

The Experience of Denmark's Universal Early Education Policy and the Exploration of a Chinese Pathway

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Abstract: In 2025, China launched a child-rearing subsidy system, marking a new stage in the implementation of fertility support policies. However, the child-rearing subsidy still faces the challenge of transforming from "economic compensation" to "developmental support" during the pilot phase. This article adopts a comparative research method and analyzes the universal early education policy in Denmark based on five dimensions: eligibility, accessibility, affordability, flexibility, and quality. The research finds that Denmark has established a mature system oriented towards children's development through fiscal sharing, diversified subsidies, quality binding, and policy coordination. In contrast, China still has room for improvement in early education. Therefore, this article proposes exploration paths for China to build a child development support system from five aspects: goal reconstruction, tool innovation, system coordination, fairness deepening, and quality traction, in order to promote the construction of a child-friendly society.

1. Research Background and Problem Formulation

With the gradual relaxation of China's fertility policy, the cost of family upbringing has become a key factor restricting the fertility rate. The introduction of the "Management Specifications for Childcare Subsidy System (Trial)" in 2025 marks a new stage in fertility support^[1]. However, if the subsidies only flow into family accounts and fail to effectively improve the quality of inclusive childcare services or form a strong connection with the early development goals of children, short-term social support may miss the key window for long-term human capital investment. At the critical stage when the inclusive childcare subsidy system in China is in its early establishment and urgently needs to shift from economic compensation to development support, conducting international comparative research holds significant reference value. This paper employs the comparative research method and adopts a comprehensive five-dimensional framework proposed by Xiao Jing (2021) as an analytical tool^[2]. Selecting the inclusive early education system in Denmark as a typical case, it provides a reference for further optimizing the childcare subsidy system in China.

2. Analysis of Denmark's Universal Early Education Policy System

2.1 Policy Evolution Timeline

2.1.1 Welfare Experiment Period (1828 - 1919)

In the 19th century, Denmark mainly relied on social forces to establish early education, presenting a dual-track system of separate care and education. The orphanages served children from the working class, focusing on providing basic living security; the kindergartens served the upper class, emphasizing educational development. At the beginning of the 20th century, the concept of "National Kindergarten", which integrated care and education, was introduced, and early education began to tend towards integration. "National Kindergarten" was established through private fundraising, but due to financial difficulties, many children from working-class families still could not receive satisfactory education. After the war, Denmark's society first proposed a resolution to provide economic support for early education, aiming to ensure the healthy growth of children from poor families ^[3].

2.1.2 Universal Development Period (1919 - 1964)

In 1919, Denmark passed the "Early Education Economic Resolution", initiating national intervention in the education of children from poor families. In 1933, the "Public Assistance Act" aimed to ensure the minimum living standards for citizens. This act stipulated that early education institutions with at least two-thirds of their students coming from poor families would receive a 50% subsidy for their operating costs. In 1964, the "Children and Adolescents Act" was based on the principle of "universalism", aiming to alleviate family burdens and help children adapt to social development. The act stipulated that the operating costs of early education institutions would be shared by the government and families, with the government covering 50% of the expenses.

2.1.3 Universal Development Period (1964 - 1998)

From 1964 to 1998, the Danish government successively promulgated the "Social Assistance Act", the "Child Family Allowance Act", and the "Parental Leave Law". In 1976, the "Social Assistance Act" clearly emphasized the importance of early education and stipulated that local governments must vigorously establish institutions, allowing children under the age of 10 to receive 800 Danish kroner per month ^[4]. In 1986, the "Child Family Allowance Act" stipulated that the government would provide a tax-free allowance of 5,000 Danish kroner per year for all tax-paying families with children under the age of 18^[5]. In 1992, the "Parental Leave Allowance" stipulated that parents were entitled to maternity leave, paternity leave, and child-rearing leave, and could receive a maximum 80% of their salary during the leave period ^[6].

2.1.4. Universal Improvement Period (Since 1998)

In 2004, the "Education Curriculum Act" clearly stipulated the goals and curriculum content for early education ^[7]. In 2006, the "Teacher Education Act for Nurseries" provided a systematic explanation of the training goals, contents, etc. for early education teachers ^[8]. In 2007, the "Daycare Act" stipulated that families have the right to choose different types of educational services and subsidies based on their own circumstances. In 2019, the revised "Child Allowance Act" added multi-child allowances, subsidies for seriously ill children, adoption allowances, and allowances for disabled children, etc. After two hundred years of development, Danish families only need to bear 10.5% of the childcare costs, which accounts for only 9.1% of the total family income.

