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## **Preservation of learning outside the primary classroom: A comparison of policy and practice in Danish *udeskole* (outdoor school) and English primary Outdoor Education (OE)**

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### **Abstract**

This opinion piece advocates the benefits of incorporating Outdoor Education (OE) into primary education practice across the curriculum by evaluating OE policies and practices in Denmark and England. Using a literature-based auto-ethnographic informed approach we look at the benefits gained through participating in outdoor primary education in Danish *folkskoler* (weekly schools) which practise *udeskoler* (outdoor schools) and compare these with English primary schools. By outlining the different OE policies in each country, the barriers encountered, and the different teaching practices used, we evaluate the effectiveness of the respective policies and approaches. Our conclusions are that there is more freedom for teachers to practise and explore creative Outdoor Education approaches in *udeskoler* and, while the overall policies towards OE in the two countries are similar, differences in practice occur due to the different ways the respective education systems apply their respective policies. In England the National Curriculum enforced by Ofsted inspections places

OE as a subset of Physical Education (PE) which narrows its use in the broader curriculum. In Denmark, the management of schools through local school boards and parent participation in decision-making allows teachers a different perception of risk, facilitates more experimentation and better integration of a wider curriculum in *udeskoler*.

## Keywords

Outdoor learning, Forest Schools, Primary Education, Teaching, International Education, skovbørnehaver, naturbørnehaver.

## Link to article

<https://educationstudies.org.uk/?p=17327>

## Introduction

This article seeks to contribute to this debate by considering the differences in policy and practices in Outdoor Education (OE) in Denmark and England. Danish and English education at primary level rates similarly in OECD outcome statistics (OECD, 2022) with the main exception being the number of teachers where Denmark has twice the numbers than England per head of school population, and England has eleven times more primary pupils per head of population than Denmark. England is ranked 7<sup>th</sup> in the world for Mathematic literacy while Denmark is 13<sup>th</sup>, a 3% difference, while for Reading Literacy they lie 22<sup>nd</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> respectively, with England being slightly ahead (Nationmaster Statistics, 2022). This paper therefore looks at the wider differences in practice in outdoor education and the respective benefits rather than the effects of outdoor education on attainment.

While there is a general recognition that outdoor education is beneficial to all students (Rickinson *et al.*, 2004, Ofsted, 2008, Bentsen, 2010, Fiennes *et al.*, 2015, Harvey *et al.*, 2020), there is little to support a distinctive practice of outdoor education for teachers. The National Curriculum for England and Wales places outdoor learning as part of Physical Education (PE) and expects pupils to ‘Take part in outdoor and adventurous activity challenges both individually and within a team’ (National

Curriculum 2014: 2). This leaves little encouragement for teachers trying to use OE in broader primary curriculum such as English or Mathematics. This lack of specificity for OE in the curriculum led to debates in the literature about definitions (Rickinson *et al.*, 2004) and a lack of direction and clarity for English primary schools (Webber and Hardwell, 2019).

Outdoor Education as a concept is ‘...broad and complex’ (Rickinson *et al.*, 2004:2) and can be difficult to define (Becker, 2017). This is especially true when definitions across different nationalities and cultures are considered (Nicol, 2002b). The actual content of outdoor education further complicates matter, as Dean (2019: 54) notes, that outdoor learning can have different and ‘...distinctive foci, outcomes, and locations while still being considered OE’. These difficulties in definition are evident in international comparisons and if we used Donaldson and Donaldson’s often-used definition of outdoor education as ‘...education in, for, and about the outdoors’ (1950 : 17), it would draw us to include studies outside our observed experience of and diminish our arguments. Waite *et al.* (2016) caution about the way studies of outdoor education are presented when comparing non-like studies such as Forest Schools and residential events with outdoor activities based within the school week like *udeskoler*, making comparisons difficult to justify.

We, therefore, take the meaning of outdoor education as those activities which are conducted in the outdoors as part of the normal school week such as Physical Education (PE) and which may include general curriculum studies such as Maths and English and include wider activities such as adventure learning, nature studies and school trips. While the term ‘Outdoor Education’ is used for different educational contexts and experiences in the literature it is possible to provide a clearer definition of the terms ‘*folkskole*,’ and ‘*udeskole*’ from a Danish context. *Folkskole*, or ‘weekly school’ as it is sometimes referred to in Denmark. is the Danish equivalent of the English Primary School, with daily compulsory attendance required for five days a week. ‘*Udeskole*’ is the out-of-school learning which takes place as part of *folkskole* and is highly regarded in the OE literature. Here pupils are taken outside for one day a week to learn. Danish *udeskole* and English Primary OE are often compared similarly in the literature, but we argue here there are differences due to the nature of each country’s curricula for primary age pupils.

