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Lessons from Remote School and Work New Vistas for Research on Children's Well-Being

Abstract

In autumn 2021, Covid-19 still has effect on our daily living and our possibilities to conduct everyday life practices such as work and studies. Current realities of 'new normality', based on remote work and restrictions of social activities, for example, are grounded on the vast changes that occurred when the pandemic began. In this text we take a look back to the period of school closures in Finland, and their effect on families' daily practices related to children's well-being and school work. We explore the impacts of remote school to learning opportunities to find ways to utilize the new, good practices of remote school also in the future. At the same time, we emphasize the significance of support from home for children's school achievement and accordingly, the need to find new ways to study school work more holistically.

Keywords: basic education, covid-19, Finland, remote school, everyday life

Changes in daily living in the spring of 2020

The spring of 2020 brought sudden and thorough changes to the daily living of Finnish families. On 16 March, the Finnish government declared a state of emergency over the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak. Among the various measures taken, educational institutions were closed. At the same time, it was strongly recommended that employees work from home. Thus, many parents started remote work and stayed at home with their children, who participated in on-line learning activities organised in variable ways. The home environment became a place of both work and leisure. Walk-in closets and cellars were turned into offices for remote workers, children spread their schoolbooks over kitchen tables, and family computers were in heavy use. The state of emergency caused by the Covid-19 pandemic came suddenly, and our habitual ways of living were shattered into pieces. Everyday life, often considered repetitious and filled with routine, unquestioned daily activities, turned into a great unknown (see Nilsson & Marander-Eklund 2021). Established ways of thinking and doing had to be abandoned, and families' everyday lives became a space of active agency and solution seeking practices. (On different ways of interpreting daily living, see Michael 2006.) The practical changes in daily living also caused ruptures in established cultural ideas about the distinction between life and work. For many people, this stark, yet mostly unquestioned distinction between work and home life has been maintained through separate environments. Instead of repeating their normal ways of daily living, people had to use their creativity to build a new way of 'normal' everyday life.

Among the most drastic social and cultural changes in families' daily living was the intertwining of adults' and children's daily work. Work and school days, usually separate during the school year, were suddenly spent together by the kitchen table. For the two months of school closure, schoolwork became part of the daily activities of many Finnish homes. It soon became evident that homes were equipped with varying facilities for effective online learning, and parents had different capabilities to support their children's schoolwork (Valtioneuvoston tiedepaneeli 2020). Schools provided children with computers in case their families did not have suitable equipment. Teachers also instructed pupils with digital learning tools. However, this period emphasised the effect of family inequalities on children's opportunities for learning (Daniel 2020; Luthar, Ebbert & Kumar 2020; Van Lancer & Parolin 2020). The ruptures in ways of living considered normal also opened a view to unequal practices and social problems that have been present for a long time but have remained largely invisible behind the established ideas of private family life. Other actions taken to mitigate the spread of the virus also had a wide impact on families. The restrictions led to unemployment in various working sectors, which

caused economic problems for many families. In addition, the accessibility of social and health care services was limited, and receiving help and support became more difficult (Hietanen-Peltola, Vaara, Laitinen & Jahnukainen 2020). Studies (e.g. Sorkkila & Aunola 2021) show, how parents' exhaustion over the situation was hardest in families with children in need of special support. Provision of support online by special educators was found difficult (Eutsler, Antonenko & Mitchell 2020; Sainio, Nurminen, Hämeenaho, Torppa, Poikkeus & Aro 2020). Due to this, in these families the period of online learning was more demanding and affected families' daily routines most. There are limits in the measures schools can take to balance the inequalities between pupils, and new practices and ways of thinking should be found. What could we learn from our Covid-19 era experiences?

Changes in schools – changes in research

In the spring of 2020, our team conducted research on schools' work on well-being and school personnel's well-being in Finnish basic education schools for children of age between six to sixteen. Our goal was to gain an understanding of the practical actions taken in schools to enhance pupils' well-being. These actions covered, for instance, the promotion of pupils' participation, teaching of socioemotional skills, inclusion of physical activity in the school day and prevention of bullying. At the same time, we examined school personnel's capabilities to realise such actions by including various measures of work climate and well-being, such as collaboration, work motivation, exhaustion and leadership.

