Child Care Policy: A Comparative Perspective

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Introduction

Growing recognition of the importance of child care has brought with it increased acknowledgement of the need for some form of government support. Yet, just as the reasons behind the growing demand for child care vary, so too do the forms of government involvement. Comparative analysis of these patterns of choice can contribute to the identification of best practices.

Subject

Decades of comparative research have led to a general agreement on the basic requirements for a good system of non-parental child care and recognition that the establishment of such a system requires government support. Comparative policy analysis shows that a few countries, like Denmark and Sweden, come close to the ideal. In other countries, there are real "islands of excellence" (e.g., Emilia Romagna in Italy). Yet many systems offer substantially less than this and recent developments suggest that the trend is not necessarily one of progress toward the ideal.

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Issues

There is quite widespread agreement within the research community on the following core issues:

1. The system should be accessible. No child should be excluded on the basis of income, parental employment status, place of residence, or formal citizenship. Yet in many systems, access is a problem as there are insufficient spaces and fees represent a barrier to quality child care for many families.
2. The program should be high quality. Numerous studies have documented the importance of quality child care in the form of a healthy, safe, and stimulating physical environment; appropriate staff:child ratios; and a pedagogical program that recognizes the child as an actor in the here and now. This requires public investment, not only to deal with affordability, but also to provide well-educated staff who will receive fair wages.
3. The program should be comprehensive. While promoting universal accessibility, the system also needs to recognize the diversity of needs, including respect for the cultural and linguistic diversity of the population. This too requires government involvement. The achievement of these goals, in turn, depends on the establishment of an effective governance structure to meet the challenges of integration, coordination and local diversity

Research Context

Initial comparative research on child care policy was carried out under the auspices of the Organisation for Economic Development and Cooperation (OECD) in the 1970s. Additional applied policy research was conducted by the important, but short-lived, European Commission Network on Childcare in the 1990s, as well as the OECD's more recent initiatives. In the 1990s, academic interest in the topic spread beyond experts in early childhood development as feminist students of the welfare state drew attention to the challenges posed by the growing "care crisis." A separate line of investigation has highlighted the development of "global care chains,"[1] that is, the recruitment of women from the global south (or Eastern Europe) to provide child care in the homes of families in Western Europe and North America.[1]

Research Questions

What are the diverse ways that governments shape the scope and quality of non-parental child care arrangements? How have different countries responded to the governance challenges? Finally, to what extent have governments turned to recruitment through global care chains to meet the growing demand for child care?

Research Results

The early research conducted under the auspices of the OECD highlighted the need to integrate *day care*, a service originally provided for children whose mothers needed to work to sustain family incomes, and *kindergarten*, preschool education usually for children 3 to 6 years old, often on a part time basis and, in many countries, largely available to upper income families.[2,3,4] By showing the need to combine the two, these studies highlighted the need to meet the demand created by women's rising labour force participation by providing programs of quality, service to the developmental needs of the child, and quantity. Not all systems were designed to achieve this, however. The studies identified three patterns of provision: (a) The laissez-faire approach, characterized by the co-existence of several systems, partially age-related, with auspice often proprietary or voluntary, typical of the Anglo-American countries; (b) the dual system, based on an age break (crèches for infants and toddlers, preschools for those 3 years old to school-age), typified by France and Italy; and (c) the coordinated system, then being pioneered in the Nordic countries.

The various ways different countries combined (or failed to combine) education and care continued to be a focus of research within the early child development literature.[5] Until the 1990s, those interested in broader patterns of social policy tended to ignore child care, focusing instead on social insurance and cash benefits. Feminist researchers, interested in issues of gender equality began, however, to call attention to the social policy challenges posed by the growing need for child care.[6,7,8] National responses were divided between *male-breadwinner* and *female-friendly* regimes, with the latter more inclined to take an active role. Mainstream welfare regime research subsequently picked up on the issue, focusing on the way in which child care policies reflected broader assumptions about the respective roles of states, markets and families.[a,9-13]

The welfare regime literature added two key points. First, this research showed that the ways countries deal with the demand for child care tend to reflect broader assumptions about the respective roles of states, families, markets and the voluntary sector. Second, by locating child

care within wider welfare regimes, it showed that state involvement in this field is not limited to countries where the public sector plays a key role in financing and provision. All states have an impact on the respective roles played by the state, the family, the markets, and the community sector. In some, they work to support a market for care via information provision and corporate and individual tax deductions; in others, policies that might include generous family benefits, long parental leaves and part day or part week preschool, favour parental care.