In England outdoor education is formally written into the National Curriculum of England and Wales as a subset of PE (National Curriculum, 2014) and generally is delivered as PE which focusses mainly on teams, sports such as football or rounders and sometimes adventure activities, while in Denmark the setting of local curricula means *udeskole* is part of the whole curriculum, is locally set and may or may not include objectives relating to PE depending on the local objectives. Activities in *udeskole* are therefore broader than those covered in PE focussed OE. Bentsen and Jensen (2012) describe *udeskole* activities as:

...characterised by teachers making use of the local environment when teaching specific curriculum subjects. They may, for example, illustrate mathematical concepts by measuring and calculating the volume of trees in mathematics, write poems in and about nature for language-related tasks or contextualise history by visiting historically significant places or buildings (200).

The descriptions here outline the initial problems and broad similarities within which to compare literature on the subject but provide the conceptual background to assess policy and its effects on practice.

## **Methodological considerations**

As an opinion piece informed by auto-ethnographical experiences and founded in the literature on OE and *udeskole*, we discuss here the underpinning approaches relating to research methodology. Auto-ethnographical reflection uses the researcher's own lived experiences to help understand differences in culture and practice and is particularly useful in this case as it gives an insight into the reasons for cultural experiences (Nugrahenny and Galina, 2021). Our experience of both educational cultures under discussion added to the depth of understanding and is used to consider reasons for differences in practice.

This article takes a narrative approach, structured around the main themes of benefits, policy, and barriers to examining the reasons for different practitioner approaches we observed in Danish *folkskoler* (weekly schools) *udeskoler* (out of school) and English primary school OE. We chose a narrative approach to writing up this paper as we found and explored the literature rather than a systemic one as

there were a number of interwoven themes and this approach allowed us to deal with these better. Taking a participatory advocate perspective, we intend to describe the best practices in *udeskoler* and primary OE in England. By examining the policy and practice of outdoor education in each country we advocate the more liberal and exploratory approaches used in Danish outdoor education to enhance the development of primary school experiences in England. Creswell (2008) advises that this forms part of the positionality of researchers and should be informed. As advocates of outdoor primary education we have been involved in the teaching of outdoor primary school education in schools in England, and *udeskoler* in Denmark, and have significant research experience in out-of-school study.

This exploration of the differences in policy and practices of outdoor education in Denmark and England considers the reported benefits of outdoor education, examines the respective policies in each country, and considers the application of the policies in each country by considering curricula and the way the OE is delivered. This provides a rich picture of why there are differing experiences for pupils in English and Danish OE.

## Why Outdoor Education?

While there are many studies which outline the benefits of OE only a few studies link a type to a specific category of benefit. Key advisory papers on the subject include a meta-study by Rickinson *et al.* (2004) of literature written in English but including international studies, reviews and analytical research to 2004 and a meta-study by Fiennes *et al.* (2015) of UK literature reviews. We incorporate government documents from Ofsted (2008) and the National Curriculum exploring regulatory body opinions and include relevant academic articles from 2015 where they help to identify benefits. From Denmark we include the key work of Bentson and Barford (2012-2021) and include relevant parts of the scoping review of Nordic literature by Rennan and Iverson, (2022).

Rickinson *et al.* (2004) found both short and long term 'gains' from primary outdoor education experiences, but note there was a wide variation in types of experiences and benefits reported in the literature '...between different kinds of programmes, and different types of outcomes' (5). They conclude that adventure programmes improve

attitudes, beliefs and self-perceptions as well as interpersonal and social skills. Where there is a positive focus on cognitive and physical/behavioural aspects in the programme, there is evidence this can aid the development of general and specific academic skills leading to improved engagement and achievement. The substantial Ofsted report *Learning Outside the Classroom* (2008: 5) found ‘...learning outside the classroom contributed significantly to raising standards and improving pupils’ personal, social and emotional development’.

Fiennes *et al.* (2015) draw together 15 systematic literature reviews and 58 primary research studies on Outdoor Education in England considering various aspects of outdoor learning. They found a broad spectrum of benefits and outcomes considered in a range of outdoor activity types. Here we isolated and reduced the types so they could be compared to the Danish *udeskole* activities conducted during school time outside the school. Figure 1 reproduced below gives the type of activities and age groups concerned, but only six studies focussed on primary education. These were all in Key Stage 2 (7-11 year olds) and categorised as field studies (1), adventurous activities (1), other outdoor (2) and learner activities (2). One Key Stage 1 study (age 5-7) is reported too, but this seems to be part of one of the above studies and hence the total of seven rather than six.

