Episode 148: Susanne Garvis

# KL: Katie Linder

# SG: Susanne Garvis

# KL: You’re listening to “Research in Action”: episode one hundred and forty-eight.

# [intro music]

# Segment 1:

# KL: Welcome to “Research in Action,” a weekly podcast about topics and issues related to research in higher education featuring experts across a range of disciplines. I’m your host, Dr. Katie Linder, research director at Oregon State University Ecampus, a national leader in online education. Along with every episode, we post show notes with links to resources mentioned in the episode, a full transcript, and an instructor guide for incorporating the episode into your courses. Visit our website at ecampus.oregonstate.edu/podcast to find all of these resources.

On this episode, I joined by Susanne Garvis, a professor of child and youth studies and particularly early childhood at the University of Gothenburg Sweden and a guest professor at Stockholm University Sweden. She's a mixed methods researcher in the field of early childhood education and has been involved in national and international research projects, consultancy, and work with governments, agencies and NGOs. Professor Garvis is the leader of the funded Nordic systems approach to Early Childhood research. Her research interests include policy, quality and learning development with teachers, young children, and their families.

Susie, thanks so much for joining me on the show today.

**SG:** Thanks for having me.

**KL:** So I'm really excited to learn a little bit more about your research specializations. Can you share a little bit about some of the research you've done in the area of early childhood?

**SG:** Definitely. So I'm a professor of child and youth studies at the University of Gothenburg in Sweden and also a guest professor at Stockholm University, and part of my role is to really focus on the concepts of policy learning and also quality within the field of early childhood education. Early childhood education is quite unique, where it's only been around for 20 years, and so it's quite a new research field. But in recent years, especially with all governments becoming focused on early childhood as a way for prevention, there's been a lot more focus on early childhood research as well, especially around how we can improve quality. And this is where my research has come in in particular of how we can improve quality by looking at a lot of the structural, as well as some of the process quality aspects of early childhood. And what I mean by structural, is things such as having qualified teachers in the classroom - what does that actually do overall? So I've done some meta-analysis studies looking at all the research over the years that actually shows that it's really important that we have qualified – uh bachelor qualified preschool teachers. Also looking at things such as group size, so what is the ideal ratio of children and staff for preschool quality and how does that influence learning? And then also my research has focused on process - so that is the daily interaction and conversation that might happen between children and staff, or children and children. On top of that, I also work within the systems approach to research, so that means that I look at the way that policies shape early childhood, but also how my research can actually help shape policy from a ground-up effect as well. And this also includes working with families and working with parental education around the benefits of early childhood education.

**KL:** So Susie, because this is kind of a newer research area - and it's clearly pretty vast and broad in terms of what you could cover, I'm curious how you narrow down into particular topics that you're kind of choosing what to work on next. What helps you to make that decision about where to shift your focus in this area?

**SG:** Yes, so it's very much dependent on whatever the research problem is at the time, and that depends on the context or the country. So I have worked across multiple countries that have different needs based on what stage their early childhood system actually is in. So for example, I was talking and consulting with people in Turkey recently, and in their particular context, early childhood is quite new. Whereas in Sweden, we've had early childhood since the 70s - so it's a different set of problems. So therefore that means that the research that's needed around it is quite different.

**KL:** Okay, that's really interesting. So I'm curious, given that you have these different cultural context you're working in, what originally lead you to research in this area and to kind of narrow your focus here?

**SG:** That's a good question, actually. I used to be a preschool teacher myself and I used to become quite bored, I guess, wondering these bigger questions about how can I make an impact to the field overall? So then I decided to actually go back and learned more through a master’s and a doctorate, and then also by becoming a parent. So I have both a personal, as well as a professional interest in this area. But with regards to culture, I’m actually an Australian who's living in Sweden, but I've worked across multiple countries as well within the field of early childhood education. And so you begin to understand the way that culture really, really shapes research agendas not only in early childhood, but in research overall, and you start to see the emergence of certain paradigms or ways of researching that's unique to a certain country or culture.

