



I UR OCH SKUR “RAIN OR SHINE”



SWEDISH FOREST SCHOOLS

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Creative STAR 
Learning Company

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Introduction

In October 2008 I had the opportunity to visit Lidingö Island, the birthplace of I Ur och Skur – Swedish forest schools. I visited several forest schools in and near Stockholm and met more than 30 teachers who work in these schools, along with several parents.

Background

Skogsmulle was a concept developed by Gösta Frohm in 1957. He was involved at a national level with the Association for Promotion of Outdoor Life (Friluftsrämjandet) and came from a military background. “Skog” means “wood” and “Mulle” is a fictional character who helps children learn to love and care for nature. It is estimated that 1 in 4 Swedes have attended Skogsmulle activities in their childhood. Friluftsrämjandet offer comprehensive training for adults wishing to become Skogsmulle leaders lasting a minimum of four days.

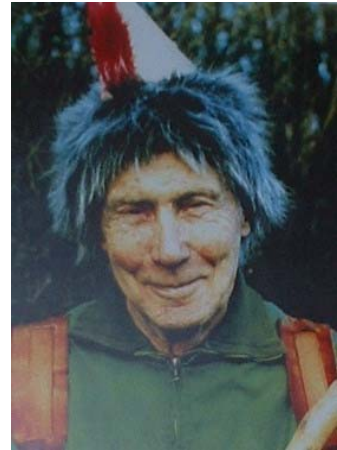


Figure 1: Gösta Frohm dressed as Mulle

Mulle is a cheery innocent character and Frohm created stories which capture young children’s imagination and enable them to learn about the natural environment. Skogsmulle has friends who are also introduced. Laxe helps children learn about water. Fjällfina introduces mountains and high places. The newest and coolest is Nova, who is an alien from another planet, similar to Earth, but totally unpolluted. She arrives in a dragonfly rocket and skis down to Earth on a sunbeam. Leaders frequently dress up as one of the characters or use puppets to engage children in the exploration of nature.



Figure 2: Lida open recreation area

Gösta Frohm lived in Lida, an open recreation area, just south of Stockholm. In this place, there are fun nature trails set up for each character, with beautiful visual signs. The activities are simple, based on the introductory story for each character and child-centred. Parents and leaders can buy a guide booklet to the trails. Nova's path culminates at the top of a small hill beside Frohm's now derelict cottage. There is a wheelchair accessible rocket shelter and a fine view.



Figure 3: The signpost indicating the Mülle path

The History of Forest Schools (I Ur och Skur) in Sweden

In October 2008 I had the privilege of meeting Siw Linde, the founder of the first forest school in Sweden in 1985. Siw started out as a pharmacist. When her children were born, she became involved in a Skogsmulleskola in the Seventies and underwent the training to be a Skogsmulle leader.

As she enjoyed this role, she retrained as a nursery nurse. At the time, pharmacist jobs were scarce so this career change made good sense. In 1980 she started working in a very traditional nursery and continued her weekend work as a Skogsmulle leader. Siw noticed how effective the Skogsmulle school was. The children loved the characters, stories, songs, games and simply being outdoors. She wondered about the possibilities of this approach being integrated into a nursery school.



Figure 4: Siw and Magnus Linde

With support and encouragement from her husband, Magnus, she and another nursery worker, Susanne Drougge, found a house on Lindingö that the owners were willing to rent and in 1985 she opened the first “I Ur och Skur” school which means “Rain or Shine” with six children and several principles:

- The pedagogical approach is that children's need of knowledge, activities and togetherness is fulfilled by being in nature.
- Children learn how to be in nature and how to protect it. This is achieved by having fun together in the forest, fields, mountains and on lakes in all kinds of weather, all year round.
- Cooperation with the children's parents maintains quality outdoor activities.
- Nature is not indestructible. By improving knowledge about nature and understanding of the interrelationships in nature, this can change people's attitudes.

