

## **State and Family Responsibility for Universal Childcare: an Analysis from the Perspective of Social Integration**

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**Abstract:** With China's population structure change, the accessibility of 0 - 3-year-old infant care services is a key issue for social sustainable development. Existing studies mostly examine childcare from welfare supply or policy tools, neglecting the deep social structure. Based on social integration theory, this paper redefines the childcare dilemma as an anti-integration mechanism due to the imbalance between state and family responsibilities, not just a lack of welfare supply. Through theoretical deduction and literature analysis, it identifies the triple anti-integration effects of responsibility imbalance: gender exclusion enlarges labor market gender division, class solidification strengthens intergenerational transmission of unequal opportunities, and social trust erosion weakens the legal basis of public governance. On this basis, it proposes a responsibility reconstruction framework for social integration: the state takes the main responsibility for inclusive care supply, the family focuses on emotional support and education, and multi-party collaboration shares the responsibility. This research offers a new theoretical perspective for understanding China's nursery education policy's deep social function.

**Keywords:** Universal Childcare; Social Integration; State Responsibility; Family Responsibility; Responsibility Restructuring

### **1. Introduction**

Under the background of rapid changes in the population structure, scientific design of population policies and supporting measures is the premise of achieving sustainable social development. The nursery policy is particularly critical. The supply of infant care services directly affects the family's reproductive choices and the long-term development of society.

However, at present, China's nursery policy system is not perfect, and problems such as insufficient service supply, high fees, and uneven quality are obvious. The kindergarten attendance rate of 0-3-year-old infants in China is only about 5.5%. The average kindergarten attendance rate in OECD countries has reached more than 35%, and that in Denmark, Iceland and other countries is more than 60%. There is a significant gap in this field in China. Parenting anxiety caused by insufficient supply has become an important reason affecting fertility willingness. In 2022, the strategic arrangement of "establishing a fertility support policy system" was clearly put forward at the national level, which means that childcare services are officially included in the main issue of population governance.

From the perspective of functional orientation, childcare services can promote fertility, support women's employment, and improve the multiple values of human capital. For fertility, affordable and high-quality care services can reduce the cost of parenting and improve fertility willingness; For female employment, inclusive care can release the potential of female labor force and reduce the adverse impact of "maternal punishment" on career development. For human capital, 0-3 years old is the key stage of children's brain development. High quality early care and education have a far-reaching impact on children's cognitive and social emotional development. Therefore, care service is the key link to promote the long-term balanced development of the population. Its policy design should not only stay in the perspective of pure technology, but also be examined in the broader framework of social structure and social solidarity.

From the perspective of social integration, the significance of inclusive care goes beyond the scope of balancing family work and improving the quality of the population. The theory of

social integration focuses on how society relies on institutional arrangements to maintain member connections and prevent social fracture. From this perspective, the main role of inclusive care is to bridge social cracks and enhance social cohesion with the help of institutionalized public services. At present, the lack of childcare services has produced anti integration effects: first, the responsibility of care is distributed according to gender, so that the burden of childcare is all on women, which leads to the exclusion of women from the labor market and further exacerbates gender inequality; The combination of the availability of childcare services and the family's ability to pay has differentiated the early development opportunities of children from different strata and solidified social inequality. These two effects have weakened the foundation of social solidarity and run counter to the goal of promoting social integration.

Around the above analysis, this paper puts forward the following research questions: (1) how can the imbalance between the state and the family in the responsibility of childcare produce the anti integration effect through a specific mechanism? (2) With the goal of promoting social integration, how should the responsibilities of the state and the family be reconfigured and optimized? This paper will discuss the above issues, first sort out the relevant literature and theoretical framework, then analyze the anti integration mechanism of responsibility imbalance, and finally put forward the analysis framework of responsibility reconstruction, hoping to provide a new theoretical perspective and policy reference for the study of nursery policy.

## **2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework**

This paper sorts out the relevant research literature from four directions, namely, the development process of China's nurseries policy, the research status of the nurseries service supply system, the existing international experience, and the theoretical framework of social integration.

