Child Care Selection Under Welfare Reform:
How Mothers Balance Work Requirements and Parenting

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This paper examines the reasoning and experiences of mothers in selecting child care while trying to meet welfare-to-work requirements. Three theoretical positions that have been used to look at child care selection — rational choice, structuralist, and cultural — are examined and critiqued in light of a structural developmental psychology perspective. The paper then reports on semi-structured, open-ended interviews with seven mothers from three different ethnic groups — African-American, Anglo, and Latina — who range in age from 21 to 42. Interviews covered a 15-month period of time following the mothers' enrollment in a welfare-to-work program. The major finding is that mothers have hierarchically ordered criteria for evaluating child care possibilities, and the preeminent criteria is that they trust the child care provider to keep their children safe and well cared for. Structural constraints on the mothers choices are also analyzed. The findings in this article suggest that policy makers should focus on issues of trust and legitimacy of child care providers, as well as on more traditional concerns of supply and educational quality.

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Latrice, African-American mother of 2 children

Introduction

As the number of working parents has increased over the past decade, the question of why parents use one type of child care or another has been asked more frequently by researchers and policy makers alike. For example, when researchers see an apparent effect of the quality of child care on early development, it is important to know how much of the "effect" is actually attributable to family and neighborhood factors that led to the "selection" of high or low-quality care. In addition, Center-based programs like Head Start, and vouchers intended to broaden child care options have grown substantially in recent years. Nonetheless, most low-income women continue to select kith or kin members to care for their children (Fuller, et al., 2000).

A growing number of quantitative studies are helping to identify how family or maternal attributes influence the child care used by working mothers. For example, we have learned that maternal education, ethnic membership, household income, parenting beliefs and practices, levels of social support, the child's age, and the number of siblings all influence the type of child care parents use (Fuller, Holloway, & Liang, 1996; Singer, Fuller, Keiley, & Wolf, 1998; Fuller, et al., 1999). We also know that organizational or neighborhood factors, like the availability of centers and preschools (widely unequal across states and low-income communities), bound these family level variables (Holloway & Fuller, 1999). This earlier work, however, includes only limited qualitative evidence on how women themselves view their options and the criteria that they consider in their selection process. The issue of child care selection also remains under theorized: we have only partial explanations for the kinds of child care "choices" that parents are likely to make under local conditions.

In an effort to increase our qualitative data base, and develop more nuanced explanations of child care use, this paper reports on the reasoning of seven mothers about their child care over a 15 month period. When we began talking with them, each mother had recently entered a new welfare-to-work program in California. As participants in these programs, all the mothers were eligible for subsidies to pay for child care during the hours they were engaged in welfare-to-work activities. The subsidies could be used to cover center based care, a family child care placement, or kith or kin caregivers. Our goal was to explore the mothers' criteria for selecting child care providers, and follow what was usually a sequence of different caregivers over a period of time.

The most important of our findings in this on-going research is perhaps not surprising. It indicates that these mothers are initially concerned with what we have labeled trust in finding child care for their children. Being able to trust their child care provider means they have confidence their children will be safe from harm, and that their children's basic needs

will be attended to. This means the children will not be abused, their diapers will be changed, they will be fed, and they will not be ignored – particularly if they are upset. While the cultural patterns and individual understandings about who is trustworthy have yet to be fully explored, we are taking the opportunity of this article to advance a new conceptualization of selection that focuses on this clear finding. We then illuminate secondary criteria that women talk about once this basic condition is met. While some women worry about their toddler spending too much time passively watching television, others consider the provider's flexibility in terms of the hours that they work or their ability to provide transportation. But this second level of criteria, while always present in the minds of these women, only gets concrete consideration once they feel a more basic level of trust with the potential child care provider.

We begin with a brief review of how child care selection has been conceptualized, drawing from both quantitative and qualitative studies, and then explain our own perspective in conducting this research. Second, we describe our method of conducting repeated interviews with a small number of poor, single mothers. Third, we present our results in two main parts: focusing on the criteria mothers use in evaluating child care, and the pathways they follow to secure and maintain that care. Fourth, we discuss our findings with regard to the theoretical perspectives already presented, and suggest policy considerations that flow from our results.

Theoretical Accounts of Child Care Selection

Set forth below are three theoretical perspectives that have been applied to research on mothers' child care selection. Each has supplied only partial explanations for why mothers end up with the child care they have. We argue that our own perspective is an improvement on each of these because it accounts for the factors they look at, plus additional factors we consider important. In each case what the various theories look at is driven by their assumptions about how people think and what shapes their behavior. Although we do not here attempt to settle these theoretical debates, we do hope to move them forward. We also want to alert the reader to our perspective because it shapes the type of data we collect, and how we analyze that data.

Rational Choice Explanations. Most studies of selection continue to view the household as the primary unit of "decision making." Families are viewed as having variable and exogenous criteria, and they are entirely conscious of these criteria (Arrow, 1951; Becker, 1976). This account of "choice" displays neoclassical assumptions regarding the parents' rationality and drive to advance the child's development and human capital skills, presumably yielding long-term economic benefits. No assumption is made that a parent's preferences are determined by class position or community membership, as with the accounts described below. Studies of child care selection from this perspective provide evidence that decision-making is driven by economic considerations or criteria, centered within the family unit. We know, for instance, that maternal employment, level of education, parents' concern with explicit development of the child, and provider prices help predict selection of center-based programs (Fuller, Holloway, Rambaud, & Eggers-Piérola, 1996).

Researchers working from the household-centered frame, including economists, have more recently begun to recognize social associations or institutional structures that may constrain or condition parental decisions. For instance, Haveman and Wolfe (1995, p. 1837)

talk about how parents appropriate from their social environment particular beliefs and practices related to child development, including "the sort of monitoring, disciplinary, nurturing, and expectational environment in which their children are raised." This suggests that criteria do not exogenously appear out of thin air, but instead are endogenous to community norms and organized ways of raising young children, such as within child care organizations. Even Becker and Tomes (1976, S148) recognized that communities differ in their spending on schooling and parents concerned with their youngsters' development would move into neighborhoods where "public contributions to their children's schooling would be greater." In short, families are situated within institutional settings.