Code	School grounds	Residential Facility	Local community	Other (specify)	Unclear
5 – 10	3	11	5	9	0
11 – 14	3	22	4	4	1
15 – 18	3	18	2	2	0
18 – 25	0	10	2	1	1
Not stated	0	1	0	1	1

Table 1 No. primary studies bwy age of participant and setting (Fiennes *et al.*, 2015)

Examining the studies of key stage 1 and 2 activities in Fiennes we found the following. Bowker’s 2004 study of children on a visit to the Eden project stated the intention of the visit was to create ‘...physical experiences will stay with them for a very long time: by generating interest, excitement, enthusiasm, motivation and eagerness to learn, they will ultimately contribute to increased conceptual understanding’ (p. 228).

The article does not say whether this was achieved, but reports better cognition and understanding of rainforests, though suggests teachers involvement through activities and curriculum integration assisted this too. Fielding and Jones (2014) describe a bug hunt and outline that the children found the bug hunt fun and became more knowledgeable about types of bugs, but also claim children became more ‘...engaged and enthusiastic across the curriculum’ (p.27). Humberstone and Stan’s (2009, 2011) studies at English residential locations focussed on teacher interaction and claim the benefits were in children interacting positively with their friends to become more independent. However, all studies note interaction with teachers was important in creating benefits and not all experiences are positive, especially if teacher interaction with pupils becomes negative.

The studies cited by Fiennes (2015) cite many benefits for outdoor learning but Fiennes argues many should be treated with caution as they are broad and difficult to align with a type of outdoor activity, but personal benefits are widely reported including improvements in: motivation, engagement, enthusiasm, enjoyment, concentration, attention focus and creativity initiatives. Broader benefits include: relationship with nature, self-awareness, communication or teamwork, health and well-being, healthy lifestyles, healthy behaviour, health, and physical/mental motor fitness. Despite being unable to clearly define activity types which create specific benefits, there is a consensus that outdoor learning provides clear benefits. Our personal experience of English primary pupils OE is that they mainly do sport-based activities including cricket, football, tag rugby handball, tennis, teambuilding, netball, hockey and athletics. These sessions are at least once a week with some schools operating after school clubs, adventure activities such teambuilding once a year at scout-camp, or adventure centres. Activities include constructing tepees, raft building, canoeing, and orienteering. These run once a year for a day. Wider curriculum lessons do take place outdoors, but infrequently. These include outdoor English education, and some maths lessons covering shapes, or geometry. The observed benefits are: better mental health, improved attitude and motivation, enthusiasm to learn, an appreciation of nature, and greater enjoyment in their learning.

The benefits of the *udeskole* in Denmark need to be taken in context. Bentsen (2012) notes *udeskole* activities are characterised by teachers ‘...making use of the local environment when teaching specific subjects and curriculum areas.’ (1). This differs

from the English approach reported in much of the literature as *udeskole* is specifically directed towards being part of the mainstream curriculum and includes mathematics, history and language. A number of studies advocate the benefits of outdoor learning including: increased concentration (Munoz, 2009), higher levels of wellbeing and social interactions, and more 'joy' in being taught (Mygind, 2007). Bentsen summarises that outdoor learning in *udeskole* has shown it can play a role in children's learning and development. Only one article looked at the context of regular outdoor education within the school curriculum comparing Danish and English outdoor learning. Waite, *et al.* (2015) compared Danish *udeskole* and English forest schools with a focus on purposes, aims, pedagogy, content, outcomes and barriers. The authors noted both approaches support children in their social and academic achievement, and physiological and psychological well-being, while recognising that experiences were not the same in each country: Forest Schools and *udeskole* were contextually different. From our personal experience, OE in Denmark provides a greater level of freedom for pupils and staff alike. When observing Danish *udeskole* practice there appears less worry about children partaking in activities where they might hurt themselves and more focus on what could be gained from the experience. In terms of their learning and overall development, the benefits associated with *udeskole* appear to be greater motivation engaging in a more participatory manner, and with less reservation. Pupils not engaging in a classroom are keen to participate outdoors. Communication and teamwork were much more collaborative outside and focussed on tasks set, and working with other classes across school was more natural. For example, at *udeskole* one of us observed a group of primary-age pupils, supervised by their teacher, prepared and cooked chicken curry independently using sharp kitchen knives on their own over a large campfire. The children interacted with the task and socially with one another without teacher supervision facilitating their social and practical development. This also advanced their motor skills as they organised and prepared wood for the fire and chose and cut up the ingredients for each evening meal. The teacher gave ingredients and an outline of what to do, but then left the preparation to the pupils observing from a distance, answering questions as they arose. Pupils were allowed to climb trees and the teacher said '... they will learn if they fall'. This freedom to use sharp utensils, prepare fire and climb is not something we would expect to encounter in normal primary outdoor activities in the

