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Parental trust in the Finnish basic education system during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic in Finland rapidly changed many of the established practices in Finnish schooling. Normal teaching was replaced by distance learning and many daily routines (grouping, school meals etc.) were ordered to be organised following new safety instructions. In this study, we examined how pupils' parents in Finland have experienced the exceptional schooling practices caused by the pandemic and how their experiences and views relate to parental trust in the Finnish basic education system. The study included three research tasks: 1) to study the school-level variation in parents' experiences of pandemic-time schooling; 2) to compare parents' views on the schools' safety instructions with teachers' views; and 3) to study how parents' experiences and views were related to trust factors in the Finnish basic education system.

Our data is based on a nationwide research project, which examines the effects of the pandemic on schooling, teaching, learning and wellbeing in Finland. For this study, we utilised data from both the parental questionnaire (N=30,572) and the teacher questionnaire (N=5,797) collected in November 2020. Data were analysed with multilevel structural equation models (MSEM) conducted in the Mplus environment. Our results showed that in general the pupils' parents were satisfied with pandemic-time schooling. The variance in parents' views was even surprisingly small, especially when thinking of the notable differences in the schools' readiness to organise distance learning (Vainikainen et al., forthcoming). Interestingly, the teachers evaluated the adherence to the schools' safety instructions more critically than pupils' parents did. As expected, positive experiences on pandemic-time schooling predicted a higher level of trust in the basic education system – especially when the parents reported that the teachers were available for their child, communicated about their child's progress and organised distance learning with real-time interaction.

Keywords: institutional trust, pupils' parents, COVID-19 pandemic, Finnish basic education system

Introduction

Citizens' trust in the major institutions in society is a widely studied field in social science (e.g. Möllering, 2006; Uslaner, 2018). Institutional trust is important for the state democracy as well as for the functioning of broader social and economic processes (Listhaug and Ringdal, 2008). A high level of trust signifies that the institution is working effectively and enjoys a legitimate status in society. In several international surveys on institutional trust, the Nordic countries including Finland have repeatedly ranked at the top (Listhaug and Ringdal, 2008; Delhey and Newton, 2005). In a global comparison, the Nordic welfare state model (Esping-Andersen, 1990) has been shown to be successful in creating institutions that are experienced as efficient, fair and equal, which evidently supports a high level of trust in the Nordic societies (see Ervasti, Fridberg, Hjerm and Ringdal, 2008).

In this article, we focus on scrutinising the manifestation of trust in one of the key institutions in Finland, namely the Finnish basic education system. Trust is a key concept in the Finnish basic education policy. It is crucial for school and teacher autonomy, but makes also the basis for the Finnish school evaluation culture with no standardised testing, school inspections and rankings (see Wallenius, Juvonen, Hansen and Varjo, 2018; Wallenius, 2020). In Finland, the school system and its teachers are widely respected by pupils' parents. Undoubtedly, in the 2000s, the Finnish pupils' success in the OECD's PISA assessments (OECD, 2002) has supported a view of a well-performing institution that can be trusted.

The global COVID-19 pandemic suddenly changed many of the established practices in Finnish basic education. In spring 2020, the schools were closed due to increased infection rates and normal school days were replaced by distance learning for almost two months. In autumn 2020, new safety regulations were introduced to guarantee the pupils' and school personnel's safety during the school days. At the same time, an intense debate on the 'correct' schooling policy was carried out in the news and social media (see End COVID-19 Finland-working group, 2021). In addition, the very first research findings showed significant school-level differences in pandemic-time schooling readiness (Vainikainen et al., forthcoming). These notions led us to hypothesise that the experiences of the distance learning period or schools' safety instructions did not meet the expectations of all Finnish parents in a trust-building manner. However, so far, the parents' experiences of the pandemic-time schooling in Finland have not been studied.

Thus, the aim of our article is to examine how the special circumstances in Finnish basic education due to the COVID-19 pandemic have been experienced by the pupils' parents and how their experiences and views on distance learning and school information on safety instructions relate to parental trust in the Finnish basic education system. In addition, we are interested in seeing how the teachers' views relate to those of the parents. Our empirical data draws on a large nationwide study funded by the Ministry of Education and Culture in Finland. Both the parental (N=30549) and the teacher questionnaires (N=5797) were collected in November 2020.

Since parental trust in the basic education system lacks a systematic research tradition, the nature of our research must be understood as exploratory. Before presenting our research design and the data

more thoroughly, we take a look at the theoretical discussion on institutional trust and its mechanisms in education, and present how trust is a key concept in the Finnish basic education policy.

Institutional trust in education – definition and mechanisms

Since the seminal works pointed out the relevance of trust for society's cohesion, prosperity and democratic stability (see Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 1995), trust has emerged as a worldwide research subject across disciplines. In the field of social science, research on trust is typically separated into two dimensions. Studies on social trust examine trust between individuals or groups, whereas the concept of political, or institutional trust (in this article we prefer using institutional trust), refers to individuals' trust in various institutions: e.g. governmental institutions (parliament, state governance, local administration, legal system, police force etc.), other (quasi-)public institutions (e.g. education providers, mass media, science organisations) or private sector actors (e.g. employers, companies) (see Bornstein and Tomkins, 2015). Research has shown that social and institutional trust are typically positively interrelated (e.g. Newton, 2007; Newton, Stolle and Zmerli, 2018).

