

Erasmus + Educational Visit

Denmark

April 2019



In the April 2019 Eatser holiday, teachers visited Aalborg to look at outdoor learning in Denmark. The Educational Visit was funded by Erasmus +.

Erasmus + supports the implementation of the European policy agenda for growth, jobs, equity and social inclusion.

Europe needs more cohesive and inclusive societies, which allow citizens to play an active role in democratic life. Erasmus+ is an important instrument to promote the inclusion of people with disadvantaged backgrounds.

Well-performing education and training systems help to tackle challenges by providing people with the skills required by the labour market and the economy, while allowing them to play an active role in society and achieve personal fulfilment. Reforms in education strengthen progress towards these goals, on the basis of a shared vision between policy makers and stakeholders, sound evidence and cooperation across different fields and levels.



Denmark Research Trip 2019

During the first part of the Easter break this year, I was privileged to lead a trip of a group of education staff to the city of Aalborg in Denmark. We went to look at their educational system and particularly the way in which they incorporate Outdoor Learning into everyday school life, especially early years. I was particularly interested to visit Denmark as they are not only credited with being the instigators of modern 'Forest School', but were judged as the second happiest country on Earth in 2019 behind Finland in the yearly United Nations study (Denmark is always in the top five!).

It is important to understand that culturally Denmark is very different to the U.K. There is not the paranoia or fear of strangers that we have here, that leads to high fences and children being escorted everywhere. This was most obviously seen in the practice of leaving sleeping infants in their prams outside shops, whilst the parents went in shopping or for a coffee. There would of course be a baby monitor left in the pram, but only in case the child woke, not because they were worried someone might take the child, as Anna, one of our university hosts and mother of a toddler told me, 'Such a thought would not enter our heads'.

Our trip started at the University of the North, which has a teacher training department. It's facilities and canteen were excellent. They have just built a school garden area complete with chickens and a greenhouse as part of their outdoor learning training for the students and every school we visited had chickens and extensive growing areas for the children to learn about food production. We had a lecture from Marianne, who lectures on Outdoor studies and is a Nature Guide and in return I gave a short lecture on the English education system, it's challenges and how we use outdoor learning at the present time.

The schools also work very closely with the local community. The fantastic outdoor shelters we saw were on school property, but shared with the community around and visitors to the area. One head teacher told me the local teenagers were expected to come down and use the shelters in the evening, light a fire and have a beer, but that they would tidy up before they left. The shelters had fire pits, stainless steel work tops, running water and sleeping shelves and the Head said they were available for people to stay in. I asked about this and was told that if I was hiking or kayaking in the area, I was welcome, as was anybody, to use the shelter. What about if I was in the shelter and the class came down to use it in the morning I enquired. 'Well, we would say good morning to you' was the reply. This was seen as normal and there was no worry about it. These close links to the



community and local business also mean that the schools have access to funding from the area surrounding the school, which seemed to be very common and forthcoming. We saw many developments, some old and some brand new that were used by the community and educators. One lovely new development was the home of the local fishing club, but they didn't need the facility during the day, so then it was available to the teenagers we saw investigating plastic in the oceans. The room had microscopes, fish tanks, internet access and a white board alongside fishing trophies, taxidermied fish, club badges and cooking facilities.

The education system is more relaxed than here in the U.K. Children start at six years old and often stayed in the same school until they were sixteen. The age groups would have different areas, but all be on the same site. The children are not as closely supervised during their breaks or in many lessons, but are trusted to be doing what they should and this did seem to be the case. Staff and pupils are seen as equally important and their views equally valued. One school we visited for a day



explained that they had got rid of the Head teacher's office and he now worked within an area with other senior and admin staff so that they weren't seen as separated off. They had glass partitions between areas and desks and even a glass conference room so the children could see the staff working together. The culture of respect this generated permeated the whole school. Yes, there were children waving or doing a cartwheel or little dance to show off to the visitors, but this was seen as normal childish behaviour and was answered only with a smile.

The library was also at the heart of the schools we visited, seen as the centre of learning and very important, whereas in the U.K. it is often just put in a little used room or stuck in a corner. Parents were quoted as the child's best resource and the schools had very good home/school links. Children brought laptops from home to use in school and at some point I think the schools were expected to provide a laptop for pupils, but this was a little unclear. Older pupils were also encouraged to use their mobile phones in lessons, using apps to scan products for ingredients, but put them straight away when asked and I didn't see one teenagers sneak theirs out again for a quick look.

