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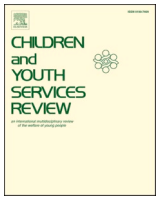

Well-being, school and age, from the understandings of Chilean children☆

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ABSTRACT

Summary: This research studies the relationships that promote well-being in the school setting from the perspective of Chilean children's understandings and how these vary with age by comparing 10- to 11- and 14- to 15-year-old students using a sample of 21 children. The material was collected using semi-structured interviews followed by a thematic content analysis.

Seven school categories were identified: performance-based relationships; relationships of support (or lack thereof) from the adult world; relationships with teachers who facilitate (or fail to) learning; supportive peer relationships, fun and friendship; contentious peer relationships; relationships with the school as a whole; and relationships with the material conditions and physical environment of the school.

The children perceive their well-being as affected by: relationships between students and teachers, the exigencies of schoolwork, discipline and control, support and interpersonal communication, peer relationships, the availability of affective support, conflict resolution, and poor treatment (bullying). They also talk about the school as a whole and the entirety of interactions transpiring there, affective links with the adult world, and its socio-spatial, infrastructure and habitability conditions. The two studied age groups present common elements, although there are also distinctive, heterogeneous traits of each group that depict the diversity of the well-being experience related to age.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the guidelines of international bodies (OECD, 2013) and the academic world (Ben-Arieh et al., 2014) have increasingly highlighted the importance of studying well-being during childhood and adolescence and its relevance in creating policies and programs for this population. We understand well-being to be the subjective experience that arises for an individual due to their own life circumstances. This includes life in general terms and specific areas such as family, friends and the use of free time (Ben-Arieh et al., 2014). Taken together, these are the subjective dimensions of quality of life (Veenhoven, 2002). They include interrelated cognitive (satisfaction with life in general and satisfaction by niches or areas of life) and emotional-affective (positive and negative affect) components (Diener, 2006).

The evidence produced during this process highlights the relationship of subjective well-being with physical and mental health, quality interpersonal relationships, educational results, and the integral human development of individuals and the groups they are part of, including group and individual skills and positive resources (Zappulla et. al., 2014; Jiang et al., 2013). The literature also shows that this category negatively correlates to high-risk behaviors like substance abuse (alcohol, tobacco, illicit drugs), violence, aggression, risky sexual conduct (Proctor et al., 2009; Shek & Liang, 2018), and more.

Despite significant advances in understanding the subjective well-being of this age group, the literature shows that the quantity of available data on the well-being of children and adolescents (C&A) comes nowhere near the amount accumulated for adults (Casas et al., 2014; Tomyn & Cummins, 2011). The vast majority of research into childhood well-being comes primarily from the developed world, Europe and the USA more specifically. Research on this topic in developing nations is scant (Casas et al., 2014; Tiliouine, 2015).

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2. Relevance of qualitative studies on well-being in childhood and adolescence

A push toward researching the well-being and subjective experience of life satisfaction for C&A was started under a qualitative research paradigm that includes the systematic study of the meanings, understandings and notions C&A hold about well-being, including the characteristics and features inherent to relational contexts and spheres (Savahl, et al., 2015; Fattore, et. al., 2019). We are guided by perspectives such as those proposed by Castellá Sarriera & Bedin (2016), Fattore & Mason (2017), and White (2017). They point out that the social orders that people inhabit are determinants of well-being and are closely connected to social relationships, reciprocity links and the networks that make up the collective groups to which they belong (Camfield, 2012).

Such research adds to the study of well-being in terms of the link between childhood and the adult world in the various socialization processes C&A are part of (Fattore & Mason, 2017). It also highlights the impacts that the naturalized ways of understanding and defining roles, rules and behavior that order daily life have on well-being (Fattore et. al, 2019). This research approach offers the possibility of accessing and studying the activities, lived experiences and understandings of C&A from their own perspectives. These dimensions are influential and important, but typically are not easy to access using quantitative, traditional framings, so it is useful to help surpass childhood research trends that give preference to indicators based on adult conceptions about what is important for C&A well-being (Newton & Ponting, 2012).

Progress in this line of research has gone hand-in-hand with valuing the participation of children and adolescents as research subjects rather than objects, acknowledging them as valid informants and active participants. Inherent to this is the importance of considering their knowledge, opinions, attitudes and understandings about the things that affect them (Newton & Ponting, 2012). This has led to inquiry into their own understandings of well-being, their experience it and which factors they identify as affecting it (Fattore, et. al., 2016). Furthermore, the C&A themselves are consulted about their ideas on how to improve subjective measures of well-being (Casas & Bello, 2012).

2.1. The school environment and well-being in childhood and adolescence

Available evidence in the child and adolescent well-being research field informs us about the importance of satisfaction and dissatisfaction with the school setting and resulting key impacts on life satisfaction (Lee & Yoo, 2015; Do Santos et al., 2013). The literature specifically reports on the significance for C&A well-being of a positive school climate (Steinmayr et al., 2018; Reid & Smith, 2018), teacher-student and student–student interactions (Kusuma-Wijayanti et al., 2020), a sense of belonging at school, the experiences of an emotional connection and links with other students (Prati, et al., 2018), or the degree to which they share group norms and values, have their educational expectations and goals satisfied, and feel they belong to the classroom group (Petrillo et al., 2016). The literature also provides information on how feelings of stress and school pressure affect well-being (Oyarzún, et al., 2017; Navarro et al., 2015), the correlation between perceptions of social support (from teachers and classmates) and school competence (Alcantara, et al., 2016; Cuadros & Berger, 2016; Tian et al., 2015).

With this background as a foundation, the study of well-being and schools should not merely make reference to cognitive or individual psychological processes. Instead, the very focus should be placed on addressing the context of social relationships and the institutional practices operating in the school along with the opportunities that arise in a social space such as this (Wyn, et al., 2014). This highlights the significance of placing the analytical focus on the quality of these relationships in terms of feeling cared for, respected, supported, etc., and the lived experiences of relationships with teachers and peers (Ramírez – Casas del Valle, et al., 2017).

