

Restricted Childhood, Interrupted Youth

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Research observations on participation in education and leisure during the COVID-19 pandemic in the Nordic countries.

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and Sinikka Aapola-Kari*



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Abstract

In this study, we conduct a research overview and report on the rights of Nordic children and youth in the spheres of education and leisure during the COVID-19 pandemic. We follow up on our first report, ‘Children and Young People’s Participation During the Corona Pandemic’ report (Helfer et al., 2023). In the first report, we explained how the COVID-19 pandemic was handled in the Nordic countries and related initiatives to safeguard the rights of children and young people. In all countries, there has been a great concern about the impact of the pandemic and how the restrictions have affected children and youth, particularly vulnerable groups.

For this report, we have charted research on the consequences of the pandemic on children and young people’s situation within the spheres of education and leisure, particularly from the viewpoint of participation. The focus has been on research conducted during the years of the pandemic 2020–2022 in Sweden, Denmark, Finland, and Norway, including related studies in Iceland, Greenland, and the Faroe Islands. We have extensively searched publications and filtered the most relevant studies for closer inspection. We bring forward research perspectives on children and young people’s varied experiences during the pandemic, their learning results, and their possibilities for meaningful leisure activities. Furthermore, we look at to what extent children and young people have been informed about and included in decisions that affect their lives.

We compile and synthesise findings from the research literature to illuminate these questions. We also highlight potential gaps in the research regarding those elements that need to be investigated more extensively and parts where the long-term effects of the pandemic on children and youth need to be examined in the coming years.



Key points

- **COVID-19-related research was mainly focused on children and young people's wellbeing and learning, and less can be found on the issue of participation.**

A lot of research has been conducted on education, focusing on how children feel about their schooling, how students in higher education have been affected, whether their learning or motivation has suffered, and their levels of anxiety and mental health. We could not locate much research on the actual involvement of children and youth in decision-making.

- **Studies of the short-term effects raised concerns regarding children and young people's mental health and wellbeing.**

Surveys of the views of teachers and pupils and their immediate feelings concerning distancing measures in schools showed worrying trends. Teachers and other academics were worried about the effect on wellbeing. In some studies, the results indicate higher levels of anxiety and boredom and lowered wellbeing among children and young people.

- **Some positive short-term and medium-term effects.**

It is important in reading the literature to note the differences between *short-term* impact and *medium-term* impact. Concerning short-term impact, we found several studies that reported positive findings for some aspects of the lives of children and youth. For example, some pupils and students felt less stressed. Perhaps more time was spent with parents. In some countries, we also see positive findings concerning online learning. Further, studies of medium-term effects on learning do not show a dramatic decline in students' or pupils' performance. It is important, however, to be aware of vulnerable groups who experienced a decline in learning, mental health or social connectedness.

- **Significant differences in impact.**

Across the Nordic region, we can see notable differences in the impact of the pandemic for different groups, both across regions within countries and across gender and cultural and social groups. In so far as there is a pattern,



it is that children and youth who were already in a vulnerable position were generally affected more negatively during the pandemic. A systematic comparison between the Nordic countries was not possible based on the literature we have found.

- **Gaps in the literature: Long-term studies, vulnerable groups, broader impact on lived social lives, and influence.**

The studies we have surveyed cover the short-term and medium-term impact of the pandemic, which is understandable, given the timeframe of our study. Future research should focus on the long-term consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic for different groups of children and youth, particularly vulnerable groups. It is important to look for negative and positive consequences beyond the 'average effects' for specific groups.

Sammandrag

I detta arbete gör vi en vetenskaplig översikt och en rapport om barns och ungas rättigheter i samband med undervisning och fritid i de nordiska länderna under covid-19-pandemin. Det här är en fortsättning på vår första rapport om barns och ungas delaktighet 'Children and Young People's Participation During the Corona Pandemic' (Helfer et al., 2023). För denna rapport har vi kartlagt forskning kring konsekvenserna av pandemin för barns och ungas situation i samband med undervisning och fritid, i synnerhet när det gäller delaktighet. Fokus har varit på undersökningar som genomförts under pandemin 2020–2022 i Sverige, Danmark, Finland och Norge, inklusive motsvarande undersökningar från Island, Grönland och Färöarna.

Vi har genomsökt ett stort antal publikationer och valt de mest relevanta undersökningarna för närmare granskning. Vi lägger fram forskningsperspektiv på barns och ungas olika upplevelser under pandemin, deras inlärningsresultat och möjligheter till meningsfull fritidssysselsättning. Dessutom undersöker vi i vilken utsträckning barn och unga har informerats om och fått vara med om att fatta beslut som påverkar deras liv. Vi samlar ihop och sammanställer resultat från forskningslitteraturen för att belysa dessa frågor. Vi framhäver även potentiella brister i forskningen som gäller de saker som borde undersökas i större utsträckning samt delar där pandemins långtidsverkningar på barn och unga behöver undersökas under de kommande åren.



Kärnpunkter

- **Covid-19-relaterad forskning har främst varit fokuserad på barns och ungas välbefinnande och inläring, och det finns inte så mycket som handlar om delaktighet.**

Mycket forskning handlar om undervisning, vad barn tycker om sin skolgång eller hur studerande vid högre utbildning har blivit påverkade; huruvida deras inläring eller motivation har blivit lidande samt om deras nivåer av ångest och psykiska hälsa.

- **Undersökningar av korttidsverkningarna orsakade bekymmer för barns och ungas psykiska hälsa och välbefinnande.**

Undersökningar av lärarnas och elevernas åsikter och deras omedelbara känslor gällande distanseringsåtgärder i skolor visade oroväckande trender. Lärare och andra akademiker var bekymrade över barnens och de ungas välbefinnande. I några undersökningar visar resultaten högre nivåer av ångest och leda och mindre välbefinnande bland barn och unga.

- **Några positiva verkningar på kort och medellång sikt.**

När man läser litteraturen är det viktigt att lägga märke till skillnaderna mellan verkningar på kort och medellång sikt. Beträffande verkningar på kort sikt hittade vi flera undersökningar som redogjorde för positiva resultat gällande några sidor av barns och ungas liv. Några elever och studerande kände sig till exempel mindre stressade. De tillbringade kanske mera tid med föräldrarna. I några länder ser vi även positiva resultat gällande distansstudier. Dessutom visar undersökningar av medellångsiktiga verkningar på inläring ingen dramatisk minskning av elevernas eller de studerandes prestationer. Det är emellertid viktigt att vara medveten om sårbara grupper som upplevde sämre inläring, psykisk hälsa eller social samhörighet.

- **Viktiga skillnader mellan verkningar.**

I de nordiska länderna ser vi betydande skillnader mellan verkningarna av pandemin för olika grupper, både i olika landsdelar och när det gäller kön samt kulturella och sociala grupper. Om det finns ett mönster kan det vara att barn och unga som redan var i en sårbar ställning blev i allmänhet mer



negativt påverkade under pandemin. Vi kunde inte göra en systematisk jämförelse mellan de nordiska länderna utgående från den litteratur vi har hittat.

- **Brister i litteraturen: Långsiktiga undersökningar, sårbara grupper, bredare verkningar på socialt liv.**

Våra undersökningar täcker pandemins verkningar på kort och medellång sikt eftersom vi hade så lite tid på oss. Framtida forskning bör fokusera på covid-19-pandemins långsiktiga konsekvenser för olika grupper av barn och unga, i synnerhet sårbara grupper. Det är viktigt att leta efter andra negativa och positiva konsekvenser för specifika grupper än de vanliga verkningarna.

Introduction

Education and leisure are life spheres that have huge importance for children and young people. Both school and leisure environments are, in addition to being spaces for learning and doing things together, central places for building and maintaining social relationships. It can, however, be said that needs regarding participation and influence are different in childhood and youth. There are considerable individual variations within (age) groups. Factors such as gender, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, disabilities, sexual orientation and whether you live in a city or a sparsely populated region also impact individuals' opportunities for participation and influence.

Researchers have, in the past few years, been active in generating research projects concerning the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on society and distinct groups of people. The pandemic has severely impacted the youngest and oldest members of society, and their everyday lives have changed dramatically. The pandemic has particularly affected children and youth in socioeconomically or physically vulnerable situations (Yuan et al., 2022), those who have fallen ill (Lopez-Leon et al., 2022), those who had family members in risk groups or who faced violence or abuse at home (Augusti et al., 2023). Some children and young people struggled with access to and participation in learning activities during the worst stages of the pandemic or, for upper secondary school students, during online learning. However, not all the effects of the pandemic were negative, which can be seen in some research findings.

In this report, we focus on recent research concerning the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic in Nordic countries, particularly on children and young people's participation in the spheres of education and leisure. Our task in this study was to look for research to shed light on these issues. Our extensive search covered the Nordic region's latest scientific and research publications. The central aim of our research project is to chart how children and young people have been affected by the various restrictions and protective measures during the pandemic



and how – and if – they had the opportunity to influence the decisions that greatly affected their lives.

This literature review is a companion report to ‘Children and Young People’s Participation During the Corona Pandemic – Nordic Initiatives’ (Helfer et al., 2023). The first report focused on Nordic children and young people during the pandemic, their place within different countries’ governmental strategies, and measures implemented to ensure their participation and influence in school and leisure time, consistent with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, Article 12). Several interviews with experts and institutions representing children and young people were conducted, supported by various internet materials, including official statements from the Nordic countries. The first report investigated the decision-making processes during the pandemic to see whether children and young people were consulted and involved when the authorities implemented strategies and measures in connection with the pandemic.

We concluded that in almost all Nordic countries, children’s voices were ignored to some degree in decision-making, and therefore the rights of children and youth were limited during the pandemic. In many cases, children and youth were consulted, but only after decisions were made. Additionally, some groups of children and young people were not always heard in policies, which made structural inequalities more visible. In the first report, promising practices were highlighted from the lessons learned from expert interviews for ensuring the best interests of the child and youth during similar crises as the COVID-19 pandemic. (Helfer et al., 2023).

This second report aims to produce an overview of research about the conditions for children and young people’s right to be heard and participate in education and leisure during a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic in the Nordic Region. The point of departure is that while pandemic policies did restrict the rights and the possibilities of participation for *all citizens*, adults and children, the consequences could potentially be greater, and worse so, for children and youth than for adults.

As the first report showed, in hindsight, children and youth could have been included more in decision-making concerning restrictions. That inclusion would have led to better adherence to the restrictions and fewer negative consequences for



children and youth in vulnerable situations. It is therefore particularly important to adequately consider the question of children's rights and participation in future crises – and that lessons from this pandemic are learned. With this concern in mind, we have searched for scientific and research literature on the right to be heard and participate in education and leisure.

The purpose of this study was to learn about existing and future research knowledge and data concerning the consequences of the pandemic for children and young people in terms of distance learning and free time during restrictions, including aspects such as wellbeing, loneliness and attendance to hobbies, cultural events, or youth services. The study identifies existing, ongoing, and planned research and analysis of the consequences of the pandemic for Nordic children and young people. The research we focus on covers children from school age (seven years) until 25 years of age. The research material has been published from March 2020 to the end of August 2022, and forthcoming or freshly published works have been included throughout the writing process.

The current report was mainly compiled by researcher Alix Helfer from the Finnish Youth Research Society and chief analyst Jakob Trane Ibsen from VIVE – The Danish Centre for Social Science Research, with contributions from research director Sinikka Aapola-Kari and research assistant Viola Särkiluoto from the Finnish Youth Research Society.

Analytic focus and scope

The present report complements the first report in two ways, firstly, by its analytic focus and scope and secondly, by its structure and depth. While the first report focuses on governmental strategies and builds on grey literature and material from government and non-government institutions, such as consultancy reports, the present report includes a broader survey of scientific literature on different aspects of the rights of children and youth under the COVID-19 pandemic in the Nordic countries. We have conducted a literature review to include the most recent literature from various fields, namely from psychology and health to educational sciences and social sciences.



The first report was divided by country with a longer conclusion at the end, synthesising findings across the different countries. This structure reflects in part the organisation of the work, carried out by country-specific teams working in parallel, and in part a concern with accurate and extensive representation of material in the different countries. The present report is structured not by country but thematically. Building on the first report, we report on findings under each theme, noting gaps in knowledge between countries.

Funding

Both reports have been commissioned by The Nordic Welfare Centre and financed by The Nordic Committee on Children and Young People (NORDBUK) and The Nordic Council of Ministers. The reports form a part of a four-year project that aims to increase knowledge and cooperation in the Nordic Region concerning Children and Young People's Opportunities for Participation and Development During the COVID-19 Pandemic. The project falls under the Nordic Council of Ministers' Action Plan for 2021–2024. The goal is for the Nordic Region to become the world's most sustainable and integrated region. A central objective of this goal is to ensure equal opportunities for the development and participation of all children and youth in the region.

What do we mean by the rights of children and youth?

