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Caring leadership in early childhood education in Chile: tensions from a highly gendered context

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ABSTRACT

Educational leadership at early childhood education (ECE) has been extensively studied. However, evidence from Chile is still scarce. As with many parts of the world, the ECE workforce is very female-heavy and Chile is no exception to this. This situation presents an intriguing context for leadership studies as particularities of a gendered role for women as leaders in Chile has not been a matter of analysis. Leadership in ECE includes a sense of vocation or 'passion' for children's care, development, and learning, called caring leadership. This concept highlights an ethical component, interpersonal relations and a concern for the well-being. This article presents the findings of a three-year study involving 12 women leaders in ECE who established a Professional Learning Community. They were interviewed throughout the research. Findings reveal three tensions. Firstly, leadership is associated with a maternal role, perpetuating gender stereotypes. The second tension addresses the dynamics of personal connections within ECE teams in terms of asymmetry or horizontality. The third tension arises from the significance of caring as a crucial aspect of working in ECE education. These tensions underscore the need for a critical analysis of leadership in ECE, as gender considerations may overlook the complexity of the leaders' role.

Introduction

While leadership studies have historically been dominated by masculine codes in the labour market, where authoritarian styles and competition are valued characteristics of leaders, the early childhood education (ECE) level stands out with its almost exclusively female workforce, including their leaders (Siraj-Blatchford and Hallet 2014; Subsecretaría de educación parvularia 2021a). Also, ECE has specific features that differentiate it from other educational levels, and two of these characteristics are particularly relevant for leadership

practice: close relationships with families and communities, and a holistic curriculum that includes cognitive, but also socioemotional aspects (Cherrington and Loveridge 2014).

In this scenario, both international and recent Chilean literature have identified three key features of ECE leadership. Firstly, the distribution of tasks is crucial for leaders to ensure the fulfilment of all the requirements necessary for the smooth functioning of the educational centre. This promotes a trustworthy and participatory environment (Falabella et al. 2022; Heikka et al. 2021; Sisson et al. 2021), showing that distributed leadership is central in ECE (Fonsén et al. 2019). A second characteristic refers to the development of strong engagement with families and territorial networks, with the aim of aligning education and caregiving practices (Siraj-Blatchford and Hallet 2014). This leadership style is known as holistic leadership (Heikkinen, Ahtiainen, and Fonsén 2022; Hujala and Eskelinen 2013), which involves fostering robust/strong relationships that extend beyond mere educational aspects. It also encompasses the protection of children's rights and their holistic care from a compassionate perspective, considering the well-being of families and staff members (CIAE 2018; Halpern, Szecsi, and Mak 2021; Siraj-Blatchford and Hallet 2014). In this line, the third feature encompasses the ethics of care that underpin holistic leadership and situate the physical and emotional well-being of the community as central to leadership practices (CIAE 2018; Hujala and Eskelinen 2013; Siraj-Blatchford and Hallet 2014).

The study of leadership from a gender perspective at the ECE level has been conducted for the past 30 years (Ailwood 2007; Henderson-Kelly and Pamphilon 2000; Jayne 2006). However, most of this literature has been produced in Europe or English-speaking countries (Scrivens 2002). In Chile, there are only a few studies reported on ECE leadership (Cabrera-Murcia 2021; CIAE 2018; Opazo et al. 2023), and only one that explicitly focuses on aspects related to ECE leadership and gender (Falabella et al. 2022). This fact presents an interesting area for leadership studies, as the particularities of gendered roles for women as leaders in Chile have not been extensively analysed.

It is interesting to note that these leadership styles have been increasingly valued and promoted in different labour contexts, because they foster better organisational climate and contribute to workforce productivity and commitment (Cáceres, Sachicola, and Hinojo 2015). This has implied that these styles are seen as intrinsically positive, although they are still considered more linked to naturally feminine characteristics that could challenge the dominant codes in managerial and masculinist leadership contexts (Hazegh 2019).