Trust has become a central topic in the field of educational research as well. However, the ways in which trust is manifested in education are complex and manifold. Authors of a recent systematic literature review of 183 peer-reviewed articles state that the research field of trust in education can be labelled in three domains: 'trust in educational settings', 'educational governance and trust', and 'generalised trust' (Niedlich et al., 2021). Literature on trust in educational settings covers a wide range of studies from organisational climate and leadership to trust-relationships between different stakeholders, e.g. parents and schools. For example, trusting relationships are more likely to become established when parents feel the teacher is competent and acts in a child-centred way (Shelden et al., 2010; Lerkkanen et al., 2013). Common among studies on educational governance and trust has been a critical look at the recent modes of educational governance that emphasise competitiveness, performativity, control and high accountability measures, questioning their ability to contribute to the improvement of educational performance (e.g. Sahlberg, 2010). Studies on generalised trust usually examine the influence of education on generalised trust in societies. In general, at least in democratic, non-corrupt countries, a positive relationship between educational attainment and generalised trust is supported in these studies (Niedlich et al., 2021).

However, despite a wide body of research, the actual mechanisms or the origin of institutional trust are ambiguous. Two competing theoretical traditions offer different explanations for the origin of trust (e.g. Mishler and Rose, 2001; Rothstein and Stolle, 2008). Cultural theories hypothesise that trust in (political) institutions is exogenous, meaning that trust originates in long-standing and deeply seeded beliefs that are rooted in cultural norms and thereby institutional trust may be seen as an extension of social trust. By contrast, institutional theories hypothesise that institutional trust is endogenous, meaning that trust is dependent on the performance of the institution. As Mishler and Rose (2001, p. 31) simplify, 'institutions that perform well generate trust; untrustworthy institutions generate skepticism and distrust.' According to Niedlich et al. (2021), studies have shown that perceptions of performance, fairness, and transparency are relevant factors in shaping individuals' trust in educational systems.

In this study, we adopt the research tradition of institutional theories as a theoretical starting point for our research, although we agree that cultural aspects and contextual conditions are important to note when interpreting the empirical findings. Our research design is based on the following definitions of trust in the literature: 1) 'To put it simply, political [institutional] trust is about the relationship between the citizens and the political system' (Kestilä-Kekkonen and Vento 2019, p.18). In other words, trust in an institution is a dynamic relation, hence exposed to change, either to strengthen or weaken; 2) 'Trust in an institution means confidence in the institution's reliable functioning' (Möllering 2006, p.74). This second definition entails an idea of individuals having certain expectations of the functioning of the institution. In terms of basic education, we may think that from parents' perspective, this means foremost quality teaching in a safe schooling environment; and 3) 'Trust in institutions is built on information or experiences of its performance' (Berg and Dahl, 2020, p.1286). Trust is built either on personal experiences or information received from the institution itself or other second-hand sources, e.g. friends, colleagues, news, (social) media, rumours and narratives. Here, it is important to note that 'performance' does not only refer to performance as such (e.g. pupils' learning achievements) but also to an experience of fair and equal treatment (see for example, Berg and Dahl, 2020). In terms of institutional trust, an unequal experience may be more harmful than an institution that performs equally bad for everyone.

Trust – a key concept in the Finnish basic education policy

A high level of trust is often associated with democratic societies, good governance, low corruption rates, security, economic wealth, a relatively narrow distribution of income and the existence of social safety nets – all features of the Nordic welfare states (see Ervasti et al., 2008). In many international large-scale surveys on trust in societies (e.g. European Social Survey, European Values Study, World Value Survey), the Nordic countries including Finland have repeatedly shared top positions (Listhaug and Ringdal, 2008; Delhey and Newton, 2005). Thus, it is no wonder that the Nordic Council of Ministers named trust as Nordic gold, a natural resource (NCM, 2017).

Trust is a concept that is often highlighted when talking about the Finnish school system. In Finland, the basic education system (grades 1 to 9, 6- to 15-year-old pupils) is free of charge and mainly public, as most of the schools are run by the municipalities. All schools follow a national core curriculum; however, since the 1990s the schools and the local educational authorities have enjoyed extensive autonomy in arranging schooling within the framework of the national core curriculum. School autonomy and a mutual trust between different stakeholders are core features of the Finnish school evaluation policy as well as a lack of school inspections, obligatory national testing (only a sample-based testing) and school ranking. (e.g. OECD, 2014.)

