

From The Times
October 6, 2009

Lessons in life at the forest school

Thousands of pupils in Denmark learn tree climbing not times tables. But this carefree life for the under-7s is under threat

By Rosemary Bennett



It's a chilly, breezy afternoon in Klampenborg, an affluent suburb just north of Copenhagen. Two dozen children are playing in woodland that lies off the busy main road that leads into the city. Some are clustered around a teacher playing his guitar, others are running in and out of the oak trees in some made-up game. Empty lunch boxes are stacked by a tree and mats are strewn across the grass, evidence of a recent picnic, although it is not quite picnic weather. The children are well wrapped up in fleeces, jumpers and wellies.

It looks as if it is an afternoon outing for the local children, a break from the classroom and a chance for a little fresh air.

But something quite different is going on here. The wood is the classroom for these children who are pupils at the Klampenborg Skovbo, a forest school. From 8am to 4pm, five days a week, the 25 or so children come to school here, rain, hail or shine. They have their snacks here, eat their lunch here, build dens and play hide and seek. And there is no popping back home to use the loo. All that goes on outdoors too, with plenty of plastic bags on hand to remove the evidence.

The first thing to strike the British visitor is that most are school-age children, not toddlers. They are between 3 and 7 years old. Their peers in the UK would be sitting at desks learning to read, write and add up, with a half hour run around at lunch time if they are lucky.

Denmark prides itself on its late start to formal schooling at 7 years old. But forest schools are very different from the kindergartens that most Danish children attend. Kindergartens focus on similar things to English schools — developing cognitive and motor skills through drawing or solving puzzles, for example. At a forest school, there are no crayons, no drawing paper and no

puzzles — just the great outdoors.

Another unusual element, from the British point of view, is that at this school the teachers, assistants and carers are all men, a rare sight in early years education in the UK. In Denmark, forest schools are not considered radical or some wacky alternative to “proper” education. One in ten schools for this age group are forest schools, making them part of the educational establishment.

Robert Grandahl is the 50-year-old head teacher, an evangelist for the forest school model. He is assisted by three other “social pedagogues”, experts educated to degree standard in child development, and a couple of carers. He joined the forest school only a few years ago having spent most of his career in care homes for teenagers. “This is much better. Less noise for a start,” he says.

There is a curriculum, largely based on the changing seasons, but not one that would pass muster at a British school. It involves learning to keep warm and dry in the snow, as well as building snowmen. In spring the children look for signs of new life in the forest and learn the names of the main plants and trees. In summer they study the wildlife — deer and birds at this particular school. They learn about changing foliage in the autumn and how animals prepare for hibernation.

“Lessons” are free-flowing exchanges between pedagogues and children, or children and children. They are encouraged to take the lead and point things out and ask questions. To an outsider, it all looks much like playing. Everything is heavily skewed towards the children’s social and emotional development.

Grandahl gives this example: “Every morning before we leave the hut all the children get into their outdoor clothes by themselves, even the youngest ones. I know it is difficult for them sometimes, especially in the winter when there are ski-suits and gloves and hats. But we do not rush them. We give them all the time they need. Sometimes it takes over an hour. But it gives the children confidence and independence,” he says.

He believes this environment offers young children everything they need to prepare them for formal school. “They play for much of the day. They get all the skills they need here. They hone their social skills, how to get along with other children, how to take care of other people. We help them to find the tools to solve conflict with one another. They learn to be independent, to take risks and find their own safe limits, and to cope for themselves outside,” he says.

“They also learn about nature, to respect it and be part of it.” As he is speaking the children run off to climb trees together, clearly a highlight for many of them. Their shrieks of laughter ring out as they urge one another to go higher and higher. Health and safety does not get much of a look in here. “We have about one trip to hospital a year. It’s not a big deal for the parents when there are accidents,” Grandahl says.

And what happens when these carefree kids who have never sat at a desk arrive at big school at the age of 7? Where do they find the discipline for comprehension, times tables and endless writing exercises? “We are one of three institutions that feed into the local school. The teachers

there are all very happy with our children. They say all the pupils are socially more advanced and are the most ready to learn,” says Grandahl.

The contrast between Skovbo, which roughly translates as “home in the forest”, and a British primary school could not be more stark. Most children in the UK start formal learning at the age of 4, and are expected to be able to write a basic sentence by the time they are 5. The new Early Years Foundation Stage has 69 targets for literacy, numeracy and even emotional development. British parents are slowly becoming aware of the lack of spontaneous fun in their young children’s lives. Unsupervised outdoor play has largely vanished, replaced by structured after-school classes and weekend visits to indoor soft-play centres or swimming pools. There is no statutory obligation to have outdoor space at the 15,000 registered nurseries, and numerous schools have sold off their playing fields in the past 30 years. Acres of green space is usually on offer only in the independent sector.