In this report, we look at the concept of children and young people's participation in the fields of education and leisure. To define the terms *right to be heard*, *participation* and being *involved*, we refer to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). Article 12 refers to the right of children to freely express their views in any decisions or proceedings that affect them. In these processes, the child's voice should be taken into consideration "in accordance with the age and maturity of the child" (UN, 1989). The article further stipulates that children should be provided with an opportunity to be heard, either directly or through a representative body.

The UN General Comment no 12 (2009) further specifies the right to be heard as a right for both the individual child and groups of children (such as a class of



schoolchildren or children of a country) and discusses the term *participation* further. While it is easier to assess the maturity and age of individual children or small groups (such as school classes or school councils), all effort should be exerted to hear the opinions and thoughts of larger groups of children. Environments and structures should enable children to voice their views and have these taken into consideration so that policymakers can receive a relevant child's perspective to consider while preparing or evaluating policies or measures:

“These processes are usually called participation. The exercise of the child or children's right to be heard is a crucial element of such processes. The concept of participation emphasises that including children should not only be a momentary act but the starting point for an intense exchange between children and adults on the development of policies, programmes and measures in all relevant contexts of children's lives” (CRC/C/GC/12 2009: 5).

To summarise, we define participation as structures and processes that allow children and youth to be heard and influence planning, implementation and evaluation (f.ex. Lundy 2007) of school and leisure. During the pandemic, this could have referred to children and youth voicing their opinion on how onsite school, leisure and sports could have been organised under the imposed restrictions. To broaden the definition of participation, we also included a *physical* aspect of participation in school and leisure in this overview. The COVID-19 pandemic caused illness and social isolation, and consequently, it hindered children and young people from physically accessing and participating in education and leisure activities.

Research questions

For this report, we have gathered current research concerning the conditions for child and youth participation and influence during the COVID-19 pandemic. These research questions are followed for each of the main topics that we report on:



What does research reveal about children and young people's right to be heard, participate, and be involved in school and leisure during the COVID-19 pandemic in the Nordics?

- What do we know about different groups of children and young people and their opportunities to be heard, seen, and involved during the pandemic?

What are the gaps in knowledge?

- Are there any gaps in our knowledge, and is there a need for further research in any areas – what are the current works in progress?
- Are there any groups (age, gender, social, economic, and cultural) that we know too little about?

Research process

In the first phase of our research, we conducted expert interviews for each Nordic country, where Child Ombudspersons (in countries where they exist), various relevant state officials, municipalities and/or ministries, researchers and other experts, and representatives from NGOs were interviewed. In these interviews, we asked for information about research and other data concerning the participation of children and young people in education and leisure. These expert interviews provided our first sources of knowledge. For the first report (Helfer et al., 2023), online searches were conducted on the web pages of NGOs and other youth organisations, government ministries, and other institutions. We also collected the published work of the aforementioned organisations and institutions from expert groups and regional and country-specific reports (for example, by the association of local and regional authorities). Findings from the first project will be used in parts of this report.

In the second phase, a thorough literature search was made for this report by a library specialist in October 2022, covering the timeframe between March 2020 and August 2022. The thematics included the effects of the pandemic on children and young people's lives and the right to participate in school and leisure activities (including *time free from work or duties, hobbies, and youth work*) and how child and youth participation was realised in the Nordic countries during the pandemic.



A list of keywords was used in the publication search in multiple research databases (including Academic Search Premier, SocIndex, ERIC, PsycInfo [Ebsco], Sociological Abstracts, International Bibliography of the Social Sciences [ProQuest], PubMed, and local databases such as NORA – Open Research Analytics - Den Danske Forskningsdatabase, DIVA, Cristin – Current Research Information System in Norway, Journal.fi in Finland), to find the relevant research publications. The focus was on research related to education and leisure, but even other studies, such as studies on wellbeing and vulnerable groups, were included in the classification.

The first search included 690 references, from which the most relevant studies were selected. The relevant publications were identified and classified based on abstracts and/or summaries separately for each country of origin and joint international research involving Nordic partners. These were grouped country-specifically and thematically following the structure of the first report.

Apart from already published works, internet searches were also made to gather information on relevant works in progress. The literature search was compiled using Google Scholar, with keywords such as ‘pandemic, UN Convention of the Rights, youth’ with each Nordic country name. These sources were used to enrich our knowledge of child and youth participation during the pandemic and used later in the conclusions. The funding decisions of the larger research funding organisations for each country and major national foundations were examined to find ongoing but unpublished research projects.

Additionally, we scanned the webpages of the central national research institutions, such as universities and sectoral research institutions, to identify ongoing research. Information about webinars and other research-related events was examined in a thorough search. The same classification was used in relation to ongoing research projects that have yet to publish their results. Bachelor’s and Master’s theses were not included in this research, even though they could have been a good addition to the research knowledge; however, here, we wanted to focus on reputable peer-reviewed publications produced by professional researchers to guarantee the research quality.



We have made a judicious selection of publications and focused on presenting and comparing their findings. However, only a few relevant articles were on participation and the right to be heard in the Nordic context. The selection of publications includes the relevant themes in the field of education and leisure, with a specific view on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children and youth. We have done our best to include research publications from all Nordic countries to the extent possible; however, we may only have found publications on particular themes from one or two countries in many cases.

The research projects have varied per country regarding thematics, methodology and target group, which results in a somewhat unbalanced situation regarding many themes. Many studies have been made on mental health and subjective wellbeing during the period of COVID-19, however, this was not the focus of this study. Studies that did not directly focus on the effects of COVID-19 were excluded. There were a few studies that addressed a central concern of ours – the right of children and young people to voice their concerns in the arenas relevant to them – however, without a focus on the pandemic and its social repercussions. For example, one Danish study of young people’s voice in secure institutions (the most intrusive form of out-of-home placement) was excluded for this reason (Henriksen et al., 2022).



Country	Education	Leisure	Other
Sweden	11	9	1
Denmark	11	3	5
Finland	16	28	9
Norway	11	4	10
Iceland	3	0	1
Greenland	1	0	1
Faroese Islands	1	0	0
Country comparison	8	1	2
Total	62	45	29

Table 1. Overview over the texts that became part of the analysis (Chapters 1 and 2), including information on which Nordic country and topic they covered. The label “country comparison” includes either several Nordic countries or research of the Nordic region. The subject “other” includes research on wellbeing, involvement and other topics that were either difficult to fit within the dichotomy of education and leisure or were used as a reference in both chapters. References in the introduction or conclusion chapters are not listed.

We do not systematically depict the different pandemic phases, as we briefly did in our first report (Helfer et al., 2023). Although the phases of the epidemic and the corresponding restrictions are relevant for depicting children and young people’s possibilities for education and leisure, there was too much variation in the policies of different countries.

The structure of the report is thematic. In part 1, we focus on the sphere of education, looking at research findings concerning access to education, experiences from distance education, and consequences thereof for student learning, wellbeing, and social inequality.

Part 2 focuses on research perspectives regarding the sphere of leisure, ranging from the consequences of the pandemic concerning children and young people’s engagement with sports and other hobbies to access to public spaces, cultural activities, and social relationships.

In the conclusion, we evaluate our results, highlight some of the most interesting results from our review, and point to topics that need further research.

Part 1: Education

The everyday life of children and young people and their families has been affected by the various restrictions of the pandemic both psychosocially and physically; the stress of falling ill, fear and worry about family members, risk groups, and social distancing which meant remote education or cancellation of leisure activities for older students.

In legislation, learning is assumed to be a necessary requirement for the right of children and youth to participate in society. Each type of study addresses an aspect of the benefit or lack thereof they receive in their education. Some studies focus much on the immediate, very short-term consequences; others take a longer view. This focus is reflected in the findings. In the literature, we found a set of themes that cover different aspects of the lives of children and youth.



1.1. Limits on access and absences

The first aspect is the limit on access and the resulting absence from primary or secondary school or voluntary education. Compared with OECD countries, the limits on access through school closures were generally lower in the Nordic region, particularly concerning closures of primary schools. A study from the OECD found that among 30 countries with comparable data, the average closure of primary schools was 54 days during 2020, with large differences between countries and within countries (OECD, 2021: 8-9). Most Nordic countries were either just below this figure (Finland) or well below it (Sweden, Norway, Denmark). However, there was also great variation within the region in the length of closures and how severe the consequences were.

Among the Nordic countries, during 2020–2021, access to primary schools was limited the longest in Denmark, Norway, and Finland due to the COVID-19 restrictions (Randall, 2022; OECD, 2021). In most countries, regulations limited access to schools for longer periods of time, especially school closures that lasted longer for older students and in metropolitan areas. Policies implemented at the upper secondary level were more similar across the Nordic region. Sweden stands out as having fewer regulations and keeping schools open to a greater extent than the other countries (Hall et al., 2022). Swedish primary and pre-primary schools were kept open, offering onsite teaching throughout the pandemic. However, many pupils were absent voluntarily due to concerns about health risks for grandparents and others¹. Also, access to participation in classroom teaching was affected for both students who experienced periods of online and distance learning and younger pupils whose education took place in the classroom.

Although children and young people were not the driving force of the pandemic, as in the first waves, they did not seem to spread the virus as easily as older citizens and were not getting as sick; they were still obliged to quarantine if they had

1 In a survey by UNICEF, around seven out of ten young people in grades six to nine mentioned that they knew someone who chose not to participate in onsite education, not because of illness, but due to a family member who belonged to a risk group. Approximately one in five respondents had chosen to stay home because of their own or their parents' fear of getting infected with the coronavirus. (Ingeström & Karlsson, 2020).



COVID-19 symptoms (Hall et al., 2022: 7). A general concern during the pandemic was that schools should follow up on children and youth who already had many absences from school or training.

Data from absences and school dropout is hard to map, as there are no coherent studies or indicators in the Nordics. In Sweden, many schools used a system of notifying social services about pupils with significantly high absences. In a study (Sjögren et al., 2021) by The Swedish Institute for Evaluation of Labour Market and Education Policy (IFAU), the estimated number of pre-primary aged children (kindergarten or preschool, aged 0–6) not participating in education in 2020 was mapped. In previous years, the number of monthly absences had been stable, between seven and ten per cent, peaking in February. In 2020, a clear peak was seen in March, when the estimated number of absences from pre-primary education was more than 20 per cent. This was more than double the number compared to the year before. (Sjögren et al., 2021). In many of these cases, the pupil already had a background of being absent from school, a family background with limited knowledge of Swedish, or a previous contact with social services. The Swedish National Agency of Education (Skolverket, 2020) interviewed school headmasters, who similarly noted higher numbers of absences in pre-primary education.



1.2. Distance learning

In all the Nordic countries, there was **increased use of distance learning** at all levels of schooling. In a comparison between the Nordic education systems, Hall and colleagues (2022: 9) argue that the Nordic countries were relatively well-prepared for transitioning to distance learning due to good access to digital technology. The Nordic countries are internationally rated among the best in terms of digital preparedness. For example, in Finland, the shift to remote teaching was rather smooth due to the resources put into digitalisation before the pandemic (Lavonen & Salmela-Aro, 2022).

Although primary school children have remained onsite and received little remote instruction, there have been periods of online teaching in most Nordic countries between March 2020 and May 2021, lasting from a few days up to nine weeks with regional variations (Hall et al., 2022: 8). **The switch did not occur without problems.** There were differences in distance education according to the student's age, the teacher's ICT skills and the adaptability of the curriculum online. For example, students in vocational schools or universities of applied sciences have had limited access to training. In Finland, vocational education students experienced that they needed more support and received less of it than upper secondary grade students (Ukkola & Väättäinen 2021: 48-49). Additionally, Miia Sainio and colleagues (2020) emphasise that the opportunity to learn and develop in a distance school was realised in different ways for students. Still, it was difficult to predict for whom distance schooling was suitable and for whom it was not. We will turn to this topic later when discussing inequality between different groups (see Chapter 1.2.3).

One of the large challenges was keeping **a sense of community** in distance education. A Norwegian study notes that the Norwegian school system emphasises the value of active involvement in classroom discourse. Yet, little was known at the time of the study of how teachers can achieve a high degree of pupil participation (Folkman et al., 2022). In the same vein, a survey-based Danish study (Auer, 2022) of emergency remote teaching in secondary schools found that teachers changed their methods from more modern involvement-focused teaching methods to more traditional ones, resulting in less dialogue, less interaction, and a decrease in student motivation. A qualitative study (Christensen et al., 2022a) of health



science education (tertiary education), also from Denmark, found an identity loss among teachers due to less room for feedback and visual contact with students. According to staff and students, the pandemic weakened opportunities to promote a community feeling in educational institutions. High school and vocational education students would have liked to participate and have a greater influence on the operation of the educational institution, for example, on course provision, reading arrangements and flexibility in studies. In addition, students wished that more time and effort had been invested into making the students get to know each other and creating a community feeling. (Hakamäki-Stylman et al., 2021).