### **2.1 The Evolution of China's Childcare Policy**

China's nurseries service system has gone through the development process from unit welfare to marketization, and then to inclusive. In the planned economy period, nurseries

service is provided by state-owned enterprises and institutions, which is part of unit welfare; After the launch of the market economy reform, the supply of nurseries has changed to market-oriented, but the market-oriented development has failed to fill the supply gap, and has also blocked out a large number of low - and middle-income families. In recent years, with the promotion of the national fertility support policy, nurseries services have begun to develop in the direction of universal benefits. Humalin combed the evolution process of the 0-3-year-old infant care service system, summarized the development path and pointed out the institutional logic behind it. Sunfeng and others focused on the evolution logic of the nursery policy paradigm, analyzed the process of the development of China's nursery policy from fragmentation to systematization, and proposed that the transformation of policy objectives, policy tools and policy discourse promoted the paradigm transformation<sup>[1]</sup>. Some scholars analyzed the policy deviation of supporting measures for childbirth under the background of the three child policy, found that the current policy coverage was not wide enough and the implementation was insufficient, and proposed to carry out inclusive adjustment to ensure the accessibility and fairness of services.

At the level of policy tools, most of the existing studies focus on the combination optimization of command-based, incentive based and capacity-building tools. Jiang Ailing and others made a quantitative analysis of 27 policy texts issued in Shanghai from 1999 to 2022 and found that there were structural deviations in the use of policy tools: insufficient supply of capacity-building tools and excessive use of command tools, which limited the improvement of the quality of the nursing service system. Zhang Qi and Zhan Zhongle studied the establishment of the "integration of nurseries and kindergartens" model from the perspective of institutional cohesion, and proposed that 0-3-year-old nurseries and 3-6-year-old preschool education were separated from each other in terms of management system, teacher allocation and curriculum standards, resulting in policies that could not be linked and resources that could not be shared. They stressed that the integration was necessary. These studies laid the foundation for understanding the institutional logic of China's nurseries and kindergartens policy, but few studies paid attention to the deep impact of

policy implementation on the social structure.

## 2.2 Research on Childcare Service Supply Systems

In the research on the supply system, the social care analysis framework proposed by Daly and Lewis provides a reference for clarifying the role of the state, the market and the family in the care service. This framework defines care as a social arrangement across countries, markets and families, and proposes to strengthen the public responsibility of the state, transfer the care service from the private field to the public field, and prevent the excessive responsibility of care from falling on the family. At present, it has been widely used in the comparative study of welfare policies, providing a theoretical tool for analyzing the imbalance between the state and family responsibilities. Hongxiumin and other scholars put forward the realization path of accurate supply around the differentiated needs of different families, and proposed that the supply of childcare services should consider the differences of income, working methods, children's age and other aspects of different families, so as to avoid resource mismatch caused by the "one size fits all" policy. Limengyun studied the theoretical logic of employers' participation in childcare services, and believed that employers' participation could increase the total supply of services, promote the balance between work and family, and improve employees' satisfaction and loyalty.

In terms of financial support mechanism, Hewenjiong and Zhang Xue analyzed whether it was feasible to adopt the subsidy system of "supplementary supplier" and "supplementary demander" at the same time, and mentioned that direct subsidy to nurseries and childcare institutions and child care subsidies to families have their own advantages and disadvantages, and reasonable system design needs to organically combine the two. In terms of technology empowerment, Zhang tirong and ran Jieting are concerned about the prospects of digital technology for the empowerment of childcare services. They believe that big data, artificial intelligence and other technologies can improve the efficiency of service matching and optimize the regulatory process, but they should also be vigilant against the new social exclusion that may be caused by the digital divide [11]. On the whole, the existing supply system research has accumulated a lot of achievements in policy

design and institutional innovation, but most of them focus on the optimization of technology, and rarely examine the deep social function of childcare services from the macro perspective of social integration.

