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Counting What Counts. How Children are Represented in National and International Reporting Systems

Tanja Betz

Abstract Reports and profiles aimed at comparing the well-being and living conditions of children within and across countries are based on child indicators which measure the children's current lives. These reports, which are part of the child indicators movement, have become popular because they serve as useful monitoring and goal-setting tools for policymakers. Researchers focus on empirical discussions regarding how to measure well-being more accurately and how to increase the transferability of data to policy and put less effort into questioning underlying conceptualizations of children in detail. Quantitative studies focus on the main changes in the child indicators movement described as shifts "from negative to positive" or "from well-becoming to well-being". There are no complementary qualitative in-depth analyses of the underlying assumptions about children and childhood. From a childhood studies perspective this is relevant because the unspoken representations not only show the changed adults' views of children, they also shape the lives of children. Therefore, in national and international reporting systems the dominant conceptualizations of children are emphasized, and whether and how the described major shifts in the child indicators movement have occurred is questioned. A discourse analysis approach is used to examine three influential reporting systems: the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) report (2007), the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report (2009), and the KIDS COUNT report (2011). The findings show a great variety in the realization of the shifts and also indicate consensus on still conceptualizing children as becomings and future adults.

Keywords Children · Childhood · Indicators · Child indicators · Well-being · Childhood studies

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1 Introduction

Counting what counts is the slogan of the 2009 KIDS COUNT data book. Data books are compiled annually based on indicators of the well-being of children in the United States to provide information on the conditions of America's children at the national and state levels and also to track trends (Annie E. Casey Foundation 2009). The reports provide inter alia indicators on education such as *teens between the ages of 16 and 19 not attending school and not working.* One finding in 2011 is that between five and 15 % of children in this age group and a total of "about 1.6 million teens (…) were neither enrolled in school nor working" (Annie E. Casey Foundation 2011, p. 54). The problem is that these teens are "at a disadvantage in achieving economic success in adulthood" (ibid.). Therefore, the indicators used in this report, as is true of various reporting systems, are important to achieving relevant outcomes.

The indicators introduced here are examples of some of the many indicators included in diverse national and international reports, country profiles and league tables. They measure various politically relevant aspects of the living conditions of children. There are two aims: to assess children's current lives and well-being within or across countries in order to compare politically manageable conditions of growing up; and to identify trends. The reports are provided by different stakeholders. Recently they have been published by influential international political organizations such as the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF).

The reports are a relevant part of the child indicators movement, a political and also scientific movement which began in the 1960s. A crucial part of the debate within the movement all along has been the sociology of childhood as a theoretical framework (see below). There is also an ongoing and elaborate debate on the quality of the data. Researchers and staff of political organizations point out the limitations of existing data and make efforts to overcome them to better describe the status of children. They also discuss how to properly conceptualize *well-being* and how to measure it more accurately and completely (Annie E. Casey Foundation 2009, 2011; Bradshaw et al. 2006; Lippmann 2005; Lippman et al. 2009; OECD 2009; UNICEF 2007, 2010). However, less effort is directed at questioning and empirically analyzing the underlying conceptualizations of *children* in the measurements of children's well-being. There have been some quantitative studies with a comparative approach over time and geographic regions which have focused on general changes in the movement over the last 25 years. The "main shifts in the child indicators movement" are described as, among other things, "from negative to positive" or "from well-becoming to well-being" (Ben-Arieh 2006, 2010, pp. 14ff., 2011; Ben-Arieh and George 2001, see below). However, within the movement there are still just a few theoretical contributions from a distinct branch of childhood studies, the deconstructive sociology of childhood (see below), and only rarely are there contributions from a qualitative approach with its specific insights into the data. Therefore, this article is based on an empirical, in-depth analysis of the dominant understanding of children and of how children are represented in the current reports. From the perspective of the deconstructive sociology of childhood, this qualitative investigation is relevant for at least two reasons. First, the unexplored representations of children in the reporting systems allow research into whether the adult view of children is changing and if it is,

how and with what variations. Second, the assumptions made in the reports shape the lives of children and the arrangement of childhood at least in the areas on which the respective policy recommendations focus. Therefore, in this article the dominant conceptualizations of children in selected facets of the child indicators movement will be highlighted and whether and how the major shifts described have occurred will be examined. To do this, a discourse analysis and childhood studies approach will be used to examine three influential and relevant reporting systems on children in more detail: the KIDS COUNT report (2011), the OECD report (2009) and the UNICEF report (2007).

2 The Amalgamation of Research and Politics in the Child Indicators Movement

The analysis of data from *child indicators* requires a specific approach which is unlike other "pure" approaches within social science: child indicators are "doubly moored" (Ben-Arieh and Frønes 2007) because they have "their roots in both empirical and theoretical modeling, their use in both social science and policy" (p. 2). An ongoing debate in the child indicators movement is the empirical and theoretical modeling of the concept of well-being. The empirical question, relevant for the scientific use and development of the indicators, is how to measure well-being (more) accurately. Several criteria are discussed in identifying, reviewing and improving indicators (for the following: Ben-Arieh 2009, p. 108, emphasis in the original, elisions, the author):

– "*Significance for the well-being of children*. Indicators should be comprehensive in their coverage and relate to significant consequences for children's well-being
– *Conceptual validity and accuracy* (…). [There is a] need for a solid conceptual ground not compromised by vague and oversimplified estimations
– *Applicability*. Indicators should measure the current well-being of children as well as establish a base for analyzing the consequences of existing policies or programs (…)
– *Impartiality*. Indicators should be perceived by critics of the research community and by decision makers across the political spectrum as fair, accurate, and unbiased."