A second kind of social collective recognized by neo-classical theorists relates to what has come to be called "social capital" (Loury, 1977). The perception of trust is important to this way of examining how parents invest in their children's development and schooling (Coleman, 1988). The individual parent is viewed as embedded in social relationships or networks that can provide a variety of resources. Obligatory forms of social support offer one type of resource, directly relevant to the question of which kith and kin members mothers may call on to provide child care services. In fact, we have found that a low-income mother's level of reported social support is inversely related to the propensity to select a child care center. In other words, women with weaker support networks are more likely to seek out a slot in a center-based program (Fuller, et al., 1999).

Structuralist Explanations. Scholars rooted in this framework are less concerned with the criteria parents use in selecting child care and more focused on how a family's social-class position determines their real options. For instance, we know that the per capita supply of centers and preschool organizations is correlated with neighborhood wealth (reviewed in Holloway & Fuller, 1999). Class dynamics also help determine which women benefit from a more open job opportunity structure. Since better-educated women, presumably raised in middle-class or affluent families, are more likely to find well paying jobs, their maternal employment rates are higher. This spurs demand for child care in a stratified pattern that reproduces supply inequality from one generation to the next.

Other studies show that the quality and kind of child care program sought by parents can differ systematically, based on the parent's social class position. For instance, Joffe (1977) found that upper middle-class white parents sought centers that provided ample play activities, a rich array of educational materials, and less directive forms of discipline. In contrast, poor and working-class parents preferred caregivers that provided sharper structure and discipline, greater respect for adult authority, and were less concerned with the socialization of independence. According to this perspective, parents seek differing forms of cultural capital and social rules, based on their position in the class structure, rather than determined by individual criteria absent any particular social context. (Holloway, Fuller, Rambaud, & Eggers-Piérola, 1997).

Cultural Explanations. The notion of trust and reciprocal support among adults, within and outside the household, is more central to cultural explanations for how parents select child care. Recent studies focusing on Latina mothers, for example, have highlighted how a provider's language, forms of affection, and rules of authority signal a mother's comfort with alternative providers (Fuller, Holloway, Rambaud, & Eggers-Piérola, 1996). This essentially is a cultural convergence argument, from which variable levels of trust and sense of "cultural appropriateness" is derived.

A second cultural framework — centering on cultural models and micro social mechanisms that guide individual behavior — stems from cultural psychology. Here social scripts and perceptual schema come together into behavior sequences or tacit models of action that may play a role in how mothers select caregivers. For instance, parents who see child care as linked to the acquisition of skills or social behavior that advance later school achievement are more likely to search out a center-based program. Yet parents who are fundamentally concerned about safety and stability may not invoke or appropriate the first cultural model, linked to getting one's child ready for school (Holloway, Fuller, Rambaud, and Eggers-Piérola, 1997).

This approach emphasizes the primary role of cultural models and builds on Goodenough's (1957) viewpoint that individuals live in bounded social groups and learn how to think and behave in particular ways that make sense to other group members (see, e.g., Quinn & Holland, 1987). Cultural norms and practices are viewed as the central determinants of individual understandings and behavior. Generally, researchers in this tradition seek to catalogue cultural practices, and look for individuals who are cultural exemplars and thereby serve as models for others (Shweder, 1990; Shweder, et al., 1998). Importantly, other researchers in the cultural psychology tradition have taken a more nuanced and complex view of psychological processes. They have accounted for individual variation by locating the individual within unique "developmental niches" formed by the overlap of structural features, customs, and the psychological characteristics of significant others (such as parents) (Super & Harkness, 1999). From this phenomenological tradition, a fundamental point comes into clearer focus: the interpersonal trust of which our sampled mothers repeatedly spoke is more likely to be established if cultural models and symbols are shared between parent and the potential child care provider.

Structural Developmental Approach. We suggest that the cultural scripts, structural features, and individual choices emphasized by each of the theories described above provide important but incomplete explanations for why mothers end up with the child care they use. This position is derived from a structural developmental perspective in developmental psychology. It acknowledges that cultural features of the social environment provide important scripts that help individuals interpret and navigate their world, but does not view those scripts as the main source of psychological organization. It also recognizes that structural features of the environment, such as social class, play an important role in the decisions people make because they help define what is possible, and thereby bound the realm of individual choice. Finally it posits, in accord with the rational choice theorists, that people do think about their decisions, and that they make those decisions based on criteria or reasons. Those decisions, however, are influenced by a variety of factors such as culture, class, and the perceived and actual possibilities of a given situation (Turiel, 1998; Turiel & Wainryb, 1994). In addition to psychologists, anthropologists have also recognized the importance of individual interpretations of culture and structural features in understanding family level decisions (Stack & Burton, 1998).

The positions described above reflect deep theoretical divisions regarding how the psyche is constructed and what accounts for human behavior. Our initial qualitative analysis cannot arbitrate among these theories. Nonetheless, they represent a cross section of the approaches brought to bear on our research question – and each provides some useful concepts with which we may interpret our data. Our results show a complex set of pathways that reveal

elements of the rational choice, structural, and cultural frameworks, and that are guided by mothers' understandings and expectations about what is important for their children, given the circumstances of their world.

Method

Sample

The data presented here are drawn from interviews with 7 women (6 mothers and 1 grandmother). Those interviews are part of a series of four qualitative interviews with each of 15 mothers, occurring over a period of 20 months. The women chosen for this paper had the most to say on the issue of child care selection. This series of qualitative interviews is part of a larger study, the Growing Up in Poverty Project (GUP), that is looking at what is happening to mothers and their children as the mothers go to work under the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program.[1] The women interviewed here were already participating in the GUP study. We selected these mothers by reviewing the survey data from the GUP study and, based on the criteria described below, asking them to take part in the sub-study.

The mothers come from one of three ethnic groups represented in the GUP study in our target city: African-American, Anglo, and Latina. We also endeavored to get a range of women with regard to their ages (early 20's – early 40's), their degree of social support as measured in the main study described below, and their job readiness as evidenced by varying levels of education and prior work experience. In selecting the women, we attempted to get a cross section of the types of child care available, specifically, formal child care centers, licensed family child care, or license-exempt care (a close friend or relative). This proved somewhat harder to achieve since the child care used by mothers often underwent significant changes during the first year of our study. Our one grandmother was interviewed because she lives with our study mom, was willing to participate, and offered us an important window into the role of grandparents in child care. Most of the women have successfully completed job training or other education programs and are now working. One mother was sent to jail over the past year, but will soon be getting out. All of the mothers have been, and are currently, using some form of child care.

