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# Risks in Early Childhood. Reconstructing Notions of Risk in Political Reports on Children and Childhood in Germany

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**Abstract** Social scientists and policymakers increasingly are placing attention on the concept of risk in conjunction with early childhood. The term “risk” is used widely, although it is ambiguous and linked to different groups of children, circumstances and outcomes depending on the purpose of policy debates or studies. From a childhood studies point of view, the exploration and reconstruction of the prevalent political discourses on risk in early childhood and on the concept of “children at risk” are significant especially in the policy area because notions of risk are negotiated and reproduced and assumptions about children at risk structure the legitimate ways of living as a child. For this paper a discourse analysis approach was chosen to evaluate the construction of risk in 16 current federal-level political reports on children and childhood in Germany. The findings reveal that there are different, but no arbitrary or contingent constructions of risks and that the family is seen as the most important venue of risk for young children. As well, the discourse on risk suggests a probabilistic future in the sense of a vicious circle especially where migrant children are concerned. Differing notions of risk and their likely connections to different political interventions are discussed.

**Keywords** Children · Childhood · Risk · Children at risk · Childhood studies · Policy · Cultural politics of childhood · Prevention

## 1 Introduction

The growing attention given to early childhood can be seen on both the national and international levels when opening daily newspapers, reading scientific publications,

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or following political debates. Various political issues are linked to early childhood: early language training for better integration of migrant children; early childhood education and care to reduce social inequalities (for the European Union: EACEA 2009); and as an opportunity to ensure and to increase the country's economic stability and success. Also, the debate on the challenges and problems facing children's welfare with respect to the appropriate pedagogical treatment of children and their families when observing situations of neglect or abuse of young children can be mentioned, or the prevention paradigm which has gained political ground in many countries (see France and Utting 2005).

In these debates on children and childhood the term "risk" has gained more and more importance (see also Dekker 2009; Stephens 1993; Turnbull and Spence 2011). Whereas on one hand it is classified as a buzzword (for the US discourse: Swadener 2005), on the other hand it is a relevant although dazzling and fuzzy category (in a historical perspective: Lohmann and Mayer 2009) in social science, public and pedagogical debates and in the area of policy.

Current examples are manifold: implementations of multiple parent and child education and intervention programs aimed at unfolding preventive effects for children at risk can be observed. OPSTAPJE is an internationally visible program developed in the Netherlands to compensate for *developmental risks* facing young children. Quite widespread in Germany as well, this preventive education program for parents with toddlers aged 2 to 4 years is aimed at fostering the development of knowledge and skills among children at risk, especially children with ethnic minority backgrounds (Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport/Ministry of Education, Culture and Science 2000). In addition, the category of risk is used in the current KIDS COUNT report of 2011 (Annie E. Casey Foundation 2011) where the well-being of America's children on a national and state-by-state basis is ranked. Within the report, various indicators of risk facing growing up successfully are described, inter alia *risks of dying* within the first year of life, *risks for adverse educational, health and other negative outcomes* and *risks of failing to achieve economic success in adulthood*.

Looking at just these two examples it is obvious that the term risk is used in various ways (see also Hughes (2011) for the term anti-social behavior and France and Utting (2005) for the concept of prevention). It is linked to different groups of children in terms of age, economic resources, health, development and also educational issues and it addresses indicators as well as outcomes. At first glance it can be assumed that as more examples are mentioned more definitions and notions of risk could be introduced. As Anderson Moore (2006) argues, "the positive side of this confusion is that program providers have some leeway in how they define 'at risk' for their programs" (ibid., p. 1) and the same may be true of political initiatives (see section 3; Hughes 2011) and academic endeavors.

Even though the term "risk" is used widely and has become more and more prevalent – Dekker (2009) speaks of a "story of expansion" (ibid., p. 17) – surprisingly, the current discourse on risk in combination with early childhood very rarely has been investigated from a childhood studies point of view (a dynamic exception for the UK: James and James 2008a) - especially in Germany where the study presented in this article has a unique feature. The childhood studies point of view, or social science approach, conceptually and empirically examines notions of children and childhood, the generational order, and closely linked to that, the changes in the status of children in society.

Hence, the exploration and reconstruction of the prevalent discourses on risk in early childhood and on the concept of children at risk are significant. In this regard, it can be assumed that the policy area is interesting. This is because here, notions of childhood and the child are negotiated and produced<sup>1</sup> and thus policy shapes the living conditions of young children and also of children at risk in a respective country and time period. Assumptions about children and children at risk therefore structure legitimate ways of living as a child. Furthermore, the analysis of notions of risk allows for international comparisons of the specific interplay between discourses and policies for children and to identify similarities and differences between risk discourse in different countries (see for example: Hughes 2011; see section 6).

Based on these hypotheses, the purpose of this article is to analyze the constructions of risk in several areas of policy on the federal level in Germany currently from the point of view of the sociology of childhood (Alanen 2005; Harden 2000; Lange and Mierendorff 2009). For this reason, the focus of our research was on Germany-wide political documents such as action plans and reports published between 2004 and 2010 after the so called “PISA-trauma” which became relevant to action in the creation of policies that address children and parents. In more detail, this study is aimed at exploring the following research questions:

- To which politically relevant themes is the label of risk in combination with children and childhood interrelated?
- What are the characteristics of discourse on risk?
- Who is labeled as being at risk?