These empirical and methodological reflections in various studies and documents are quite elaborate. They are interwoven with conceptual questions or a *concept driven approach* to the data (Betz 2008; Noll 2002). This approach requires that the first step in the development of a reporting system be a conceptualization or the establishment of a conceptual framework. From this, the relevant dimensions of measurement are derived. For each dimension, indicators are selected or constructed and at the end, quantified. As can be shown later on in the findings, the reports rely on a developmental perspective but a children's rights perspective and an investment perspective can also be found. When analyzing the reports, a gap between the theoretical framework and its requirements and the availability of data was observed; in other words, the intent and the results differ (see below). This ongoing problem has been discussed widely and it has to be acknowledged that many efforts have been made to rectify it over the years (e.g., Bradshaw et al. 2006; OECD 2009; UNICEF 2010).

As Frønes ([2007](#)) states, indicators are "bridging conceptualization and measurement" and "despite their obvious character as constructions, even complex indicators may melt into the phenomenon; poverty or well-being is understood as what is being measured" (pp. 19f.). Consequently, both the conceptualization of well-being and the conceptual framework are meaningful—they assess what is measured. Thus, it is important to consider two aspects. First, no neutral measurements or classifications exist; they are all biased, structured by a particular, although sometimes implicit, perspective. This is true no matter if the data in the reports appears to "tell its own tale"; especially when it is from the child's perspective, the child is "given a voice" and the data appears to be "authentic" and unbiased (critically: Betz 2009, pp. 93f.). Second, it is important to bear in mind that it is mostly the adult decision-makers and not the children themselves who decide what is to be measured and what is worth mentioning; the conceptualizations are mainly relevant to adults (see for exceptions: Bradshaw et al. 2006, p. 3f.; Fattore et al. 2007). These insights are relevant in particular because indicators are used for policymaking. For this reason, indicators have their roots not only in empirical and theoretical modeling as stated earlier, but also in politics. This goes along with a *policy driven approach* to the data respective to the indicators (Betz 2010a; Noll 2002). This approach assumes that indicators are oriented towards controlling knowledge by ensuring the data collected will prove desirable to policymakers. Therefore, policy concerns derived from political aims are the starting point of the reporting system. Based on these political aims, indicators are operationalized and quantified via data derived from one or more databases. In particular, this approach is observable when policymakers and not researchers alone, participate in the process of developing and defining indicators.

Subsequently, the debate is on how to increase the transferability of data to policy. The political purposes of social or child indicators are diversified, inter alia (Moore Anderson et al. 2003, pp. 1-3):

–   *monitoring* by tracking outcomes which may or may not require policy interventions
–   *describing* in the sense of information, tracking trends and identifying areas of concern and positive outcomes
–   *setting goals* "to establish quantifiable thresholds to be met within a specific time period" (p. 3)
–   increasing *accountability* "to achieve positive or improved outcomes" (p. 3).

As mentioned earlier, the problem of limitations in the available data has to be seen in combination with this policy driven approach. For example, the lack of statistical information on the early years as criticized in the UNICEF Report Card 9 (UNICEF 2010), or the fact that children too often are invisible statistically as criticized in the OECD (2009), expresses that gathering this type of information is not as important or acceptable to a political majority as gathering other data (e.g., for older age groups). The same is true of the KIDS COUNT reports where only politically acceptable indicators from existing databases are included, and data which are likely to be continued in the near future are used (Annie E. Casey Foundation 2011).

Thus, even though it has been denounced many times, it is for policy based or majority based reasons that data collection systems are not very responsive to the shifts described below (chapter 4 and 7).

A consolidated overview of the facts indicates that the child indicators movement is receiving increasing recognition in the social sciences and also around the world, especially in economically advantaged nations (Bradshaw et al. 2007; UNICEF 2007, 2010). This is not only because the broadly known reports and data books are not limited to science but are co-produced by researchers and staff of political organizations, but also because they address various audiences such as the media and business leaders and, most notably, the results are valuable to policymakers. Indicators are a tool to be used to assist in the outlining and evaluation of policies and practices (Frønes 2007; OECD 2009, pp. 164ff.; Thomas 2009); the data act as an early warning system (Moore Anderson et al. 2003; UNICEF 2007).

3 Conceptual Background: The Deconstructive Sociology of Childhood

There are, as Ben-Arieh (2008) points out, research-related reasons for the rise of the child indicators movement. The respective research domain is the sociology of childhood or *childhood studies*, a social science research perspective. Also, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) provides an important framework on which to base the understanding of children's well-being through child indicators and it is a reason this area of study has gained in importance on a supranational level (Bradshaw et al. 2006).

The analysis of childhood and children from a social science perspective means that childhood is seen as a "configuration of social processes, discourses and structures which relate to ways of living as a child at a particular time in a particular society" (Zeiher 2009, p. 127). This understanding is close to a social constructivist perspective. It suspends the assumption that childhood has some real existence beyond the social. As it is true that the concept of well-being is a construction, it also is true that the concepts of children and childhood are constructions. It is worthwhile to take a closer, social scientific look at these representations: first, to investigate which of them are dominant in which societal domains, for example, policy, science, law; and second, to analyze the effects of these representations in different settings. These issues can be explored through a *deconstructive sociology of childhood approach*, one of three approaches within childhood studies (in addition to the *structural sociology of childhood* and the *children's studies* (Alanen 2005; Betz 2008) which are more widespread in the child indicators movement). In the deconstructive approach, researchers examine the construction of childhood and investigate why and how childhood changes (James and James 2004, p. 32). Through representations in texts, pictures and images, childhood is seen as a plurality of discourses; however, social practices and institutions are linked closely to these representations (Hengst and Zeiher 2005, p. 15; James and James 2004; Mills 2000). This deconstructive approach emerged from tracks in social science such as constructivism, sociology of knowledge and discourse analysis. Deconstruction also is understood in the sense of breaking down and showing hegemonic and hierarchic dichotomies such as the opposition of children and adults (Hengst and Zeiher 2005, p. 15). No matter which representations and constructions of children are dominant, they always have to be seen in relation to adults. This is because "a child cannot be imagined in the absence of an idea about what an adult is, just as it is impossible to picture the adult

and his or her society without positing the child" (Christensen and Prout 2006, p. 43). Common representations of children (Christensen and Prout 2006; Mills 2000; Thomas 2009) follow (Table 1):

