Alternative Policy Designs and the Socio-political Construction of Childcare

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ABSTRACT Policy makers and advocates have a variety of tools from which to choose when designing childcare policy. Policy design choices, such as whether to provide childcare assistance through a new government program or via a voucher for use in the private market, are in fact social, political, moral, and value-laden choices that shape the nature of young children’s experiences in care settings. Although rarely discussed, these choices also privilege particular social constructions of childcare by defining our understanding of the policy problem and the characteristics of the target populations. In addition, policy designs institutionalize and legitimize particular forms of governmental involvement in children’s lives – as well as give power and voice to some interests over others – resulting in a new political context for future policy debates. To better illustrate these socio-political effects, this article documents and compares these consequences of five common childcare policy designs.

Introduction

Although much of the public debate regarding childcare policy focuses on expansion or retrenchment in policy, the actual content of childcare policies is the result of a series of individual design choices made by policy makers. These choices determine critical features of the services children receive, including exactly who is eligible for a particular program, the means by which a program will be delivered, and the arm of government that will implement the policy. There is no question that these choices have consequences for the nature of young children’s experiences in care settings, as well as for the types of childcare available to families. Although less often discussed, these choices also have longer-term social and political consequences. In particular, policy designs privilege certain social and political conceptions of childcare, serving to institutionalize some modes of discourse regarding childcare and childcare policy over others, as well as to legitimize a certain role for government in young children’s lives.

This article looks across childcare policies in several nations to identify five policy designs commonly used by governments. Drawing on the childcare policy literature and theories of policy tools, we apply a conceptual framework drawn from the social construction and new institutionalism literatures to the alternative policy designs. We illustrate how the use of each tool represents a social, political, moral, and value-laden choice to privilege particular social and political constructions of childcare. In addition, we discuss how each policy design institutionalizes a particular form of government service, which gives power and voice to some interests over others, resulting in a new political context for future policy debates.
Socio-political Construction of Childcare

Background: childcare policy design

Gormley (1995) has emphasized the cross-cutting nature of childcare [1], which is:

especially vexing and perplexing, to both analysts and parents ... it is a labor problem, a social
problem, a regulatory problem, an intergovernmental problem, an administrative problem, a
community problem, and, of course, a familial problem. (p. 32)

Not surprisingly, a wide range of policy approaches has been utilized to influence the provision of childcare. To assist with synthesizing these alternatives, we adopt Salamon’s (2002) categorization of policy designs into common ‘tools of government’ – each representing a primary mechanism by which government attempts to achieve its policy goals.[2] In the area of childcare, we identify five policy tools commonly utilized (often in combination) by governments: (1) direct government provision in which a public agency provides childcare services; (2) grants-in-aid to lower levels of government or organizations to provide childcare services; (3) vouchers that assist parents in purchasing childcare services in the private market; (4) tax expenditures that refund a portion of families’ childcare costs; and (5) government insurance to fund childcare by parents or other caregivers.

Although these policy tools focus on similar broad policy goals (for example, access to affordable childcare services), the tools represent distinct approaches to childcare policy. Each accords different priority to competing short-term objectives by distributing benefits to different constituencies and institutionalizing a particular governmental approach to childcare. These choices structure the services provided to children and families. For example, a policy that provides increased access to childcare through the private market will likely benefit families who are well equipped to navigate that market, while families unable to find, access, or afford their preferred provider will gain less (if at all). In contrast, the provision of childcare by government can more directly target new childcare slots toward particular groups or types of families (for example, in a certain rural area). Hence, when one design is chosen over another, different children and families, as well as objectives (for example, access versus quality), ‘win out’. In addition, these design choices have longer-term social and political consequences. Illustrating these socio-political consequences is the primary aim of this article.

Conceptual Framework: socio-political consequences of policy design

We adopt a conceptual framework in which policies have not only material consequences for the individuals impacted by them, but also social and political consequences that structure social discourse and policy debate for years to come. As emphasized by Lowi (1964, 1972) and Salamon (1989, 2002), seemingly technical design choices are, in fact:

profoundly political [decisions], which give some actors, and therefore some perspectives, an
advantage in determining how policies are carried out ... [T]he choice of tool is often a central
part of the political battle that shapes public programs. What is at stake in these battles is not
simply the most efficient way to solve a particular public problem, but also the relative influence
that various affected interests will have in shaping the program’s postenactment evolution.
(Salamon, 2002, p. 11)

In an effort to illuminate these socio-political consequences, we draw from two overlapping theoretical perspectives commonly employed to analyse governmental action: social construction and new institutionalism.