Children from single-parent families basically achieve "zero cost" for education.

2.2 Analysis of the Core Mechanisms of Denmark's Universal Early Education System

The core mechanisms of Denmark's universal early education system can be understood from four aspects. Firstly, the Danish government, through legal constraints, clearly stipulates that 87% of the operating costs of childcare services are borne by the government, while the family's contribution accounts for only 10.5%. The public finance is used to reduce the burden on families. Secondly, the government provides universal support to all families in the form of child allowances, family tax exemptions, etc., and also offers special support such as cash care allowances for specific groups. Through "Early Education Purchase Coupons", the government subsidizes families to choose certified private institutions. The government directly provides a high proportion of subsidies to various childcare institutions, effectively curbing market prices. Additionally, institutions such as the Danish Evaluation Institute regularly assess the core dimensions of the institutions, such as the curriculum framework, teacher qualifications, teacher-student ratio, and learning environment, and bind the eligibility for public subsidies with the legal quality standards rigidly. Finally, Denmark has a paid parental leave of approximately 52 weeks with a mandatory father's quota, which alleviates the time and career pressure on parents.

3. Comparison between China and Denmark and Exploration of the Chinese Path

3.1 Five-Dimensional Comparison between China and Denmark

This article uses five core dimensions - "qualification", "availability", "payability", "flexibility" and "quality" - to compare the universal early education policies in Denmark and China. Firstly, from the qualification dimension, Denmark's universal early education program is open to all children, with priority supplementation for disadvantaged children and the establishment of subsidies for children with disabilities. In China, the national unified child care subsidy system in 2025 mainly targets infants and toddlers under the age of 3. Secondly, from the perspective of accessibility, Denmark has undergone the evolution of inclusive policies over the past two hundred years and has become relatively mature. It has abundant educational resources and the enrollment rate of children aged 0-6 in kindergartens exceeds 90%. In contrast, in China, in recent years, the state has launched a series of measures to address issues such as "difficulty in enrolling in kindergartens and high costs", but there are still problems such as insufficient quantity and uneven spatial distribution. Especially, there is an imbalance in resource allocation between regions and between urban and rural areas. In terms of affordability, the Danish government provides substantial subsidies, and families bear only 10.5% of the cost in raising children. Although China has established an annual cash subsidy system (3,600 yuan per child per year), for the high cost of raising children, families still face considerable economic pressure. From the perspective of flexibility, the forms of inclusive childcare subsidies in Denmark are diverse and flexible, and families have high selectivity and autonomy. In China, the main form is cash subsidies. Finally, in terms of quality, Denmark has formed a relatively complete and systematic supporting policy system, with relevant standards for courses and teachers. China is establishing quality standards for childcare services. Based on the differences between the two, this provides a clear direction and focus for the optimization of China's policies in the next step.

3.2 Exploration of the Chinese Path

3.2.1 Goal Reconstruction: Establish a Child Development Support System

Our country should orient itself towards the core concepts of "social investment" and "children's rights", and clearly elevate the goal of "promoting the all-round development of children aged 0-6" to a strategic supporting position of equal importance and consistency with the former. When reconstructing policy goals, it is necessary to shift the discourse from "encouraging childbirth" to "investing in the future", establishing a public responsibility awareness that raising a child requires the joint efforts of the entire society, and recognizing that the cultivation of a complete child requires the mutual cooperation of families, institutions, and society. In policy design and evaluation, not only should child-rearing subsidies, related supporting services, and parental child-rearing leave periods be included as aspects of policy performance assessment, but also indicators of children's health, cognition, and social emotions should be incorporated. In terms of departmental collaboration, it is necessary to break through existing administrative barriers, not only by having departments such as the Health Commission and the Human Resources and Social Security Department fulfill their functions, but also by promoting the participation of departments such as education, finance, development and reform, and even urban and rural construction. Together, they should form a joint force to focus on the ultimate goal of promoting children's development.