The investigation of these representations in current documents within the child indicators movement is interesting in four ways. First, these ideas about children affect not only the conceptual framework and the indicators of a reporting system, but also the methods of collecting data, the interpretation of the findings and discussions about (the treatment of) real children. As a result, the deconstructive approach is fruitful for questioning the preferred way of conceptualizing children in the child indicators movement, and the ways of constructing their well-being. Second, the analysis provides insight because the models of children and childhood are linked to demands for a "right" or professional kind of interaction with children—children are seen as in need of protection, supervision, care, nurturing, training, restriction, etc. Investigating the representations and models of children is relevant since "how we are seen determines in part how we are treated, how we treat others is based on how we see them; such seeing comes from representation" (Dyer 1993, p. 1 cit. Christensen and Prout 2006, p. 43). This argument is valid in pedagogical as well as political contexts. Third, especially when it comes to children, a "combination of silent voices and insufficient information in their interests has contributed to the largely powerless position of children in society" (Andrews and Ben-Arieh 1999, p. 106). Hence, it is worth verifying if, how, when, and also which children (for example, the youngest) have a marginalized societal position in opposition to adults. In addition, whether the reports address the status of children at large or of subgroups (alongside ethnic or gender categories) is interesting because the latter would provide insight into their diverse political representation. (I will come to this point later.) Fourth, on an empirical level we can see that these representations only rarely can be considered "pure". Instead, in many quantitative and many qualitative studies the findings reveal an overlap: children are conceptualized as being dependent and at the same time as being active. These observations also reveal the manifold role of children in society. The same is true for the child indicators movement where facets of survival and well-being can be gathered at the same time and combinations of current and future aspects of children's well-being are common (see Ben-Arieh 2011).

Table 1 Prevalent representations of children in opposition to adults

Children	Adults
Becomings	Beings
Future members of society	Actual members of society
Dependent	Independent
Irresponsible	Responsible
Passive	Active
Vulnerable	Powerful
Incompetent	Competent
Immature	Fully developed
Irrational	Rational

4 Changes in the Child Indicators Movement – Changes in the Views of Children

Since the origins of the child indicators movement about 50 years ago (for details see Ben-Arieh 2008, 2010), researchers, administration officials and later on national and international organizations such as the OECD, UNICEF and the Annie E. Casey Foundation have discussed and defined child indicators and have produced reports and profiles based on them. These indicators cover a broad range of social concerns (Frønes 2007, p. 8); however, what is seen as a social concern differs depending on country, policy, protagonists and time. Consequently, the realization of the child indicators movement varies from country to country and among regional stakeholders (for details see Ben-Arieh 2010, pp. 10ff., 2011); nevertheless, the "evolution of child well-being indicators has occurred virtually everywhere, although at varying paces" (Ben-Arieh 2008, p. 9).

When developed, the indicators generally were said to "meet the need for planning and social reporting in the presence of complexity and change" (Frønes 2007, p. 6), and the data and the reports based on them continue to adhere to the maxim "to improve something, first measure it" (see UNICEF 2007, p. 3). In addition, significant changes in the child indicators movement have taken place over the last 25 years (Ben-Arieh 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011; Ben-Arieh and George 2001). The areas where the main shifts have taken place[1] are as follows:

4.1 From Survival to Well-Being

It has been pointed out that in the past "much attention has been paid to [assessing] children's physical survival and basic needs, focusing often on threats to children's survival" (Ben-Arieh 2010, p. 15). The "survival indicators" typically highlighted in the past are represented by, for example, "child or infant mortality rates," "drop-out rates" or "immunization rates." However, the current focus has expanded beyond children's immediate survival to include indicators which capture the "quality of life" and "well-being," especially in developed countries (p. 17).

4.2 From Negative to Positive

As in the discussion of health and illness, Ben-Arieh (2010) argues that the former narrow focus of the child indicators movement on problems and/or failures should be expanded to include measuring positive behaviors and protective factors as they relate to children—a shift in focus which has taken place. Current child indicators include positive factors such as the "life satisfaction" of children and their "well-being" along with negative indicators.

4.3 From Well-Becoming to Well-Being

Well-becoming, the dominant paradigm of former child indicators, means that children "are instrumentalized by the forward-looking perspectives in the sense that their

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[1] Due to space constraints, only five out of six shifts are examined here. The last shift "towards a composite index of child well-being" is not relevant to the investigation presented in this article (Ben-Arieh 2010, p. 17). In the newest publications Ben-Arieh (2011) even speaks of nine shifts but the new ones are not essential to the study presented in this article.

"good life" is postponed until adulthood" (p. 16). Ben-Arieh speaks of the emergence of a child-centered perspective of well-being which focuses on monitoring children's current status, the "here and now" of children, but he admits that the well-becoming perspective is "still dominant" (p. 18).

4.4 From Traditional to New Domains

In the past, measurements of child well-being concentrated on indicators from social services and professions such as health or education. Recently, the indicators have become more child-centered and interdisciplinary and they cut across professions. The indicators focus on "new" areas of childhood such as the life skills of children, children's activities and the different contexts of their participation, their culture and their civic involvement.

4.5 From an Adult to a Child Perspective

Whereas in the past the adults were central and the family was generally the unit of observation, today children are the unit of observation and are also the primary source of information. Now the actions, feelings and thoughts of the children are explored. This shift is observable in upcoming social monitoring of children to be based on indicators (for German speaking countries: Betz 2010b).

