

Inside-Out Nature: A Denmark experience

After recently attending a residential course for practitioners wanting to learn more about children's learning in the outdoors, Ruth Gill describes her experience and shares her views on outdoor learning in Denmark.

My expectations

I had very little understanding of the thinking and research behind outdoor learning prior to the course and gained my enthusiasm for further enquiry from my work colleagues who had experienced a training day from Inside-Out Nature. They were brimming with ideas as to how this might translate into our setting.

I searched the online course details to find a residential in Denmark which appealed immediately; five days away visiting settings, children and their pedagogues to learn about the philosophy that guides their practice. Just for once I wanted to see outdoor learning in Denmark with my own eyes and to make my own judgements on how and what children gain from this experience.

Kindergarten origins

The outdoors as a learning environment has been evident from 1840 with Froebel's first kindergarten in Germany which influenced the formulation of the Froebel Society in Denmark from 1902. A common misconception is that 'Forest school' describes all of the early childhood provision in Denmark; this is not the case. There is a diverse mix of kindergartens; some offering a complete outdoor experience, while others offer a mixture of outdoor learning with a sport or art-based element.

Residential course

The course costs include your accommodation, breakfast and lunch and transport between

the motel and the settings. All that needs to be organised and paid for separately is your air travel and expenses, such as evening meals. The course is OCN accredited upon completion of a reflective account of the experience.

Day one

This is spent travelling on the most part. I travelled early in the morning for a flight to Edinburgh which offered the connecting flight to Billund airport. Little did I realise at the time that the other course attendees were on the same flight! We were all met at the airport by Jane and Keld who would be our guides over the next five days.

That evening Keld gave the group a guided tour of Viborg which is rich with history and benefits from a small shopping area with some restaurants to choose from for our evening meals. I was astonished during the cultural tour at how clean the streets were. There was no rubbish rolling around the street and no chewing gum stuck to the floor so I asked the question, 'Why is the town so clean and well presented?' Keld's reply was, 'That's 20 years of kindergarten for you.' So the secret of a well cared for environment is in the nature of the people that use it.

Day two

Our first visit was to Fredly Nature Kindergarten which is what you imagine when you think of 'Forest schools'. Children here are pre-school in age which extends to six-year-olds.

This nature kindergarten operates outdoors for the day using four bases. The children are guided by a routine which visits each base but allows them to explore their environment along the way. There are trees to climb, bushes to hide in and netting to climb and roll upon.

This netting was secured between six trees and offered the children challenges to climb, roll, balance and bounce. Our outdoor experience was led by the child at the front with her pedagogue.

The pedagogues are unhurried with the children, they speak calmly and stand back from the intense play to observe and 'see' the learning. They do not carry around Post-it notes and pens making endless observations. After all, the significant moments in a child's progress will be remembered and reflected upon later.

Inside Fredly Kindergarten you can see why children spend their time outdoors; the space is small and used for storage for all the outdoor clothing, complete with drying cupboards bigger than your average fridge freezer. The kitchen is open to children who can take part in preparing food and making bread for breakfast. There is a small area for children to sit at a table and eat their meals but very little in the way of toys to play with compared to what the UK children are exposed to.

Every setting has a wonder cabinet which is used to explore the life cycle of

creatures and items are on view as a reminder of the child's experiences. Children can open the cabinet, handle the items and talk about their memories of that experience.

The Fredly wonder cabinet featured small animal skeletons, a mole preserved in a jar and a variety of smaller creatures like frogs and spiders found on their expeditions to the forest.

Later on that morning the children returned to the main base where a camp fire was started and children continued to explore their environment and play with their peers.

This area on the edge of the camp fire is used extensively for building and creating. The white door entrance housed a wood shop area where one little boy perched on the wood cutting bench worked on a piece of wood with a small saw. No supervision and no safety gloves or goggles in sight; yet he clearly did not need them. These children are shown how to manage risk and are trusted to use the equipment for that purpose only.

After lunch at the motel we discuss outdoor learning, our experiences and reflect upon the morning. A guest from the Viborg Kommune equivalent to our Local Authority visits to discuss with us how the provision is managed across the area. I am amazed at how little emphasis there is on ratio's, floor space, and curriculum plans to name but a few.

The Danish curriculum was established in 2004 and like the *Early Years Foundation Stage* has six areas of learning; Personal development; Social development; Language development; Nature and natural phenomenon; Body and movement; Culture, expression and values.

