)” (P3).

In these accounts, play appeared as part of everyday territorial life rather than as a separate pedagogical or institutional activity. The emphasis participants placed on neighbors, cousins, siblings, and nearby families suggests that play served as a mechanism through which children progressively entered community life and established durable forms of social connection.

The interviews also revealed that play functioned as a space for relational mediation and emotional regulation. Several participants described situations in which play contributed to repairing conflicts or reducing tensions between children. One student explained that “you can be angry with someone, but then you play football together” (FG), while another noted that “sometimes we argue, but later we continue playing” (FG). Teachers similarly observed that play often reorganized relationships among students: “during recess they solve things among themselves” (T2), and “when they play together, they calm down more quickly” (T1). These accounts suggest that play practices also functioned as everyday mechanisms for negotiating coexistence, maintaining group participation, and regulating emotional tensions within peer interactions.

Beyond conflict resolution, participants frequently associated play with the creation and maintenance of social relationships. Children described play as an opportunity to

meet others, strengthen existing friendships, and establish new forms of connection. As one student explained, “playing football creates many relationships with other people” (FG), “you can be in a bad mood with someone, but then you play football together” (FG), while another added that “a friendship can even be created” (FG) through these interactions. Similar memories appeared in adult narratives. A kimche recalled that children gathered with “neighbors, cousins, and other families” (K2), and play took place when children met while caring for animals in shared fields. Across generations, participants consistently described play as a social practice through which relationships were initiated, maintained, and renewed, making participation with others a central component of the play experience.

Another recurring dimension across the interviews was the collective and implicit character of learning within play practices. Parents frequently emphasized that children learned through observation and participation rather than through explicit instruction. One participant explained that “they learn by watching how the others play” (P4), while another stated that “nobody taught us directly... we learned among ourselves” (P1). This perspective was strongly reinforced by kimches, who repeatedly highlighted the autonomous and communal nature of childhood learning. As one participant explained, “children learned among themselves” (K3), while another added that “they watched first and then they did it themselves” (K2). One student noted that he learned football by accompanying his older brother to matches and “watching him play” (FG), whereas another explained that his father encouraged him to participate and gradually taught him the game. Teachers and caregivers also emphasized that “one learns from the other” (T2), highlighting imitation, observation, and participation as central mechanisms through which play repertoires circulated across generations and peer groups.

In this sense, play practices appeared not only as recreational experiences but also as relational environments through which children incorporated forms of coexistence, emotional regulation, and participation in community life.

Beyond its relational character, play also emerged as a practice through which participants interpreted continuity and change across generations. Adult narratives rarely described childhood play as an isolated personal memory. Instead, recollections were embedded in broader reflections about transformations in community life, family relationships, available spaces, and forms of childhood participation. Parents and kimches frequently compared their own experiences with those of contemporary children, producing accounts that simultaneously referred to persistence, loss, adaptation, and the recovery of play practices.

Several participants recalled childhoods characterized by extensive outdoor play and collective participation. One kimche explained that “we spent the whole afternoon outside” (K2). Similar memories appeared among parents, who described childhood as a period when children “got together with neighbors and cousins” (P4) and spent much of their time in shared community spaces; “We would gather in a field and play tag-and-cops games there... and “we would forget about the animals.” (K1). “(...) when there was frost, we would slide on the frozen ground (...)” (P2).

These recollections were frequently contrasted with present conditions. As one participant noted, “now it is not like before” (K2), while another remarked that “today all of that is being lost” (P1). However, these narratives did not simply express nostalgia. Rather, they constituted situated interpretations of social and cultural transformations affecting childhood experiences, including changes in mobility, technology use, family dynamics, and opportunities for collective interaction.

Within these memories, traditional games occupied a particularly significant place. Palín and linao were repeatedly mentioned by students, teachers, parents, and kimches as recognizable elements of local cultural experience. Students identified these games among

the practices they knew and participated in, while adults frequently associated them with family and community life. One kimche recalled that “our parents took us there and we played palín” (K1), while a parent explained that “we were able to recover that old game that was played as palín” (P1). These accounts suggest that certain play practices function not only as recreational activities but also as repositories of collective memory, cultural recognition, and intergenerational continuity.