Overall, these shifts indicate that the key aspects of conceptualizing children change over time. These changes not only provide information for improved in-dicators, they also reveal changing views on children and childhood on a discursive level. This observation is central from a deconstructive approach. Most reflections on the shifts are placed on a conceptual level, but the shifts also were tested and proven in several quantitative studies (inter alia Ben-Arieh and George 2001; Ben-Arieh 2006) which focused on key terms and also on a title and content screening of relevant publications from around the globe in a time comparison. The findings revealed that the shifts had occurred (see Ben-Arieh 2011). Complementary to these quantitative studies, the results of an in-depth qualitative analysis of the realization and variation of these shifts in three relevant reports will be shown in the following discussion.

5 Research Questions and Method

The research questions focus on if, and if yes how, the five major shifts previously described have occurred in three important social reporting systems and on how children are represented in these reporting systems. The results of a discourse analysis conducted from the deconstructive sociology of childhood perspective will be presented.

5.1 The Discourse Analysis Approach

A discourse analysis framework developed in the ongoing research project *educare* (Bischoff and Betz 2011) was applied. Methodologically, the analysis is a

combination of a thematic discourse approach, a sociological knowledge approach and a critical discourse analysis approach (Höhne et al. 2005; Jäger 1999; Keller 2007). Discourses are seen as a set of linguistic practices driven by rules (Kajetzke 2008). First, the research question was defined as noted earlier and then the *discourse thread* was narrowed down to the theme "children." Along with the main focus on national political reports in Germany, some international reports which fit the definition of the *discourse mode* of interest were included. Next, after all relevant reports from the past 10 years were screened, it was decided which passages of text were relevant to the respective questions and the *corpus* was defined. Last, the reports were characterized and a manual for the analysis and preparation of the material was developed. It was important that the reports analyzed were relevant to society in that their focus was on areas regulated by law, for example, the Child and Youth Report of the German Government, and that they were relevant in that they provide direction for political action. It also was important that the documents were accessible to the public and that the media, policymakers or decision-makers took notice of them (e.g., see O'Hare 2008 analyzing the impact of child indicators). Typical discourse documents, text passages and the theme as a whole were analyzed in detail. Then the data which so far had been obtained was reflected upon and summarized (Bischoff and Betz 2011, p. 23). To answer the above-mentioned research questions, three documents relevant to action were selected. The following is a compendium of the investigation.

5.2 The Data Corpus

Initiated in 1990, the KIDS COUNT data book is a report published annually in the United States. The Annie E. Casey Foundation, a private organization, provides the data book with profiles of the well-being of America's children on a state-by-state basis. The data captures a wide range of factors affecting children's well-being such as educational attainment, health, and adequacy of income. Overall, the data book is based on 10 indicators which are intended to "increase public awareness of children's issues and enhance public policies to support vulnerable children" (O'Hare 2008, p. 395). There are several criteria for selecting indicators including consistency and availability to all states and over time (Annie E. Casey Foundation 2011, p. 71).[2] The data in the data book comes from various sources including the U.S. Census Bureau, the National Center for Health Statistics, the National Center for Education Statistics, and the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. For this analysis, the KIDS COUNT data book entitled "America's Children, America's Challenge. Promoting Opportunity for the Next Generation" (ibid.) was examined.

The OECD report deals explicitly with children and was published for the first time in 2009. It is about "enhancing the well-being of children" (OECD 2009, p. 9) and includes data on children in all OECD countries across six dimensions: material well-being; housing and environment; education; health and safety; risk behaviors; and quality of school life. All data already were publically available; no new data were collected. The data originated in the OECD income distribution database, the

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[2] Because of data limitations—similar to the other two reports—the stakeholders are obliged to dispense data which provide good information about child well-being but which are not comparable over all states or countries or which come from one-time surveys (see Lippmann 2005).

Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) database, the European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC), the World Health Organization Mortality database and many other sources (for details see pp. 34–60). Across the six dimensions, 21 indicators were selected based on special requirements, inter alia, the indicators needed a policy focus and were as up-to-date as possible (p. 29). The publication "Doing better for children" (OECD 2009) also was analyzed.

UNICEF's Report Card 7 of 2007 provides a "comprehensive assessment of the lives and well-being of children and young people in 21 nations of the industrialized world" (UNICEF 2007, p. 2). Its purposes are "to encourage monitoring, to permit comparison and to stimulate the discussion and development of policies to improve children's lives" (ibid.). Not very different from the OECD, UNICEF explores six dimensions of children's well-being: material well-being; health and safety; education; peers and family relationships; behavior and risks; and young people's own subjective assessments of their well-being. In all, it covers 40 indicators (p. 2). Again, a great variety of data sources was used covering many OECD countries (see also the background paper: Bradshaw et al. 2006). The publication investigated was "Child poverty in perspective: An overview of child well-being in rich countries" (UNICEF 2007).

6 Results

In the following, the results are shown separately because the reports differ in relevant aspects of their analysis; however, the findings from each reporting system are presented with references to other findings. In the discussion the reports were interpreted collectively.

6.1 Children in the KIDS COUNT Reporting System 2011

Unlike the indicators used for the reports discussed below, the 10 indicators used to measure the well-being of children for the KIDS COUNT report (Table 2) were not

Table 2 Overview of the 10 key indicators of child well-being in KIDS COUNT

Dimensions	Indicators (Age Coverage)
Adequacy of income, health, educational attainment	• children living in families where no parent has full-time, year-round employment (0–18)
	• children in poverty (0–18)
	• children in single-parent families (0–18)
	• low birth weight babies
	• infant mortality rate
	• child death rate (1–14)
	• teen death rate (15–19)
	• teen birth rate (15–19)
	• teens not in school and not high school graduates (16–19)
	• teens not attending school and not working (16–19)