For many teenagers and young adults, distance education increased feelings of loneliness and led to increased contact with mental health and support services. **Loneliness** has also been one of the main issues pupils and students have faced in distance education as peer relationships have become thinner. (Moilanen et al., 2021). In Finland, for example, the School Health Promotion (SHP) study indicated that pupils were significantly lonelier and more anxious during periods of distance schooling than before spring 2020, and many reported difficulties in doing schoolwork (Repo et al., 2020). Studies (f.ex. Keller et al., 2022) found that young people living in smaller dwellings and alone had significantly worsened mental health conditions.

Some results depict how students felt they had received less support from their educational institution for maintaining their **study motivation** during the pandemic. For example, Norwegian (Gudmundsdottir & Hathaway, 2020) and Finnish (Ahtiainen et al., 2022) teachers have reported motivating students and creating engaging environments in distance schooling to be challenging. Furthermore, in Finland, students' study motivation lowered in distance education (Goman et al., 2021: 40-44).

A Norwegian study of lower secondary school students found negative sentiments among students. Students experienced **less support and feedback** from their teachers during distance schooling and found that teachers gave students more written than oral feedback during distance schooling. The study further found a tendency for lower efforts and self-efficacy among low-achieving students. The authors suggest that this tendency "might be difficult to reverse when schools reopen" (Maelan



et al., 2021). Swedish teachers also found it more difficult to help students reach the educational objectives when classes were held online (SNAE, 2021).

Icelandic researchers (Sveinsdóttir et al., 2021) have emphasised the importance of **study methods in distance education that activate students and promote cooperation** to maintain students' mental wellbeing. For example, students could be taught stress management techniques. In higher education, more focus should be put on methods of organising distance education and student support.

When the exceptional conditions caused a drop in wellbeing and learning for some students, other students nevertheless benefitted, as for them, distance education improved the accessibility of education, for example, for those living in more remote areas (Ukkola & Väättäinen 2021: 49-50). Some studies found **positive experiences** regarding learning and inclusion. As a positive remark, in a study made in Finland, there appeared to be less bullying and disruptive behaviour in distance education than before (Repo et al., 2020; Repo et al., 2022a; Moilanen et al., 2021). Icelandic teachers found that working in smaller groups made it possible to provide more inclusive and individualised support to their students, although some students were disadvantaged in the new settings (Björnsdóttir & Ásgrímsdóttir, 2020). A Norwegian study of students in public health nutrition (tertiary education) found that the sudden shift to digital teaching was challenging initially, but there are indications that the students quickly adapted to the new situation (Almendingen et al., 2021).

There are differences between students and schools in any case, whether there is a pandemic or not, and some students always need more support than others. Third-grade teachers who were interviewed in Finland saw benefits from the exceptional conditions, and according to them, independent study worked well for some students. The teachers emphasised the importance of cooperation in their efforts to guarantee that pupils in different classes are as equal as possible. Some students could focus on learning better at home than in a large class, some were happy when they did not have to wake up early or wait for slower students. (Ukkola & Väättäinen, 2021: 47).



Several surveys have been conducted on the **views of different school professionals** (teachers, pedagogues, and principals) regarding the operation of education.

A Danish study of teachers' experiences found a significant lack in their ability to perform a caring role for some children and provide social and emotional support for them (Primdahl et al., 2021). In Finland, many schools, teachers and principals were at the limits of their ability to cope with the exceptional conditions during lockdown. The teachers of basic education felt that the differences in competences increased when other students progressed in their studies, and the skills of others declined. According to the teachers, there were challenges in implementing special pupil care, for example, for pupils with Finnish as a second language. (Ukkola & Metsämuuronen, 2021: 67).

1.2.1. Effects on learning and learning environments

Distance learning tends to **demand more from the students** in terms of planning and self-discipline. It can increase the risk of some students falling behind (these vulnerable groups are discussed in Chapter 1.2.3). Except for Iceland, many standardised national exams were cancelled between 2020 and 2021 throughout the Nordic Region. (Hall et al., 2022). In many Nordic countries, students received better marks (Hall et al., 2022). Researchers (f.ex. Metsämuuronen & Lehikko, 2022: 15) have observed that the pandemic has exacerbated the differences between students and placed some students in vulnerable situations.

The rapid transition to distance learning caused **inequality between schools** because not all schools had the same capabilities and equipment to transition to distance education. There has been a shortage of IT equipment and students' digital skills in many schools, which has affected online teaching. Teachers felt that they could not provide sufficient support for all their students. (Goman et al., 2021; Ukkola & Väättäinen, 2021: 48). In many cases, the pandemic actually increased the spread and speed of existing distance learning initiatives and forced teachers to adjust their teaching (Damşa et al., 2021). Greenland is an example of this (Kivitsisa, 2022).

One pattern concerning lockdowns in all countries was **great regional differences**. There was variation between municipalities and regions, and some did not see a



pandemic-related pattern in pupils' participation at school. (Socialstyrelsen, 2021). Some groups, such as children of parents with lower socioeconomic or educational backgrounds or immigrant backgrounds, were more vulnerable. (Socialstyrelsen, 2021). On the other hand, distance schooling offered the possibility of not having to commute long distances to school each day. In a study made in Finland, young people felt positive that less time was spent on trips to school, whether the school was near or far. (Tuuva-Hongisto et al., 2022, 141).

The short-term effects of distance schooling in upper secondary have been especially intensely studied. In a Norwegian study, learning was significantly reduced during the school closure in the spring of 2020 (Andersen et al., 2021) and Danish pupils experienced that they learned less when schools were closed (Wester, 2021). Pupils reported spending less time on schoolwork than on a normal school day (Blikstad-Balas et al., 2022). Another Norwegian study (Skar et al., 2021) shows a considerable drop in learning (namely writing quality and fluency) during school closures when writing tests were compared among first-grade students after seven weeks of remote teaching to the previous year's scores.

There have also been contradictory discussions on the outcomes of distance education in learning skills and outcomes. From a short-to-medium-term perspective, it seems that the pandemic has not created any gaps in learning. A Danish **study of reading scores** before and during COVID-19 showed “no evidence of a major learning slide” in the first 14 months of the pandemic (Birkelund & Karlson, 2022). The study does, however, find some mixed results. The older pupils (eighth graders, age 14) experienced a loss of three percentile points in reading performance, while pupils in grades 2 and 4 (8 and 10 years of age) experienced a learning gain of about five percentile points. The study notes that this difference could be seen as a result of school closures being significantly longer for older (22 weeks) than younger children (eight weeks).

Similarly, Swedish researchers have concluded that the pandemic has not directly impacted the **development of students' skills** – though pupils have been allowed to go to school onsite. In a Swedish research report, the results of literacy tests of first to third elementary school grades during the pandemic were compared with those obtained before the pandemic. In the results, no effect was observed in either skill at



any grade level, whether averages, dispersion of results or proportions of students of different levels were compared. (Fältd et al., 2021; Hallin et al., 2022). Even though the older pupils, in some ways, felt less detached than younger children, there has been a concern regarding their learning and, in particular, concerning bridging to higher education or training, concerning waiting time for admission, and socialisation into a new place of learning or training, as the pandemic dragged on.

A large Danish study examined the possible **long-lasting impact** of COVID-19, examining self-reported indicators for various time points during and after the lockdown. They found an interim decrease in mental health, but only in those young people with pre-existing depressive symptoms. The authors interpreted their findings to mean that the lockdowns did not substantially impact mental health and quality of life for the average population of children and youth. (Joensen et al., 2022). According to Birkelund and Karlson (2022) the learning slide after 14 months into the COVID-19 pandemic in Denmark, “in contrast to expectations, we find little evidence of widening learning gaps by family background” when examining differences in reading performance concerning family background. However, they reported some mixed results. Firstly, the older pupils in grade 8 had a slight increase in the learning gap according to parental income. Secondly, they found some indication that boys and low-performing pupils suffered more from school closures than girls and high-performing pupils; however, these differences were interpreted as ‘minor’ (ibid).

1.2.2. Wellbeing of pupils and students during the pandemic

There has been much discussion about the impact of the pandemic on wellbeing, and plenty of articles were found on the pandemic’s effects on **mental health** (ex., von Soest, 2022; Thorisdottir, 2021; Evensen et al., 2022; Pedersen et al., 2022; Sarasjärvi et al., 2022; Hagen et al., 2022; Lehmann et al., 2022). According to a study from Denmark (Rømer et al., 2021), psychiatric admissions, referrals, and suicidal behaviour showed an increase in psychiatric hospitalisations among children and young people during the pandemic. However, the authors of the studies interpreted this as a continuation of a pre-pandemic upward trend rather than an effect of COVID-19 and lockdowns. In this section, we will elucidate studies concerning the wellbeing of children and youth during the pandemic.



Distance education has challenged the coping of pupils and students. In a Finnish study among 5th to 6th and 7th to 8th grade students, researchers (Salmela-Aro et al., 2021) found risks for school **burnout** during distance education. The study indicated that polarisation occurred in pupils' academic wellbeing during COVID-19, and the socio-emotional skills had importance in promoting wellbeing. Another research among university students has also shown an increase in study burnout and the role of psychological needs in remote teaching from May 2020 to May 2021. (Salmela-Aro et al., 2022).

Some studies have pointed to an important **difference in experienced health problems**. For example, a Norwegian study of 12 to 16-year-olds found that girls had “a significantly more pronounced increase in mental health problems and somatic health; loneliness in the early stages of the pandemic significantly predicted health complaints one year later, both mental and somatic complaints” (Hafstad et al., 2022). Further, children and young people who already were diagnosed with a mental illness were found vulnerable to the distress associated with the pandemic (Jefsen et al., 2020).

Some comparative studies have been conducted with one or more Nordic countries compared to non-Nordic countries. One such study (Hajek et al., 2022) found that in a group of seven countries, there were particularly high prevalence rates of depression and anxiety among individuals aged 18 to 29 years. The study also found that **probable depression increased with age**, with great income difficulties and lower health-related quality of life. Another Norwegian study covering a broader age group (ages 6-19 years) cited some survey-based studies that find no decrease in mental health until autumn 2020. However, they found some indications of worsening mental health in the age group, particularly in the last part of their study period (end of 2021). The study noted that the latter finding aligns with an Icelandic study that found an increase in self-reported depression after lockdown (Evensen et al., 2022: 9).

Distance education created challenges in the implementation of support services during exceptional circumstances. Children's rights organisations that provided **support services**, such as BRIS in Sweden, noticed a significant rise in contacts, especially during the online and distance learning period of upper secondary schools



(Angsell et al., 2021). The same trend has been noticed in Finland (Koponen, 2022) and the Faroe Islands (Helfer et al., 2023: 124). The closure of high schools in 2020 reduced mental health services used by high school students. In Sweden, the decline in contacts with mental healthcare services was greater among boys and more pronounced among second and third-grade high school students (Svaleryd et al., 2022).

Another Danish study, a medical case report of two otherwise healthy children, reported **symptoms of functional disorders** triggered by stress in relation to the COVID-19 outbreak. The report found that little treatment was necessary and that the children quickly recovered. One study noted, in particular, a concern for distance education in Denmark during the first period of home-teaching in primary schools (Qvortrup et al., 2021). The concern was mainly for younger children who lost important skills in relation to *learning* and *learning-to-go-to-school*, such as raising your hand, listening to and waiting for classmates, and so on.

A Danish study of three age cohorts (ages 7-9) from one city during the first period of COVID-19 combined data on the mental health of children and families before COVID-19 with responses from families of **anxieties and stress** during COVID-19 (Hulgaard et al., 2022). The study found that most children (69 per cent) reported few worries about their health. The children who did report high health anxiety symptoms were those who had levels of internalising symptoms, such as sadness, loneliness, anxiety, at age 5. The study concludes that anxiety during the first lockdown was not caused by family exposure to COVID-19 but by being a more anxious child or a child of more anxious parents.

A Swedish study (Fäldt et al., 2022) identified how children **living with disabilities** experienced the pandemic and its impact on their life. The interviewed children reported a significant impact on their social life and felt anxious about the illness and their grandparents. In another Finnish study, young persons with disabilities described online learning as challenging. Students with an impairment experienced a lack of support in online teaching, as a misfit unable to adjust to new learning practices, and amplified their experience of disability (Mietola & Ahonen, 2021).



Especially the **quality of life** of students has been a research focus due to the exceptional distance education period, which has decreased, especially among youth in their twenties (Lahtinen et al., 2022). There seems to be a difference in findings depending on the study type and period. The studies first conducted on the basis of surveys of professionals and pupils generally expressed deterioration of students' mental health. However, some of the later studies that seek to account, for example, prior tendencies (such as a rise over several years in depression symptoms) seem to show a less dramatic impact. A study from Denmark (by the Egmont Foundation) of the earliest experiences showed that one in four young persons substantially changed their feelings of being content during COVID-19 (Egmont Fonden, 2020).

On average, most children changed their views by a little, for the worse; however, ninth graders actually changed their **views for the better** during the first phase. This finding corresponds to a different study that showed that the oldest primary school pupils fared best during the first phase of COVID-19 regarding their attachment to teachers and schoolmates. In contrast, the third-grade pupils (age 11) experienced the greatest degree of detachment (Wistoft et al., 2020: 26). The study also notes corresponding findings from Norway. The authors argue that the young pupils "clearly cannot cope in a situation with remote teaching to the same degree as the older [13-15 years old] pupils" and that it is, therefore, necessary to construct age-suitable teaching strategies (Ibid, 2020: 29).