In the 2000s, the Finnish school system has become known worldwide for its pupils' high achievement results on the OECD's PISA assessments (OECD, 2002). The Finnish school system has been able to combine high performance results and equity, and the school-level variation has been characteristically small (Kupiainen, Hautamäki and Karjalainen, 2009). In Finland, teacher education is a master's level degree and the teacher profession is highly respected in Finnish society. Qualified teachers, school and

teacher autonomy, and modest school evaluation policy have often been presented as the main reasons behind the Finnish PISA mystery (see OECD, 2014; Simola, 2015; Sahlberg, 2011). Undoubtedly, the Finnish pupils' PISA success has, in general, supported a view of a well-performing institution that can be trusted.

In a typical policy discourse in Finland, trust is often emphasised as a valuable and fundamental feature of the Finnish school system. Trust is presented as an alternative to neo-liberal policymaking, which typically draws on various control and accountability mechanisms, e.g. standardised testing, school inspections and ranking lists (see Wallenius, 2020; Wallenius, Juvonen, Hansen and Varjo, 2018). A good example of this is how the former director of the Finnish National Board of Education Olli-Pekka Heinonen describes the Finnish schooling environment as a web of trust relations:

> "Recently, the question has been asked whether we should introduce stricter normative guidance in order to achieve nationally uniform goals. The idea feels appealing. However, it would mean gnawing at our key strength, as the Finnish comprehensive school is built on trust: National confidence in the ability of the education provider to meet the conditions for learning in schools. The education provider's confidence in the ability of schools and teachers to know the best pedagogical solutions. Teachers 'confidence in each pupil's unique ability to grow and find their own strengths." (FNAE, 2018)

The Finnish school system is also highly valued among Finnish families. In a recent parental survey in 2018 (N=9842) of both primary school (grades 1-6) and lower secondary school (grades 7-9) families, over 85 percent of respondents answered that they trust their child's school and teachers (Finnish Parents' League, 2018). We may think that high parental trust in the basic education system is largely based on its ability to combine high performance with equity, but also that parental trust mirrors a more deep-seeded cultural norm – a 'logic of appropriate behaviour' (March and Olsen, 1989) – in Finnish society. In Finland, the pupils' parents have learned to trust the basic education system and adopted the autonomous status of schools and teachers as a norm. For example, in contrast to other Nordic countries, no serious demands for intensifying school accountability measures has been expressed in Finland, despite the decline in the most recent PISA assessments in the 2010s (see Wallenius, 2020).

However, there are some signals that may tell of eroding parental trust. In Finland, every pupil is allocated to a place in a nearby school, though pupils may apply to another school with some restrictions (Seppänen, 2003). Research has shown that in the 2000s the tendency to not choose a nearby school has become more and more common especially in the largest Finnish cities (Seppänen et al., 2015). In addition, the popularity of hiring private tutors has grown among families also for young pupils (Yle News, 2015). This preference for increased parental choice and educational consumerism has caused worry among many educational researchers for several reasons (e.g., Berisha and Seppänen, 2017) – but it also can be interpreted as a kind of mistrust in the core values of the Finnish basic education system and in the ideal of all schools being equally acceptable in parental views. In this sense, our study gives important and updated insight of parents' views and perceptions in Finland during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Understanding the COVID-19 pandemic as a crisis challenging established practices

There is clear evidence that different crises tend to affect institutional trust negatively. For example, in Finland the severe economic depression in the early 1990s and the financial crisis in 2007-08 decreased citizens' trust in many core institutions – yet in only a few years, the trust-levels normalised to previous ratings (Söderlund, 2019). Political scandals and exposures of corruptive behaviour, even if being single cases, may also affect institutional trust negatively.

Even if the COVID-19 pandemic was not an endogenous crisis of schooling, the pandemic changed many long-established practices in Finnish basic education. For example, the distance learning period challenged teacher autonomy by putting teachers' working methods under surveillance in pupils' homes in an unforeseen manner. In addition, schools had to inform and convince pupils and their parents of their ability to follow new health and safety instructions in daily schooling. Thus, in this article, we understand the pandemic as an exogenous crisis in the Finnish schooling environment, which challenges the established relationship between schools and pupils' parents. We will now take a brief look at these main changes in Finnish basic education during the pandemic.

Changes in Finnish basic education due to the COVID-19 pandemic

As in many European countries, the COVID-19 pandemic hit Finland at the turn of 2020. On 29 January 2020, the first case was confirmed in Finland, when a tourist visiting Ivalo from Wuhan tested positive for the virus. In the following months, the number of new infections rapidly increased and on 16 March 2020, the Finnish Government jointly with the President of Finland declared a state of emergency due to the pandemic. On this date, the Government also announced several measures of public safety by issuing a decree on implementing the Emergency Powers Act. (e.g. Yle News, 2020).

Within these safety measures, all schools except pre-primary education were immediately ordered to be closed and replaced by remote teaching. The measures were scheduled to be in place until 13 April but were later extended to 13 May. On 14 May, the pupils were allowed to return to school for the last few weeks before summer holidays.

