



## Short communication

Increased provision of *udeskole* in Danish schools: An updated national population surveyKaren Barfod<sup>a,b,\*</sup>, Niels Ejbye-Ernst<sup>b</sup>, Lærke Mygind<sup>c</sup>, Peter Bentsen<sup>c</sup><sup>a</sup> University of Copenhagen, Nørre Alle 55, DK 2200, Copenhagen, Denmark<sup>b</sup> VIA University College, Skejbyvej 1, DK 8240, Risskov, Denmark<sup>c</sup> Health Promotion Research, Steno Diabetes Center, Niels Steensens Vej 8, DK 2850, Gentofte, Denmark

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## ABSTRACT

Education outside the classroom (EOTC) has the potential to increase children's learning, physical activity, social relations, school motivation, and well-being. In Denmark, EOTC has undergone a rapid development from a grassroots movement to part of a top-down reform in public schools. It is therefore pertinent to provide an update of the survey conducted by Bentsen et al. (2010) and a baseline to serve as the basis for evaluating future effects of policy intervention on EOTC. Based on a nationwide telephone survey of school leaders, this study shows an increase in Danish school classes practicing EOTC on a weekly or biweekly basis, from at least 14% of public and private/independent schools in 2007 to at least 17.9% of all public schools and 19.4% of all independent and private schools today. While the new school act appears to promote EOTC, we believe that teachers who are not familiar with this practice may lack the necessary competence to practice it. We argue that the widespread use of green space and nearby environment in teaching should be reflected in initial teacher training, connecting educational planning and green space management.

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## 1. Introduction

Education outside the classroom (EOTC) represents a variety of practices (Rickinson et al., 2004). It has the potential to increase children's learning (Fägerstam, 2012; Fiennes et al., 2015), physical activity (Grønningsæter et al., 2007; Mygind, 2007), social relations (Hartmeyer and Mygind, 2016), and well-being (Rickinson et al., 2004; Mygind, 2009). In Denmark and Norway, regular educational activities outside the classroom in the nearby environment and on school grounds are termed *udeskole* and *uteskole*, respectively (Bentsen et al., 2009; Jordet, 2010). Initially, *udeskole* spread with support from individuals and non-governmental organisations (Bentsen et al., 2010). However, more recently, a current Danish educational act has facilitated its further dissemination (DMoE, 2014a,b). This provision has reinforced Denmark as a country of reference for EOTC (Rea and Waite, 2009). Several trends in *udeskole* have been unfolding in Denmark. From the case study "the Rødkilde project" [in Danish, Rødkildeprojektet], describing

and evaluating an EOTC intervention in which a class received the equivalent of 20% of their compulsory education in a forest setting over three years (Mygind, 2007, 2009), a research environment developed around the turn of the millennium, and the first PhD theses explicitly concerning *udeskole* were written (Hyllested, 2007; Bentsen et al., 2010).

Parallel to the development within the academic environment, *udeskole* incipiently became an optional subject in teacher education and amongst nature interpreters and educators. Several development projects funded by the European Union (Barfod et al., 2012) improved practice and education in the field of EOTC amongst teacher students, in-service teachers and educators. These initiatives formed the background for much larger grants and funded projects, e.g. "Development of Udeskole" [in Danish, Udvikling af Udeskole], an approximately 1 million EUR project, funded by The Danish Ministry of Children, Education and Equality and The Danish Ministry of Environment and Food, aiming to develop, communicate and expand practical knowledge in outdoor education, and TEACHOUT (Mygind et al., 2012), a four-year 1.3 million EUR research project studying physical activity, learning and social relationships in pupils in *udeskole* on the one hand, and teachers' intentions and practices on the other. The study included 16 schools, with a total of 19 EOTC classes and 19 non-EOTC parallel classes, and approximately 1000 pupils.

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### 1.1. A school act supporting EOTC

In the first systematic survey of *udeskole* in Denmark from 2007, Bentsen et al. (2010) showed through an electronic questionnaire to all Danish schools that at least 14% (response rate 52%) of all schools had one or more teachers practicing *udeskole*, and that approximately 15% of respondents stated that they planned to start doing so within three years. This indicates that we can expect a higher number of schools practicing *udeskole* at the time the updated survey, seven years later. In congruence with international studies (e.g. Beames et al., 2009; Waite, 2011), barriers connected to funding and limited support from school leaders (e.g. “non-flexible time schedule”) were found to be “limiting” or “very limiting” for EOTC (Bentsen et al., 2010). With the transformation from being a grass-roots movement to receiving policy support (Skoveniskolen, 2011), the structural frames and perceived fewer barriers might enhance the occurrence of EOTC.

Governmental support in Scotland has shown an average increase in outdoor provision within primary school from 2006 until 2014: “... the increase came through schools offering more teacher-led events in school grounds and more residential experience” (Mannion et al., 2015, p. ii). Furthermore, two of the five key barriers to EOTC described by Rickinson et al. (2004) in their literature review are shown to be diminished when the education is located on green school grounds (Dyment, 2005). The provision of green school grounds reduces concerns about the children’s health and safety since it involves no dangers associated with transportation, and can be designed in a safe manner. Furthermore, EOTC on green school grounds is less time-consuming and requires a minimum of resources and support (Rickinson et al., 2004; Dyment, 2005).