A comparative study investigated school belonging among **migrant students** in secondary schools. The study covered Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden, and the UK. The study reports two main empirical findings. The first is a statistically non-significant decrease in school belonging in the study group. Based on a subsample of the countries (Denmark, Finland, and the UK), the second showed a small but significant increase in post-traumatic stress symptoms in the study group following school closures. (Szelei et al., 2022). The authors argue that school belonging should be a topic for future research.

The higher the education, the worse the effects?

School closures in the Nordics often lasted longer for older students (Hall et al., 2022). During the pandemic, the functions of **higher educational institutes** have been restricted throughout Nordic countries (Randall, 2022). Even in Sweden, universities were strictly closed, which led to many students reporting negative consequences related to mental health and academic self-efficacy (Berman et al., 2022).

The pandemic situation was reflected in the mental wellbeing of university students in the summer of 2020. A comparison was made in Finland with data collected right before and after the first COVID-19 restrictions, which showed that the **perceived mental wellbeing** was weaker on average during the pandemic than before. In the data collected during the pandemic, better mental wellbeing was connected to less study-related stress and COVID-19 worries and greater satisfaction with the government's communication and the educational institution's pandemic measures. The researchers conclude that the information and support provided by the educational institution are important for students' wellbeing in exceptional circumstances and therefore recommend paying attention to related practices. The results indicate that the educational institution's operating methods may be important for students' wellbeing. (Sarasjärvi et al., 2022).

In a Norwegian follow-up survey, **higher education students' quality of life and satisfaction with teaching** was better in face-to-face education than in distance education. College students in face-to-face education were more positive about their subjective well-being, which hypothetically was interlinked to participation in social events. (Fretheim et al., 2021). In Finland, in a study which explored the life satisfaction of young people during the first six months of the pandemic, one of the least satisfied in different respondent groups was university students (Lahtinen & Myllyniemi, 2021). In another Finnish study (Kauppinen et al., 2021) on young people during the pandemic, studying in high school or university was identified as a risk of experiencing loneliness compared to respondents who were working. The strongest connection with the negative experiences of distance education was the experience of loneliness and the fact that the young person has experienced the restrictions on social contact as negative (ibid).



In a study on Icelandic university nursing students, research (Sveinsdóttir et al., 2021) found that exhaustion was connected to a **lack of support** and unclear instructions related to distance education—students who found the organisation and progress of their studies challenging had felt exhausted. Additionally, mental health symptoms and physical health had an impact on exhaustion. Online education has not only been negative for students. In a survey at the University of the Faroe Islands (Olsen, 2021), students reported appreciating online learning, although onsite learning was generally preferred for better motivation, focus and concentration.

1.2.3. Effects of distance learning on social inequality between different groups

Schooling is a major tool to enhance social mobility in the welfare states of the Nordic Region (Hall et al., 2022). Online teaching arrangements have affected equal learning opportunities for groups of pupils and students. The Parliamentary Ombudsman in Finland received most **COVID-19 complaints** due to children, schools and education on admission to universities, arrangements for remote studying, school meals, learning support, and arrangements for matriculation examinations. The joint questionnaire by Special Procedure mandate holders on COVID-19, submitted by the Finnish NHRI (Human Rights Centre), found many complaints about online exams and accessibility to the right to free school lunch. (Svanberg, 2021). Across the Nordic countries, there has been attention to the possible effects of distance schooling on children and youth in vulnerable positions.

In a Norwegian study by Folkman and colleagues (2022), teachers expressed competing responsibilities in engaging all children and providing particular advice and support for children in vulnerable positions. Teachers also expressed a strong reliance on **parents supporting** their children in completing their work. This presents a particular challenge in distance learning. (Folkman et al., 2022: 1). The lack of onsite education weakened the realisation of equality, especially for students in special education. Students' academic progression during remote instruction was linked to the amount of their parent's involvement, which was higher for those with higher socioeconomic backgrounds (Bakken et al., 2020).



Several studies, however, express concern for how different groups of vulnerable children and youth have fared. They cover many aspects and indications of learning. A Danish (Jæger & Blaabæk 2020) study uses register data to analyse families' loans of digital children's books from public libraries. Generally, it is the case that families with more resources make more use of public libraries than families with less **socioeconomic resources**, where parents are unemployed or in insecure, low-paid jobs. The scientific term is that there is a *socioeconomic gradient* in library borrowing. Therefore, examining how this aspect of the children's learning environment is affected during the pandemic is relevant.²

Jæger and Blaabæk show that this socioeconomic gradient increased during lockdown, a finding which suggests that COVID-19 increased inequality in learning opportunities because better-off families were more successful at using libraries during the pandemic than worse off families (Jæger & Blaabæk, 2020). A later study of reading skills by Reimer and others (2021) also found a strong socioeconomic gradient in reading skills but only a short-term increase in inequality in relation to COVID-19 concerning reading.

The activity levels of pupils who come from low-income families are generally lower. One purpose of school sports is to even out these differences, and this was not always possible under the pandemic restrictions. (Generation PEP, 2021). The recommendations of social distancing and online learning affected organised sports in schools as well. According to Generation PEP (2021), sickness was the most common reason for pupils not participating in school sports lessons. The closing of public institutions, such as libraries, or school canteen, created challenges for many (Goman et al., 2021: 36-37).

Different vulnerable groups have been identified in the research, such as those with an immigrant background, students who need special and enhanced support in their learning, children and youth under child welfare, or students with poor

2 The authors note that they do not claim that library loans capture "all (or even most) dimensions of the learning opportunities parents provide to their children. Nonetheless, our data provide a unique opportunity to study the evolution of inequality in one dimension for an entire population." (Jæger & Blaabæk, 2020: 1).



internet access. Especially in early education, students' successful participation in distance learning requires their **guardians' interest, time and support**. The support given by the family may be connected to their socioeconomic background. (Ukkola & Väättäinen, 2021: 11).

Home conditions had a large impact on distance learning – some pupils faced practical problems regarding participation in remote education. In basic education, problems identified within their earlier studies intensified during the distance learning period. The new situation put pupils in an unequal position in terms of **study conditions**, as some lacked tools, adequate network connections, facilities, and support from guardians. For example, in Finland, in every tenth family, a parent lost their earned income at least temporarily due to pandemic-related restrictions. The same number of families lacked either a computer or an internet connection sufficient for distance learning (Eurochild, 2020). In Sweden, pupils also reported the problem of overcrowding, as having parents and several siblings at home made it impossible to have a quiet place to study to attend classes and complete assignments. (Rädda barnen, 2021).

Concerning the varied impact of COVID-19, some studies have examined the effect of **housing conditions**. Living with parents was identified as protective against an increase in symptoms of anxiety (Repo et al., 2022b). One Danish study found that youth without access to outdoor spaces experienced a greater decline in mental wellbeing and correspondingly greater odds of onset of low mental wellbeing. The study also found that living alone more than doubled the odds of the onset of loneliness compared to living with parents. The study concluded that “youth living alone, in denser households, and without direct access to outdoor spaces may be especially vulnerable to mental health declines” (Groot, 2022).

Vulnerability is reflected both in survey responses concerning children and youth and the social welfare of education professionals and in the use of social welfare institutions. Concerning the use of social welfare institutions, the Chairperson of the Human Rights Council of Greenland, for example, noted an increase in notifications for the crisis centre in Nuuk of **violence in families** (Menneskerettigheder, 2020). However, conversely, in Norway, a similar study of crisis centres found a reduction in the number of requests during lockdown but a return to normal



afterwards (Bergman et al., 2022). In Norway, an internet survey was conducted on the extent of violence and abuse of children and youth (Augusti et al., 2021). The study found that children and youth who were already at risk were even more likely to have been victims of various forms of abuse and violence. Another Norwegian study (Nesset et al., 2021) found a dramatic increase in intimate partner violence during the first COVID-19 lockdown.



1.3. Involvement in planning and implementation – Participation in education

Several surveys have been carried out **on the views of pupils and students** in order to examine their feelings and experiences in distance education. However, fewer studies were made on the participation and involvement of children and young people in education during the pandemic. According to Article 28 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, children have the right to quality education. The Ombudsperson for Children in Sweden has pointed out the importance of involving children and young people in evaluating their wellbeing and the initiatives taken in schools. (Barnombudsmannen, 2021). In Sweden, children under 12 were allowed to participate in school and organised sports throughout the entire pandemic, but still, there were gaps in participation due to pupil or teacher illness, and in some cases, parents made the decision not to let their children participate in activities at school during spring 2020.

In 2020–2021, the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC) evaluated the capacity of vocational education and training (VET) and general upper-secondary education to strengthen **students' growth into active and critical citizens** (Hakamäki-Stylman et al., 2021). The evaluation focused on the development of students' participation, community cohesion and civic competences and the role of student bodies in this process (feeling of belonging to and participating in a group and participation in the operations of the educational institution and societal affairs). In the evaluation made during 2021, students' opportunities to influence decision-making in matters relevant to them were analysed. The respondents of education institutions mentioned that distance education periods reduced the chances of student participation (ibid: 81). According to some students, distance education enabled more equal participation, and in some answers, it was mentioned that an educational institution was able to make use of the good practices of remote operation that had already been created. However, the increase in inequality and differentiation during distance education was mentioned (ibid: 88).



The Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare (2022) studied changes in the **experience of youth inclusion** during the pandemic in the light of descriptive ‘vulnerability’ background variables. Based on the data of the Finnish School Health Survey in 2019 and 2021, the results show that the mean of the inclusion indicator decreased during the pandemic, especially for girls, for respondents belonging to a gender minority, for those coming from lower socioeconomic background and for persons who experienced a fairly or very poor state of health (Leemann & Virrankari, 2022: 159). However, the changes might not necessarily be due only to the pandemic. The experience of inclusion is strongly connected to wellbeing and future hopes (ibid: 161).

Additionally, the pandemic has affected **the activities of student bodies**. Some student union operations were transferred online, whereas some halted entirely; cuts in resources and restrictions on the students’ use of facilities were reported by union members (Hakamäki-Stylman et al., 2021, 110). One of the problems identified was recruiting new active members to the student unions. For example, in Finland, a large proportion of students felt that they had not been allowed to influence the educational institution during the restrictions. In a study on pupils in secondary education, students felt that the educational institution had not taken care of the community during exceptional times, and students have not been asked for feedback on the implementation of distance learning. Based on the open answers, students felt that when feedback was collected, nothing was implemented (Owal Group, 2021: 41).

Also in Norway, the crisis management on the effects of school closures on children and young people included experts, such as experts in the field of economics and other expert bodies, but **children or youth were seldom involved** (Christensen & Læg Reid, 2022). Ultimately, decisions were made at a political and administrative level (Christensen et al., 2022b). Another Norwegian study (Dyregrov et al., 2021) examined the risk perception of young people (ages 13 to 20) and their experience during the pandemic through an online survey. The study found, among other things, that **young people wanted more information about COVID-19 targeted at them**. According to the study, “being informed and trusting the information received decreased anxiety” (ibid).



The Swedish School Inspectorate (Skolinspektionen) carried out a survey in 2020 with upper secondary school principals and students throughout the country. Up to 70 per cent of the interviewed principals in 56 upper secondary schools replied that the health and wellbeing of pupils had been mapped during the online learning period, whereas 28 per cent of pupils said that their schools had followed up on the pupils' wellbeing at a high level. In some schools, there had been **a system of mentor or class board** (klassråd) meetings where chosen mentors met with pupils regularly and afterwards reported any concerns to the principal or the staff board of student health. During periods of online learning, this work was more difficult as it was harder to reach the students online. When it came to the efforts made for the pupils' well-being and their involvement in planning and implementing health promoting initiatives in the school, the principals' views were more positive than the pupils'. More than half of the principals responded that students' views were well considered and taken into account. The pupils' responses were more critical. In only one-third of the schools, students answered that they had the opportunity to influence the school's health promotion work to a large extent. Interviewed students also mentioned that they would have had opinions but were rarely heard, or there were no channels to voice them. In some schools, teaching staff attended student board meetings and took the initiative from ideas that the pupils had suggested. (Skolinspektionen, 2021).

In a survey by UNICEF on the feelings of children and youth regarding **school events and activities**, Swedish pupils in grades 6–9 expressed their disappointment with many cancelled events and limitations in the school environment. The majority had experienced a decrease in participation in onsite education, as they had family members in risk groups or had been ill themselves. Additionally, the opportunity to participate in significant school events, such as school dances or graduation ceremonies, had been restricted, and many expressed their disappointment with these decisions. (Ingeström & Karlsson, 2020).