Concurrently, the importance of relationships with others has come into focus through a systematic review of available qualitative literature. One example is the relationships that transpire at school with adults and friends, and therefore the impacts that social links have on C&A well-being. Relationships that offer protection, security, affection, and support in everyday tasks that bring with them a sense of being respected and include active participation are understood as meaningful for well-being in the school setting and other intimate contexts by C&A in many studies (Carrillo et al., 2021). Likewise, other prior research reports that Latin American C&A believe the principal and most important aspects affecting their well-being include: feeling cared for, loved and supported by significant adults in their lives; engaging and participatory lessons at school; feeling supported in their personal projects; and having opportunities for personal and family progress (Alfaro, et al., 2019). Studies with Australian children report that well-being connects to assessments made about having the freedom to act and make decisions, and exercising personal autonomy in everyday situations (Fattore et al., 2007).

Furthermore, studies by Thoilliez (2011) with European children provide information on school life. Their well-being is mainly connected to academic achievement as something that makes them feel happy, while sadness is associated with failing an exam. Slovakian 15-year-old students consider peer relationships to be essential to experiencing well-being at school. They also underscore the value they assign to receiving additional instructions on how to develop communications and interpersonal skills as part of their study plans (Blaskova & McLellan, 2017). Huynh and Stewart-Tufescu (2019) also report that some Canadian schoolchildren state that well-being at school is influenced by the quality of the relationships they have with their teachers, since they are viewed as key actors in the learning process. Children who had positive feelings about school felt supported by their teachers, who offered them creative ways to learn and listened to them. On the contrary, children with negative feelings about school said their teachers did not sufficiently support their needs.

In Chile, studies of subjective well-being in childhood and adolescence have reported that satisfaction with school varies to an important degree according to belonging and contextual conditions. One specifically reports that C&A in establishments with greater poverty present a lower level of satisfaction with their school in comparison to establishments with higher socioeconomic conditions (Alfaro, et al., 2016). Another study by Ramírez-Casas del Valle and Alfaro-Inzunza (2018) reports that for adolescents in Chile, the role that is recognized and assigned in the relationships that occur in the teaching and learning process is a very relevant dimension for their experiences of well-being. It found that students reject the figure of the teacher as a hierarchical superior and that only using an expository method of instruction that positions students as passive subjects and mere receptacles of content does not promote participation. Therefore, it is relevant to their well-being that they are considered in decision-making and in pedagogical methodologies and practices within the school.

Likewise, the results of the recently published qualitative study by Alfaro et al. (2021) report that the experience of satisfaction in school for Chilean C&A is related to having opportunities to meet and interact with peers and experiencing the support and trust of friends. It did not show great variations or differences among the various studied socioeconomic statuses in this regard; however, when it comes to the relationship between teaching methods and well-being, important differences according to the socioeconomic levels of the C&A were reported. Students of medium–high socioeconomic status (SES) emphasize the importance of feeling that they are active participants in their learning processes, emphasizing that their satisfaction with school is associated with respect for different learning rhythms. On the other hand, the possibility of having fun and entertaining themselves in class and with the methodologies employed as learning strategies is more relevant for low SES students. Likewise, this study reports that there are important differences between adolescents of different socioeconomic levels regarding the dimensions of school life that are associated with satisfaction with school. Noting that while for all students, satisfaction

experiences are associated with the possibility of feeling supported and understood by teachers, students with low SES predominantly associate their satisfaction with not feeling mistreated by teachers. This difference is also evident for the classroom climate in which only the C&A with low SES indicate that their satisfaction is associated with the absence of reprimands and shouting by the teacher as well as with a decrease in noise and disorder in the classroom. The participants affirm that these factors hinder their learning.

2.2. The school system in Chile

In Chile, the state guarantees the availability of accessible and inclusive education for all children and adolescents from preschool to 12th grade, which is the final year of secondary education. These rights are stipulated in the country's political constitution. Education in Chile is divided into four levels: preschool, primary, secondary and higher education. Eight years of primary education and four years of secondary education are compulsory. The Chilean education system is regulated by a public entity (MINEDUC) that as of 2020 served 3,906,610 students in 15,919 educational establishments (70 % urban; 30 % rural). In Chile, educational establishments are divided into public (59 %), semi-public (35 %), private (4 %), delegated administration corporations (0.5 %) and those dependent on local services (1.5 %). Spending on education in Chile represents 7.4 % of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The mandatory instruction time for only primary education is 1,008 h per year (MINEDUC, 2019), the second-longest among OECD member countries.

Moreover, Chilean education faces different challenges. Different policies and legislation have been promoted to improve school climate and student mental health, such as the school inclusion law (Chile, Ministerio de Educación, 2015), the law on school violence (Chile, Ministerio de Educación, 2011) and other quality indicators, such as the school coexistence climate (Agencia de Calidad de la Educación, 2016; Ley N° 20.536, 2011; Ley N° 20.845, 2015). Even though previous legislation exists, it is not enough to provide support for specific interventions, such as violence prevention, school climate improvement, and mental health support. In addition, there is a more significant focus placed on student achievement than well-being, which can impact students' well-being, especially those with a lower socioeconomic status (Varela et al., 2020). For example, a previous qualitative study in the country showed a lack of institutional support for teachers when trying to strengthen the focus on the socio-emotional development of students (Agencia de Calidad de la Educación, 2015). The Chilean school system also has significant levels of inequality, which is reflected in unequal access to private education. Therefore, there is an unequal distribution of vulnerable students among public schools, especially those living in low-income communities, (Cornejo, 2006; Valenzuela et al., 2010). A previous study in Chile with 5,733 teachers across the country evidenced the negative effect of community violence and school level of vulnerability on teachers' levels of bonding (Varela et al., 2021), which reflects higher levels of inequity in Chile.

2.3. The importance of age in subjective well-being during childhood and adolescence

During the early days of research into the correlation between well-being and age, the literature reported strikingly contrasting information, initially stating there were no significant differences in the various stages of the C&A development process (Ash & Huebner, 2001). This gradually changed as researchers began to use more sensitive scales (Holte et al., 2013) or improved the research methodologies (González-Carrasco, et al., 2016). This gave rise to reports of differences and gradual changes in the levels of well-being during the passage through childhood and adolescence. Current literature informs us that along this life transition, well-being scores tend to decrease between 10 and 16 years of age (Chui & Wong, 2016; Lee & Yoo, 2015), rebounding after 15 or 18 years of age (Bălţătescu, 2014; Casas, et al., 2015).