## 2.3 International Experience and De-familialization

International comparative studies have provided important reference experience for the development of inclusive care in China. In the field of welfare state research, "de-familialization" refers to the use of social welfare system to partially transfer the responsibility of care from the family and reduce the dependence of individuals, especially women, on the family. Mahon's study mentioned that most countries that have made practical progress in the construction of inclusive care have experienced a de-familialization system transformation, that is, with the help of large-scale public investment, the care responsibility has been transferred from the family's private field to the national and social fields, which can not only improve the accessibility of care services, but also have a positive effect on gender equality and social mobility [12]. The experience of the Nordic countries is very typical. The local government has included inclusive childcare in the priority scope of public finance as the institutional support to promote women's access to the labor market and the equal development of children. It has achieved the results of higher fertility, higher female employment and lower child poverty, breaking the traditional dilemma of "fertility female employment childcare services".

This shows that the institutional arrangement of childcare services will not only affect the living standard of a single family, but also profoundly change the gender structure and social mobility mode of society. For China, it is an issue that needs to be further studied to build a model of responsibility sharing for childcare that suits Chinese society while drawing on international experience and combining with the actual situation of China.

## 2.4 Social Integration Theoretical Framework

Existing studies have deepened people's understanding of the problem of nursery education from the perspectives of policy evolution, supply system and international experience, but there is no unified theoretical

integration between different research directions. This paper introduces the theory of social integration as the core analysis framework, hoping to give a more inclusive theoretical perspective. The classical origin of social integration theory can be traced back to Durkheim, who divided two different social connection modes: mechanical solidarity and organic solidarity, and proposed that modern society needs to rely on division of labor and cooperation and institutional arrangements to maintain the organic connection between members. Contemporary social policy scholars have further expanded this theory and used it to analyze how the welfare state can reduce social exclusion and promote social integration through institutional arrangements.

Some scholars put forward that promoting social integration should become the development direction of China's social policies, and also mentioned that social policies should not only pursue economic benefits, but also play a role in maintaining social unity. Liuxiaomin and Yang Rong further clarified the conceptual boundaries of social integration and political integration, and proposed that social integration emphasizes the promotion of unity and integration between different groups by relying on institutionalized social policies, with the core of reducing social exclusion and enhancing social cohesion; And political integration is more inclined to rely on political system to achieve national level unity and coordination. Chan et al. Gave an operable definition and analytical framework for the study of social integration, and divided it into two dimensions: structural integration and emotional integration, which prepared an analytical tool for this paper to analyze the anti integration effect of childcare responsibility.

From the perspective of social integration theory, nursery service is not only a social welfare policy, but also an integrated policy closely related to social solidarity, fairness and justice. The fundamental criterion for dividing the distribution of responsibilities between the state and the family in childcare is whether it is conducive to promoting social integration. If the responsibility of childcare is over stressed on the family, it will produce anti integration effect through gender exclusion and class solidification; If the state assumes the responsibility of supply, it can promote the integration and unity of different social groups. This analytical framework raises the discussion of nursery

policy from the technical level to the theoretical level of social structure and social unity, and provides a new perspective for understanding its social function.

### **3. Analysis of Disintegrative Mechanisms from Responsibility Imbalance**

From the perspective of social integration, the current lack of inclusive care resources is not only the lack of welfare supply, but also the institutional problem of serious imbalance in the distribution of responsibilities between the state and the family. This imbalance transfers too much care responsibility that is difficult to bear for a long time to the family level, and will continue to bring social exclusion and social division through the fixed mechanism, forming a typical anti integration effect. Next, it will analyze from three aspects: gender exclusion, class solidification and trust erosion, and explain how the responsibility imbalance systematically destroys the foundation of social integration.

#### **3.1 Gender Exclusion and Social Division**

When there is a gap in public childcare services, institutional and cultural inertia will make the care of infants and young children a matter to be handled within the family, and the responsibility for care will also be disproportionately placed on women. This situation of allocating responsibilities according to gender comes from a dual mechanism: the traditional gender concept originally regards women as the primary undertaker of care tasks, coupled with the lack of public childcare support, which makes women face the dilemma of "quitting the workplace" or "bearing double pressure" after childbirth. Under such structural constraints, women will be effectively blocked out of the mainstream labor market due to the interruption of childbirth, career development, income reduction and promotion obstacles.