The interviews also revealed the importance of material and territorial conditions in shaping play experiences. Participants consistently described play through references to forests, fields, mud, rivers, animals, courtyards, and open spaces, indicating that play was inseparable from the environments in which everyday life unfolded. Rather than appearing as neutral backdrops, these spaces actively structured forms of movement, interaction, imagination, and participation. One participant recalled that “there was a forest behind the house” (FG), while another explained that children often played “while looking after the sheep” (K2). Parents similarly described games involving mud, improvised constructions, and exploration of nearby environments, highlighting how available materials became part of the play experience itself; “That was our concrete: the earth.” (P2).

Material creativity also emerged as a recurrent feature of childhood play. Several participants remembered producing their own toys and play objects using resources available in their immediate surroundings. One parent explained that “we made spinning tops with pieces of wood” (P1), while another recalled that “we invented things ourselves with cloth and plastic bags” (P2). These narratives suggest that play was not only practiced within a territory but also materially produced through active engagement with that territory. In this sense, children were not merely users of play environments; they participated in the transformation of everyday materials into meaningful forms of interaction and collective experience.

At the same time, the corpus showed that schools occupied an ambivalent position within these processes of cultural continuity and transformation. While some participants perceived schooling as contributing to the reduction of free play opportunities, others described schools as spaces where traditional practices could be reintroduced, taught, and revitalized. This was particularly visible in references to palín and linao. One kimche explained that “it is like the games are coming back again, palín and linao” (K2), while a teacher described activities organized around these practices within the school context.

These results further suggest that, rather than operating exclusively as institutions of cultural standardization, schools appeared in several narratives as contested spaces where local play repertoires could be simultaneously marginalized and revitalized. Participants frequently described tensions between curricular routines, reduced opportunities for free play, and the recovery of culturally meaningful practices such as palín and linao. In this sense, schools emerged not merely as settings where play occurs, but as institutions actively involved in the circulation, transformation, and re-signification of cultural repertoires. The presence of these practices within school activities suggests that intercultural educational spaces may contribute to sustaining forms of cultural participation that otherwise face growing pressures associated with technological change and transformations in community life.

Play in these school contexts operated as a situated relational practice through which children participated in collective forms of life, learned culturally meaningful ways of interacting with others, and negotiated their relationship with territory, memory, and community. Rather than constituting a discrete recreational activity, play emerged as a socio-cultural environment where belonging, participation, learning, and cultural continuity were continuously produced through everyday interaction (see Table 1).

Table 1. Emerging categorial structure of play practices in childhood.

Category	Subcategory	Analytical Interpretation	Representative Quotes
1. Play as an everyday relational experience	1.1. Peer play and proximity networks	Play emerges as a practice sustained by the copresence of significant others. It does not appear, in the first place, as an individual action, but as an activity that is activated with friends, siblings, cousins, neighbors, or colleagues. Relationality is not a side effect of play, but its condition of possibility.	"We play with our friends... some children from different grades" (FG). "We played with our classmates from there in the neighborhood, with the neighbors" (T2). "I played with my cousins, other neighbors" (K4). "With my little niece, with her cousin who is three years old" (P2).
	1.2. Play as an inter-generational and community encounter	In several stories, play is inscribed in a broader sociability than that of the age group. It does not just bring children together; it also convenes family, community, and observers. This expands the game from a logic of entertainment to a form of social participation.	"Our parents took us too... there we were playing palín" (K2). "We have activities... where adults participate" (T2, on palín/linao and other activities). "They went out all the... of the community" (K2, when talking about soccer on the community field).
2. Play as a spatially situated practice	2.1. School play spaces	The game is organized around precise places in the school environment: court, playground, dirt, or sand spaces. These places are not a neutral background; they structure the type of possible interaction, the size of the group, and the materiality of the game.	"On the field... the sand court... behind the CRA" (FG). "Here on the school field" (P2). "Here at school I played, I learned to play balls" (K2).
	2.2. Domestic, neighborhood, and territorial spaces	Play overflows the school and is anchored in houses, sites, hills, fields, pastures, and animal care places. This shows that the playful practice is territorialized and that the everyday environment offers materials, routes, and opportunities for encounter.	"We played with mud... we built little houses" (P2). "At home with my siblings and my neighbors... when the animals were taken care of" (K1). "There, where, in my house... a little field like that" (K2). "There was a little pile of dirt... there they play doing... a little clay bread" (P2, referring to her daughter).
	2.3. Materiality of space and ways of playing	Land, mud, water, court, forest, or site are not only locations, but resources for the game. The materiality of the environment shapes forms of invention, corporeality, and experimentation.	"Pure land" (P1). "Playing with mud... he made some pastries, some rolls" (K2). "Passing through a forest... there is the field" (FG).
3. Play as a cultural practice and generational memory	3.1. Playful repertoires recognized as their own	In the corpus, there are games that are named as part of a local or Mapuche repertoire, especially palín and linao. This does not mean cultural uniformity, but it does mean that certain games function as markers of recognition and differentiation.	"Palín, linao" (FG). "Therefore they play palín, they play linao" (T2). "Our parents took us... there we were playing palín" (K2). "We were able to recover that old game that was made in palín" (P1).
	3.2. Play as a childhood memory and temporal comparison	Adults and kimches reconstruct the game from memory and place it in contrast with the present. That comparison is not just nostalgia; it is a way of making sense of changes in childhood, school, and the community.	"We played more... there were no cell phones" (T2). "Now it's not so much anymore" (K1, on the court and the games of before). "It's like the games are back again. The palín, the linao" (K1).
	3.3. Learning by observation, participation, and transmission	The game is learned by watching, accompanying, and gradually entering into practice. This form of transmission is key because it shows that play functions as a mechanism of socialization rather than merely as a spontaneous activity.	"Between themselves, the companions" (K2, on how their children learned to play). "I learned to play balls... here at school watching" (K2).
4. Game in transformation: tensions between the traditional and the contemporary	4.1. Emergence of technologies and displacement of face-to-face gaming	The stories show that cell phones, video games, and digital platforms are not only new artifacts but competitors for time, attention, and availability to play in person.	"I'm on my cell phone and that's it" (FG). "By cell phone it can be... a lot of technology" (P1). "Because he has his cell phone" (K2, comparing his childhood with his