Annie E. Casey Foundation 2011, own compilation

divided into themes (dimensions). Although themes such as adequacy of income, state of health and educational attainment are mentioned at the beginning of the report, they do not appear in the findings. Nevertheless, the indicators can be divided by content: the dominant domain of *health and safety* (low birth weight, infant mortality rate, child death rate, teen death rate) is represented in two-fifths of the indicators; *income* (children living in families where no parent has full-time, year-round employment, children in poverty) and *education* (teens not in school and not high school graduates, teens not attending school and not working) are each represented in one-fifth of the indicators. The remaining indicators are divided between two other domains: "teen birth rate," a kind of *risk behavior*; and *family structure*, "children in single-parent families." The latter indeed is linked to the *income* theme. In its report, the Annie E. Casey Foundation argues "children growing up in single-parent families typically do not have the same economic or human resources available as those growing up in two-parent families" (Annie E. Casey Foundation 2011, p. 60). Overall, themes for children's well-being include *health, safety, income, education, family structure,* and *risk behavior.*

When it comes to the main changes introduced in Section 4 hereof, the table above plainly shows that the shift "from survival to well-being" is not relevant. However, in the year 2011, the *health and safety* indicators, which include issues of survival such as low birth weight and three indicators representing mortality, are shown to be relevant. Even clearer is that the shift "from negative to positive" is not important in this reporting system; 10 out of 10 indicators are of risk or other negative factors. Most impressive are the negations which are in the indicators such as "teens NOT attending school and NOT working." None of the indicators captures positive descriptions of children. Similarly, the question of the shift "from traditional to new domains" can be answered; the indicators, especially the ones concerning *health, safety* and *educational attainment,* represent quite traditional domains. In addition, the well-becoming perspective seems to be dominant and only a few indicators, for example, the child poverty rate, can be interpreted at the same time as part of a well-being concept in the sense of focusing on the "here and now" of children. Indeed, an analysis of text passages indicates entanglement with the future and, therefore, a focus on well-becoming, for example: "Children who grow up in low-income families are less likely to successfully navigate life's challenges and achieve *future success"* (p. 8, emphasis added). When discussing the shift "from the adult to the child perspective" it must be noted that sometimes the children and sometimes the families are the units under observation. It is obvious that children are not the primary source of information; therefore, whether this reporting system represents the "child perspective" has to be questioned.

When concentrating on the question of how children are represented in this report, it can be shown that children are conceptualized as vulnerable, dependent and in need of protection. Not only do the indicators themselves (e.g., "low birth weight babies" or "children in poverty") confirm this finding, but the analysis of the text backs it up: "The 10 indicators used to rank states reflect a developmental perspective on childhood (…) In all of these stages of development, young people need the economic and social assistance provided by a strong family" (p. 32). In addition, there is a strong focus on children as becomings and as future (and hopefully productive) members of society—readable on the indicators capturing *risk behavior* or *educational*

attainment. This finding also can be proven in the text, especially when children are called "the next generation" (this is even a part of the report's title), a generation which has to be prepared (by adults symbolized by the "we"): "Our country's long-term prosperity depends on how well we prepare the next generation to meet the challenges of a competitive global economy" (p. 8). The sustainability of the American society and economy, therefore, is dependent on future adults and the focus is on an actual investment in children: "Invest in proven strategies that help children reach their full potential and equip them with the knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary to contribute to a growing economy and a vibrant society" (p. 8). To conclude, the prevalent view of children is future-based and economic and on a conceptual level not only can be called a *developmental perspective* but also, and more particularly, can be referred to as an *investment perspective.*

Analysis of the indicators and the text led to another interesting finding, one which affects the way children are mentioned in the report and, therefore, their political representation: the children were not differentiated in a socio-structural or gendered way. In fact, the indicators were broken down by race and origin to illustrate differences in well-being among ethnic groups. Concerning age coverage, analysis showed that sometimes all people under 18 years of age were classified as "children", for example, in connection with child poverty; however, in the domain of *education,* the focus was just on teens between 16 and 19 years of age. This result is quite interesting, as the public debate on "early investment" (Olk 2009) runs parallel to the report's rationale. We only can assume that in the years to come, further indicators representing aspects of early childhood education and care will be included in this reporting system.

6.2 Children in the OECD Reporting System 2009

For the OECD report, 21 indicators divided into six dimensions were measured. Table 3 shows the number of indicators per domain, which indicates that the dimensions were weighted differently.[3] Most emphasis has been placed on the dimension of *health and safety,* the same as in the KIDS COUNT report. This dimension is represented by eight out of 21 indicators (Table 3) while each of the remaining domains, *material well-being* (average disposable income, children in poor homes, educational deprivation), *risk behavior* (smoking, drunkenness, teenage births) and *educational well-being* (average mean literacy score, literacy inequality, youth not in education, employment or training (NEET) rates) are represented by three indicators. Therefore, the themes of children's well-being for the most part are comparable with the themes in the KIDS COUNT reporting system: *health, safety, income, education,* and *risk behavior.* However, two further domains have been added: a new theme called *housing and environment* (overcrowding, poor environmental conditions); and the well-known theme of *education,* which has been picked up from another perspective. The OECD calls it *quality of school life* and it refers to the self-assessment of children concerning "bullying" and "liking school". Therefore, the range of themes

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[3] However, the reader cannot always understand the distribution, for example, why is the indicator "educational deprivation" linked to *material well-being* and not to *educational well-being*?

Table 3 Overview of the 21 indicators of child well-being in the OECD report

Dimensions (number of indicators)	Indicators (age coverage)
Material well-being (3)	• average disposable income (0–17)
	• children in poor homes (0–17)
	• educational deprivation (15)
Health and safety (8)	• low birth weight (0)
	• infant mortality rates (0–1)
	• breastfeeding rates (0)
	• vaccination rates (pertussis and measles) (2)
	• physical activity (11–15)
	• mortality rates (0–19)
	• suicide rates (0–19)
Educational well-being (3)	• average mean literacy score (15)
	• literacy inequality (15)
	• youth NEET rates (15–19)
Risk behaviors (3)	• smoking (15)
	• drunkenness (13–15)
	• teenage births (15–19)
Quality of school life (2)	• bullying (11–15)
	• liking school (11–15)
Housing and environment (2)	• overcrowding (0–17)
	• poor environmental conditions (0–17)

OECD 2009, own compilation

is broader in the OECD reporting system than it is in the KIDS COUNT reporting system.