There were consequences on children and young people's participation in extra-curricular activities, such as additional lessons or support with homework. According to the discussions that the Ombudsperson for Children in Sweden (2021) had with pupils, these activities were cancelled, adapted into smaller groups, or transferred online with the aim of slowing down the spread of the virus. Children and young



people interviewed by the Ombudsperson for Children had possible solutions on how these activities could be modified or organised under pandemic regulations. However, some interviewed pupils mentioned that **their school did not have a platform where pupils could express their ideas or participate in the planning processes of adapting the extra-curricular activities**. During online and distance learning periods, pupils expressed their feelings of loneliness and isolation due to the lack of social activities in school and leisure. (Barnombudsmannen, 2021).

According to a study by Lindberg and Hedenborg (2021), there is a lack of child and youth participation in school sports. This is surprising as the Swedish curriculum for compulsory school and preschool emphasises democratic ways of working and that pupils should have opportunities to take the initiative and influence activities in physical education and sports. (Lindberg & Hedenborg, 2021).

It can be concluded that young people's experiences of distance education during COVID-19 were divided. Distance education could be a health-promoting opportunity that has a positive effect on their wellbeing, study motivation and efficiency, but it could also constitute limitations. **More opportunities could have been provided for young people to participate in the design of their studies**, namely through a flexible and active co-creation between the educational institution and the students themselves so that they could have the opportunity to choose whether they wished to participate in studies remotely or physically onsite at the educational institution (Hemberg et al., 2022). Support measures and study guidance should be developed appropriately in relation to new educational technologies, as they may not suit all students equally for different reasons.

Part 2: Leisure

2.1. Sports and hobbies

The restrictions related to the pandemic have not only affected areas of study and learning. The restrictions also challenged children and young people's social relations and their right to meaningful leisure – opportunities to see friends, participation in activities or just hang out.

In our first report (Helfer et al., 2023), we noted a concern for leisure activities of children and youth across the Nordic countries during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is encapsulated by the quote from the chairperson of the largest Danish sports association when they say that a fundamental disruption has taken place as people cannot meet in “common activities that inspire us”.

“It was quite clear to us that what started as a full-blown health crisis could quickly become a social crisis... What does it do to us as human beings, when our everyday lives are so disrupted, when we cannot meet in the common activities that inspire us?”

Chairperson of DGI (the Danish Association of Gymnastics and Sports) – quote from first report (Helfer et al., 2023: 69)

We also found several governmental measures that were taken to curb the negative effects of lockdowns on leisure activities. We have therefore been concerned in our current research overview to look for findings concerning the impact of the restrictions on different types of leisure activities.

It was generally harder to find research on leisure time and social lives covering all the Nordic countries than on education or mental wellbeing, but we have found some new knowledge concerning sports and hobbies, leisure activities in public (such as cultural activities and events) and private spaces (such as the change of social relationships).



With tight restrictions on gatherings, children and young people's participation in many kinds of leisure activities was heavily affected during the pandemic. We found some studies exploring the (dis)continuity of sports and other hobby activities during lockdown. There was, for example, a concern that young people's motivation would decrease when the opportunities to share their activity with others in the form of concerts, exhibitions or other things did not exist. The pandemic has been challenging for children and youth who were already vulnerable. These groups consist of people with disabilities, those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, crowded living or families where a parent worked a job with a high risk of getting ill (i.e., health care professionals, bus drivers, teachers).

2.1.1. Participation in sports

Most articles related to sports or training we found were from the first lockdown period in 2020. The following examples illustrate what has been studied about children and young people's physical activities during COVID-19. In all the Nordic countries, sports activities were affected by the pandemic. The restrictions on associational life seem to have been weakest in Greenland, the Faroe Islands, and Iceland (Helfer et al., 2023). However, concerns were also expressed in these countries, for example in Greenland, on whether members of the associations would lose motivation when no competitions or championships were organised,³ or when people changed their habits. A strong concern noted was whether people who were doing voluntary work would change their habits and opt out of voluntary work in the future. In Norway, the Association of Voluntary Work (Frivillighet Norge) reported a sharp decline from 2020 to 2021 in the share of the population engaged in voluntary work (from 66 per cent to 55 per cent) (Frivillighet Norge, 2022: 21).

In the less-restricted Sweden, **sports activities were adapted from groups and indoor activities to outdoors, smaller groups and even online**, and for significant periods of time between 2020-2022, competitions were banned for most non-professional sports (Hedenborg et al., 2022). In general, the participation of children,

3 See [link](#). We have not found quantitative data on this. A recent report from University of Southern Denmark focused on qualitative data on the habits of movement, and motives and barriers on participation. Birgitte Westerskov Dalgas and Apollonie Kreutzmann, 2022: GRØNLAND I BEVÆGELSE Hverdagsfortællinger om bevægelsesvaner og motiver og barrierer for fysisk bevægelse: [Rapportserien MOVEMENTS](#)



young people and young adults (up to 25 years of age) in organised sports decreased during the pandemic due to the pandemic-related measures and restrictions on group sizes, social distancing, and health measures, as well as competitions and other events; almost one in three people had in 2020 chosen to pause their sports hobby. Yet, many young people and young adults kept active by training independently or following training on social media. In spring 2021, four out of ten sports associations stated that fewer children participated in their activities. The largest decrease was in contact sports, such as combat sports, dance, and indoor sports, such as handball and floorball. (Riksidrottsförbundet, 2021). Most children's sports were kept open throughout the pandemic, so the decline in sports participation for children born after 2005 was perhaps not as high as it might have been with stricter measures. (Norberg, 2022).

Closures of schools, sports clubs and facilities reduced children and young people's opportunities to participate in physical activity. In a Finnish study (Ng et al., 2021), most general upper secondary school pupils reported that their **physical activity levels decreased during lockdown** in the spring of 2020. Further, some youth increased their physical activity due to competitive aspirations, using indoor or outdoor possibilities. For example, during the first lockdown, one of the largest fitness chains in Finland offered free online fitness sessions, which could have encouraged young people to be physically and socially active. (ibid). Seventeen per cent of Finnish children increased their participation in outdoor games and play, according to a data survey collected in autumn 2020, whereas there was a decline of 23 per cent in the organised sports activities of children (Berg et al., 2022). The increased play was associated with greater children's independent mobility, while decreased sports activity was associated with a smaller activity space. Also, in Sweden was discovered, that children who belonged to higher socioeconomic backgrounds had higher activity levels and higher numbers of participation in organised sports in their free time. (Generation PEP, 2021).

Even in Sweden, a fifth of children and young people experienced that they had exercised less during the pandemic, according to the survey and interviews by Generation PEP (2021). Interviews with young people revealed **that they felt less motivated to do school-related tasks and physical activities after long periods of sitting still**. In 2020, the average decline in activity levels was 10 per cent among



young people aged 7–20, which was the largest measured drop since the Centre for Sports Research began mapping the activity levels of youth in 2009 (Norberg, 2022). The Public Health Agency of Sweden decided to allow summer camps on a limited scale in 2020, which ensured a right to significant leisure for those who had an opportunity to participate (Ingeström & Karlsson, 2020). Additionally, in a study made in Norway during the first lockdown (Anyan et al., 2020), younger participants showed a reduction in their physical activity, which could lead to higher levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms.

When sports activities were interrupted in the spring of 2020, many sports clubs successfully arranged practices online and started actively developing new ways to continue their activities. According to Finland's Report Card on Physical Activity for Children and Youth (2022: 35), sports clubs **developed innovative digital solutions** during the pandemic, and the situation ushered sports clubs into a new digital era. As an innovative example, an analysis tool to enable coach-led orienteering practices during the restrictions was developed by a youth club; GPS monitoring was implemented so that athletes' practices could be analysed by a remote connection. Additionally, cheerleaders recorded their performances which were sent for evaluation by referees during the competition weekend. (ibid).

Hence, during the pandemic in the sports sector, young athletes experienced little or no **influence on competitive sports participation**. However, the young people who thought they belonged to the best in the team or group felt to a greater degree than they had great influence and were always involved, but that the coaches largely decided everything related to the design of the sport, such as training frequency, or the content of the practice. The young athletes (15–17 years of age) experienced social participation to a large extent and political participation to a lesser extent. (Redelius & Eliasson, 2021).

Vulnerable groups under restrictions

During the pandemic, some groups of children and young people became more vulnerable to the restriction measures.

One of these groups identified as vulnerable consists of young people who moved from primary school to secondary school or youth from comprehensive school who transition to vocational education. A large longitudinal study examined possible connections to mental health problems from lower participation in sports (Burdzovic-Andreas & Brunborg, 2021). The study found that pupils who started high school during the pandemic year had few chances to participate in organised sports in late 2020 but were otherwise comparable in terms of self-reported mental and physical health.

For some **children and young people with disabilities, participation in activities during the pandemic could be extra challenging**, as maintaining activities or participating in them might require more resources, staff, and competences. This difference was clearly visible during autumn 2020 in comparisons of the numbers of participants for parasports to the general average in Sweden (MUCF, 2020). An analysis of the consequences of the pandemic for civil society from 2020 reveals that the consequences were harder on associational activities (activities organised by NGOs) for young people with disabilities. Almost half of the organisations stated in the survey that they only had a few opportunities to adapt their activities. (MUCF, 2020).

Even though **parasport associations** prioritised maintaining activities for children during the pandemic, children and young people's participation in parasports was hit harder than children and young people's participation in sports in general. For instance, there was a significant drop in participation opportunities for children and young people of all ages. The decline in opportunities per age category for parasports, as compared to the average for all sports, was for



- 7-12-year-olds in parasports a 33 per cent decline versus a 9 per cent decline in all sports;
- 13-16-year-olds in parasports a 48 per cent decline versus a 9 per cent decline in all sports;
- 17-20-year-olds in parasports a 50 per cent decline versus a 15 per cent decline in all sports;
- 21-25-year-olds in parasports a 59 per cent decline versus a 21 per cent decline in all sports. (Myndigheten för delaktighet, 2021: 23).

This clearly shows that the decline in participation in parasports in all age groups was significantly steeper than in all sports, with the difference being almost 40 per cent in some age groups. The participation dropped even by more than half in some age groups (ibid).

Additionally, some children and young people with **mental, cognitive, or physical disabilities** or who needed extra assistance to be able to participate in leisure activities (such as sports, which were allowed for children up to 12 years of age) faced difficulties in accessing sports and leisure when they were cancelled, moved online, or organised outdoors. For example, in Sweden in 2020, parasports had a significant loss of members compared to other sports. This is directly opposed to the goals of the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, which stipulates the right to a full life and active participation in the community for children with disabilities, Article 28 stresses access to education, and Article 31 provides the right of the child to participate freely in cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activities. Most importantly, Article 2 stipulates that all rights (including the rights to participation) belong to every child under 18. (MUCE, 2020).

2.1.2. Participation in leisure: hobbies, cultural events, and hanging out

Throughout the Nordic countries, COVID-19 restrictions impacted young people's free time. Hobbies were transferred online or put completely on hold. Restrictions affected the organisation of youth events, such as youth camps and centres or other public and semi-public spaces, such as libraries (Kauppinen & Laine 2022, 69). When youth activities were closed due to restrictions, it became **difficult to support those young people who did not have a hobby** before the pandemic or



whose hobby was interrupted due to restrictions. Many families in a lower socioeconomic background had to pay attention to the financial cost of hobbies – the high cost of certain hobbies had kept them out of the reach of others in the past, too (Kauppinen & Laine, 2022: 97).

The constant back and forth between the tightening and loosening of restrictions on hobbies made many young people frustrated. According to a Finnish study on youth between 12 to 24 years (Salasuo & Lahtinen 2021), three out of ten young people found the **interruption of hobbies** very negative during the pandemic. The interruption of hobbies can be considered to have affected the satisfaction of young people in their free time, which decreased during the pandemic. In their open-ended answers, young people expressed disappointment with cancelled plans and hobbies such as dance or music lessons that had transferred online or restrictions on the opportunities to spend time with friends. (ibid). For young people living in socioeconomically vulnerable areas and in some sparsely populated areas with limited access to digital technology, participation in online activities has been difficult (MUCE, 2021)

The interruption of hobbies was not only seen in a negative light. When guided hobbies transferred into distance activities, free time further increased for some young people. For example, Mikko Salasuo and Jenni Lahtinen (2021) point out that not everyone thought the interruption of their hobby activity was negative, on the contrary, about a tenth of young people felt that **the suspension of recreational activities was positive**. For some, staying at home might have been easier because of experiences of bullying, discrimination, or harassment in connection with their hobby. Time spent with parents and siblings increased, which was seen as positive in many families. Further, in Sweden, it was noted (MUCE, 2021) that online activities have been positive for some children and youth, as they did not have to commute to their hobbies after school.

Much attention in the public debate has focused on the possible impact of living **a life in front of screens**. According to a Norwegian study, screen time has increased among adolescents (von Soest et al., 2022). Some findings from Denmark of gamers aged 16-19 suggest that gaming “proved to be something to do in a situation of nothing to do”. The study by Tea Bengtsson and colleagues (2021) found



that “young people’s gaming practices were beneficial in allowing young people to maintain a social life and in providing a legitimate social space for maintaining friendships and/or coping with boredom”. On the other hand, Wilska and colleagues (2021: 81) reported an increase in the problematic gambling habits of young adults aged 18 to 25 during the pandemic. Loneliness felt during isolation might lead to maladaptive online behaviours. In a study on the dark web (Sirola et al., 2022), younger age and male gender were associated with using the dark web as an information source about COVID-19, which has been identified as a risk in terms of (dis)information source.