Theories of social construction focus on how key aspects of political discourse (for example, views of target populations and assessments regarding the severity of public problems) are not inevitable but determined through an ongoing social process in which citizens, journalists, politicians, and practitioners bring personal experience, perspectives, and values to make meaning of a particular issue (Stone, 1989; Luker, 1996; Schneider & Ingram, 1997). These constructions are necessary heuristics which enable interpretation and provide rationale for social action. The power of these constructions should not be underestimated. Many social constructions are so ingrained that people tend to accept them as real and as the only interpretation they can imagine (Schneider & Ingram, 1997). In fact, contemporary scholars of childhood studies often argue that childhood is
a social construction in itself (Cleverley & Phillips, 1986; James & Prout, 1990; Dahlberg et al, 1999). Similarly, childcare services, which are underpinned by these visions of childhood, may be viewed in a number of ways: for example, as custodial arrangements for children while their parents work; pre-primary education to prepare children for formal schools; opportunities for children to socialize with their peers and learn what it means to be a citizen; compensatory services for children from home environments that are deemed deficient; or public spaces where adults and children engage together in a variety of projects of social, cultural, political, and economic significance (Dahlberg et al, 1999).

Policy tools, as collective actions, serve to codify and strengthen these social constructions. Although not usually articulated directly, every policy proposal puts forward a particular conception of a social problem. For example, Pacini-Ketchabaw (2005) illustrates how the adoption of Ontario’s Day Nursery Act promoted particular discourses – such as the need to follow strict programming and behavioral guidelines – which remain as policy legacies shaping Canadian childcare politics today. Commonly, social problems are not objectively determined but framed for political reasons to support a particular policy solution (Edelman, 1988; Weiss, 1989; Gormley & Peters, 1992). As a result, adoption of a particular policy design includes the adoption of a particular politically constructed problem and the ideological interests it reinforces. Much problem definition draws on social constructions of target populations as either ‘positive’ or ‘negative’ (or ‘deserving’ or ‘non-deserving’). For example, Schneider & Ingram (1993) emphasize the ‘strong pressures for public officials to provide beneficial policy to powerful, positively constructed target populations and to devise punitive, punishment-oriented policy for negatively constructed groups’ (p. 334). Thus, policy choices reinforce the position of particular groups in society and further advantage or disadvantage these groups in future policy making.

New institutionalism recognizes the relative autonomy of political institutions and their norms to impact policy decisions (March & Olsen, 1984) and posits that political institutions shape the rules and aspects of the strategic environment to give priority to certain groups and ideas over others (Steinmo & Watts, 1995; Cohen, 2001; Raden, 1999). The approach has antecedents in Lindblom’s (1959) characterization of policy making as incremental and piecemeal, in which policy makers make minor alterations to pre-existing policy design. Once a government begins down a certain path it becomes quite costly to deviate from this course; therefore, decisions ‘at one point in time can restrict future possibilities by sending policy off onto particular tracks, along which ideas and interests develop and strategies adapt’ (Weir, 1992, p. 19). The choice of particular policy designs represents a critical juncture in which even small changes concomitantly institutionalize a particular role for government (Salamon & Lund, 1989; Suchman, 1995) and limit alternatives (Pierson, 1993).

In this perspective, policies can be conceptualized as institutions that – like other institutions – structure the distribution of resources, agency, authority, and legitimacy. The idea that policies reshape the political environment has a long legacy. In 1935, E.E. Schattschneider suggested that ‘new policies create a new politics’. More recently, this conception has been greatly advanced by theoretical and empirical work labeled as ‘policy feedback’ literature, in which scholars examine how enacted policies alter the next round of policy making (Orloff, 1988; Skocpol, 1992). For example, the placement of authority for a childcare policy prioritizes particular functions of childcare. An education department may be inclined to emphasize pre-academic skills, while an employment or social affairs bureau may be inclined to value the ability of childcare to assist parents in working outside the home. As a result of these values, particular elements of childcare (for example, certain hours of operation) will be mandated, funded, and monitored, while other aspects can vary dramatically. This phenomenon has been examined by Adams & Rohacek (2002), who critique the USA’s Childcare and Development Fund (childcare subsidy program for low-income families) for its near exclusive focus on childcare as custodial care to support parents working and its lack of institutional features to promote the educational functions of care.