Studies show lower well-being scores for adolescents compared to children, with notable declines as seen in Germany, where it was reported that life satisfaction for both sexes went down with age. This decline was most prominent between the ages of 13 and 14 (Goldbeck, et al., 2007) or moderate as of age 11 and 12 (up to 2 points on a 0 to 10 scale), according to children in the Catalonia region of Spain (González-Carrasco, et al., 2016). This is also associated with lower levels on the student life satisfaction scale as reported in China (Liu et al., 2016). Older age groups experience less school satisfaction along with more negative rather than positive affect at school. This could be linked to the fact that secondary education is characterized by higher curricular standards and more frequent formal exams in this country (Liu, et al., 2016). This gradual declining trend is maintained over the years, as reported by students in Hong Kong (Shek & Liang, 2018).

Thus, there is evidence for conjecturing that the very dynamics of life satisfaction are idiosyncratic, distinctive and heterogeneous between the different development phases of each life stage (González-Carrasco et al., 2016; Shek & Liang, 2018). This means it is necessary and important to conduct studies for the purpose of evaluating and better understanding the magnitude of the subjective changes, and above all, to understand the dynamics associated with them along the development path and the distinctive qualities of life events that can give rise to changes in well-being as stated by Anglim and collaborators (2015).

Based on the background given above, the importance of studying the following question becomes evident. What are the relationships that promote well-being in the school setting from the understanding of Chilean children and how does this vary by age, comparing 10- to 11- and 14- to 15-year-old students? The objectives are defined as: (1) Describing the understanding that children have about relationships in the school setting that affect their experiences of well-being; (2) Describing the common and distinct aspects according to the life stage of children's understanding about relationships in the school setting that affect their experiences of well-being.

3. Method

3.1. Approach:

This study is part of a larger research project of mixed design that aims to understand the well-being transformations throughout adolescence. In view of the aims of this report, a qualitative design was chosen in order to better access the understandings of the phenomenon from the point of view of the C&A participants, considering subjectivity to be a valid means of studying human practices (Guardián – Fernández, 2007). Just as Fattore and collaborators (2007) pose, the use of qualitative methodologies enables an approach to children's experience of well-being using their own reference points, which is essential for understanding and addressing this phenomenon with a youth-centric perspective. A descriptive cross-sectional study was designed. The thematic content analysis method was used to analyze the material whose epistemological-methodological framework is Schutz's social phenomenology (1932/1967) that explores the subjective experience, considering that people are capable of attributing meaning to situations of daily life. Therefore, it is the subjective meaning of the experience that constitutes the focus of study (Mieles et al., 2012).

3.2. Participants:

A total of 21 children in the Metropolitan and Bío–Bío Regions in Chile participated. The first is in the central area of the country where the capital is located and the second is in the south where the city of Concepción is located, which is also one of the most populated cities in the nation. Children from both sexes with different socioeconomic levels from various classrooms were chosen in order to vary the sample. As noted in Table 1, the participants were in fifth grade (10 to 11 years of

Table 1
Characterization of participants.

Grade	Gender	High SVI	Average SVI	Low SVI	Total
5th grade	Female	–	3	2	5
	Male	2	3	–	5
9th grade	Female	1	3	1	5
	Male	2	3	1	6
TOTAL		5	12	4	21

age) and ninth grade (the first year of high school, aged 14 to 15). To ensure the diversity of the sample, we worked with establishments with different levels of vulnerability as an approximation of socioeconomic level. This classification was taken from the assessment made by the educational system in Chile for the allocation of economic resources to schools, using the School Vulnerability Index (SVI). This index was developed in Chile by the National Board of School Aid and Scholarships (JUNAEB, 2020), an entity housed under the Ministry of Education. The SVI classifies the degree of psychosocial vulnerability of the educational establishments, providing an approximation of the students' poverty level. The socio-economic and health information of the students' family is used to calculate this index for each educational institution. The information includes parents'/guardians' income and educational attainment levels, students' health status and emotional characteristics, along with the physical and community environment of the facility (rural or urban; public safety). The index returns a score from zero to 100, which was divided into thirds for the purposes of this analysis (High, Average and Low SVI) depending on the vulnerability level (JUNAEB, 2020).

3.3. Data production technique:

Semi-structured interviews consisting of guided, yet flexible, conversations were held to produce the information by deeply discussing the responses and emergent topics (Gainza, 2006). The individual technique was chosen as it enables going into greater detail about personal experiences, and creating a climate of trust that produces a deeper and more intimate conversation. The interview was conducted using a script that addressed topics including the notion of well-being and discontent, dimensions of well-being, well-being trajectories, the role of gender and material aspects.

As a means of encouraging conversation, the participants were asked to make drawings about their experiences, feelings, belongingness, relationships and places that made them feel good or bad, and how these things are connected. After the activity was finished, we discussed the elements they had included in their drawings. In order to assess the thematic guide and use of drawings, a pilot of the data production technique was first conducted with five C&A. This was done to adjust the question format and instructions for the drawings, and to understand what the participants thought about this stage regarding the way the interviews were conducted.

3.4. Fieldwork procedures and ethical safeguards

The study was approved by the Institutional Research Ethics Committee of the Universidad del Desarrollo, on May 14, 2018, certifying that it complies with all ethical requirements for research with human beings. The educational establishments that were selected in accordance with their school vulnerability index were first contacted and institutional agreement to participate in the research was granted. A list of fifth and ninth grade students was obtained by contacting the school facilitators. Invited participants were randomly selected, and they and their legal guardians received information about the study. Passive consent was accepted from the legal guardians whereas the participants gave their informed consent. The ethical safeguards documents (institutional consent of the schools, parental consent and informed consent of the C&A) included the research objectives, confidentiality safeguards and the use of the material produced, the option to withdraw from participation in any phase of the investigation, and the issuance of a generic report to the schools. Hard copies of the documents containing the aforementioned information were sent to the guardians. The time elapsed between sending the information and conducting the interviews was at least two weeks.