Based on these research questions a discourse analysis approach was used to examine the constructions of risk. This approach can be classified as being inductive. The framework was developed in the ongoing research project *EDUCARE*<sup>2</sup> (Bischoff and Betz 2011, 2013a, b). Besides that the article intends to plausibilize the function of the current risk discourse on children and their families in Germany. The underlying, but also prospective aim of the investigation therefore is to contribute to a better understanding of the various functions of risk discourse and the links between assumptions of “children at risk” and political initiatives.

## 2 Childhood Studies and Social Constructivism

To explore childhood, a definition which conceptualizes the notion of childhood is needed. As Zeiher (2009) pointed out, childhood is 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” (ibid., p. 127). Childhood, therefore, can be conceptualized as a plurality of discourses manifested in texts, pictures and images and, in addition, social practices, processes and structures which also are linked closely to these representations (Hengst and Zeiher 2005, p. 15; James and James 2004, 2008a, b). Childhood

<sup>1</sup> This is also true not only on all societal levels but also on different societal fields like for example law, market, and the family. Due to empirical reasons the article has its focus on the policy area on a federal level.

<sup>2</sup> See section acknowledgements.

institutions such as the education and childcare system or the family, form part of these structures but they also include institutions such as the law and politics which regulate the living conditions and everyday lives of children. This understanding can be interrelated with a social constructivist perspective (James and James 2008b) and it reveals that childhood and the constructions of children have to be seen in a socio-historical context and that childhood has no real existence beyond the social (Harden 2000; Hendrick 1990; Lohmann and Mayer 2009). “Biological ‘facts’ of growth and development are culturally relative; they are interpreted and understood in relation to ideas about children’s needs, welfare and best interests, which vary between cultures” (James and James 2008b, p. 22). Conceptualizations and experiences of childhood, therefore, vary across time and space. To facilitate the exploration of the relationship between ideas about childhood and notions of childhood which are embodied in, for example, different political discourses, the experience of children as a social category and the impact ideas and experiences have on the everyday life of every single child, James and James (2008a, p. 105) developed the theoretical construct of “cultural politics of childhood.” This concept operates through the process “of redefining and reordering the everyday practices of children” arguing that “concepts of ‘childhood’ and ‘the child’ begin to change and these changes feed back into the everyday lives and experiences of children” (ibid., p. 106 f.).

Based on these assumptions it is possible to explore the constructions of childhood and investigate why and how childhood changes in different societies and at different times (James and James 2004, p. 32, 2008b). To this end, it is interesting to analyze the constructions which are made by various influential groups in society. These are policymakers and scientists – at least in the domains of medicine, sociology, educational science, psychoanalysis, and psychology – along with child advocates, parents, etc. Focusing on these groups is productive because they negotiate the meaning of childhood and of being a child at a particular time and which descriptions of children, for example, children at risk, are valid. With this understanding, exploring law, science, or as it is done in this article, politics, can be understood as key factors in the “dance of ongoing social construction” of what a child is and what childhood is for (James and James 2008a, p. 106). In this context, multipliers of children at risk also can be investigated (Dekker 2009, p. 32), for example, special laws, political initiatives and social science. At the same time, the influence children have on their representations and the structure can be taken into account and, therefore, the children’s own constructions of risk (see Harden 2000). In this context the concept of agency is widely used in research (see James 2011; James and James 2008b; critical: Dahlberg 2009).

Against the backdrop of childhood studies there appears to be value in investigating the area of policy in Germany and how the concept of risk is defined for at least three reasons. First, here we can find the official, meaning legitimate, understanding of children at risk. Second, policy frames essential components of the process children go through while growing up and, therefore, of how children at risk are treated and how policies shape the lives of all children (see: James and James 2008a; Turnbull and Spence 2011). In focusing on policy it becomes obvious that the notions of risk are manifold but not infinite (see section 6), and there are some common patterns describing risk in combination with children and childhood. Third, there is a gap in the research and, as Lohmann and Mayer (2009) point out, “the term (at risk) is enjoying a surge in popularity even though the connotative boundaries of what ‘at

risk' describes seem to be broad and fuzzy and definitely warrant a critical discourse analysis" (ibid., p. 6, insertion T. B.). This is especially true for the German context.

### 3 Analyzing the Concept of Risk in Political Discourses

When focusing on the current state of research it becomes obvious that the notion of risk in combination with childhood seldom has been investigated on the level of political discourse. However, there are some interesting studies, partly driven from a childhood studies point of view.