Applying this conceptual framework to alternative policy designs can illuminate ways in which policies shape power, preferences, participation, and policy making in the future (Skocpol, 1992; Pierson, 1993; Mettler & Soss, 2004). The legacy of previous policy choices – with their associated service delivery system, construction of the problem and target population, policy winners and losers positioned to win or lose again, and legitimization of a particular role for
government – is the framework in which future childcare policies are experienced, understood, debated, and selected.

**Childcare Policy Tools**

As already argued, policy makers, advocates, and citizens should consider a broad set of policy consequences while they wrestle with selecting the best means to achieve particular goals. In this section, we provide a critical examination of five common childcare policy designs (see Table I for a list and key characteristics of each). For each policy tool, we describe the tool in general, provide an example of its current use [3], and highlight the implications of that policy design for the socio-political construction of childcare. Specifically, we ask: what social constructions of childcare, children, families, and government are advanced by the policy design? Which ideas, interests, and actors does the institutional structure privilege? What are the implications of these constructions and institutions for future policy making?

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Table I. Overview of five common childcare policy tools (adapted by the authors from Salamon, 2002).

**Direct Government Provision and Childcare**

Direct government provision is the delivery of a certain good or service by government employees through a public agency rather than through a third party (Leman, 2002). In the case of childcare, direct government provision takes the form of childcare services funded and administered by a government authority. A good example of this policy design is the French *école maternelle*, which entitles all of the nation’s three- to six-year-old children to attend preschool. The central government determines a national curriculum, teacher salaries, pedagogy, and evaluation, while local governments assume responsibility for facilities and providing support staff (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2006).

By holding this administrative function within government, direct government provision reinforces an active role for government in childcare policy and decreases the legitimacy (and strength) of arguments against public interventions in children’s lives. In contrast, for indirect government provision, a different form of administration occurs in which the government vests parents, providers, school districts, or local governments with authority to choose and monitor childcare. Compared to these indirect approaches, direct government provision is highly visible, which reinforces the public message that childcare is an appropriate domain for governmental intervention. Indeed, the *école maternelle* enjoys widespread support across the political spectrum; there is little to no opposition to government involvement in the program.

Institutionally, the use of direct government provision reflects the values and priorities of the administrative agency designing and administering the program. In an agency that also administers
public education, for instance, childcare services may mirror the structure and content of early education programs; alternatively, childcare services administered from a public welfare agency may reflect the agency’s focus on maternal employment over education. In the example of France’s école maternelle, which is administered from the education ministry, the educational focus of the program is illustrated in the program’s operating hours and school-year calendar, as well as by the inclusion of its teachers in the teachers’ union for primary school teachers.

In addition, the agency and bureaucrats selected to operate the program gain a reputation as early childhood experts capable of designing programs and determining the means by which programs should be evaluated. As a result, direct government provision establishes institutional memory about the way services should be provided, which renders them highly sustainable. This institutional ‘stickiness’ may limit governments’ responsiveness to the public in future policy debates since it is ‘stuck’ with a particular programmatic format supported by government insiders who have authority over the existing program. This institutional rigidity is apparent in the école maternelle, whose centralized institutional structure makes it more challenging (a) to devolve any responsibilities to lower levels of government and (b) to coordinate with other forms of childcare provision (such as the crèches, which serve infants and toddlers). The particular approach legitimized by the direct government provision policy becomes the foundation on which future policy debates begin discussion regarding which alternative (or competing) policy options are optimal and even possible.

Grants-in-Aid and Childcare

A grant-in-aid is a subsidy of public funds from a central government to a recipient organization or subnational government to render a specific service or activity (Beam & Conlan, 2002). Grants-in-aid are commonly used in childcare policy when a national or regional government ‘grants’ funds to local-level governments to provide early childhood programs. An example of a grant-in-aid is Great Britain’s Sure Start program, which provides funding to integrate services for very young children (primarily from birth to the age of three) and their families in areas identified as being in need. Since these funds are administered via a grant-in-aid (rather than a direct government program), it is local-level policy makers who define the types, nature, and elements of services to be provided. Therefore, by choosing a grant-in-aid, British policy makers forgo some control and oversight in order to allow for locally defined policy solutions (Beam & Conlan, 2002).

