

# *Udeskole*—Regular Teaching Outside the Classroom



Karen Barfod and Erik Mygind

## 1 Introduction

When teachers choose to teach outdoors,<sup>1</sup> they want to achieve something tangible based on their teaching convictions and set of values.<sup>2</sup> There is an intentional choice behind overcoming the challenges of *udeskole* and actually going out with the pupils. This choice is justified by the teachers partly through learning theory, but also from an educational viewpoint of *Bildung*, where the pupils' independent work, thinking skills and ability to approach tasks in several ways are of great value. The didactic field of *udeskole* has been analysed through observational studies in theory and practice (Jordet, 2010). One of the elements defining the uniqueness of *udeskole* are studies indicating that the teacher often use hands on and inquiry-based approaches in their teaching (Barfod & Daugbjerg, 2018).

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<sup>1</sup> *Udeskole* is among Danish *udeskole* researchers defined as curriculum-based teaching and learning outside the classroom and school buildings in natural as well as cultural settings one day or two half days a week or every fortnight on a regular basis, e.g. lasting months or years.

<sup>2</sup> The overall aim of the Danish TEACHOUT research project was to generate knowledge about the strengths and weaknesses of practicing *udeskole* compared to mainstream education under the framework of the new school reform. TEACHOUT investigated physical activity, learning and social relations.

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This chapter is mainly based on perspectives, excerpts, reformulations and translations of the Ph.D. Thesis by Barfod (2018), Mygind et al. (2018) and the chapter in Danish language 'Udeskole—Regular teaching outside the classroom' (translated title) (Barfod et al., 2020). We publish this chapter with the expressed permission of the publisher Frydenlund.

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## 2 How Are Teachers Motivated to Teach Outdoors?

Teachers express a wide range of positive elements connected to their experience of regular teaching outdoors. The motivational elements can be divided into pupils' learning and development, social relations and the experience of professional fulfilment (Barfod, 2017).

### Pupils learning and development

Teachers experience how *udeskole* gives pupils the opportunity to deal with topics and subjects in the surrounding community. *Udeskole* is an opening to the world outside the school buildings, and teachers experience how abstract concepts become concrete to pupils. The process of learning becomes, according to the teachers, more meaningful for the pupils.

In addition, teachers experience that there are far fewer conflicts between the pupils than inside. The social structures in the class are softened in a positive way. It can be other pupils who perform outdoors than indoors in a classroom setting, thus playing a positive role in terms of pupils' interaction and recognition of each other. This has a positive influence on the classroom environment and affects the learning processes taking place. Teachers find that many pupils benefit in many different ways by being taught outdoors, both socially and cognitive (e.g. Fågerstam, 2014).

### Social relations

We found that teachers mention more positive relationships between pupils when they experience each other in different situations outside as compared to inside teaching (Mygind et al., 2018). Some pupils who need more space and to 'let off steam' do not seem so disruptive outdoors. This in turn means that other pupils perceive them as less annoying and deal with them more openly.

Another important element for teachers is their own increased positive relationships with pupils. In the motivation theory called self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2014), the opportunities to exercise competence, work autonomously, and establish positive relationships are fundamental to employees being highly motivated in the workplace. In our studies, teachers express how they feel that practicing *udeskole* supports good teacher-student relationships (Mygind et al., 2018). During the outdoor lessons, there is time during transportation to the outdoor place to make a non-committal conversation about, for example, changes at home or personal stuff. A difficult conversation about divorce, new siblings, or general well-being is easier to have while walking, digging, or otherwise doing something together.

Experiences of common challenges are also seen as something that can connect teachers and pupils more closely. The teacher-pupil relationship can become more balanced when both experience the same, thus creating a 'common third'. A sudden shower also makes the teacher wet. When the bus does not arrive, the teacher also has to wait. When there is a long way to go, the teacher must also go a long way. A teacher even calls his/her relationship with the pupils "brothers-in-arms" as they try to solve tasks together, and show loyalty, responsibility and trust in each other (Mygind et al., 2018, 604).

