

Out with the blackboard, in with the cow!

Or even better: Send the whole school out on the fields. That is at any rate what the people at "The farm as a pedagogical resource" have plans on doing.

"This is something completely different than making enjoyable excursions to farms where the children pet the cow before they return to the classroom to draw a picture of the barn", says Øyvind Lyngstad, leader of the project in Northern Trondelag.

Partaking in the life of the farm

The pupils are included in the work of the farm the whole year around. They are involved in the whole process too, from lamming to preserving of food and preparing of meals, from sowing to selling. This gives them much more than insight in farming, say the researchers who explain that integrating agricultural work in the school can help pupils meet the requirements of most of the school subjects.

The plan to connect the farm to the school with a Gordian knot has succeeded over all expectations. The pupils can't wait until the next visit in the barn and on the field, where as the farmers are so enthusiastic that there is a waiting list to partake. But this is not any gimmick to acquire fresh blood in agriculture, promises Lyngstad.

Strictly according to the curriculum

"Absolutely not. This is an attempt to realize the ambitions in the Norwegian school plan which came out in 1997. It actually states that the school shouldn't limit itself to giving children theoretical knowledge, but also include a large portion of practical work.

In addition the pupils are supposed to learn about their local society, cultural heritage and the interweaving of man and nature at the same time they are in physical activity.

"Children are human beings in breathing, sweating bodies", says Erling Krogh at Norway's agricultural university (NLH). He is a teacher and instructor for the project.

"We will bring the body back to school, let the pupils discover and learn with all their senses."

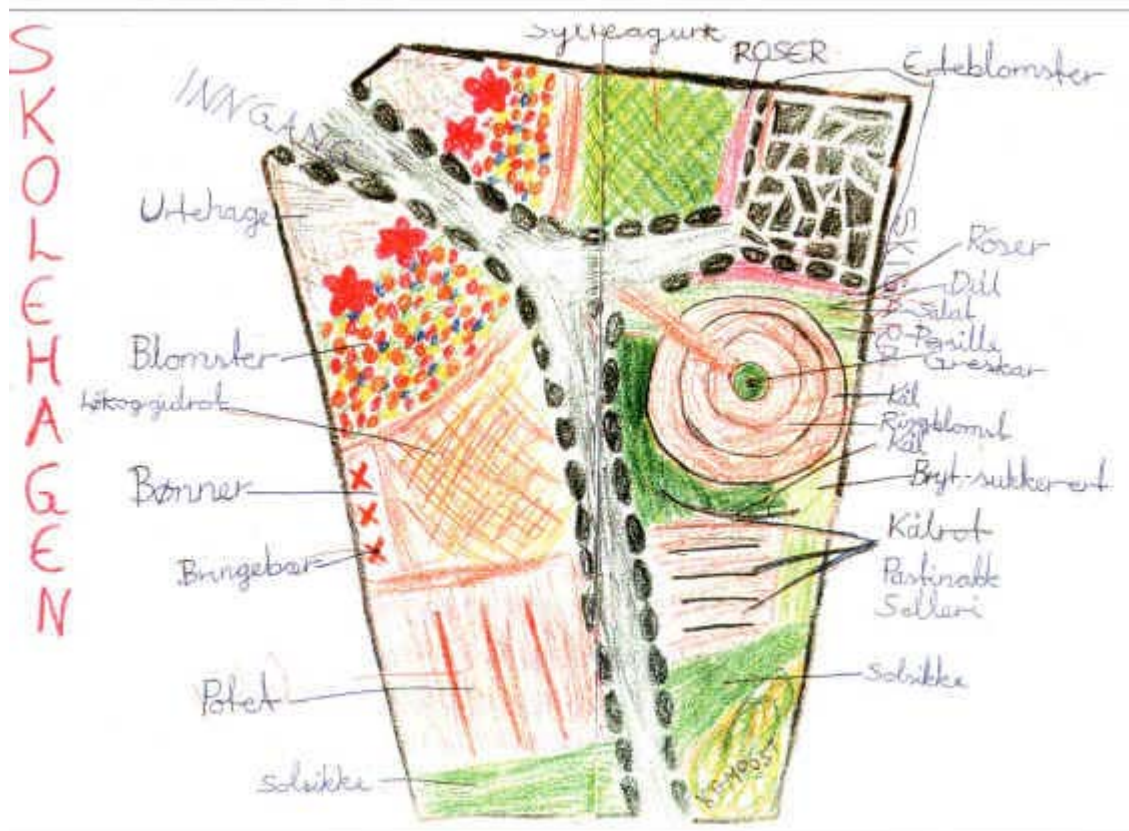
The idea of the farm-school was conceived in Norway, and there are still not many similar projects in Europe. The unique aspect is the anchoring in the goals of the Norwegian curriculum and this will soon be presented at an international conference.

"The Swedes are very interested in the idea" tells Krogh. And there are plans to begin something similar in this neighbouring country.

"Troender" experiment

Researchers think that the farm is an ideal stage for theoretical knowledge, and in Northern Trondelag the project is already under development.

"The director for agriculture has already given support to a 3 year pilot project which is financed through regional and local funding", tells Øyvind Lyngstad. 22 schools in 15 municipalities partake in the project.



Map of schoolgarden made by a child

Teachers and farmers go together in teams and develop their own pedagogical plan. And it is obvious that much learning can be packed with straw and the smell of the barn. The barn and field are very good areas for natural science, but sowing and harvesting can also become exacting exercises in mathematic.

The University of Northern Trøndelag (HINT) is itself engaged in the development of the project and has the responsibility for evaluation after the first years.

Positive reactions

The farm provides other challenges than the classroom and so called theory-weak pupils often blossom in the meeting with practical tasks. Pupils who are used to being losers can experience becoming roll-models for other pupils.

"Then I ask the kids if they like the activity on the farm, I get the same answer everywhere", says Lyngstad. "They love it and want more time at the farm." At the same time the farmer can acquire more confidence in the worth of what he is doing and the farm is filled with life and happenings."

Not in addition

How much teaching happens around the barn and hay manger varies a great deal. Some schools have whole days at a time several times in the course of a week, others have just one or two days a month.

"The most important thing is that preparation and the following work are thorough and well anchored in teaching goals", says Lyngstad. This is not an addition to the regular school, but an alternative way to do teaching. Therefore there shouldn't be talk of losing math and language hours, but exactly the opposite, giving the children good practical experiences to link to theoretical knowledge.