Like direct government provision, grants-in-aid establish an active role for government in the provision of childcare. The central government ensures childcare is available for children for a specified period of time and coordinates education and care services. Moreover, to be eligible for grants-in-aid, childcare programs are required to comply with conditions, including inspection and working toward government-defined goals (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2006). Unlike direct government provision, which is considered a broad and highly visible public intervention, a grant-in-aid conceptualizes government involvement as a locally based solution. As a result, the social construction of childcare focuses on families, communities, and local providers as the appropriate venue for childcare policy. Since some policy makers (as well as some members of the public) view governmental involvement in the lives of very young children with some degree of caution, it is not surprising that Great Britain’s Sure Start grant-in-aid program serves young children from birth to the age of three. The use of grant-in-aid policy designs for this age group codifies the distinction between direct government provision and grants-in-aid.

The institutional arrangement inherent in grants-in-aid provides legitimacy, resources, and authority to local-level bureaucrats rather than to the more centralized policy makers who develop and fund the program. Because the level of government that funds the program does not actually provide the childcare services, those bureaucrats have less capacity to advocate for childcare expansion than they would if childcare was funded and provided by direct government provision. But, not surprisingly, grants-in-aids do elicit advocacy among local-level stakeholders from across the political jurisdiction. In Great Britain’s Sure Start program, services are provided by a range of actors including private, voluntary, and community sector agencies. As a result (and similar to direct government provision) grants-in-aid are quite stable, hard to cut or reform, and difficult to redirect as needs shift over time (Anton, 1989; Beam & Conlan, 2002).
Vouchers and Childcare

Vouchers grant 'limited purchasing power to an individual to choose among a restricted set of goods and services' (Steuerle, 2000, p. 4). The increased focus on the privatization of social services in many countries has brought voucher-based policy approaches to the forefront in policy areas such as childcare and education (Howlett & Ramesh, 1993; Steuerle & Twombly, 2002). Vouchers are different from grants-in-aid in that families have more control over the nature of services than the suppliers of goods and services (for example, direct government provision). Vouchers enable families who are unable to afford childcare to purchase these services for their young children. Vouchers also offer families the freedom to choose among providers within the childcare market. By using vouchers, policy makers define the social problem as access to the paid childcare market – a market that is reinforced by providing public goods through limited government intervention. For example, almost all families in Australia accessing childcare receive the Childcare Benefit, a voucher that provides fee support adjusted by family income and need. In Australia, multiple levels of government influence the provision of childcare. National government funds and supports quality assurance systems, while state governments regulate the quality of services that families choose (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2006). Ultimately, however, vouchers ensure families have greater choice of childcare services.

In contrast to direct government provision or even grants-in-aid, voucher programs endorse diversity of type and sector of care by subsidizing a mixed-delivery system for paid care rather than providing childcare through a direct government program. This places the choice of provider firmly in the hands of parents, who select caregivers that align with their values, schedule, preferences, and needs (as long as those caregivers exist and the voucher covers the cost of care). The voucher also reinforces a social construction of childcare as a service–customer transaction rather than as a benefit of social citizenship provided by government – even when government is financing a large portion of the care, as is the case in Australia. The emphasis on parent choice also assumes that parents have sufficient information to assess and select quality childcare for their children. Finally, the use of the market as a delivery mechanism reinforces notions that the shortages and lack of coordination present in a childcare ‘system’ can be addressed via a demand-side subsidy, rather than through supply-side investment in the programs themselves. In reality, mismatches between the supply of services and parent demand are common, as providers often choose not to open in lower-income communities.

Institutionally, vouchers vest some authority with the governmental agency administering the program but primarily engage market-based service providers as advocates for childcare subsidies through two avenues. First, providers receiving subsidies may become engaged in policy efforts to protect the funding stream; second, because subsidies are available, new providers may enter the market because they can provide childcare services to families who without the subsidies would not be able to afford the providers’ fees. These forces coalesce to support future policy development that embraces a mixed-delivery system, which may contribute to a lack of system coherence and coordination due to multilayering of administration and regulation across different programs. In fact, the lack of coherence was one of the primary issues in Australia (as well as other nations using market-based delivery systems) identified by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s review team (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2006).

Tax Expenditures and Childcare

Tax expenditures utilize the tax system to subsidize particular expenses (Howard, 2002). In childcare, tax expenditures typically provide a tax write-off or credit to reimburse families for some of their childcare expenses during the year, such as the Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit in the USA.[4] Like childcare vouchers, tax expenditures emphasize private responsibility for delivering childcare services and focus on a demand-side subsidy approach. Tax expenditures aim to solve the problem that some families cannot afford to participate in the childcare market by reducing the cost of childcare that families secure in the private market. Even more than for vouchers, tax expenditures minimize the role of the government in the day-to-day subsidization (not to mention provision) of childcare. Tax expenditures, like vouchers, place the responsibility for securing
childcare in the hands of families navigating a mixed-delivery system, thereby reinforcing the legitimacy of the childcare market as a primary mechanism to supply childcare. As a result, tax expenditures replicate problems associated with a market-based social service system. In particular, families disadvantaged in the market are likely to be disadvantaged by childcare policy provided through tax expenditures. In many cases, parents use their tax credits to purchase childcare that has less stringent regulations than childcare provided through other policy tools (for example, direct government provision). As a result, some tax credits tend to emphasize access and affordability of childcare over quality.

