

The Political Evolution of the Child Care and Development Block Grant: From Childcare to Preschool

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In the US, policymakers haven't agreed on the goals and purposes of childcare subsidies. The cultural definitions of federal welfare policy are regularly contested and evolve according to policymakers' and bureaucrats' understandings of the needs of children and poor families, and advocates' frames (O'Connor 2002; Skrentny 1997; Steensland 2006). But empirical studies have yet to observe how these contestations unfold in the context of an indirect and devolved welfare state and their concrete effects for how welfare policies define and serve the needs of children and poor families (Clemens 2006; Prasad 2016; Tach and Edin 2017). At least since the 1960s, US childcare policy has been framed as either "work support for parents" or "educational benefits for kids." Studies of US childcare policy development have described how federal childcare definitions and funding streams place the interests of working parents in competition with the needs of children (Levitsky 2018; Michel 1999). According to these accounts, the legacies of welfare policy and public ambivalence towards women's unpaid and paid labor have produced complex funding arrangements, divided constituencies, and foreclosed certain possibilities for "universal" childcare policy. But prevailing accounts of US childcare policy development overlook how the meaning and purposes of childcare policy are historically contingent and constructed, that is, subject to shifts in national politics, funding streams, and public beliefs about what counts as good care.

Using the case of the Child Care Development Block Grant (CCDBG), the largest federal funding source of childcare assistance for low-income families, I demonstrate how the CCDBG is an *ambiguous welfare program*—motivated by multiple, sometimes contradictory logics that

produce *complexity*—overlapping funding structures and regulations reflecting policymakers’ and bureaucrats’ evolving cultural definitions of childcare and solutions to poverty, and advocates’ frames. I will show whether the block grant is primarily viewed as a “work support program for parents” or an “education program for kids” has been contingent on contextual factors and broader shifts in national politics, presidential strategy, party control of Congress, and public opinion. The law’s ambiguity enables policymakers, advocates, and bureaucrats to align with the law on different grounds, at different times, for different reasons to achieve their political goals (Stone 2012).

Previous research on ideas in policymaking have primarily observed how logics shape policy outcomes through the passage of official laws and tended to overlook how the majority of federal policymaking takes place through state-level mechanisms with important distributional consequences. And while studies of the complex and delegated welfare state observe the distributional consequences of changes in federal welfare logics and funding patterns (Pacewicz 2018), these dynamics have been primarily observed as a one-way dynamic rather than a bidirectional relationship that undergirds and forms the basis of federalism and the complex interagency and financing partnerships involved in policy implementation. Specifically, I observe how shifts in federal welfare logics and funding patterns initially driven by the passage of the welfare reform law of 1996 created new opportunities at the state level to reframe the meaning and purposes of the CCDBG. In doing so, I reveal an additional state level mechanism of advocacy influence and federal policy change through reauthorization processes. Further, in observing how logics emerge in a broader cultural context that varies advocates’ influence and bureaucrats’ conceptions of what is politically feasible, this study contributes to broader scholarship on how logics shape policy.

In my findings, drawing on ethnographic research including archives of legislative debates, CCDBG expenditure data, and interviews with bureaucrats and advocates, I show how Illinois actors strategically navigated shifts in national politics and federal funding patterns by constructing new symbolic structures—bureaucratic offices, cultural categories of worth, and metrics for judging policies that aligned with prevailing ideas about the purposes of childcare subsidies. During the 1990s, state level actors initially thought of the CCDBG program as “work support for parents” that was based in a family model of care provision and led to prioritizing voucher payments to the most disadvantaged poor households. But by the 2000s, state level actors began conceptualizing CCDBG subsidies as “educational benefits for kids” that was based in the center-based model and favored payments to providers—an educational logic that became institutionalized during the 2010s. I then show the concrete effects of this change in logics as an increasing share of childcare spending shifted from voucher payments for family caregivers to center-based care for kids, altering the number of children and poor families served by policies.

Further, I demonstrate how these state level innovations become symbols of government effectiveness that influence federal reauthorization processes and what new rules and regulations get written into the CCDBG law in 2014. I find that logics of work support prioritize rules oriented towards improving access to childcare as an economic benefit for parents. In contrast, logics of education embed rules that link standards and resource transfers to providers with the goal of improving the quality of care children receive. Education logics also incentivize states to reduce the number of children and families served by voucher payments while increasing the proportion of children served by centers and the wages of providers.

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