The concept of *udeskole* in Danish schools

Peter Bentsen, University of Copenhagen, Denmark; pbe@life.ku.dk

February 2012

This short document describes and discusses one particular form of outdoor education in one particular context: *udeskole* (meaning ‘outdoor school’) in Danish schools. The document is organised in five sections: First, I define and describe *udeskole* in Danish schools. Secondly, I provide an overview of the national context. Thirdly, I describe the aims of *udeskole*, followed by a description of key initiatives. Finally, I discuss *udeskole* in an international perspective.

1. Definition

More and more Danish teachers have started introducing curriculum-based outdoor learning as a weekly or biweekly ‘outdoor school’ day for school children aged 7-16. *Udeskole* is characterised by compulsory educational activities outside the buildings of the school on a regular basis (Bentsen, Mygind & Randrup, 2009), and takes place in both natural and cultural settings, e.g. forests, parks, local communities, factories and farms (Jordet, 2007). *Udeskole* activities are characterised by teachers making use of the local environment when teaching specific subjects and curriculum areas by, for example, measuring and calculating the volume of trees in mathematics, writing poems in and about nature for language-related tasks or visiting historically significant places or buildings in history education. However, teaching and learning activities are often cross-disciplinary. The approach is often to work with an academic subject matter or concept in its real, concrete form to facilitate learning and understanding. Outdoor learning is not a statutory requirement of the Danish school system, so the decision to take teaching outdoors rests with the individual teacher and school. *Udeskole* is not mentioned in the Danish national curriculum, but outdoor teaching and learning are mentioned indirectly in the overall aims and directly under some of the subjects, i.e. biology, geography and physical education.

Most literature on *udeskole* is on a practical level, i.e. how-to manuals. Generally speaking, the concept of *udeskole* in Danish schools emerged from the writings and works of Norwegian scholar Arne N. Jordet. His work is consistently referenced in the *udeskole* field and seems to be a key source in the Danish movement. Jordet was one of the first to position *udeskole* in a theoretical pedagogical context. He argued for its potential and described the theoretical, didactical and pedagogical thoughts, ideas and background for *udeskole*. 
Jordet aimed to develop a ‘didactical theory for udeskole’ to describe the potential of this concept and stimulate the development of outdoor learning in schools’ and teachers’ practice. Jordet’s point of departure was general education theory, general didactics and a dialectic relationship between theory and practice. Jordet (1998, translated in Jordet, 2008, p. 1) defined udeskole as follows:

Outdoor schooling is a working method where parts of the everyday life in school is moved out of the classroom – into the local environment. Outdoor schooling implies regular activities outside the classroom. The working method gives the pupils the opportunity to use their bodies and senses in learning activities in the real world in order to obtain personal and concrete experiences. Outdoor schooling allows room for academic activities, communication, social interaction, experience, spontaneity, play, curiosity and fantasy. Outdoor schooling is about activating all the school subjects in an integrated training where activities out-of-doors and indoors are closely linked together. The pupils learn in an authentic context: that is, they learn about nature in nature, about society in the society and about the local environment in the local environment.

2. National context
This concept of udeskole stems from Norway (Jordet 2007, 1998) where teachers and pupils also use natural surroundings or a culture setting i.e. museums, companies, factories, churches etc as ‘outdoor’ classrooms on a regular basis. It is hard to find a suitable equivalent word in English, but udeskole could be understood as ‘outdoor schooling’ or ‘out-of-school-teaching’.

The concept of udeskole is not written in the Danish national 7-16 curriculum as it is (or has been) in e.g. Norway (Jordet 2007; Mygind 2005), it is however initiated as local development projects by individual teachers, group of teachers or whole schools. These development projects must be seen in the light of the Danish ‘free school model’, schools and teachers’ interpretation of the curriculum, and their relative freedom to develop new pedagogical ideas and methods. Thus, Mygind (2005) has characterised udeskole as a bottom-up phenomenon started by devoted and enthusiastic teachers originating from ‘the reality in the Danish school system’. As such, this form of outdoor education has been a practitioner’s project and can be characterised as a grassroots movement – and a form of counterculture to the existing ways of practising school, education and teaching.
Results have shown that at least 14% of all Danish schools have one teacher or more practising this form of school-based outdoor learning (Bentsen, Jensen, Mygind & Randrup, 2010) with a similar trend in Norway and Sweden (e.g. Bjelland & Klepp, 2000; Limstrand, 2001). Scandinavian concepts like forest kindergartens and udeskole have attracted international attention, and there is evidence that other countries have adapted Scandinavian models and approaches to outdoor education and learning (Henderson & Vikander, 2007; Muñoz, 2009; O’Brien & Murray, 2007).

The Danish school system

Denmark has a distinct school system (c.f. Danish Ministry of Education 2009a, 2009b; Cirius 2006) and landscape (c.f. Mygind & Boyes 2001; Jensen 1999) framing outdoor education of children. The Danish public school is an inclusive and broad school in the sense that it includes both primary and lower secondary education with no streaming (Cirius 2006). Danish children begin their nine years of compulsory schooling the year they turn seven. Children between the ages of three and six attend kindergarten, and almost all children attend a voluntary pre-school year before starting school. All children between the age of 7 and 16 must receive education provided by municipal school, private school, or at home; it is a matter of choice, as long as national standards are met (Danish Ministry of Education 2009b).