England. The teaching approached was relaxed and reported by the *udeskole* teachers as common practice in Denmark. These provided real-life experiences and the chance to develop skills that can be called upon later in life.

There are a number of studies in England which specifically consider the learning benefits of OE, and while this is beyond the scope of this article, it does emphasise the wider benefits. These include Quibell *et al.* (2017) who in a substantial research study in England found that children participating in outdoor learning had improved attainment in English reading, writing and maths and this was ‘...significantly more than children who received conventional classroom-based schooling’ (p. 581). This study too found the role and actions of the teacher important and suggested other factors may have helped including smaller class sizes, but the benefits appear lasting and provide continuing improved attainment.

The benefits from outdoor learning experiences for primary age schoolchildren may be categorised broadly as: social, motivational, health and well-being, learning enhancements and societal. While these make the topic itself worth exploring, it is generally accepted that further research into the categories of experience which cause a category of enhancement is needed. While we do not seek to align these categories our exploration of different outdoor teaching policies, experiences and practices, should provide an important contribution to the OE debate.

## Examining policies

Education policies in both countries are set by government. In Denmark, overall aims for *folkskole* education are set in the Danish Parliament, and targets for each subject are given by the Minister of Education. *Udeskole* is part of *folkskole* but is not a curriculum requirement (Bentsen, 2017). However, the 1989 public school act allowed a lot of decisions to be made by local schoolboards where parents must make up the majority of the membership (Bensten, 2009). These local school boards, working with local municipalities, schools and teachers, are responsible for the day to day curriculum content and teaching approaches. Schools can draw up their own curriculum but they must align with the aims and skill areas set by the Danish Ministry of Education, (2007). This allows more flexible approaches than the system in England and encourages curriculum planning to include outdoor education. The survey by

Barford et al. (2019) of Danish *folkskoler* found 31 per cent of all schools practised *udeskole* for half a day or more (Barford et al., 2022). *Udeskole* is not formally written into the Danish national curriculum. The publication *Improving the Public School* by the Danish Ministry of Education (2014: np), however, promoted *udeskole* with a special focus on ‘...learning, motivation and well-being; and working more closely with local sports clubs and cultural centres’. From our practical observations of *udeskole* we see teachers are encouraged to cover a range of activities outdoors but without set guidance. *Udeskole* teachers have a wider interpretation of what might be done outdoors and the things they can let children do. They emphasise child-centered exploration and greater flexibility which allows educators greater personal confidence in what they can and can’t do and where it fits in their curriculum.

In England, the National Curriculum embeds Outdoor and Adventurous Activities (OAA) in the primary curriculum under PE in 1988 (Webber and Hardwell, 2019). Its approach to teaching beyond PE is left to individual schools and for teachers to interpret its form in practice from the single line which states that it expects pupils to ‘Take part in outdoor and adventurous activity challenges both individually and within a team’. (National Curriculum 2014: 2). *Ofsted (2008: 5) provides a little extra stating* ‘...schools evaluate the quality of *learning outside* the classroom to ensure that it has maximum impact on learners’. This has led to debate as to what outdoor education actually means outside PE and sport and how to apply this guidance. The intention appears to be to promote outdoor education and government initiatives such as visiting farms (Rickinson et al., 2004) tend to support the notion that policy is to support outdoor learning. Our experience in English primary schools is that policy is followed as written in the National Curriculum with most outdoor learning being facilitated through PE. There can be some difficulty in justifying approaches for mainstream sessions outside PE initiatives by schools, and individual teachers do exist for subjects such as Maths enhancements, Science lessons and Personal, Social Health Education (PSHE) such as litter clearing and constructions. Some schools have an outdoor learning policy, but these tend to incorporate OE as an extension of PE. The lack of a clear definition in the National Curriculum of what OE is to be used for outside PE contributes to the nervousness of teachers when planning mainstream curriculum activities.

