

Return of the nanny: Public policy towards in-home childcare in the UK, Canada and Australia ^[1]

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Abstract

Research on early childhood education and care (ECEC) policy focuses overwhelmingly on formal, centre-based provision and, to a lesser extent, on family day care (or childminding) provided in the homes of registered carers. Comparatively little research addresses the policy treatment of care provided in the child's home by nannies and au pairs. This article examines the position of in-home childcare in Australia, the UK and Canada, and the varied nature and extent of public funding and regulation. Introducing a new dimension into comparative studies of ECEC, it also explores how shifts in migration policy in each country have intersected with ECEC funding and regulation to reshape the recruitment and employment of in-home child carers. Australia, the UK and Canada are all liberal, market-oriented countries, but there is considerable diversity in the way governments support and regulate in-home childcare, their rationales for so doing, and in the connections between childcare and migration. We argue that connecting the analysis of in-home childcare to migration policies raises new questions about the classification and comparison of ECEC policies.

Conclusion

Our analysis of the different policy approaches to in-home childcare in Australia, the UK (England) and Canada shows how different national policy arrangements either include or exclude in-home childcare from the broad ECEC policy arena. While liberal countries are known for their market approach to funding care services, the findings illustrate that ECEC funding, regulation and migration policies in these three countries differ in ways that have particular implications for the provision of in-home childcare. The marketization of ECEC contributes to privatization of services and, sometimes, the formalization of services through registries of care workers. However, public subsidization in the absence of regulation for services can lead to unclear boundaries between public and private responsibilities across the informal and formal domains.

Drawing on regime theories and literatures on care responsibilities and classifications, the article illustrates that policy reforms in both the ECEC and migration sectors are critical to analyzing the public policy treatment of in-home childcare and how it is positioned across the public/private and informal/formal domains. At a schematic level, funding for Australia's In Home Care programme is the most formal and is furthest towards the public end of the public-private continuum, yet the scheme is tightly targeted and capped, and only available to a small minority of families. In Canada, public funding facilitates the use of informal, unregulated care, including non-relative care provided in the child's home. While there is some assistance through public funding, in-home childcare remains in the informal and private domain. The UK's funding arrangements, through the childcare element of the Working Tax Credit, places it between Australia and Canada on the informal-formal continuum and private-public continuum. Immigration policy in the UK and Canada promotes the hiring of nannies and domestic workers, and compounds the complexity of classifying care responsibilities across the public/private and informal/formal domains.

These findings confirm the complexity of classifying the 'liberal states' as relying on the family and market mechanisms to provide ECEC and other social care (O'Connor et al. 1999; Jenson and Sineau 2001; Mahon et al. 2012). Using in-home childcare as a lens to analyze public and private responsibility, we can see that public funding for private and informal care arrangements raises new questions about classifying and critiquing ECEC and other social care policies.

Despite similar 'liberal', market-led mechanisms used in ECEC policy, the scope of government support for in-home childcare differs. These findings contribute to an emerging body of research on the impacts of migration for nannies and other domestic care workers (Busch 2013; Búriková and Miller 2010; Lutz 2008; Williams and Gavanis 2008) and also raise important questions about the implications of government support for in-home childcare for families and children. In particular, the intersections of these policy levers impact the affordability and quality of care for families, and are divided across income/class lines (Adamson 2016, forthcoming). Australia is the exception in its targeted approach to providing In Home Care for children and families from low- to middle-income families who face barriers to using mainstream services. Privately provided nannies remain a reality only for higher income families. Despite access to subsidization through tax credits and vouchers, most families in the UK hiring nannies are still middle- and high-income earners. The traditional income disparities among users of in-home childcare are contended by critics and conformed by data that shows only 12

percent of nannies are employed by families with gross annual household income of £ 70,000 or less. In Canada, the CCED is more generous to families who spend more on childcare, which also tend to be families with higher incomes. This tax measure further embeds income inequalities among families (Harder 2004). For dual earner families with multiple children, the Live-In Caregiver programme has often been seen as the more affordable option to centre-based services; however, it is still only accessible to middle- and high-income families. In the UK and Canada in particular, government support for in-home childcare preserves class-based inequities that are evident in these countries' broader childcare systems.

The findings provide a foundation to for further comparative analysis into why these three countries differ in their policy treatment of in-home childcare, and what the implications might be for children, parents and care workers.

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