Table 3 indicates that, again, the shift "from survival to well-being" can be observed in part. The importance of the *health and safety* theme goes along with the emphasis on indicators such as "low birth weight" or "mortality rate" which focus on the survival of the next generation. The shift "from negative to positive" is not consistent and negative indicators are still dominant; however, positive indicators are included as well (e.g., liking school). Concerning the question of "well-being instead of well-becoming", the indicators of *risk behavior* clearly focus on growing up. While indicators such as "children in poor homes" can be interpreted as part of a well-being concept in the sense of focusing on the current status of children, again, the emphasis on *education* and *health and safety* focuses more strongly on the future than on the present situations of children. This future-orientation also can be confirmed in passages of text. The OECD states: "All indicators show a good deal of variation in child outcomes" (OECD 2009, p. 9). Similarly, analysis of the shift "from traditional to new domains" shows that the previously dominant traditional domains such as *health, education* and *risk behavior* (14 out of 21 indicators) are being joined by indicators which not only are in the "well-being" and the "new domains" categories (such as bullying), but which also represent a "child perspective" instead of an adult perspective. Children are not only the unit of observation in this reporting

system they are also the source of information.[4] To conclude, some shifts are more easily observable than others and, therefore, the findings show a variety in the realization of the shifts within this OECD report.

As in KIDS COUNT, children are primarily represented as becomings as shown by the risk behavior and the educational indicators. Analysis of a portion of text reinforces this impression,[5] which is quite similar to the arguments in KIDS COUNT: "Countries need to pay better attention to the lives of their children for the sake of their economies and their societies," and "The indicators (…) place a strong focus on future well-being for children. A future focus is reasonable in child policy given that children have the longest futures of any age group" (OECD 2009, p. 25). In this way, the report reveals another view of children which is always associated with the future perspective. The OECD report states: "If all goes well, the children of today create an environment that makes the current and future lives of today's adults easier. If all does not go well for children, the remedial costs must be faced now and into the future" (p. 14). This passage of text implies that children are not only seen as becomings but also as potential problems. This perception also is reflected by the choice of some indicators: smoking, drunkenness, teenage birth (see also Brown Rosier 2009).

Again, the status of children is represented mostly at large and the children only rarely are divided into subgroups: 11 out of 20 indicators are differentiated by sex; three indicators are differentiated by migrant status. There is no breakdown by socioeconomic status and a breakdown by age is realized in seven indicators. This is comparable to the KIDS COUNT report in which the indicators of *educational well-being*, *quality of school life* and also of *risk behavior* concentrate solely on 11 to 19 year-olds.

6.3 Children in the UNICEF Reporting System 2007

UNICEF has the reporting system with the most indicators, 40 divided among six defined dimensions.[6] As in the other two reports, the number of indicators per domain shows the areas of emphasis of the report (Table 4). Again, the report focuses mainly on *behaviors and risks* with 12 out of the 40 indicators. All other areas have five or six indicators each and, therefore, are weighted similarly. The themes also are quite similar to those mentioned in KIDS COUNT and OECD: *health, safety, income, education,* and *risk behavior*. Indeed, further themes called *relationships* and *subjective well-being* have been added. Most of these indicators are different from those used in the OECD reporting system. Another additional theme in the UNICEF report is referred to as "peers". Peer *relationships* and *subjective well-being* are irrelevant in

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[4] It is interesting to note that the report takes a strong interest in the self-assessment of children in their role as pupils. That means an aspect of education is in the foreground when the children make their assessments without them being asked, for example, whether they like their lives as a whole or like being children (even beyond school).

[5] This view also is supported by the fact that the indicator "liking school" is not part of the *education* domain. When it comes to issues of education, whether pupils like school seems to be less relevant. It is more important that the average literacy score is high, the literacy inequality is low, and the youth NEET rate is low as well.

[6] As mentioned earlier, here again the reader cannot always understand the attribution of the indicators, for example, the separation of *health and safety* on the one hand and *behaviors and risks* on the other hand. Both domains cover aspects of behavior and of health.

Table 4 Overview of the 40 indicators of child well-being in the UNICEF report

Dimensions (number of indicators)	Indicator (age coverage)
Material well-being (5)	Children in households below 50 % median income (0–17)
	Low family affluence (11, 13, 15)
	Deprivation of educational items (15)
	Cultural deprivation (15)
	Children in households without an employed adult (0–17)
Health and safety (6)	Infant mortality rate
	Low birth weight
	Immunization against measles, DPT3, and Pol3 (< 1)
	Accidental and non-accidental child deaths (0–19)
Educational well-being (6)	Achievement in reading, mathematics and science (15)
	Full- and part-time students remaining in education (15–19)
	Young people not in education, training or employment (15–19)
	Young people expecting to find low-skilled work (15)
Relationships (5)	Living in single-parent families (11, 13, 15)
	Living in stepfamilies (11, 13, 15)
	Often eating the main meal together (15)
	Spending time just talking with parents (11, 13, 15)
	Children finding their peers 'kind and helpful' (11, 13, 15)
Subjective well-being (6)	Self-defining health (11, 13, 15)
	Young people with high life satisfaction (11, 13, 15)
	Young people reporting negatively about personal well-being (15)
	Young people liking school a lot (11, 13, 15)
Behaviors and risks (12)	Cigarette smoking and drunkenness (11, 13, 15)
	Cannabis use (15)
	Teenage pregnancy rate (15–19)
	Sexual intercourse and condom use (15)
	Physical fighting (11, 13, 15)
	Being bullied (11, 13, 15)
	Eating fruit and breakfast every day (11, 13, 15)
	Physical activity (11, 13, 15)
	Overweight (13, 15)

Bradshaw et al. 2006; UNICEF 2007, own compilation

the reporting systems mentioned earlier but both of them are included in the UNICEF report.