In January 2020, we collected questionnaire data with 437 respondents from various professional groups in 48 basic education schools in Central Finland (e.g., teachers, special education teachers, school assistants, school instructors and school leaders). Only two months later, on 18 March, Finnish schools were put under a lockdown. In only a few days, our fresh data became a source of knowledge of 'what used to be'. The responses about concerns over pupils' screen time, or about physical activities during the school day, for example, did not reflect the realities of remote school days. In addition, the personnel's feelings of competence and relatedness at work, for instance, did not reflect the situation that had changed from face-to-face interaction to the digital environment. With regard to well-being at work, the focus of our study, the practises described in the responses concerned the face-to-face environment. Now, the personnel was forced to learn and create new ways of teaching and caring for students from scratch. We decided to collect a new set of data with questions modified to grasp the realities of the new situation. This

data, which consists of 270 responses from 27 schools, described well-being in schools during the two months of school closure from 18 March to 14 May.

Within only five months, we had collected two sets of data which described school personnel's perceptions on school well-being in two completely different school environments. The first was based on 'being there' with the pupils, in daily interaction. The second was for the most part realised through digital tools and in it, participation depended on the skills of and equipment for using such tools. The two sets of data allow us to see points of departure for studying the daily living of school-aged children and their families from a novel perspective that could benefit our strategies of 'exiting from Covid-19' successfully.

The role of family in children's well-being at school was not defined as a key research question in our surveys. Thus, it was not explicitly asked about, but the open-ended questions allowed for expressing concerns over home environments, for instance. In the data collected in January, the open-ended responses mentioned the role of parents only occasionally, and mainly in relation to multi-professional support – how much families receive or do not receive support from social and health care services, for example. However, the second set of data, collected right after the lockdown, emphasised pupils' home conditions. The school personnel brought up the parents' role and significance when asked: 'Is there something else you would like to tell the researchers about your working conditions during online schooling, or about its effects on pupils (positive or negative things)?' This made us, researchers of school well-being, ponder whether this unexpected viewpoint should be given a more significant role in forthcoming studies, besides the current learnings about digital environments' effect on pupil well-being.

Our study does not illuminate the viewpoints of parents, but reflects the importance of parental support and the significance of home as a learning environment from the perspective of educational staff.

Serendipities and surprises in online school

The school closure of spring 2020 has been vastly studied by several research groups in Finland, thus increasing our understanding of the impact of remote school on pupils' learning outcomes (e.g., Herkama & Repo 2020; Kankaanranta & Kantola 2020; Finnish Education Evaluation Centre 2020; Sainio et al. 2020). In these studies, concerns over increasing inequalities, and increasing or deepening learning problems were rightly expressed. However, another set of voices was also found. The new ways of learning and teaching brought many positive outcomes, which came as a surprise in the anxious atmosphere of the early pandemic period.

Our own study implied that the concern about children not being able to manage remote school was partly unjustified. For instance, the typical preconception that remote school would be unmanageable for pupils who had had previous difficulties at school was not straightforwardly supported. Instead, school personnel expressed that it was not possible to foresee who would do well and who would fail. They reported many positive surprises and described how even small children and children with special support needs also achieved well at online school.

I discovered many new aspects in my pupils. Those who maybe do not do so well at school surprised me positively at online school. (Subject teacher id 230)

Another positive surprise experienced by the personnel was that online interaction with pupils was sometimes even better than in a noisy classroom. Teachers reported how they had more time for individual pupils, and how some pupils found it possible to talk about their feelings more openly.

For my surprise, during online teaching, I managed to connect well with pupils with whom I had not connected so well in the classroom. (Subject teacher id 260)

The digital environment thus provided new opportunities not only for teaching but also for interacting with pupils. The main benefits of the rapid change in the learning environment were the improved digital skills of both pupils and personnel, as well as the new tools that enabled teachers to keep in contact with pupils who were in risk of dropping out.

What was positive was that we were able to reach our students of concern easily by phone or through Teams [online conferencing platform], and school assistants and teachers provided them with personal support and guidance with their assignments. (Head teacher id 119)

One of the surprises related to online school was that pupils who were bullied and suffered from the social dynamics at school, benefitted greatly from remote school. According to school personnel, many pupils who had difficulties in concentrating at school were also able to study better at home.