Both in England and Denmark the policy intentions for OE appear similar, but it is a formal requirement only in England. Both countries see benefits and are trying to encourage it. However, in practice the placement of OE in the English National Curriculum as a subset of PE has narrowed the curriculum focus for OE activities (Prince, 2018) so the application of policy is not seen as naturally supportive of other curriculum subjects. This makes UK school systems focus on the set subjects for inspection and it is natural that teachers will concentrate on teaching to satisfy mainstream National Curriculum content (James and Williams, 2017). Bilton and Waters (2016) note a general lack of clear aims for outdoor education in England and competing priorities with higher profile parts of the National Curriculum such as Maths and English (seen as priority areas when inspected) make OE outside PE secondary when compared to more 'mainstream' priorities.

In Denmark, policies are managed differently as curriculum and practice is decided locally with an emphasis on overall targets and less on prescription and inspection. It is our opinion that the policies are not so dissimilar as to be responsible on their own for the differences in practice. It is our contention that the positioning of OE as a subset of PE makes it difficult for teachers in England to justify using it to enhance other curriculum areas, and it becomes secondary to curriculum areas which form the focus of inspection.

## **Practice in outdoor education**

The comparison of *udeskole* and English primary outdoor education practice can be difficult due to the differing types, aims, and objectives of the various reported approaches to outdoor education. Types of teaching range from teacher-led instructional approaches (Subramaniam, 2019) to libertarian approaches where teachers largely let go of the curriculum (Fraser, 1987) or even hand it over to pupils as in the case of Summerhill School in the UK (Cassebaum, 2003).

A search of the literature for a specific pedagogy for teaching in the outdoors brought up various approaches. Searching under 'outdoor teaching pedagogies' on Google Scholar brought up five different internationally focussed pedagogical approaches for the first five titles: Fieldwork pedagogies facilitated through technology (Thomas and Munge, 2017), Practical Fieldwork (Thomas, 2015), Pedagogical Content Knowledge

PCK (Dyment *et al.*, 2018), a recognition of a lack of pedagogies but advocacy of Experiential Learning (Sutherland and Legge, 2016) and a final result which was a book suggests a variety of approaches are being used but new approaches are needed (Watchow and Brown 2011). Noting critiques of Google Scholar we also conducted a search of the British Education Index, (part of EBSCO Research Databases) which brought five results with the following pedagogies: Outdoor/place pedagogies (Green and Raynor, 2020), a variety of outdoor pedagogical practices advocated in Stockwell (2022), innovative approaches using animals in Cutting and Passy (2022), a teacher-focussed liberal creative pedagogy based on nature-rich outdoor environments (Wishart and Rouse, 2019) and an article describing an experienced outdoor teachers' pedagogical approach as '...nurturing expanded understandings of self through place-responsive teaching and pedagogic agility' (Evans and Acton, 2021: 1).

The spread of pedagogical approaches suggests there is no specific approach to OE (Wainwright and Williams, 2022), but our literature shows the most common approaches align to social constructivism based around creativity and inquiry or experiential learning. There is an added layer of complexity when looking at the way research on teaching methods in OE has been conducted. For example, Barford and Daugbjerg (2018) categorise type of teaching activity, measuring teaching activities against an inquiry-based learning approach, while Legge (2022) considers exploratory pedagogies.

We therefore decided to use categorisations of the type of teaching practices reported in *udeskole* to provide a framework against which practices in England can be compared. These were adjusted to provide a continuum of approaches by teachers ranging from: giving no instruction to pupils, facilitating pupils individually in tasks, facilitating pupils in groups in tasks, scaffolding pupils' inquiries, instructing pupils directly. Barford and Daugbjerg (2018) again provide a useful summary of learning approaches undertaken by pupils in Danish *udeskole* as:

*.....orientation, conceptualization (questioning, hypothesis generation), investigating (planning, exploration, experimentation, observation and data interpretation, analysis), conclusion, and discussion (with communication and reflection) (2).*

In *udeskole* our observed teaching approaches align with Barford and Daugbjerg's (2018) categorisations. Teachers are more involved in curriculum planning and this allows them to plan in effective practitioner approaches such as orientation, conceptualisation and investigation. *Folskoles* using *udeskole* plan for one day a week outdoors so it encourages the use of outdoors for broader mainstream curriculum subjects. Teachers tend to embed more creativity in their lessons and feel less constrained by a rigid curriculum. Overall, there is an open approach to planning and delivery as teachers feel they can try things out without the fear of misaligning their activities with a future inspection regime.