The pedagogy is based on the conviction of the founders that “children receive help in their development from things found in nature. They learn to crawl, jump, balance and climb on fallen trees and mossy rocks. This is an ideal playground. Children get a feeling of togetherness as they listen to fairy tales under a tree whilst sharing a picnic. Their senses are trained by tasting, smelling, touching, looking, listening and comparing anything that can be found in a meadow, woodland or lake. Curiosity and an inquiring mind soon become directly stimulated when children are outdoors. Every caterpillar, beetle or flower can provoke a cluster of questions and thoughts. All this helps children in I Ur och Skur schools to attain a built-in feeling for nature which will last a lifetime.”



Figure 5: Tree climbing is a popular activity in all I Ur och Skur schools

The process was not smooth. It took more than eighteen months to overcome the bureaucratic hurdles and learn to deal with the red tape involved in setting up a nursery. The neighbours objected strongly and vociferously about a nursery being established in their residential community.



Figure 6: I Ur och Skur school grounds

Also in the beginning, the nursery received no state funding. The parents were very supportive, such as making play objects and permanent shelters in the forest nearby. Although the I Ur och Skur schools are now funded on a per pupil basis in line with other schools, the tradition of high parental involvement and commitment continues. For example, in one school, parents gather to repair and improve the wooden equipment in the forests one Saturday per term. There are other jobs such as cleaning and maintaining the equipment inside and outside the houses.

Siw believes that the strong parental support is a key factor in the success of an I Ur och Skur. Almost all parents attended a Skogsmulle as children and are firmly committed to the underpinning principles. For example, one parent, Ina Müller, is a climate change lawyer. Her oldest child is a boisterous, energetic boy. She feels that the outdoor life suits his personality and interests. Although she was not wildly enthusiastic about all the family walks with her own parents, now she sees the benefits of her childhood outdoor lifestyle. There are positive spinoffs for the parents. Friendships develop and the forest equipment can be used for birthday parties instead of an indoor venue! The parental community is strong.



Figure 7: Ina Müller and her youngest child who will attend when he is two years old

By the spring 1986 more than twenty children were enrolled and as the word spread, journalists and educators came to find out more. Siw and Susanne realised that it would be helpful to provide courses for teachers interested in establishing forest schools. They began doing this in order to ensure that there was a cohesive and uniform approach to outdoor nurseries. In the mid-Nineties, I Ur och Skur schools were adopted by the Friluftsförbundet organisation.

Since 1985 more than 180 I Ur och Skur nursery schools have been established and 18 primary schools. All are run in different ways but adhere to the same principles. Friluftsförbundet oversee the I Ur och Skur schools. All staff must be members and the school pays a fee to cover administrative costs and courses. Friluftsförbundet activities such as skiing, skating and Skogsmulle methods are routinely incorporated into the life of all I Ur och Skur schools and nurseries.

Siw continued to work at her original I Ur och Skur Mulleborg school. In 1990, after completing a part time distance learning course, she became a qualified nursery teacher. In 2002, Siw retired but she continues to have an active involvement in I Ur och Skur Foundation and regularly hosts international visitors wishing to gain first-hand experience of Swedish forest schools.

Siw has been amazed at the interest shown in the I Ur och Skur schools. The approach has been established in Japan, Germany, Russia, Finland, Latvia and Norway. In Japan there are now more than 2000 Skogsmulle leaders and over 100 courses have been run for interested adults. In 2002 the first International Skogsmulle Symposium was held. This 2-day event included seminars and workshops. It was so successful that the Symposiums have been held every third year since then.



*Figure 8: The entrance to Mulleborg I Ur och Skur.
The banner states "All children have the right to be outdoors."*

The Expansion of Skogsmulle Activities

Skogsmulle is, in fact, a specific programme of activities for 5 and 6 year olds. They venture into the forests with their friends and leaders and occasionally even meet Skogsmulle himself! However, demand from parents and children led to increased provision for other ages groups:

Skogsknopparna is for 1 and 2 year olds. This allows for initial exploration of nature, parents and children together with the leaders.