Thus, with only a few weeks' preparation time, all Finnish schools – teachers, pupils and also pupils' parents – were faced with a historical situation in which teaching was organised online. Particularly in primary grades, distance learning was often not particularly well-structured and parents had to involve themselves in their child's schoolwork to an extent that became stressful for them (Koskela et al., 2020; Vainikainen et al., forthcoming). In this, the situation was comparable to early international findings on the effects of the distance learning period on parents' and families' experiences and wellbeing (e.g., Brom et al., 2020; Davis et al., 2021; Janssen et al., 2020; Parczewska, 2020; Westrupp et al., 2021). In Finnish lower secondary schools, distance learning was on average implemented in a more structured way from the very beginning, but here the differences between schools were much larger than what is typical for the Finnish basic education system (Vainikainen et al., forthcoming).

On 1 August, before the new semester started, the schools were given new instructions in order to organise the schooling according to updated safety regulations. These recommendations given by the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare (FIHW) and the Ministry of Education and Culture (MEC) included several issues concerning daily routines at schools such as:

- In primary schools, teaching groups should be kept separate throughout the school day. In optional subjects, the teaching group may change if the teaching could not otherwise be carried out. If keeping teaching groups separate in lower secondary schools is impossible, one should invest in space and hygiene and try to stagger teaching as much as possible.
- By staggering activities and utilising outdoor spaces, the aim is to keep as few people as possible in the same space.
- Meals will be arranged in the designated class or group if possible. The dining room can be used only in stages, not for shared dining sessions.
- Both children and adults wash their hands whenever they come to school as well as before leaving home. In addition, hands are washed with water and soap always before meals, when coming in from the outside, and after sneezing or coughing.
- According to the Communicable Diseases Act, the investigation of infection chains is the responsibility of the doctor responsible for infectious diseases in the municipality or hospital district. If someone is diagnosed with a coronavirus infection at school, the exposed persons must be traced and set under quarantine. (FIHW and MEC, 2020)

During the autumn period, an intense public debate on the 'correct' schooling policy was continuously carried out in the news, television political programmes, letters to the editor and especially on social media (e.g. Twitter and Facebook) (see End COVID-19 Finland-working group, 2021). While many parents promoted the need for normal classroom teaching, some parents asked for more strict safety regulations or distance learning periods. Schools' ability to follow the new safety instructions entailed many preconditional challenges. Organising mass schooling with limited teaching space, observing instructions of social distance in narrow staircases and corridors, and following new hygiene rules caused worry among many parents. In addition, especially in the largest cities, the official information concerning confirmed coronavirus infections in the schools was at times severely delayed. In many cases, information was already distributed through other channels such as parents' WhatsApp groups and others (End COVID-19 Finland-working group, 2021). Needless to say, the schools were forced to perform their main task, organising quality teaching in a safe environment, in challenging circumstances.

Research design

Research questions

The changes in normal schooling caused by the COVID-19 pandemic give us a cogent starting point to study parents' experiences and their relationship with institutional trust in the Finnish basic education system. Two major changes affected normal schooling in 2020: in late spring, the period of distance learning for almost two months and later in the autumn, the new safety instructions.

In this study, we examine the school-level variation in parents' perceptions regarding distance learning practices, flow of information and trust in the basic education system and schools' safety instructions. In addition, we are interested to see whether parents and teachers share a similar view on schools' safety instructions. Finally, we explore the relationships between distance learning practices, flow of information and parental trust factors. We summarise our research task with the following research questions and hypotheses:

Q1. Is there school-level variation in the parents' perceptions about distance learning practices, flow of information and trust in the basic education system and schools' safety instructions?

H1. Differences between schools, for example, regarding pupils' achievement have traditionally been small in Finland when compared internationally (e.g. Kupiainen, Hautamäki and Karjalainen, 2009; OECD, 2019). However, studies that have been conducted during the first school closure related to the COVID-19 pandemic (Vainikainen et al., forthcoming) have shown that school-level variation in the implementation of distance learning at the beginning of the pandemic was surprisingly large. Therefore, we are expecting to detect notable school-level variation also in parents' perceptions about the flow of information, distance learning practices and trust in the basic education system and schools' safety instructions.

Q2. How do parents' perceptions of schools' safety instructions reflect to teachers' perceptions of the situation at school during the autumn of 2020?

H2. We expect that parents' and teachers' perceptions of schools' safety instructions would be somewhat similar even though it must be noted that the measures we used for parents and teachers were not exactly the same (see "Measures" and Table 2).

Q3. How do parents' perceptions of distance learning practices and the flow of information predict their trust in schools' safety instructions and trust in the basic education system?

H3. According to institutional theories, trust in an institution is built on experiences and information of its performance (Berg and Dahl, 2020; Möllering, 2006). Prior studies of distance learning during the pandemic have shown that the way distance learning is implemented is connected with children's and their parents' wellbeing during school closures (e.g. Davis et al., 2021; Janssen et al., 2020). Therefore, we expect that parents' perceptions of distance learning practices and the flow of information is also related to their trust in schools' safety instructions and general trust in the basic education system.