From a gender perspective, the sense of vocation or 'passion' for the care, development, and learning of children within ECE leadership can be problematic for women leaders if it is assumed uncritically. This uncritical assumption can reinforce and naturalise gendered attributes that have traditionally been associated with work in ECE, where discourses related to gender, class, and

race can undermine the status of leaders (Falabella et al. 2022; Poblete 2020). This is particularly relevant in the Chilean context where images of gender and class of ECE leaders are also highly associated with religious images of women characterised by self-sacrifice and devotion (Galdames-Castillo 2017; Poblete 2020). As with many parts of the world, the ECE workforce is very female-heavy and Chile is no exception to this. Bearing in mind that ECE in Chile is the educational level with the highest percentage of women labour force participation (Subsecretaría de Educación Parvularia 2021a), it is fundamental to critically analyse the discursive structures that underlie these perceptions, and that might be reproducing stereotypical conceptions of gender.

Research from Chile shows that gender stereotypes are present in ECE practices in the classroom, but also in how that educational level is organised and led (Azúa, Lillo, and Saavedra 2019; Falabella et al. 2022).

In Chile, a stereotypical discourse about gender has prevailed, assuming that children will naturally identify with their gender as a result of socialisation, and will eventually learn to be men or women (Ramírez-Pereira et al. 2019). Although ECE teachers in Chile are aware of the gender complexities in society, especially those that have arisen from social movements (Cardenas Olavarría and López 2022; Rodriguez et al. Forthcoming), the binary sex/gender system remains entrenched, making it challenging to alter their practices despite their beliefs (Azúa, Lillo, and Saavedra 2019).

Leadership practices are closely intertwined with hierarchical and power dynamics, particularly in relation to gender struggles. Women have been traditionally situated in a position of less power, even in leadership roles (Jiménez González 2016). In ECE, the symbolic power displayed by the leader is less valued, due to gender stereotypes that predominate in this area (Ailwood 2007; Falabella et al. 2022; Opazo et al. 2023). This particular context, described both worldwide and in Chile, emerges as an original place to understand how gender roles are reproduced, resisted, and negotiated from leadership practices. As a result, the research question was formulated as follows: What are the tensions in leadership practices in ECE from a gender perspective?

Conceptual framework and the Chilean context

ECE leadership and gender

Leadership is a socially constructed, situational, and interpretive phenomenon (Waniganayake 2014). Thus, and in the same way that it has been recognised at the school level, leadership in ECE represents a key element in the quality of learning for children (Douglass 2019; Fonsén et al. 2019; Waniganayake 2014).

The features of ECE leadership – distributed, holistic and sustained by the ethic of care – are critical for the well-being of children, their families, and the

pedagogical team (CIAE 2018; Hazegh 2019; Siraj-Blatchford and Hallet 2014). However, these are simultaneously a risk for the professional status of ECE leaders due to the naturalisation of these practices as feminine (Falabella et al. 2022). Studies have shown that emotional and caring practices are strongly associated with feminine codes and therefore subordinated to masculine codes such as strength, rationality, or efficiency (Osgood, 2012). This is especially evident within the Chilean ECE context where ECE is nearly exclusively a women's work. The annual report from the Chilean Minister of Education in 2022 shows that 99.9% of the people working in ECE are women and that only three men work as EC teachers in Chile (Subsecretaría de educación parvularia 2022).

In this context, a maternal role has been traditionally attributed to women, who would 'naturally' have the skills to educate and care for young children (Wise and Wright 2012). This discourse has hindered the profession's social value since professional skills are assumed to be something naturally developed by those who work in the field, practically all of them women, and therefore it is supposed that no further professional education would be required (Dalli 2008). In addition, in Chile, this social construction is accompanied by a lower social value towards the ECE educators in comparison with their primary or secondary teaching colleagues (Elige Educar 2019). This is also reflected in ECE teachers working in precarious conditions, including high workload, high child–adult ratio (Elige Educar 2019; Pardo and Adlerstein 2015), and the worst salaries and contractual conditions of the educational system in the country (OECD 2019; Pardo and Adlerstein 2015) which contributes to questioning the professional nature of ECE teachers.

Likewise, ECE teachers have an aversion to occupying formal leadership positions that place them above the pedagogical team, as this style is traditionally associated with a more masculine leadership approach (Cáceres, Sachicola, and Hinojo 2015). Thus, once they assume these positions, women ECE leaders do so with feelings of guilt and shame, manifesting behaviours that return them to a horizontal position with the rest of the team. In this way, the figure of 'machine women' or 'super managers' who fulfil all kinds of functions with high levels of self-demand is built (Carrasco 2020; White 2021).