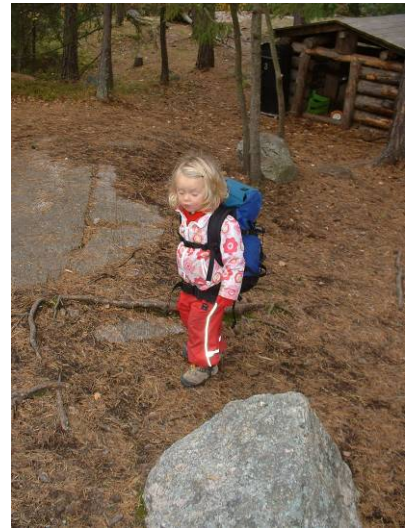


Figure 9: A two-year old in school

Skogsknyttarna (ladybirds) is the sessions for 3 and 4 year olds. Playing, singing and discovering are all part of the fun. Jill Westermarck, a pre-school lecturer at Stockholm University and Ulla Wihlborg who runs a private I Ur och Skur (Rain or Shine) day care centre developed the programmes for the Under-5's age groups.

Strovarna is for 7 to 10 year olds. They make excursions, arrange fireplaces and have organised gatherings.



Figure 10: Parents have built most of the toys and structures in the school grounds

Frilufsarna is for 11 to 13 year olds. They have longer walks, canoeing or skiing trips together with their leaders. This sometimes involves overnight camping.

TVM is the outdoor group for the 14 year olds and beyond. They plan their own trips into the woods, mountains or on water.

Thus, perhaps unusually amongst forest schools, the Swedish I Ur och Skur schools have a specific structure based on these activities. Furthermore these activities can be complimented at weekends as part of the Friluftsförbundet activities run by volunteers.

Features of I Ur Och Skur Schools

As a consequence of visiting several I Ur och Skur schools and nurseries, I learned several interesting facts:

- 1) I Ur och Skur schools have an indoor place. If the weather is really atrocious or the temperature falls below -10°C then the children will spend up to three hours inside at some point between 8.30am and 2.30pm which is the standard day. However over the course of the year, 80% of the time is spent outdoors.

- 2) The forest is not the only outdoor space used. Many schools have a large outdoor play area beside the house. Whilst forests are important, other habitats provide important opportunities for playing and learning:

- Meadows – necessary for learning to ski
- Ponds and lakes – for skating
- Orchards – for collecting fruit
- Open hills – for sledging, etc.



Figure 11: Rope on rock in the school grounds

- 3) Outdoor adventure activities are explored in various non-competitive ways at all ages. Skiing, canoeing, sledging, orienteering, pole walking are to name but a few activities routinely undertaken by children attending I Ur och Skur schools. These activities are an integral part of all schools programmes.
- 4) Bushcraft is not the dominant activity at any age. Learning through play and having fun takes place in many ways. There were structured, adult-led activities including:
 - Literacy activities, e.g. looking for alphabet shapes in nature
 - Numeracy, e.g. making patterns for a partner to copy using leaves, cones, etc.
 - A “star hunt” of physical, literacy and numeracy activities
 - Listening to stories
 - Finding out how worms help decompose leaves
 - Lots of songs and rhymes
 - Cooperative games
 - Circle times
 - Memory games using natural objects
 - Outdoor adventure activities

- 5) There are no toilets in the outdoor areas. If children are on walks or activities away from the house, the Swedish advice is to count seven bushes and go there! Excrement is always managed carefully and buried.



Figure 12: Caring adults make all the difference

- 6) The I Ur och Skur have a tradition of valuing a high degree of interaction between interested adults and the children. So head teachers consistently spent money on staffing rather than materials and equipment. The I Ur och Skur primary school had 80 children and 5 laptop computers. A lot of resources were purchased at Ikea or have been made by staff, children and parents.

- 7) The children, even 2-year olds, carry their own gear which includes a seating mat, snack, healthy lunch and any toy or treasure collected when out on walks or all day trips.
- 8) The schools have a similar feel to outdoor centres. There are lots of natural materials used indoors for display purposes and various structured or unstructured activities. There is more information about nature in the form of books and laminated pictures and photos for using outdoors. There are more toys such as jigsaws and soft toys with a nature theme. There are significantly fewer plastic toys and much more wood.
- 9) There are several consistencies between the schools' outdoor areas. No sand pit has a cover. This was the situation in all Swedish schools, I Ur och Skur or traditional. Lots of natural shrubs, trees and plants are present in all schools too. The traditional schools have asphalt, a space for football and some expensive play equipment. The schools do not have walls plastered with large scale displays and information making many of the rooms feel larger and calmer.