All educational sites are part of the municipality as are the schools and teachers are employed by the municipality not the individual schools. This means that the schools are not charged to visit sites as they would be here, by organisations like the Essex Wildlife trust, council, RSPB etc. Schools are offered a visit, by mutual consent and so are expected to go to the natural sites in the area. The staff at these sites are trained teachers and considered very highly. When a teacher has worked for a number of years and is known to have the required knowledge they can become a 'Nature guide'. There are only fifteen Nature guides in the Aalborg municipality and the high regard they are held in shows the importance that outdoor learning has in the Danish curriculum. One teacher, leading a trip, told us, 'Outdoor learning is the most important lesson we teach! How else will we survive?' There is also a more relaxed attitude to health and safety. We saw, and participated with children wading out to sea netting sea creatures to study, forging red hot metal and climbing trees. There were no doubt risk assessments and all the staff were trained, but the respect between staff and children and the expectation of safe behaviour rendered our over protective attitudes irrelevant.



The ideas I have brought back for this trip

- Staff and children are of equal importance and their ideas should be valued
- We need to find ways to develop better respect and trust in our society
- Links between schools and community are so important
- The library should be seen as the centre of information and learning and the skills to access your own learning are the key to unlocking it's power
- Outdoor learning should link up with all curriculum areas
- Links across Europe are so important
- Find ways of using technology like mobile phones within our educational system
- If I could wave that magic wand, I'd rebuild our society from the bottom up



Visit to Aalborg Denmark

April 2019

Monday

Lille Vildmose Centeret.

A wonderful resource for the local community. Maintained by a combination of business sponsorship and local authority funding. This offered opportunities for schools to explore various aspects of outdoor learning with animals and facilities that would be difficult in an individual school. One striking difference I noticed was one activity the children could experience was the skinning butchering, cooking and then eating of animals. The facility also had a "death tower", where the children could observe dead animals and how they provide food for other animals and bugs. All these facilities were also available to the public. Some clever use of technology was used without overpowering the "hands on" experience.

I felt that it would very valuable if children in the UK could experience where their food comes from. I was also very impressed how they combined technology in a subtle and an engaging way, such as pressing a button gives a description of the animal then the sound of the animal can be heard in the distance. We were quite inspired to try this in our own outdoor learning space.

I only regret that we cannot take our children to this inspiring place.

We spent the afternoon at the UCN the local university that does research into the practice and benefits of outdoor learning. We attended a fascinating lecture by Marianne Hald. Marianne was obviously very passionate about the benefits of outdoor learning. Marianne explained how the law in Denmark requires all children to have 45 minutes of movement a day and how this can be outdoor learning. She also explained how outside learning could be a "normal" lesson but using the benefits of the outside classroom. We then presented to the students how we practice outdoor learning in our schools. This I also took a lot from as the four schools have different challenges to their outside learning. The difficulties faced by an inner-city school was enlightening.

Tuesday

Hals School

We were met at bus stop by the delightful principal Per Bodker Andersen. He took us on a tour of their enviable outdoor learning facility before we joined a maths lesson. The children were finding and identifying bugs. When they had identified the bugs, the results were recorded on a bar chart. This was all completed outside. All the children seemed very engaged and confident in the outside environment.

Per explained how the outside area was not just for school use but also for free public use. The funding was from a combination of sponsorship and local authority funding. The area and in fact the whole school had no fencing, so the public could freely and easily use the resource. Per told us that it was used for parties at no cost, he said because it was for everyone then it was also looked after by everyone. We were then taken on a short tour of the school. I noticed that the children seemed to have quite lot of freedom, playing in all different corners of the outside area during their break with what seemed very little adult supervision required. Another obvious difference was no uniform.



A short walk from the school the children were able to explore the harbour looking for and identifying small animals. They recorded the results on their iPads. Each child has their own iPad which had to be purchased by their parents. I felt this made excellent use of the local environment.

Wednesday

Frejlev school

Some older students gave us an engaging talk about how they try to make their school as sustainable as possible. We also joined the students for lunch in the canteen. I was impressed with how lunchtime was handled as there were only two staff members supervising the children, as the children cleaned up after themselves. We were then observed a lesson in the school garden, which was very similar to our own lesson in our school garden. The main difference in their garden was they had chickens and a wooden block where the children would slaughter the chickens. Once again, the children seemed to have a lot of freedom.

Thursday

Lindholm Høje and Rubjerg Knude

The Viking Centre (Lindholm Høje) was very similar to hands on museum experiences in the UK although the children were allowed a little more freedom to work with the blacksmith's tools.

In the evening we had a meal with some of the local teachers. Some of the teachers seemed quite envious of the British system where the children have a little less freedom. Maybe the ideal path is somewhere in between.

Friday

Egholm and Svenstrup School

Egholm was an interesting facility where schools can arrange field trips to explore the nature of the island. We observed a lesson about pollution and how quickly plastics spread in the ocean. The whole facility was available to the local community and we briefly joined a barbecue in one of the purpose-built shelters that are dotted about the island.