Young people’s opportunities to **participate in and practice cultural activities** were naturally affected by the pandemic. During the spring of 2020, many art schools in Sweden switched to remote learning to a large extent, organising distance education for young people born before 2005 or dividing their educational activities so that elementary school children were allowed into the premises while high school students were taught remotely. Teaching that occurs in groups along with so-called ‘drop-in’ activities was more difficult to transfer online. There was a concern that young people would not return to sports or continue with cultural activities in their free time after the pandemic and that fewer young people would start activities after it. As young people’s opportunities to enjoy cultural activities decreased during the pandemic, cultural actors have not been able to meet young people at school. (MUCE, 2021).

The restrictions on leisure activities can be argued to have detrimental effects on the wellbeing of children and youth. A Norwegian study (von Soest et al., 2022) examined the **drug use and psycho-social wellbeing** of young people aged 13 to 18. The study found more depressive symptoms and less optimistic future expectations during the pandemic, even when accounting for measured time trends. Comparative to an Icelandic study (Thorisdottir et al., 2021), researchers found that alcohol and substance use decreased among youth during COVID-19. The research discusses that the decrease in substance use was most likely due to the social restrictions on gathering, which might have resulted in less social pressure and fewer exploration of substances (ibid).



The lack of partying was a large concern for youth due to social distancing policies, which researchers have named a **'joy deficit'** (Kauppinen & Laine 2022: 325-326). It is clear that there are plenty of moments in youth that are uplifting special moments, different from everyday life, such as graduations, dances or other transition rites. The image of young people represented by the media during the first year of the pandemic was quite divided: they were at the same time presented as recent graduates focusing on their future and on the other hand, irresponsible revellers causing a health threat (Martikainen & Sakki 2021: 483-485).

In a study of youth experiences during the pandemic in Finland, attention was drawn to the fact that it is sometimes important for young people to be away from the gaze of adults (Kauppinen & Laine, 2022, 95). In a situation where encounters between people must be avoided, social media and various digital games were highlighted as **places to hang out**. Young people have different opportunities and skills to participate in social media – digital inequality was often referred to during the pandemic, as some lack devices or connections (ibid, 96)



2.2. Restricted youth and closed relationships

The stay-at-home restrictions affected not only the environments where children and young people spent time but also relationships. This chapter will focus on how the pandemic affected the social relations of children and youth. **Play and recreation are children's rights, which were partly not realised during the pandemic.** In a study on emerging adults who graduated during the pandemic (Repo et al., 2022b), researchers concluded that social relations play an important role in adjusting to stressful life events – individuals with prior symptoms of anxiety and experiences of loneliness are vulnerable to greatest deterioration in anxiety (ibid: 12). Further, the children interviewed expressed a longing for play, yard games, and togetherness with friends and family members during the restrictions (Valkendorff, 2022). The global pandemic blurred the possible futures for young people as the **global crisis intertwined with their emerging adulthood** (Vehkalahti et al., 2021). Due to restricted childhoods and interrupted youth stories, some researchers have called these young people the “lost youth” (Bjørknes et al., 2022).

The pandemic caused conflicting emotions for many young people by introducing a need to prioritise relationships with significant others. The pandemic had an **effect on close relationships**, both good and bad. Young adults were forced to drift between the responsibilities of protecting high-risk family members and sustaining important connections for personal identity formation. (Vehkalahti et al., 2021). In a study of Finnish families' coping strategies during the spring of 2020, limiting social contacts was particularly bad for young people, for whom friends and the support received from them have a special meaning (Suvisaari et al., 2022). The restrictions reduced and changed the way to be with significant others. Some studies depicted children and youth longing for their grandparents (ex., Sihvonen & Saarikallio-Torp, 2022), who were sometimes separated from the nuclear family due to health or safety reasons. Restrictions on gatherings, quarantines, and school rules had prevented close togetherness with the extended family and others.

In an article based on Finnish young people's writings about their COVID-19 experiences, some youth living with a family member belonging to a risk group had



been forced them to think about the health and safety of their significant others. Still, at the same time, this caused the feeling of exclusion from meaningful social relationships and fear of being left out or “**missing out**”. Due to the restrictions, young people’s agency was impacted, and developing their feelings of belonging to a community was more difficult. (Sihvonen & Saarikallio-Torp, 2022).

During the pandemic, examples of **community spirit** were also found. One such example was the ‘Teddy bears in windows’ challenge. The idea was to put teddy bears on windows for the children to see when most activities were cancelled, and as such, children could have this new activity of ‘teddy bear spotting’ in their neighbourhoods. Katriina Heljakka’s article (2021) examines the phenomenon of the teddy challenge and analyses it as a form of hybrid *toy activism*, an emerging form of play manifesting a strong message about the agility and empowerment of city inhabitants living in quarantine. Although focusing on adults, the article suggests that toy activism is a way for participants to express their active participation in fighting the potential negative effects of social distancing produced by self-isolation and strengthens people’s ability to cope with challenging times (ibid).

Location matters when it concerns meeting with others. The handling of the COVID-19 pandemic was different even within the Nordic countries, as in Finland and Norway, where the restrictions were more regional than in Denmark (f.ex. Randall, 2022). The transmission of the virus was more challenging in crowded city spaces, even with the closure of urban activities and social distancing measures. Therefore, space matters when discussing COVID-19 and children and youth were in *different positions depending on their location*.

Urban youth was a focus of research in Finland. The objective of the ‘Nuorten paikkataju ja huolet’ (Urban youth during the COVID-19 pandemic) research project (FYRN 2020-2023) was to understand the experiences and concerns of young people in different parts of cities during the COVID-19 pandemic and to make visible where and how young people moved in restricted urban environments. The research methods comprised of multi-dimensional and multi-vocal ways to reach out to youth in cooperation with the cities’ youth work departments. The research material built an understanding of how youth work can respond to the new obstacles and life situations of young people caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.



Additionally, a competition was organised by the researchers for young people aged between 15-20 years old, asking them to draw, paint, record, and write, “What would you want adults to understand about young people’s lives in the cities during the COVID-19 era?”. Youth sent in photographs, videos, poems, drawings, fiction texts and mixed media works, which were included in the anthology based on the research project (Laine et al., 2023).

A qualitative study (McGahey, 2021) focused on the disruption of private space for young people living in an international student dorm. The dorm was previously considered mainly a private space for socialising but “emerged as a closed unit that collapsed into single space living, work, and leisure activities”. The **changes in the private space** and the social detachment that this represented were stressful for international students.

The **connection to nature** became stronger, especially among young persons living in cities (Neuvonen et al., 2022: 94). During the COVID-19 pandemic, nature environments offered many people comfort, joy, and a place to calm down. Walks in local green areas became an integral part of everyday life for many when other public leisure spaces were closed. Many young people experienced nature and outdoor activities alone or with friends as an important pastime (Laine et al., 2023). Some students experienced that nature helped them cope with everyday life and provided a place to meet with their significant others during the exceptional times (Puhakka, 2021; Puhakka et al., 2023, forthcoming). All Nordic countries encouraged (and compared to other countries which only permitted) outdoor activities, such as exercising and going for walks (Hall et al., 2022: 4).

In sparsely populated areas in Finland, many young people had the possibility to move back to their **rural home** regions with no infections in their immediate environments. In interviews with young people living in sparsely populated regions in Finland during the COVID-19 lockdown period of spring 2020, it was revealed that their relationship with their remote home regions suddenly gained new, positive meanings compared to the global and national COVID-19 hotspots (Vehkalahti et al., 2021). Although rural regions offered safety, care, and familial relationships, they did not represent a desirable future in the long run. Many emerging young adults described being forced to rely on their parents, which felt



like “stepping backwards in time” due to the displacement of their independent life. (ibid). On the other hand, the transition of hobbies online was seen as creating equal opportunities for youth living in remote areas to participate in hobby activities, as it was not necessary to travel to their hobbies and some cultural events were hosted online (Kauppinen & Laine, 2022: 64).

During the pandemic, there has been a rapid transformation of every day to digital spaces. For some, **digital environments and online applications** solved challenges they faced related to their free time. During the strict pandemic restrictions in Finland in 2020, many youth services switched, for example, to the Discord application, where young people could chat, play, listen to music or watch TV series together (Hoikkala et al., 2023: 62). Researchers (Pietilä et al., 2021) have argued that digitality supported the ability to cope in lockdown situations with people’s everyday activities, such as work and school, societal participation, and social interactions. Inadequate ICT skills and technical issues were identified, and a digital divide was seen, with less ICT-skilled youth having unequal access to societal participation.

Not everyone is in the “same spot”

During the pandemic, many young people continued hanging out in public and semi-public spaces. Young people spent time in shopping centres and, to an increasing extent, in public outdoor spaces – parks, playgrounds, kindergarten yards and outdoor exercise areas. Hanging out was possible in those spaces, within the restrictions. Hanging out provided young people with moments free from the supervision of adults in a time when the opportunities to find their own space were limited. (Kauppinen & Laine, 2022: 97).

The stricter attitude towards young people hanging out in public spaces was also reflected in the changed arrangements of urban spaces. For example, hanging out in shopping centres was made more difficult by removing chairs from corridors. Some young people found this contradictory because those who had enough money to spend were still allowed to sit in cafes. (ibid: 93).

However, the spaces for hanging out underwent changes during the pandemic. Especially in the spring of 2020, the emptied urban space seemed to be mainly occupied by young people hanging out and intoxicated persons (Laine et al., 2023). This changed the social nature of the space and, in some places, even led to disputes between young people and adults about places where to hang out. In addition, the pandemic seemed to further tighten general attitudes towards young people hanging out (f.ex. Martikainen & Sakki, 2022). Young people hanging out also experienced inappropriate behaviour from adults, such as sexual harassment in public spaces. (Kestilä et al., 2022: 57).



2.3. Private spaces: Differential impacts in the everyday

Home is **not always a sweet home** for all children and young people. The official recommendation to stay at home worsened the situation of some young people. The homes and families of children and young people are very different from each other, which greatly influenced their individual experiences during the pandemic. Not all homes were ready to adapt to distance life. Some young people could not follow their hobbies, transferring from live classes to online due to lacking a suitable space or technical devices (Moilanen et al., 2021; Eurochild, 2020). Cases of family violence, whether mental or physical, increased in 2021 compared to 2019, and home incidents reported to the police increased (Hietamäki et al., 2022). When social interactions were limited during the first year of the pandemic, especially verbal violence was reported (Näsi & Koltola, 2021: 27). For young people from unstable home conditions, hanging out in public and semi-public spaces may have been safer than staying at home, despite the contagious virus.

Recommendations to stay at home were hard for those in a particularly vulnerable position, for example, young people belonging to **sexual and gender minorities** (Leemann & Virrankari, 2022; Majlander et al., 2022) or those with ideological or religious views differing from their parents (Sihvonen & Saarikallio-Torp, 2022). The experience of young people belonging to gender minorities was especially impacted, which could have long-lasting effects on their wellbeing and future plans.

A Norwegian study examined a different age group for symptoms of anxiety and depression before and during the pandemic (Hafstad et al., 2021). The study found that clinical levels of anxiety and depression increased slightly (from 5.5 per cent exhibiting symptoms before February 2019 to 6.3 per cent during COVID-19 after the first lockdown in June 2020). The study finds, however, that the main driver was an increase in age between assessments. The study found that adolescents in single-parent households were much more likely to experience an increase in symptoms of anxiety or depression. Before and during COVID-19, adolescents in low-income and **single-parent households** were most exposed to anxiety and depression. Based on this, the authors of the study argue that “health inequities



related to living conditions need to be addressed in future action plans, and intensified measures to mitigate inequities are needed” (Hafstad et al., 2021: 7).

The restrictive measures were criticised regarding people living in **institutional care for persons with disabilities**. For example, the meetings with family members could only be made according to the principal’s decision. (Nieminen, 2022). Young people with disabilities have been identified as one of the groups most deeply affected by COVID-19. Different factors have been identified (f.ex. Shakespeare et al., 2021) which put them in a vulnerable position: being in a risk group due to the disease itself, reduced access to services (such as health care and rehabilitation) and experiencing adverse social impacts of efforts to mitigate the pandemic. (ibid). In a Finnish research project (Mietola & Ahonen, 2021), young people with a disability expressed that they were in complete lockdown in their housing unit, which prohibited all visits to and from the unit.

The pandemic significantly impacted **incarcerated persons**, whether prisoners serving juvenile sentences, young prisoners, or those with parents in prison. Due to the restrictions, holidays and exit permits were almost automatically denied to prisoners for a long time. Contact with the outside world took place by telephone or online connections. Quarantines made it hard to meet with family or significant others. There were long periods when children or spouses could not visit the prison. For example, siblings were kept from each other if the youngest were in prison with their mother. There are also under-18-year-olds in prisons who have faced the same issues outlined above. Many teenagers convicted are in child custody centres, which became prison-like during the pandemic due to quarantine restrictions. (Nieminen, 2022: 78-99.)

