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School leaders' perceptions, practices and aspirations about schoolification in ECEC

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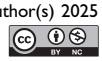

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María-José Opazo
Universidad de Chile, Chile

Marcela Pardo
Universidad de Chile, Chile

Pablo Rupin
Universidad de O'Higgins, Chile

Sergio Galdames
Universidad de Santiago de Chile, Chile

Abstract

This paper explores school leaders' perspectives on Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) schoolification and how they tackle this trend, drawing upon literature on leadership in both the ECEC context and the school system. Through a qualitative framework, 10 Chilean leaders from five publicly funded K-12 (kindergarten to Grade 12) schools – principals and instructional coordinators – were interviewed. Findings show that school leaders know little about ECEC, significantly moderating their possibilities to work with this educational level. When addressing the schoolification phenomenon, our data indicate that while school leaders care about it, particularly about the negative consequences for children, they have few skills and tools to support the work of ECEC teachers. Even though leaders have promoted some measures to tackle ECEC schoolification in the schools they lead, we argue that these strategies tend to be aspirational or sporadic rather than systematic and long-term. These findings contribute to understanding how school leaders shape ECEC practices, highlighting the need for the development of leadership to effectively address schoolification.

Corresponding author:
María-José Opazo, Institute of Education and Centre for Advanced Research in Education, Universidad de Chile, Periodista José Carrasco Tapia 75, postcode 8320000, Santiago, Chile.
Email: mariajose.opazo@ciae.uchile.cl

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Introduction

Schoolification, defined as the introduction of objectives and practices traditionally associated with primary education into early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings (Woodhead and Moss, 2007), is a trend with significant negative implications. It constrains children's opportunities for holistic development and undermines their well-being (Moss, 2012; World Organisation for Early Childhood Education (OMEP), 2010). The main characteristics of schoolification include the setting of large classroom groups; the prioritisation of indoor classes over outdoor or open spaces; the promotion of asymmetric or unidirectional interactions between children and adults, which limits peer interaction; the reduction of opportunities for play; and the restriction of dialogue and spontaneous movement in favour of stillness and discipline (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2006). Notably, a narrowing of the curriculum has been documented, with reading, writing and mathematics prevailing at the expense of other learning areas (Bingham and Whitebread, 2012).

This trend has been reported as a quasi-global phenomenon over the past two decades. It has been observed in several European countries (Brogaard Clausen, 2015; Gunnarsdottir, 2014; Moss, 2002; Van Laere, 2017) as well as in Australia (Barblett et al., 2016), New Zealand (Alcock and Haggerty, 2013), the United States (Bassok et al., 2016; Brown et al., 2021; Hustedt et al., 2018) and Latin American countries such as Colombia (Buitrago, 2015), Peru (Ochoa, 2015) and Chile (Pardo et al., 2021).

Having gained greater traction in countries that emphasise children's preparation for primary school (Bingham and Whitebread, 2012), ECEC schoolification has been interpreted as an expression of a view of ECEC as merely preparatory ('pre-primary' or 'pre-school'), rather than as a legitimate educational stage in its own right (OECD, 2006: 59–60). Several scholars have argued that schoolification constitutes a form of colonisation of ECEC (OECD, 2006: 62), whereby primary education subsumes ECEC, undermining its holistic pedagogical foundations (Kaga et al., 2010; OMEP, 2010). This process also tends to marginalise the care component, a core element of ECEC (Van Laere et al., 2012).

In Chile, these concerns have been echoed in research focused on the perspectives of multiple stakeholders, such as ECEC teachers, policymakers and school principals (Pardo et al., 2021). These studies confirm the widespread perception that ECEC has become 'over-schoolified' as a result of intersecting factors, including public policy and institutional cultures (Pardo et al., 2021). In response, the Chilean Ministry of Education has attempted to counteract this trend by encouraging stronger collaboration between ECEC and primary teachers (Ministerio de Educación, 2004), and by mandating school leaders to implement transition strategies between Pre-K, kindergarten and first grade (Ministerio de Educación, 2017).

In sum, schoolification in Chile is strongly reinforced by policy frameworks that emphasise early preparation for primary school and academic achievement. In particular, the high-stakes nature of the national standardised assessment system (SIMCE) has placed significant pressure on school communities to prioritise academic performance from the early grades. Research has shown that such accountability mechanisms shape curricular decisions and pedagogical practices, encouraging schools to adopt primary-level methodologies even in ECEC settings (Falabella, 2013; Pardo et al.,

2021). As a result, schoolification in Chile is not merely a cultural or pedagogical trend but a deeply embedded phenomenon with policy roots.