James and James (2008a) analyzed various connotations of the concept of risk in early childhood that have been in political discourse *in the UK* since the late 1960s. Inter alia, in their study they examined political initiatives such as Every Child Matters. They identified the language of risk as being part of a moral panic growing over the years which means that a group of persons, in this instance all children, emerge to be defined as a threat to values and interests which are valid in society (ibid., p. 109 ff.). In these processes childhood itself is defined as a problem and risks are naturalized. In combining the discourse on risk with the discourse on protection, social responses such as measures to control and discipline all children are authorized and installed (see also section 6). Likewise, Turnbull and Spence (2011) retrace how the concept of risk proliferated across social policy issues related to children, young persons, and the family *in the UK* between 1996 and 2009 (during the New Labor era). Their analysis shows that the term risk became more and more popular and was used in different ways. Mostly, young people at risk were "positioned as a problem, at least in part responsible for their own risky behavior or social position" (ibid., p. 949). Furthermore, Turnbull and Spence (2011) question the extent to which the construction of children and youth at risk is an effective way of driving policy interventions. For example, the concept of risk provides potentially endless justification for early intervention and surveillance – even in the absence of a presenting problem.

In a contemporary comparative study of children at risk, Hughes (2011) analyzed political discourse on anti-social behavior of young people and uncovered two counterpoised perspectives. His findings revealed that even though the behaviors were seen as equally problematic, the notion of risk was constituted differently: in England the dominant discourse was concerned with the *risk to society* caused by young people exhibiting anti-social behavior; in Victoria (*Australia*), the political discourse centered on the *risks to children* engaging in such behavior (ibid., p. 391f.). Hughes differentiated between the notion of children at risk (Victoria) and of children as risks (*England*). These conceptualizations go hand in hand with rationales for different policies and interventions. In a quite similar study, Brown Rosier (2009) analyzed the opposing constructions *in the US* discourse of children as problems and children as having problems, with a strong emphasis on children being seen as actual problems for adults. She distinguishes among three observable constructs: children as nuisance; children as vulnerable, which makes their protection a continuous political concern and problem; and lastly, children as having problems of their own such as teen pregnancy, drug use, dropping out of school, etc.

Swadener (2005) conducted a study aimed at deconstructing the rhetoric of children and families at risk prevalent *in the US* discourse since the 1960s and its

relationship to political debates and ideologies. According to Swadener, children and families at risk can be equated with children and families who are socially excluded or at risk of failure in various contexts, for example, the education system. In these processes very different mechanisms can be observed including othering, blaming the victim (for example, single mothers), declaring poverty as a private and behavioral issue, and many more.

It has to be assumed that the conceptualization of risks and the associated political rationales and interventions differ between countries and time periods due to societal differences and the different developmental paths and political logics in each country. Therefore an empirical investigation of the specific German context and political discourse is needed which represents a research gap (see: Lohmann and Mayer 2009; for an analysis of the current *German* discourse of “children at risk” see also: Betz and Bischoff 2013).

#### 4 Methodology and Data Corpus

To explore and analyze different notions of risk in German policy documents we developed a methodological approach which will be presented here shortly (for details see: Bischoff and Betz 2011, 2013a, b). Methodologically, the analysis used in the study at hand is a combination of various discourse analytical approaches. We conceptualized the risk discourse as a thematically-bounded discourse (Höhne et al. 2005; Höhne 2010). We focussed on the discourse form political reports and plans and analysed the documents with regard to (arbitrary) classifications through linguistic settlements of differences in political documents like “children with different socio-economic backgrounds” versus “all children”<sup>3</sup> (see Betz and de Moll 2013) or “migrant parents” versus “all parents” (see Bischoff and Betz 2011, p. 35) and the interrelations between different themes. This analysis is based on the hypothesis that to bring up a subject, classifications and linguistic settlements of differences are necessary. Therefore the discourse differs linguistically. Against this backdrop, thematical selections and interlinkings evoke significance in terms of predications which means the ascription or the denial of attributes or characteristics like for example speaking about “children with deficits” (see for details: Bischoff and Betz 2013a; Höhne 2010, p. 435 ff.). Our aim was to reconstruct typical elements of thematical discourses (see also: Bischoff and Betz 2013a). At the same time, we focused on intra- and also interdiscursive conjunctions of themes and linguistic elements, and also on the interlinkings of propositions (see Angermüller 2007; Höhne 2010; for details about “doing discourse analysis” in the outlined understanding: Bischoff and Betz 2013b).

Obviously, our analysis differs from most of the above-mentioned studies inasmuch as we were not interested in a comparative approach or in special political programs or initiatives implemented for children at risk. Our intention was to gain a deeper understanding of the label of risk in combination with children and childhood in policy and to ask which themes currently are interrelated to the concept of risk (and how they are interrelated) (see also Turnbull and Spence 2011, p. 947). In this

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<sup>3</sup> The oppositions which are constructed can be meaningful without being logical because “children with different socio-economic backgrounds” of course are an integral part of “all children”.



understanding our approach to the data was inductive and also reconstructive, although framed by a childhood studies approach (see sections 1 and 2). In addition, we wanted to explore the characteristics of risk discourse and to investigate which groups of children are most likely to be labeled as at risk in the area of policy that means which classifications are typical for the German political discourse at present.

