

**The Experience of Denmark in Working with Preschool Children:
What Can Ukraine Learn?**

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Abstract

The relevance of this research is driven by the necessity to study the educational experience of European countries for creative utilization in the process of integrating Ukraine's education system into the European and global educational and scientific space, as well as by Denmark's high social standards, consistently leading the global happiness rankings for many years.

The aim of this research is to outline the main theoretical and methodological ideas and practical approaches to organizing work with preschool children in Denmark for comparison with the traditional approaches in Ukraine.

The research methodology included analysis of comparative pedagogical literature, publications in the Danish educational press, observations in Danish educational institutions, conversations, and interviews with parents of preschool children – both Danish citizens and Ukrainians seeking temporary protection in this country.

The results revealed significant differences in the experiences of Ukraine and Denmark regarding work with preschool children: less regulation of daily routines in Danish educational institutions; a focus primarily on the interests and development of the children rather than preparation for school education; an emphasis on cooperation, mutual assistance, and empathy in Danish child institutions with almost no competitiveness among Danish children, and so on.

The conclusions outline the prospects for further research to uncover the underlying reasons for the identified differences. In particular, it is considered appropriate to study the impact on the organization of work with preschool children of the traditional Danish worldview, known as *hygge*, as well as the somewhat lesser-known phenomenon – the so-called Law of Jante.

Keywords: preschool children, Denmark, Ukraine, approach.

Problem Statement and Relevance. Ukraine's aspiration to integrate into the European and advanced global educational and scientific communities has sparked interest in the specificities of foreign educational systems, especially in the leading ideas and experiences of European countries. Comparative studies are not new to Ukrainian researchers. However, educational systems of different countries have

not been equally explored. For instance, the education and science systems of Scandinavian countries have rarely been the focus of Ukrainian scholars.

Today, the experience of Scandinavian countries, in particular, is attracting broad public attention, as these nations have consistently topped the World Happiness Report rankings for many years. In 2023, Finland, Denmark, and Iceland were ranked highest (Helliwell et al., 2023, p. 36).

A second significant reason for the growing interest in Scandinavian countries, and Denmark in particular, is their leadership in providing military and technical assistance to Ukraine in its resistance to Russian aggression, as well as their acceptance of a significant number of Ukrainians seeking temporary protection under special legislation following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia. As a result, many Ukrainian children and young people are now attending preschool, general secondary, and higher education institutions in Denmark.

Unfortunately, Wikipedia does not provide up-to-date information on the number of Ukrainians currently living in Denmark, as the relevant article was last updated in the relatively peaceful year of 2020 (Ukrainians in Denmark, 2020). More accurate information is available on the official website of the Embassy of Ukraine in the Kingdom of Denmark (Embassy of Ukraine in the Kingdom of Denmark, 2023), which states: “Before the full-scale war started by Russia, over 16,000 Ukrainians were living in Denmark. The estimated number of temporarily displaced Ukrainians who have arrived in the country since the Russian invasion in February 2022 is up to 50,000” (Embassy of Ukraine in the Kingdom of Denmark, 2023). Thus, with over 60,000 Ukrainians, whose children are now affiliated with Danish educational institutions, there is a need to become more familiar with the Danish education system, particularly its preschool sector.

Ukrainian researchers have only recently begun to study the characteristics of education at various levels in Denmark, and not very actively. Therefore, **the aim of this article** is to provide a brief overview of the state and prospects of research on preschool education in Denmark.

Presentation of the Main Material. On the page of the Ukrainian scientific periodicals on the website of the Vernadsky National Library of Ukraine, using keywords as well as a search through open sources on Google, we found 28 articles and materials on the Danish education system (Table 1).

As we can see, research on the Danish educational system began at the end of the first decade of the 21st century with the works of O. Ogiyenko (2008, 2009) and O. Leontieva (2009) on adult education, and it continues to this day. Ukrainian scholars have primarily focused on the theoretical and methodological issues and the experience of organizing education in general (6 articles), higher education (4 articles), and adult education (3 articles) in Denmark.