The interviews were conducted at educational establishments in a relaxed, private space set up for this purpose. The interviews were literally transcribed afterwards with the anonymity of the participants maintained by using initials and identification numbers. The data production process was done concurrently with the analysis in order to include the relevant topics that had arisen on earlier occasions for inclusion in the follow-on interviews.

The data production process was carried out between September and December 2019. In October of that year what was dubbed the social outbreak took place in which there were sizeable public demonstrations demanding fairer and more egalitarian living conditions for the population. As Jiménez-Yañez (2020) posits, the social protests that took place during this period can be understood as a collective release after decades of living under an economic model imposed during the dictatorship, accepted in a transitional period, and validated upon the return to democracy. Likewise, and as stated above, the effects of this societal model are detected in the high levels of inequality in the Chilean school system. Although this background is beyond the scope of this research, this socio-historical contextualization of data production is provided since the societal and political climate of this period impeded access to educational establishments.

3.5. Data analysis strategy

A thematic analysis of the contents was conducted to identify, analyze, develop and organize the detailed thematic patterns uncovered in the data that are relevant for addressing the research query (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic content analysis was used because it was considered the most pertinent analytical strategy for achieving the study's objectives.

The analytical process was done by a team of trained researchers to perform this work. First, a detailed reading of the literal interview transcripts was done. Once we were familiarized with the material overall, key passages were chosen from each one. The quotations were used to create a codification using "live" codes, which were then organized into significant themes for the study. Relevant topics were those that captured important information pertaining to the research question, representing a level of structured response or meaning (Mieles, 2012). This process was continuously revised and triangulated by the researchers, meaning the research team made needed adjustments and reorganized anything that was deemed pertinent in meetings to discuss and contrast the analyses. In this process, the themes and subthemesthat emerged were identified, defined and named, and their essential elements were highlighted to order and rank the initial codes in more abstract categories for the purposes of the study. Subsequently based on the codings, the data were reorganized into categories of themes and subthemesusing the MAXQDA version 2018.2 software.

3.6. Rigorous criteria

In order to ensure the scientific rigor of the study, the criteria of transparency, density, depth and intersubjectivity were employed (Krausse, 1995). To achieve the depth and density of the data, two pilot interviews were carried out beforehand in order to ensure that the topics to be discussed were clear and relevant and that the questions elicited sufficient depth.

To reduce internal bias, each analyst on the research team independently performed a detailed individual analysis of each interview (which were recorded in the analysis software). The analyses were then jointly presented, compared, and discussed by the participating analysts.

Such triangulation and revision by the researchers were carried out throughout the analytical process in meetings to review and audit each of the codes and themes, and the creation of categories of themes and subthemes. The density and rigor of this triangulation process justified not auditing the analyses with the study's student participants.

4. Results

The content analysis was organized as a function of the aspects that the interviewed children stated as having an impact on their well-being, focusing on the school environment and the relationships that develop in those places (Table 2). Seven central categories were identified and shared by both age groups: (1) Performance-based relationships at school; (2) relationships of support (or lack thereof) from the adult world at school; (3) relationships with teachers who facilitate (or fail to) learning; (4) peer relationships that provide support, fun and friendship; (5) contentious peer relationships; (6) relationships with the school as a whole; (7) relationships with the material conditions and physical environment of the school. In turn, in each of these content categories incorporate specific subthemes that distinguish the various perspectives and particularities of each of the studied age groups (10 to 11 and 14 to 15 years of age).

1. **"Relationships of performance at school" category:** This describes interactions understood from the C&A perspective as performance requirements that happen in the school setting and are experienced as impacting well-being.

a. Relationships of academic demands, doing prescribed activities: For the children aged 10 and 11 (Age A), relationships of academic demands - understood as referring to the intensity and requirements of having to carry out everyday school activities - are experienced as producing a feeling of suffocation, overload and rejection of the school space, as shown in the following remarks:

2. … *I feel overwhelmed at school because I have to complete all my schoolwork, write down* **everything** *the teacher puts on the blackboard, study for tests, think about whether or not I'm passing, think about answers that might be correct. In short, I feel overwhelmed at school and at home no… (E17).*

b. Relationships of academic demands (grades) from school and parents: The older C&A (Age B) report having this same kind of experience, but they describe it as the pressure they feel coming from teachers and parents to a significant extent to achieve certain evaluation scores. The pressure that comes from earning "poor grades" and the resulting unhappiness is notable. On the contrary, they report the experience of having good academic performance as producing well-being, as depicted in the following remarks:

C: It's like compensation for my family.

I: What? Please explain that to me.

C: I feel good about myself because I'm getting good grades… (E5).

c. Relationships of social control at school, reprimands, penalties: The younger children (Age A) also describe being involved in relationships of social control in school that are experienced as affecting their well-being characterized by reprimands and penalties, as the following quotes narrate:

I: … what else makes children feel bad?

C: … that they get suspended and all that (E3).

d. Relationships of social control at school, rules, commands and compelled expression: For the 14- and 15-year-old C&A, relationships of social control also have an impact on well-being. In their case this is characterized by being subject to rules, commands and constraints on their freedom. This is reported as experiences that provoke displeasure and a feeling of being oppressed, leading to conflicts at school as the following statements illustrate:

Table 2
Summarizing the main categories and differences by age.