Although this may seem contradictory to the distributed leadership characteristic of ECE, the distribution of tasks allows for a more horizontal organisation that fits with the professional culture of ECE teachers. Indeed, in a sense of equalising the conditions of power, leaders can share part of their attributions with educators either through tasks' distribution among those who make up the centre's management team, or the subrogation of the headteacher's role when the leader is absent (Cáceres, Sachicola, and Hinojo 2015; Douglass 2019). In line with the gender perspective, the distributed style has been associated increasingly with feminine characteristics, since its exercise requires strong interpersonal skills, such as communication and active listening, generation of relational

trust, among others that have traditionally been assigned to women (White 2021).

However, despite the social devaluation towards ECE leadership gendered feminine practices, its features have shown to be the most effective in relation to learning, since they have positive effects in generating a shared vision, and focus on learning, relational trust, well-being of the pedagogical staff, collaboration between teachers, formation of professional learning communities, empowerment of educators, and the emergence of intermediate leadership (Carrasco 2020; Douglass 2019).

Nonetheless, even though a biassed view towards care practices at the ECE level persists, in the international literature, the concept of leadership in ECE has transitioned towards a more postmodern paradigmatic vision, which highlights the changing, non-linear, and complex nature of leadership from a feminist, post-structuralist, and postcolonial perspective (Nicholson et al. 2020). In Chile, this transition has not yet been part of the discussion. For Robson (2013) the leadership practices of women in ECE represent a creative subversion of the official leadership culture, as they show an ability to deal with complexity, ethical dilemmas, and the need to adapt. In fact, the evidence is clear in pointing out that the predominant perception among women who lead ECE centres refutes the more commercial, business, and traditionally masculine models of leadership, supporting the importance of the ethics of care, commitment to the local community and families and well-being as the centre of socio-emotional relations (Elwick et al. 2018). In Chile these features are also observed in the ECE leaders, for example, Cabrera-Murcia (2021) highlight that creating places of positive relationships are among the main responsibilities reported by participants. Likewise, Falabella et al. (2022) evidence that the dominant leadership style in Chilean ECE is a caring leadership in which ethics of care are at the core of the work. Therefore, when female directors are exposed to exercising a more traditional leadership, they tend to reject their authoritarian exercise (McMahon 2016), and may even decline their jobs (Karaoglu 2020).

Thus, to take a leadership position in ECE represents the intention to make a difference in children's education, even if this means working in an undervalued and misunderstood environment, with little emotional, financial, and professional support (Poblete 2020). This sacrificial action is linked to the maternalisation of professional roles in the field of ECE and the devaluation of their exercise due to the fact of being women (Wise and Wright 2012). With this in mind, post-structuralist feminist theories provide an opportunity to rethink leadership in ECE by problematising power relations that circulate in dominant and institutionalised discourses. In order to analyse power relations, focusing on marginalised groups allows one to visualise the hidden aspects of the ways dominant discourses are constructed. Thus, focusing on women in leadership roles highlights the existence of dominant masculine ideals in leadership and suggests new alternatives to conceptualise leadership in ECE (Davis, Krieg, and Smith 2015).

Chilean context

Chile has been acknowledged as a leader in ECE in Latin America, since the country has an extensive tradition in early childhood teacher education that started in the early 1920s (Pardo and Woodrow 2014; Peralta 2011). In the last 20 years, there has been an increase in public investment in education and care for children (Peralta 2011). This situation coexists with a context of neoliberalism that promotes early schooling, with a focus on the development of basic skills of literacy and numeracy, ignoring key elements of this level, like a play-based-pedagogy (Pardo and Woodrow 2014).

Provision of ECE in Chile is mixed, private, and state funded under a voucher system (Barco and Carrasco 2020). On the one hand, there are two state organisations funded by the Ministry of Education that oversee ECE centres: JUNJI (National Board of Early Childhood Programmes) and Fundación Integra. On the other hand, there are subsidised ECE centres and schools that are part of the ECE system. Only 5% of ECE is privately funded (Subsecretaría Educación Parvularia 2021a).

ECE in Chile comprises children under school age, from birth to six years old. Children are mainly organised in three levels by age: 0–2 (nurseries/sala cuna), 2–4 (Day care centres/nivel medio), and 4–6 (kindergarten/nivel transición), but in some educational centres there are children from mixed ages. Only the education for 5–6 years old children is mandatory and universal (Ministerio de Educación 2018). Besides, educational centres that provide ECE should have an official certification. ECE teachers are in the process of joining the System of Teacher Career, which implies an improvement in salaries and in opportunities for professional development.