**The works of Ukrainian researchers are devoted
to the education system of Denmark**

Education in Denmark as a whole (Denmark Education system, nd; Korolchuk, 2019; Nezhyva, 2019; Protsai, 2014; Fedorchenko, nd; Shugalii, 2015)		
Different education levels	Professional education	Adult education
primary (Yarova, 2013)	as a whole (Vornachev, 2015)	Leontieva, 2009
secondary (Єгорова, 2018; Швадчак, 2019)		
extracurricular (Bondarenko, 2021)	pedagogical (Tovkanets, 2023)	Ogienko, 2008, 2009, 2019a, 2019b
higher (Hrab, 2020; Ziablovska, 2023; Logvinenko, 2014; Shvadchak, 2019)	design (Ziablovska, 2023)	Oros, 2018

It is important to note that the Danish education system is often examined by Ukrainian researchers not in isolation but within certain civilizational and regional contexts:

- 1) a purely Scandinavian context (Hazina, 2021, 2023; Logvinenko, 2014; Ogienko, 2008, 2009, 2019a, 2019b);
- 2) a broader European context (Tovkanets, 2023);
- 3) a wider European and North American context as a whole (Oros, 2018) (Figure 1).



Fig. 1. Civilizational and regional contexts of the study of the Danish education system by Ukrainian scientists

Regarding foreign preschool education, studies on the experiences of European countries also predominate:

- The European Union (Ivanova, 2021a; Stepanova-Kamysh, 2021b);
- The United Kingdom (Ivanova, 2021b);
- Particularly Scandinavia (Korolchuk, 2018; Markovska, 2021; Stepanova-Kamysh, 2021a, 2021e, 2023; Shvadchak, 2021).

There are also works dedicated to preschool education in Australia (Stepanova-Kamysh, 2021c), Singapore (Stepanova-Kamysh, 2021d), and countries across different continents (Bodean, 2018).



Fig. 2. Countries whose preschool education is being studied by Ukrainian scientists (Yuryeva, 2024)

Of the six sources found directly related to preschool education in Denmark, three (Dovbysh, 2019; Yehorova, 2018; and Udartseva, 2019) are popular introductory materials on websites for parents. Therefore, only four articles (Hazina, 2021, 2022, 2023; Demyanyuk, 2023) are scientific works that, among other topics, focus on preschool education in Denmark.

An analysis of these articles indicates that the most in-depth exploration of the organization of work with preschool children in Denmark is conducted by I. Hazina. We deliberately avoid using the term “preschool education in Denmark”, as such a term does not exist in the Scandinavian country itself. Instead, they refer to “daycare”, which more accurately reflects the essence of the phenomenon. Denmark does not have “full-fledged” preschool education in the Ukrainian sense.

Organized activities such as learning letters and numbers, practicing writing, and listening to and retelling stories only begin in the children's “zero class”, one year before entering formal schooling. Before that, virtually all children between 0-6 years attend family daycare (0–2-year-olds), day nursery (0–2-year-olds) or kindergarten (2–5-year-olds) every day. This gives Early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings a unique role in supporting general wellbeing and development for all children.

In ECEC (Early Childhood Education and Care) institutions, children are under adult supervision, and the educational process occurs, but predominantly in relaxed, informal situations that do not appear to be deliberately structured.

Starting from July 1, 2018, municipalities and ECEC institutions began implementing elements of, and by July 1, 2020, had fully implemented “Den styrkede pædagogiske læreplan” (Emu-redaktionen, 2023a) – “The Strengthened Pedagogical Curriculum”. According to this document, the key principles of the Danish daycare system are as follows:

“A child learns by exploring with their body and senses, by being curious and asking questions, encountering challenges and questions, and experimenting, for example, with materials and making discoveries.

A child also learns through communication, sharing, and social interaction, by experiencing new things and feeling, for instance, that they can make an innovative and creative contribution to the contexts they are a part of with other children and adults.

A child's learning is fostered by daring to make mistakes, hesitating, and giving free rein to their imagination” (Emu-redaktionen, 2022) [Italics from the original source. A.P., K.Yu.].

“The Strengthened Pedagogical Curriculum” includes the common pedagogical foundation:

- View of the child
- Formation and child perspective
- Play
- Learning
- Communities of children
- Pedagogical learning environment
- Cooperation with parents
- Vulnerable children
- Cohesion

The pedagogical learning environment supports children's general learning, including curiosity, drive, self-esteem and movement within and across the following six curriculum themes:

1. Comprehensive personal development
2. Social development
3. Communication and language
4. Body, senses and motion
5. Nature, outdoor life and natural phenomena

6. Culture, aesthetics and community.

As we can see, “The Strengthened Pedagogical Curriculum” shares many similarities with the “Basic Component of Preschool Education in Ukraine – the Standard of Preschool Education” (Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, 2020). The “Basic Component” includes seven educational areas, which are quite comparable to the elements of the pedagogical foundation and curriculum themes (Table 2).