Research Gaps

There has been some research on governance models, well-reflected in the OECD's *Starting Strong*, which focused specifically on the importance of coordinated policy development at the central level and the coordination of central and local levels to balance equity and diversity objectives.[14] While recognising the critical role to be played by development of a coherent national framework, Peter Moss's recent work also highlights the importance of a degree of local autonomy and capacity for making child care centres "sites of democratic practice."[15] Thus far, there has been less attention to this important aspect by students of welfare states, but there is growing interest in the way that different central-local (or, in federal states, such as Canada, central-provincial-local) arrangements affect governance of the child care sector.[16,17,18]

Understandably, comparative research on child care policy has focused on national systems of provision. Yet globalization is having an impact on child care policy, notably through the development of global care chains. This aspect initially received even less attention internationally, with the partial exception of North American researchers, conscious of the critical role played by low wage earning immigrants in providing affordable child care within the home.[19,20] Subsequent research however suggests this practice is not confined to "liberal" Anglo-American countries. In Western Europe the combination of immigration policies and new forms of support for in-home child care is actively promoting recruitment of migrant care providers.[21] Nor do care workers simply move from South-to-North.[22,23,24] There is considerable intra-regional movement within Asia and Latin America. While this may provide an inexpensive solution to the growing demand for care in the North, it creates a different set of relations governing the respective roles played by states, families, and markets.[b]

A second globalization issue is the growing influence of international organizations on this field. In the first decade of the new millennium, the OECD undertook two substantial studies, one under the Directorate for Employment, Labour and Social Affairs (*Babies and Bosses*) and the

other under the Education Directorate. The World Bank, UNESCO and the European Union have also shown growing interest in the issue, as have international foundations such as Soros, which is playing an important role in Eastern Europe. Further research needs to be done on the diverse policy solutions being purveyed, from the more instrumental (child care as a means to promote women's labour force participation) to the rights-centred view articulated by UNESCO.[25]

Finally, work inspired by poststructuralist theorists challenges the developmentalist perspective that has contributed to a standardised view of quality that is heavily reliant on quantitative indicators. This new line of research highlights the importance of "complexity and multiplicity, subjectivity and context, provisionality and uncertainty."[26] As such, it underpins an open, dialogical conception of quality that is very much in line with the pedagogy practiced in Reggio Emilia. Unfortunately, the OECD seems to have embraced a narrower view, given its plans to launch a 'baby-PISA'.[27,28]

Conclusions

Specialists in early childhood education and care largely agree on the main features of a good, high quality, inclusive child care system. The establishment of such a system depends, however, on effective government support. This is where the comparative analysis of child care policies, drawing on interdisciplinary research tools and concepts, can make a contribution. Early systems of classification of policy patterns highlighted the important question of whether existing policies fostered the development of an integrated system of early childhood education and care. More recent research, informed by the work of sociologists and political scientists, has helped to locate child care within the wider set of relations governing the respective roles played by states, families, and markets.

Implications

Comparative analysis of child care policies can help to identify best practices and some of the institutional and political impediments to their adoption. It is important, however, that such research does not restrict its focus to the national level. Arrangements governing the respective roles of national and local governments constitute an important component of the governance structures, limiting or enhancing capacities for overall coordination as well as for adjustment to local needs. In addition, researchers need to direct their gaze beyond the national level, and include analyses of the ways in which global inequalities combine with national migration and

welfare regimes to shape a global care chain.

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Notes:

[a] Esping-Andersen's typology focuses on three systems: (a) liberal (programs targeted at low income, at-risk, or other families added, at best, via individual or corporate tax deductions), (b) conservative corporatist (support for at-home care), and (c) social democratic (public financing and provision of universal child care). For an alternative classification of care issues in the South, where children are left with grandparents or other kin while their mothers provide care for children in the North, see:[10,11,12,13]

[b] In Canada, Alan Pence's work has been very important in this regard.