In this complex context, it is central to discuss the potential contribution of school leaders to the schoolification trend. Two research questions guide this study. First, what are school leaders' perspectives on ECEC schoolification? Second, how do school leaders tackle ECEC schoolification?

The importance of school principals

There is a well-established body of knowledge addressing the vital role of school leaders in improving teaching and learning (Leithwood et al., 2020). Principals and other school leaders have been identified as the second most significant factor explaining improvement of learning opportunities (Radinger, 2014). School leaders indirectly influence learning through teachers' motivation, capacities and working conditions (Hallinger and Kovačević, 2019). The role of school leaders is even more critical in challenging or uncertain situations (Ahumada et al., 2016) and in periods of policy reform (Gu et al., 2018).

During educational reforms, school leaders frequently assume a broker role, distributing information, power and resources while motivating the school community to integrate the new ideas. Shaked and Schechter (2017) found that principals are not merely gatekeepers, transferring information from one place to another, but have a central role in understanding change in schools: 'They serve as mid-level policy managers, who leave their "thumbprints" on policies received from the authorities' (Shaked and Schechter, 2017: 32). School leaders shape, reduce or expand the direction of educational policies depending on their degree of autonomy (Heikkinen et al., 2021). Ganon-Shilon and Schechter (2021) found three primary considerations influencing how principals make sense of externally defined changes, including caring for teachers' needs, preserving school vision and adjusting to the school context. Similarly, González-Falcón et al. (2020) argue that principals judge the introduction of changes depending greatly on their assessment of the socioeconomic and cultural school context. Moreover, some authors have argued that school leaders moderate their support for educational policies depending on their experience and personal characteristics (Niesche and Martin, 2013). Principals play a central role in defining the quality and depth of classroom activities. For example, Katterfeld (2013), analysing math' teaching reform, found that school leaders significantly contributed to teachers and students only when they possessed a clear instructional vision of mathematics teaching, including deep understanding of how the mathematics curriculum should be enacted in classroom practice.

Drake et al. (2023) indicate that principals rarely have experience and qualifications in ECEC, limiting their ability to support this educational level effectively. Other studies have made similar arguments, frequently addressing challenges within ECEC (Blose and Muteweri, 2021; Kamwitha et al., 2022). As will be shown in the following section, the role of school leaders in ECEC is closely related to the pedagogy implemented in educational settings.

School principals in ECEC

Limited research has focused on the role of leaders in ECEC, and even less on their responsibilities during periods of change (OECD, 2020). As this study focuses on school leaders' perspectives on ECEC schoolification, it is essential to emphasise that literature on this educational level has shown that while sharing elements with leadership in primary and secondary education, leadership in ECEC tends to be more holistic and comprehensive (Hujala and Eskelinen, 2013).

The principal's role in an ECEC setting is different but equally important as educational quality in supporting children's learning (Nupponen, 2005). At this educational level, leaders focus more on pedagogical practice than on curriculum and instruction (Siraj-Blatchford and Hallet, 2014). Monitoring and continuous assessment of children's learning and teaching are highly relevant, and it is recommended that pedagogical practices be evaluated collaboratively against established standards (Siraj-Blatchford and Manni, 2006).

However, implementing pedagogical collaboration and reflection between school leaders and ECEC teachers can be challenging. For example, in highly market-oriented educational systems, such as in Singapore, leadership tends to be more hierarchical, limiting opportunities for teacher collaboration (Vijayadevar et al., 2019). Other reasons reported in the literature for why leaders are unable to lead pedagogy include high administrative workload (Cabrera-Murcia, 2021; Falabella et al., 2022; Opazo et al., 2022) and daily stressful situations (Elomaa et al., 2020; Kristiansen et al., 2021).

Accordingly, the relationship between school leaders and ECEC teachers can be problematic due to the distance in professional expertise and the lack of adequate working conditions within schools. For example, Heikka (2013) showed that Finnish ECEC teachers perceived that principals were responsible for pedagogy, development, assessment and implementation of the Finnish National Curriculum (Heikka, 2013: 263). However, the time and resources to fulfil these responsibilities were insufficient (Heikka and Waniganayake, 2011).

Pedagogical work carried out by leaders and ECEC teachers is essential for ensuring quality education (Heikka and Hujala, 2013). As evidence indicates, successful leadership is characterised by a vision focused on teaching and learning. Highly effective principals concentrate on improving pedagogy and curriculum, valuing interactions between adults and children and supporting staff in developing better ways to engage children (Siraj-Blatchford and Hallet, 2014). Recent evidence from the Hong Kong context shows that high-quality leadership practices positively influence children's effective learning (Cheung et al., 2019).