There is a national curriculum for the ECE level, as well as national regulations for quality as the National Framework for Good Teaching in Early Years Education (Subsecretaría de Educación Parvularia 2019). Recently, a National Framework for Good Management and Leadership for ECE was released by authorities. This document provides an orientation to ECE leaders and describes good practices and personal resources that will facilitate the achievement of educational goals (Subsecretaría de Educación Parvularia 2021).

Methodology

This research uses a qualitative approach that contributes to the subjective reconstruction of the research topic (Denzin and Lincoln 2018), and was part of a three-year broader research about collaborative learning in ECE teachers. A single case-study approach was used (Yin 2014), with a Professional Learning Community (PLC) formed with 12 EC teachers as the case under study. This PLC met the criteria defined by Hord (2009) to establish a PLC as a collaborative space for professional development. They met regularly one day a month, for

five years (2015–2019). Participants were 12 EC teachers, aged on average 34 years old with, at least, a 4-year university degree, who worked as headteachers for 6 years on average (between 1 and 14 years), and as ECE teachers for 10 years on average (from 4 to 24 years). They were employed by the same state institution, formed as a non-profit foundation, which enrolled children from 84 days of age until five years, from families living in vulnerable socioeconomic situations. All of the participants were women, due to the highly feminisation of ECE workforce in Chile. Data were collected by semi-structured interviews (Taylor & Bogdan, 2000) lasting between 30 and 45 min, considering teachers' perceptions about their role as leaders, and the organisation and dynamics of PLC. Data collected during year 1 (2017) was mainly focused on how PLC worked; while year 2 and 3 (2018/2019) addressed leadership practices and how they transferred their PLC' work into their educational centres. Every year, the PLC chose four participants to be interviewed with a total of 12 interviews during the three-year study. Participants signed an informed consent that included authorisation to record interviews and ensured confidentiality and protection of the information obtained.

These data were analysed, at first, in a descriptive way through an open coding process using a thematic content analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). General results were shared with participants in order to validate initial interpretations. Then, a second interpretative analysis was carried out, defining tensions that emerged from a gender perspective, considering the codes extracted in the initial phase. All this procedure was carried out with the support of the NVivo 12 software. All the transcripts were read and reread, individually and collectively, to obtain patterns in the data and support the identification of codes, allowing the triangulation of information (Guba 1989). Categories and codes emerged, both deductively and inductively. From the interpretive analysis, tensions were built from a gender perspective. These tensions were collectively analysed and discussed, using extracts of the data translated from Spanish to English.

Results

The results are presented in a descriptive and interpretive analytical way. The first is based on quotes from the participants, and the second is expressed in terms of tensions that emerged from the analysis of leadership in ECE from a gender perspective. This section presents how each of the three tensions frames the leadership of ECE within gender stereotypes that are permanently reproduced in the Chilean educational system.

Disputing the professional and the personal: leadership as motherhood

Participants perceived their role as leaders with an emphasis on features typically identified as feminine attributes. One of the headteachers describes her

role in the PLC as a mother, using the image of motherhood widely as a metaphor of their role in the context of the PLC:

> The girls see me like a mum, (because of) my personal characteristics. I care about the details and I like that people feel welcome (because) if everyone feels comfortable then all of us are going to be better. (María, 2018)[1]

In this quote, the headteacher explicitly refers to the image of 'a mum' arguing that the PLC perceives her as such because of her personal characteristics.

From this metaphor, the first tension arises from the dichotomy between professional and personal attributes that leaders assume this role entails. The former are related to specialised knowledge and skills that are acquired through training and working experience, which have been associated to masculine attributes (Elwick et al. 2018), while ECE leaders associate the latter as personality attributes and are assumed as characteristics that are not learned but are inherent to themselves as women.

This metaphor is reinforced by well-being being a priority for all the participants, either in the PLC or at their own educational centres, and these personal attributes are considered as an expectation for the work at the educational centre. For the ECE teacher quoted below, this was an insight about the complexities of her role.

