

THE WORLD

BY RICK NOACK

SAMSO, DENMARK — On a balmy Monday afternoon earlier this month, Sebastian Lukas, 27, watched from across a clearing as his third- and fourth-grade students whittled branches into spearheads with sharp knives.

His gaze turned to another group, who were supposed to be working on math problems. Two students, perched on a log, scrambled to produce their textbooks, just in time to look busy.

Lukas began the year teaching in a classroom like any other, in Samsø Frie Skole, a school on the Danish island of Samsø. But when the novel coronavirus pandemic struck, the school, like many across the country, embraced a new way to hold certain classes: almost entirely outdoors.

Instead of sitting at desks, Lukas's students wander through a rambling woodland, lush with trees and crisscrossed by dirt tracks.

As countries grapple with how and when to restore students to classrooms, a growing number of schools have embraced outdoor learning — especially in the highly regarded Nordic education systems, where the model had already begun to gain momentum.

When many Danish schools reopened in April, Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen urged teachers to allow for as much time outdoors as possible, as a precaution against the spread of the virus. In Norway, education and health officials also recommended that classes meet outside.

Out of nearly 200 Norwegian schools willing to respond to a recent survey by researchers Ulrich Dettweiler and Gabriele Lauterbach, the results of which have not yet been published, more than half said they had begun to provide more outdoor classes. Researchers in Denmark said they had observed a similar trend.

Some countries, including Germany, have a tradition of outdoor preschools and kindergartens, which have begun to catch on in the United States as well. The pandemic may drive more countries to experiment with the model for older students.

With educators and policymakers around the world watching with interest Denmark's relatively smooth reopening, advocates for outdoor schooling say they hope newfound acceptance of the approach will outlive the pandemic.

'It's better to be here'

Samsø, a sparsely populated, energy self-sufficient and carbon-neutral 44-square-mile island that was once a meeting point for Vikings, is a windy, hour-long trip by ferry from the mainland village of Hou.

The Samsø Frie Skole — a private school funded, like many others in Denmark, in large part through public grants — first pondered the move outdoors long before the pandemic. Coronavirus accelerated those plans.

The new, forested area, surrounded by grain fields, includes old farmhouses, where students will be able to take shelter in bad weather, according to principal Anna Mattsson.

"It's going to be a combination"

of indoors and outdoors, she said. The aim is to have students learn outside several times a week, with fluctuations based on weather.

No one at the school said they were worried about the impending winter.

"We're used to it," said Rikke Ulk, the chair of the school's support association. "It's a matter of dressing well."

Until the new buildings are ready, students must walk or bike more than a mile from their old

classrooms to their new forest school. Teachers haul some of the younger children in carts affixed to bicycles.

Milling about before one such shuttle ride on a September morning, Noa, 11, said she liked the new school setup.

It's "just so beautiful — it makes me happy," she said.

After the 10-minute trip, students gathered in clusters beneath the trees, some wielding a book in one hand and a branch in

the other. As the day progressed, teachers incorporated the surroundings into their classes. Children crouched to examine beetles and other insects during a biodiversity lesson.

During a physical education class, older students hoisted stones.

Much of the classwork continued as it would have indoors. During breaks, students played chess.

Some said they preferred cer-

tain aspects of learning inside.

"Sometimes, it's better just being in the classroom, so we can focus," said Sally, 12.

Cian, 9, an aspiring cook or robot engineer, disagreed. "It's better to be here," he said, holding his math book. "It's cozier."

Lukas said outdoor class works better for some students than others. "But some kids who have a hard time sitting love to come out here," he said, and some students who struggled to focus on math

indoors have shown aptitude outside.

The outdoor advantage

Researchers say outdoor teaching, implemented carefully, can have benefits.

"Educators have observed that children are calmer in the forest," Natalija Gyorek, a forest school advocate in Slovenia, said in an email.

Students taught outside display higher motivation levels than their peers in classrooms, said Karen Barford, a professor at VIA University College in Denmark who studies outdoor schooling. Those who study outside for at least two hours a week also tend to achieve somewhat better reading test scores, according to one study, she said.

One of the most commonly accepted Danish arguments in favor of outdoor schooling centers on health benefits, said Mads Bolling, a researcher at the Steno Diabetes Center Copenhagen. Students are able to avoid the adverse affects of sitting still all day.

But he cautioned that potential disadvantages are not yet fully understood, and some research suggests outdoor schooling appears to provide the most for children who are already highly motivated.

