Early Years Twilight Seminar

14 August 2019 video transcript

Video 7: Equivalence

DARLENE LEACH: Now, you used a term before, and I would think it's a bit like what we see as equity, but you used the word equivalent education, and that intrigues me a little bit. We're aware that in Victoria at the moment there are quite a bit of reform happening, particularly with what we have termed school readiness funding, which is equity funding, to ensure that there are additional dollars going to services that would have families that possibly would benefit from extra investment and also we've got the new announced rollout of kindergarten for three year olds which will go over a period of time. So, in terms of equivalent education, how does that work in Sweden?

SUSANNE GARVIS: It's acknowledged, first of all, that equality can never be achieved cause people are different. People have different starting points, but then also children and families have different starting points. So rather than talking about in terms of equality, we talk about things in terms of equivalence especially in education. And in the Swedish preschool curriculum, this is the statement about equivalence where, ‘It should take into account the different conditions and needs of children and be adapted to all children in the preschool. This means that education in the preschool cannot be structured in the same way everywhere and that the resources of the preschool should not be distributed equally.’

Because children and families have different needs. They need different allocation of resources. What this also means, though, is that the preschool teachers need to always think about how can they support the children and their families considering there is difference, and some of these strategies are quite universal across the preschools. So one of them, for example, is sign language. Sign language is very common in Swedish preschools and it's actually in the curriculum as well. And the idea is that if children are coming in who may not be competent with language or children may be coming in and learning Swedish, there are signs there to help the children communicate.

People often think that Swedish is a homogeneous society but, in fact, there has been large waves of immigration that have come. So in some preschools there can be up to 15 different languages. So to help the children and the preschool team communicate with one another, sign is then seen as an equaliser, where it provides opportunities for children to be heard but also for teachers and the teaching team to work with the children. And sometimes if the signs are still being learnt, the children can also point to the picture cards and the teaching team can use the picture cards. And then this is then implemented over time as well with Swedish language. As part of the equivalence in education, there is also recognition of the importance of mother tongue policy.

So what this means in early childhood is that children need to be competent and confident in their first language before they engage with other languages. And part of this can mean, as part of this resource allocation, is that if there are children who speak a language other than Swedish, they need to be supported in that language. So that includes having assistance and working out ways that the child's mother tongue can actually be integrated into the Swedish curriculum and the Swedish preschool, but also allowing the other children to engage in that language.

So, for example, if an assistant comes in and works with a child who speaks Arabic, the other children in the preschool will also learn some Arabic songs and – and some of the Arabic words as well. So again it's about trying to really implement this idea of equivalence. With equivalence, it's also about providing equal or equivalent access for all children to be involved in excursions. So the excursions that the children go on can never be charged. That is national law. Even in schools, excursions can never have a cost. So the idea is that if children do not have access or if the parents have difficulty trying to go to these places, because of the financial reasons or other reasons, the child at least is able to experience these. And sometimes it's been a fantastic experience for the child to then take this information home to the family who then can learn that they can also engage with this space. So, for example, the library. The child – the children will go home and talk to their parents about the fantastic experience they've had and then this can be followed up with some parents actually then visiting the library for the first time.

Equivalence also extends to parent communication, surveys and involvement. So if the parents do not speak Swedish, the material needs to be translated. So the quality improvement survey that is sent out can be translated into different languages. When the results are collated and reported back, again it's about providing access to understanding. So this idea of equivalence then also recognises that quality looks different in different places because of the different conditions and needs of the children. But the idea of equivalence is the benchmark for quality. So all children need to be provided with the same education regardless of their background and situation. So when the municipality is actually looking at the reports that come in from the individual preschools, they're looking at it through the lens of equivalence education in regards to quality.

DARLENE LEACH: So what about children, for example, with additional needs, either a disability or a developmental delay. How are they included into the programs in Sweden?

SUSANNE GARVIS: So Sweden has the concept of education for all. So children with a disability would be included as much as possible into the preschool. So there would be no special preschool. They would attend just the every day preschool. They would be provided with support through an assistant, but because the children are in a multi-age as well, the children are very accepting of this. And education for all is one of the pillars – as part of this equivalence for education as well, that all children, regardless of their background, regardless of their situation, is provided with the same. It's then for how the preschool team works with this as well, but recognising that they will need to implement different ways with different children.