> Building a team is crucial. When I realised that and the fact that it was my responsibility to do that, the way we interact changed. I began to generate more spaces for us to get to know each other, and for the team self-care (…) I paid more attention to making the others feel good. Not just that they would work well, but feel good. (Doris, 2018)

Within this image of the leader as a mother, these women build their authority through their affection and focusing on the emotional needs of the group. For these leaders ensuring the community's well-being was a priority and these personal attributes were valued as an expectation for the work at the nursery.

This tension is also explicitly expressed in the shift from a focus on the efficiency or productivity to the well-being of the group. The creation of loving and caring environments is expected to be a condition for professional learning and headteachers consider it a critical part of their role. Personal attributes such as closeness, affection, empathy, and proactivity in making others feel welcome were the main resources that ECE leaders identified as helpful to build safe, trusting, and affective spaces at the workplaces, associating their leadership to motherhood. Within this image of the leader as mother these women built their authority through, on the one hand, expressing affection and focusing on the emotional needs of the group, and on the other hand, being firm in setting norms and a fair work structure to solve problems in the workplace.

Participants expressed that the main role of the leader was in caring for and nurturing children, by focusing on children's needs:

> We work with families, (I) have to have certain skills such as knowing how to listen, understand, empathise, sometimes with adults and also with children. One has to know to empathise, as a team and as headteacher, one has to be available (…) for any dimension that the team and the family would need. This is based on developing skills that are not taught at the university and are not theoretical either, (…) because these are skills that depend on how one gets to know people. (Andrea, 2018)

In that sense, the image of motherhood perpetuates feminine gender stereotypes that value the private role of women in society, and the historically naturalised relationship between women and children, which assumes that women are predisposed to raise and care for children. In turn, this assumes an image of children as dependent, vulnerable, and innocent that requires special care, love, and attention.

Participants also identified a broader idea of care, that is not only concerned about children's needs but also includes developing a mother–child relationship with their team and families and had to juggle their priorities, interests, and needs. In order to do so, ECE leaders worked to provide safe spaces, developing trust and communication within the group. This concern about the team's well-being was observed both at the PLC and in the work of headteachers within the educational centres. However, in some cases this type of relationship created dynamics that could 'infantilise' the (female) adult and undermine the authority of the leader. In this situation ECE headteacher observed herself as a mother who had to care and direct her team, moving from a place of managerial authority to a familiar role.

> It is my main challenge, it's not that I can't work with adults, but I need to make the adults (…) understand that this is a job, that has objectives and that I am not their mum, and that I can't solve their problems. And those things are beyond my power. (Marisa, 2019)

Within a mother's role leaders' professionalism and authority are undermined as they are valued not by their professional competences and experiences but by their personal attitudes naturalised as feminine. In the case of the quote above, this headteacher expresses a tension between her personal and professional features as the expectations about solving other people's personal problems are not related to her role, her professional knowledge, or skills but rely on her personal attitudes, as being seen as a mum. This puts this woman at the constant risk of disappointment or not fulfilling the expectations of the group, which could mean being considered as not a good leader in this community.

Asymmetry or horizontality: distrust and fear of bonding

In this study, headteachers highlight not only how building trust allows for partnership rather than asymmetric relationships and that this is valued in itself as a familial and affective bonding. However, this is also acknowledged as a mechanism to deal with the difficulties at work.

> It is a leadership centred in the team, trying to validate what they know and support them in participating in the different tasks at the nursery, by asking for their opinions whenever it is possible. There are some things (in which I need to be) more direct, but in others we all contribute and the girls are quite motivated and used to being taken into account and being recognised for their talents. Leadership is centred on them, on listening to them. (Patricia, 2018)

Leaders identified themselves as equals and part of the teams of educators. Being close to each other and establishing horizontal relationships is seen as a way of validation within the community and therefore they made an explicit effort to listen to their team's opinions and motivations, as was revealed by the headteacher in the quote below.

> Educators and especially the headteachers' role is quite lonely, we make decisions by ourselves. In contrast, when you have a vision of community you can make decisions supported by your community, and you can say (to them): 'how do you think that I can handle this better' and this helped me to believe that I'm not alone, to trust others and to know that creating affective bonds is useful also as support on management roles, because you only rely on your closest people when something is becoming difficult for you. (Patricia, 2018)

Furthermore, horizontal relationships are characterised by considering others as equals, part of a team, and working in a network. Thus the expression of affection, the genuine concern for others, and the importance of caring are crucial elements in daily work.

