



I Ur och Skur Utsikten A Swedish Outdoor Primary School



Report by Juliet Robertson
December 2008

I Ur och Skur Utsikten: an Outdoor Primary School

Utsikten School is one of eighteen “Rain or Shine” outdoor schools that exist in Sweden. This case study illustrates some ideas and ways of working from a school where outdoor learning is a key part of its ethos.



Figure 1: The path beyond the tree house is the boundary

Utsikten School was set up by three teachers, Annelie Hamrin, Susanne Drougge and Harriet Guter in 1994. They decided to extend the principles of the nursery outdoor schools into the primary age group. Harriet remained the principal of the school until August 2008. Last year the school was inspected and received a very good report.

The setting is very open. Nearby is a meadow, various sporting facilities, including a gym hall, and a lake. The nearest forest is 2km away and the children always walk there when having their weekly day in the forest. Like many schools in Sweden there are no boundary fences. The children know exactly where they are allowed to play and generally this is strictly adhered to.

The school has 80 pupils grouped into three purpose built houses. Grades 1 and 2 are based in the Meadow House. Grades 3 and 4 use the Forest House and Grades 5 and 6 have the Alpine House. Each house is hexagonal with an entrance area and five rooms coming off the central gathering room.



Figure 2: View from the Forest House central room

Every room has a specific function, e.g., arts and crafts, maths, language, nature study and science. The rooms are simply furnished, mostly with Ikea furniture! All have a door to the outside areas. In many classes there is comfy seating in the window areas where children are frequently found reading.



Figure 3: The entrance area

The organisation of resources is just as important, if not more so, in an outdoor school. The cloakrooms are in the main entrance to each house. Pull-on slippers are provided for visitors to put on over their outdoor shoes, in order to keep the house clean. Each child has their own pegs and baskets for their outdoor gear, backpacks and spare clothing.

Each teacher has their own basket of resources for taking outside. This includes a register for the morning and various favourite items personal to each teacher. Each child has their own box of pens and pencils for work, which are kept in a basket beside the door, along with homemade clipboards which are larger than factory made ones. The reason for this is that young children find it easier to work on larger clipboards and they provide a flat space on the outdoor tables which have slats. Portable magnetic whiteboards are also right next to the doors. Seating mats are stored beside each classroom's outdoor area.



Figure 4: Ready-to-go resources



Figure 5: An outdoor shop for maths

Like the I Ur och Skur outdoor nurseries, there is a commitment to keeping the adult ratios high at approximately 1 adult for every 8 children. As a consequence a lot less money is available for resources. If a teacher is absent through sickness or course attendance, then parents are expected to assist in covering the classes! Not all adults are teachers. Some are classroom assistants and others have been hired to meet the additional needs of specific children. A PE teacher and English teacher are employed to teach all classes.

The school has five laptops for the older children, which are used as and when needed rather than in timetables slots. The staff feel that the children have plenty of opportunities to use computers and similar technology at home and it is not necessary at the primary ages to organise formal ICT sessions.



Figure 6: Personal planning time

In terms of the curriculum, most of the time is spent learning and playing outdoors. The day begins at 8.30am and the finishing time varies between 2pm and 3.15pm. Children are taught for 19 hours per week. Interestingly many children remain at school playing until 5pm. The staff are expected to supervise the children during this time. However staff get time off at various times during the day to plan and prepare.

Swedish, English and maths are compulsory subjects. The school does not use a reading scheme. The children learn to read through real books and staff have developed their own literacy programmes to make the most of the outdoors. Harriet feels that this makes reading less competitive as children don't track their position by a reading scheme. It also saves money as schemes are expensive.



Figure 5: Maths resources

Likewise in maths, textbooks are not used until Grade 5. The staff have developed their own scheme. Again this is linked to working outdoors and much of the materials are Montessori based.

A big emphasis throughout the school is on the use of personal planning books by children of all ages. These are used several times during the week to ensure the children know what they are learning and have personal targets appropriate to their age and ability. The targets are crossed off the list as the week progresses and the children complete the work.

Beautiful plant displays indicate targets in maths and Swedish which children are expected to achieve. The children really like these and frequently refer to them for guidance when undertaking their weekly planning.

Displays are also present on the walls outside. The children's work and information is laminated and mounted outside.



Figure 8: Maths Target Display



Figure 9: Grade 5/6 outdoor classroom

Health, expressive arts and technology activities are integrated into other curriculum areas. For example children create letters from cones, leaves and other natural materials outside before going indoors to paint letters as part of learning their alphabet. The science is predominantly nature based. However every subject is taught outdoors at least once per week.

The school grounds were interesting. There were no boundaries. The official turning area for cars had been cordoned off with a bench. Games had been painted on the asphalt and it had become an additional outdoor space.

A lot of children cycled to school. The trees made a natural bicycle rack - a cheap and eco-friendly solution.



Figure 11: The turning space



Figure 12: The outdoor seating area for Grades 1 and 2

The use of logs rather than expensive seating structures bought from a commercial company is another example of a low cost eco-friendly solution to a need. As the logs degrade, they can be replaced. The degrading logs can rot and become a home for minibeasts, moss and fungi.

The dining area has seating inside and out. Like the classrooms, the indoor dining room has doors that access the outdoor area.



Figure 13: The outdoor dining area



Figure 14: The recycling area and storage space

There is plenty of outdoor storage space, that children and adults can easily access. It is worth considering the layout inside a shed, such as the best place for shelves and hooks. Also think about the position of a shed. For example, gardening tools beside a garden area rather than at the other side of a school.

Much of the furniture is simple and made of second hand materials. Parents donated materials and helped build play structures, such as these rope swings. The children have plenty to do. For example there was table tennis set, chess table, garden area, sandpit, blackboards and lots of decking to sit on. It allows for a continuation of free play that happens in the pre-schools.



Figure 15: Free play outside after school



Figure 16: Two children choosing to complete their planning work outside.

It was wonderful to see children outside working and playing. They were clearly taking responsibility for their own learning in a very child-centred way and all were doing different activities. Some of these were structured with adult support. Other activities were child led. Whilst groups were evident, whole class indoor desk activities were not! The school had a calm, relaxed and focused atmosphere and it was a pleasure to be there!

Acknowledgements

This report was compiled by Juliet Robertson, Creative STAR Learning Company, as part of her 2008 Winston Churchill Travelling Fellowship where she visited USA, Canada, Sweden and the Czech Republic to find out about outdoor technologies for children . The Winston Churchill Trust operates Travelling Fellowships as a living memorial to Sir Winston Churchill. More than 100 awards are made each year to enable UK citizens from all walks of life to travel abroad and bring the benefits of their experience back to the UK. For more information visit: www.wcmt.org.uk.

A warm thank you goes to:

- Siw and Magnus Linde who founded the first Swedish forest school and organised the programme of visits.
- Harriet Guter, former principal of Utsikten Primary School for checking the accuracy of this document.
- Rosaleen Joyce, who put me in touch with Siw and Magnus and whose books and publications serve to inspire Early Years educators throughout the UK.

If you are looking for support, training, advice or resources about increasing the quality and quantity of outdoor learning happening in your school, contact Juliet Robertson via her website www.creativestarlearning.co.uk

Further ideas and inspiration can be found on Juliet's blog "I'm a teacher, get me OUTSIDE here!" <http://creativestarlearning.blogspot.com>