Data and methods

Data collection procedure

Our research is part of a larger nationwide research project that examines the effects of the pandemic on schooling, teaching, learning and wellbeing, funded by the Ministry of Education and Culture in Finland (for a more detailed description of the project see Vainikainen et al., forthcoming). The research project started in April 2020 and the first data collection was conducted in May 2020 after the first school closure in Finland. A second data collection took place in November 2020 and the data, which are used in this paper, were collected during that cycle. The data were collected online using the Qualtrics survey

system and the links were delivered to different respondent groups (school principals, teachers, school welfare personnel, pupils and pupils' parents) through principals via online platforms that schools use in their everyday communication. For the purpose of this paper, data from parent and teacher questionnaires were utilised.

As the Ministry of Education and Culture funded the research, the research permits were obtained from the ministry and school principals were contacted for the school-level research permits. Participation was voluntary and the data were collected anonymously, but all respondent groups were informed that school and municipality identification codes were included in the response and that data could later be merged at the school level.

Participants

In total, 30 572 parents from 1090 schools (51% of all) and 242 municipalities (78% of all) responded to the parental survey. The schools and the municipalities were distributed evenly across the country. As can be seen from Table 1, approximately a similar number of parents (~3000) from different grade levels answered the survey[1]. In most cases, the respondent was the pupil's mother.

Table 1: Participating parents by child's grade level and parent's role

Grade	N	Role	N
1	3029		
2	3341		
3	3215		
4	3619		
5	3694		
6	3286		
7	3574		
8	3661	Mother	25029
9	3131	Father	3742
10*	22	Other caregiver	302
Missing	0	Missing	1499
Total	30 572	Total	30 572

* voluntary basic education

Altogether 5797 teachers from 1130 schools (53% of all) and 225 municipalities (73% of all) answered the teacher survey. Of the respondent teachers, 36% worked as class teachers in primary grades and 38% as subject teachers that mainly work with lower secondary level pupils (however, language teachers in primary grade levels are usually subject teachers and thus included in this group). Approximately 20% of the teachers were working either as special education teachers or special class teachers and the rest (6%) in other positions within schools (e.g. student counsellors).

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[1] Parents were asked to answer the survey thinking about the child who goes to the school that distributed the survey link. In the case of several children in the same school, the parents were instructed to think about their first child in alphabetical order or answer the survey multiple times.

Measures

Parents' perceptions of distance learning practices during the school closure in spring 2020 were measured in parent questionnaires with six items, in which parents were asked retrospectively to evaluate the *structure* (schedule, requirement of participation in online teaching, lesson-based tasks and task submission control) and the *dialogue* (teacher's availability and activity in communicating with the child about his/her progress; cf. Moore, 2013) of the experienced distance learning. All items were answered on a Likert scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (every lesson).[2]

In addition, parents were asked to evaluate the amount of information regarding schools' safety instructions they had received. This *flow of information* scale consisted of three Likert scale items ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

Parental trust scales were measured with items in which parents were asked to evaluate statements concerning their *trust in the school's safety instructions* and their *trust in the basic education system.* Each scale was measured with three Likert scale items ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

Teachers' perceptions of schools' safety instructions were evaluated with six items, in which teachers were asked to evaluate the adherence to COVID-19 safety instructions in their school. All items were measured with Likert scale items ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). All the items and their descriptive figures are presented below (Table 2).

Table 2: Descriptive information of each item

Item	n	mean	stdev	skew	kurt
Distance learning: Structure					
p1. teachers followed the schedule during distance learning	25448	5.24	1.76	-0.98	-0.05
p2. teachers gave assignments required to be submitted during scheduled lessons	24413	4.06	2.06	-0.14	-1.34
p3. teachers gave separate assignments for each lesson	24878	5.32	1.77	-1.04	0.07
Distance learning: Dialogue					
p4. teachers were available during the online lessons	25729	5.30	1.74	-0.88	-0.31
p5. teachers required attendance in online lessons	26087	5.03	2.01	-0.76	-0.75
p6. teachers were regularly in contact with my child in order to follow up on how learning proceeded	25872	5.08	1.74	-0.74	-0.51

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[2] Parents' perceptions of distance learning practices were asked also during the first data collection cycle in May 2020. However, for this paper, data from Cycle 2 were used because only then were items regarding parental trust and safety instructions introduced. In other words, parents were asked retrospectively to evaluate distance learning practices from spring 2020, approximately six months afterwards. This retrospective aspect may have caused some bias in the evaluations but comparisons between parents' answers in Cycle 1 and Cycle 2 showed very similar in both cycles.