	The transformation is not absolute, but it is clearly perceived by adults.	son's). "Some of them are walking around with their cell phones now" (K3).
4.2. Coexistence between continuity and change	The material does not show a simple substitution of the traditional for the digital. Rather, hybrid scenarios emerge in which football, hide-and-seek, palín, balls, and video games coexist. The transformation, therefore, is uneven and situated.	"We played Roblox... on the cell phone" and at the same time football, hide-and-seek, palín and linao are mentioned in the same focus groups (FG). "He's always with ... or with friends and goes out to play ball" (K2, about his son).
4.3. School reconfiguration of cultural repertoires	Some cultural games do not appear as linear family continuity, but as practices reintroduced or revitalized in school. This is especially visible in palín and linao.	"No, we didn't learn it here... in school I believe... It's like the games are back again. The palín, the linao" (K2). "Here the boys don't play palín... championships are not held" (T1, showing institutional variation).

Source: own elaboration.

These narratives show that play practices were experienced as collective forms of participation embedded in everyday relationships, community interaction, and shared coexistence. Across the interviews, playing was consistently associated with being with others, negotiating participation, learning through observation, and maintaining social bonds within peer and family networks. In this sense, play appeared not only as a recreational activity but as a relational environment through which children progressively incorporated forms of coexistence, emotional regulation, and participation in community life.

Beyond these relational dynamics, participants also described play as deeply connected to territorial movement, material environments, and everyday rural experiences, particularly through interactions with natural spaces, seasonal conditions, and locally produced play materials.

Objective 2 sought to analyze how these play practices configure conditions for the experience of emotional well-being, considering their implicit and not necessarily explicit character in children's and adults' narratives. Across the interviews, emotional well-being rarely appeared as a directly named category. Instead, it emerged indirectly through references to enjoyment, companionship, belonging, participation, freedom of movement, and the continuity of collective play experiences. Rather than treating well-being as a pre-defined psychological construct, these recurring dimensions were interpreted as sociocultural indicators through which emotional well-being became visible in everyday play experiences. In this sense, well-being was expressed less as an abstract psychological state than as a lived and situated experience embedded in everyday practices of play, coexistence, and community participation.

Across the interviews, emotional well-being associated with play appeared primarily as an experience of enjoyment, taken for granted rather than explicitly problematized. Children did not usually name well-being as an abstract emotional state; instead, they referred to play through expressions of pleasure, entertainment, movement, and preference. Statements such as "what matters is playing... it is fun" (GF), "I like to play ball... it is entertaining" (GF), and "recess is the best... we can play there" (GF); "I enjoyed that very much; I was happy" (P4) show that enjoyment was embedded in the ordinary experience of play itself. In these accounts, well-being was not formulated as a reflective category but appeared as a lived affective quality associated with being active, sharing time with others, and occupying spaces where children could move more freely.