The main thing (in *udeskole*) is, that there is something external, a problem, a question, a common concern and a goal, both parts aim to solve. The philosopher Michael Husen (1996) introduced a concept describing unusual situations named ‘the common third’. The expression was used when teacher and pupils carry out a task together, towards a mutual goal (e.g. make a fire, explain marks from animals, make a shelter from rain, etc.). The common third expresses the sharing of a task, collaboratively formulated by teacher and pupils in an attempt to solve the task, share an experience not previously experienced. The experiences with ‘common third’ situations support development of an enriched teacher–pupil relationship. It could be argued that this is an important pedagogical outcome from *udeskole* that seems to provide learning opportunities with mutual benefits to the indoor teaching as well (Mygind et al., 2018, 606).

### **Teachers reinforce their professionalism through working with *udeskole***

In our studies, the experienced teachers perceive that the teaching culture has developed in ‘neo-liberal’ directions, reducing their tasks. They feel that they are checking whether students are doing well in tests, thus measuring only a fraction of the knowledge, skills and attitudes students acquire through (school) life. Often, teachers are not given the opportunity to make use of all their professionalism and professional identity in the classroom. Emphasis on narrow learning goals, testable skills and marks tighten the open space for the art of teaching and professional judgement. Choosing outdoor teaching helps them to maintain or even regain their sense of professional mastery (Barfod, 2017). When teachers choose to teach outdoors, they step out of the classroom with books series and national tests, and into a space of unpredictable challenges and opportunities. Teachers say they are set free to think about the purpose of the lessons themselves and the means to achieve these aims. The self-selected frameworks for teaching are perceived by teachers as setting them free to practice teaching that is not limited by books or online portals in advance. The teacher turns, once again, into the professional who makes choices, acts, plans, implements, and evaluates teaching. At the same time, teaching outdoors is also consistent with teachers’ own preferences and values. According to the teachers, school education should be more than grades and test results, and many teachers relate how their educational goals of teaching are supported by *udeskole* (Mygind et al., 2018). According to the teachers, *Udeskole* supports a holistic development of pupils, through activities involving bodies and senses, to a greater extent than the classroom does. Both novel and experienced *udeskole* teachers who participated in our research are people with a positive attitude to nature, and with experiences from scouting, outdoor sports or other outdoor activities. Some teachers describe how the concept of *udeskole* legitimized an educational practice they already knew worked. Teachers often have experiences of thriving outdoor themselves, and transfer these experiences to their professional lives. However, when teachers’ understanding is experience-based and positive, a critical attention to and look at the practice may be lacking. A dilemma may arise between the fiery-soul-driven teaching, and the lack

of professional reflective criticism of one's own outdoor practice (Ejbye-Ernst & Bentsen, 2017).

### 3 What Challenges Do the Outdoor Teachers Face?

Teachers meet several barriers to outdoor teaching, both structural and in relation to content. On the one hand they meet barriers associated with the structure of the school day being divided up into time-limited classes and related teacher coverage, on the other hand barriers associated with time and resources for planning and implementing well-designed and professionally sound teaching.

#### School structures

Traditionally, the school has been designed for classroom teaching, in terms of both physical design and other structures such as subjects, teacher coverage and times for the school bell. When the whole class goes out and away from the school grounds, it often takes more time than a set schedule at school allows. If the individual teacher has to switch lessons with colleagues by themselves every time, and has to apply for and find an accompanying adult, it can become a major administrative task. Therefore, the backing by management and colleagues, or at least acceptance, for flexible timetabling is important for organizing outdoor teaching. At the same time, a regular *udeskole* day, e.g. every second Thursday, can make it easier for parents to remember a little extra in the lunch box and appropriate clothing. Structures and frameworks can be developed and supported for *udeskole*, but this support from management does not apply in all places.