According to our research interests we narrowed down the discourse thread to the themes of children and risk. Our main focus was on political documents in Germany in different policy areas at the federal level. Thus, we screened all relevant political reports and plans from the years 2004 to 2010 after the “PISA-trauma” which concentrated the public, science and also political attention to the strong link between poor educational outcomes of children ‘at risk’ in Germany and their parents’ socio-economic status and immigration status (see: Betz and Bischoff 2013). Then we determined which reports and also which passages of text were relevant to the respective questions and thus we defined the corpus. Due to our empirical investigation, we limited the analysis to the domains of family, child and youth welfare, integration, education, and social welfare. Lastly, the reports were characterized to gain an understanding of the background, the authors and the circumstances surrounding the documents.

To identify the most relevant reports, various characteristics were essential for the arrangement of the sample; the documents had to be relevant to society in that their focus was on areas regulated by law, for example, the Child and Youth Report of the German Government from 2006 (BMFSFJ 2006), and the National Action Plan from 2008 (BMFSFJ 2008) which is an international obligation. Thus, we were sure the reports were relevant in that they provided direction for political action. It also was important that the documents were accessible to the public and that decision-makers had taken notice of them, for example, that the German Bundestag (Federal Parliament) had discussed the issues enumerated in NAP 2008.

After the sample was constituted, typical discourse documents, text passages and the themes as a whole were analyzed in detail. Then the data was reflected upon and summarized (see Bischoff and Betz 2011). To answer the above-mentioned research questions, 16 documents relevant to action were selected in the following six policy domains: family, children, youth, integration, education and social welfare (for an overview of the entire data corpus check our website EDUCARE<sup>4</sup>).

## 5 Results

In the following section an aggregate of the multiple detailed findings on risk will be presented. By examining some overall and, therefore, typical findings on the current German discourse we hope to attract attention to the entire sample (see also: Betz and Bischoff 2013).

Basically, a characteristic of the political risk discourse is that it contains various, but no arbitrary or contingent constructions of risks. Two aspects exemplify the findings: first, most of the themes related to risk in combination with childhood are linked to the family (5.1) and assume a deficit perspective; and second, risks mostly

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.idea-frankfurt.eu/en/research/research-domains/professionalization-ofeducators/educare?set\\_language=en](http://www.idea-frankfurt.eu/en/research/research-domains/professionalization-ofeducators/educare?set_language=en)



are interrelated with an understanding of all children as the next generation, which is shown in the close link between the present and the future in the discourse (5.2). Here, especially a particular group of children are labeled as “at risk” – migrant children.

### 5.1 Entanglement of the Notion of Risk with Deficit Discourse

When analyzing politically-relevant themes it immediately becomes obvious that the combination of children and childhood with the label of risk is closely linked to four themes: *illness*, *health*, *development* and *education*. Therefore, children are considered to be at risk if they are living with or are likely to be exposed to continued ill health or unhealthy lifestyles, if they have developmental delays, and/or if they are expected to experience adverse educational outcomes (see also section 5.2). This finding for the German context is slightly different from the results Turnbull and Spence (2011) found from examining the UK discourse. Due to their focus on the youth population in particular, they revealed that risks also are connected to criminological issues. According to the authors, the term is more comprehensive in the UK in this domain and has spread well beyond delinquency.

The findings from the German discourse indicate that the *family* is a particular venue of risk. Most often, when talking about risks in early childhood and of children at risk, the risks can be located within the family. On one hand, structural and, therefore, more distal factors are mentioned here such as *social background* or *social class* and also *family poverty*. In particular, it is predominantly children affected by poverty and low socioeconomic status, migrant children, and children with single mothers who are labeled as being at risk. On the other hand, factors such as *domestic violence*, *child neglect* and *child abuse* also are mentioned as indicators in *family upbringing* which can be seen as risk factors on a more proximal level. Again, migrant children especially are construed as being at risk. This strong interrelation between risks and the family overall is a characteristic feature of the political risk discourse in Germany (see also Turnbull and Spence 2011 for UK). Also, family risks play the main role in the history of the expansion of the concept of children at risk (see Dekker 2009). It is obvious that the current discourse is localized in particular to the private living situations in which children are growing up as the following excerpts from the “Armut- und Reichtumsbericht” (Poverty and Wealth Report) of the German Government and the “Ausländerbericht” (Report on Foreigners) illustrate:

“The family, in its various forms, is the fundamental unit of group living in society. Pleasantly, for the first time in 10 years there were more births in 2007 than there were in the previous year. More than three quarters of all children still grow up in families with married parents. However, the percentage of children being raised by single parents and by parents who live together but are not married is increasing constantly. The vast majority of families live in secure financial circumstances. However, children are at higher risk of living in poverty when they grow up in *single parent households*, in *households where the parents do not participate in the workforce or have low level employment*, or in *households with several children*” (BMAS 2008, p. 101, emphasis and translation T. B.).