Procedures

Individual Interviews. These semi-structured, open-ended interviews took place in the mother's home or workplace, at a time when it was most convenient for her. Mothers were compensated for their time. The interviews were conducted in the mothers' primary language and translated if necessary. Each participant presented here has been interviewed two to three times over a one year period, not including the interviews for the larger GUP study.

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[1]   The larger GUP project is a three year national study of 948 single mothers who entered the new TANF programs in California, Connecticut, and Florida in 1997 or 1998. In California and Florida single mothers with a child, age 12-42 months, were invited to join the study during the summer of 1998. The invitation was made during a two hour orientation session that the mothers were required to attend shortly after applying for TANF benefits. The participation of the mothers was voluntary. In Connecticut single mothers were randomly assigned to an experimental group living under new welfare rules and a comparison group living under old AFDC rules in 1996. The data include in-depth maternal interviews, child care quality assessments, and direct assessments of young children's development. (Fuller, et al., 2000).

Subsequent interviews built on the previous interviews, focusing on updates on subjects already discussed, questions arising from prior interviews, and new topics not yet covered (Lincoln, Yvonna, & Egon Guba, 1985). We asked mothers to talk about their experience with welfare reform and child care, their personal backgrounds, their families and communities, and their views about the future.

While we developed a common set of themes to address with each mother, the order in which they were covered and the specific questions asked varied from person to person. This allowed us to cover the same topics across mothers, but allowed for variations due to personality, what was happening in the mother's life at the moment, and individual differences in each mother's story. In general, interviews would proceed with the interviewer telling the mother that we wanted to talk about, e.g., her experiences with child care since entering the welfare-to-work program. We would encourage each mother to give us both historical and current information, and stories to illustrate her experiences and opinions. The object was to allow mothers to give their own narrative account of a topic, with the interviewer strategically asking for more detail or clarification as the situation warranted.

The interviews were conducted one-on-one and tape recorded for transcription. The transcriptions were then coded as described in the Analysis section. The intent was to develop an on-going, open, and confidential relationship with each mother in an effort to construct a fuller description of welfare reform and child rearing than was available from the survey, observational, and testing data we had in the larger study.

Analysis of Data. As a result of some initial trends noted in the GUP study, we began to develop themes that we wanted to explore through more in-depth interviews. These themes served as a template for the first round of qualitative data gathering. As each interview was completed, it was reviewed and critiqued at team meetings focusing on coverage of previously identified topics, and exploring emerging themes. For each mother, a guide for subsequent interviews was developed from these critiques. The data presented here cover a 15 month period beginning in late 1998.

Once the interviewing process began to take shape, we started to construct a coding manual based on trends identified in the interviews. The coding system consists of three major subdivisions (child, child care provider, mother), depending on who is the focus of the discussion. These are further divided into 16 sub-categories. For example, under the category "child care provider" a sub-category is labeled "child care selection process," and would include blocks of text in which the mother addressed how she thought about, found, and maintained her child care. For purposes of this paper, such sections of text were extracted, re-read, and additional sub-coding was done to capture themes like trust and learning opportunities. A further round of analysis is reflected in the child care pathways section in which we have constructed a chronological history of each mothers' child care arrangements.

Generalizability. The current research has brought into focus how crucial it is for these mothers to develop a sense of trust in their children's care providers. Surprisingly, previous research does not seem to have focussed on this important criterion. While caution must be exercised in generalizing from such a small sample, we believe that the spontaneous elaboration of this issue by most participants points to its likely importance for broader groups. Future research should be aimed at establishing whether this is indeed the case for welfare mothers in general, and will be explored further in our own, on-going work. Particular

attention should be paid to what mothers from various backgrounds, and with varied life experiences, consider necessary for establishing a sense of trust in their child care providers. The pathways section illustrating the struggles these mothers went through to find and maintain child care should be read less for the specific problems each mother faced, and more for how it illustrates that structural features like bureaucratic requirements and child care supply constrain mothers' choices, and interact with criteria mothers have for child care, to produce results (specific child care placements).

Results

We begin by providing a brief overview of the mothers and their child care pathways. Following this is a description of the major criteria mothers talked about which helped guide their decisions regarding child care. Looking at the criteria allows us to see how mothers ordered their priorities in order to meet more basic, immediate needs like trust before moving on to more long-term considerations. Finally, we describe the processes mothers went through to get and maintain child care over a fifteen month period. Following those processes helps us to understand how structural features of their world, like attributes of the welfare system or child care supply, influenced which child care they used.

Introducing the Mothers

All of the mothers we interviewed were single, except one who was separated from her husband when she entered the study. With the exception of the Anglo mother, the women all live in apartments in a large, predominantly African-American public housing project. When we first spoke with them, each mother had at least one other person taking care of her children at some point during the week. Generally these people were relatives or friends. Almost always the major child care provider was the maternal grandmother. Equally common was the fact that these providers were not paid for their time. Over the course of the next year, the child care arrangements shifted considerably in most cases as the mothers entered job training programs and/or secured employment. The major shift was into formal, licensed child care that was paid for with a government subsidy. In almost all cases, however, there remained an unmet childcare need that was usually covered by a relative or friend, and equally usually was without pay. In addition, for those whose child care arrangements shifted, the transition was marked by struggles with locating a facility that the mother could get to and that had room for her child. There were also considerable problems in some cases, at least in the beginning, with securing the subsidy. For a few women, the problems continued either because the mother was periodically deemed ineligible for a subsidy, or was negligently dropped from the subsidy rolls.

Three of our mothers are African-American. *Latrice* is a 30 year old mother with two boys who were three and two when we first talked with her in 1998. Latrice shared her apartment with her brother and sister (who was a minor). *Tanisha* is 32 years old and her son Derrick was two when we first interviewed her. Tanisha lives alone with her son. *Gayle* is the 28 year old mother of three: two boys, eleven and eight, and a three year old girl, Taneeka. Gayle has been married to the father of her children for 2 years, though they have been together for 11 years. They all live in the same household. Two of our mothers, and the one grandmother, are Latinas. *Claudia* is 35 years old and lives alone with her three children who are 3, 8, and 9 years old. *Pilar* is 21 and has a three year old daughter, Alicia. Pilar lives

with her mother *Rosa*, whom we also interviewed, and Pilar's 14 year old sister. In August, 1999, Pilar was sent to jail for 6 months for violating her parole. During that time, Rosa was given guardianship of Alicia. Our Anglo mother, *Charlene* is 42 years old and has a 4 year old daughter. This is her "second family" as she also has a 23 year old daughter. She lives in the house where she was born, along with her mother, a sister, and her sister's son.