Since ECEC schoolification mainly concerns the appropriateness of pedagogical practices and teaching methods used with young children, leaders' capacity to influence pedagogy is a crucial element to consider. To our knowledge, there is no empirical research that specifically examines the relationship between the observed schoolification trend and leadership practices in ECEC. Research on leadership in Chilean ECEC institutions has focused primarily on ECEC settings for children under four years old (Cabrera-Murcia, 2021; Opazo et al., 2022; Zett et al., 2023). Less is known about the relationship between schoolification and leadership in K-12 schools.

School leaders and ECEC schoolification

Leadership in ECEC is characterised by ongoing communication with diverse stakeholders, a focus on learning and reflective practice and support for staff working conditions (Ang, 2012). However, our review of previous research did not identify any studies specifically addressing the role of school leaders in the context of ECEC schoolification. The available evidence from schoolification studies is limited, frequently describing the role of leaders in general terms, without addressing the trend of schoolification or clarifying some of its central features.

Despite their limitations, a key finding of previous studies relates to the critical role of school leaders in implementing policies that have contributed to ECEC schoolification, as they repond to external pressures (municipal, national), while carrying out complex negotiations with ECEC teachers, students and parents to implement processes designed elsewhere.

As observed by Abreu and Roberts (2016) in the UK, schoolification is widely dependent on leadership support since 'Improving readiness for school will require a combination of system

leadership, a more focused challenge from Ofsted [Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills] and greater leadership from primary schools' (2016: 7). Several authors have noted that principals and other school leaders enforce ECEC schoolification policies within schools. Brogaard Clausen (2015) argued that Denmark's decentralisation strategies gradually granted school leaders more power to control most decision-making processes, including instruction. Accordingly, the push for schoolification originates from outside schools, usually from the national or municipal agenda. Principals and other school leaders are responsible for implementing decisions developed elsewhere, placing them in a challenging position to negotiate with local ECEC teachers, students and parents.

Bradbury (2019) recently observed that external pressures, including the fear of failing external inspections conducted by Ofsted in the UK, have driven school leaders to exacerbate the issue by implementing a series of control strategies designed to enforce schoolification practices. As a result, through the directives of school leaders, ECEC teachers are increasingly confined to a narrow set of learning activities, while their professional roles have shifted to place greater emphasis on tracking, data collection and analysis. Brogaard Clausen (2015) further highlighted that the expansion of schoolification has resulted in an increase in administrative tasks and a reduction in time available for pedagogical discussions among school leaders, ultimately undermining both their practice and the work of ECEC teachers, with negative consequences for children.

Given that the schoolification of ECEC has been identified as problematic both internationally (OECD, 2006) and in Chile (Pardo et al., 2021; Pardo and Opazo, 2019), this trend can be regarded as a significant challenge for ECEC teachers and all members of the school community.

Contextualising ECEC in Chile

In Chile, ECEC encompasses the education of children aged between six months and five years (Congress of Chile, 2009), and precedes formal primary education. As part of the education system for almost five decades, ECEC was constitutionally recognised as the first educational level in 1999 (Congress of Chile, 1999). The national ECEC curriculum was established in 2001 and updated in 2018 (Ministerio de Educación, 2018). This curriculum stipulates that ECEC must have a holistic character, which, in practice, means that learning experiences for children should address its eight learning areas (Ministerio de Educación, 2018: 12).

Chilean ECEC presents a distinctive institutional configuration compared to many international systems. While in several countries ECEC is mainly delivered through stand-alone preschool centres, in Chile, the final two years of ECEC – pre-kindergarten (Pre-K) and kindergarten (K), for four- and five-year-old children, respectively – are predominantly provided within primary schools. ECEC in Chile is voluntary, and the majority of provision (both in nurseries and schools) is state-funded (Opazo and Poblete-Nuñez, 2024). According to the latest official data available, by 2023, Pre-K and K classrooms accounted for approximately 58% of total enrolment in ECEC across the country, highlighting the central role of schools in the provision of this educational stage (Subsecretaría de Educación Parvularia, 2024). Thus, the majority of children who access ECEC in Chile do so through school-based settings.

These schools, often referred to as 'K-12' institutions, typically serve children from early childhood through secondary education, and are governed by the same administrative and pedagogical leadership structures. As a result, Pre-K and K classrooms fall under the responsibility of school principals and instructional coordinators whose leadership approaches and institutional logics are often shaped by school-wide goals and policies (Correa and Falabella, 2022; Poblete Núñez and Falabella, 2020). This structure has important implications for how ECEC is interpreted,

implemented and supported within Chilean schools, particularly in relation to the increasing tensions between early childhood pedagogies and school accountability frameworks.