“With the presentation of the first report on indicators of integration, the commissioner has shown that the educational problems facing children and youth cannot be ascribed primarily to their migration background but rather to *socio-structural factors*, the *language spoken in the household*, the *level of education aspired to* and the *educational level achieved by the parents*. (...) Many studies confirm that. (...)” (Beauftragte der Bundesregierung für Migration, Flüchtlinge und Integration 2010, p. 102, emphasis and translation T. B.).<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, especially when focusing on the family, the analysis shows that the discourse on risk is a discourse of deficits: being at risk delineates something that does not exist – yet, something children or families cannot do – yet, and something which children or families cannot achieve or afford – yet. Parents not only are construed as being deficient and shirking their responsibilities, but also as being passive. This deficit discourse can be illustrated in the following texts extracted from the “Armut- und Reichtumsbericht” and the “Bundesweites Integrationsprogramm” (Germany-wide Integration Program):

“However, risks to families living in poverty are not confined to insufficient financial capital. Children and youth also suffer from *developmental deficits* which lead to health problems and social disadvantages. Frequently, the capabilities of children from underprivileged families already are falling behind their peers when they are only in primary school. This particularly is true of children and youth with migration backgrounds. Therefore, the availability of a high quality infrastructure for early education and care as well as opportunities to strengthen the parents’ educational competencies are indispensable to support families in parenting and educating their children” (BMAS 2008, p. 101, emphasis and translation T. B.).

“Corresponding to the OECD, the impact of the family on literacy in reading, mathematics and science is twice as strong as the impact of school, teachers and instruction. (...) Families who are comparatively remote from the education system either because of their difficult socioeconomic position or due to reasons of migration, often are restricted when it comes to supporting their children’s education, training and career choice processes. (...) Little or no knowledge of the German language, precarious residency in Germany, lack of information about the German education system or a different understanding of the relationship between the roles of educational institutions and parents due to their own traditions, might cause a sense of inability to cope with the requirements of educational institutions in Germany – especially the school system. Above all, a lack of knowledge of the education system and of the educational attainment and the resulting career choices available, can lead to parents making decisions about educational careers which do not live up to the individual abilities of their children (...)” (BMI/BAMF 2010, p. 22, translation T. B.).

To summarize, the risk discourse mainly is characterized by a language of deficits and negations. It highlights the absence of a desirable condition from an adult perspective

<sup>5</sup> The ellipses (...) indicate footnotes which refer to scientific sources such as studies.

concerning the child and/or the family as a whole – notably for specific families, especially migrant families.

## 5.2 The Shift Between Present and Future

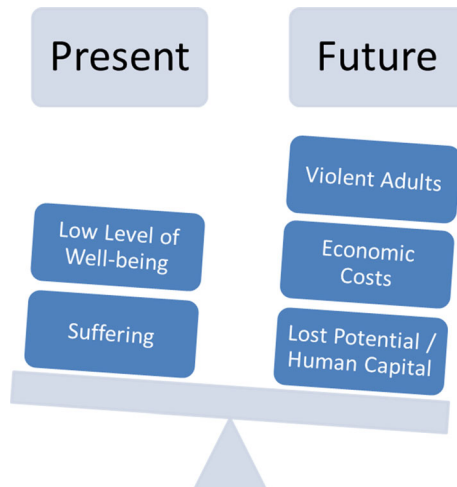
Another characteristic of risk discourse is the strong link between present and future – as it already has become obvious in the deficit constructions, talking of children or families who cannot achieve or afford relevant goods, for example, books, school materials, etc. – *yet*. On one hand, the indicators or risk factors mentioned in the reports show that children at risk suffer in the here and now and currently have a low level of well-being but on the other hand, and this is the focal point, the risk factors are localized in the future. Therefore, a scale can symbolize the main focus (see Fig. 1).

Figure 1 shows that the discourse of risk is mainly a discourse of the future. Its function is to forecast. In this regard, the discourse of risk is a discourse of statistics which operates on probabilities. From this perspective, risk means the probability that something negative will occur.

The main issues which are predicted are derived from descriptions of children, their families and their actual living circumstances and are allocated to the domains of violence, economics and human capital in the sense of educational outcomes. Risks in early childhood inevitably are linked to unfavorable and poor outcomes on these dimensions: first, children at risk become violent adults; second, they cause economic costs such as welfare dependence; and third, they do not use their potential and invest in their human capital. Exemplarily the first dimension can be illustrated by the following text extracted from the “Armut- und Reichtumsbericht”:

“Parents who use force to their children often suffered from violence in their childhood” (BMAS 2008, p. 101, translation T.B.).

The strong links described above between the present and an unknown future in the German discourse also are observable in many political documents, for example, in the US discourse (see U. S. Department of Commerce 1997). In addition, the Annie E.