**KL:** So I'm wondering if you can share a little bit about what the key audiences are that you’re kind of targeting for this research, because it seems like it could go in a number of different directions. Who are some of the people that you're trying to reach and respond to?

**SG:** So it - again it depends on the type of research that I'm doing in regards to quality, policy, or learning. But usually if I'm working within a systems approach to research, there are multiple audiences. So firstly, it is of course policy and government makers - the people who will be making structural changes to the overall rules and requirements around early childhood education. Below, in a structured approach or a systems approach, we then also have audiences of being able to work with professional learning with teachers and also with parents, and then also within the systems approach children can be our audience. And we have actually worked with children to ask them about aspects of quality, aspects that they like about teachers, what they do and don't like about being in a preschool, because their opinions and their perspectives are very, very important within this concept of early childhood quality as well.

**KL:** So I'm curious - when you're working particularly with children as subjects of your research, what are some of the things that you're taking into account as - as kind of key things to keep in mind working with such a young population?

**SG:** So there are a lot of ethical issues around working with children, and we have to think about first of all with the ascent or the consent process, depending on which country you're in, for children involved, but also how we can elicit their responses in meaningful ways. And sometimes we might engage with even concepts of arts based research. I'm a mixed methods researcher, so I employ both quantitative and qualitative, but when I'm working with children, I actually implement a lot of Art based research. We will use photographs - so ask the children to take photographs with cameras, maybe with - maybe draw pictures, or even tell us stories about their experiences. And we find that these types of recall events are very, very helpful for the children, and actually sharing their perspective for us.

**KL:** So I'm going to refer listeners back to a recent episode we did with Gail Crimmins on arts-based research, if they want to learn a little bit more about that. Susie, I'm wondering if you can give us an example of one of the projects you've worked on in early childhood research.

**SG:** So a recent project that I just completed is an Erasmus strategic partnership project which involved Turkey, the Netherlands, and Sweden and we were looking at parental involvement with a specific focus on father involvement in preschools, because we know from research that when we actually involve the father's, it really improves the outcomes for children in the preschool for their learning. And we also know from some of the research that father involvement and participation can also lead to increased physical education for the child, so improved health outcomes as well as mental health improvement. So this particular project was about up-skilling teachers at various preschools in Sweden, the Netherlands, and Turkey, and then also working with children about their perspectives of actually having fathers or parents participating more. And one particular thing that we found across the three countries was that parents wanted to be more involved in the preschools, but also in non-traditional ways. So we often think that parents want to be involved through face-to-face meetings or actually physically being in the space of the preschool, but we found from this particular project that parents were wanting to be more involved in different formats such as online communication, and then also wanting to have more - uh more documentation or sharing of what's actually been happening through emails and other online formats.

**KL:** So what's next for your research in this area? Is this something where you know, you do a project and you have projects that grow out of that project that you just finished, or do you kind of shift into a new direction? How do you see this work moving forward?

**SG:** So I work across multiple topics in projects, and this particular project was very much based around the requirements for a European project at the time, and we were a partner in that particular project. And from that now, we have grown into looking at book publishing's around parental involvement, getting into international study where we're looking at what parental involvement means in different countries. So we’ve actually invited numerous - around 20 countries around the world to participate in that, where we will be applying for grants together, but also publishing together where we're looking at what research has been done in those countries, what the curriculum says, and what policy documents say. And what we actually find in this type of cross-cultural research as well, is that even though we are using the same words - so even the word parental involvement, there are different words used in different countries, and these words actually have slightly different meaning as well. And that's been really interesting for us to actually see where - when we're having a conversation with other researchers, we think we are talking about the same topic because we are actually using the same words, but in reality we’re actually talking about different concepts.

**KL:** Well, that is the perfect segue into our next segment, where we're going to chat with Susie a little bit more about her cross-cultural research. We're going to take a brief break, and we'll be back in a moment!

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# Segment 2:

**KL:** Susie, in segment one we briefly touched on some of the cross-cultural research that you're working on right now with early childhood, and I want to dive into this a little bit more. Some of your research has compared context of different countries and this is certainly not something that you had to do, I mean, you could certainly focus in on one particular area or context. Why did you kind of choose to go in this direction to really contextualize the research across these different cultural contexts?