In England our observations of OE teaching approaches show conceptualisation including questioning; hypothesis generation is used alongside activity and directional instructions, sometimes written. OE is largely PE and sports-focussed but includes theorising how a team might improve performance or how to play better as a team. There are other outdoor activities such as adventure days organised at off-school activity centres such as a scout camp and each class is offered the opportunity to attend these once a year for a day. Here activities include investigation of the local environment such as a bug hunt, planning, building of tepees and rafts, and exploration of the area through orienteering. Some OE activities are done nearer schools and these might be, for example, Maths lessons where data interpretation and geometry are done outside. Activity sheets and summarising through conclusions tends to be done on outdoor activities, including sport. All sessions are expected to be completed with de-briefs from staff.

Differences in practices in *udeskoler* and English Primary schools begin with planning OE. In Denmark OE is planned as part of the overall curriculum rather than as a subset of an inspected subject. The less rigid requirements of the Danish curriculum make *udeskole* planning part of the outdoor learning experience. This facilitates placing the wider curriculum within broad objectives for *udeskole* experiences. In England there is good practice in primary OE but this does not extend to one day a week and outside PE it tends to rely on individual teachers using being creative to embed other subject activities outdoors. There is a sense that the planning of these none-PE subject experiences are less formal as teachers strive to justify these activities as still valid curriculum learning experiences.

## Barriers to outdoor learning

*Udeskole* is not a curriculum requirement in Denmark and Barford's (2022) survey found 19.5 per cent of all schools practised out-of-class teaching. Barriers to teaching are cited by Barford and Bentsen (2018) as the reason this is not higher. Figures for England are not clear cut due to the complex nature and definitions of what is being dealt with. In practice 100 per cent of schools must have PE, but figures for teaching in the outdoors in a wholistic curriculum sense are not available.

An exploration of barriers to outdoor learning in England and Denmark uncovers similar concerns but with some key differences. Rickinson *et al.* (2004) identify five categories of barriers in England:

- (i) fear and concern about health and safety; (ii) teachers' lack of confidence in teaching outdoors; (iii) school and university curriculum requirements limiting opportunities for outdoor learning; (iv) shortages of time, resources and support; and (v) wider changes within and beyond the education sector(6)

As the fifth category does not deal with primary-age education we deal with just the first four.

In England teachers' fears and concern about the health and safety of children out of school is widely reported in the literature (Solly, 2015). These are compounded due to: the concerns of parents (Blanchet-Cohen and Elliot, 2011), the dangers of injury outside (Waite, 2010) and uncertainty and fears about following set regulations (Carrier *et al.*, 2013). In *udeskole* Barford and Bentsen (2018) see risk from a more pragmatic perspective, that of following regulations and protecting children from the climate. This suggests there is a clear difference in the type of health and safety concerns in each country and that this barrier is much more of a concern in England.

Lack of confidence for teaching in the outdoors is a continuing concern amongst teachers in both countries (Barford and Bentsen, 2018; Schume and Blatt, 2019; Waite, 2010, 2020). This is more widely reported in the UK than Denmark, but concerns are evident in both locations and centre on the purpose of going to learn outdoors, how to make pupils learn outdoors, and what to teach. In England, aims for OE seem to be confused with a variety of reasons promoted, including personal, social

or dispositional aspects rather than curriculum learning (Bilton and Waters, 2016). In Denmark while uncertainty is evident over outdoor teaching, this is less about its purpose and aims and more how it should link to the curriculum. Barford and Bentsen (2018) note this link may be facilitated by the 'Danish tradition of letting the teacher choose the teaching method, he or she considers being the most suitable' (p.152). This places the important distinction of giving the teacher the confidence of knowing their approach is based on a respect for their teaching expertise which seems to be lacking in English OE. The varieties of outdoor education in England, as part of PE, adventure learning, forest schools etc. may contribute to this lack of confidence, making teachers consider that OE expertise exists in these other settings which they lack. Overall, a lack of clarity in aims for outdoor teaching, role expertise and the place of the non-PE curriculum in outdoor education seem to be significant barriers to teaching outdoors in England which is overcome by the recognition of the teacher's 'freedom of methods' in Denmark (Westbury *et al.*, 2000).