#### Preparing for teaching outdoors is perceived as a big job

When the teacher is teaching outside, it is often with less use of already made resources and pre-printed materials. Teachers feel that when their professionalism comes more into play, it is both challenging and exciting, but also exhausting. Preparation time and the other resources provided for teaching today, rarely cover the effort required for the teacher to implement good teaching outdoors. Over time, pupils and teachers establish routines, and the teacher builds up a 'bank' of materials that can be used outdoors. There are freely accessible public websites with ideas and materials (skoven-i-skolen.dk; udeskole.nu; draussenunterrichten.ch) but even experienced teachers still concede that elaborate preparation is needed for *udeskole*.

#### The teacher can feel unnoticed

In many schools, there is only one teacher who teaches outdoors, although the recent development in Denmark shows how more and more teachers at the schools with at least one *udeskole*-class start up (Barfod et al., 2020). It can be tough in several ways being the only one: The teacher him/herself has to invent or adapt many teaching

materials. There might be a lack of cooperation and support from colleagues, and in addition, some teachers may feel a bit isolated in the staff room (Barfod, 2017). Stereotyped notions that *udeskole*, outdoor and adventure education are the same, or attitudes about how learning is best promoted inside the classroom can make outdoor teachers feeling alone at their school.

Another barrier to practicing *udeskole* is the uncertainty about pupils' learning. Both novel and experienced teachers now and then feel uncertain whether the teaching and learning is truly educational enough in terms of the acquisition of testable skills, although research has shown that pupils learn just as much of what is tested when they learn outdoors (Otte et al., 2019). Learning is still commonly tested with ordinary test-tools in primary school.

### Uncertainty and unpredictability

An interesting dilemma, or ambiguous concept in working outdoor, is uncertainty (Barfod, 2017; Beames & Brown, 2016). There are a large number of 'uncertainties' associated with *udeskole*, in terms of content, meaning and process. Leaving the classroom is also leaving the predictable framework, which adds to the uncertainty of teaching. Although the teacher has carefully planned the day, it is always unpredictable how the weather will be, whether a large dog will pass the campsite or if there is major contractor work in progress in the parking lot where the pupils should gather. But at the same time, there is also the possibility of something unplanned happening that increases learning outcomes, strengthens curiosity or provides new perspectives on the subject of teaching. Thus, there is increased *uncertainty* about the outcome of teaching and also unpredictability about the process of teaching (Beames & Brown, 2016). The rational, effective and controllable process of education gives way to what American educational philosopher John Dewey called "indefinite situations without obvious answers" (quoted in Beames & Brown, 2016, 76) outdoors. Uncertainty can be accentuated as a major positive factor in teaching, as proposed by the Dutch educational researcher Biesta (2010). Biesta argues that teaching loses its original purpose when it becomes "strong, safe, predictable and risk-free". In contrast to this predictability, educationally desirable teaching creates an opportunity for something new to be brought into the world. Biesta even believes that teaching should be an open system without unambiguous cause-effect relationships. Many studies show that habits, routines, discipline and clear goals help make pupils feel safe and ensure good results outdoors (Glackin, 2018). *Udeskole* regularity itself is part of this establishment of routines, and popular *udeskole* booklets also cite habits and routines as essential elements of outdoor school (see, e.g. Bendix & Barfod, 2012). The question therefore seems to be whether there is a contradiction between school discipline in the form of habits and routines, and subject oriented, open, inquiry-based education, enhanced by the curiosity induced through unpredictability.

