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Udeskole in Denmark: A Narrative of Mutual Support and Sharing

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Introduction

Our narrative oscillates between a macroview, providing an insight into the context and structure in which *udeskole* (out-school) is located, and a first-person perspective to emphasize the importance of the choices and actions of every single person in the patchwork of people working towards getting children outdoors. We see the individual actors as nodes in a larger and continuously growing national and international network. It is the effort, united and powered by a shared idea or affinity, of these nodes and their particular configuration, shaped by macrolevel structures, possibilities, and boundaries, that have given form to current Danish *udeskole* practice as we see it today. Networking, cooperation, and empathy are in this case embodied by individuals being affiliated to different organizations. As such, it is not possible to point to one person or organization as the driving force behind the development of outdoor teaching in Denmark. Rather, we point to a shared vision and affinity for the *udeskole* approach, uniting people from different sectors, geographical entities, and a growing public and, more recently, a political awareness of the potentials of the approach.

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The Meeting

It's the very first day of the annual Danish nature guides' conference. The nature guides are certified, having taken their training in teams with one cohort graduating per year. As they work scattered around the whole country, this conference provides the only occasion for the nature guides to meet. Therefore, there's a lot of hugging, recalling memories, and laughs. On this day, there's a walk up one of Denmark's highest mountains (the mountain measures 170 metres—on a global scale not very impressive). As I walk, I ask the dark-haired woman beside me who she is, and what she does. Her name is Malene and she is the coordinator of the largest open-access source of outdoor educational activity descriptions in Denmark, skoven-i-skolen.dk that translates directly into "the forest in the school." Funded by private and public sources, she and her organization have created a webpage which thoroughly describes and tests activities and courses in all subjects in the national curriculum, accessible free of charge. Every teacher can send in their activity descriptions and the organization will edit them, draw printable work sheets, and when possible, refer to existing knowledge. Finally, the materials are published for the public to be used free of charge. From this webpage, all teachers can find high-quality ideas and material, easily applied in their next outdoor lesson: "How can you work with fractions in your outdoor maths lesson?" "How might one build an underwater viewing scope?" "How can the children measure relative humidity during outdoor teaching?" "How might I use nature for a poetry slam?" I have known this webpage for years and so I am honoured to meet Malene. She smiles at me and asks—"and what do you do?"

The Danish Outdoor Landscape

Outdoor activities are common and diverse in Denmark. There are many outdoor leisure-time hobbies; along the coastline are kayakers, sailors in small sailboats, kite surfers, anglers, fly fishers, and people who swim and windsurf. Hang gliders soar near the slopes of the shore and birdwatchers search for water birds, people walk their dogs and camp in tents, and hunters, mountain bikers, scouts, and runners use the forests. Being densely inhabited (about 132 people per square km) and heavily cultivated, not much wilderness (if any) can be found. However, being outdoors is seen as healthy and safe, as can be seen by the abundance of nature kindergartens, and culturally, being an outdoor person is mostly considered valuable. Children nap outdoors in cribs and baby carriages, from birth and even during winter, and nature kindergartens are common and popular. The Danish outdoor landscape and the general

cultural acceptance and appreciation of spending leisure time outdoors by many people afford the context and background for outdoor teaching in Denmark. In this environment, teaching children outdoors on a regular basis grew from the bottom up just before the millennium. The present chapter provides a narrative of the birth and growth of the practice of outdoor teaching, in Danish termed *udeskole*.

The Danish School System

In the Danish school system, children start at the age of 6 and have 10 years of compulsory schooling with the same classmates until the age of 16. All children are taught together during these ten years, with no segregation according to gender, colour, academic level, religion, or social status. Children with special needs are, when possible, also included in public schools. One-fifth of all schools are independent or private schools, although they receive massive governmental support which, in practice, opens up a relatively free choice of schools to all parents, despite income. Women represent approximately 70% of the staff in primary and secondary schools (Danish Ministry of Education, 2012), and about 84% of staff in preschools (three- to six-year-old children) (BUPL, 2010).

The preschool and teacher education takes place at university colleges. Both educational degrees are called “bachelors of profession”; the preschool teacher education called “pedagogue” lasts for three-and-a-half years, and teacher education lasts for four years.

Becoming Part of a Network

“I work on the teacher education course at the University College,” I answered Malene. “I do outdoor courses for teachers who want to start or develop their teaching outside the classroom.” “Well, we have a small group that meets every month when the moon is full to study and discuss udeskole,” Malene said. “Do you want to come to our meetings?” From that day, I took the train five hours each way on a monthly basis to meet Malene, Eva, Henrik, and Poul. In these meetings, we would share, read, write articles and features, discuss, plan, write applications, build castles in the air, and slowly build up a strong intersectoral network. Eva was a nature guide, Poul was initially a part of the national Danish Outdoor Council and later employed at the Forest School, and Henrik was employed at the Municipality of Copenhagen. Together, we represented or had contacts widely in the outdoor land-

scape, and realized that we needed to create a network for people working with, or who had interests in, outdoor learning, teaching, and education.