SCHOOL and AGE			
Categories	10–11 age group subthemes (Age A)	14–15 age group subthemes (Age B)	Principal differences by age group
(1) Performance-based relationships at school	Relationships of academic demands, doing prescribed activities	Relationships of academic demands (grades) from school and parents	The younger children reported feeling overwhelmed by an excessive academic burden. The older children reported ill-being due to the demands of being evaluated and earning good grades.
	Relationships of social control at school, reprimands, penalties	Relationships of social control at school, rules, commands and compelled expression	The younger students mentioned their experiences of excessive demands and penalties. The older students report coercion, the loss of autonomous expression and a lack of liberty.
(2) Relationships of support (or lack thereof) from the adult world at school	Relationships with teachers that provide support/ care/ understanding	Relationships with amiable teachers who listen and support	Both age groups value the affective and instrumental support of their teachers. The older students highlight feeling emotionally connected to their teachers.
	Lack of confidence in relationships with teachers	Lack of confidence in relationships with teachers	Both ages lament a lack of trust in relationships with teachers.
(3) Relationships with teachers who facilitate (or fail to) learning	Entertaining and motivating learning relationships	Entertaining learning relationships that help one focus and feel good	Teaching-learning relationships that produce satisfaction for both age groups are those characterized as active, motivating and entertaining.
	Learning relationships that do not facilitate understanding	Learning relationships that do not facilitate understanding	Teaching-learning relationships that offer nothing to well-being according to both age groups are those that fail to facilitate understanding.
(4) Peer relationships that offer support, fun and friendship	Relationships with peers that provide support, understanding and affection	Getting along well, sharing interests and support among friends	Satisfactory peer relationships for both age groups are those that have ties of positive affect.
	Fun relationships of play with friends and playing in class	A sense of belonging and daily living with friends, classmates	The older participants refer more often to joining the social sphere, underscoring group belonging

(*continued on next page*)

Table 2 (*continued*)

SCHOOL and AGE			
Categories	10–11 age group subthemes (Age A)	14–15 age group subthemes (Age B)	Principal differences by age group
			and everyday socializing.
(5) Contentious peer relationships	Relationships of peer harassment Fighting with peers	Relationships of harassment and denunciation Fighting with peers Relationships of mistreatment, lack of affection and shared interests	Both age groups talk about mistreatment affecting their well-being. Mistreatment for the older students is described as a lack of affection, having no shared interests, and distrust.
(6) Relationships with the school as a whole	Friendship as one kind of relationship cultivated at school	Ties and friendships as relationships that are cultivated at school Opportunities and learning at school	Both age groups show that the well-being they experience is affected by the interactions that take place in the school overall. The older students also understand school as a space for opportunities for exploration, participation, education and related experiences.
(7) Relationships with the material conditions and physical environment of the school		Proximity of the school and home Nature and beauty Satisfactory spaces and furnishings at school	The older participants' experience of well-being is affected by interactions stemming from the socio-spatial conditions of school.

…*It's that* school *isn't a place where I feel good anymore, to put it like that, because it's not a place where I can feel free or be myself because school has a lot of rules. … I mean nobody likes to always be following rules. People want to feel free, like I do in my own room, … I feel oppressed sometimes (E6).*

There is a difference between the age groups in terms of the relational experiences with the academic demands that affect well-being. The younger children reported overwhelm from the academic load whereas the older children experienced ill-being caused by high demands for earning good grades. Furthermore, the connection between the discontent and relationships of control for the younger students is connected to experiences of being reprimanded and penalized; however, for the older students it is about coercion, a loss of autonomous expression and a lack of freedom.

2. "Relationships of support (or lack thereof) from the adult world at school" category: This describes the interactions with the adult world that provide or deny various kinds of developmental support that are relevant for the C&A study participants' life satisfaction.

For both the Age A and Age B groups, the adult world in the school setting is primarily represented by the figure of the teacher. Relationships with them are understood on a relational continuum that ranges from the teacher who provides support through their interactions to the kind that appears as a remote figure in which no trust can be placed.

a. Relationships with teachers that provide support/care/understanding: For the Age A group, a feeling of well-being is connected to those teachers capable of providing supervision, understanding and support who they experience as a protective agent that makes them feel cared for and understood.

I: … for example the relationship with teachers. How important is that for you? Does it seem important or not so much?

C: Yes, yes it's important, caring for them and they take care of you (E11).

b. Relationships with amiable teachers who listen and support: For the Age B participants, relationships with teachers that produce well-being are characterized by receiving support and feeling heard. They positively assess relationships with the teachers they consider to be "cool" when they perceive they are getting support for the concrete needs of their school lives as well as other affective and emotional aspects when they are being heard. Relationships they establish with head teachers seem especially relevant because they perceive them to always be concerned with their students' needs. They also value the establishment of interactions that let them get to know them as people, learn about them and develop positive shared emotions.

… Those teachers are the ones I think I get along with best because (…) we're like friends because we've known each other since we were quite young. They have known me since I was little, so they understand my quirks and whatnot. I don't know, to me they seem like good people (E20).

c. Lack of confidence in relationships with teachers: For both the Age A children and the Age B adolescents, the other pole of the relational continuum with the adult world is characterized by a lack of trust in relationships with teachers. This is depicted by one Age A child who states not knowing the teacher well, preventing the child from entrusting the teacher with school experiences.

I: And are you close to the teacher?

C: No, not that close.

I: No. Is there any trust there?

C: Not really, … I still don't know much about this new one……. I mean, I still don't know him well.

I: …and if you knew him better, that's the missing piece?

C: Yes (E2).

Affective and instrumental support exemplified as being caring, understanding and providing resources to meet needs are all aspects of relationships with teachers that play a positive role in well-being for both age groups. Trust in relationships is another aspect mentioned. However, for older students the most differentiating aspect is feeling emotionally connected with the teachers. In terms of affective exchange with teachers that promotes well-being, notable aspects include interactions that build closer relationships, getting to know each other on a more personal level and developing shared positive emotions.

3. "Relationships with teachers who facilitate (or fail to) learning" category: This describes how from the C&A understandings, well-being and life satisfaction are associated with the qualities of teaching and learning relationships with teachers at school. Diverting learning relationships are positively correlated for personal well-being for both age groups.

a. Entertaining and motivating learning relationships: For Age A children, these function as motivational triggers for learning.

… When we review everything we were going over, she makes characters, faces and stuff like that, a lot of fun things (E14).

b. Entertaining learning relationships for improved focus and feeling good: The Age B students say that this kind of relationship helps them focus and feel good. They show that their teachers' good humor and entertaining learning strategies are enjoyable and help them engage with the class contents.