Later we joined the after-school tree climbing club at Svenstrup School. The staff taking the club all had a qualification in tree climbing and safety seemed very important. This was a great ending to a very full week.



Denmark 2019

I was so excited to be given the opportunity to visit Denmark to look at Outdoor learning in Early Years.

The trip didn't disappoint. We stayed in the city of Aalborg in the north of Denmark and were given the opportunity to visit a variety of settings and experience the value of learning outside the classroom. We visited schools, education centres and places of interest including a Viking burial site. We were able to feel how the community works together with schools to provide "outstanding" education. They help fund equipment or loan equipment as well as share the facilities and use them for community events.

Although we didn't see Early Years it was still a very insightful trip of the Danish School system and how Outdoor Learning plays a very valuable part in the education of all children. A teacher of senior school children told me that in fact it was "the most important part of education". Outdoor Education focuses on embedding knowledge, physical experiences using all senses, socialising with the community and exciting experiences leaving the children with the awe and wonder and wanting to learn more. We observed a lesson where children discovered the effects sea pollution was having on our living creatures. These teenagers showed a desire to change and seemed to understand the urgency.

What is Outdoor Education?

"Outdoor education is a way of learning, where parts of the school life is placed in the local community. Outdoor education therefore involves regular activity outside the classroom. The working method gives the students the opportunity to use all their senses, so they get personal and concrete experiences in the meeting of local life. This way of learning provides space for subject activities, spontaneous unfolding and play, curious search, imagination, experiences and socialising."

"Outdoor education is about activating all school subjects in an integrated teaching where outdoor and indoor activities are closely related, as the students learn about society in society, nature in nature and local environment in the local community"

Arne Jordet (2009)

In the schools we visited, children seemed to be given the respect and trust to use their time effectively. Children from year 0 onwards (age 6) must have free time to be spent outside the classroom. Children in year 0 do not receive any formal education during their first year, this is viewed as an introduction to school life. Although very informal, children are still to have an hour free time 5 times a week. This is time for them to have some sort of physical movement outside. This is reduced gradually, over the next few years, until it is just 1hour a week. Children are trusted to move around the school grounds during this time maybe having a snack, resting, playing or socialising any way they choose.

Children seemed to have very clear boundaries and knew their expectations. After lunch in one school children had to wipe tables and put up their chairs when they finished. There was very little mess and no waste. Children were proud of their school and took care of it.





We visited

- An “eco centre” where schools and members of the community can visit to learn about the environment and how “bog” land is so important and why native animals are being reintroduced into the area. We were also shown how the exhibits in the centre were used. Everything was tactile or interactive. Danish educators seem to love taxidermy!
- The university
- Several schools to see how outdoor learning is approached
- Museums
- Beach school
- Outdoor education centres
- An after school club



What I observed

- Everyone is equal and is important in their own way.
- Trust - Schools have no fences and the community can use outdoor facilities in the evenings, weekends etc. The rule is to tidy up afterwards.
- Trust – Children are given freedom and trusted to do the right thing.
- Freedom – children have time to move each week and during this time they have to be outside. They are given the trust and freedom to do as they please.
- Community working together with the schools.
- Library is the heart of the school. It is where all learning meets.
- The importance of free time - In year 0 (6yrs) they have an hour every morning and then each year one day is dropped until they have one day a week. This is free time. Also during their lunch break the younger children must be outside.
- Parents are the children’s best resource. We need parents support.
- Older children teach and guide younger children.
- Money – Learning outside the classroom is considered the most important and money is spent to provide a great environment.
- All staff are encouraged to teach lessons outside at least once week. This can be any subject. We observed a maths lesson, data collection.



- There is stress and pressure, staff and children are encouraged to learn skills to help with this. We stumbled across a group making soup and relaxing around a fire.
- ICT to enhance and introduce learning. Short videos being used effectively.

What I will strive to do to move forward in my personal practise

- Use ICT effectively to enhance Outdoor Learning.
- Organise CPD for all staff to give ideas and the confidence to use the outdoors effectively working together to enhance all learning.
- Try to develop a more usable environment so the outdoors will be used more.
- Making a teaching space that is dry (sides for the gazebo) and a social seating area.
- Effective links with the junior school and senior school. Maybe students could come and help our children in the garden.
- Try and reduce food waste.
- Use the library as a valuable resource.
- Help install pride in all our children.
- Look for links in the community to help our children

I came away from the trip feeling really positive that we are doing a great job and that our children are being given amazing opportunities outside the classroom. We still can do more and it is important to never stop improving.

Thank you for giving me this incredible opportunity. It is one that I will reflect on for a long time and hopefully will be able to use to make our children's experiences richer.



Christina Walter

Forest School / Outdoor Learning

Lead LSA