Table 2

Comparison of Basic component of preschool education in Ukraine & The strengthened pedagogical curriculum (Denmark)

Educational directions of Basic component of preschool education in Ukraine	The strengthened pedagogical curriculum (Denmark)
Personality of the child	Comprehensive personal development
Child in a sensory-cognitive space	Body, senses and motion
Child in natural environment	Nature, outdoor life and natural phenomena
Child's play	Play
Child in society	Social development
Speech of child	Communication and language
Child in the art world	Culture, aesthetics and community

I. Hazina (2022) writes with clear appreciation about the active involvement of parents in collaboration with preschool institutions, which is highly relevant for Ukrainian preschool education as well. It is worth mentioning that the authors of the “Basic Component of Preschool Education in Ukraine” view family involvement in the child’s development as one of the conditions for the implementation of the preschool education standard, and the formation of each competence specified by the standard presupposes parental participation (Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, 2020).

Her review of the functioning of specific Scandinavian “forest schools” is also interesting and valuable (Hazina, 2023), and the author even notes that certain analogs of such institutions have emerged in the Ivano-Frankivsk region of Ukraine, under the forced circumstances of the full-scale Russian-Ukrainian war (Hazina, 2023, p. 19).

I. Hazina also generally evaluates the controversial phenomenon of the “Law of Jante” positively (Hazina, 2021). However, to be fair, the author does mention an opposing viewpoint regarding this socio-

psychological and traditional cultural-historical phenomenon, which exists within the Scandinavian countries themselves.

The “Law of Jante” – *Janteloven* – is a distinctive Scandinavian social code that emphasizes collective achievements and well-being, while at the same time showing disdain and even hostility toward displays of individual achievements, which are perceived as insignificant (Norman, 2024). In terms familiar to Ukrainian readers, *Janteloven* can be compared to conformism or community pressure on the individual aimed at preserving social stability. R. Norman, co-founder and editor-in-chief of the English-language website “Scandinavia Standard”, refers to *Janteloven* as the key principle of Scandinavian philosophy, prevalent in Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Iceland (Norman, 2024). In her view, “understanding *Janteloven* is essential for understanding the history and modern culture of these countries” (Norman, 2024).

At the same time, today the Scandinavian countries successfully combine a social model of public welfare with a capitalist economic model, thus encouraging “a system in which individuals strive to be financially and socially successful, while also eschewing the self-promotion that often accompanies this kind of success” (Norman, 2024).

Since O. Demyanyuk (2023) also provides a positive, albeit uncritical, assessment of the role of *Janteloven* in the Danish educational system, we can assume that, like I. Hazina, the author might have been emotionally influenced by the article of O. Yehorova (2018), founder of a private kindergarten and school with a professional background related to work in Denmark but unrelated to education or pedagogy. In our view, the phenomenon of *Janteloven* and its impact on the socio-psychological characteristics of modern Danes, as well as the national education system of this Scandinavian country, still awaits thorough study. We hypothesize that Denmark's high rankings in the long-standing “happiness indexes” (Helliwell et al., 2023, and others) may, among other factors, be explained by the absence of open, aggressive competition in society as a result of the influence of the “Law of Jante”.

Conversations and interviews conducted with parents of preschool children from Ukraine, who arrived in Denmark after the start of Russia’s full-scale military aggression against our country, revealed that they were initially somewhat disappointed by the “lack of education” in Danish daycare institutions, the unusual freedom of children in choosing activities, and surprised by the large number of male educators. At the same time, Danish parents, during conversations, expressed unconditional support and sympathy for Ukrainian children but were sometimes surprised by the Ukrainian preschoolers' inability to adhere to social norms and displays of selfishness. They were also sometimes shocked when witnessing what they perceived as harsh treatment by some Ukrainian mothers toward their children.

Conclusions. The research has shown that in recent years, there has been a growing interest among the Ukrainian educational community in the features of the development and functioning of the educational systems of leading developed European countries, one of which is Denmark. To date, the structure of Danish education as a whole, as well as issues related to secondary, higher, and adult education, have been sufficiently researched. At the same time, Danish preschool education is only beginning to attract researchers' attention.

In our view, the prospects for further research lie in the comparative study of the theoretical and methodological foundations of preschool education in Denmark and Ukraine, approaches to constructing its content, organizational principles, methodological tools, and the perception of the Danish daycare system by Ukrainian parents and preschool children.

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