

Early Childhood Centers in USA and Faroe Islands/Denmark

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I work with early childhood leadership and school leadership at the Department of Education at the University of the Faroe Islands. Faroe Islands is in Europe and lays in the middle of the north Atlantic sea. Faroe Islands and Greenland are a part of the kingdom of Denmark.

In 2017, I was on a successful six-month research visit at McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership at National Louis University in Wheeling. Amongst other things, I acquired an in-depth knowledge of how early childhood care and education differs between the USA and the Faroe Islands/Denmark.

One crucial difference is that early childhood centers in the Faroe Islands and Denmark are most often funded directly by municipalities rather than by tuition, fees, and child care subsidies which are common in the U.S. Parents in the Faroe Islands and Denmark who are not receiving benefits pay between one-sixth and one-tenth of the amount that US parents pay to have a child in an early childhood setting. The remainder of the cost in the Faroe Islands and Denmark is covered by municipal tax revenues.

Another significant difference is that over 90% of preschool children in the Faroe Islands and Denmark have a full-time place in an early childhood setting, which is considerably higher than the figure for the USA and other countries. The main reason that the rest of children under school age in the Faroe Islands and Denmark are not in early childhood settings is that there is state-financed maternity leave throughout most of the first year of a child's life.

The biggest difference, however, between the Faroe Islands and the USA, and even Denmark, is probably that the introduction of formal school learning is much later in the Faroe Islands. In Denmark, this starts at the age of six and in the USA, at age five. Children in the Faroe Islands are not introduced to formal school learning until the age of seven when they start school.

Likewise, the work carried out in Faroese early childhood settings is little marked by academic learning. The Faroese Early Childhood Setting Act from 2000 says that the goal is “with care, in a secure and child-friendly environment, to develop and shape children in the best possible way” (my translation). In accordance with this goal and my in-depth knowledge of the Faroese early childhood field, I find Baumfield's (2013) description to be a good characterization of the focus areas of pedagogues (preschool teachers) in early childhood settings in the Faroe Islands and Denmark. In line with Baumfield's (2013) description, pedagogues in early childhood settings do not teach in a structured way literacy, numeracy

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etc., but their focus is rather on children's overall development, involving a firm belief in the importance of learning through play and in nurturing the child's natural curiosity. Further, a common way of understanding the concept of "pedagogy" in the Faroe Islands and Denmark can be illuminated with the words of Petrie et al. (2012, p. 225): *"'Pedagogy' implies that you are working with the whole child: body, mind, feelings, spirit and creativity. Crucially, the child is seen as a social being, connected to others and at the same time with their own distinctive experiences and knowledge."*

After six years as a researcher in the field of early childhood in the Faroe Islands, my impression is that, unfortunately, there is too sharp a division between formal learning in schools and broader pedagogical activities in early childhood settings in the Faroe Islands.

After a six-month research stay in USA, my impression is that formal learning and broader pedagogical activities blend with each other in early childhood centers in the USA. However, it also appears to me that school-like learning activities in early childhood centers in the USA are more valued than the broader pedagogical activities. I have indicated previously that early childhood education needs to enhance a certain amount of formal learning, but at the moment it seems to me, that in the USA it has tipped too much over to that side. Hence there is a danger of losing focus on securing development of the whole child: body, mind, feelings, spirit and creativity. I find it important to remember that children in early development stages need a holistic development approach that nurtures the child's natural curiosity through play.

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