… I enjoy some *teachers more than others, because they teach but they also tell jokes, so I pay more attention and get more involved in the class. After playing around a bit we start class and I feel more focused already, … I'm going to pay more attention to the teacher because if they're friendly and fun, I'll give my full attention (E20).*

c. Learning relationships that do not facilitate understanding: Both age groups identify with unsatisfactory learning relationships that impede understanding class contents. Age A children point out a lack of

concern with explaining the subjects well, which adds obstacles that inhibit learning.

… for example, I don't understand the way this teacher explains mathematics and I used to be good at math with the teacher I had before (E9).

For the Age B adolescents these relationships are characterized as affecting concentration in class and understanding the contents. The teens state that passive learning methodologies give rise to such effects, as shown in the following quotes:

… there are some teachers who don't know how to teach. They sit down and put up a slide and tell *you okay, this, this and this and they make an outline, and there's the textbook, and I can't concentrate like that (E7).*

Taking a comparative look at the experiences of both age groups, we see that the relationships of teaching and learning that create satisfaction are characterized as active, motivating and entertaining, without notable differences between the students aged 10 to 11 or 14 to 15.

4. "Peer relationships that offer support, fun and friendship" category: This describes participants' understandings that highlight the peer interactions (classmates and friends) that are important to their well-being characterized by experiencing affective and social connection in the school environment. Notably, this is the category with the greatest amount of variability between Ages A and B.

a. Relationships with peers that provide support, understanding and affection: For Age A children, relationships that produce satisfaction are those established with friends. They provide support, understanding and caring, exemplified through spending time together, being concerned about and paying attention to each other's needs, and helping and understanding one another.

… I have a friend who any time I need her, she helps me. So, whenever she needs helps, I help her, or we explain the things the other doesn't understand to each other, and we do that with several classmates (E11).

b. Getting along well, sharing interests and support among friends: For the Age B students, such relationships are described as having shared interests, getting along well and providing company. These features are expressed as the stability of having friends in the school setting, daily contact with them, dialogue, support reciprocity, and activities they do together outside of school.

… I can go to school because all of my friends are going to be there. When I get to class I know they're *going to be there and we'll keep talking. We'll keep making progress, I mean we'll keep mutually supporting each other in our schoolwork. Because at school more than assisting you, your friends are going to help you just be present at school. I'm proud that a friendship like that can help you while you're at school (E4).*

Additionally, for the Age A students these relationships are differentiated by offering entertainment and play, whereas for the Age B adolescents, they specifically describe the possibility of feeling they are part of something and sharing everyday life.

c. Fun relationships of play with friends and playing in class: Age A children value and associate well-being with being able to play with friends at school, which is exemplified in physical activities such as running during recess or playing in class, thus providing fun experiences.

… Yes, I feel a sense of well-being at school because I can have fun with my friends and classmates. I can play (E10).

d. A sense of belonging and daily living with friends, classmates: One of the most valued aspects in terms of well-being for the Age B participants is a sense of belonging to the peer group and sharing everyday experiences. Knowing that friends are present at school, engaging in activities outside of school, getting to know classmates and feeling comfortable with them, as well as the integration of every-one in the class are all expressions of feeling like they belong to a group of equals.

… My classmates are friendly and I also invite them over to my house or to go out. I think that's what I like most, that I spend a lot time with them outside of school, too (E20).

When comparing the experiences of both age groups as stated earlier, relationships with peers that produce satisfaction have the distinctive quality of being experienced as creating understanding and notably enable the exchange of affection, concern for each other, paying attention to each other's needs and understanding one another. In short, they are characterized by having ties of positive affect. However, for the 14- to 15-year-old group, while peer understanding is significant, the quality that sets them apart is about being part of something, sharing everyday experiences, and feeling like an integrated peer group participant. They make more references to engaging more with the social world and underscore group belonging and sharing everyday life.

5. "Contentious peer relationships" category: This describes understandings of peer interactions that negatively affect well-being, including experiences of harassment at school as one of the clearest examples of the emotional suffering this kind of incident generates. This category contains elements in common for both age groups, for example, experiences of bullying and fighting. There are other elements that specifically pertain to the Age B adolescents, such as mistreatment, a lack of affect, not having common interests, and the absence of trust.

a. Relationships of peer harassment: For Age A students, the experiences of ill-being with peers is characterized by systematic harassment expressed as verbal and physical aggression giving rise to emotional suffering and harm. A sense of impotence emerges as a result of such harassment, attended by resignation and feeling it is impossible to change the situation.

… Yes, it was a difficult time. They bullied me for two years, and when they started bullying me in third grade, I was hoping for, I wanted vacation to start, and to not have to see them again until the next year (E17).

b. Relationships of harassment and denunciation: The Age B students also describe school bullying as an experience of systematic harassment. This gives rise to a search for help from the adult world to prevent further bullying. Additionally, demonstrations of denunciation are organized (a "funa"; Chilean term for public acts of shaming and condemnation) in the event of sexual harassment cases. Based on participants' remarks, we submit that there is an active approach taken to denouncing and eliminating harassment in the school setting.

I: Which aspects of well-being do you relate to your school? Do you think the school impacts your well-being? If so, how?

C: Yes, I think it *does have an influence. I mean the thing about being at school, I've seen a number of "funas" because they denounced a teacher for harassment of a kid who's at this school, and of a graduate… (E15).*

c. Fighting with peers: Another element shared by the age groups relates to the experience of fighting among peers. For the Age A participants, such conflicts are transitory and may include interrupting communication with friends (pausing temporarily while the conflict lasts), anger, jealousy, and/or physical acts of aggression. These kinds of experiences are described by the Age A children as producers of ill-being.

… I don't recall very well, but I do remember which room we fought in, and we didn't want to talk to each other. This made me feel bad, and then, eh… A friend and I hit each other and… that's all. I felt bad (E2).

In the case of Age B participants, these conflicts are also temporary and are expressed as fights with friends and poor treatment. I: What do they do to you at home or in school that make you not feel so good?