Similar to the OECD report, the shifts are observable in part. Survival indicators play an important, but not a dominant role. The shift "from negative to positive" is not consistent here either; more than half of the indicators have a negative focus. Most clear is the emphasis on "well-being instead of well-becoming". In fact, the majority of the indicators, such as *risk behavior,* focus on the (problematic) teen years and adulthood, for example, the children are smoking cigarettes, are drunk, use

cannabis, are pregnant, use condoms, etc. However, many other indicators are directly linked to the "here and now", for example, high life satisfaction, children finding their peers kind and helpful, often eating the main meal together. In particular, this shift is due to the addition of the themes *relationships* and *subjective well-being*. The shift from traditional to new domains may be seen in the same way; still dominant are traditional domains with 24 out of 40 indicators, but some indicators, especially when they represent the child perspective instead of the adult perspective, point in the direction of new domains. Besides, children are not only the units of observation; they are also the source of information. Unlike the OECD, UNICEF integrates a self-assessment of children which does not focus directly on the school as a pedagogical institution in the generational order or solely on the family as another pedagogical institution, but on the peers. This is represented by at least one out of the 40 indicators.

Again, children are seen mainly as becomings and also in part as problems (risk behaviors, educational indicators), but in addition, UNICEF also conceptualizes children as persons in their own right. From this point of view, the indicators "self-defining health", "life satisfaction" and "personal well-being" can be interpreted. This finding is supported by a passage of text which deals with the report's base: "The starting point is the Convention on the Rights of the Child (…) the assessment focuses on the economic, social and cultural rights of the child" (UNICEF 2007, p. 40). The interpretation that the entire report follows a children's rights perspective, however, is too strong because there are many indicators beyond the UNCRC. Nevertheless, it is the first hint that children's rights were a factor in the decision of which indicators would be used and which ones would not be used. Also observable is an overlap in the classifications of indicators as UNICEF states: "The report also attempts to reflect the Convention's position that the promotion of the rights of the child is important for its own sake *as well as* being a critical investment in the future of society" (p. 40, emphasis added).

Surprisingly, all children in the UNICEF report are represented at large. None of the 40 indicators has a breakdown by sex, migrant or socioeconomic status. Coverage by age is quite limited; most of the indicators concentrate on 15-year olds. Out of 40 indicators, three are age-neutral (age coverage 0 to 17), five refer to early childhood (infant mortality rate, low birth weight, immunization), and 32 refer to the youth population (11 to 18). In the dimensions of *educational well-being*, *relationships*, *subjective well-being* and *behaviors and risks* there is no information about children younger than 11.

7 Discussion

The initial question of whether there is empirical evidence for the major shifts in the child indicators movement has to be answered with "yes" and "no". It is quite obvious the shifts did not occur in all reporting systems in the same way. There are large differences between and also within the reporting systems depending on the aims and intentions of the stakeholders and due to data limitations. However, there also is strong consensus—survival indicators, negative indicators, the focus on well-becoming and, therefore, traditional domains and the adult perspective are still present (see also the African Reporting System: African Child Policy Forum 2008; for similar findings in African countries: Ben-Arieh 2011).

It is important to note that the realization or lack of realization of these shifts should not be judged or classified as "good" or "bad" (for a discussion about more positive indicators see Lippman et al. 2009) because the deconstructive perspective is not a normative but an analytical one. For this reason, all reports are seen as legitimate parts of the child indicators movement and the findings provide insight into the dominant conceptualizations of children and childhood. In particular, the findings concerning an overlap in classifications reveal that exploring children and childhood is manifold; depending on the different perspectives of childhood (inter alia from developmental psychology, social science, or economics), children can be conceptualized as being vulnerable and at the same time as being actual members of society characterized by traditional and new domains in the same breath. From a deconstructive approach, therefore, the interesting questions are: "Why are there differences between and also within the reports in the realization of the shifts? Which processes facilitate data collection corresponding to the outlined conceptualizations or impede data from being responsive to the shifts? How does childhood change in relation to these changing conceptualizations?" These questions are relevant because the political arrangement of childhood as a phase of life is closely linked to the dominant representations. The answers are complex and hardly have been investigated from a social science perspective. Some feasible arguments are presented here.

First, quantitative studies reveal changes over time (Ben-Arieh 2011). Concomitantly, the findings indicate, as demonstrated, that as well as these shifts occurring in a time comparison, there is still a common and dominant understanding of what childhood is for which seems to be quite persistent, has a long tradition, and shapes the way childhood is experienced and how it has been conceptualized since its "discovery." Foremost, childhood is a transitional phase of life and many observations influence outcomes in adulthood. This is also what the KIDS COUNT, OECD and UNICEF reports refer to when they point out that their indicators are important to outcomes. Simultaneously, the UNICEF report points out the children's subjective sense of their well-being and that these indicators do not directly influence outcomes. Maybe this is a forerunner of a greater change to come. Society and policy makers are still interested in children predominantly because they represent the future (and should guarantee economic prosperity) and they are less interested in the "present" of children and in their opinions, in intergenerational analysis exploring the access to resources of all currently living generations, or in intergenerational power imbalances (Olk 2009). Therefore, there are policy-based reasons for the discrepancy between conceptualizations (such as well-being instead of survival) and the data but this discrepancy preserves the prevalent representations of children as being in opposition to adults (see Table 1). The dominant focus on providing for and protecting children as traditional psychological and pedagogical domains, provides knowledge which can be used to advance optimum caring options and support for children. However, the implicit and explicit goals are for children to have positive adulthoods and for society to survive (for Children's Surveys: Betz 2009). Consequently, the dominant focus is still on children's performance according to the goals of institutions for children (in the educational system) or of adult child experts (in the domains of health, psychology or safety). Analysis consistently shows that the dominant representations are of children as future members of society, as becomings, partly as problems, and as vulnerable. In addition, children often are represented by (the problematic) teens (see Brown Rosier 2009) and only

occasionally by infants or toddlers. This finding might change in the years to come and the "early years" will become a dominant theme, especially in light of early, political and pedagogical interventions (see the arguments for "appropriate policies to improve child well-being" in the OECD report (OECD 2009, p. 11).