For teachers, the switch to outdoor learning can be challenging, too, said researchers Dettweiler and Lauterbach. "You need to practice," said Dettweiler.

A survey of hundreds of Norwegian schools conducted by Dettweiler and Lauterbach raised questions about whether outdoor schooling might actually make social distancing more difficult. Some teachers said it was difficult to "separate the children when they're outside," said Lauterbach.

The shadow of winter

For many teachers in Denmark, the benefits to outdoor learning appear to outweigh the downsides, Dettweiler said. Danish and Norwegian professionals active in the field said they have received a growing number of inquiries from colleagues around the world.

Even if outdoor class may not be practical for all schools or in all climates, said Bolling, it is not an all-or-nothing proposition. Samsø Frie Skole plans to be flexible about which classes meet outside and which do not, and other schools can modulate accordingly.

The late-summer months were a good time to begin the experiment, all seem to agree. When the school day comes to an end, there's no bell. Instead, Lukas whistled, summoning his students and sending them back to the old school building.

Sally, 12, who had expressed reservations about outdoor work, was among the slowest to pack up after her class had ended. She did not want to leave.

She said she was not afraid of spending more time than usual outdoors during the coming months of cold.

"It will be fun," she said, "to experience nature in four seasons."

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In Denmark, forest is the classroom

Coronavirus pandemic drives growing movement toward teaching children in outdoor settings



Since April, students at the Samsø Frie Skole on the Danish island of Samsø have spent their days learning outside in a rambling woodland dotted with old farmhouses. Lessons often make use of the natural setting, such as a physical education class in which students hoist stones or math studies where children alternate with whittling. Teachers haul the younger kids to the forest in carts attached to bicycles.

PHOTOS BY MAJIA HITTI/GETTY IMAGES

DIGEST

ETHIOPIA Media mogul faces terrorism charges

Ethiopia has filed terrorism charges against Jawar Mohammed, a prominent media mogul and opposition politician from the Oromo ethnic group, the attorney general's office said on Saturday.

Jawar, founder of the Oromia Media Network and a member of the Oromo Federalist Congress party, was arrested in June amid the widespread unrest that followed the assassination of

popular Oromo musician Hachalu Hundessa.

Jawar was instrumental in protests that brought Abiy Ahmed to power in 2018. But he became a critic of the prime minister, accusing him of failing to protect Oromo interests.

Jawar and 22 other activists, including Oromo opposition leader Bekele Garba, face charges relating to the violation of anti-terrorism laws, telecom fraud laws and firearms laws, the attorney general's office said. Those charged also include journalists and scholars.

— Reuters

Libya's prime minister doesn't back oil deal with rebels:

Libyan officials say Prime Minister Fayez Serraj, the leader of the U.N.-supported government, does not support a deal with his primary rival in the country's civil war to lift a months-long blockade on its vital oil trade. The deal with Khalifa Hifter, whose eastern-based forces led a failed year-long siege to take the capital, Tripoli, appeared to have been spearheaded by the deputy prime minister, Ahmed Matiq, and emerged days after Serraj said he planned to hand over power by the end of October.

Peruvian president survives impeachment vote:

Peruvian President Martín Vizcarra survived an impeachment vote Friday night, as the country copes with one of the world's worst coronavirus outbreaks. The 78-to-32 decision to oppose impeachment came with 15 lawmakers abstaining. A two-thirds majority was needed.

Police arrest 8 in deadly gas explosion in Bangladesh: Eight people have been arrested in connection with a deadly gas explosion this month at a mosque outside the Bangladeshi capital,

Dhaka. Four engineers and four other officials employed by the state-run gas distribution company Titas were charged with alleged negligence in the Sept. 4 explosion that cost 33 lives, a police spokesman said.

India says arrested militants have Pakistani al-Qaeda ties:

India's National Investigation Agency says it has arrested nine al-Qaeda militants who were planning attacks in several locations including the capital, New Delhi. The NIA said the individuals were "associated with Pakistan sponsored module of al-

Qaeda." Pakistan's foreign office did not respond to a request for comment.

Storm kills 2, brings flooding to Greece:

At least two people were killed as a hurricane-like storm pounded parts of central Greece, creating flooding that led to the rescue by emergency workers of more than 600 people. The country's firefighting service said Saturday that it had fielded almost 2,500 calls from trapped residents in central and western Greece or about removing fallen trees that were blocking roads.

— From news services