**SG:** I think it's really important that we engage in research that also looks outside our country's borders, rather than always being inward-facing. It's not just so that inward facing research isn't important, but we can also learn more from what our neighbors are actually doing. And so with cross-cultural research, we can also learn that countries may be doing things in different ways, perhaps things are being done better, how can we implement these strategies? But we can also learn that sometimes when we are talking about a generalized idea in the world, it may actually be different in reality, and a good example is actually work with people - with researchers in Russia. And originally I had come with an understanding of Vygotskian theory, based on what I had learned from that very much a westernized paradigm, but when I'm actually talking to Russian researchers, the home of Vygotsky, I start to realize how different the Western understanding is to the Russian understanding. So part of cross-cultural research is also going back to original sources or ideas and actually discussing how these ideas may have changed as they have filtered through other countries or cultures.

**KL:** So in the first segment you offered one example of this cross-cultural research. I'm wondering if you have other examples that you can share of the kinds of work you've done in this area.

**SG:** So – definitely. So some of the cross-cultural research has been around - perhaps we're looking at teachers in different countries, and we may implement a survey and we can find that there are different - different response rates or perspective attitudes based on the country. So then we will go back and actually look at what is the foundation of the culture or the context in that particular country. And an example is from a recent paper that we published in an International Journal of Special Education, where we were looking at Swedish Preschool teachers compared to other countries, and the Swedish preschool teachers had very, very strong beliefs and capabilities around inclusion compared to the other countries, and we had to actually go back and question what - why was this the case? It's the same survey, why are the Swedish teachers so - so highly in their perceived capabilities? And it turns out that it's a foundation of equality that's through all the Swedish society. So because the idea of inclusion is embedded right from the beginning and is everywhere - whether it be the day-to-day public in schools and preschools in the university, the idea of inclusion is so strong that it becomes embedded in the personal beliefs of the teachers. So this is why we were then coming up with some type of explanation for why the Swedish preschool teachers had such high competence, and it's only through our own understanding of culture that we were able to actually go back and come up with some type of understanding about this. But the importance of this type of research is that we - behind each comparison, there is always a story about the cultural context and it's really important as researchers that we explain this culture or the context as much as possible, so then people begin to understand that it's not - it's not simply black and white, there is actually gray understanding there.

**KL:** So Susie, you've mentioned I think some of the benefits of this kind of cross-cultural research for really understanding in a more in-depth way the literature that you're working with but also the context of your research subjects, and in some ways you make it sound so easy and simple, but I'm sure there are complexities to this and challenges. Can you talk a little bit about some of the challenges that you faced doing this kind of cross-cultural research?

**SG:** So some of the biggest challenges were around basic understanding about words. So even the word ‘Inclusion’ - if we are talking about it in a Swedish context, especially in the Swedish language, for example, its different understanding toward it would be in an Anglo-Saxon context. So this is one example of where we have to be very careful where we think we are talking about the same concept, but that concept can actually be different because of translation. Another problem has been the ways that academics actually work together. So different cultures, as I have discovered, work in different ways, so it's important about finding different strategies and different ways of working with people from different contexts, so then they also are able to achieve the same outcome. And I think this type of cross-cultural research problem of working with people from different cultures, is probably the same as it would be in an interdisciplinary research environment, where there was probably tensions as well that may emerge if an educationalist, like myself, is working with somebody from the health arena, just because we have different understanding about what is important and how we go about doing things.

**KL:** Can you talk a little bit about how you’re locating research sites and research partners in these other countries that you're working with?

**SG:** So the research - the researchers that I work with have usually been through building - building relationships either earlier on in my career or through being invited to be involved in projects. So in Europe, we're very lucky that we have access to the European Union Grants, which is often about working together for the better - the better of the European society, and we also have funding available that allows us to go and spend time at other institutions and likewise for academics and other institutions in Europe to come and visit us any of the Gothenburg or Stockholm University. So this idea of the collaboration is really, really important to cross-cultural research. I have sometimes also cold email people if I haven't had a contact in a certain country, and that's usually worked out quite positively as well, where there might be somebody, for example, in a developing country who needs support as well. And those types of connections then are usually - are usually fostered through research grants and writing. To then become long-term working relationships around this cross-cultural research.