Criteria That Informed Mothers' Pathways To Child Care

In talking with mothers about their child care pathways, as well as asking them about ideal child care arrangements, it became evident that they had rather clear criteria guiding them. We characterize those criteria as trust, location and transportation, and learning opportunities. Furthermore, while all the criteria were important, it was evident that they were hierarchically ordered. As will be explained more fully below, however, these mothers were doing more than hierarchically ordering criteria and making decisions based on that. They also tried to get all of the criteria met, and manage the interrelationships between the criteria and other considerations such as the need to find employment.

Trust. The one criterion common to all our mothers, and which was the most important one for them, was the requirement that their children be left with someone they trusted. Trust refers to the mothers' feeling confident that their children will be physically safe, something Pilar and Charlene talk about explicitly in their concern about children being mistreated by child care providers. Mothers, such as Latrice and Gayle, also talked about being confident their children would be well cared for – that their physical and psychological well being would be closely watched. The conditions considered trustworthy also varied with the age of the child. As Pilar and Kathleen mentioned, once their daughters are old enough to report mistreatment or neglect, they felt more confident leaving them with non-relatives. While these mothers differed somewhat in their descriptions of what child care providers needed to be trusted about, they all seemed to agree that trust must be based on an actual interpersonal relationship. Thus family and close friends most easily met this criterion while strangers like child care workers were deemed to meet it, if at all, only with time and experience.

When we first talked with her, Latrice was particularly concerned about the issue of trust in finding a child care placement. She explained that she was having her mother take care of both her sons because she trusts her mother not to neglect them:

> Nobody ever would watch them but my mother and the [family child care provider]. And like, I hear, I just couldn't leave them no where else. It's just hard for me to leave them somewhere that I couldn't watch so I could be at school. So I couldn't like, you gonna be OK? Just watch them, see if they OK. Because a lot of child care homes, they're like real nice to you, you know, [but] they don't change the pampers. And [by the] time you come, that's when your child gets some attention. They're sitting there crying all the time, you know....

Trust remained an important consideration after Latrice was able to place her children in a child care center:

> My cousin works at the day care, that's why they actually went to the day care, 'cause she works there. There be some strange stuff about baby-sitters. I just don't be knowing. And my mom watch him, she the only one

that'll be able to watch them. If somebody else come, they don't be knowing.

Tanisha also placed her child in a center because of a personal connection – her sister-in-law worked in the center and had been encouraging her to enroll her son. Trust, based on familiarity, were important considerations for her in placing her son in a formal child care setting. Gayle talked about similar concerns in trying to check out child care arrangements with people she didn't know. She was concerned about issues of trust and knowing what was happening when she wasn't around. Gayle wanted to be able to drop by anytime to see how things were going. She found, however, that "most baby-sitters I have to schedule a time ... to come see their facilities and see how they do things. [Laugh]. And that's not good." Gayle wanted to be able to drop by to check out the provider when the provider didn't know she was coming, because "that's when you can really see how things are."

In looking for child care, Claudia was interested in finding a licensed child care center, but was concerned about trust. She was willing to place her child with her relatives — particularly with her mother — while she looked, but she was not willing to place them in a licensed family child care home: "Some people are picky about where their kids are gonna be, like I was. I didn't want my kids to go to somebody's home. I wanted them to be in a center." Claudia's reason was that:

> I don't trust anybody's home. I mean, you know, people that I don't know.
> I just didn't want her somewhere like that. ...and I know I shouldn't do
> that because at one time I was thinking about having mine, my daycare,
> and I was like, no — I just don't. I can't see her at somebody else's house
> and I'm leaving her there for eight hours or so. I don't leave my kids with
> baby-sitters unless I have to go to school or to work or something. And
> the baby-sitters is only my mother.

Claudia also told us about her strategy for finding a trustworthy child care placement. At first she began by simply paying them a visit. She found this was not sufficient, however, and that it took getting to know the center staff before she felt completely comfortable:

> "I didn't really know what to think of it just by visiting and then um, as I
> got to know the people, you know from going up there every day with her
> and stuff and everybody was real friendly and you know, there was no
> rudeness or anything...it's nice."

Trust and safety were overriding considerations for both Pilar and Rosa regarding child care placement. They voiced a lack of trust in non-relative child care providers, especially for young children, based on the potential for child abuse or neglect. As Pilar explained:

> I prefer my mom to watch her because I mean, I don't trust like sending
> her to a day care after things that I see on T.V. and stuff. ... Like, people
> would hide cameras in their house just to see how their baby-sitter was,
> and you could see like one time this baby-sitter was whipping a little kid
> with a wooden stick. And I'm like, God, if somebody did that to my baby
> I'd be in jail forever because I'll go after them. So I don't even want to try
> that or nothing. ...Because I mean, I know at day cares, they'll sit there

and let your baby cry forever, I mean like, for hella long and don't even —
unh unh, I don't like that.

These concerns were echoed by Rosa: "Pilar wanted to wait until [her daughter] was old enough, to where she could talk if anything was to happen to her. But until then, I would watch her [because] we used to see things on TV. And they used to show where people would have cameras in the house and how their baby-sitters would react. Or like in senior care, how they would get treated."

When asked to describe a good child care situation outside of having the child with a relative, Rosa remained focused on issues of trust:

> Where I can walk in and I can feel right off the spot because when somebody comes into your house, and I've gotten a lot of people that have told me when they walk into the house, they feel at home. And that's what you want for your child, when you take them into a childcare, that you're going to be able to feel comfortable. That when you walk out of there, you don't have to worry. And accidents. Little kids are going to have accidents. They're going to fall, they're going to bump their heads and whatever, it's natural. I mean everybody, all kids, we've all gone through that. It's just, you don't want to take a child into a childcare where you're gonna one, have doubts, if, 'Well, I don't know this person, I don't know how they are or how they're gonna treat my child or you start to look how the place is or how the person is. That's how I feel.'

Pilar also addressed the possibility of placing her daughter in center care, and also focused on the issues of trust and safety:

> Or like, I mean, maybe like when she's four, I'll find other-because like, she's going to have to go to school, but like, when she can talk, I'll feel better so she can tell me what happens or if somebody hits her.