With some pupils, online learning seemed to suit them better than studying in the classroom. In my opinion, this is because studying alone, they were able to concentrate better, and they did not have to keep up any roles. At the same time, some of the pupils did not manage to work steadily, and learning gaps seemed to grow. The role of home and support from home also appeared important. (Subject teacher id 66)

For some pupils, the digital tools and learning environment enabled better interaction with the teacher and other pupils. Based on our analysis, we also suggest that working at home benefitted bullied and shy pupils. It also made time management more flexible. Many pupils seemed to manage better when they were given more freedom to choose how and when they would complete their school assignments. The flexibility offered by online learning tools could be regarded as something that could also be utilised after the pandemic.

Ruptures in normalised concerns

Despite the positive experiences of online school, the problems with many disadvantaged pupils remained, or became worse. Several studies that have examined the impact of remote school on pupils' learning and well-being have pointed to the unequal opportunities for learning and participation in online school (e.g., Ahtiainen, Asikainen, Heikonen, Hienonen, Hotulainen, Lindfors, Lindgren, Lintuvuori, Oinas, Rimpelä & Vainikainen . 2020; Van Lancker & Parolin 2020). Remote learning requires strong self-direction skills, and evidently some pupils needed more support than they had needed before in the structured school environment.

During remote school, the significance of family support for pupils' school attendance was emphasised. Children's social background and home conditions are known to be highly unequal and to cause adversity and vulnerability to certain children, but measures to overcome the problem have been insufficient already before the pandemic and the resulting changes in pupils' well-being (Daniel 2020). Of course, the differences between disadvantaged and more privileged pupils' possibilities to participate and benefit from studying have been recognised by education and social and health care professionals (Valtio-neuvoston tiedepaneeli 2020; Van Lancer & Parolin 2020; Bernelius & Huilla 2021). However, the period of remote school also brought some of these problems to public discussion. There were strong concerns about children whose family conditions were considered precarious and even dangerous due to, for instance, their parents' mental health problems or substance abuse (Ahtiainen et al. 2020; Tso et al. 2020). Concerns on whether all children would have food and a secure place to stay during the school closure were expressed, as well as a fear that the number of children who would drop out of school completely would increase. (Armitage & Nellums 2020; Van Lancker & Parolin 2020.)

These concerns were widely discussed in the national media and questioned the benefits of the school closure in safeguarding health and well-being. Disadvantaged children, in particular, became a national worry and overall, the significance of school in reducing the effects of social inequality was emphasised. And vice versa, the role of parents and the home environment in learn-

ing became visible. These viewpoints were also raised in our data. Our respondents had noticed how some children received a lot of support, whereas in some families, it seemed as if the period of remote school was not regarded as education of importance.

For older primary school pupils, technical difficulties were a problem: some failed to return their online assignments repeatedly. Those who received support for their learning at home were in a clearly better position than those who did not have an adult to help them. (Class teacher id 103)

Some families left the pupils all on their own . . . the teacher's efforts are not enough if the parents or the pupil do not take care of the schoolwork. (Class teacher id229)

The situation of some children caused concern among school personnel. Respondents described how some pupils had the possibility to study in a peaceful environment with good digital skills and equipment, whereas others did not have a place to concentrate on studying or did not get support for online learning at home. Some children were completely dependent on their parents' support.

Some pupils with disabilities were not able to participate in online learning. Their teaching was left to their parents. (Special class teacher id 78)

Parents were burdened by their increased responsibility for their children's schoolwork, which was mentioned in several responses.

Parents were tired from taking care of their own work and their children's schoolwork. (Class teacher id 92)

We should note that while parents' support, or more specifically the lack of their support, was often expressed as a concern, positive views were also expressed. One viewpoint raised in the open answers was that the school closure made parents see and understand better how their children were doing at school. According to our respondents, this had a positive impact on the relations between teachers and parents. Many parents were present throughout the school day, and their perception of their children's studies changed.

Parents took more responsibility for their child's learning and gained a better understanding of it. (Class teacher id 61)

Our research suggests that the home as a learning environment and parents' possibilities to support their children are among the key factors that explain the differences in learning outcomes during remote school – both the positive and negative impacts on pupils' performance.