From a theoretical perspective, this institutional arrangement is a typical form of social exclusion, which is contrary to the goal of social integration. McDonald mentioned that the fundamental reason for the ultra-low fertility rate in the contemporary developed society is the structural contradiction at the institutional level: the degree of gender equality in the individual oriented system has been greatly improved, but the gender inequality in the family oriented system is still very stubborn. When society requires women to enter the

workplace equally and acquiesces that women should bear most of the parental responsibilities, women's fertility will naturally decrease. Gornick and Meyers' comparative study around many countries shows that the society without public support for childcare is easy to fall into the "low fertility trap" and "gender inequality trap", which will eventually lead to the decline of women's labor participation rate and career development opportunities, and the power relationship within the family cannot be changed<sup>[11]</sup>. This shows that the distribution of childcare responsibilities according to gender is not only a problem faced by families or women alone, but also a problem related to social integration. It weakens the cohesion of the whole society by excluding women from social and economic activities.

### **3.2 Class Solidification and Unequal Opportunities**

If the care of infants and young children is only counted as the family's personal responsibility, whether a family can successfully obtain the care services is directly determined by the family's financial ability to pay. Excessive marketization will lead to price stratification and quality differentiation of childcare services, and finally form a market pattern of "high quality and good price". Children from high-income families can enter high-quality childcare institutions, which has accumulated obvious advantages early; However, low - and middle-income families can't afford to pay, so they can only choose low-end nurseries without guaranteed quality, or simply stay at home and be taken care of by their families. The demand of different families for childcare services is obviously different, but the current supply system can not accurately identify and meet these different needs, resulting in unfair resource distribution .

From the perspective of human capital theory, 0-3 years old is the key stage of children's brain development. The quality of care in this period will have a long-term impact on children's cognitive level, academic performance and social adaptability in the future. The gap of early education opportunities divided by the ability to pay will continue to accumulate influence in a person's whole life, making social inequality more serious between generations, and will also affect the long-term competitiveness of the whole society<sup>[12]</sup>. This difference in

opportunities existing from the beginning of life has brought great challenges to social integration: it will fix the existing social stratum structure, reduce social mobility, weaken the organic links between members of different strata, and make the society gradually split rather than unite.

### **3.3 Systematic Erosion of Social Trust**

The lack of effective supervision of the nursery market will also erode the foundation of social trust. When the family, as an independent subject of responsibility, faces a market with unequal information and high risk, a wide range of anxiety and distrust will slowly arise. Childcare service is related to the health and safety of infants and young children. Parents are very concerned about the quality of service. However, in the absence of unified quality standards and effective information disclosure mechanism, parents can not judge the true service level of childcare institutions. They often have to rely on word of mouth or limited market information to make choices.

In recent years, nursery institutions have frequently exposed safety accidents, which has seriously hit the public's confidence. When the public feel strongly unsafe for the most basic demand of "having children", their trust in market order, social norms and even the government's governance ability will be seriously damaged. The loss of social trust will weaken social cohesion, which is a typical anti integration phenomenon. From the perspective of social integration theory, social trust is an important link to maintain social unity. When social members lose trust in basic public services, the foundation of social integration will be shaken. Therefore, rebuilding social trust is not only a technical problem in the management of care services, but also a key task to maintain social integration.

### **4. Responsibility Restructuring for Social Integration**

The imbalance of responsibility will lead to systematic anti integration. To solve this problem, we must carry out a deep reform with the ultimate direction of promoting social integration. The core of the reform is to completely reconstruct the responsibility relationship between the state and the family. The development direction of social policy should be to promote social integration, and the establishment of the nursery service system is

the key path to achieve this goal.