There is a forest school movement, but it’s not quite like Denmark’s. On offer are one or two forest nurseries for 2 to 4-year-olds, or days out in the woods for schoolchildren, maybe stretching to a week-long course for teenagers.

The Secret Garden Outdoor Nursery in Fife is the closest Britain comes to a proper forest school. Founded by Cathy Bache, a former childminder, there is no building and the children are out in the woods all day whatever the weather.

Even with the support of the local authority and the community, getting it established has not been plain sailing. It took about four years to open and get to the point of having 90 per cent of places filled. At the most recent inspection, officials were not happy with the “wild toileting” arrangements.

If a movement is building for forest nurseries, it will struggle to break into the highly regulated world of formal schooling in the UK. Sue Palmer, the literacy expert and author of *Toxic Childhood*, thinks this is a shame. Although many parents are starting to question the rigid approach to early years learning in the UK, she believes it would be difficult for parents to allow no formal learning until the age of 7, when everyone else is reading and writing.

She has just returned from a visit to Denmark where she is researching forest schools and found little research on what impact they have on the children’s academic performance later on. “As far as the Danes are concerned, the benefits of forest schools are immeasurable so they don’t try. In fact they have a pretty scathing attitude towards measuring outcomes in general. But there is concern there about the country’s relatively low performance on reading, and questions are being asked about why that is. Danish children don’t do as well as other Nordic countries with the same late start to formal education, such as Finland,” she says.

The latest international study ranks Denmark’s pupils 23rd in the world for reading at the age of 15, compared with Finland in second place. The science ranking is also low, at 28, below countries such as Poland and Slovenia.

“In the end, I think there are things that matter more to Danish society, that they value social and

emotional development very highly, so I'm sure the future of forest schools is safe," Palmer says. Back in Denmark, it's picking-up time at Klampenborg Skovbo. Children and teachers are back at base camp, a rudimentary wooden hut with a small kitchen and office. There are no piles of papers, no files and, most notably, no computer. It is most definitely an Ofsted-free zone.

"We don't really have any paperwork. If we have a problem with a child we talk to the parents. Only if we had some really serious difficulty would we need to keep records or documents," says Grandahl. "We do have an inspection about once a year. They just look at the photographs on the notice board and come outside and watch what we do all day. I think this is one of the big things about our system. We are all well qualified and trusted to do a good job. It's only if people are not well qualified and low paid that you need lots of rules."

Christel Becker is collecting Fiona, 4, one of the minority of girls who attend. Three quarter of the pupils are boys.

Her elder sister went to a normal classroom-based pre-school, and her mother regrets it now. "She was always sick and always complained when she had to go outside and play. Even though it was all based around play, I thought it was all very intense.

"Fiona was quite into girls things, dressing up as a princess and so on. But she gets on with the boys really well and likes all the physical play and is a lot more active than her sister now," she says. "She can draw and paint at home if she wants to, so she isn't missing out. If I could do it over again I would send both girls here."

Sebastian, 4, has just joined the school and says he is loving it already. Word has spread that once or twice a year, there is a mass sleepover in the forest and he cannot wait. "The swings are the best part but I want to go to the shelter and stay the night," he says.

Bernhardt, 5, has been at Skovbo for a year so has seen all the seasons. "Winter is the best time, building things in the snow. It's not so good in the rain. Everything gets wet but we have a few places where we can go and take cover. This summer has been fantastic. We have seen a woodpecker this year and two baby eagles," he says.

Grandahl is concerned that the freedoms of the forest schools are under threat, despite their popularity.

From next year, all schools will be obliged to provide a hot meal for pupils. Here, they all bring a packed lunch. He and his colleagues are trying to work out whether they can use the little kitchen to prepare food, or whether they will have to use outside caterers. Either way it will add to the DKK2,000 (£250) monthly fees. And there are voices in the educational establishment asking whether this slow start to formal education is risking Denmark's economic position in an increasingly competitive global market.

Grandahl hopes parents will resist pressure to change the system. "Opposition, not to forest schools, but to our slow start to formal education, is growing. There are people who think we should not be starting at 7 and want to see what will happen if we bring down the age that

reading and writing begins. I think that would be a great shame.”