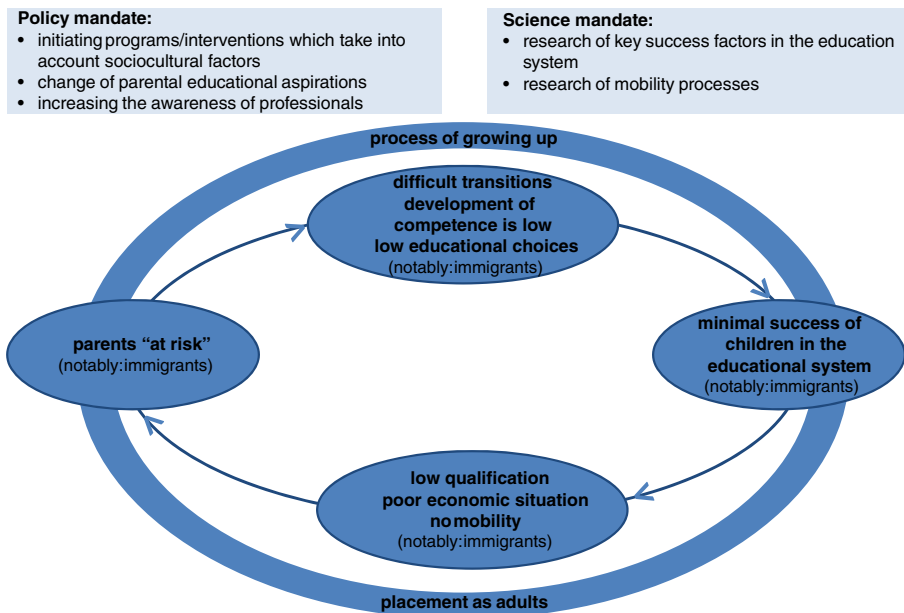


**Fig. 1** The shift between present and future in risk discourse. Source: Own compilation

Casey Foundation, a private charitable organization dedicated to helping build better futures for disadvantaged children in the United States (see [www.aecf.org](http://www.aecf.org)) argues, for example, “high-quality pre-K for *at risk kids* helps narrow the achievement gap, reduces grade repetition and special education placements, increases high school graduation rates, reduces crime, and leads to greater employment and higher earnings among adults” (Annie E. Casey Foundation 2011, p. 22, emphasis T. B.).

From this citation another characteristic also specific to the German risk discourse becomes obvious: Risks are located on two levels (see also Turnbull and Spence 2011 for the UK discourse): on the individual level, which contains a forecast for individual development, for example, children at risk become violent adults (see above), blue collar workers or adults with low job security; and on the societal level where risks pinpoint policy or public issues. Risks in early childhood indicate future economic costs for the society and lost potential which jeopardizes national economics. Again, these societal factors which are an indicator for the German discourse also can be viewed in the US discourse where the Annie E. Casey Foundation points out that being at risk may limit children’s future productivity and the country’s long-term economic stability (ibid., p. 10; see also the arguments in France and Utting 2005 on the prevention paradigm).

It is interesting to note that this forecast, especially in the area of education, covers the entire generation from the early years when young children growing up in poverty are likely to become bad students or criminals in their teenage years to when the children of today become the parents of tomorrow. Here, the future-oriented risk discourse functions something like a crystal ball; it designs a vicious circle which transgresses the generations. This vicious circle is amplified for migrant children (see Fig. 2).



**Fig. 2** Vicious circle of risk discourse linked to education which outlasts the generations. Source: Own compilation, driven by an analysis from the Report on Foreigners (Beauftragte der Bundesregierung für Migration, Flüchtlinge und Integration 2010)

Figure 2 was designed to be read clockwise. The starting point of the risk discourse lies in the current living conditions of children from families where the parents are construed as being a risk to their children (see also section 5.1). In the process of growing up, children of families at risk are likely to have difficult transitions in the education system (p. ex. high repetition rates), to have low literacy skills and to have low competencies in various domains. These children likely will be less successful in school than their peers from families with higher socioeconomic status or from families with long histories of local residency. Due to their inferior qualifications and restricted certificates, their economic situations as adults most likely will be poor. Without observable upward mobility, the former children at risk now become parents at risk and the vicious circle enters the next turn in the line of generations. This forecast, which again emphasizes the deficit discourse (see section 5.1), mostly and in detail describes migrant children who, therefore, are predominantly seen as being at risk.

Here again, corresponding to the political discourse, the public has a responsibility to disrupt this vicious circle (see Fig. 2); policy has to disconnect the “natural development” which is delineated in the discourse through programs and interventions. These political initiatives seem to be able to change parental educational aspirations and increase the awareness of the professionals working with children at risk of the negative outcomes that are likely if they do not intervene early. In addition to politics, scientists also are to be held responsible for breaking the vicious circle. According to the political discourse, their mandate is to initiate research into the key factors in the education system which influence the success of children at risk and to initiate studies of the processes of mobility in the succession of the generations (see also the strong link between the politics of prevention and the expanding evidence-based, scientific approaches to prevention: France and Utting 2005).