These narratives suggest that enjoyment, companionship, and a sense of belonging were among the emotional qualities most frequently associated with play experiences, highlighting the affective significance of participation in shared play activities; "The point was to play, share, and talk." (P5).

This experience of enjoyment was also connected to moments of relief from school routines and everyday obligations. Participants repeatedly described recess, outdoor spaces, and free time as opportunities to suspend more structured demands and enter into a different mode of interaction. Teachers observed that “when they go out to recess, the first thing they do is go to the field” (T2), while caregivers recalled that, after completing daily tasks, children “were going to play”. These narratives suggest that play configured a temporary space of freedom, where children could reorganize their time, bodies, and relationships outside the more regulated rhythm of school and domestic responsibilities. Well-being, in this sense, was associated not only with pleasure but also with the possibility of experiencing autonomy, movement, and affective release.

A second dimension of well-being emerged through interaction with others. Children, parents, teachers, and kimches consistently associated positive play experiences with companionship, friendship, and group participation. One student explained that “we play with our friends... some children from different grades” (GF), while adult participants recalled playing “with the neighbors... with the classmates of the neighborhood” (Teacher) or “with my cousins... with my brothers” (K1). “Children would come from the other side of the hill and from different parts of the community.” (P1). These accounts indicate that the emotional value of play was strongly tied to co-presence. Playing was meaningful because it allowed children to be with others, join groups, maintain friendships, and avoid isolation.

This relational effect of play was especially visible in references to social integration and recognition. Participants described play as a practice through which children became part of a group and remained connected to peer and community networks. Expressions such as “we all played... there we got together” (GF), “a lot of children gather on the field” (P4), and “he is always with friends... he goes out to play ball” (K2). In this sense, emotional well-being did not emerge only from individual enjoyment, but from the possibility of being recognized as part of a shared social world. The child who plays is not merely entertained; the child participates, belongs, and is seen by others.

The third dimension concerns the situated character of well-being. Participants’ narratives show that positive emotional experiences depended on the availability of concrete spaces, times, materials, and culturally meaningful practices that made play possible. Students referred to school fields and courtyards as recurrent places of play: “on the field we play... we are almost always there” (GF), while adults similarly noted that “here on the school court they play” (P2) and that “where we lived there was room to play” (K4). These accounts suggest that well-being was not detached from material conditions. It depended on access to spaces where children could gather, move, invent games, and sustain relationships.

At the same time, this situated well-being appeared vulnerable to contemporary transformations. Adults and kimches repeatedly contrasted present childhood with earlier experiences of outdoor and community-based play. Statements such as “now it is not like it used to be... they do not play so much outside” (P2), “before, more was played” (K1), and “now they are more on the cell phone”; “My children and grandchildren cannot play the way I used to, because now there is pavement, and it is practically a highway.” (T1) show that the conditions for experiencing well-being through play are perceived as changing. Technology, reduced free time, and transformations in family and community life did not simply eliminate play, but reconfigured the ways in which children access companionship, movement, and shared spaces.

These transformations were not described merely as changes in recreational preferences but as modifications in the conditions through which emotional well-being is experienced. Several participants associated reduced opportunities for outdoor play with fewer opportunities to meet peers, participate in community life, and engage in culturally

meaningful activities. From this perspective, concerns about technological change reflected not only the replacement of certain games but also the perceived weakening of relational environments that traditionally supported companionship, collective participation, and emotional connection with territory and community. Well-being, therefore, appeared linked not only to the existence of play itself, but also to the continuity of social and cultural conditions that make meaningful play possible.

These results indicate that emotional well-being associated with play was configured through three interconnected processes: enjoyment as an ordinary affective quality of play, relational participation as a condition for belonging and recognition, and access to situated material, territorial, and cultural conditions that sustain playful experience. Thus, well-being did not reside in play as an isolated activity, but in the relational and sociocultural conditions that allowed children to participate meaningfully in shared forms of life (see Table 2).

Table 2. Emergent categorial structure linking play practices to the experience of emotional well-being.