Children who receive support from **child welfare and child protection** agencies became even more vulnerable during the pandemic. This was due to the numerous restrictions placed on them, even though no general ban on visiting child welfare institutions was issued. In many cases, children living in institutions had their contact with their families reduced to a minimum. According to Liisa Nieminen (2022), in Finland, there are many differences in the basic and human rights protection of children in practice, such as the social status of the individual child or that of their parents. Further, in another study, users of youth shelters experienced



increased violence during the pandemic. Some faced difficulties going out, working, maintaining social relationships, studying and using services. In the interviews, clients hoped that the professionals would receive additional training on violence and its consequences so that the experiences would not be underestimated. (Nenonen et al., 2022).

A Danish study of youth in **out-of-home placement** showed mixed results for this otherwise vulnerable group. When specifically asked about details such as more contact with adults in the place of care [foster family or institution], about half of the young people agreed that they have experienced more contact, togetherness, structure and a feeling of in their everyday life in the first lockdown. The other half of the young people found their everyday life more difficult under lockdown (Lausten et al., 2022). Finnish researchers interviewed young adults who have visited the Red Cross Youth Shelter during the pandemic and asked how the crisis has affected their lives, social relationships, daily activities, and their future plans. The young adults who participated in the study felt that their special experiences had not been sufficiently listened to and taken into account in decision-making. Further, it was mentioned that information was often provided in a difficult way. The news and political speeches were characterised by sensationalism and one-sidedness, and it was hard to follow the endless stream of news. (Kallio et al., 2021).



2.4. Youth services under restrictions

The **restrictions affected youth services and changed their operations**, also family services were reduced. The closure of services impacted different groups of children and young people. The largest drop occurred in the services mostly used by families with children, i.e., early childhood education, children's counselling and medical services (Lammi-Taskula et al., 2020; Moilanen et al., 2021). For example, during the first wave of the pandemic in Finland, youth work centres had to limit the number of visitors or close facilities in many areas (Kivijärvi et al., 2022: 38; Manu et al., 2021: 37). Similarly, many other public services and spaces were restricted, including libraries, where children and young people may normally spend time.

When services were transferred online, studies showed that youth with immigrant backgrounds or who face challenges in learning, such as youth with ADHD or dyslexia were least involved in digital leisure activities. (Pálsdóttir, et al., 2020). Several studies have noted smaller, vulnerable groups who experienced worsening conditions under the COVID-19 restrictions. For example, a study of the immediate effect of COVID-19 on children with obsessive-compulsive disorders (OCD) found that they experienced worsening anxiety, and depressive symptoms and the extent of avoidance behaviour increased. Further, a study of young people struggling with anxiety and personality disorders found “severe, enhanced levels of mental distress among patients receiving **telephone-based consultations** as the main alternative to specialised PD treatment during the COVID-19 lockdown.” (Hartveit Kvarstein et al., 2022).

A study from Norway (Klette-Bøhler et al., 2023) suggests that **children with disabilities have been systemically marginalised** during the COVID-19 pandemic due to contamination measures. Remote schooling has placed children with disabilities in a vulnerable situation and has enabled some individuals to live a life according to their visions and values. According to Kjetil Klette-Bøhler (2021), socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds impacted how many children with disabilities received less support from educational institutions and welfare services. Some children with disabilities had trouble handling online social codes and learning in distance education.



Musical practices became an important part of some children's everyday education and added a sense of wellbeing and social participation. (ibid).

Another vulnerable group identified as being impacted by the closure of leisure activities are children from **lower socioeconomic backgrounds**. Some families have encountered financial stress due to layoffs or illnesses. The accumulation of problems could be accelerated by a parent's unemployment, the reduction of support offered by the family's close circle, the isolation resulting from the restrictive pandemic measures and the additional demands placed on parents (Nieminen, 2022: 37). According to a Finnish study (Lammi-Taskula et al., 2020), parents who felt that they did not receive sufficient help from support services experienced the most burnout.

The pandemic did not only negatively affect youth services, **as new forms of doing youth work were further developed**. These included digital solutions, outreach and detached youth work, which means working where the young people are and aim to engage with young people and support young people based on their needs (Kivijärvi et al., 2022; 40). In the spring of 2020, detached youth work took to the streets and online, which transformed youth work to become more widespread and develop the employees' skills. Due to these innovations and environmental changes, new groups of youth were reached (Tormulainen & Kauppinen, 2022: 132; Kivijärvi et al., 2022: 49).

Conclusion

3.1. Recap:

What has been studied during the pandemic?

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected many aspects of our lives and has been a severe global crisis. The restrictions and interruptions of the everyday have affected all children and young people, but the extent and length of the effect have varied. A major societal crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic brings existing inequalities and power structures to light. There are many groups that require particular attention as the crisis may have reinforced vulnerability among children and young people (f.ex., Augusti et al., 2023). It is important to consider how ethnicity, gender, and class differences have affected children and young people's experiences and their overall situation during the pandemic.

Since the onset of the pandemic in Europe in 2020, there has been a lot of scientific research activity related to the crisis, unsurprisingly accompanied by an accelerating number of publications. There have been new calls and rounds of funding for research, particularly on the pandemic experience, and many ongoing research projects have modified their research questions to include this theme in their work. Mental health has been a major concern, and the pandemic has been broadly studied through the lenses of wellbeing and psychology in social sciences (Liu et al., 2021; see ex. Viner et al., 2021).

Opportunities and limitations

At the same time, the pandemic has made it very difficult for many research projects to meet their original aims. In many cases, the social restrictions have posed real challenges for field work and even made it impossible to generate data. Particularly research projects where the methods have been qualitative and included fieldwork requiring face-to-face contact have struggled to maintain their work. For example,



in a UK-based survey among researchers, about 80 per cent reported that they were forced to change how they conducted their research due to the COVID-19-related restrictions (UKRI, 2021). To some extent, the difficulties can be seen in the types of publications published recently (On COVID-19 pandemic impacts on qualitative research see also Otto & Haase, 2022; Santana et al., 2021).

Probably, it has been easier to conduct surveys or register-based research, for example, than studies where face-to-face interviews or art workshops would have provided the main source of data. This may be one of the reasons why participation has not been so widely covered as a research topic. According to our searches, it is quite challenging to study children and young people's participation by statistical methods. It is also likely that the research cycle of many qualitative research projects is longer than many research projects using survey data and statistical methods, for example, and the publications from such projects will come out later.

Few studies on inclusion and participation

Participation has not been a widely studied topic in the publications we have charted. This is an important observation. The omission of this perspective may be due to many aspects; it is perhaps not a concept that has been integral in many research disciplines, and as such, possibly not so familiar to researchers who concentrate on children and young people's education or leisure. Another possible explanation is that such research projects have been planned but not funded. And a further question regards the results of such projects, even if they are funded, as there may be fewer journals which are open to articles concerning this kind of research approach, and the publication of results on these themes may be more difficult than for more traditional research themes concerning education and leisure.

While it is not within our scope to comprehensively map all research on children and youth during the pandemic, it can be concluded that there is a plethora of studies on young people's learning and their everyday experiences and wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, there are significantly fewer articles available at the time of this study that focuses on the inclusion and participation of Nordic children and young people in matters that affect them greatly – namely in the spheres of education and leisure time.



Like Laura Lundy and colleagues (2021: 263), we conclude that most of the initiatives to capture children's views were not rights-focused. Of the plethora of research, consultations were seldomly “designed by children for children”, and some of these studies found were outside of the Nordic countries (such as Lundy et al., 2021). More studies in the Nordics co-designed with children and youth about their experiences and views should be implemented to realise their human rights. In another review of methods used to collect the voices of children and young people during COVID-19 (Jørgensen et al., 2022), researchers found only a few international studies actively involving children and young people in the research process or using a rights-based framework.

Indications of deepening inequalities in learning and access to social and cultural spaces

The role of schooling is central in children and young people's lives in the Nordic countries, where the compulsory schooling age may extend from 6 to 18. A school is a place for learning and, importantly, a social sphere where social relationships are formed and negotiated. While Nordic societies managed to transfer much of the teaching and class activities into the digital realm, the social aspect of schooling suffered. This profoundly affected the wellbeing and participation of many children and young people. While distance schooling was organised surprisingly swiftly, the learning results have not been equally consistent. There is some evidence that educational inequalities have deepened during the pandemic (f.ex. Birkelund & Karlson, 2022). Groups that were vulnerable before the pandemic has been in a particularly difficult position during the pandemic (e.g., Fäldt et al., 2022). The experience of inclusion in school dropped particularly for girls, gender minorities, those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and persons who experience a poor state of health (Leemann & Virrankari, 2022). Further, disabled youth have been in a vulnerable position as they are in a risk group due to the disease itself, have reduced access to services (such as health care and rehabilitation), and experience adverse effects from pandemic mitigation efforts (Shakespeare et al., 2021).

Even more, restrictions have been applied to hobbies which are very common leisure activities for children and young people. Group sports and competitions were stopped in many places, facilities closed for periods of time and transferred outdoors or severely restricted. The end of a regular hobby activity left a large gap



in the everyday life of many children and youth. The right to meaningful leisure has therefore been jeopardised for large groups of children and young people, as they have not been able to participate in their usual leisure activities, whether related to sports, cultural activities or other types of activities. However, many continued to train individually or with the support of digital media.

The pandemic did not only have negative effects on children and young people. Some of the consequences of the restrictions on young people's leisure activities were perhaps surprisingly positive, regarding the ban on competitions in sports, which allowed them to participate in sports activities with less pressure on performance (Helfer et al., 2023: 130). It is interesting to note also that during the pandemic, children and youth did not only stop hobbies, they also found new ones (f.ex. Tarvainen et al., 2023 forthcoming).

Younger age groups have had positive experiences of having spent more time with their families when there have been restrictions on social gatherings (ex., Sihvonen & Saarikallio-Torp, 2022), and some gained new aspects in their lives, such as a connection to nature (Vehkalahti et al., 2021; Puhakka, 2021; Puhakka et al., 2023 forthcoming). For some, visiting friends was an important change to the free time spent at home with parents and siblings (Repo et al., 2022b). Outdoor gyms and indoor private training camps offered some young people a way to exercise and spend time with friends. (Nyyssölä & Manner, 2023). Just this change in their everyday life patterns and slowing down has made it easier for some to focus on the most important things in life. Close and safe relationships had a huge impact on many during the pandemic.

Interrupted youth

However, the restrictions regarding the use of public spaces and gatherings have been harder on older young people, for whom social relationships are of central importance. They have, in many cases, been restricted from meeting their friends and making new contacts in leisure and education. For them, this appears as a fundamental lack in their youth. They thought they could not fully live their youth during the pandemic, as many social events were cancelled or restricted. Many important rituals and festivities which are of huge importance to young people have not been celebrated and have caused a "joy deficit" (Kauppinen & Laine, 2022).



The consequences of the lack of participation in onsite education are many. Early and primary education positively affects a child's development (linguistic, social, cognitive) and life. Yet, smaller groups are beneficial for learning, but an inconsistency in learning affects the learning results. From a long-term perspective, lack of participation in school and school closures cause learning gaps for students, which can further impact their future job opportunities and income, and, therefore, even affect economic factors at the societal level. (Sjögren et al., 2021).

Nevertheless, participation can be seen as a very important topic in relation to children and young people's position and influence in society. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 12) states very clearly that children's rights need to be considered in society concerning issues that have an effect on their lives. It is also important that research regarding children and young people takes this perspective into account for the decision-makers to know whether children and young people's rights of participation and influence are realised in society. It is the joint task of the academic community – university education, researchers, research funders and editorial boards – to take the topic of children and young people's participation seriously and ensure it will be included in future publications.

Looking for relevant publications

We have aimed to highlight some of the most interesting research perspectives regarding the consequences of the pandemic on children and young people's experiences of education and leisure. Where possible, we have focused on participation. We hope the result may be useful to policymakers and professionals working with children and youth and the research community.

When we set out to conduct this research overview, little did we anticipate that the research on young Nordic people's education and leisure during the pandemic would be quite such a huge compilation of publications. The hundreds of articles from the literature search and other relevant references were located during the extensive work for the first report (Helfer et al., 2023). The amount of data exceeded all our expectations and made our task greater. Filtering the most relevant publications from the plethora consumed many resources.



Another surprise for the research team was that in the multitude of articles, so few discussed children and young people's rights or participation, which was our main focus. It can thus be said that we had on the one hand, almost too many publications to work with, and on the other, that we had very few relevant publications. Trying to manage this contradictory situation, we chose to present some central research themes which have relevance for the wider discussions of children and young people's participation in society, even though not all of them include a developed discussion of this theme.