Item	n	mean	stdev	skew	kurt
Flow of information					
I have been informed about…					
p7. how safety instructions are followed at school	29798	5.55	1.60	-1.11	0.45
p8. how school meals are organised at school	29629	5.21	1.79	-0.84	-0.32
p9. how social distance is secured in classes	29507	4.90	1.84	-0.60	-0.71
p10. hygiene instructions at school	29536	4.97	1.80	-0.63	-0.65
Trust in the basic education system					
p11. I trust that teachers are able to follow the curriculum also in exceptional circumstances	26676	5.49	1.59	-1.06	0.39
p12. I trust that children are given quality teaching in all circumstances	26614	5.45	1.52	-1.01	0.43
p13. Distance learning has strengthened my view of Finnish basic education being of high quality	26324	5.48	1.60	-1.05	0.36
Trust in schools' safety instructions					
p14. I trust that school meals are organised according to safety instructions	29745	5.53	1.66	-1.16	0.51
p15. I trust that social distancing instructions are followed at school	29620	4.81	1.94	-0.55	-0.90
p16. I trust that school personnel follow the safety instructions	29729	5.53	1.59	-1.09	0.41
Teachers' perceptions of schools' safety instructions					
t1. school meals are staggered for each class separately	5635	3.00	2.32	0.63	-1.23
t2. social distance is secured in the dining room	5695	5.07	2.02	-0.75	-0.75
t3. teaching is organised to avoid unnecessary crosspatching of groups	5748	2.37	1.89	1.17	0.03
t4. teachers work only with one group if possible	5747	2.74	2.04	0.83	-0.72
t5. more teaching is organised outdoors	5747	3.18	1.78	0.40	-0.89
t6. close contact between staff is minimised	5767	4.19	1.84	-0.13	-1.05

Data analysis

Before the actual analyses, descriptive statistics for each variable were calculated in Rstudio (Table 2).

After that, analyses were conducted in Mplus statistical package version 8.6 (Muthén and Muthén,

2018). First, the structure of the measured scales was examined with a single-level confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) with maximum likelihood estimator (ML). Cut indices, which were used for evaluating a sufficient model fit, were Comparative Fit Index (CFI) >.95, the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) <.06, and the standardised root mean square residual (SRMR) <.10 (Kline, 2005). Next, analyses proceeded with unconstrained two-level CFA models, which made it possible to examine the school-level variation of the established factors (Silva et al., 2019) and answer research questions one and two. Intraclass correlations (ICC) were calculated with model constraint option in Mplus by dividing the between-level variance of the latent factors with the total variance in them (see Geiser, 2013). In order to answer research question three, the factors for trust in the basic education system and trust in schools' safety instructions were predicted by the three other factors. Since there was almost no school-level variation in the trust factors (ICC= .05 for trust in safety instructions and ICC= .03 for trust in basic education system), they were defined as within variables whereas factors measuring distance learning practices and flow of information were allowed to have variation at both levels. Fit indices were acceptable for all models (Table 3).

Table 3: Fit indices of different models

Model	χ^2	CFI	RMSEA	SRMR w/b
M1. Single-level CFA parents	(χ^2 (94, N = 30489) = 7581.815, p < .001	.975	.051	.032
M2. Single-level CFA teachers	(χ^2 (9, N = 5759) = 188.891, p < .001	.968	.059	.024
M3. Two-level CFA parents[3]	(χ^2 (186, N = 30466) = 6383.149, p < .001	.973	.033	.031/.094
M4. Two-level CFA teachers	(χ^2 (18, N = 5753) = 153.208, p < .001	.966	.036	.028/.035
M5. Full regression model	(χ^2 (124, N = 30466) = 5577.403, p < .001	.975	.038	.031/.051

Results

(1) School-level variation in the flow of information, distance learning practices and trust

Our first research question considered the school-level variation in parents' perceptions regarding distance learning practices, flow of information and trust in safety instructions and in the basic education system.

School-level variation in parents' perceptions were examined by analysing intraclass correlations (ICC) in a two-level model in which school was the cluster variable. Analyses showed that the intraclass correlations were largest for distance learning practices (i.e. ICC= .10 for the dialogue of the distance learning and ICC= .07 for the structure of the distance learning and for the flow of information) but as explained above surprisingly small for trust factors (Table 4). Therefore, our hypothesis regarding

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[3] In two-level models of parents' data, two residual correlations were allowed at the between level in order to achieve a sufficient model fit at the between level (between level SRMR was .114 for M3. before this modification and .094 after it, other fit indices were unaffected by these changes). This same modification was done also in the final, full regression model (M5.) even though all fit indices were at an acceptable level also without this modification.

school-level variation of parents' perceptions was disconfirmed for the parental trust variables, and confirmed for the other variables such as distance learning practices and flow of information.

(2) Parents' and teachers' views on safety instructions at school

Our second research question considered parents' and teachers' perceptions of how well the schools' safety instructions were followed. As can be seen from Table 4, teachers' perceptions of safety instructions at school varied remarkably more at the school level than parent's perceptions of schools' safety instructions (ICC= .36 vs. .03). Overall, teachers' perceptions of the adherence to schools' safety instructions seemed to be much less positive than parents' perceptions (teachers' perception M=3.5, SD=1.3 vs. parents' perception M=5.3, SD=1.6). Even though the measures that were used for measuring parents' perceptions were not exactly the same as the measures used in teachers' questionnaires, these results suggest that parents' and teachers' perceptions regarding safety instructions at school differed from each other.