Category	Subcategory	Analytical Interpretation	Representative Quotes
1. Well-being as an experience of enjoyment that is not problematized	1.1. Enjoyment as an inherent quality of the game	Well-being is expressed as pleasure and immediate entertainment, without being elaborated as an explicit emotional category; it is presented as a given quality of play.	"What matters is playing... it's fun" (FG). "I like to play ball... it's entertaining" (FG). "I had a lot of fun with it, I was happy... we spent the whole day playing" (P1).
	1.2. Play as a space of relaxation and freedom	Play appears as a time and space differentiated from everyday demands, especially school, associated with freedom and relief.	"Recess is the best... we can play there" (FG). "When they go out to recess, the first thing they do is go to the field" (T2). "After doing things... they were going to play" (P1).
2. Well-being as a relational effect of play	2.1. Well-being associated with interaction with others	Well-being emerges in co-presence, in shared experience, and in the possibility of playing with significant others.	"We played with the neighbors... with the classmates of the neighborhood" (T1). "I played with my cousins... with my brothers" (K2).
	2.2. Well-being as social integration and recognition	Participating in the game allows you to be part of the group, reducing isolation. Play works as a mechanism for social inclusion.	"We all played... there we got together" (FG). "A lot of children gather on the field" (P4). "He is always with friends... he goes out to play ball" (K2).
3. Well-being as a situated experience	3.1. Well-being conditioned by access to play spaces	The wellness experience depends on the availability of suitable physical spaces for playing.	"On the field we play... we are almost always there" (FG). "Here on the school court they play" (P2). "Where we lived there was room to play" (K2).
	3.2. Well-being and continuity of play practices	Well-being is affected by the possibility of sustaining play practices over time; a decrease in these practices impacts the childhood experience.	"Now it's not like it used to be... they don't play so much outside" (P4). "Before, more was played" (K1). "Now they are more on the cell phone" (P3).
	3.3. Well-being and contemporary transformations	The incorporation of technologies reconfigures the conditions of well-being associated with play, generating tensions between forms of interaction.	"I'm on my cell phone and that's it" (FG). "By cell phone it can be... a lot of technology" (P1). "Because he has his cell phone... it is no longer like before" (K2).

Source: own elaboration.

These results show that emotional well-being associated with play was experienced primarily through participation in collective, meaningful, and situated forms of interaction rather than through explicitly named emotional states. Across the interviews, enjoyment, companionship, movement through shared spaces, and continuity of play practices emerged as recurring elements through which children and adults described positive childhood experiences.

The narratives additionally suggest that these experiences depended on the availability of relational, territorial, and material conditions that enabled play practices in everyday life. In this sense, well-being appeared closely connected to opportunities for coexistence, collective participation, access to shared spaces, and continuity of culturally meaningful forms of play.

4. Discussion

Results challenge perspectives that conceptualize play primarily as a developmental activity or educational resource. Across participants' narratives, play did not emerge as an isolated behavior directed toward specific learning outcomes, but as a relational environment through which children participated in collective forms of life. The significance of play was not located exclusively in the activity itself, but in the network of relationships, spaces, material conditions, memories, and cultural meanings that made play possible. From this perspective, play can be understood as a socioemotional ecology: a dynamic configuration in which emotional experiences, social participation, territorial belonging, and cultural transmission are continuously produced through everyday interaction.

The results also suggest that emotional well-being is experienced less as an individual psychological state than as a relational accomplishment emerging from participation in meaningful social practices. Participants rarely described well-being through abstract emotional vocabulary. Instead, they referred to enjoyment, companionship, participation, freedom of movement, and opportunities for interaction. This finding is consistent with sociocultural approaches that understand emotions as situated processes emerging within systems of social participation rather than as exclusively internal experiences (Mesquita & Walker, 2003; Rogoff, 2003). In this sense, well-being appeared to be embedded in opportunities for belonging, recognition, and collective engagement.

These findings are in significant dialogue with the literature that has highlighted the role of play in children's socio-emotional development, which has pointed out that play, particularly in its free and self-directed form, constitutes a privileged context for the development of self-regulation, emotional expression, and the construction of social bonds (Pellegrini, 2009; Whitebread et al., 2019). However, in general, in this literature, there is a tendency to conceptualize well-being in terms of individual competencies or intrapsychic processes; on the other hand, the results of this study suggest the need to shift this gaze towards a more situated and relational understanding.