Danish public schools are run at the local governmental level. Recently, a development towards decentralisation within the public school system has taken place which may be characterised as a ‘free school model’ within the framework of each municipality. The public school act of 1989 decentralised a lot of decisions to school boards, which have the parents in the majority (Danish Ministry of Education 2009b). In general, the public school has the same curricular structure in all parts of the country, but there is a wide range for variety based upon local government and local school decisions. The central administration of public schools is carried out by the Danish Ministry of Education. The Danish Parliament takes the decisions governing the overall aims of the education, and the Minister of Education lay down the target for each subject, but the municipalities, schools and teachers decide how to reach these targets (Danish Ministry of Education 2009a). Schools are permitted to draw up their own curricula as long as they are in harmony with the aims and skill areas set by the Ministry, and teachers have within this framework what could be called ‘freedom of methods’. Fundamentally, Danish teachers have professional autonomy – ‘freedom of methods’ – and as a consequence of this, the obligation to argue (for their
choices). However, Danish society, education and schools are (also) moving towards an increased focus on accountability and control. This development could result in alternative methods requiring better argumentation as well as documentation and evaluation from teachers and schools.

**Major policy initiatives**
Traditionally, the classroom has been the central place for formalised teaching of children and adolescents. However, outdoor education and learning is a growing focus for organisations within policy, planning and management of green space, e.g. forests, woodland and urban parks. This includes e.g. public organisations such as the Danish Forest and Nature Agency (2002a, 2002b), private organisations such as the Danish Forest Association (The Forest in the School, 2008) and NGOs, such as the Danish Outdoor Council (1997, 2006) and The Danish Society for Nature Conservation (2009). The focus on education outside the classroom seems to have become increasingly popular, and has even increased during the last decade in Denmark (Christensen, 2004; The Forest in the School, 2008). Thus, outdoor education and learning has received more political and administrative attention in Denmark.

3. **Aims of udeskole**
In his definition, Jordet (1998) stressed pupils’ opportunity to experience and use their body and senses in learning activities. In this sense, *udeskole* is a way of understanding learning, and thus, education and schooling. He focused on a ‘holistic’ and progressive education by accentuating communication, social interaction, spontaneity, play, curiosity, and fantasy. Furthermore, he called *udeskole* a ‘working method’, thereby emphasising its humanistic pupil-centred tradition (cf. a teaching method) and indicating the active role of the pupil. However, Jordet argued that *udeskole* is more than a method; it builds on a fundamental thinking and a philosophy about teaching and learning: an understanding that education exists in a social, political and geographical context, e.g. ‘...learning activities in the real world to obtain personal and concrete experiences’. Historically, ‘mainstream’ curriculum has in contrast focused on the classroom, the book and the timetable (Brookes, 2002). Jordet’s definition could be interpreted as a reaction to ‘context-free’ schooling, education and learning. He wanted theoretical, practical and aesthetic approaches ‘to walk hand in hand’, ultimately contributing to a better school, strengthening pupils’ learning outcomes, and improving their health and well-being (Jordet, 2008). This renewed focus on localism, context and
the situation could be perceived as a form of counterculture to existing ways of practising schooling while still emphasising the importance of the written curriculum and didactical considerations.

To summarise, the pedagogical foundation or platform of Jordet’s ‘didactics of udeskole’ could be labelled progressive outdoor experiential education. Udeskole theory emphasises that learning does not exist or happen in a vacuum. Drawing on Dewey (e.g. 1916, 1938), Klafki (e.g. 2001) and a constructivist tradition, Jordet (2007) argued for a progressive pedagogy, emphasising the socio-historical, cultural-historical and situated nature of learning.

Jordet answered the ‘what’ question of udeskole curriculum, by placing emphasis on ‘academic activities’, ‘everyday life in school’, and ‘… activating all the school subjects...’ (see quote above), and by underlining that outdoor teaching should be curriculum-based and the out-of-classroom activities ‘more than a picnic’. With this rationale, the main content of udeskole in Danish schools would be the overall aim of the Danish schools, the standard requirements concerning the subjects, and standard regulations concerning the so-called ‘Common Objectives’ for teaching in the individual subjects (i.e. national curriculum) (Danish Ministry of Education, 2009a). However, Jordet (2002a) also called attention to the pupils’ general education and ‘bildung’, focusing on the ‘whole’ person and holistic education, i.e. social, cognitive, physical and motor skill development. In this sense, udeskole can be characterised as curriculum-based outdoor learning.