Table 4: Intraclass correlations of different variables

	Intraclass correlation (ICC)
Parents' perceptions of	
Flow of information	.07
Distance learning: structure	.07
Distance learning: dialogue	.10
Trust in safety instructions	.05
Trust in the basic education system	.03
Teachers' perceptions of	
Safety instructions at school	.36

(3) Distance learning practices and flow of information as predictors of trust

Our final research question considered the relations between parents' perceptions regarding distance learning practices, flow of information and trust factors. These results are summarised in Figure 1.

As expected, the flow of information positively predicted both trust in safety instructions (β=.68, p<.001) as well as the overall trust in basic education (β=.22, p<.001). Regarding distance learning practices, only the dialogue of the distance learning was a significant predictor of trust factors, whereas the structure of the distance learning did not statistically predict either of them.

It has to be noted that even though the dialogue factor significantly predicted both trust factors, its effect on trust in safety instructions was very small (β=.05, p=.003) whereas its effect on trust in the basic education system factor was notably stronger (β=.58, p<.001).

Therefore, our hypothesis regarding the relations between different established factors was only partially confirmed. As expected, all the established relations were positive, indicating that positive experiences may lead to higher levels of trust. However, regarding distance learning practices, it seems that especially parents' perceptions of the dialogue of distance learning was connected with trust, whereas the structure of it was less important in terms of trust.

Overall, the model fit the data well (see Model 5 in Table 3) and it explained 49% of the variation in the trust in safety instructions factor and 44% of the variation in the trust in the basic education system.
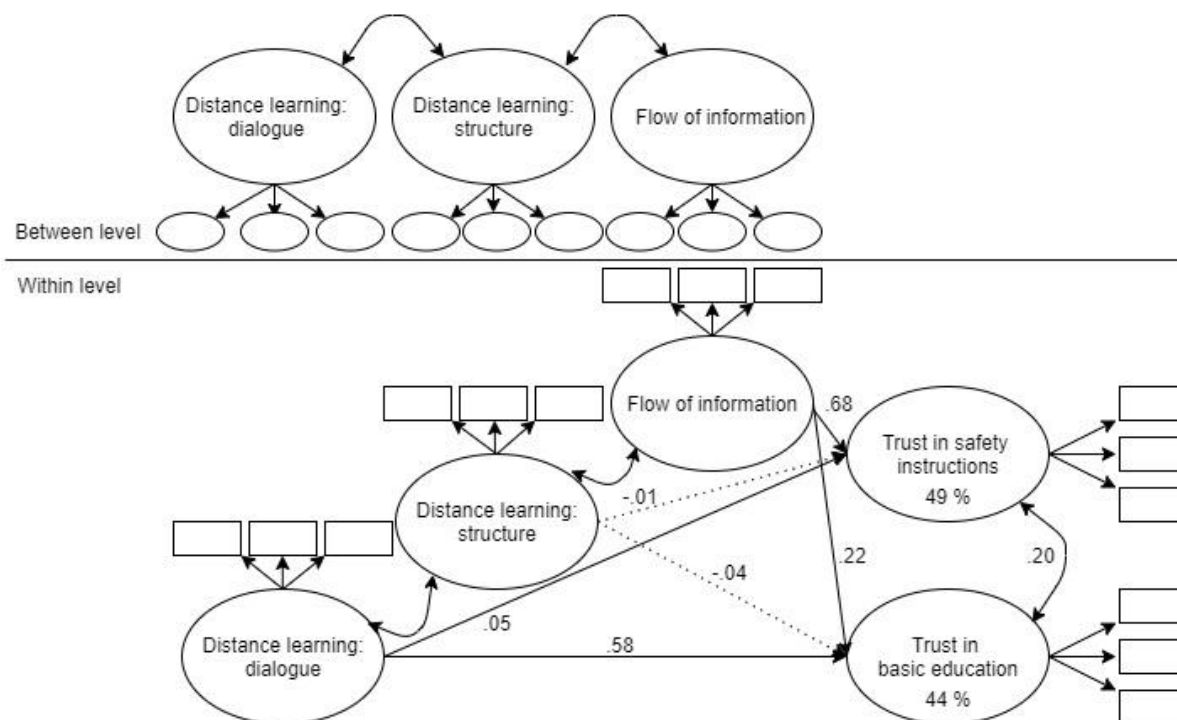

Figure 1: Distance learning practices and flow of information as predictors of trust. (Significant effects (p<.05) (standardised coefficients) are marked with solid lines and non-significant with dashed lines.)