From a sociocultural perspective, play can be understood as a mediated practice that articulates developmental processes with specific historical and cultural contexts (Vygotsky, 1978; Rogoff, 2003). In this line, the findings show that emotional well-being cannot be reduced to an internal experience of the subject but is configured in participation in socially organized practices. The relevance of interaction with others, the centrality of spaces, and the presence of specific cultural repertoires reinforce the idea that emotional development is deeply intertwined with ways of life and contexts of activity.

Likewise, the cultural dimension of play becomes particularly relevant in contexts of sociocultural diversity. The presence of games such as the *palín* or the *linao*, as well as the references to forms of play linked to the territory and community life, allows us to understand the game as a space of cultural transmission and resignification. In this sense, the well-being associated with play not only refers to enjoyment or interaction, but also to the possibility of participating in practices that make sense within a specific cultural matrix. These dialogues with approaches that highlight the importance of considering cultural variability in emotional development and forms of well-being (Nsamenang, 2006; Keller, 2018).

Beyond cultural transmission, the findings suggest that play serves as a mechanism through which children establish emotional connections to territory, collective memory,

and community life. References to forests, fields, animals, mud, rivers, and locally produced play materials indicate that emotional experience was not detached from the environments in which everyday life unfolded. These findings extend sociocultural approaches to play by showing that emotional well-being is not only mediated by social interaction, but also by children's active engagement with material and territorial worlds. From this perspective, the socioemotional significance of play emerges through participation in culturally meaningful environments rather than through the activity itself.

The role of schools deserves particular attention. Rather than appearing solely as institutions that standardize childhood experiences, schools emerged as ambivalent spaces where local play repertoires could be both constrained and revitalized. References to *palín* and *linao* suggest that intercultural educational contexts may contribute to the circulation and re-signification of cultural practices that are no longer transmitted exclusively through family or community networks. This finding invites a more nuanced understanding of schooling in Indigenous contexts, recognizing schools not only as sites of cultural interruption but also as potential spaces of cultural continuity and renewal.

On the other hand, the transformation processes identified in the study introduce a critical dimension in the understanding of the link between play and well-being. The growing presence of digital technologies, the reduction in spaces for free play, and the reorganization of school time configure conditions that can limit or reconfigure opportunities for interaction, exploration, and participation. These findings are consistent with research that warns of the decline in unstructured play and its potential effects on social-emotional development (Gray, 2011). However, the material analyzed also suggests that these transformations do not operate in a homogeneous way, but rather give rise to hybrid forms of play, which invites us to avoid simplistic readings in terms of loss or replacement.

The results allow us to move towards a conceptualization of emotional well-being not as an individual attribute measurable in isolation, but as an emergent experience of participation in social and cultural practices. From this perspective, play can be understood as a privileged space where relational, material, and symbolic conditions are articulated that make well-being possible, rather than as an instrumental means to achieve it.

However, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study was conducted in two rural schools located in Mapuche territories in southern Chile, and, therefore, the findings should be understood as contextually situated rather than statistically generalizable. The purpose of the research was not to produce representative claims, but to generate an in-depth understanding of how play and emotional well-being are experienced within specific sociocultural contexts.

Second, although the study incorporated multiple actors—including students, teachers, caregivers, and *kimches*—the distribution of participants across groups was not homogeneous. In particular, the student data were generated through two focus groups involving eight children, which may limit the diversity of childhood perspectives represented in the corpus.

Third, a substantial portion of the material relied on retrospective narratives provided by adults and community knowledge holders. These accounts offer valuable insights into cultural memory, intergenerational transmission, and perceptions of social change, but they do not necessarily correspond directly to contemporary childhood experiences. Future research could complement these perspectives through ethnographic observation and longitudinal approaches capable of documenting play practices as they unfold in everyday life.

In conclusion, the findings suggest that play constitutes much more than a recreational activity within children's everyday lives. Across the narratives of students, caregivers, teachers, and *kimches*, play emerged as a socioemotional ecology through which children experience belonging, participation, emotional well-being, and cultural continuity.

Rather than appearing as an individual psychological outcome, well-being was configured through relationships, territorial engagement, collective memory, and culturally meaningful forms of participation. These findings contribute to sociocultural and intercultural understandings of emotional well-being by highlighting the importance of sustaining the relational, territorial, and cultural conditions that make play possible in diverse educational contexts.

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Note

¹ P = parents; K = kimche; S = student; T = teacher; FG = focus group.

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