Second, the explanation of why the shifts are not observable consistently is that they require a "pure" concept-driven approach. The construction of positive indicators or new domains or the conceptualization of children as beings (in the here and now) implies conceptual ambition. Besides the respective concept-driven approach as an underlying framework—as mentioned earlier the investment perspective, the developmental perspective and in part the child rights perspective—the reports analyzed can be classified as a mix of approaches: partly concept driven but also data driven and policy driven. This is true even though the people responsible for the reports invest more and more energy in explaining their conceptualizations and indicators and their classifications. A *data-driven approach* means that the basis for the analysis is an available pool of suitable data which allows indicators and finally classifications, that is, an indicator grid, to be extrapolated. Here, pragmatic considerations play an important role as well as the data's comparability nationally, internationally and also over time (Betz 2008; Noll 2002). As all the reports deal with data constraints, this is also an explanation for the differences in the realization of the shifts. The reports examined refer to existing data sources and no new data were collected. Therefore, data-related reasons which are closely linked to policy issues impede the results from being more responsive to the outlined conceptualizations.

Nevertheless, the reports play a decisive role in bridging the actual gap between conceptualizations and data. The reports are embedded in an array of statements, conferences, websites with additional indicators and auxiliary material (e.g., www.kidscount.org), and in this way public awareness is created. The reports initiate policy and societal and professional debates on child well-being and provide civil society and policy-makers with information to argue for child well-being. Furthermore, they not only monitor child well-being but also make policy recommendations, set benchmarks and foster coordination and collaboration in data collection and dissemination (Lippmann 2005). From a childhood studies perspective it is interesting to investigate how these developments are changing childhood in diverse countries, which still is an open-ended research question.

8 Conclusion

There is no doubt that there has been a rise in the importance of the child indicators movement over the last 50 years; indeed, recent studies have shown that the number of reports has grown significantly in the last decade (Ben-Arieh 2011). Because of the constantly changing context concerning the efforts to measure and monitor the well-being of children and their living conditions in different countries and also across countries, re-examinations of the field of child indicators are helpful for the understanding and documentation of potential changes (Ben-Arieh and George 2001; Ben-Arieh 2006). Complementary to these ongoing quantitative studies and evaluations, it is fruitful to examine the success story of the movement from a deconstructive sociology of childhood perspective as exercised in this article.

First, from this perspective an in-depth analysis of the themes in the child indicators movement, their entanglements with other themes and the representations of children and childhood in texts and documents is beneficial because it allows a deeper understanding of what is meant when talking about "child well-being". Only an in-depth analysis can reveal how the themes are entangled and related and how they can be enhanced. Data currently classified as belonging to "well-being" have to be rearranged and classified as being part of "well-becoming" (see chapter 6). Thus, the deconstructive approach can increase awareness of the discrepancy between conceptualizations or political rhetoric and data bases and also investigate its consequences. This perspective can carve out that the harmonization of concepts and data may lead to different policy outcomes because representations of children and childhood and social practices are inevitably linked (James and James 2004).

Second, this approach opens the door to the empirical investigation of the amalgamation of research and politics in the child indicators movement. In this regard, qualitative studies which go beyond the analysis of the representations of children and childhood in the child indicators movement are needed—studies which take into consideration the actual research and also the political contexts in which children's voices are represented and the power imbalances that shape them (Betz 2008; Spyrou 2011). With such research we will get a closer look behind the scenes. At least two reasons speak for such an analysis. First, as the findings revealed, even though the availability of data still seems to be one of the most influential drivers behind the majority of the reports (and the main excuse for criticism of indicators and of descriptions of children's well-being[7]), it is obvious that there are conceptual frameworks as well as political concerns which promote the respective reporting systems. Even with this mix of approaches (concept driven, data driven and policy driven), this alliance very rarely is investigated by researchers. An ongoing examination of the child indicators movement from a deconstructive perspective would provide interesting insight into how the reports are prepared and, therefore, how they can be interpreted. Knowledge about these circumstances is waiting to be discovered. In Germany, "workshop reports" have provided valuable insights into changes in social reporting over the years (Zinnecker 1996). Second, the amalgamation of research and politics promises to provide enlightenment as well as insight into the political consequences derived from the findings. This is especially interesting keeping in mind that most of the reports concentrated on representing children at large and not as subgroups (divided by gender, age, ethnic or socio-structural categories). Suitable questions for further research include: What are the political consequences of this representation? Does it boost the status of children as a group in opposition to adults and help them achieve a more powerful position in society or does it weaken the political representation of special groups of children who face educational, health, safety, income, housing, or any additional challenges more often than other children? One answer can already be given: further research is needed.

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[7] The analysis showed that irrespective of data constraints, to some extent the indicators have been wrong-headedly attributed to the dimensions within one reporting system. Furthermore, the wrong-headed attributions become obvious when comparing the three reports; one and the same indicator is attributed to different domains. UNICEF, for example, attributes "living in single-parent families" to *relationships;* in contrast, KIDS COUNT attributes it to *adequacy of income*. UNICEF considers "liking school" to be a matter of *subjective well-being*, while OECD attributes it to *quality of school*.

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