> I think that (the PLC) promotes this vision of wanting to build with others, of trusting in what my, or our team says, trusting that here they are trained to learn and to do. Leadership is more about recognising others' motivations, skills and from there start building within the nursery. (Andrea, 2018)

From these results, a second tension emerged highlighting the contrasts between hierarchical relationships, that have historically been praised in traditional leadership styles, and building horizontal relationships, which are characteristics of holistic leadership. The former style is associated with masculine attributes such as prioritising rationality, efficiency, and control, whereas the latter is related to what are naturalised as feminine attributes such as emotionality and horizontal relationships.

Participants in this study widely stressed the importance of building a team. The idea is that each person would play a role and the main role of the headteacher would be to envision which person of the team would be best suited for each task. The purpose was to build a trusting and safe environment in which each one could deploy their role in the best way possible.

It is interesting to note that, although placing caring and emotions at the centre of the leadership role is highly valued by leaders and the team, headteachers also struggle to be considered as the leader outside the team by other members of the community because of the horizontal relationships. Caring

for others and horizontal relationships have been considered 'feminine attri-butes' and therefore assumed as natural in the work of women in positions of power (Comas d'Argemirr 2016). However, this naturalisation of these character-istics as feminine critically disempower ECE headteachers, creating a tension with the vertical and rational image of the leader. This struggle is critical in ECE leadership and ECE headteachers and it is closely related with the third tension.

Building affective and caring relationships in the workplace

As stated in the previous section, ECE headteachers tend to promote horizontal relationships and caring environments in the workplace:

> I care about the details, the little things and they would say 'aww that is Maria!' because of how affectionate I can be. (Maria, 2018)

This quote also illustrates that this way of working with others is an inherent aspect of their personalities and therefore as something external to their role or as a value added that they bring with them. They recognised the importance of emotionally supporting their team and promoting spaces of self-care, as the participants below expressed.

> I started to generate more moments to get to know each other, for (group) self care (…) I paid more attention so that the others could also feel good. Not only that they work well, but that they would feel good. (Doris, 2018)

> (it is important that) if you feel bad or sad you could share and say so, and you could talk to us if you feel overwhelmed. I try to promote self care with the team taking a bit of all that (we learned at PLC). (Patricia, 2018)

The third tension found in this study is related to the struggle of ECE leaders between building affective and caring relationships in the workplace and being concerned about efficiency and the execution of the multiple tasks that imply working in ECE.

The relevance of caring in the ECE workplace is tensioned by the understand-ing of ECE as a feminine task. The need to be taken care of and being cared for, permanently reproduces gender stereotypes around those who take care of others. This is directly related to the image of the leader as a mother that was discussed in the first tension, stressing the emotional commitment, nurturing, and caring attitudes as part of their identities. In contrast, the processes of plan-ning, managing, and executing the tasks to run an educational centre appear, as something rational and learned through specialisation and practice in the field.

This dichotomy between caring-personal and rational-specialist perpetuates gender stereotypes by which women are naturalised as caring and nurturing, while rationality and efficiency are seen as masculine attributes (Osgood, 2012). In the highly feminised field of ECE, caring for others has been highly

valued in Chilean and international research, as a critical aspect of the work, an essential element that must be at the core of the relationships built with children and among practitioners (Jayne 2010; Opazo et al. 2023; Poblete 2020). Likewise, ECE leaders who participated in the study stressed that caring practices with their team allowed them to create better interactions with children as well as among practitioners.

This tension was also evident in the participation of ECE leaders in their PLC. In that context, ECE leaders had reflected about the relevance of care and the tension interpreted, not by prioritising one aspect of this dichotomy, but by making visible the relevance of promoting care within their workplaces recognising it as a central element of human interactions, as mentioned by the headteachers below

> (Self care spaces) have allowed us to bond and generate trusting attachment to each other (…) The trusting bonds allow for better reflections. (Doris, 2018)

> '(Some) times we are very overwhelmed and this is a space (PLC) to say 'this is happening to me' and there we give each other advice, we talk … '. (Marisa, 2017)

> 'the PLC is a space we all look forward to every month because it is a space where I will be able to relieve our ideas'. (Beatriz, 2017)

This quote reveals how some participants were reclaiming care as a core practice in ECE. Caring is not only related to their personal attributes but in connection with the tasks involved in working with people, and therefore is a skill that needs to be developed in relation to the context and the work. This minimises the gap between learned and innate attributes. Care is seen as a basic human need and therefore essential to the diverse activities of working with people. This rationale is part of the identity of PLCs and the possibility of care and self-care becoming a feature in ECE leadership that promotes team well-being in contrast with the traditional leadership styles that instrumentalises care narrowing its practice to particular contexts, places, and subjects.