Udeskole in Denmark

Udeskole involves regular teaching outside the classroom in curricular subjects. Most commonly, it takes place half a day every week and mostly in the main subjects Danish, mathematics, and often science, although all subjects can be taught outside (Bentsen, Mygind, & Randrup, 2009). It is frequently the teachers who decide to take the children outside during class, allowed for by a tradition of teacher autonomy and methodological freedom of choice in Scandinavian countries. Implicit in this approach is that the teachers are the experts and the ones carrying the responsibility for the educational goals, and the activities are by definition connected to the common aims and the subjects. Teachers are not required to have any special certification, or education, to take the children outdoors; it is the same curriculum but processed in another way. As such, a teacher can decide to take the children out in the schoolyard or in the nearby surroundings to measure the height of the church tower in mathematics: “What’s the estimate?” “How can we use trigonometry?” “Can we climb the tower and then measure from the top—but what about the spire?” “Can we get up there?” Alternatively, we might be interested in going to the grocery store in a geography lesson to investigate where the food comes from, and if continents are represented, how many countries we are importing from. As such, the subjects can be used, elaborated, and activated by the teachers and pupils outside the classroom, usually without an overwhelming pile of paperwork.

Establishing an Organizational Structure

With support from the organizations and institutions of our employment, the first steps to establish the national network UdeskoleNet was taken in 2006, where educators, researchers, and practitioners met for the first time. UdeskoleNet aims to develop udeskole practice, by getting new input on seminars and sharing knowledge and experience with the everyday work outside the classroom. Since then, the network has grown in numbers whilst maintaining its independence being a grassroots movement, and powered by collaboration and mutual effort. The network succeeded in mobilizing the former Minister of Education to a meeting in which school practice was discussed. The first time she mentioned the word udeskole on

national television, hands clapped and we felt that we took part in not only practice and research, but also increasingly in policymaking.

Udeskole in Denmark, Continued

Taking the children outside on excursions during school time has for a long time been a common practice, but conducting teaching outside the classroom systematically has grown in the last 20 years. Teaching outside the classroom has come alive and, as a rising tidal wave, has grown from small-scale initiatives fostered by passionate individuals, organizations, and schools to large government-supported projects. One of the main tasks for enthusiastic outdoor teachers has been to open up the school, lifting the children's eyes from books, texts, and tablets to walk outside, letting them learn about subjects, issues, and fields of knowledge through interaction with the surrounding world and society. With the first described project in 1999–2002 (Mygind, 2007, 2009), the development of nature classes and *udeskole* took off in Denmark from the bottom up, initiated by two practising teachers and partly inspired by the practice and research conducted by Dr Arne Jordet in Norway. Subsequently, increasing public interest, coverage, and probably public support due to a zeitgeist of appreciation of the outdoors inspired teachers all around the country to start *udeskole*. Even though it is possible to practise without further applications or approval, *udeskole* is not mentioned explicitly in the national school curriculum. It is not seen as a separate subject with recognizable content but more as a method for teaching content. And this should be done by someone who is not only an outdoors person but also deeply embedded in the content of her/his subject.

Did We Celebrate Too Soon?

The holistic, hands-on, and experienced-based approach to *udeskole* has been practised widely in Denmark, most often with formation (*bildung*), socialization, physicality, and well-being as the main goals. Combining problem- and inquiry-based learning with creative, practical approaches in nature has been seen as a holistic way of letting the child grow up in harmony and feeding in to a curiosity for learning. However, with the previous reform of the public school in Denmark, more emphasis was laid on learning goals. The intention of the reform was to “provide students with more time for learning. With new and more varied forms of teaching. And with more focus on academic standards and well-being” (Danish Ministry of Education, 2014a). Whilst not

mentioning *udeskole* explicitly in the reform documents, the former Ministry of Education founded the Development of Udeskole project (Danish Ministry of Education, 2014a, 2014b) as part of a wider initiative to raise the academic levels of school children and to reduce the impact of social background on academic performance, both of which *udeskole* was thought to contribute towards.

These recent initiatives, we would argue, are indicators of an increasing political interest in the potentials of *udeskole* and perhaps the coming of a political agenda or vision for *udeskole*. Whether the political interest in the outdoor field stems from a passion for bringing children in closer proximity to nature to enhance children's socialization and physical well-being shared with *udeskole* practitioners or is related more narrowly to the enhancement of testable, academic achievement remains debatable. However, these different approaches disturb the intuitive, nonverbalized understanding of what teaching outside the classroom should support, held by many practitioners, and therefore might foster fruitful discussions. Should teaching outside the classroom be a method for generally achieving higher grades and better academic test results? Or ought it to be a time and place where children, perhaps not thriving or succeeding in the regular indoor school, might gain confidence and positive experiences and where learning is seen in a broader, less testable perspective? Is it possible to work with, and develop, a practice that contains both academic and formational purposes? These discussions must be undertaken in research and practitioner networks, courses, and during teacher education. Care must be taken to choose examples, exercises, and approaches that make the student (or teacher) aware of the wide array of different ways to work outside and what kind of learning this supports. Furthermore, care should be taken to continue to discuss with, and influence, policymakers so that the idea of *udeskole*, based on a holistic view of the children, is not substituted for with academic standards and performance.