As of 2022, 99% of Pre-K and K classrooms are located in K-12 schools (Subsecretaría de Educación Parvularia, 2022). These schools are administratively led by a school principal (*director/a*) supported by an instructional coordinator (*jefe/a Unidad Técnico-Pedagógica, UTP for its acronym in Spanish*), who together share responsibility for pedagogical leadership, curriculum implementation and supervision of teaching practices. Instructional coordinators are responsible for supporting curriculum implementation, supervising pedagogical practices and coordinating teacher teams. Their role is formally recognised within school leadership structures and exerts significant influence on pedagogical decisions (Cortez and Zoro, 2016).

The dual nature of school leadership in Chile, balancing managerial and pedagogical responsibilities, has been shaped by public policy frameworks that emphasise school accountability and instructional improvement (Campos et al., 2019). However, evidence suggests that many school leaders lack familiarity with the pedagogical foundations of ECEC, limiting their ability to effectively support ECEC educators at this level (Pardo et al., 2021).

Most Chilean K-12 schools must participate in a mandatory national student achievement test (SIMCE, for its acronym in Spanish) in the second, fourth, sixth, eighth, 10th and 11th grades. For second grade, it assesses reading comprehension; for fourth grade, reading comprehension and mathematics (Ministerio de Educación, 2021). SIMCE is a high-stakes test that can impose severe sanctions on publicly funded schools with low scores, including their closure (Congress of Chile, 2011). This policy infrastructure has contributed to shaping what Santori (2023) defines as the quantified school: an institutional form characterised by the pursuit of score-based optimisation, full compliance with system demands and a broader alignment with discourses of meritocracy, excellence and responsible parenting. Falabella (2013) has posited that, as a result, schools are teaching literacy and mathematics to Pre-K and K children as an early preparation for SIMCE. Likewise, Pardo et al. (2021) found that ECEC teachers, school principals and ECEC national authorities admitted that schools prioritise developing Pre-K and K children's skills that, in the future, will allow them to achieve high SIMCE scores. The pressure to perform is also connected to global trends of datafication in early childhood education, where increasing reliance on metrics and accountability frameworks reshapes pedagogical priorities. As Bradbury (2020) argues, schoolification processes are increasingly driven by the logic of data production, even for very young children, reconfiguring early learning experiences towards measurable outcomes. Moreover, other works have documented the trend towards ECEC schoolification (Lagos-Serrano, 2022); among these, Pardo et al. (2021) found that principals and instructional coordinators do not fully understand the specificity of ECEC pedagogy, as they overlook, for instance, the relevance of play in the education of young children. Similarly, Margetts and Phatudi (2013) found limited knowledge among school leaders about the challenges and opportunities of ECEC.

Throughout the manuscript, we have ensured consistent and explicit use of terminology to describe leadership roles in Chilean schools, such as school principal and instructional coordinator. We acknowledge that nomenclature for leadership positions may vary across international contexts, and we have aimed to maintain clarity for an international academic audience.

Chile is an interesting country to deepen the enquiry into the role of school leaders in relation to ECEC schoolification. This is because the embeddedness of Pre-K and K classrooms in K-12 schools may imply that school leaders face a contradiction between upholding the holistic nature of ECEC and aiming at high SIMCE scores (Congress of Chile, 2011). In addition, this is the first study addressing the role of school leadership in supporting the ECEC level in K-12 schools in the Chilean context.

Methodology

Research design

This research adopts an exploratory qualitative design (Jupp, 2006: 110–111). The use of an exploratory qualitative design aligns with the need to investigate a relatively underexplored area, as qualitative research is well suited to understanding complex social phenomena (Creswell, 2013). This approach allows for flexibility and openness to emerging themes and meanings. In this study, the aim was to explore subjective experiences, perceptions and practices related to the schoolification of ECEC, a phenomenon with limited empirical investigation in the Chilean context.

Data collection

Data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews (Corbetta, 2007), based on schedules adopting an etic perspective (Given, 2008). These schedules enquired about the definition, causes and propositions for ECEC schoolification as a priori categories, addressing, for example, how the school encourages playful learning in ECEC. At the beginning of each interview, participants were informed that the study aimed to explore their perspectives on the schoolification of ECEC. The concept was introduced in general terms, referring to the adoption of primary school methodologies in early childhood settings, a definition used as a starting point for open-ended discussion. Each interview lasted approximately one hour and was conducted online via videoconference (Zoom or Google Meet). With participants' consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and fully transcribed for subsequent analysis.

Participants

Participants were drawn from five publicly funded K-12 schools. These schools were selected through convenience sampling (Jupp, 2006: 196–197). All five schools are located in the Metropolitan Region of Santiago, Chile. According to national student assessment data, they exhibit comparable academic performance levels. This commonality in institutional context helped ensure a degree of consistency across cases, while allowing for the exploration of variation in leadership approaches. Within each school, participants included the school principal and the instructional coordinator ($n = 10$). All participants received and signed an informed consent form outlining the aims of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation and the confidentiality procedures. This document was based on consent templates previously approved by the University of Chile's ethics committee.

