

*Dissertation Title:* Education or Welfare? American and British Child Care Policy, 1965-2004

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*Abstract*

The care and education of pre-school children presents a perfect storm of conflicts among the needs of women, children, and states, particularly in societies that maintain a sharp barrier between the private and public spheres such as the United States and Britain. American and British policymakers attempted to address these tensions in the early 1970s by proposing universal child care programs. In the U.S., the Comprehensive Child Development Act (CDA) of 1971 passed both the House and Senate by overwhelming majorities but was vetoed by President Richard Nixon. Going further than any proposal before or since to establish a national public child care program, it would have made public child care centers universally available on a sliding-scale basis: free for children of the poor but available for a fee to middle and upper class children. The British Department of Education and Science, led by Secretary Margaret Thatcher, published a White Paper in 1972 calling for nursery expansion, but it was never fully implemented. It proposed a dramatic expansion of public nursery education, so that it might be available within a decade to all families with three and four year old children who chose to utilize it, with funds being made available first to local areas designated as most in need.

My dissertation presents an in-depth account of the political bargaining that occurred during this period in both countries, and addresses the factors that contributed to the failure of these universal child care proposals. Although neither child care program was implemented (or fully implemented, in the British case), the proposals raise important questions about the relationship between the state and the family. It also analyzes the aftermath of these policies' failure through to the end of Thatcher and Reagan administrations.

It then turns to the mid-1990s which represent a key divergence in the two nations' paths, as Britain returned to its earlier nursery education initiatives for all children and the United States further entrenched its reliance on the private market for the provision of care. The passage in 1997 of the British National Child Care Strategy, a central component of New Labour's War on Child Poverty, included a free and universal preschool provision for all three and four year old children. In the U.S., by contrast, the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act expanded child care subsidies only for eligible low income children below the age of five, thus continuing the American reliance on the free market to provide this necessary service for most families.

I argue that conflicting visions of child care as an educational intervention versus a welfare service—and as a universal provision benefitting all children and families versus a means-tested program targeted to low-income families—explain the differences between these two countries' policy developments in the 1990s. Specifically, my dissertation examines how British and American conceptions of motherhood and child-rearing compare, and how policymakers viewed the role of the state in intervening with parental responsibilities. In the United States, Republicans balked at the idea of public child care provision for the nonpoor, yet British politicians of both major parties supported universal public interventions in the early years at various points across the period.