Although both tax expenditures and vouchers support similar ideas about the purpose of and responsibility for childcare, tax expenditures have a few important institutional differences. First, tax expenditures, in effect, provide entitlements for childcare assistance since tax breaks are delivered directly through the tax system to all who claim them. And, because families access childcare assistance through the tax system, they are not subjected to long program waiting lists, limited funding, or inadequate space, which families frequently face when utilizing vouchers. The trade-off is that tax expenditures typically are claimed annually, unlike vouchers, which may be provided to families on a more regular basis. Second, because tax provisions are far less visible than other childcare tools, benefits delivered via tax expenditures reduce any social stigma of receiving or promoting government assistance (Howard, 2002). In fact, Howard has highlighted how tax expenditure expansions can actually be portrayed as a retraction of ‘government power’ (p. 428) in order to garner broad public support in political climates that favor small government. Of course, the use of the tax system also institutionalizes key features of the nation’s tax system within the childcare policy. For example, in the USA, families below a particular income level do not pay income tax and thus may not benefit from a non-refundable tax expenditure.

Institutionally, tax expenditures are quite hidden from public view. In the US program, tax expenditures are rarely (if ever) targeted for budget cuts or provided as examples of government largess. Estimates of the government investment in childcare typically exclude the dollars provided to families via the Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit since the cost to government is in forgone revenue rather than appropriated governmental spending. Childcare provision via the tax system entails a unique ‘subterranean’ politics; not surprisingly, tax expenditures tend to be sustained over time (Hacker, 2002). Of course, since the visibility of tax expenditures is limited, so is the potential for governments to claim credit for the expansion of this policy. Therefore, politicians and advocates solely seeking political gains may be uninterested in promoting childcare through tax expenditures.

Government Insurance

Government insurance aims to protect individuals, families, communities, and society from situations that might otherwise be financially devastating. The government provides insurance for circumstances which have a positive social benefit but which private insurers are loath to protect against (Feldman, 2002). In the area of childcare policy, governmental insurance is typically used to provide parental leave payments to families with very young children, protecting families from the risk of insolvency when they are separated from the labor force. In Sweden, for example, parental insurance provides families with the financial resources to care for their newborns. Swedish employers, employees, and taxes fund parental insurance, which is administered by the Swedish Social Insurance Agency (Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, 2005). The state guarantees low-income parents a minimum benefit and higher earners receive a percentage of their income, shared between mothers and fathers.

Compared with the other policy tools, government insurance programs, such as Sweden’s parental leave policy, put forth a unique and mixed social construction of governmental responsibility. The tool represents significant governmental involvement in the lives of very young children but that involvement enables parents to be primary caregivers. In other words, parental leave supports a private approach to childcare rather than a more formal or public approach (for example, government-sponsored infant-toddler centers). Childcare provision through social insurance payments is an earned social benefit for workers, which links childcare and maternal work in the social discourse. Thus, the social construction emphasizes government responsibility to
provide benefits to workers – not childcare provision to young children per se. Yet, the fact that all workers pay into the insurance system – including those who have not and will not take parental leave – implies that investment in childcare benefits society at large and not just parents (Kamerman, 2000).

Institutionally, government social insurance is quite unique. The use of payroll or wage taxes to collect the necessary revenue avoids the need for annual debates over the level of spending and structures the benefit in a way that makes it available for all who choose to utilize it. However, payroll and wage taxes (as well as universal programs such as Sweden’s leave policy) are quite visible to all workers, including those who do not utilize the insurance. Thus, the benefit levels are vulnerable to public criticism, which can lead to cuts. This occurred in Sweden where the maximum payout as a percentage of income and the minimum guaranteed benefit were lowered during the public budget difficulties in the 1990s. At the same time, debates over insurance approaches may engage new actors in supporting childcare. For instance, labor unions may be more likely to protect these benefits by negotiating with government and employer organizations on behalf of their members. More significantly, the structure of social insurance programs may also engender strong public support because workers who contribute to the insurance pool may feel they have a right to receive the benefit. Because all workers pay into social insurance, they have legitimacy in utilizing it. Finally, the use of social insurance terminology ‘reflects a political belief that these terms protect the program from opponents’ (Salamon, 2002, p. 196).