### Pedagogy

Pedagogical approaches to *udeskole* are primarily described in Nordic literature, as literature with Anglo-Saxon backgrounds often is based on a more adventure-oriented

practice than the *udeskole* concept of Danish primary school. One of the things that is special about Nordic *udeskole* is that it is often the teacher him/herself who is responsible for the teaching, and they only sometimes draw on external providers when it makes sense. In many other countries and cultures, outdoor education is left to experts, such as rangers, nature guides, and museum tour guides, and the potential to link experiences and teaching within the classroom with the outdoor days can be limited. Therefore, it is especially important that it is the teacher who plans the subject and overall content of the teaching and ties learning from the different arenas together. However, the teacher can easily hire nature guides or others who supplement the subject matter the class is working on if the teacher has an overall plan for the aims. *Udeskole* is a part of the total teaching provision in primary school. The teaching should be seen as a unified whole, with strong links between what goes on outside the classroom and what goes on inside the classroom. *Udeskole* is not an ‘add on’ of extracurricular activities, but an ‘add in’ of varied work methods taught in each subject (Bentsen et al., 2018). When the teacher chooses to relocate parts of the teaching outside the classroom, it often has consequences in relation to the teaching and working methods that come into play. The objectives of education are aimed at a balanced and holistic formation of the student’s head, hand and heart—or in other words, the student’s cognitive development, the student’s skills and the student’s attitudes and feelings (Jordet, 2010).

What does it take for outdoor education to become motivating and educational? The question ‘What is good schooling?’ is inextricably linked to the question ‘What is good teaching?’. *Udeskole* is per definition a part of the overall teaching of the school, and thus works within the school’s main aims and goals. *Udeskole* provides variety in teaching and opens up to different forms of teaching.

### **Inquiry-based teaching in *udeskole***

Teaching methods that “strengthen relevance, meaning and application orientation in a differentiated teaching” have received increased attention, especially in the field of science (Albrechtsen & Qvortrup, 2017, 25). The prevalence and peculiarity of inquiry-based teaching has been intensely discussed and investigated, but very different practices have been called inquiry-based. Pupils do not necessarily have freedom to make choices during the teaching, even if it is called inquiry-based, as these methods can include very closed ‘cookbook’ experiments where a particular procedure must be followed closely. Notions such as problem-based teaching and problem-solving activities can be linked to the study concept (Artigue & Blomhøj, 2013). Skovsmose (2003) introduces the concept of ‘study landscapes’, in which mathematics education can invite pupils into exploration and to work problem-oriented. It has been emphasized in reports on Danish mathematics teaching that teaching is less problem-oriented and mainly consists of more closed training tasks (Bundsgaard & Hansen, 2016) as opposed to tasks that allow pupils to make conscious and meaningful choices while solving them (Katz & Assor, 2007; Skovsmose, 2003). In more experimental and inquiry-based teaching, pupils make a choice of method based on a reflection on the consequences and, during the work, ask themselves

the question: “What if ...” (Blomhøj & Skånstrøm, 2016). Thus, the tasks include elements of openness. The term ‘inquiry-based’ is here applied to teaching situations where pupils are challenged by working with something unknown using something already known, where ‘study landscapes’ are organized so pupils can choose methods or find solutions to mathematical problems. In *udeskole*, the concept ‘inquiry-based’ is thus connected both to situations where pupils, through experiences and reflection, inductively examine relevant elements (e.g. by studying details in nature through a magnifying glass), and those situations where pupils work with the scientific method as long as these are not fully teacher-controlled.

Using this understanding of inquiry-based teaching, half of the tasks presented in Danish *udeskole* are inquiry-based (Barfod & Daugbjerg, 2018). Thus, compared to a very low proportion of inquiry-based teaching in classroom teaching (Bundsgaard & Hansen, 2016), *udeskole* has a great potential to increase the proportion of inquiry-based teaching in everyday education.