The role of the curriculum is cited by Rickinson *et al.* (2004) as a barrier to outdoor learning across all school sectors and, while focussed on post primary, there is a recognition that the focus in the English National Curriculum on 'Outdoor and Adventurous Activities' as part of PE hinders the broader use of the outdoors for wider curriculum studies. Teachers leave the outdoor learning aspects of their subject as it appears clearly part of PE rather than a resource to be used across subjects. This is in marked contrast to *udeskoler* where flexibility of curricula allows teachers across subjects see the outdoors as a cross curricula resource. The 2014 Danish Ministry of Education Act refers specifically to the use of outdoor learning without referring to subjects or types of teaching which supports this (Barford *et al.*, 2016).

A number of international studies indicate the lack of time, resources and support for outdoor learning (Barford and Bentsen; 2018; Waite, 2020 Knudsen and Gjessing, 2021). Time is mentioned by teachers in both countries in terms of increased workload, and planning and space in the curriculum to go outdoors, suggesting that OE is still not seen as part of the mainstream curriculum. In England Waite's 2009 study into the barriers to OE, identified teachers felt the nature of outdoor spaces available was problematic with the weather and safety of the space areas of concern. Lack of support from helpers was also a concern as pupil to helper ratios and regulations on level of clearance for working with children affected volunteer numbers. This is also noted by

Barford and Bentsen (2018) as Danish regulations often require more than one teacher to be present at *udeskoler*.

Funding for OE, while a concern is not reported as a significant problem for England in Waites 2009 study, this may be uneven across England (Taylor *et al.*, 2009) and in terms of provision, for example extended forest school stays (Waite, 2016), and the closure of outdoor centres in some locations (Barkham, 2021). Risk and safety seems less of a concern in studies on *udeskoler* than English primary schools, but the weather is noted in Danish studies (Barford and Bentsen, 2018). Interestingly Barford and Bentsen write from a perspective of how to deal with this problem rather than reporting it as a problem. School structures and pupil expectations provide additional barriers in Denmark as schools still plan for a traditional curriculum and teachers fear that pupils do not see *udeskole* as how a school should really be.

## Conclusion

Our observations and exploration of the literature on English and Danish outdoor teaching show that there are few differences in overall policy intentions, but the way policy is implemented affects both planning and practice. This results in a better planned, yet more liberal, approach to teaching wider curriculum subjects in *udeskoler*. The rigidity of the English National Curriculum where OE is a subset of PD, and the effects of concerns about Ofsted inspection hinders not just the practice in OE but the planning and development at a wider curriculum level. OE in England, therefore, takes place in formats which can be justified, leading to a more formalised and rigid experience for pupils. While concerns over regulation and safety are recognised, these exist in both countries but it is more likely pressure from parents that creates a more safety conscious and therefore restrictive OE environment in England.

The literature concurs with our observations that outdoor education in Denmark in the form of *udeskole* is much more prevalent in *folkskoler* than in English primary schools. With overall stated aims in policy between the Danish and English outdoor schools not being too dissimilar, policy as stated does not seem to be the cause of the differences in practice. This, however, may hide the competing perspectives between the policy and inspection regimes. While it is clear Ofsted inspections are guided to be sympathetic to outdoor learning and recognise good outdoor learning practice,

(Ofsted, 2008), Dillon *et al.* (2006) argue that there are 'differing possibilities about both priority and process' (p.3) in regards to OE may have resonance. Schools have to prioritise between the seemingly fixed and directive National Curriculum in England, and outdoor education does not seemingly fit well with this. Systems and structures are tied to showing achievement of this curriculum. Schools prioritise the stated National Curriculum outcomes and systems and learning processes are developed to show adherence and achievement of its objectives. This does not encourage experimentation of alternative teaching methods in the outdoors. Therefore, we confidently state that the policy of outdoor education is itself not at the heart of a lack of curriculum integration.

The barriers to learning exist in each country and again appear similar. Fear and safety concerns exist in both countries (Waite *et al.*, 2014) but seem to be more of a concern among teachers in England. In Denmark teachers of OE are more worried about parents' perceptions of safety (Barford and Bentsen, 2018) and have specific fears, for example about protecting children from the weather. This seemingly minor difference is perhaps significant in that it shows Danish teachers are more prepared to try out things and overcome problems. However, perhaps English teachers need to see risk-benefits rather than just risk (Prince, 2018). However, studies report a lack of confidence in teachers from both countries as outdoor teaching practitioners (Waite, 2015; Barford and Bentsen, 2018) and little theoretical guidance is available (Wainwright and Williams, 2022). Perhaps here there is a gap for the academic community to develop a clear pedagogy for OE possibly based on experiential, inquiry-based, problem-based learning.