Data analysis

We conducted a qualitative content analysis of the interview transcripts, drawing on both a priori and emergent categories (Schreier, 2013). A priori categories were developed by operationalising the elements of ECEC schoolification, such as emphasis on discipline, adult–child interactions and curricular focus. The analysis followed an iterative process that involved careful reading of the transcripts, the application of the coding framework across the dataset and refinement of categories as new themes emerged. This structured approach enabled us to identify patterns related to pedagogical interactions, curricular practices and leadership dynamics in relation to schoolification.

Findings

Findings show that participants reported isolated practices to tackle ECEC schoolification, alongside aspirations for developing more comprehensive strategies in the future. These practices and aspirations, related to their perspectives about ECEC schoolification, are first described in this section.

Question 1: What are the school leaders' perspectives about schoolification of ECEC?

Overall, principals and instructional coordinators indicated that schoolification of ECEC is a harmful trend to teachers and students. Despite initial concerns, it is possible to identify two perspectives on how schoolification should be seen within schools and educational communities.

Schoolification is indeed happening in ECEC placed in PK-12 schools. According to all leaders' perspectives, schoolification is characterised by a rigid structure in which pedagogical lessons take place. In this strict structure, children sit in their chairs almost all day, with the ECEC teacher leading the sessions and limited opportunities for interaction between them. In addition, play is relegated to recess time only. In this scenario, some of the leaders argued that this is not the way ECEC should be performed, because it does not respect children's developmental stages as, at this age, children should have more freedom and spaces for learning through play. Overall, schoolification is seen as harming children and their eagerness for learning, even in the future.

> It [education] shouldn't be rigid; it should be focused mainly on the values and the stage of the child. You can't force a five-year-old child to take tests, standardised tests that stress them out, right? It has to be knowledge and an acquisition of knowledge in an enjoyable way for the child … there are certain schools where that happens, and the child, when they reach elementary school, or when they reach eighth grade, the child is already fed up with that rigid education. (Instructional coordinator, School 4)

Leaders also expressed their concern about schoolification being a trend that is present in the majority of Chilean schools due to, among other factors, family pressure and national standardised tests that schools must observe, like SIMCE. Those pressures have changed the way children are learning and the contents being taught, much of which is now focused almost exclusively on literacy skills.

> I think it happens in most schools, which require children's schoolification, and children are stressed learning to read in kindergarten, [this] has a lot to do with the Ministry of Education's requirement that schools prepare for the SIMCE – the national standardised test – so, is a reality that cannot be ignored. (Instructional coordinator, School 5)

The focus on reading skills and the rigid classroom structure with little space for play are the most frequently mentioned issues related to ECEC schoolification. Nevertheless, for some participants, a rigid classroom structure is not always viewed as a negative aspect.

Schoolification is not so bad, but it must be balanced. Notwithstanding the above, for some participants ($N = 4$) – two school principals and two instructional coordinators from different schools – schoolification is indeed a problem, but only when it is taken to an extreme. They stressed the importance of finding a balance. In fact, these leaders indicated that a complete absence of schoolification could compromise children's primary education success, since the transition from

kindergarten to primary education is a significant change for them. In that context, the establishment of some habits and routines that children will later encounter in first grade are neccesary.

> I think you have to find a balance, right? You have to find a balance because I don't think that schoolification is all bad, I think that there are some things that can be taken from it, such as normalising routines, being able to establish habits and gradually preparing children for what they will experience [later on]. (Principal, School 3)

The use of playful pedagogical methodologies is an aspect highly remarked by school leaders. In a way, according to their perspectives, ECEC schoolification 'is not so bad' as long as there is room for playfulness in the pedagogical experiences carried out by ECEC teachers. Play appears to be a key element to consider.

> I believe that all extremes are bad: for me, all extremes are bad, that is, no schoolification at all is bad, and schoolification taken to an extreme is also bad, so, there has to be a middle ground between the two things, right? [With] more playful activities … where children can learn, because if we do schooling too much, children are going to get stressed. (Principal, School 2)

This more nuanced position may be explained by the fact that these leaders associate some degree of structure with better adaptation to the next educational stage. While all participants referred to schoolification as the adoption of primary school methodologies in ECEC, their interpretations of its consequences (whether harmful or beneficial) were not uniform.

Question 2: How school leaders tackle schoolification of ECEC?