**KL:** So, I'm curious, Susie, what is your favorite part of doing this kind of cross-cultural research with these collaborators and different partners?

**SG:** I would have to say my favorite part is actually visiting these countries and actually going to see early childhood settings. So likewise when I have visitors come to Sweden, we will often take them to see Swedish preschools, and you learn so much from being in it actual context of early childhood. I could talk about it, but through personal experience of actually visiting the site, you learn so much more.

**KL:** What are some of the differences that you've seen in the different preschool sites in these different countries?

**SG:** So there are a lot of differences around the setup of preschools in regards to if children can go outside, if they have to stay inside, also around the amount of teaching or formal learning as opposed to play or three play being allowed in the preschool, and then also differences between things such as individual teaching or group teaching as a whole. So again, it depends on what the culture or the context is. When we were in a Russian preschool, it was very formal, where the children could be in care until 8:30 at night. In other places that we've been to, children may go home for lunch, such as in Germany or France. And so these types of contexts are really important to understand because the child's experience, the teacher’s experience, and the parents experience is all different, but it's based on what is the tradition in those cultures.

**KL:** This work sounds so interesting. Thanks for sharing a little bit more of the detail of your cross-cultural engagements. We're going to take another brief break and when we come back, we'll hear more from Susie about some of the problems and issues in early childhood. Back in a moment!

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# Segment 3:

**KL:** Susie, given your research in this area, I’m wondering if you can describe some of the issues, problems, challenges that are most, kind of, prevalent with early childhood.

**SG:** So one of the biggest problems at the moment has been finding qualified staff and preschools to enhance quality. And also the continuity of staff, so that means having the same staff members there every day for the children. And the reason why this has been so important, is that we now know from a number of different studies that children experience a lot of stress when they start preschool, and that if the stress continues - so for example, if they are seeing a new teacher every day, the stress can lead to long-term health problems as well. So we know from this research that we want children to be in a safe environment where they have secure attachments with staff, otherwise the spikes that are going on with cortisol and the other negative factors that are contributing to stress can lead to long-term anxiety and other risk factors for children. On top of that, we also know that there are risk factors there for staff - so being a preschool teacher isn't easy, and we know in certain countries. It's the most stressful job out of all of the professions. And so again, we know from - from the research, and especially from the research in Sweden, that preschool teachers are usually more likely to leave the profession, because they have higher rates of stress and anxiety. And this can also be included into mental health and also physical health - is something such as higher noise, problems having access to breaks or actually being able to go to the toilet, and - because of supervision, usually there has to be somebody in the room the whole time, and then also actually having a time - down time for lunch breaks and things like that. So this problem in early childhood is very much about how to reduce stress not only for the children, but also for the staff as well, because in many countries this is a growing problem.

**KL:** So I'm wondering if you can speak to kind of the valuing of people who are in these early childhood settings, because I think that particularly here in the US, I think there's an awareness that these - these folks are not paid a whole lot in some cases. And are maybe in some cases seen as basically babysitters, not necessarily people who are educating these children in what is a very formative time for them. Can you talk a little bit about what you've seen cross-culturally around how these kinds of positions are valued?

**SG:** So we know from the research that the first three years are the most important time for brain development for a child, and it's really important that we have the most skilled people working with children who are in formal care settings. What this means in a cultural context is that some countries require preschool teachers to have master’s qualifications, so they want the best and the brightest in teacher education to actually work where its most needed. In other countries however, being a preschool teacher is very low status, and in some countries there is no formal qualification at all needed. And this again creates problems around the continuity of care, the consistency of care, but also understanding things such as child development, or how to implement a preschool curriculum, how to work with children who have different needs. So we know as well that it's really, really important that we have the most qualified people working, but unfortunately this doesn't seem to happen in many countries.

