Early Years Twilight Seminar

14 August 2019 video transcript

Video 1: An overview of Swedish early childhood education and care

DARLENE LEACH: It's an absolute pleasure and a privilege to be here today with Susie. We're going to spend some time reflecting with you on the similarities and differences in - of the Swedish early childhood education system and the one that we all know, live and breathe on a day-to-day basis in Victoria. We've got a relatively new Victorian framework in 2016, but in Sweden they've had a new early learning curriculum since 2018. So we thought that might be a good place to start. In our framework, the Victorian framework, for birth to eight, we have an ecological model that talks about the context in which children and families live and our role in that as professionals supporting early childhood learning and development. We'd like to hear from Susie tonight, as a starting point, about what's the life of a child in Sweden. What is the Swedish context, who's responsible for preschool programming, for example, how are they delivered, and the regard and value that early childhood education has in Sweden.

SUSANNE GARVIS: Fantastic, Darlene. And one thing that is really interesting about tonight is we're having a conversation which is very much a part of Swedish culture with the word diskutera. So diskutera translates as discussion, and so in preschools, in society, it is considered the basis of how information is shared. Critical reflection comes into this. So diskutera is a large part of the daily work of everybody, and so tonight we're also going to engage in diskutera with each other but also with the audience.

So, firstly, this concept of the Swedish preschools. It's known around the world for being exceptional quality and it's often ranked as one of the highest in regards to children's outcomes, but how come? Tonight I'm gonna share with you some ideas about how it actually works but also strategies that you could think about in your own practices and daily routines. The first thing to consider is that there is a statement in Sweden about what is the role of preschool, and this is written in the curriculum document. And the role of preschool is seen as part of the education system. It is considered the first step for children and families into the education institution, and it is often the first step for families to work with a Swedish agency. Therefore, they have to get it right.

Part of the preschool as well within Swedish policy is around poverty prevention. So that means that the role of the preschool is to provide all children with the same start in life. Swedish thinking is that children should not be held responsible for their own backgrounds. Therefore, the role of the preschool is to make this equal or equivalent for children. And so we see this through many of the structural features in the Swedish system. First of all, there is the 4-month placement guarantee to guarantee access for parents. So this means that you register with your local commune or municipality for a preschool place, and then within four months the local council must give you a place. So access is allowed for all parents.

Secondly, there is also in this structure regulation of fees. Regulation of fees have come from a history where - when fees weren't regulated parents could not afford preschool, and it's only through government control of fees that parents can then engage with preschool. When I take about fee regulation, it is about making sure that preschools are for all. So for a high-income earner with only one child, the fee would be around Australian $180 for one month for a child under three. Once the child is over three and universal access kicks in, that amount then decreases to Australian $80 a month. What that means is that the government will fund the other amount of that. So the government funding is equivalent between Australian $26,000 and Australian $30,000 for each child in preschool. So, the fee regulation as well works on a sliding scale. So the more children you have the less you pay for fees, and then after the third child preschool is free.

There is also a high trust of preschools and preschool teachers, and this comes from surveys about which is the most trusted professions and industries, and preschools are always highly ranked. The reason why is that the preschool is considered the building blocks of society. It's where equality and equivalence is built, so the role of the preschool and the role of the preschool teacher is respected because they are the ones who are achieving this idea of human rights for all but also establishing future citizens. Because of this high status and trust of preschools, it means that the rate of enrolment of children in preschools is very high. So 95% to 96% of children will attend a preschool.

Preschools will start at one year of age to five years of age, and this is to do with parental leave. So once a parent has finished parental leave, the child will then start attending preschools. There is no differentiation in preschool. So the choice is your child either goes to preschool or they do not go to preschool. But the high attendance rates show that most children do actually attend preschools. There are private preschools and there are public preschools, and parents can choose which one they want to, but because of fee regulation it is the same cost regardless. There is no difference in the quality between a private and a preschool because, again, it is regulated by the commune.

There are three types of preschools besides private and public. There are also night preschools that operate for families who work, such as in hospitals or police who require care for their children. There is the concept of fraelder ecooperatives, which is parent-run preschools, and parents will take an active role in the preschool, and in those particular preschools as well parents can take on supervision control of children. So if the teacher is sick for the day, the parent - one parent can actually step in and take on supervision duties. So there is also independent preschools that I have talked about and the public preschools, but they all come under the same - the same system.

Part of the approach of putting preschool under the education system has also been the change of language, and this has been really important in actually building the status of the profession and respect for the profession. So what that means is that previously preschool was referred to as dargus or childcare. And then by when it came under education it took on the name of foreschooler or preschool. With that came more respect for the actual learning that is happening in the preschool, and a strong acknowledgement that children have a life-long desire to learn and it starts with education in the preschool.

Within the preschool as well, there is the preschool curriculum that was revised in 2018 and, as part of that preschool curriculum, all the roles of the preschool staff are highlighted. So the preschool director has tasks, the preschool assistant has tasks and then also the preschool teacher has tasks. And up here is some examples of what the preschool teacher is expected to do. The preschool - the curriculum for the preschool is short. It's only around 26 pages. And the idea is that it creates team work.

So there are different definitions of what each person will do, but the overall understanding is that the preschool director, the preschool teacher and the assistants will work as part of the preschool team to support the children in their learning. You'll notice as well that fun and engagement are actually used as the role of the preschool teacher up there. And also trying to find this right balance through the day between learning and rest, and this is flexible. So the teacher is learning and the teaching team is working on cues for the children. So what that means is that the timetable is flexible. It can actually change each day depending on the needs of the children. Sometimes they may have a sleep at 11:30, sometimes they may have a sleep at 12. It just depends on how the group is going. When I talk about groups as well, one important consideration in the Swedish context is the multi-age groupings.

So the traditional model is to create a family where there will be one year olds to five year olds, and there will usually be three adults in the room with 15 to 17 children, and that there is a lot of scaffolding and learning that is happening between the different age ranges. Other models in the Swedish system might be one and twos grouped together, so one and two year olds tore three to five year olds, but it is very rare to have individual age rankings in our Swedish system 'cause the idea is that the children are learning from each other all the time. In those groups as well, if there is three staff to 15 or 17 children, it will be the same staff for the whole child's period there if they're in that group as well.