

# An incomplete revolution? Changes and challenges within German early childhood education and care policy<sup>[1]</sup>

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## Introduction

For several decades German family policy was based on the paradigm that caring for young children was the foremost responsibility of the family. Over the last 20 years a transformation of policies has occurred, suggesting that this paradigm is no longer determining the political direction. By the end of the 1990s it was apparent that the policies and intervention programmes of the German welfare state, once classified as a prototype of a 'conservative-corporative' and 'familialist' welfare regime (cf. Esping-Andersen, 1990; Leitner et al., 2008), were noticeably insufficient in offering appropriate solutions to emerging socio-political challenges.

In particular, declining birth rates, a rising female labour market orientation and economic changes fostered a critique of the male-breadwinner model, which was the basis of the familialist regime. This model implies a clear gender division of male breadwinning and female home-based care for smaller children (cf. Ostner 2006, 2010, p. 212).

Influenced by the social investment strategy within welfare policy (cf. Esping-Andersen et al., 2002; Giddens, 1998) – which gained considerable influence in European policy orientations around 2000 – a discourse arose about the economic as well as social importance of activating and promoting human capital. At the core of this approach was the political support of female labour market participation and child-oriented investments. Early childhood education and care (ECEC) became one main instrument for achieving those goals and for implementing the social investment strategy within family policy. Embedded in the same social investment paradigm, the child as future citizen-worker (cf. Hendrick, 2010; Lister, 2003; Olk, 2007) moved into the centre of political attention. Based on the assumption that children's ability to build up human capital was determined during the first years of life, early education turned into a prerequisite for a successful competitive knowledge economy and, on the individual level, for overcoming social disadvantage (cf. Esping-Andersen, 2002). In Germany as well as in other countries, highquality early education began to be regarded as 'the "silver bullet" to improve the educational chances of children, especially for children from deprived families' (Hübenthal/Iffland, 2011, p. 116). Investing in children's long-term educational attainment, in turn, was seen as a way to enhance society's overall prosperity.

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