#### **4.1 Return and Definition of State Primary Responsibility**

Maintaining social integration and preventing social division are the core functions of the modern state. On issues related to childcare, the state should change from a passive observer of the market to an active defender of social equity and assume the primary responsibility. The first point is the responsibility of public service supply. In order to narrow the class gap and ensure fair opportunities, the state should extend the inclusive care service as a basic public service, and use large-scale public financial investment to build a service system with public institutions as the backbone and inclusive private institutions as the main body, so as to ensure that children can obtain quality and affordable care services. The second point is the responsibility for building a collaborative governance system. The primary responsibility of the state does not mean that it undertakes all affairs. The state should be a good system designer and build a diversified collaborative governance pattern dominated by the state, with social participation and market supplement. Optimize the combination of policy tools, clarify the responsibilities of all parties with command tools, guide social participation with incentive tools, and improve service quality with capacity-building tools.

#### **4.2 Adjustment and Repositioning of Family Core Responsibility**

Maintaining social integration and preventing social division are the core functions of the modern state. On issues related to childcare, the state should change from a passive observer of the market to an active defender of social equity and assume the primary responsibility. The first point is the responsibility of public service supply. In order to narrow the class gap and ensure fair opportunities, the state should extend the inclusive care service as a basic public service, and use large-scale public financial investment to build a service system with public institutions as the backbone and inclusive private institutions as the main body, so as to ensure that children can obtain quality and affordable care services. The second point is the responsibility for building a collaborative governance system. The primary responsibility of the state does not mean that it undertakes all

affairs. The state should be a good system designer and build a diversified collaborative governance pattern dominated by the state, with social participation and market supplement. Optimize the combination of policy tools, clarify the responsibilities of all parties with command tools, guide social participation with incentive tools, and improve service quality with capacity-building tools.

#### **4.3 Multi-stakeholder Collaborative Responsibility-sharing Mechanism**

To build a responsibility sharing system led by the state, family responsibility and multi-party cooperation, we must first establish an effective coordination mechanism. First, build a government led overall coordination mechanism, promote the renewal of the policy model of nursery education, establish a cross sectoral coordination mechanism, integrate resources from different departments, form a policy synergy, and make the relevant policies of "one old and one small" become an integrated development strategy. Second, we should create a mechanism to attract the wide participation of social forces, play the role of different subjects, establish a demand-oriented precise supply mechanism, and encourage social forces to provide diversified childcare services. Third, we should improve the quality supervision and information disclosure mechanism, establish a perfect quality supervision system, build a real-time monitoring platform using digital technology, achieve transparent management of the whole process, ensure children's safety and service quality, re-establish social trust, learn from international advanced practices, creatively absorb the experience of various countries in combination with China's actual situation, and explore the development path of childcare services that conforms to China's characteristics.

#### **5. Conclusion**

From the perspective of social integration theory, this paper systematically analyzes the responsibilities of the state and family in China's inclusive care services. The research shows that the essence of the current nursery dilemma is the serious imbalance between the responsibility boundary of the state and the family. This kind of institutional imbalance will promote the social division effect through the triple anti integration mechanism: gender exclusion widens the gender gap between the battlefield and the

family, class solidification will strengthen the intergenerational transmission of unequal opportunities, and the erosion of social trust will weaken the legitimacy of public governance. This is contrary to the goal of social policy to promote social unity and enhance social cohesion, which is the key contradiction to be solved in China's current social governance.

The main point of this paper is that in order to solve the problem of nursery education, we should jump out of the idea of simply repairing technical policies, and rebuild the responsibility relationship between the state and the family in the direction of promoting social integration. The state needs to change from a negative market guide to an active social integration subject, and assume the responsibility of public service supply, building a collaborative governance system and exploring institutional innovation. Family responsibility should be separated from the unsustainable state under the premise that the state provides basic protection, focusing on core functions such as establishing close emotional connection, guiding children's personalized growth, transmitting family values and participating in service quality supervision. This kind of responsibility reconstruction is not a simple responsibility transfer or buck passing, but a rational division of labor and functional improvement from the perspective of social integration.

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