Discussion and Conclusion

In designing childcare policy, policy makers face a complex institutional environment in which a wide range of actors has a high stake in the outcomes of their policy choices. Given this socio-political context, comparisons of policy tools raise the question of what can be done to expand, enhance, or alter a nation’s childcare policies once a particular policy design has been institutionalized. Recognizing the institutional and normative barriers to large-scale reforms, it is important to consider incremental changes to childcare policy designs. Furthermore, decisions regarding other factors, such as eligibility, regulation, curriculum, and funding, alter each policy tool’s impact and socio-political consequences. The design features of a voucher, for instance, shape governmental involvement in childcare. The nature of the voucher determines the type of childcare families use (for example, government-regulated childcare); eligibility requirements determine who receives childcare (for example, only low-income parents); and the amount of funding associated with the voucher determines the quality of services they utilize (for example, inexpensive low-quality care). Furthermore, vouchers are limited by the availability of alternatives (for example, the supply of various services). Thus, a seemingly technical decision has short-term consequences for the recipients of childcare services, as well as the long-term socio-political consequences discussed previously.

To address the shortcomings of each tool, policy makers increasingly use a mix of policy tools. In fact, each country discussed here relies on multiple tools to provide childcare. France’s école maternelle, our example of a direct government provision of childcare services, is one among many tools used to support families with young children. France supports the provision of childcare for infants and toddlers through multiple sources, including grants-in-aid, tax benefits, and family subsidies (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2006). In this example, the choice of different tools for different forms of childcare for children of different ages may reflect ambiguous institutional and social values surrounding young children’s care. Understanding these values, as well as the technical and socio-political implications of each tool, is pivotal to designing a coherent and effective approach to solving public problems (Howlett et al, 2006); yet blending tools is typically done in an ad hoc fashion without attention to the optimal mix of instruments needed to achieve government goals (Salamon, 2002). By identifying the trade-offs of different approaches, policy makers and advocates alike have the capacity to make these choices with sound technical and political judgment.

The aforementioned policy tools determine more than the distribution of childcare-related resources among families, providers, and local governments. In the words of Ringeling (2002), policy tools are ‘political weapons and marching banners alike’ (p. 597). And much of their power
stems from the social constructions and institutional structures they advance. As with most political weapons, these dynamics are often understood by those policy makers, advocates, bureaucrats, providers, or families in favor of or against particular policy changes. Yet, they rarely enter the broader political discourse or the empirical analysis of the effects of particular policy approaches. Instead, the instrumental or distributive features of the policy are put forth (for example, the number of children who will be served or the size of the tax credit). This discourse tends to obscure the fact that underlying these policy positions are ideas, interests, and values that are very much at stake. In this way, policy formation is a process by which values and priorities become codified, institutionalized, and to some degree determined in future social and policy debates.

What makes this process so critical is the institutional stickiness of policy designs, which makes it difficult to alter a course of action once a particular institutional arrangement has been adopted. Moreover, since the most politically feasible policy proposals tend to reinforce the already dominant social constructions and institutional structures, future policy making tends to add momentum to the dominant paradigms. It is our hope that our framework for comparing tools and their consequences presented in this article allows for policy debates and decisions that consider how the choice of a childcare policy tool determines much more than an isolated governmental policy affecting childcare. Instead, we ask policy makers and advocates to consider what drives their choice of policy design and how their choices contribute to social constructions of childcare, children, families, providers, and markets, and the institutional role of government in making childcare policy.

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Notes
[1] In this article, the term ‘childcare’ encompasses all forms of early education and childcare arrangements for children from birth to compulsory school age.
[3] These examples are drawn from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s Starting Strong reports (2001, 2006) in order to highlight national policies that clearly employ a particular tool of government. In each example, these policies exist alongside other childcare (and social service/education) policies that utilize a mix of other policy tools. Thus, the examples best illustrate the consequences of a particular tool rather than the overall childcare policies of a particular nation. In addition, although our examples are drawn from a comparison of national policy among advanced industrialized nations, the definition of policy tools and the conceptualization of socio-political consequences are also evident in other nations and at other (lower) levels of government.
[4] Tax provisions are sometimes also used to stimulate investment by corporations in childcare and other child development efforts.

References
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