Figure 13: Children playing after school

Research into effectiveness of Swedish forest schools



Figure 14: Child with her “dogs”

Shimizu, M. et al (2002) investigated the contribution of “Skogsmulle” activities to the formation of environmental awareness and environmental literacy in Ichijima, a Japanese town. They found that children who had experienced Mulle activity within the town acquired better environmental awareness and literacy and participated more positively in community activity.

From this they suggest that nature-based activities are useful particularly at the pre-school age for environmental learning.

Grahn et al (1997) studied children’s behaviour (how they play, how often they are outside, their play routines, etc.), development of motor function and powers of concentration during the course of a year at two day nurseries, one an I Ur och Skur and the other a traditional nursery in new, spacious premises. This is a summary of their findings:

At the I Ur och Skur nursery:

- The sickness absence difference between the nurseries was over 5%. This was consistent and uniform throughout the year with the I Ur och Skur having the higher attendance rate.
- The children from the I Ur och Skur nursery had better concentration. This was verified statistically.
- The I Ur och Skur children had better motor function. To climb and play on uneven ground or to play only on flat ground without trees appears to have a pronounced influence on children.



Figure 15: Sliding down rock

- The I Ur och Skur children played more imaginatively. The games were more varied. The games had a beginning and end which the children themselves decided upon in most cases. Because objects could be left outside the games were able to continue for more than one day.

At the traditional nursery:

- The dominant activity was cycling. Play seldom got to a stage where roles and action had a lot of scope. Children who wanted to be on their own went to the outer stages of the playground but would be caught up in the cycling activity.
- Play was interrupted either by other children who disturbed it, or by the staff. Nothing could be left outside and cleaning up was an important element.
- The playground was increasingly the only outdoor place where the children spent their time owing to cutbacks in money and staffing.
- Staff stepped in more to intervene when conflict arose. Diary entries showed that the staff often felt inadequate.



Figure 16: Staff facilitate the children's learning

Benefits of forest schools

"It is necessary to be outside for our brains to be stimulated from the flow of sound, light, shapes and colours that nature provides. Especially between the ages of 3-6, when the energy flow in the human brain is at its greatest." David Ingvar, Professor of Neurophysiology, Brain Researcher.

"Outdoor activities reduce the levels of stress hormones among children aged six in primary schools. High cortisone levels indicate stress, and stress has a documented bad influence on memory capacity. Outdoor activities give better learning in a pure logical sense." Anders Szczepanski, Director National Centre for Outdoor Environmental Education, Linköping University.

“The brain wants to have fun! A little child doesn’t have to go to school to be able to learn to walk and talk. Movement is pure joy. Outdoor activities are especially important for children who don’t fit in the traditional classroom. The outdoor pedagogical classroom values, activates and uses other abilities rather than the verbal. I call this outdoor pedagogy for good health.” Nina Nelson, Senior Lecturer and Senior Physician, Children’s Clinic, Linköping University Hospital.



Figure 17: Looking at acorns

“When it comes to concentration capacity, the children within I Ur och Skur pre-schools are more than twice as focused as children within a normal pre-school. Their motor skills are better, they are less frustrated, restless and sick.” Patrick Grahn, Senior Lecturer, Institution of Landscape Planning, National Agriculture University of Sweden.

I Ur och Skur staff perspectives

As well as visiting four I Ur och Skur schools I was lucky enough to meet staff from other “Rain or Shine” schools and Friluftsrämjandet volunteers who attended a presentation I gave about outdoor learning in Scotland. This led to some interesting discussions. When I asked the attendees to tell me their favourite activity with children, this led to a wide variety of responses, which give a broad overview of what happens in forest schools:

- Skiing and sailing with the children
- Lighting a fire and cooking simple food
- Climbing hills with ropes
- Using the juices in plants to create colourful art pictures
- Canoeing and walking
- Climbing up trees and on fallen branches
- Playing games where natural objects are held, felt and described
- Simply relaxing and being with the children
- Doing a litter pick-up
- Having a different nature theme each week
- Playing “Moose and Forest”. It can take 3 hours.
- Playing with water in early spring



Figure 18: A sense of wonder

The staff cited the following equipment as most useful when working with children outdoors:

- A stress ball
- String
- Rope
- Matches (for playing games and doing art activities as well as lighting fires)
- Sheet
- Knife
- Magnifying glass
- Blanket
- Food
- Something to sit on
- First aid bag
- A windup torch and compass
- Mulle rulle! (a clever way of keeping toilet roll dry and accessible)
- A book of songs

Visits to I Ur och Skur schools

In addition to this overview, there are three shorter reports which cover my visits to the following forest nurseries and schools:

- I Ur och Skur Mulleborg – the original forest kindergarten
- I Ur och Skur Skogsknattarna – where children meet in the forest
- I Ur och Skur Havskatten – a private day care centre
- I Ur och Skur Utsikten – an outdoor primary school



Figure 19: Fallen logs provide endless play opportunities

The United Kingdom and Swedish Forest Schools

The first visitor to Lidingö was Shirley Johnson an Early Years teacher from Manchester in 2003. Rosaleen Joyce, a local colleague, followed in her footsteps in 2004. She had secured a DfES sabbatical fund to observe Early Years practice in Denmark and Sweden. However it was her visit to the I Ur och Skur schools which had the most impact on her practice.



Figure 20: Juliet Robertson and Siw Linde.
All visitors have their photo taken on this fallen tree.

Upon her return to the UK, Rosaleen Joyce wrote about her experiences in an article for the December 2004 edition of *Nursery Education* magazine and set to work developing her outdoor practice at Hollingworth Nursery in Tameside. In 2006 she published her first book, *Playing Outside Rain or Shine*. Rosaleen illustrated the activities she undertook with the children and parents at Hollingworth and her book demonstrates the connections between the outdoor area of a nursery and weekly adventures into the nearby forest.

In March 2006, Rosaleen arranged a guided visit to Manchester for Siw and Magnus Linde which allowed them to see the impact of the visits to Sweden as well as Early Years practice in the UK. POLNET, the Promoting Outdoor Learning Network, was established with the following aims:

- 1) To promote a wide range of quality outdoor experiences for all children from 3-11 years, both in and out of school.
- 2) To promote a sense of civic responsibility in all our children by enabling them to gain a sense of their interdependence with nature as they learn outside.
- 3) To share and develop current good practice with members, other parents/carers, the local community and wider international community.
- 4) To continue to develop members' knowledge and understanding of outdoor learning by:
 - Keeping up-to-date with current research
 - Sharing expertise
 - Exploring international models of outdoor learning

Then in May 2007, Rosaleen took a group of seven Early Years practitioners to Lidingö to undertake an introductory course to the Skogsmulle School lasting 20 hours.

Meanwhile the news began to spread. One year later Sharon Cowburn, founder of the Flying Start Nurseries in Cornwall paid a flying visit to Lidingö and thanks to Rosaleen Joyce, who put me in touch with Siw and Magnus, I was able to experience the joy, freedom, creativity and inspiration that I Ur och Skur schools facilitate every day, come rain or shine.

Further Information

The Forest Education Initiative (FEI) supports the development of local forest schools by offering local and national expertise, advice and networking opportunities for forest school leaders. FEI also provides funding for locally constituted groups for training and education. Training for forest school leaders and assistants is available. For more information or enquiries, contact the FEI Coordinator (Scotland) via e-mail: fei.scotland@forestry.gsi.gov.uk or visit the website www.foresteducation.org.uk

If you wish to receive news about POLNET, please contact Rosaleen Joyce via her e-mail address: rosaleen_joyce@yahoo.co.uk

Juliet has written several case studies about international outdoor learning which can be downloaded from her website www.creativestarning.co.uk. Please contact her if you have any queries about this or other reports she has written.

Acknowledgements

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Many thanks go to Siw and Magnus Linde who founded the first Swedish forest school and organised the programme of visits. Also, a warm thank you to Rosaleen Joyce, who put me in touch with Siw and Magnus and whose books and articles serve to inspire Early Years educators throughout the UK.

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"Must we always teach our children with books? Let them look at the mountains and the stars up above. Let them look at the beauty of the waters and the trees and flowers on earth. They will then begin to think, and to think is the beginning of a real education." David Polis