… I don't know, at school there are people that sometimes I don't get on with. We fight, but in the end we patch everything up (E16).

d. Relationships of mistreatment, lack of affection and shared interests: As stated above, some distinguishing elements were identified by Age B including the experience of feeling uncomfortable with classmates, poor treatment, a lack of affection, the absence of shared interests and distrust as aspects that produce ill-being and affect self-esteem.

C: No, here (school), it's like being here brings me down…. It's like they're not. They don't support me, but they don't ignore me either. They stand there and give me nasty looks and try *to make me feel bad, stuff like that.*

I: That's bringing you down?

C: Yes, like they don't make me feel good or normal, and they stress me out (E7).

Comparative analysis shows that mistreatment affects well-being for both age groups. This includes harassment, verbal and physical aggression, emotional pain and fighting. However, additional elements are identified by the older students as relevant aspects impacting self-esteem, including a lack of affection, having no shared interests and mistrust.

6. "Relationships with school as a whole" category: This describes how participants' feel their well-being is affected by interactions that take place at school overall. Both age groups comprehend the school as a collective, broad and integrated space experienced as a whole where important everyday relationships and diverse needs are all cultivated.

a. Friendship as a kind of relationship cultivated at school: The Age A students value the school setting for the chance it provides to build friendships with equals, creating pleasant experiences and well-being together. To the contrary, when the school setting does not offer the chance to build friendships with others, school life does not lead to experiences of well-being.

I: (…) Why do you think that is? In what way do you feel good at school?

C: Because I have friends here, a lot of friends, and I feel comfortable here at school (E1).

b. Ties and friendships as relationships that are cultivated at school: For Age B, the school space is also valuable because of the opportunities for building relationships of respect, acceptance, fun and friendship among equals. This assessment includes the potential for interacting and creating connections with significant adult figures.

… *I honestly wouldn't know what to say. I think that ever since you're little they teach you to relate* to *your classmates in whatever manner, so you have your classroom, and the idea is that you get on well with them (E20).*

c. Opportunities and learning at school: The older students also positively assess the school insofar as it serves as a space that lets them explore a range of activities, access knowledge and learn new things.

C: What they (teachers)have us… They explain that the foundation is the subject, and they provide us knowledge and education.

I: And that makes you feel good.

C: Yes, because I learn, … (to learn) it's good (E5).

Comparing the two age groups shows that the well-being they experience is affected by the interactions that take place with the school as a whole. This serves as a collective and open space that nurtures and cultivates the peer friendships that are important to their experiences. They also have an appreciation of the affective links with the adult world at school, especially the teachers. A distinctive aspect particular to the older group is that school is a space that provides opportunities to explore and engage in various activities and to access knowledge and learning. Likewise, their understandings point to the importance of having opportunities to foster respectful and accepting relationships with peers, classmates, and teachers.

7. "Relationships with the material conditions and the physical environment of the school" category: This describes how participants view their experience of well-being as affected by interacting with the school's socio-spatial conditions.

This category addresses aspects related to the C&A's assessment of the "Proximity of the school and home" attribute as well as having well tended and aesthetically beautiful green spaces, part of the "Nature and beauty" attribute.

Satisfactory spaces and furnishings at school: They positively assess quality comfortable infrastructure, adequate physical spaces, and having furnishings that facilitate school life and the learning processes. In the absence of such conditions, the adolescents perceive that their school experience is impaired, and they form critical opinions of their educational establishments.

I: Regarding material items, how do you think the quality of physical surroundings affects your well-being?

C: I think it has a big effect.

I: Why?

C: Because there's a big difference between a school that remains consistently appealing compared to one that, I don't know, has a lot of nasty things written on the walls or when they can't be used for what they were designed for (E19).

This category was only found for Age B, in which the participants demonstrate the potential to assign value to the school's environment and the infrastructure. The younger children did not report this, showing that it may be that their well-being is less connected to an appreciation of this category.

5. Conclusions and discussion

The purpose of this research was to study the understanding of well-being described by Chilean children in terms of the relationships and interactions that are part of the school setting, and further differentiating how this varies by age. Another intention was to contribute to the idea of well-being that is understood as a contextually situated construction in which relationships and ties along with the needs that they meet are all important, while helping identify the continuities and discontinuities of such understandings by age.

The results show that from the voices of children in the school setting, well-being is first affected by the relationships that take place during the educational process between students and teachers in which the experience of the academic demands of schoolwork, the use of disciplinary and control systems, teaching methodologies, support and personal communication are all relevant. Secondly, the C&A understandings underscore the importance of the quality of relationships they build with peers when it comes to providing emotional support, conflict resolution methods and poor treatment (bullying). Thirdly, a positive experience with school as a whole that incorporates the interaction dynamics of various participants is conducive to well-being. It becomes a collective and open space that plays a key role in encouraging peer friendships and creating affective ties with the adult world, especially teachers. This is also where the socio-spatial conditions, infrastructure and habitability of the school all come into play.

These results coincide with previous research on the status of education in Chile that speaks of the impacts on well-being of the teacher-student relationship in the teaching–learning experience (Alfaro, et al. 2021; Ramírez-Casas del Valle and Alfaro 2018), having opportunities to meet and interact with peers and experiences of supporting and relying on friends, and the importance of feeling like active participants in their own learning processes (Alfaro, et al. 2021).

The results show that regarding understanding of well-being at school the two studied age groups present common elements, although they both have distinctive, heterogeneous traits as well. This provides evidence of the diversity and lack of total homogeneity of the experience of well-being during each life stage. From a cross-sectional perspective, we see that relationships that provide dynamics of care centered on the needs for protection, mutual affection and good treatment, that in general terms can be characterized as having positive affective ties, lead to a greater propensity for well-being in the younger group.

In contrast, the same relationship qualities that are important for the well-being of the younger students are also significant for the older ones. The distinction, however, for the latter group is that having relationships that enable autonomy, freedom of expression, and a sense of belonging, sharing daily lived experiences, feeling like an integrated participant with opportunities for and experiences of exploration and experimentation, and having relationships of respect and acceptance with peers, classmates and adults are all more dominant. The older participant refer significantly more often to engaging with the wider social world and underscore group belonging and sharing everyday life.