Discussion

Drawing from a gender perspective, this paper has discussed three main tensions that shape the leadership role of Chilean headteachers. The first tensions positioned headteachers as mothers highlighting personal characteristics of warmth and emotional commitment with children and the ECE communities. The professional knowledge and skills these headteachers performed were permanently conditioned by these attributes that are naturalised as feminine and innate. Closely related to the image of the mother, a second tension showed that ECE headteachers tend to promote horizontal relationships with practitioners, emphasising the importance of being close and building affective bonds. However, this made their authority invisible within the group and

especially with members of the educational community. The third finding demonstrated the tension between the critical place of care in ECE leadership against the concern for the more rational and specialised aspects of working as headteachers in Chile. Participants placed care at the core of the work in this field and as a key element to promote good relationships. However, caring practices perpetuated gender stereotypes associating women as natural carers of young children.

This last tension is key as it allows for a holistic view that links the three tensions presented in this paper and indicates the challenge of highlighting the importance of caring and well-being as human needs and conditions for working professionally, as shown by participants in this study. However, within the highly feminised ECE field caring and emotional commitment to the need for care perpetuates gender stereotypes around those who need it -who will be seen as vulnerable, dependent, and childish – , and those who provide care – stigmatised as feminine and as mothers. This naturalisation of care as feminine is dangerous and has implied the deprofessionalisation of ECE headteachers and situates care as an accessory element of their work. In turn, this deprofessionalisation implies a continuous struggle for professional recognition as ECE leaders (Carrasco 2020).

These findings are aligned with recent research that has shown the importance of caring and emotional work in ECE. For example, in Chile Falabella et al. (2022) have shown that ECE headteachers deploy a leadership centred in people's well-being which is considered as a double-edge sword as although it is coherent with the nature of the work in ECE and brings benefits for their professional identity, it also perpetuates gender stereotypes that undermine their professionalism. This research indicated the continuous struggle of ECE leaders to be acknowledged for their professional attributes instead of their social-emotional dispositions. However, it is interesting to note that ECE leaders who have participated in this PLC acknowledge that learning to make caring practices visible and including them explicitly within their management strategies have allowed them to promote collaboration, trust, and build better teamwork in the workplace. This is recognised by them as a specialisation of caring practices that merges the personal into the professional dimension of their work allowing them to reflect and improve their leadership. However, although, some formal requirements regarding team well-being are addressed in the National Framework of ECE Leadership (Subsecretaría de Educación Parvularia 2021), this research likely reflects the participants' perception based on their community experience, where they perceive it as a safe place where they care for one another. As mentioned earlier, this aspect of ECE leadership is complex due to the potential reinforcement of women's role as exclusive caregivers. Nevertheless, they acknowledge the relevance of caring for each other, demonstrating a broader understanding of care. Besides, these caring functions have not yet been examined as EC leadership attributes.

Limitations of this study are related to the context and the data collection. The first one is linked to the nature of a case study approach, where particularities of a case are analysed in depth. This research was carried out in a Latin American country, which makes these results not generalisable to other contexts. Besides, due to the particular features of Chile, where only one percent of ECE workforce corresponds to men, it is difficult to include male's perspective about this issue and we acknowledge that women are not representative of all ECE female leaders, but due to the Chilean context, it is not possible to include male headteachers. About the data collection, these results were part of a broader study that focused on PLC and the way that leadership emerged as a practice in that context. Besides, gender perspective was an analytic tool used in order to interpret data. In that context, data might be limited by the focus of the original study, and other sources of information might be included to have a deeper perspective of the topics. For example non-participatory observation or ethnographic method might be included in order to understand the way that leadership practices are enacted in a gendered context, like ECE settings in Chile.

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Note

1. Participants were identified by pseudonym

Disclosure statement

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