Charlene explained that trust and safety have always been important concerns for her, even with her first daughter. With her second child, she has continued her strategy of getting to know her daughter's care givers personally: ·

> I feel pretty comfortable with [my daughter's current child care].... I've always been with my other daughter ... I went through each class with her, and I've kept close eye on things, and stuff. And even if I think for the first year I was helping in the kindergarten and the first grade, I'd help just to see how they would get along with other kids, you know. But now, it's kinda hard to do this if I'm working. But, I'll make time during the mornings and stuff, I'll make times. Oh, yes, I'm going! [Laughter] And on top of that, I know the school, I know a lot of the teachers up there.

Charlene also told us that, other than care from a center she trusted, care by family members was preferable:

> I don't like to leave her with babysitter and other...family is good.
> ...Daycare centers and stuff like that I stress like that because some of the

> kids I knew that they were.... I really checked out things before I put
> mine in one. I don't trust...I'm not very trusting on that.... Too much
> stuff happens to little ones. But mine is outspoken. I taught her if anybody
> bothers you, you let me know big time. And she is very...she will tell
> momma. So I just make sure that she understands that nobody has the
> right to touch her, nobody has the right to hurt her. That you know, I'll
> take care of her.

Like our other mothers, Charlene would not consider leaving her daughter with a care
giver she did not trust, and with whom she was not very familiar.

Location and transportation. Provided the criterion of trust was met, some mothers
also talked about where the child care was located and how they could get there. Latrice was
concerned about the issue of location in finding a child care placement. Having her mother
take care of her children was convenient since her mother lived close to where she was
enrolled in school. Tanisha noted a concern about transportation issues regarding her child
care, especially since she didn't have a car. Thus, the location of the child care was an
important consideration: "I have to think about my son, too, like where I've got to drop him
off, pick him up. It's hard." Gayle also mentioned transportation concerns regarding child
care arrangements, since she has several children to drop off, a job to go to, and she has to
use the bus service. As a result, the logistics of where a provider was located were very
important. One of the reasons she choose the center she uses was that it was on the same bus
line she takes to drop off her son and get to work: "a lot of them that I went to were kind of
far away for me. It was kind of hard for me to get there. That was one of the big things that
I was looking at. How easy it was for me to get to, and how convenient was the buses and
stuff. That plays a big role."

Learning opportunities. In addition to being concerned about trusting their providers,
and being able to get their children to them, many of these mothers also discussed the
importance of learning opportunities. In comparing her mother with the child care center,
Latrice emphasized the safety of having them with her mother and the learning potential
provided by the center:

> I like it when my mama take care of him because I know he safe and stuff,
> but at the day care, he comes home like more excited, more energized and
> he get to show me and tell me all the stuff he did, where at my mama
> house, I know they don't go outside and play. But after day care he be
> like, "Oh, we played in the water and with the bikes and I was talking to
> my new friend." You know, he be real excited about the day care. So I like
> the day care. It keep him excited, new things everyday, all the time. He
> gets to get up early, you know, and get ready to go 'cause he's doing
> something instead of sitting in the house, you know, he rest and watch TV.
> And he just be more excited after child care 'cause he gets up and then he
> eats his cereal and then they got a certain time to be there, so that's why I
> like the little school, too, 'cause he can get up and be up and be on a little
> schedule. My mom, she puts them on a schedule, but I don't 'cause she
> has everything, like, separated out. But to me it's like, whatever
> happens...And he like, know his colors and start singing and stuff, he like that.

Latrice also liked the center because of all the activities they had for the children: "Just a lot of activities for them to do. They had a lot of activities. They seemed content, you know. I like child care, that seemed kind of nice. ... I know they had the tables set up in the morning time, as soon as they got there, they had the tables set up, about seven tables with different things you could do. Then they had a little outside part where they went to go ride they bikes or play at like the park. They got to jump off the bed and do flips and stuff."

Tanisha explained that learning was an important criterion in selecting the center she uses: "[H]e knows all his a-b-cs. He knows all his colors, and um, he can really talk and they potty trained him a little bit. ...it's good for him, you know. They read to him, and he, he doesn't know letters, you know, but he knows those colors and he knows those numbers and he can say his a-b-cs." Tanisha wants her son to be ready for school by the time he is five. For Gayle, the advantage of her center was the opportunity for language development. One of the reasons she choose her provider was that she spoke another language, in this case Spanish: "I like my children around people that speak different languages. Because I want them to pick it up." Gayle also felt that it was good for her daughter to be around other children so that she would develop her social skills.

Claudia also stated that learning was an important criterion for her, and that she associated learning opportunities with center care: "I knew that I wanted her in a center because I figured you know, she can learn more in a center than going to somebody's house everyday" It was because of the learning opportunities that Claudia preferred a center, even over her mother or another relative: "I'd rather leave her at a center. Yeah, because kids get bored fast. They need to be somewhere where they can move around and there's something else to get into or somebody else to talk to." Even Rosa, who strongly preferred kin placement, mentioned that placing her granddaughter in a preschool might help build her social skills, specifically learning to share – which was something she needed to learn.

Learning was clearly an important criterion for Charlene regarding the center she was using:

> Yeah, I like 'em, I like it very well. She knows her ABC's, she's learning her numbers and now she's learning all different letters, the writing of 'em, and hopefully she'll be working with them. She knows her name, she knows how to write each letter, but she's just not putting them together yet, but she's getting, right now, to where she wants to write everyday. ... So, I really like the daycare. And they take them out on field trips, and all over the place, library! They have their own library cards. So I've really been blessed with this place, and I'm really glad the [Resource and Referral Agency] paid for me. This has really been a good place.

Summary of Child Care Criteria. The criterion of trust is shared by each of these mothers. We are saying that it is at the top of the criterion hierarchy because it is the one factor that was mentioned by all of the mothers. In addition, the way mothers talked about the issue indicated to us that it was a criterion that must be met before they would allow their child to be left with someone else.

Trust differed from location and transportation, essentially child care availability issues, because location and transportation were not issues for all mothers, depending on what was available, her work schedule, and her transportation options. We did not find evidence of a

conflict between trust, and location and transportation, because in all cases the most trusted placement was also the most convenient – nearby kith and kin care. Structural constraints such as location and transportation, however, do come into play more if mothers are considering formal child care options. Although trust must still be satisfied, learning opportunities may be sacrificed if there is no child care that meets the mothers' schedule and transportation constraints.