Conclusion and discussion

The aim of our study was to examine how Finnish parents have experienced the exceptional schooling practices caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Our first research question considered the school-level variation in parents' perceptions regarding distance learning practices, flow of information and trust in safety instructions and trust in the basic education system. Previous studies had indicated a significant school-level variance in schools' readiness to organise online teaching during the distance learning period in spring 2020 (Vainikainen et al., forthcoming). In addition, the intense public debate on the 'correct' schooling policy under the pandemic circumstances let us hypothesise a similar kind of variance in parents' answers. However, contrary to the expectations, the school-level variance was surprisingly small, especially regarding the trust factors. Overall, in our data the pupils' parents seemed to be quite satisfied with the Finnish school system even in the times of the pandemic.

Interestingly, the parents' view of schooling practices during the pandemic times was somewhat different from the perceptions of teachers. In terms of our second research task, despite non-identical measures, the teachers evaluated items concerning safety instructions at school notably more critically than the parents. Our interpretation of this notion is that the teachers have personally witnessed how physical preconditions of limited space challenge the adherence to safety instructions daily in the schools, while the parents' views are based more on formal messages regarding the schools' safety plans, their own assumptions, good will and hopes. The results support the view of trust being a core feature of the Finnish basic education culture and a constitutive part of the home-school relationship

(OECD, 2014; Wallenius, 2020). Yet, at the same time it must be noted that non-identical measures in the parents' and teachers' questionnaires can be seen as a major limitation in this study and future studies should confirm the detected findings with identical items for both respondent groups.

As for the third and final research question, positive experiences of distance learning and the strong beliefs in schools' capacity for adhering to the intended safety measures reflected parents' trust in the school system at a general level. Quite logically, the trust in safety measures was stronger when the flow of pandemic-specific information functioned better, but the overall trust in the education system was much more strongly influenced by dialogic distance learning practices. That is, when the parents experienced that the teachers were available for their child, communicated about their progress and organised distance learning with real-time interaction, parental trust in the basic education system in general was higher. This result was in line with previous studies (Shelden et al., 2010; Lerkkanen et al., 2013), and highlights the importance of well-functioning home-school collaboration in any circumstances but particularly in the times of crisis.

In terms of research design and research validity, there are a few comments we want to share with our readers. As stated earlier, this article is more or less exploratory in its nature. Thus, we are aware of the methodological limitations that concern our research design. First, although our data was evenly distributed regionally, the fact that the survey was administrated by the schools may have caused some bias in our sample. Unfortunately, the survey did not entail much background information of the respondents for matching the sample and the population. Secondly, since there is no established indicator or systematic research on parental trust in the basic education system in Finland, we were not able to measure whether the pandemic has caused any actual change in parental trust in the Finnish school system. The items used in this study were introduced in the parental questionnaire only for the second survey cycle that was collected in November 2020. However, taking into account the unexpected speed of the global pandemic and the novelty of the situation, we assume that many other researchers in the field of education or social science agonise with similar methodological challenges, not having a clear reference point for studying the various effects of the pandemic. This has been evident in the majority of empirical studies published so far. A third topic to discuss concerns measuring institutional trust in (quasi-) public institutions. To what degree do parents' perceptions examined in this study concern solely the school system instead of a range of decision-makers at the national and local level who actually are responsible for planning new rules and regulations in these exceptional circumstances? In our view, this is an important issue that needs to be considered. On one hand, for example, in terms of safety instructions the schools can be seen as implementers of political decisions. Thus, it is quite reasonable to think that if the respondent is not satisfied with the government's pandemic-time policy, a similar dissatisfaction may be accumulated in other institutions, such as the basic education system. On the other hand, the schools are not only passive bystanders. Instead, the school personnel, the principal, teachers and others can affect schooling practices in various ways - for example, how teaching groups are organised or how information is shared within the school and to pupils' parents. From this perspective, we argue that each school has an independent role that links with parental trust, even if the schools were subordinate to political decisions.

The nationwide data used in this study as well as the ongoing research project on the pandemic time schooling in Finland enables various research designs for further studies. For example, the data allows us to examine whether parents' views differ between the rural areas and urban cities, in which the infection rates have on average been at a higher level due to higher population density. In addition, some items used in this study have been repeated in 2021 surveys. Together, these data sets enable us to examine the topic in more nuanced ways and this article will provide a firm point of reference for such studies.

Finally, with our study, we want to point out the importance of studying institutional trust in different contexts in education. Events across the world have shown a substantial decline in social cohesion, and in both social and institutional trust (e.g. the rise of populist and antihuman rights movements across Europe or the Trump era and the Capitol Hill attack, to name a few). Education and education policy have a key role in terms of trust-building in societies. Thus, we share the view of Niedlich et al. (2021) that more research on complex interconnections across several domains with innovative research designs on trust is needed.

Even though the trust indicators in the Nordic countries, including Finland, have remained relatively stable over the years, a growing concern over the future of the Nordic welfare state model, its universal services and social cohesion has become evident. In Finland, trust is a fundamental feature of the basic education system. So far, there is no reason to expect any dramatic change in trust in the Finnish school system. Still, it is worth remembering its fragile nature – trust in institutions is exposed to change, and perhaps, rather than treated as gold, trust should be considered as a renewable resource that needs to be gained, protected and fostered.

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