In general terms, leaders expressed their commitment to reducing the adverse effects of ECEC schoolification. Participants described three main approaches to mitigating ECEC schoolification: instructional interconnection between levels, promoting autonomy and professional development for themselves.

Instructional interconnection between kindergarten and primary education. The interconnection between kindergarten and primary education was identified as one of the preferred practices described by the school leaders when asked how to tackle ECEC schoolification. It is important to note, however, that these practices aim to foster playful methodologies rather than explicitly address ECEC schoolification itself. They could also be described as incipient or isolated practices, since in the leaders' discourses, these practices were not connected with, for instance, public policies explicitly oriented towards early childhood education or the national curriculum for the early years. Rather, these practices appear to be isolated initiatives.

Leaders foster instructional interconnection between kindergarten and primary education in different ways. First, by encouraging the exchange of practices between ECEC teachers and primary education teachers. Visiting each other's classrooms serves two purposes: on the one hand, to make children's transition smoother and, on the other, to highlight the work of ECEC teachers as something valued within the educational community:

> One can create a wonderful interconnection by bringing the first-grade teacher into the kindergarten classroom, where the first-grade teacher interacts with the children [also]; the children can go to the first-grade classroom and everything; so, my idea is that they [first-grade teachers] go to see the practices of

> ECEC teachers because they promote very good routines with children … first-grade teachers do not accept that ECEC teachers do an excellent job. For them, ECEC teachers just play. (Instructional coordinator, School 3)

This collaboration benefits not only ECEC teachers but also the primary level. The following extract shows how the same process is expanded into the first-grade classroom, where the assistant teacher observes and learns the teaching and learning dynamics at the primary level, while also serving as a figure of safety and support during students' transition:

> This exchange of practices, that they accompany each other, for example, the first-grade teacher, so that she can see how the ECEC teacher is working, so she can adopt some pedagogical practices from her … also, this year, we decided that the ECEC teaching assistant would accompany the children to the first-grade classroom, so the children feel supported and protected. (Principal, School 1)

The visits to classrooms, observations and children accompaniment that first-grade teachers, ECEC teachers and ECEC teaching assistants do are coordinated by their school leaders. According to their views, it is important that teachers leave their own classrooms to enhance their pedagogical capacities. The coordination they provide consists of enabling time and space for ECEC teachers and first-grade teachers to share their thoughts and experiences regarding children's learning. Moreover, in one of the schools studied, leaders promoted the exchange of pedagogical practices with other neighbouring schools. The aim of these actions was to preserve ECEC focus on playful methodologies.

> For example, we define a coordination that covers from pre-kindergarten to second grade, even to fourth grade in some cases, so that the idea [pedagogy] of early childhood education be also respected, we believe … in play, which is one of the elements that is present in children within their stage of development, their way of discovering the world, so we apply that idea – that play is a good tool. (Principal, School 5)

Promoting ECEC teachers' instructional autonomy. During the interviews, school principals and instruction coordinators discussed incipient measures related to curriculum and ECEC aims, in association with the so-called 'Reading Promotion Plan', a mandatory national reform. Since those plans of reading strategies were applied to transition levels (pre-kindergarten and kindergarten) and primary education as well in all the schools, it was necessary to enquire into leaders' points of view in this regard. It is worth noticing that most of the guidelines for these reading plans are prescribed by the Ministry of Education for the administration units of each school.

Leaders indicated that even though both the national curriculum and various reading plans are indeed implemented in schools, they advised ECEC teachers that those guidelines not be strictly followed. As one of them suggested in the interview, the national curriculum is not a bible; therefore, there is some room for innovation and autonomy in ECEC teachers' work. In this context, several examples were provided by the participants illustrating this argument. For instance, leaders promoted flexibility in the application of the reading plans:

> Well, this thing [the reading plan] that we changed from, instead of working with it five days a week, we reduced [the time] to working only one day, and we dedicated more hours to aspects that have to do with the emotional part, the children are working with the 'monster of the emotions', so this book helps them

not only to engage in educational activities but also to recognise what they feel. (Instructional coordinator, School 2)

Moreover, in one of the schools, the reading plan they used to work with was replaced with another programme, 'Paws and Letters', that fosters children's literacy skills through interaction with a specially trained dog. It is worth noting that this programme is executed alongside the official programmes recommended by the Ministry of Education.

We had to take the advice of the 'Schools Up' programme [from the Ministry of Education], which is very basic, it's like bad advice coaching, but we, within the school, we have some other ideas, we take … a programme called 'Paws and Letters', which is a dog that accompanies the reading of children who have reading difficulties, and the dog is placed so that the child reads a picture book to this puppy. (Principal, School 5)

In this sense, leaders encouraged ECEC teachers to engage in more meaningful reading programmes not only for them but also for children – programmes that resonate with the educational community.