If parents had time for their children and their assignments, some pupils possibly achieved better at online school than at normal school. With others, their parents did not have enough authority to manage their children's schoolwork, and the children acted up a lot when they were supposed to work on their assignments. (Class teacher id 26)

Here support is not only about supporting learning but about a broader attitude towards school and its importance. Some teachers also felt that some parents' commitment to their child's school attendance supported their work in the difficult circumstances:

The parents of my own class were fully committed to this online school. When both sides were committed to their duties, the outcomes were amazing and made me feel satisfied. (Class teacher id 7)

New vistas for enhancing children's well-being

The spring of 2020 may be remembered as a time when our ways of doing suddenly changed, and a whole new way of living our daily lives occurred. At that time, nobody knew how long the exceptional circumstances would last. Eventually, most of the Finnish schools were under a lockdown for two months only, and in the autumn of 2020 school closures were ordered only locally according to the local spread of pandemic. However, the end of the closure did not mean a return to normal. Instead, after a year of living under the pandemic, we only know that there is no return to the former times and practices. Among other things, this is due to the possibilities that remote work offers for achieving a better work–life balance. The question remains: what kind of normality will we reach, and by what means? And most importantly, what have we learned that could help us build not only a normal but also a better school for everyone? The impact of pupils' socioeconomic background on equality, which was made visible, should not be forgotten. The exceptional times may pass, but the daily problems of those recognised as vulnerable will not fade away.

One crucial aspect about the 'new normal' is that extensive digitalisation and hybrid ways of working will also be part of the normal in the future. Online environments can offer many benefits to pupils. At the same time, hybrid school must meet the needs of children whose possibilities to learn and

participate in digital learning environments vary because of their differences in skills or family support, for example. The exit from Covid-19 should be planned to tackle the problems caused by children's unequal opportunities.

Returning to our previous way of life is also impossible because of our new insights into and understanding of the problems of the former state of normality. The period of school closure brought to light the differences in the support pupils receive from home and emphasised the learning gaps between children caused by socioeconomic background. The role of school in narrowing the gaps became evident. On the other hand, the research results showed that parents were burdened by providing special support at home during the school closure, and this should be remembered when considering the role of home. As such, putting more pressure on families to support schoolwork will not create a better future, because not all families are able to manage it. The new normal should not be built on forcing parents to take on more responsibilities; rather, we should find new ways to strengthen the collaboration between schools and families and thus advance resilience of schools, families and children in the face of adversities (Luthar, Ebbert & Kumar 2020).

However, there are no ready-made solutions to fix the problems of inequality. More knowledge is needed, as well as research based on the new 'daily life findings'. Therefore, it is important to take a closer look on what we have learned – what we are now able to see since it is no longer concealed by the conventions of normality. What was once normalised, the vulnerable condition of many children, has now been made visible, and these recognised problems should not be left aside when the tides change.

Disadvantaged families need more support for their daily living, and the issue should not only be viewed from the perspective of social and health care services or family policies. The importance of home and the well-being of the family for school going children deserves to be emphasised in cultural studies, too. To find new ways of support, could we learn something from the changes that the pandemic brought to our daily living? Could we find something positive when we think back on the school closure and the messy intertwining of work and life, schoolwork, and daily living? Is there something that we could have grasped by the crowded kitchen table? It was not easy to integrate the daily tasks of children with those of adults, but it offered a chance to explore alternative ways to understand work and home distinctions. There is a strong cultural idea of separating work from family life and perceiving school attendance as a mainly separate element from family living. Now, as we know how much the home environment affects pupils' possibilities to study and achieve well at school, we should reconsider the taken-for-granted distinctions.

The pandemic may have changed our cultural ideas about formal education practices, and the relations between school and home, and work and leisure. We

will continue our research by exploring the question whether we could change our understanding of school well-being to encompass the overall well-being of children (see also Kallinen, Nikupeteri, Laitinen, Lantela, Turunen, Nurmi & Leinonen 2021). The school closure made it clear that schools are not regarded only as a place for educating children, but they have an important role as a social environment. At the same time, education and daily home life were not as strictly separated as before, and thus their presence in children's life became visible. Maintaining a strict division between school and spare time may not serve children, since in children's daily lives the two always intertwine.

In line with Michael's (2006) notion about active, creative agency as a tool to make changes in daily life and its unquestioned habits, we call for new, creative ways to understand work and life distinctions. Following the concept of creative agency, which we used when adapting to the changed structures of daily living during the pandemic, we could expand our thinking of school and life distinctions towards a more integrative approach. Research that focuses on and unravels cultural ideas about the relations between schools, homes, families and children could begin with a sight that became familiar to us during the lockdown: people gathered around the same table, working, studying and seeking ways to support everyone's well-being.

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