4. Key initiatives

In addition to this growing interest in udeskole and the perspectives of using forest, parks and green spaces for educational purposes from teachers and schools there is an increased awareness from governmental, non-governmental and private organisations and institutions. In 2006 a website, www.udeskole.dk, was established to further support this development. Several municipalities, especially some of the larger (e.g. Copenhagen, Aarhus and Esbjerg), have been important stakeholders in promoting udeskole (Hansen 2005; Udeskole.dk). The Danish Nature and Forest Agency (2006) is also emphasising udeskole and supports schools with facilities. In addition the private forest owner’s organisation has started the project ‘the forest in the school’ (e.g. www.skoven-i-skolen.dk). Non-governmental institutions such as the Outdoor Council also stress and support the role of nature and green areas in education for children and adolescents (Friluftsrådet 2006). In addition, there is a growing interest from researchers and media in udeskole.
However, there is no formalisation of *udeskole* or economic or political support at a Governmental and Ministerial level.

The first major Danish research and development project in *udeskole* took Rødkilde School in Copenhagen as a case study. The teachers conducted their teaching in a forest one school day per week during 2000-2003. Erik Mygind, a lecturer at University of Copenhagen, organised a multi-dimensional and cross-scientific research project that aimed to investigate the impact of this weekly compulsory teaching in natural setting on pupils, their parents and the two teachers (e.g. Mygind 2009, 2007, 2005; Andersen, Sølberg & Troelsen 2005; Herholdt 2005; Jacobsen 2005a, 2005b; Stelter 2005).

5. **International perspectives**

While the focus above is Denmark and the examples provided are Danish, similar development, practice and research can be seen in many other developed countries (Jordet 2007; DfES 2006; Davis, Rea & Waite 2006; Dahlgren & Szczepanski 1998; Bjerke 1994). The cases of Norway and Sweden are very similar to Denmark although the contexts are different especially in relation to landscape and access.

There has been mutual inspiration between Norway, Sweden and Denmark as regards practical and theoretical issues in relation to *udeskole* (Jordet 2007; Mygind 2005; Dahlgren & Szczepanski 1998). However, Danish outdoor education is also influenced by international outdoor education traditions especially from English speaking countries such as USA and the UK (Bentsen, et al. 2009; Andkjær 2005). Terms and concepts from the English speaking world are increasingly being incorporated in Danish outdoor recreation and outdoor education. But, it is not a one way inspiration. Scandinavian approaches to outdoor education seem also to influence the English speaking world. Thus, the international interest in *friluftsliv* is growing (Henderson & Vikander 2007) and the outdoors is increasingly a part of pre-school and school teaching in non-Scandinavian countries. Hence, O’Brien & Murray (2007, 2006) state that traditionally outdoor learning in Britain has included nature oriented and adventure activities mainly carried out outside school hours, and that the development of Forest Schools in Britain began in the 1990’s through inspiration from Scandinavia. Maybe outdoor education practices in Denmark and Scandinavian have (or have had?) stronger links to school curriculum than in Britain and other English speaking countries? It is clear that, an increased understanding of outdoor teaching and learning in different countries and contexts could be future research focus.
**Comparative and cultural perspectives**

Hopefully, this description of *udeskole* has relevance for a wider Scandinavian, European and worldwide readership at different stages of considering outdoor learning in the school curriculum. For this reason, it is relevant to discuss the extent to which *udeskole* is culturally specific to Denmark versus the extent to which it might be relevant to other countries. Brookes (2002) criticised the outdoor education field for consisting of predominately nationally informed interpretations. However, Waite and Pleasants (2010) called for comparative perspectives on outdoor learning and for the importance of awareness of the impacts of culture on the fields of outdoor learning and on cultural differences within and between countries. While the focus here is regular outdoor learning in Danish schools, similar developments and practices can be seen in many other Western post-industrial countries. Thus, research into *udeskole* may also contribute to comparative studies and discussions related to different practices of outdoor learning in different national settings trying to understand and compare how curriculum and (outdoor) educational practices are framed and shaped by cultural, social, political, and geographical factors.

The main point is therefore what is characteristic about Danish outdoor learning compared to outdoor learning practices in other countries (cf. e.g. Higgins et al., 2006; Lugg & Martin, 2001; O’Brien & Murray, 2007; Polley & Pickett, 2003; Thorburn & Allison, 2010; Zink & Boyes, 2006)? The answer seems to be programmes which are widespread (cf. more sporadic), compulsory (cf. optional), regular (cf. week-long residential programmes), of a cross-disciplinary educational method/approach (cf. a subject), with a substantial amount of outdoor learning carried out by classroom teachers (cf. specialist providers) in the local environment (cf. a pristine nature area further away) with early-years school children (cf. secondary education) (Bentsen, 2010).

I have identified a number of cultural issues and questions which could be interesting to discuss and explore further. Perhaps some of the differences between *udeskole* and other forms (or ‘constructs’) of outdoor learning in schools are caused by divergences between (and point of departure in) the Anglo-American curriculum tradition vs. the German-Nordic *Didaktik* tradition (see e.g. Gundem & Hopmann, 1998; Westbury, 2000); a ‘social pedagogical approach’ vs. an ‘early education approach’ (see e.g. OECD, 2006); or *friluftsliv* vs. outdoor education (see e.g. Henderson & Vikander, 2007)? However, there is a definite need for further research exploring these themes.
6. References