Becoming more informed to better understand ECEC pedagogy and principles. Finally, an aspiration expressed by school leaders in relation to addressing ECEC schoolification was that they, as leaders, should know more about ECEC pedagogical principles, all of those related to a holistic approach towards education of young children and the use of playful methodologies. The school leaders in this study were not ECEC but primary or secondary teachers. Hence, ECEC sometimes seemed to be entirely out of their scope of action. In that sense, some leaders ($N = 4$) stated that becoming more informed about it was an obligation.

It is very important that we, the people who work in ECEC, prepare ourselves to better understand what the educational process of young children is like, because I also think that it would be a mistake for a principal not to get involved with the [educational] level, because one may not know if in reality the children require another type of activity, or that there are other needs at that moment, so I think that it is relevant, and I am very pleased that my team has guided me and helped me in [doing] that … so, I think that we, as a management team, need to get involved in [knowing] the needs of our students. (Principal, School 3)

In addition, leaders said that one of the practices that aligned with that motivation is that recently, ECEC had been incorporated into the Programme of Educational Improvement (PME, for its acronym in Spanish) of each school, which had not been common previously. They believed that by doing that, ECEC was given the space that it deserved so schoolification could be diminished.

We put the leadership aspect in the PME, in the leadership aspect, we put this action which was the interconnection [between kindergarten and primary education], and also in the pedagogical leadership to look at the issue of collaborative work. (Instructional coordinator, School 1)

Discussion

The main purpose of this study was to understand school leaders' perspectives on ECEC schoolification and how they approach it in their leadership practices. We share the concern of previous studies that highlight how principals' limited instructional expertise and experience in ECEC constrain their ability to effectively support teaching and learning at this level (Blose and Muteweri, 2021; Drake et al., 2023). In the Chilean context, our findings suggest that most school principals possess limited knowledge about ECEC, which restricts their capacity to engage pedagogically with this level of education.

While our data indicate that school leaders are concerned about the negative consequences of schoolification for young children, they appear to lack the tools and competencies necessary to support ECEC teachers. Moreover, we found no evidence of deliberate efforts to propose alternative pedagogical approaches or leadership strategies that would challenge the prevailing schoolification trend. Even less evident was any attempt to develop a shared pedagogical vision for ECEC, which leaders themselves seemed to understand only at a superficial level.

While school leaders in our study expressed concern about the negative effects of schoolification, we found little evidence of sustained efforts to resist it or to empower ECEC teachers in pedagogical decision-making. This aligns with international literature suggesting that even when ECEC teachers oppose performative agendas, resistance often takes the form of subtle, localised acts rather than explicit opposition (Archer, 2022). Archer conceptualises this as micro resistance, where educators quietly enact alternative pedagogical values beneath the surface of formal expectations, sustaining what she calls a 'subversive curriculum'. The absence of such subversive acts by school leaders in our study may reflect both their limited understanding of ECEC and the strong accountability pressures placed upon them.

Additionally, our findings resonate with broader discussions about the importance of pedagogical leadership and teacher agency in ECEC settings. Studies have highlighted the critical role that pedagogical leaders play in mediating the tensions between top-down mandates and developmentally appropriate practices (Fabry et al., 2022). Fisher (2022) also illustrates how the tension between play-based approaches and school readiness pressures affects both teachers and school leaders in this transitional phase from ECEC to primary education. In our study, although some leaders valued the use of play as a pedagogical tool and promoted interconnection between ECEC and primary education, these initiatives remained incipient and lacked a clearly articulated, shared vision. This suggests a need for further development of distributed leadership practices that include ECEC teachers as active agents of change.

Overall, our findings offer insight into school leaders' perspectives on schoolification in ECEC, the practices they adopt to address it and their broader aspirations in this area. Notably, their views on schoolification are ambivalent: some leaders do not perceive it as entirely negative, but rather as problematic only when taken to an extreme. From this perspective, as long as children retain opportunities for play, the gradual incorporation of primary school routines is seen as a beneficial strategy to support the transition to first grade.

In addition, although some leaders had implemented measures to mitigate schoolification, these actions appeared sporadic and lacking in sustainability. Rather than representing strategic, long-term approaches, they seemed more like aspirations or provisional responses. This contrasts with literature on effective leadership, which emphasises the importance of continuity, long-term planning and coherent implementation (Kyriakides et al., 2021; Mascall and Leithwood, 2010). Our findings suggest that school leaders in this study had not developed a clear, shared vision for ECEC within their schools, a foundational element of strong pedagogical leadership (Siraj-Blatchford and Hallet, 2014).