Another important differentiating factor that applies only to this age group is the value they place on having well tended and aesthetically beautiful green spaces that adds to their well-being. The same goes for the school infrastructure and learning processes. This aspect may also be closely connected to the opening up to the social world that happens during adolescence, which could lead to greater attention, appreciation

and awareness with respect to the physical, aesthetic and material conditions of the spaces where they learn and grow.

The entirety of these results adds to perspectives on well-being during childhood and adolescence that highlight the importance of contextual processes and dynamics in well-being. This study specifically helps lay out the particularities and dynamics of the school setting in which the C&A develop (Sandin, 2014; Carrillo et al., 2021). It has also obtained results that are in the same line of work that position academic achievement as a relevant dimension for well-being at school (Thoilliez; 2011), revealing how a lack of leisure time, pressure and stress affect well-being (Cho & Chan, 2020). Likewise, it corroborates studies that attach importance to the quality of relationships with teachers and learning processes for well-being (Huynh & Stewart-Tufescu, 2019). It also depicts, as do other reports, the importance of teaching and learning methodologies, and pedagogical practices in school (Ramírez-Casas del Valle & Alfaro, 2018) and in general the need to bear in mind the framework of social practices that guide and organize relationships among school system members and participants (Wyn, et al., 2014).

These results also serve to complement prior work that reports friendship as a key dimension of satisfaction for school students (Cuadros & Berger, 2016). Relationships with classmates, the skills and abilities of communication and affective exchange are all crucial for well-being (Blaskova & McLellan, 2017). The negative effects of mistreatment at school in contrast with the positivity of relationships of belonging and group membership are also instrumental (Oyarzún-Gómez & Loazia de la Pava, 2019). Furthermore, these results contribute in the same way as research that highlights the importance of a sense of belonging at school for C&A's well-being, and the effects of secure belongingness and a sense of community as resources for improving student welfare (Prati et al., 2018).

The results also coincide with the work of Joing and Potdevin (2019) who report how student well-being varies as a function of the quality of an educational establishment's facilities and the learning space they provide. It also runs parallel to Loureiro and collaborators (2019) who show that the school infrastructure functions as one of the key promoters of physical well-being. Being close to nature and having green spaces are also important in the school setting.

One very important result of this study is the contribution it makes to the discussion around the idiosyncratic dynamics of well-being by age. Evidence is provided that the various evolutionary phases of each stage of life are different and not uniform with respect to well-being (González-Carrasco et al., 2016; Shek & Liang, 2018). Evidence is also furnished on the types of relationships that affect the well-being of C&A at school in each age group under study, highlighting that there are common and shared elements in each age group, along with distinctive and non-homogeneous features between both ages. Specifically, it is reported that for younger participants, relationships offering care that is focused on protection needs, affectionate exchanges, and proper treatment have a greater impact on their well-being. However, for the older participants, relationships that favor autonomy and freedom of expression take on a greater relevance, as well as relationships that promote feelings of being involved and participating in everyday school activities in which there are opportunities to explore and experiment. Establishing respectful relationships and having the acceptance of other school system members, both peers and adults, are notably important as well.

Such findings contribute to the understanding of the dynamics associated with the downward trend of well-being during the transition from childhood to adolescence, as reported in the literature (Goldbeck, et al., 2007; Chui & Wong, 2016; Lee & Yoo, 2015; Bălţătescu, 2014; González-Carrasco et al., 2016; Shek & Liang, 2018). As we have pointed out, this decline is related to lower levels of satisfaction with school, as previously studied in a number of countries (Liu, et al., 2016; Shek & Liang, 2018). Hence, the results of this study improve the assessment and understanding of the magnitude of subjective changes, and especially contribute to the debate on relational dynamics and the distinctive qualities of life events that can affect these downward trends in C&A well-being.

These results cannot be generalized to other populations or socio-cultural contexts because our specific aim was to research a particular socio-cultural reality in a given educational setting, as is the case of a school in Chile. Here challenges are observed in relation to a significant focus on student achievement compared to student well-being (Varela et al., 2020) and significant levels of inequality. (Cornejo, 2006; Valenzuela et al., 2010).

In methodological terms, it's important to consider the possibility that conducting the interviews at the schools could have affected the participants' responses. It was impossible to do them elsewhere because of accessibility issues. As a mitigation measure, the interviews were held in locations at schools that were set up to be as comfortable and private as possible.

Lastly, it is important to recognize that a key limitation of this work is that these results cannot be generalized to other populations or socio-cultural contexts. This is due to the fact that we studied a specific socio-cultural reality in a given educational setting, namely particular schools and neighborhoods in Chile. Nevertheless, we believe it contributes toward future studies in this area precisely because the experience of well-being is constituted within the relational framework where it is situated (Wyn, et al., 2014). This way of approaching the phenomenon can provide key information about schools and the experiences that take place there, and the age-related changes that would be useful for making pertinent decisions to increase C&A well-being. Another pending task of this work is to analyze the variations in their understandings of well-being in connection with other highly relevant variables such as the socioeconomic level of the students and their schools as well as the students' gender.

Given the context, one key limitation of this study is that only two age groups were addressed, thus posing an open-ended question as to how student understandings of school and the relevant aspects of their life contexts overall may vary in younger and/or older age groups. Studying the understandings of different age groups is still pending, giving special attention to how these vary as one progresses through childhood and into adolescence. It is therefore necessary to advance in the study of these dimensions including different age groups ideally by longitudinally monitoring different cohorts of students.

Another limitation of this study relates to the analysis strategies employed. This aspect of study could be strengthened if triangulation methodologies are included that incorporate a greater diversity of data production techniques such as group techniques, social immersion techniques such as ethnographic techniques, or active techniques, such as photovoice or the like. Progress is also pending around strengthening the quality of the findings by conducting an audit of the analyses and results with the participation of the child and adolescent study participants.

Despite these limitations, we do believe this study helps advance the research that addresses the issue precisely because the experience of well-being is constituted within the framework of the relationships where it develops. The well-being experience is a phenomenon inscribed in the dynamics of relational exchange specific to a given context (White, 2017).

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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