While finalising this report, some new publications are coming out, namely on the themes of child and youth participation during crises (f.ex. Kjellander & Sjöblom, 2023) as well as the rights of children during distance education (Ylisaukko-Oja, 2023) and general experiences of young people (Panula et al., 2023). Research projects, such as EduRESCUE⁴ are still investigating these topics and there is probably much more to come.

4 The research project EduRESCUE develops research-based societal solutions, tools, and coping strategies to strengthen the ability of the Finnish education system and society to cope with crises such as the COVID-19 in the future. For more [information](#).



3.2. Significance of children and young people's participation and influence

Even while the restrictions in the Nordic countries have not been as strict as in many other countries (f.ex. Irfan et al., 2022; Saunes et al., 2022), there would still have been ways to improve the involvement and participation of children and youth participation during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. Regarding the participation of children and young people, we can only guess how it would have been if they had been more involved and listened to in decision-making processes during the pandemic. For example, the importance of leisure and social gatherings for the wellbeing of young people has been, to some extent, misrecognised during the pandemic, and it has been a serious omission.

The consequences for children and young people must be assessed in decision-making both in fast, first-step actions and long-term measures. The restrictions that may be applied in the future must be reasonable in terms of leisure which supports the wellbeing of young people. Youth is a special and unique period in which peer relationships and togetherness are highly significant. Hobbies and other meaningful activities play an important role in the wellbeing of young people in settings like the COVID-19 pandemic and are a big part of identity formation. They could also have a role in overcoming inequalities between children and youth coming from different socioeconomic backgrounds.

The pandemic made many structural inequalities more visible, such as parents' varying resources to support their children during distance education. The parental support for children's learning during distance education has often been weaker, and the study equipment is more deficient in families with lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Darmody et al., 2021). This perspective calls for attention if emergency distance education periods need to be applied again in comprehensive education. The pandemic caused a social disturbance for many families, consisting of many simultaneous stress factors, such as uncertainty, financial worries, unemployment and social isolation. Parents' reduced wellbeing may have resulted in reduced



parental care and guidance, which may have put the children's adaptation to the test. (Prime et al., 2020).

It is also important to ensure that the different voices of children and young people are heard. Although vulnerable groups have been mapped, there is probably still a huge gap within the literature. In general, it is hard to gain access to more vulnerable and marginalised groups in society even during normal times, and even more so during special conditions when the researcher's own possibilities and freedoms are restricted. It is important to reach out to interviewees from disadvantaged, marginalised groups for qualitative online interviews or to some more creative ways of reaching out, like drawings or videos.

There have been new initiatives for listening to youth, such as those implemented by the Ombudspersons' offices for Children (f.ex., Iceland and Finland, see previous report for more details Helfer et al., 2023; Kekkonen, 2021). Many governments have been keen to find out how children and young people are striving through the exceptional conditions and have funded related research (f.ex. a Study on Finnish young people's experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020-2022, which was funded by the Ministry of Education and Culture; see, e.g., Lahtinen et al., 2022; Helfer et al., 2023). There have also been surveys supported by national governments, which have charted the outcomes of the pandemic by collecting data from various experts (f. ex., Finnish National Child Strategy, 2020).

As mentioned in the first report (Helfer et al., 2023) and in Lundy's theory (2007), communication and policy planning should be addressed in a child and youth-friendly way (Finnish National Child Strategy, 2020: 26-28). Children and youth should have access to information and support in a way that is suitable for them.

Recommendations

Young people should be consulted on various issues related to their free time.

As we can conclude from the studies mentioned above, the field of social activity expands, especially in the early years of youth, as friendships and peer relationships emerge alongside family relationships to support young people's identity construction and independence (Sihvonen & Saarikallio-Torp, 2022: 71). Emerging adults need their own space, which is sometimes outside the reach of their parents. Therefore, young people should be offered a wide variety of spaces and different types of activities to support meaningful leisure activities for them.

In comparison to organised sports, even spontaneous outdoor games and play should be promoted to support children's independent mobility (Berg et al., 2022). All in all, the gap between physically active and passive youth raises the question of polarization. The fact that some children and young people stopped their physical activities could have long-term effects on public health.

Mutual encounters between young people should be cherished even during exceptional circumstances.

Preschools and kindergartens are places that, at their best, bring joy, pleasure, togetherness and wellbeing to learners in ways that cannot always be measured. Peer relationships and togetherness play an important role. One of the relevant questions is how to create a bond with school, learning, and the community as distance education practices become more common (Ukkola & Väättäinen, 2021). The period of youth includes important transitions, many of which include social events and celebrations that should be made possible even when there are restrictions (Nyyssölä & Manner, 2023).



Participatory rights of emerging adults should be protected.

Especially school-aged children were given special access to school and hobbies, but this should include young people and emerging adults (18+). Children and young people must be listened to when drawing up possible restrictions. For example, what is considered good free time means different things to different young people – young people must be allowed to define what balanced and good leisure activities mean to them.

Digital platforms are central to young people's everyday life and hobbies.

Digital solutions allow young people to belong to different leisure communities, such as a gaming community on the other side of the world, which can be even more meaningful than physically near communities. Digital solutions have significantly supported many young people during the pandemic. What adults may consider to be an 'unproductive time', such as hanging out with friends or playing in digital environments, may often represent important social interaction for young people (Kauppinen & Laine, 2022: 96). The need for online youth work has also been highlighted, as young people's social relationships and leisure activities are increasingly intertwined with digital spaces. In addition, physically mobile forms of youth work have been developed, and they go to such places where young people prefer to spend their leisure time, especially outside of city centres (Tormulainen & Kauppinen, 2022).

Future emergency policies should consider young people's right to access public and semi-public spaces.

Young people often have to negotiate access to public spaces however, they should also be welcomed by them. When thinking of future crises, special attention and support should be offered to young people so they can enjoy meaningful leisure time, regardless of their backgrounds. This has been, to some extent, possible throughout the Nordic countries, as noted in our first report. However, more can be done to create safe leisure environments for young people, and this includes that



there are enough safe adults who can protect young people against violence and harassment, for example in digital spaces against online grooming.

Urban planners can hopefully also learn from this crisis when designing green city spaces. Young people especially have found comfort in natural environments during the pandemic (Puhakka, 2021), which should not be undermined. When many free public spaces were closed down, the only indoor spaces left to hang around and meet friends were private or commercial spaces, such as bars. This has an obvious impact on inequality between different groups (Laine et al., 2023).

Ethical considerations when doing research with children and youth.

More could be done so that even researchers would include the thoughts of children and young people in research planning, such as recruiting children and young people as co-researchers (Larcher et al., 2020). As well as policymakers, researchers should address the inclusion of children and young people in research processes and methods to solicit their voices and to implement a child and youth rights-based model into their research processes (f.ex. Bray et al., 2021; Pascal & Bertram, 2021). However, their participation in the study must be voluntary. As in the principles of participation modified by Laura Lundy (2007), children and young people should have the option to decline their participation in a matter that concerns them. This matters in research, as there has been much funding for different projects.

Classifying someone as vulnerable needs future consideration. Influence can be a demanding task, as one's own personality should be exposed in public in order to make their interest group's voice heard. In some unfortunate cases, influencing can lead the informant to become the target of hate speech. For example, being disabled and young is a particularly vulnerable position during a crisis like the pandemic, but as researchers argue (Mietola & Ahonen, 2021), young people's narratives depict a more varied picture. Materials (such as texts, pictures, videos, etc.) collected from youth living in special units due to their disability(ies) showed how the interplay of multiplicity of different factors leads to different experiences of lockdown. Further, there is great heterogeneity among persons living with disabilities. (ibid).



More methodological reflection is needed on ethical principles when encountering research participants from vulnerable positions (Kallio et al., 2022). Research ethical norms and guidelines do not always consider the specifics of young people's lives, and the guidelines may sometimes be incompatible with young people's needs and wishes. Situational and self-critical reflection of researchers is a prime matter in rapidly changing societal conditions.



3.3. Unpredictable futures: What are the gaps in knowledge?

It has been argued that the pandemic has generational effects and has created a special cohort of “lost youth” (Bjørknes et al., 2022; Hafstad & Augusti, 2021). Though it is too early to talk about a “lost generation”, it is likely that the consequences of the COVID-19 era on young people will only become visible over time. At the same time, there have been many other more or less global crises, such as the war in Ukraine, climate change, unstable economic prospects, energy crisis and inflation – all affecting young people’s lives either directly or indirectly by affecting their parents. Further, many reforms and structural changes have been made to the welfare state (as in 2021 with the extension of compulsory education to 18 years in Finland, see OKM 2020) in such life spheres that affect the everyday lives of children and young people.

At the same time, there is a great demand for research information. Across different sciences, special funding opportunities have been given for research projects focusing on pandemic-related aspects. There are lots of research publications in process and forthcoming, as well as various non-peer-reviewed reports that have already come out during the past three years. Additionally, much research remains unpublished to this day, as the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly accelerated and expanded scientific publishing, causing, at the same time, a delay in publishing many articles (Horbach, 2021). In many ways, the research work is still in progress. More studies need to be made about the long-term outcomes of the pandemic.

As Jørgensen and colleagues argue (2022), surveys and research made during COVID-19 represent children and young people from middle-class backgrounds more than others, and there are equity gaps in accessing the experiences of respondents from disadvantaged settings. In the published literature we have surveyed, some groups were not covered adequately. Consequently, we know relatively little about them. Namely, there is some research on particular minorities (such as LGBTQIA+ youth) but less on indigenous communities (like Sami children and youth across the Nordics) or other ethnic, religious or cultural minorities, such as Roma children



and youth. One reason could be that, generally, LGBTQIA+ youth have been more politically active (f.ex., in Sweden MUCF, 2022).

Nevertheless, it is still not possible to say much about the consequences of the pandemic for these groups. Minority youth (f.ex. trans youth) might have had difficulties spending time at home due to restrictions if they did not receive support or confirmation of their own (sexual) identity from their family (Majlander et al., 2022). Further, home violence and abuse have probably remained more hidden than before (Hietamäki et al., 2021).

Many of the research publications we have collected have been based on register data or other quantitative analyses, and there is a gap in the representativity of children and youth who are not normally heard. For example, even in the Nordic countries, there are homeless families and others whom phone surveys may not reach (mostly from unprivileged backgrounds). Reaching out to refugees or asylum seekers might be more difficult during lockdown. Children and young people who needed help from various services may have suffered from the temporary closing down of many services. It is especially important to include these voices in the discussion on the pandemic's consequences and in research as well.

Experiences of at-risk groups during exceptional situations seem to have been disfavoured for them. This raises the question of whether there may be new types of vulnerable groups brought to light by the COVID-19 pandemic and which may not be detected with the help of existing risk measures. It could be that in times like the pandemic, polarisation happens even within social classes and not only between them. (Sihvonen & Saarikallio-Torp, 2022).

In addition, it should be noted that there have been restrictions which have limited meetings with family members who did not live within the nuclear family or were living elsewhere; many young people have seen less of their grandparents and other family members and relatives. Thus, there have been difficulties in the meeting practices of separated families and the integration of immigrant families. Gathering more information on transnational family bonds during the pandemic restrictions would be important.



Another group that would need more research is the children and young people struggling with post-COVID-19 conditions or the long-term effects of COVID. There has been some discussion about a “pandemic inside the pandemic”, as some are left with symptoms like heavy fatigue, aches, cognitive difficulties, and loss of senses (Lopez-Leon et al., 2022). Long COVID can have long-lasting effects on individual educational achievement and life choices. Not to forget about children and young people who had a particularly hard time during the pandemic, whether due to home conditions or long-term illnesses, being in a high-risk group.

Closing thoughts

Due to COVID-19, life paths have become more uncertain for many. The weakening of participation can cause a vicious circle. Instead of future-oriented thoughts, all energy concentrates on surviving the present (Isola et al., 2020). The involvement of children and youth can be seen as a way to see a route out from a blurred future. Additionally, it would be key to pay attention to structures that support families with children and youth.

Structures that promote inclusion are also created by a culture where adults hear the opinions, concerns and wishes of all kinds of young people (Lundy, 2007). When the experience of inclusion weakens, trust in other people and togetherness with them decreases. This could impact how a young person relates to the future and whether they feel included in society. (Leemann & Virrankari, 2022).

The usual life course was restricted in many aspects during this halted situation, and new preconditions were applied. It is important to follow what kind of effects this might have in the long run. It may seem that most children and young people are resilient to crises, but it is crucial to find the groups and individuals that have had a particularly hard time. It is important that so many studies have been conducted on the impacts of the pandemic on children and youth, drawing attention to their concerns. But to ascertain the long-term consequences and learn more about the best ways for societies to cope in times of crises, other methods and measures of research than registry and survey data analysis are needed. Methods and measures that build on the knowledge of how children and young people feel and how they learn but focus on giving them more voice in context.

As we know from the studies we have looked at so far, isolating young people from each other causes many kinds of distortions in their wellbeing. In future crises refraining from the types of solutions that leave children and young people voiceless is essential. Societies should look closer at the participation and wellbeing of their younger members, as the future is dependent on them.

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