### Good teaching outdoors from a teacher perspective

To start with, ‘good’ is a normative and difficult concept in teaching. The term ‘good’ must be seen in relation to the goals set by teachers for teaching, and can therefore not be considered in absolute terms. Furthermore, experienced teachers regard *udeskole* as a *both-and*-practice that can accommodate several goals, goals that aim to both improve pupils’ achievement in academic national tests and holistic developmental goals. Teachers consider *udeskole* as ‘good’:

- when pupils can see the meaning and coherence in teaching,
- when they work problem-solving, are engaged and get ‘their brains turned on’,
- when they are cognitively active, and use their senses and their body,
- when pupils share experiences with teachers and peers,
- when out-of-school teaching contains both academic and educational content,
- and when *udeskole* opens the opportunity for the teacher to ‘seize the day’ and take advantage of the unpredictability of the surroundings. (Barfod & Stelter, 2019)

In addition, experienced teachers perceive *udeskole* as good when there is time for both planned and unpredictable experiences with students and teachers (Barfod & Stelter, 2019). In the teachers’ view, *udeskole* is good when it includes tasks with pupil-activating work methods that challenge pupils’ ability to think for themselves and solve problems, and when pupils experience connections in and meaning through teaching.

## 4 Discussion

Is school simply getting ‘better’ by going outdoors, no matter what is going on out there? First, it depends on what is meant by ‘better’—and in relation to what. Positive outcomes in terms of better grades? Better performance, or healthier and

happier lives? It is a normative discussion when we talk about ‘a better school’. Among outdoor educators, there has been a lack of self-criticism, and a trend toward ‘outdoor is better’. Recently, there is an incipient self-critical movement, discussing the implicit positive self-understanding and promotion of the outdoors as ‘better’ (Bentsen & Jensen, 2012; Ejbye-Ernst & Bentsen, 2017). This can be called ‘the second wave of teaching outdoors’, signifying that outdoor educators also are aware of the limitations and pitfalls.

Turning to the analysis of the positive outcomes, we also wander into the unknown. Is it nature in itself, or the organization of teaching, that contributes to the positive meaning of *udeskole* for pupils, or is it a combination? Beames and Brown (2016) emphasize that it is essential that pupils learn through unpredictable situations where there are no clear solutions, and that general principles of good teaching thus become more easily accessible in teaching if it is moved outside. About half of the teaching events we have studied outdoors are inquiry-based (Barfod & Daugbjerg, 2018). But it is not a given that inquiry-based teaching is good teaching, or better than anything else. Essential to good teaching is method diversity and variation in teaching to meet students’ different learning needs. With its particularly large proportion of inquiry-based teaching, outdoor school can contribute to this variation.

### **Both-and-goals**

Kruse (2005) argues that the effectiveness of *udeskole* should be measured in relation to pupils’ realized learning, and that “outdoor education increases school well-being but creates problems in meeting clear measurable requirements” (Kruse, 2005, 88). But at the same time, Kruse emphasizes that outdoor education should be assessed on whether it improves (or exacerbates) the students’ overall journey through life, which is a rather unattainable goal.

*Udeskole* has been used as a tool to reach subject-related aims, but the influence on the pupils’ overall development should also be emphasized. It is generally considered to weaken and limit the teacher’s ability to exert their teacher professionalism if the overall aim is restricted to academic goals.

Teachers are educated to teach subjects, but also to engage in pedagogical reflexivity. We must stand by our courage and let teachers use their professional mastery. Teaching outdoors can be one way to encourage this. Both the novel and experienced *udeskole*-teachers we have interviewed and worked with are convinced that teaching should be based on experiences, holistic and student-activating learning, and they use *udeskole* to teach in accordance with their conviction and values.



## Recommended further reading

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2. Bentsen, P., Nielsen, G., Bølling, M., Mygind, L., Stevenson, M & Mygind, E. (2019). Book: *Physical Activity in Natural Settings*. Chapter: *Greening Education. Education outside the classroom in natural settings as a school-based health promotion approach for child and youth populations*. 1st Edition. Routledge. eBook ISBN 9781315180144.
3. Hartmeyer, R. & Mygind, E. (2016). A retrospective study of socialrelations in a Danish primary school class taught in 'udeskole', *Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning*, 16(1), 78–89. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14729679.2015.1086659>.

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