According to our results, participants lacked a deep understanding of ECEC, which significantly limited their ability to provide pedagogical leadership to ECEC teachers. While this is an exploratory study, our findings suggest that structural factors (particularly the pressure exerted by national standardised testing) contribute to narrowing the curriculum and constraining pedagogical support strategies (Towers et al., 2022). In Chile, the high-stakes nature of the SIMCE assessment may partially explain the actions and priorities of school leaders. As highlighted in prior research, the pressure to achieve high student scores can drive decision-making even in early educational stages (Falabella, 2013).

Another plausible explanation lies in the limited pedagogical knowledge of ECEC among school leaders (Pardo et al., 2021), which restricted their ability to guide curriculum implementation or provide instructional support (Heikka, 2013). Although the responsibilities of school leaders have expanded considerably in recent decades in Chile and elsewhere (Montecinos et al., 2015), opportunities for ongoing professional development in pedagogical leadership have not kept pace. In this context, the combination of limited time and high administrative demands further reduces school leaders' capacity to engage meaningfully with the pedagogical needs of ECEC, a trend noted in both national and international research on leadership in early education settings (Cabrera-Murcia, 2021; Falabella et al., 2022; Opazo et al., 2022).

Despite these challenges, our study identified some emerging strategies implemented by school leaders to support ECEC. Notably, some principals made efforts to foster collaboration between ECEC and primary teachers, a practice commonly emphasised in instructional leadership frameworks (Liu and Hallinger, 2022). Facilitating peer collaboration signals an initial commitment to promoting professional development and reallocating time and resources to enhance pedagogical learning (Haglund and Glaés-Coutts, 2023). While these initiatives remain limited in scope and depth, they suggest potential pathways for strengthening leadership practices that be more inclusive of ECEC and supportive of resistance to schoolification trends.

Conclusion

This study explored school leaders' perspectives on the schoolification of ECEC in Chile, and the ways in which they respond to this phenomenon. Our findings revealed a limited understanding of ECEC among principals, which constrained their ability to support pedagogical work in ECEC classrooms within schools. While some leaders expressed concern about schoolification and showed appreciation for the value of play, their responses tended to be fragmented, short-term and not grounded in a broader shared vision. These constraints are further shaped by structural factors, such as the pressure exerted by high-stakes standardised testing and the limited opportunities for professional development in pedagogical leadership for ECEC. Taken together, the findings emphasise the need to strengthen leadership capacities in ECEC and promote distributed leadership practices that include ECEC teachers as key agents.

Further research should deepen the exploration of school leaders' perspectives regarding effective and specific strategies to tackle ECEC schoolification. For instance, future studies could investigate how ECEC is addressed in key institutional documents such as the Proyecto Educativo Institucional (PEI [Institutional Educational Project]) and the Plan de Mejoramiento Educativo (PME [Educational Improvment Plan]) We also suggest exploring intermediate leadership levels, such as the administrative tier, and how they conceptualise schoolification, define their roles and identify possible ways to address it. In addition, future enquiries should consider differences between publicly and privately funded educational settings. Finally, more attention should be paid to the structural constraints (such as the influence of standardised tests) that shape schools' responses to schoolification and hinder more transformative leadership practices.

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ORCID iDs

María-José Opazo https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5386-6612
Marcela Pardo https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5993-7373
Pablo Rupin https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7255-9004
Sergio Galdames https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6836-7595

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Author Biographies

María-José Opazo is a social anthropologist with a master's in Social Sciences by the University of Chile and a PhD in Education by the University of Nottingham. She is an academic at the University of Chile's Institute of Education and Center for Advanced Research in Education (CIAE). Her research focuses on ECE leadership, professionalism, and the schoolification of early childhood education.

Marcela Pardo is an anthropologist from University of Chile; she holds a master's degree in Educational Psychology- Early Childhood from Boston College, USA, and a PhD in Humanities from Leiden University, Netherlands. She is a researcher at the Center for Advanced Research on Education at University of Chile (CIAE). Her current research is mainly focused on ECE teachers' professionalism, and the schoolification of early childhood education.

Pablo Rupin is a sociologist (PUC), holds a master's in Management and Public Policy (University of Chile), and a PhD in Educational Sciences (Sorbonne Paris Nord). He is an assistant professor at Universidad de O'Higgins, researching family-school relations, play, early childhood, and teacher training. He is also an associate researcher at the Center for Advanced Research in Education (CIAE), University of Chile.

Sergio Galdames is an educational psychologist with a master's degree in Educational Leadership and a PhD in Education. He specializes in the research and development of educational leaders and serves as an associate professor in the Department of Education at the University of Santiago. He is also co-creator of the podcast Planeta Educativo. His current research focuses on the retention of principals and teachers in public schools.