***Udeskole* in Teacher Education**

Seven university colleges across Denmark provide teacher education in Denmark: the Bachelor of Education. Students can choose to take courses consisting of, or explicitly being, *udeskole* courses. These courses are optional, highly popular and our statistics, based upon students in 2014 and 2015 at VIA University College, records 70–82% of attendees as women, reflecting the ratio in the profession of teachers. As we started to offer *udeskole* courses in teacher education, the grass-roots engagement had to fit into organizational structures and management. With the economic issues connected to

the different providers of *udeskole* education at the university colleges, small fractures in the strong network could occur when we to some extent become competitors in securing funding for our courses. Our loyalty must be to both the vision and the idea of education outside the classroom *and* to our workplace. But being aware of the possible fissures whilst continuing to collaborate with each other in meetings, writing, debating, and developing courses will keep the outdoor scene alive and us aware of the dangers of organizational competition.

Sharing and Getting Input from the Field

The steps on the university stairs creak as the teachers arrive. The research project "TEACHOUT" has one of the monthly open-door arrangements, where a PhD or master's student gives a lecture based upon her preliminary results. This occurs just after the teachers' work time. There are lots of greetings, laughs, and hugs as teachers, researchers, nature interpreters and guides, school leaders, and students arrive at the auditorium. "Welcome to the seminar series" starts the senior researcher of the project, and silence spreads through the seats as a young researcher starts to explain her research question and methodology. After an hour, the windows have to be opened as a lively debate starts and the speaker, smiling, tries to both answer and write down some of the comments.

Two and Two Is Five

Many teachers put in tremendous effort every day working with children, taking them outside the classroom, and conducting high-quality education. Volunteers and organizations provide resources and knowledge free of charge; researchers explore the practice, study, describe, interpret, and communicate results, and teacher educators create initiatives for developing practice. Nationally and internationally, the figuration of individuals and organizations contribute to developing *udeskole*; in this network, powered by an affinity and idea, we are interconnected, sharing, discussing, and using experiences across nationalities, organizations, institutions, professions, educational levels, and individual horizons.

Common for the network, we would argue, is the understanding of and affinity for the importance of getting the children outside the classroom. Today's children are facing challenges beyond our imagination; climate change, ecological catastrophes, and cultural meetings and conflicts must be either lived with in new ways or solved. We have to teach the children more

than we readily know. We have to provide them with the tools to create solutions to some of the issues inherited from earlier generations. Using the outdoors can be one way of supporting the development of initiative, creativity, and problem-solving. From the very beginning, openness, sharing, and free access has been a cornerstone in developing *udeskole*. Many funding organizations, like the Danish Outdoor Council, subsidize applications and actions that involve volunteers and citizens and are non-profit, open-access initiatives.

The issue is not to earn money or power but to get as many children in the outdoors during their schooldays as possible. From the start, interest in children in the outdoors has connected different fields and the work towards this goal has been paved by cooperation and sharing.

The five-person *study group* that targeted *udeskole* on a wider front was one of the first established intellectual, nongovernmental volunteer groups. Participants represented a wide array of human resources: nature interpreters, academia, strategic thinkers, practitioners, teacher education—and from this group, the national network was established. Parallel to this, and in collaboration through communication, knowledge, and interest, a scientific environment was built up at the University of Copenhagen. From well-examined case studies and a few PhD students, it has developed into an international centre of excellence in the field, still diverse and connecting very different sectors, education, and people.

As gearwheels interacting and driving each other, together accomplishing a difficult task, the hands, minds, and wills of cooperating people have lifted this field in Denmark.

From university funding and teacher education to everyday work with children, people have worked to get children outdoors.

Conclusion

The idea of *udeskole* is bigger than personal goals. The idea of teaching children outside the classroom has united knowledge and resources from different levels of society. For some engaged people, *udeskole* is seen as an opposition to an increasingly controlled, test-focused, measuring society, perceived as narrowing education to academic qualifications. For others, it is a way to accomplish political strategies and educational goals. With access to this movement, and with involvement from all levels of society, women have been a part: from the Minister of Education to the female teacher.

It's not only about power, money, or academic acknowledgement. It's about our children's lives.

And It Continues

The webpage skoven-i-skolen.dk has a new coordinator as Malene has left to work in education in the national parks. After a few weeks, I grab the 'phone and call the new coordinator: "Hello, this is Karen Barfod. I am just calling to get to know you, to talk with you." "Well, wonderful, I was just about to call you," he answers, "Let's make an appointment and see how best we can cooperate."

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