Trust also differed from learning considerations, and seemed to be more important, again based on frequency of mention and the quality of the conversation. While the mothers who mentioned learning considerations certainly valued learning opportunities, they were not willing to compromise on trust and safety issues in order to get those opportunities for their children. This was evident in some mothers' concerns about the lack of learning opportunities available from kith and kin care arrangements, and the fact that those concerns would not lead them to move children into presumably richer learning environments until the mothers felt assured that they could trust those providers. For these reasons, we have placed the mothers' criteria in a hierarchy.

Although we do want to emphasize the important place of the criterion of trust in the mothers' thinking, we do not want to overemphasize the hierarchy construction. Researchers and policy makers should understand that some criteria may be more important and basic than others. We do not suggest, however, that these mothers are simply going through some kind of linear mental check list of criteria in making their child care decisions. There are also important balancing processes going on that evidence interrelations between these criteria. The clearest among these is between trust and learning opportunities. The mothers clearly value learning opportunities, both school readiness opportunities that focus on academic preparation, and socialization opportunities that focus on children learning to get along with others. And they frequently recognize that these may not be as available from kith and kin care. This realization has led most of these mothers to begin to seek out licensed care arrangements. While this has sometimes resulted in family child care placements, more frequently it has led to a search for center care. The search has been lengthened by trust concerns (mothers need to know someone who works at the center, or have the time and opportunity to get to know the center staff – and frequently both are necessary), and in some cases by location and transportation considerations. As we will see below, interactions with caseworkers have also played a role. Sometimes helpful, other times making the process more difficult and longer.

While there is an ordering of the child care criteria, we also see each of these mothers attempting to meet all of the criteria. Mothers feel all the criteria are important, but some, like trust, must absolutely be met even if it means sacrificing or postponing another important criteria like learning opportunities. Ideally, they want safe, trusted child care that is reasonably accessible and provides good academic and social learning opportunities We see this in their continued efforts to find good center based care that they can both trust and that provides learning opportunities. But their resources for meeting these criteria are limited. Trust is not easily obtained. Supply is inadequate. And trusted, convenient child care for these mothers (i.e., kith and kin care) may not have the best learning opportunities.

It is also important to note that while the criteria may be shared, their content differs somewhat from mother to mother. There may be important differences in cultural scripts

which mothers use to help evaluate whether their criteria are being met, such as cultural cues indicating who is trustworthy. Detailing more fully the extent of those differences, and determining the source of the content for each mother (e.g., cultural or family scripts, personal life experience, individual reflection) will be the subject of future research.

Process Of Establishing and Keeping Child Care

Described below are the various pathways mothers took in finding someone to care for their children while they participated in welfare to work programs. Following these pathways helps illustrate how structural features create boundaries within which mothers make decisions in accord with the criteria described in the previous section. These structural constraints are frequently part of the mothers' assumed world – unconscious structures within which decisions are made. As such, they can affect the mothers' thinking and decision making in important ways, though they do not completely determine it. Structural features salient for poor mothers include their interactions with caseworkers, the information they did and did not get regarding child care, the poor supply of child care available outside of their kith and kin, and welfare-to-work eligibility requirements that created problems in getting child care subsidies. Since these environmental features may take the form of tacit understandings (facts the mother believes to be true about the world), we may not uncover them by looking at reasoning alone. Thus we turn to her descriptions of how she has found and maintained child care.

Latrice was initially limited in her child care possibilities because she could not get a subsidy. The transition of Latrice from having her mother care for her sons to using a center was marked by a prolonged struggle to obtain a subsidy, and early on by problems with getting her provider paid. That difficulty resulted in the provider eventually refusing to continue to care for her daughter. When we first talked with Latrice she was arguing with the welfare department over her job training plan. They were willing to pay for child care if she attended the program they choose for her, but were unwilling to do so if she pursued her own course of finishing a community college degree. She complained that "that's all they care about. Like, if you already doing something, if it don't fit with they things or they qualifications, then you got to stop that. You got hurry to get into they program, hurry up and get a job with them, how they want you to do it."

Consequently, Latrice was making arrangements on her own for child care, without any help from the welfare department or the local child care resource and referral (R&R) agency responsible for helping welfare mothers find child care. Her child care was mainly provided by her mother, and for a short while by a family friend who ran a family child care – both people whom she trusted as described in the previous section. She did not pay her mother, and was only able to pay the family friend sporadically. This situation didn't last for long, however, because the friend got tired of not getting paid. Eventually, Latrice got her school program approved and along with it her child care subsidy. Once her subsidy was approved, Latrice moved her sons into a child care center run by the housing project in which she lived, and in which her cousin worked.

Tanisha describes a process of having center based care, losing it, and attempting to regain it. When we first talked with Tanisha, her son Derrick was in a child care center for toddlers. In explaining why she choose that particular center, Tanisha said: "I picked the school because my sister-in-law ... is his teacher at the school. They've been wanting me to go there. So basically, I came [to the welfare program with] my own school for him to go

to." As a result, the R&R agency did not have to help her find a placement, all they had to do was help her pay for it. Tanisha did not report any problems with that process: "They just asked me what school he is going to and what was I doing in the hours like when my mom baby-sits, what was I doing out there. I go to school at nighttime. All I had to do was fill out a bunch of papers and that was that." While Tanisha was in her job training program, Derrick was in the child care center most of the time. After Derrick left the center, her mother watched him.

Although Tanisha was happy with her child care when we first talked with her, she knew she'd have to be finding another within a year because Derrick would turn three and need a different placement. When we talked to her about one year later, her son was no longer in his original child care (for which he had become too old), and was on a waiting list for another center (for which he was eligible). In the meantime Derrick was being cared for by his maternal grandmother. Tanisha is not paying her mother for watching Derrick, other than occasional sums of money. Tanisha's child care pathway was largely of her own making in that she found center care based on family connections. While the system was essential in helping her pay for that care, the lack of child care supply has resulted in her son being cared for by his grandmother, at least for the time being.

Gayle has been using formal, licensed care since we first met her, although that was not always the case. While her pathway was made somewhat easier by previous experience with the R&R system, she too had to scramble to piece together child care in the beginning. As with other mothers, she relied on kin care to meet this need, usually her own mother. Gayle described a process of finding a child care provider that, while assisted in some important ways by government agencies, was in others largely independent of them. She originally found out about the family child care home her daughter was in through the local R&R Agency. After getting a list of family child care homes, she visited those closest to her, repeatedly dropping by unannounced (as described above), in order to determine how the children were treated when parents were not around.