## 6 Discussion and Outlook

As shown in the findings, current risk discourse is manifold and simultaneously not arbitrary, but it reveals typical patterns (see also: Betz and Bischoff 2013). Various political themes including education and family are linked to the concept of risk. In addition, risk discourse on the federal level in Germany, which was analyzed for the first time for the study at hand, has some central characteristics in that it works through deficit constructions and functions as a forecasting tool and even as a vicious circle. Furthermore, risk discourse revealed by analyzing (arbitrary) classifications through linguistic settlements of differences that the people primarily labeled as “at risk” are migrant children and their families. Due to the research questions (see section 1), the methodological approach and the selected policy documents, these findings are based on the reconstruction of politically relevant themes in the risk discourse on children and childhood in Germany, on the characteristics of discourse on risk and also on the question who is labeled as being at risk.

The limitations of our approach and findings have to be seen in the empirical analysis of the function of the current risk discourse on children and their families in Germany. Therefore the following considerations claim to be feasible and plausible but at that time they are not empirically proven - as it is true for most of the existing

studies also from other countries (critically: Betz and Bischoff 2013). Nonetheless the concluding observations and considerations firstly are derived from the presented findings and secondly they name relevant research questions to be asked in the future.

Concludingly, the findings will be discussed in the context of the theoretical perspective in which the focus is on considering how the concept of children at risk feeds back into the experiences of children, for example, in the private and public lives of migrant children. In doing so, several relevant starting points for further empirical study and theoretical scrutiny on notions of risk in early childhood in Germany will be carved out especially concerning the function of risk discourse and its sometimes ambiguous character (see also Turnbull and Spence 2011).

The label of risk in Germany, as demonstrated, is linked to several politically relevant themes, but primarily to the family and, therefore, to the area of private life. Due to this construction, the risks are mostly privatized. Aside from the high potential that risk discourse will stigmatize certain groups, for example, migrants and even the family as an institution (see Dekker 2009; France and Utting 2005), and disqualify the private daily lives of children, several further functions of this dominant construction will be discussed.

In the process of constructing the family as the venue of risk - as demonstrated above -, no mention has been made in the political documents of the successful, relatively riskless growing up that all children do in the public arena. If risks mainly are embedded in private settings, societal and especially political responsibility lies in the emancipation and release of children from these risky situations and circumstances and the facilitating and supporting of a riskless “growing up in public responsibility” – which was the theme of the eleventh Child and Youth Welfare Report of the German Federal Government in 2002 (BMFSFJ 2002).

Contrary to this understanding and despite the responsibility of public institutions such as the early childhood education and care system (ECEC) to minimize educational risks for children, Hübenal and Inland (2011) highlight the risks to children that have arisen following recent early childcare policies in Germany. According to their analysis at least two groups of children – migrant children, and children under the age of three affected by poverty and low socioeconomic status – therefore “children at risk” corresponding to the German political discourse - are at greater risk of being excluded from ECEC than other groups of children due to the social-investive reorientation of the German welfare state and its policy emphasis (*ibid.*, p. 120).

This at first irritating observation has to be understood in light of various, sometimes ambiguous political rationales, for example, due to current legal regulations in Germany which focus on integrating mothers and fathers into the labor market, children of unemployed parents have difficulty obtaining places in kindergarten at an early age. As a side effect, children from migrant families which are not as integrated in the labor market as families with long histories of residence in Germany, do not profit as much from these public children’s institutions as their peers who attend kindergarten early. It has been reported that the effects of early kindergarten attendance relate positively to greater success in school, at least over the medium term (Spieß et al. 2008). Also contrary to the localization of the risks to the family as carved out from the German political discourse, a new Germany-wide political initiative called “*Betreuungsgeld*” has been established. This cash benefit will be given only to parents who do not send their children who are under 3 years old

to the public education and care system but who care for these young children at home. A current Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development study (OECD 2012) based on findings from Austria, Norway and Switzerland indicates that the financial incentive to care for young children in private settings might have negative effects, especially for migrant children who will not profit from the positive effects on their educational outcomes of attending ECEC institutions (also, this cash benefit has no favorable impact on the labor force's supply of migrant mothers).

At the same time, and this has been neglected in the political discourse in Germany as well, there also are risks for children who attend public education and care institutions. This is the case, for example, when economic principles such as efficiency and effectiveness in institutions for children cause the children to experience "adult specific phenomena" such as stress, time pressure and performance anxiety, etc. (Hübenthal and Ifland 2011). Therefore, research is needed to explore the sometimes ambiguous rationales of policies and their implications for the current lives of children and also for their futures.

Another observation discussed in more detail here refers to the findings of the passivity which is ascribed especially to migrant children in risk discourse in Germany and, closely linked to that, the threatening inescapability of risks in the succession of the generations and the strong link between present and future (see section 5). The effects of these constructions are complex and should be explored in more detail theoretically and empirically.

First, from a childhood studies point of view, the vicious circle sketched above which seems to be inevitable as well as the construction of children as being solely passive and in deficit have to be analyzed critically (see below). In the process of growing up, it is - corresponding to the political discourse - unlikely that migrant children in their future roles as parents will be able to "escape" in the sense of being successful. These assumptions and ideas have to be questioned. Consistent with France and Utting (2005), it can be pointed out that screening programs, initiatives and outlooks based on risks may be wholly appropriate for assessing children's current support needs, but their *use to predict an individual's future behavior is fraught with statistical as well as ethical difficulty* (ibid., p. 81, emphasis T. B.). Turnbull and Spence (2011) also expound the associated problem because it is linked to the construction of a large population of "permanent suspects (...) who are subject to high levels of surveillance and early intervention that also has the potential to do harm" (ibid., p. 952). Therefore, in social science, the forecast itself in combination with the construction of passivity and deficits has to be challenged theoretically, methodologically and also ethically.