**KL:** So I'm curious if you've seen any models throughout your research that just seem to be very effective in terms of how the staff are hired, how they're supported, how children are supported in terms of the continuity of how they're engaging with the staff. I mean, are there any places that you've seen that are just really stellar in terms of how they're enacting early childhood?

**SG:** Well, the Nordic - it's one of the Nordic countries strengths for early childhood education in regards to that continuity of care and also for having qualified staff working with children. And a good example is that many of the Nordic countries actually have - what's called an ‘in schooling’ or an orientation process for the children when they are coming into the formal schooling. And so what that means is that instead of a child just being dropped off for their first day of preschool when they are two, there's a process of orientation that takes as long as the child needs. So for the first week, for example, the child may go with the parent for an hour and then it may build up based on the child's needs, until the child and the parent both feel safe and secure in that particular preschool environment. So we know from this type of approach that it really reduces the stress on the child, and it also creates opportunities for that child to develop permanent bonds or attachments with staff in these preschools. In some of the Nordic countries, they require a master's qualification, and also actually being - gaining access into these courses to be a preschool teacher in the first place is quite difficult. So again this idea of having the best and brightest in preschool – uh we can see the benefits of it - of what it actually happens in the Nordic region.

**KL:** So I'm wondering based on your research, if there was one change that you could suggest in terms of both how - maybe two changes; one in terms of how staff are treated, and then one in terms of how children are engaged in these settings. What are the changes that you think would make maybe the biggest impact based on what you've seen?

**SG:** The biggest impact would be through increased salary with teachers. So in many countries, teachers - preschool teachers or preschool staff are paid quite low, so by raising the salary it also then raises the status of the preschool, but with that higher salary also comes the expectation of more qualifications and engagement in professional learning and development. So the other part of that is how can we increase the outcomes for children? And they're actually linked together, so we know that by actually having more qualified staff in preschools, they actually create better learning environments for children, which will then contribute to better learning and development.

**KL:** So you had mentioned earlier, Susie, that you had decided to pursue your own kind of graduate training in this area, but also that parenthood itself had impacted some of how you're seeing some of these issues. Can you talk a little bit about that connection between the professional and the personal in terms of how it impacts how you research early childhood education?

**SG:** So I'm very much now sit in this this joint identity where I can take on both the idea of being a researcher, but also a parent. And it's very important sometimes when I'm working with other parents, or children, or even with teachers, because I have also been a teacher as part of this identity, is that I have this shared insider perspective that goes on. Often as researchers, we take the outsider perspective, and I think it's really important to develop a shared understanding or relationship with our research participants, especially in qualitative research, so then they are telling us what's important about the research, not what they think that we want to hear. And so often with working with parents, teachers, or children, I will share personal stories as well as part of that process, and I will find that that will start to create or build a relationship to then provide inroads to actually finding the data that we need to.

**KL:** What are some of the ways that you've communicated the findings of your research so that you can have the most impact? Clearly I think - you know, it sounds like you're hoping to impact these settings so that you can improve the experiences of both the teachers, and the students, the parents. How are you communicating out your findings to make sure that you're impacting and creating that change?

**SG:** Yeah. So again, the impact can work on multiple levels depending on who the audience is, and one important aspect that I've learned from my number of years of research is we cannot assume that language or written text is the most important form of communication, especially when I've worked with communities where up to 80% of the population in the community may be illiterate. So it's about finding different strategies that are actually useful for communication, so we can use a number of different visuals, also electronic communication, and then one thing we have found really important is the actual use of videos. So videos could be a short two minute summary of what's actually happened in the research, as a sharing back process to the participants who have taken part, and we found that videos are a lot more are useful but also access the lot more than if you had a two-page summary of a research project.

**KL:** I love that idea. Well Susie, I want to thank you so much for sharing some of the really creative ways that you are engaging in this research on early childhood. Thank you so much for taking the time to come and talk with me on the show.

**SG:** Thank you. It's been wonderful.

**KL:** Thanks also to our listeners for joining us for this episode of Research in Action. I'm Katie Linder, and we'll be back next week with a new episode.

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