Regarding her interactions with the R&R, Gayle described the process as being one in which:

> [A]ll the paper work is mainly done through your worker at [the R&R agency], and whoever you're dealing with at [the welfare department]. They usually do all the contracts. Then they send you a contract. Either they send you a copy, or you go down to [the R&R agency], and they'll go over the contract with you. Then you just sign the contract there. And what they do is they'll ask what area you stay in and give you a list of child care providers in that area. And you call and check them out, and see which ones you like the best.

Like other mothers we interviewed, Gayle's initial attempts to get reimbursed for child care encountered some difficulties. At first, Gayle had to pay for her child care out of her own money since she needed the care, but the paperwork wasn't completed yet. This was soon corrected, however, and since then her daughter Taneeka's child care has been subsidized. About seven months ago Taneeka started going to a preschool run by the public school attended by Gayle's two sons. While Gayle is not aware of who pays for the program, it is not paid for with a TANF based subsidy.

Claudia has relied heavily on her mother, and other family and friends, to provide child care over the past fifteen months. When we first interviewed Claudia her only child care provider for her youngest daughter was her mother who was not getting paid and who was not always available. Similar to Gayle, Claudia explained that in the beginning she was "running around everyday trying to find out who's going to keep her and who's gonna pick up the other two after school." While her mother was providing most of the child care she, "wasn't really steady because she had things to do. She has a bad back so, I couldn't rely on her everyday." This uncertainty took it's toll on Claudia's own schedule, "I was everyday, off and on. I missed a lot of classes because of it. ... I missed a lot of workshop days because of it."

During this time, Claudia went to the R&R agency to get help in locating more stable child care. She related that they:

> didn't help me at all. They weren't a big help as far as the choices, you know. When I was first looking for daycare, they called me, gave me a list of people's homes. 'Oh, well, this is what we have right now.' I really wasn't interested and I didn't feel like it was a big help. They didn't, you know, tell me about centers. *Did you ask them about centers?* Yeah. *What did they say?* They told me that at the time, they didn't have any.

Meanwhile, her caseworker at the R&R agency was "... getting mad. They didn't understand that you just don't jump into a program and have childcare the next day. ...they would tell us, 'Well, you need to get on it and you need to figure out what you're going to do.'" Claudia was also getting pressure from her job training instructors: "then your workshop people get mad at you. 'Well, you need to be here everyday. You know, we understand that you don't have childcare, but you need to figure that out.' Well, how can you figure that out overnight? You can't. There's no way."

Eventually, help came from outside the system in the person of another client at her work training program who told her she should fill out an application for child care assistance with an agency that serves as a clearinghouse for center placements. Claudia was able to get "all three of [her children] in. ... So it was real good. But it took me almost a year to find that." Claudia's one positive experience with the R&R agency is that once she located a center that would accept her children, she notified them and they worked out payment directly with the center.

Charlene made a partial transition from family care to center care. She continues to rely heavily on her family, however, because she often works evenings and weekends when her center care is not open. When Charlene was first looking for a placement she went to a center she already knew about because her nephew was going there. During her employment training program, she described a tight but manageable schedule:

> I would take her at seven o'clock, and get on the bus to take her out there and run from there back down to [school], and the class started at seven-thirty a.m., or I think it was seven-thirty, going on eight o'clock, when it started, the computer class until twelve. And then they had another one at two till five o'clock. So I was going to two sets of classes I was going to

> down there. Then get out and then I go run back and pick my little one up
> and then come back, and then go home.

Once she started working afternoons, evenings, and weekends, however, the center's
hours did not cover all her child care needs, which are met by her extended family:

> Now for childcare it's real good because I take her in the morning [referring
> to her daughter] and I do the things I need to do and my sister will sometimes
> pick her up or I will pick her up before I go to work and then she'll watch
> her, and then when I come home, so I have my sisters, taking care of her in
> the evening time 'till I get home from work, and then the daycare during
> the day. And I can leave her as long as six o'clock in the daycare, childcare,
> right now.

Currently, Charlene has her daughter in a preschool which is not subsidized through the
welfare system. In addition, her sister is receiving a welfare based subsidy to care for her
daughter during the evenings and on weekends.

Pilar and Rosa have faced a myriad of obstacles to getting a child care subsidy. Some of
these involve difficult interactions with caseworkers, others stem from not meeting eligibility
requirements. While this has not affected the child care placement, it has impacted the family
financially. Pilar has not seriously considered looking for child care outside of her home
since she lives with her mother, Rosa, and they both prefer a family member to watch Pilar's
daughter Alicia. Rosa did explain, however, that while there was a child care center at the
housing project in which they lived, she didn't care for the people who worked there. In
general Rosa didn't trust anyone associated with the housing authority, in part because of
their poor track record in maintaining her apartment, and in part because of their ethnicity.

During the summer of 1999, Pilar was arrested for violating her probation stemming
from a previous conviction. She was sentenced to six months in jail. During her incarceration,
Rosa was given guardianship of Alicia. Now that Pilar was in jail, Rosa explained that
Alicia was

> either ... here with us, or she spends the night over my daughter's house,
> my oldest daughter. Or, she spends the night over her [other]
> grandmother's. Her grandmother ... has her only daughter, and one of her
> sons living there. So, they watch her. Sometimes they take her for the
> weekends. Or sometimes they take her for a whole week. Right now, the
> grandmother is on sick leave. So, she'll call up and ask me, if I don't
> mind her taking her. And on the contrary. It helps. It'll give me time to
> relax. But, it's not just me watching her. It's everybody that knows that
> I'm here by myself with her. And I have a fourteen year-old. So, right
> now, I'm in a situation where it's hard.

Discussion

Theoretical Implications

Our approach is focused on the individual mother and tries to uncover how her
understandings are organized and how those understandings are used in her decision making.