Danish public schools have been continuously reformed, most recently in 2013: “The new elementary schools open their doors from the start of the 2014 school year. They will provide students with more time for learning. With new and more varied forms of teaching. And with more focus on academic standards and well-being.” (DMoE, 2014a, p. 4). The first of the three main areas of the reform concerns a “... longer and varied school day with more and improved teaching and learning” (DMoE, 2013, p. 2), and has practical implications for *udeskole*. Thus, the reform creates the structural frames for *udeskole* practice by providing extra scheduled time during which teachers can take the children out of the classroom to a nearby indoor or outdoor environment for educational purposes for more than just one or a few lessons. The content of these longer days is further specified in the reform, and includes exercise and movement for an average of 45 min every day and a concept called “the Open School”, which is intended to strengthen the cooperation between the school and the surrounding community. Thereby, the reform encapsulates a political agenda and provides a structural framework that has the potential to increase the provision of *udeskole*. However, reforms implementing curricular steering documents that enable EOTC do not necessarily initiate or enhance the provision of outdoor learning (Beames et al., 2009) as development projects have shown to do (Waite et al., 2016). The survey was conducted just as the school reform was to be implemented. Therefore, it is unlikely that the reform would have influenced the provision of *udeskole* at the time of the survey. Consequently, this study might serve as a baseline record for the effect of the reform on the provision of outdoor learning.

## 2. Methods

All Danish schools – that is, 1911 public, private and independent schools – were called during spring 2014. We were not able to reach 193 of them, corresponding to 10.1% of the schools. As the survey was conducted close to the 2014 summer break, it was

assumed that the non-respondents were busy. Eight schools (less than 1%) declined to participate. The interview results were revised and corrected for merged and closed schools, and were compared to official lists of pupil numbers from the DMoE database. The schools referred to are primary and secondary, and include public, independent and private schools. The main telephone numbers and school lists were retrieved through the DMoE public database. Lists of school size were sent from DMoE after personal communication with staff, and school size was manually entered into Excel documents along with interview results. Due to the merging and closure of some schools, a slight difference can be noted in the retrieved telephone and school size lists; only schools appearing on both lists were included in the results. At least three calls were made to each school in order to contact the head teachers before the school was registered as non-respondent. Children aged six attend the compulsory school at level 0. At the age of 16, children can choose either gymnasium (i.e. secondary/high school) or continue in class 10 before attending the gymnasium or vocational school.

After a brief introduction to the survey’s aim and concepts, head teachers were interviewed by two research assistants using a structured quantitative questionnaire regarding the schools’ provision (i.e., “Are there one or more classes practicing *udeskole* this school year at your school?”), practice (i.e., “How many classes at your school’s different levels practice *udeskole* this year?”) and “How often is *udeskole* practiced in these classes?”) and experience (i.e., “How long have you worked with *udeskole* at the school?”) of *udeskole*. In this study, a school is deemed to practice *udeskole* when at least one of its classes regularly (that is, at least half a day every second week) works outside the classroom. “Outside the classroom” is defined as the school’s nearby environment (e.g. green school grounds, school yard, or sports area), cultural settings (e.g. museum or church), nature (e.g. forest or beach), or society (e.g. police station or factory). Responses were recorded as discrete answers, i.e. yes or no. Both public and private/independent schools were divided in three equal-sized groups: small = 6–184 pupils, medium = 185–469 pupils, and large 470–1174 pupils. Data were analyzed using Pearson’s Chi-square test in SPSS 18.

## 3. Results

We find 232 public schools ( $n_{\text{total}} = 1294$ ) and 104 ( $n_{\text{total}} = 537$ ) private/independent schools practicing *udeskole* Table 1. There is no significant difference ( $p = 0.524$ ) between the occurrence of *udeskole* in public and private/independent schools, nor small, medium, and large schools ( $p = 0.063$ ).

The results show (Fig. 1) that the provision of *udeskole* is unequally distributed on different class levels, being highest at primary and lower secondary levels and declining with the children’s age.

The frequency of *udeskole* varied, with most classes on Levels 0–3 practicing it one day a week outside, dropping to half a day every second week as the most common approach as the pupils grew older Fig. 2. An exception is Class 10, where, although *udeskole* is limited, more classes practice it one day a week. With respect to duration, the private schools reported to have been working with *udeskole* for 6.2 years (mean, range 30–1 years), and the public schools reported to have been working with it for 5.7 years (mean, range 25–1 years).

## 4. Discussion

In 2010, through an electronic questionnaire Bentsen showed that in 2007 at least 14% of all Danish schools had one or more classes practicing *udeskole*. Furthermore, approximately 15% of the respondents claimed they were contemplating starting *udeskole* in

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