Second, as James and James (2008a) conclude for the UK, the findings reveal that in Germany the discourse of risk also "is, like that of protection, similarly oriented to the future and (...) is linked to a set of unknowns in adulthood: the being of the child in the present has to be safeguarded against risk in order to protect the future adult s/he will become" (ibid., p. 112). Thus, childhood, the authors argue, is being entrusted to adults rather than to children themselves. Along with these considerations, children at risk are construed as being passive, a construction which goes along with their need for adults: their problems only can be lessened by adult action and resources (see Brown Rosier 2009). The fear for children's development, therefore, is combined with an understanding of children as being innocent, incompetent and vulnerable. It is interesting to note



that, as Brown-Rosier points out, this understanding is not applied to migrant children and children whose parents are not middle class (*ibid.*, p. 258). Those children are blamed for their deficits. A similar finding is observable in the UK discourse. Turnbull and Spence (2011) pointed out that children and their families are identified as being responsible for their current negative outcomes as well as their likely future poor outcomes and thus are subject to preventive interventions. Comparably, Dekker (2009) shows that from a historical perspective, children increasingly are becoming at risk because of their own behavior and characteristics. Corresponding to Swadener's (2005) plea for a reconceptualization of all children as "at promise" for success versus at risk for failure (*ibid.*, p. 118), further research in Germany and elsewhere should call attention to the mechanism of blaming the victim by locating pathology and deficits within the migrant child and/or the family and to the side effects of early interventions.

Third, another observation is worth mentioning – the children's own constructions of risk and their active roles in their own lives have been neglected in the risk discourse. Our data show that in the political discourse in Germany, children do not play a discrete and independent role as competent and responsible actors - other than for example parents (see: Bischoff and Betz 2013a). However, the results of Harden's (2000) study showed "children (...) did not simply accept official discourses on children and risk" (*ibid.*, p. 44). To the contrary, they constructed their own understanding of risks and developed risk management strategies. As Harden showed, and this is different from the political constructions in Germany, the home is seen mostly as a "safe haven" (*ibid.*, p. 47); from the children's perspective the known and familiar is associated with safety. Thus, in the here and now risks, from the children's point of view, are localized generally in public life. Here, children express their fears of being lost or vulnerable to being taken away by strangers and of being in risky places, their concerns about the people around them, or the risks of being alone. Therefore, the main focus on the future in the political discourse and also the ascription of passivity not only omits the children's feelings, but also their dependency on the here and now and their weak position as children in society and also in public spaces. Harden (2000), for example, highlights the actual limits on children's participation in public life due to legal and also parental restrictions. It is interesting to note that these restrictions are understood by children themselves as being "for their own good" (*ibid.*, p. 57); they accept their powerless position in society (Betz 2010, p. 24). Again, research is required to investigate how the risk discourse affects the actual position of children in society, and also how it feeds back into the self-concept of children, amongst others, migrant children. The latter is a prospective research question in the EDUCARE study in 2013 where qualitative interviews with children aged 4 to 10 will be conducted.

Moreover, the likely risks conceptualized in the political discourse from which *all* children and their families are to be protected to save their futures, legitimizes the control of all children and families by adult stakeholders prior to most problem behavior arising (see also: Turnbull and Spence 2011; section 3). This dominant construction works as a double-edged sword of care and control. Brown Rosier (2009) reminds us, for example, of children's safety campaigns in the US that reduced both children's accidental deaths *and* their freedom to participate in social life. Similarly, the risk discourse can be used for "anti-libertarian purposes" and migrant families, or families living in poverty "may be subject to more intensive monitoring and control by the state. Risk (...) becomes a mechanism that gives the state authority for intervening in families that are deemed

‘dangerous’” (France and Utting 2005, p. 81). This holds true for their children in the individual process of growing up successfully and also for society as a whole. In line with James and James (2008a), it could be argued that the dispersion of the concept of risk which is observable also in Germany expresses a societal desire to re-establish a more traditional relationship between adults and children but first, this interpretation has to be investigated empirically.

Summing up, as Stephens (1993) points out, “our task as researchers should be to find the methodologies and theoretical frameworks that move us further towards understanding what developing discourses about threatened children are telling us, both about general historical shifts in public consciousness *and* about the ways that particular individuals and groups – across the jagged spectrum of age, race, class, gender, ethnicity, religion, nation and world region – experience, understand and influence these movements” (ibid., p. 249, emphasis in the Original). Therefore, research on the notion of children at risk in the political discourse in a given country and time period contributes to a better understanding of the different functions of risk discourse, and also the links between assumptions regarding children or families at risk and political initiatives.

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