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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.

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Professionalism; caring leadership; gender; early childhood education

## 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