In doing this we share with the rational choice theorists the view that mothers do make conscious and rational choices, though we do not make *a priori* assumptions about the criteria on which those choices are based. Along with the structural theorists, we look at external features of the mothers' lives, such as child care supply, transportation availability, and dealings with welfare bureaucracy that are functions of the mothers' social position or class, and that bound and thereby shape mothers' understandings of the world. We are also on the lookout, however, for criteria that may not be influenced by structural features, such as the mothers' requirement that they trust their child care providers. Along with cultural psychology theorists we are interested in cultural, familial, and other social scripts or norms that may help shape mothers' psychological organization. We do not share their assumption that such norms form the basic template of psychological organization. We are interested in developing a clear picture of how each mother's thinking and behavior is organized, and in some cases perhaps not organized. In doing that, we want to know about external social patterns which influence that organization (and thereby become part of her internal world), social patterns she might be resisting, structural features that may bound her thinking and her behavior, her experience of her world, her assumptions about what is true and not true, and her reasoning about all these factors regarding the decisions she makes (Turiel, 1999).

In this data, we see mothers making decisions about child care with regard to very clear criteria. Foremost among these is the requirement of trust, which is linked to the issues of safety and having children well cared for. All of these mothers were insistent that their children be left with someone whom they felt they could trust not to harm them. In general this requirement was most easily and clearly met by the woman's own mother, or other close family members or friends. That this is not a criterion that may be weighed against other criteria is perhaps self evident, yet it is not a criterion that has been discussed in the rational choice literature as being an important factor affecting what type of child care poor mothers use. This data clearly points out its importance. It is suggested that one of the reasons these mothers used kith and kin care early on was because it met this criterion.

While the criterion of trust must be met in all cases, these mothers also clearly showed they had other concerns if it was met. Several of the mothers talked about logistical considerations such as transportation, hours of operation, and location. In most cases, these criteria were met with kith and kin care, and became more salient only if they looked for care outside that circle. Why these mothers would bother to look outside is shown by the other major criterion they told us about – learning opportunities or school readiness. Everyone we talked with voiced some concern about what their children were learning when they were not with them. Many of the mothers felt that there were learning opportunities available in child care centers that were not available with kith and kin care or family child care homes. This is the type of arguably economically based criterion usually referred to by rational choice theorists as driving child care selection. This data supports that view in part, but also shows that type of criterion exists along with logistical and trust considerations. In addition, the criteria, at least for these mothers, are hierarchically ordered with considerations of trust taking precedence over all else, followed by the accessibility of alternatives and, provided those alternatives are trustworthy and accessible, considerations of learning opportunities.

While this expanded and ordered list of criteria more adequately explains these mothers' child care pathways than traditional rational choice models, it still does not fully explain them. In accord with structuralist explanations, these mothers, in describing their child care

pathways, noted numerous constraints rooted in their socio-economic position which interacted with their child care criteria. Perhaps first and foremost among these is that they must interact with the welfare system in order to secure non-kith and kin child care, or to get kith and kin reimbursed for their labor. Several of the mothers told of problems getting subsidy payments for kin members. These ranged from the amount of paperwork involved (a common complaint) to pressure from the system to settle on one provider. These types of payment problems would seem to push mothers away from the type of care they considered most trustworthy – family and friends – and towards licensed family or center based care. Another type of constraint, child care supply in poor communities, was also mentioned with regard to the shortage of centers and long waiting lists to get into them. Combined with payment problems for kith and kin care, the system structure would seem to push these mothers into family child care homes. Based on the criteria described above, however, these mothers uniformly resisted that push on the basis that they did not feel family child care homes were trustworthy enough (unless they knew the provider), and often did not provide enough learning opportunities. These systemic constraints, then, interacted with the mothers' child care criteria to affect both the placement of her child, and the economic effect of that placement on the extended family. Specifically, mothers initially opted for kith and kin care, largely with grandmothers who were, and mostly remain, unpaid for their labor. In addition, these same sources of care continue to fill in when, as with Tanisha, the center care system becomes unavailable.

There is another type of structural constraint evident in some of these interviews that also grows out of the welfare system, but is perhaps less obvious. It was particularly clear in the stories told by Latrice and Claudia regarding their considerable struggles to get the training and child care they wanted. Both of them described conflicts with their welfare caseworkers over job training or education choices which had the effect of making their subsidies, and therefore their child care placement, unstable. The impact of this instability was borne by them and their extended families. It also prevented them, initially with Latrice or later on with Claudia, from selecting the type of center care they preferred. Another manifestation of this issue is the sometimes untenable situation mothers like Claudia find themselves in: In order to be eligible for a subsidy you must be participating in a welfare-to-work activity; In order to participate in a welfare-to-work activity, you must have child care and, for poor mothers, that child care must be subsidized (as Latrice found out) if it is to be anything other than close kith or kin who are willing to do it for free. In sum, the welfare-to-work eligibility requirements may seriously constrain the mothers' child care options.

Policy Implications

Over the past decade the subsidized child care world has emphasized parental choice. Policymakers have come to assume that vouchers and subsidized slots will effectively raise the purchasing power of low-income parents. Just like the child care world of affluent suburbs, the supplier market will respond to rising parental demand in terms of greater supply and stronger quality.

This paper illuminates how this rendition of child car selection is overly simplistic. At least for poor parents on welfare, the force of trust – whether in a kin member, a neighborhood center or licensed family care – is paramount. Mothers know that subsidized slots are available. But regardless of the child care type, these women reason about whether the adults in the

setting are trustworthy. Then, other criteria come into play: the structure of learning activities, or the provider's proximity and flexibility to accommodate atypical work schedules. For policy makers, this should raise the concern that mothers are unlikely to utilize licensed care — no matter how large a subsidy is available or how easy it is to get, how plentiful and convenient the child care supply is, or how excellent the educational opportunities are — if they do not trust that setting to keep their child safe and well cared for. In this environment, how government and local agencies can build greater trust and legitimacy becomes the pressing question – not whether prices are too high, materials are in abundant supply, or centers are accredited. These challenges are real, but our evidence suggests that they are not preeminent factors that are driving the kinds of child care selections that mothers are making.

In addition to building confidence in neighborhood facilities, policy makers should recognize that given the importance of trust and logistical considerations for poor mothers, it seems likely that they will continue to depend on kith and kin care – both to cover the time mothers are at work, and to fill in elsewhere as needed. Even if one favors increasing the supply of licensed care, it will take time to build that supply as well as the confidence of poor mothers in it. In the meantime, it is likely that a substantial amount of child care will be provided by kith and kin of mothers entering welfare-to-work programs. Since these mothers also clearly want increased learning opportunities for their children, policy makers should consider increasing the resources and support available to unlicensed care providers so that they can offer children more school readiness and socialization opportunities.

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