There is a question of responsibility for outdoor educational activities in English schools. This is directed by the National Curriculum as being part of PE with only the single statement on outdoor and adventure activities. This therefore leaves outdoor education as a subset of PE and leaves PE as the primary activity of outdoor education. In our opinion this is a structural anomaly begins the differences in our observer approaches in the two countries. This is where we believe the policy fails English schools, not as an intentional diminution of OE, but by structurally placing it exclusively in the PE subject of the National Curriculum.

Our observed differences may also be due to cultural differences between the two countries. The devolution of school curriculum to schools and local boards in Denmark, while setting targets has meant schools and teachers work with, and are answerable to, local boards rather than the prescriptive National Curriculum inspection-based approach in the UK (Becker *et al.*, 2017). Our opinion is that this is the critical disjuncture between the two countries' respective approaches. In Denmark, local school leadership has been able to focus more on pupil learning than national targets. This has allowed teachers to embed wider curricula into outdoor learning and this in turn has resulted in the benefits being seen local and recognised. Schools in England do not have this freedom as the National Curriculum focuses on results and schools take a safety first approach which does not encourage experimentation.

Our initial observations were that risk is seen as a more natural part of *udeskole* school life as we had seen more risk allowed by the teachers. However, the research conducted in Denmark by Barford and Bentsen (2018) seems to highlight the differences in parental attitudes to risk being reflected by teachers. In *udeskole* in Denmark, teachers reflect the less risk averse approach of parents. In England teachers reflect parents' concerns about risk. Teachers' attitudes to risk in both countries are a reflection of parents' attitudes to risk in both countries, with Danish teachers more comfortable with allowing more risky activities in *udeskoler*. This seems to be a cultural attribute of Danish society as parents of migrant children in Denmark display similar concerns to parents in England. Danish schools' experiences of Covid may have changed these attitudes as reports of children returning to school during the pandemic saw parents worrying their children were on the front line of an experiment. Research by Fersch (2022) into the approaches taken by the schools as Danish pupils were some of the first to return to school after lockdown provides an outline of how schools approached and dealt with parental fears in this situation in a collaborative way which could explain the way Danish parents views schools as being trusted more to look after their children than in the UK. She notes the return was successful because of

...the importance of reflective trust in institutions and professionals and demonstrate ....strengthened by ....communication and strong relationships with teachers and schools (p.51).

Seems likely, therefore, this trust will extend to allowing teachers to feel they can allow *udeskole* activities to contain more risk than their counterparts in England.

The standards agenda in England and Wales may also play a part in the way school activities are viewed when set against measures of achievement. Braun and Maguire (2020) argue the current policy of having accountability and measurable performance standards in schools tend to focus on what can be easily measured. As discussed in this article, the benefits of OE learning are not easy to quantify, often being based on personal improvements in interpersonal communication, well-being, ability to work with others and solving problems. They also argue the focus in primary school attainment is now on targeted groups rather than individual benefits and this is not conducive to OE learning. This places OE as a background priority, hidden behind PE with difficult to measure outcomes.

The research on outdoor education may also have a part to play in the disjuncture between policy and practice. There is lots of literature on *udeskole* and English primary education, and much of it exhorts the benefits of OE, while some considers the problems. However, there is a need to align the type of activities reported with the specific benefits they bring. In addition, while the Scandinavian model of *udeskole* is held up as a model to follow, in 2019 only 19.5 per cent of general schools in Denmark had regular *udeskole* provision (Barford *et al.*, 2021).

## Further research

Further Research in the field of linking specific practices to the benefits of outdoor education is necessary to support a dialogue amongst educationalist and to allow advocacy with the policymakers. Research should be contextualised so comparisons can be made in international comparisons in a reasonably like-for-like manner. The literature reviews described by Becker (2017) tend to report on a wide range of outdoor education types all at once. Residential, Activity Centres, day visits and Forest schools etc. are all reported on side-by-side as outdoor education. Where they are compared with the *udeskoler*, only Waite *et al.* (2016) consider the integration onto curriculum and this compares *udeskole* with a Forest School rather than daily outdoor activities for primary schools. Therefore, we see a need for further research to specifically compare the way *folkskoler* in Denmark use the concept of *udeskole* with

examples of outdoor activities which can be linked to the curriculum in English primary schools so benefits can be compared in a like-for-like manner.

## Ethical considerations

This research was conducted following the guidelines of the British Education Research Association (BERA) and fully complies with all institutional requirements as a secondary research project.

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