There is no emphasis on what to plan for, what to observe or how to do this. The settings are valued and trusted to do what is required for each individual child to become a rounded citizen. Documentation is in the form of children's folders full of photographic evidence.

Day three

Two visits today; the morning spent in Høndruphus Nature Kindergarten followed by Loevspring sports and nature kindergarten; two very different settings.

At Høndruphus the leader and the children take us on a journey around their outdoor environment which is part of a working forest. Children here are very aware of the dangers of large machinery using the pathways and alert the group when tractors approach even before we can hear it ourselves.

The children are very in tune with the environment and sounds within it; they race ahead of us and are out of sight but the pedagogues show no anxiety as they know the children are ahead at the waiting tree for us all to catch up, perfectly safe. There are no boundaries or fences to enclose the area and children do not leave the setting. As the leader explained, 'why would they leave if they are having fun here?'

Children experience the seasons in cycles. The older children inform the youngest of changes they see and the peer learning cycle continues

year after year. The children are prepared for the unknown in the outdoors; this gives them the opportunity to cope with the unexpected, which has lifelong considerations.

The children's day starts at 6.30 am with lighting the wood burner in the cottage, making bread for breakfast, folding the laundry and caring for the animals they have onsite. There are no fireguards; children understand it is hot and accidents are unheard of in this environment. It is a homely environment with a sofa for sleepy children to snuggle on when they do arrive early.

At one point I observed two children playing which became physical when a much older peer in the group intervened. He spoke to the older girl and gently moved her to sit on a bench away from the little boy. She sat still and made no attempt to move. I was astonished by the regulation of behaviour these children demonstrated, which was managed between themselves in a civil manner. No need for pedagogue intervention here.

After our packed lunch with the children we visited Loevspring which is one of the very few private kindergartens for children aged two to six-years-old. This is a sports and nature kindergarten, housed next door to a gymnastics college. The children benefit from the college facilities, which range from a climbing wall to swimming pool and gymnasium access.

Most recently Loevspring have created a baby unit for children aged from one-year-old which was built by the parents. The building from start to finish took three weeks and babies attended the finished building immediately

upon completion. Parent involvement in kindergartens is very apparent with parents having a say in who is to be employed within the setting and how the setting is organised. These close relationships work well for the benefit of the children.

Day four

A visit to Lærkereden kindergarten, a setting for children aged one to six-years-old. This was amid a residential area and what surprised me was there was no CCTV anywhere on site or any door control locks or buzzer systems to monitor who is coming in or out. All that stops the children from leaving through the front door is an adult height handle. There was no concern about 'strangers' accessing the building and there had been no incidents since the setting opened in 1956.

The children sleep outdoors in these wooden and metal framed prams; safe and secure with a harness to clip the child into the pram. Children sleep out when it is freezing cold. When asked 'How cold does it have to be before you say it is too cold for the babies to sleep outdoors?', the leader suggested '-20°C.'

All the 'prams' are housed in an open-fronted chalet, often with microphones attached to the ceiling so that if a baby awakes the pedagogues can attend to the children. Could this practice be replicated in the UK? If not, why not?

This setting is the most similar to the ones we have in the UK but still the differences are there like the freedom to be with the children and not have to worry about completing paperwork or risk assessing most aspects of the child's environment.

Day five sees an early flight back to Canada for some, with the rest of us on a mid morning flight back to the UK.

What I particularly gained from this experience was the knowledge that this environment is unique to Denmark and this philosophy cannot be replicated fully in the UK; we have too much structure to the curriculum and too many rules and regulations to abide by.

What we can do is empower our children to be independent, inquisitive learners using the outdoors to build lifelong skills. The provision in Denmark is so much more than being outdoors; it is about creating thoughtful and responsible children who care about each other and who in time will create families and communities that genuinely care about their environment.

Final thoughts

On my return to England I could not help but feel that today's children in our country are so bound by rules and regulations that their freedom to experience life to the fullest is taken away from them. I hope that practitioners who can experience this environment can bring something back for our children. Would I go back to visit? Yes, although this time I might just stay.

Ruth Gill

Ruth has worked with children for 20 years. She has an MA in Early Childhood Education and an EYPS. Ruth now works at Staffordshire University lecturing on the BA in Early Childhood Studies.

For further information on this residential course and others courses available visit the website www.insideoutnature.com or e-mail info@insideoutnature.com