3.2.2 Tool Innovation: Implement "Cash + Service" Mixed Subsidies

In China, tool innovation can be carried out while maintaining and optimizing the existing universal cash subsidies. In the national scope, selected pilot cities with conditions can be promoted to implement "childcare subsidy service vouchers". Families can apply for it through the government's unified digital platform and have the funds directly paid to inclusive childcare institutions that are on the government's regulatory list and have met the national quality certification standards. The institutions can settle with the government with the vouchers and thereby obtain stable and predictable income. Thus, for families, the direct cost of using formal childcare services is reduced, and their willingness to send their children to daycare and economic feasibility are enhanced. More importantly, when families have the choice, they will naturally pay more attention to the environment, teaching staff, and course quality of the institutions, thereby promoting the aggregation of demand towards high-quality services and forming a "voting with feet" market selection mechanism. For the market, it is conducive to improving the competitiveness within the industry and effectively stimulating social capital investment in the construction of inclusive childcare positions, expanding effective supply. At the same time, in remote rural areas and other market-poor regions, a model combining "service vouchers" with direct government purchase of services and entrusted kindergarten management can be explored to ensure that inclusive childcare is not compromised.

3.2.3 System Collaboration: Integrate the Policy Support Network

In China, childcare subsidies can be directly linked to the construction of inclusive childcare services as an economic lever. To ensure that the subsidies can be transformed into accessible services, it is necessary to implement and optimize the childcare leave system, ensuring mothers' leave while specially setting up father's leave and establishing a cost-sharing mechanism for enterprises to solve the time bottleneck of care. At the same time, it is necessary to simultaneously strengthen the professional training of the childcare staff, improve the treatment and guarantee of professional talents, and provide a solid human resource quality foundation for the entire system.

Finally, to ensure the integrated implementation of the system, a "Childcare Support Card" system should be explored and established. Families can apply for subsidies, check childcare positions, and register for leave through a unified platform, achieving "one-window processing" of various policies. For rural and remote areas, flexible methods such as government purchase of services and entrusted kindergarten management can be adopted to ensure the accessibility of services.

3.2.4 Fairness Enhancement: Implementing a Graduated Subsidy Mechanism

Drawing on international experience, many developed countries have established a demand-based graduated subsidy system. China should base its approach on local realities and adjust the subsidy standards dynamically based on indicators such as the average price of the childcare market and living costs. By leveraging big data systems such as taxation and social security, different income-level families can be identified, and lower-income families can receive higher subsidies while higher-income families can have their subsidy amounts reduced or be exempted, achieving precise assistance. For families with multiple children, subsidies should not be simply added up but should increase proportionally to truly alleviate the economic pressure on such families and enhance the targeting of the fertility support policies. For children with special needs such as disabilities or developmental delays, a separate subsidy channel should be established to cover the additional medical, rehabilitation, or special education expenses required for these special needs children.

3.2.5 Quality Leadership: Establishing a Subsidy and Quality Linkage Mechanism

First of all, our country should accelerate the establishment of a unified, standardized and transparent, and objectively evaluated quality grading assessment system for childcare institutions across the country. Professional third-party institutions should conduct regular assessments to ensure fairness and objectivity. The government should mandate the public platform to make the assessment results mandatory public, serving as a quality map that can be queried and compared by the entire society. Secondly, we need to restructure the distribution logic of subsidies in our country and establish a market selection mechanism based on "better quality, better price". The government will implement a child-rearing subsidy service voucher system. Before doing so, it will screen early education institutions that meet quality standards and include them in the list of government-recognized service providers. The rating level should directly determine the maximum proportion that families can deduct when consuming at that institution with the voucher. At the same time, the subsidy coefficient given by the government to the institution should also be linked to the rating, enabling high-quality institutions to receive higher public financial support for children^[9].

4. Conclusion

International experience shows that inclusive early education policies not only can alleviate the economic burden on families, but also have a profound impact on children's early development and human capital accumulation. Through long-term institutional evolution, Denmark has established a mature inclusive early education system centered on children's development, which provides important references for China. Currently, China should base itself on its national conditions and gradually build a children's development support system oriented towards comprehensive children's development, accessible and affordable for families, and with guaranteed quality. This not only helps to alleviate the burden of family upbringing and enhance the effectiveness of the fertility policy, but is also a long-term strategic measure to promote social equity and build a child-friendly society.

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