



Researchers' views on the effects of the corona epidemic and the measures needed

Foreword

Competence, science and research, development and innovation are key springboards for the functioning and competitiveness of the welfare state. The state of emergency in Finland and around the world has shown that there is a shortage of experts in different parts of the world, the security of supply and resilience to crisis in societies has spluttered, and there would be even more use for researched knowledge when making difficult decisions.

The story of independent Finland is to invest heavily in education and competence. Even now, care must be taken to ensure that individuals and communities are able to function when emerging from the crisis. Within the sphere of the Ministry of Education and Culture, the individual's needs for pulling through are taken care of by means of early childhood education and care, training, research, youth activities, culture and sports.

For measures to recover from the corona epidemic and the subsequent restart of society, the Ministry of Education and Culture has approached researchers when collecting researched data. The biology of the coronavirus as well as the diagnostics, treatment and spread of coronavirus disease are being intensively studied all over the world.

The virus and the disease it causes have a wide range of effects on societies and economies, many of them partly interdependent, and research into these will probably accelerate once the acute crisis abates. The effects of the state of emergency on people of different ages and on different communities can continue even if normal daily life is resumed. The state and municipalities must be able to play their part in ensuring that everyone can move forward when the emergency measures end.

To support both the understanding of the longer-term effects of the coronavirus epidemic and the preparation of the measures required to mitigate them, on 30 March 2020, the Ministry of Education and Culture requested the views of six researchers

from various fields. The researchers considered the issue independently and, from multidisciplinary departure points, collected their views on a set of measures to be implemented in the administrative branch of the Ministry of Education and Culture. Participating in the work were Professor Sirkka Heinonen, Artist–Researcher Jussi Lehtonen, Professor Taina Rantanen, Leading Senior Researcher Mikko Salasuo, Professor Christina Salmivalli and Professor Otto Toivanen.

The Ministry of Education and Culture is using the researchers' views in preparing immediate and longer-term measures for coping with the corona situation in its own sector and between the Government ministries. The proposals for measures both supported the guidelines already drawn up in the Ministry of Education and Culture's preparations on the basis of other researched data and gave rise to new measures, some to be implemented immediately. It is of particular interest that the same or a similar measure was reached on the basis of research grounded in different disciplines.

In their work, the researchers were asked to answer the following questions:

- How can the corona spring be prevented from becoming a generational experience that paralyses individuals, communities, and society?
- What are the immediate and long-term effects of the situation?
- What long-term measures should society launch to mitigate the social effects of the situation?

Ministry of Education and Culture

Synthesis of the report

Supporting children and young people

The corona spring has turned society as a whole upside down. This is reflected not only in the acute shock of dealing with the situation but also in the long run. The coronavirus deepens pre-existing anxiety about the future regarding the negative effects of climate change and conflicts. It is important for people of all ages to maintain hope for the future.

This is very important especially for children and young people because the situation can change an individual's life in many ways. For example, distance education has consequences for learning, but perhaps even more significant consequences for social relationships and mental wellbeing. Many important relationships (peers, safe adults in daycare/early childhood education and care/school and hobbies, one's own grandparents) are completely interrupted or significantly restricted.

In addition, the coronavirus causes anxiety and worry on behalf of loved ones or more widely ("how will Finland/the world get over this"). Many families face unemployment and economic hardship. Some children and young people lose loved ones.

In terms of learning, inequalities between children and young people are emphasised and learning differences increase when support for learning is largely dependent on families. Welfare disparities also grow. Families are usually very different from each other and in a crisis situation this is heightened.

For some children, safe daily life, regular and adequate eating and sleeping — basic necessities — are not met, and the effects will not be limited to this spring. Indeed, it is expected that after the corona spring, differences in learning and wellbeing between children and young people will have increased.

Some children and young people will have been traumatised, many will have a shaken sense of security, some will have dropped out of learning and/or will have been left out of social relationships (while classmates have continued to interact, for instance in social media groups), and the economic constraints of many families will limit, for example, possibilities for hobbies.

Central with regard to minimising negative impacts is how well the important environments of children and young people (early childhood education and care/schools/education institutions) are able together to process the shared experience, build a new sense of community, identify those in need of special support — whether for learning, social relationships or mental wellbeing — and provide them with the necessary support.

The corona epidemic as a generational experience

It has been thought that an epidemic can become a generational experience that paralyses. The time of youth creates an important window of time in this respect. A generation's relationship to society, its values and structures is built during youth. Similarly, the social place of the young generation in the chain of generations — the relation to previous generations — is determined in youth. Studies show that, in addition to youth experiences and the extended family, there is a third variable in the dynamics of generations: impulses caused by, among others, technological or medical development/innovation, rapid economic growth, urbanisation, social crises or real catastrophes.

According to research data on Finnish generations, the timing of a deep crisis (hunger, recession, wars, the economy, health) in the years of youth may derail socialisation, and the capital needed in adulthood isn't absorbed: the generation will 'freeze' in place. The coronary crisis, when prolonged, is potentially a third variable, the pulse that leaves its mark on the young generation.

In order to prevent the current young generation, which is already experiencing uncertainty about its future, from freezing and becoming paralysed as a result of the crisis, aftercare is vital — especially for those in the margins and on the edge.

Youth work and meaningful hobbies play a large role in the recovery of the individual and the community and in the coverage of recovery — according to research, almost every young person has a hobby of some kind. Now the fields of socialisation outside the family are virtually at a standstill because of the coronavirus. This means a halt both to the education provided by a responsible and trustworthy (second) adult and to peer learning and the group experience natural to young people; but it also means a halt to the independent interaction of young people.

The entire population's trauma

The whole world has more or less stopped in the face of the crisis. Among the adult population, work, the employment situation, hobbies and travel are experiencing changes. The home range is limited for almost everyone. A limited home range increases the experience of loneliness, reduces physical activity, increases the risk of malnutrition and excessive alcohol use, falls and insecurity, and causes sensory deprivation.

The decline in physical and mental functioning accelerates, the need for help increases and social functioning may be lost. These risks affect, in particular, people living alone in small homes and the very oldest people, whose situation is worsened by the lack of digital skills. The ban on visits to nursing homes is stressful for relatives and is an incomprehensible situation for older people with memory disorders. In nursing homes, residents receive appropriate care, so the situation is more positive than that of fragile older people living alone.

Evidence in economic research indicates that negative shocks to children's parents, such as job loss, have a detrimental causal effect on children's success at school. Further, research shows that access to secondary education has many positive causal effects (education, income, less likelihood of committing crimes). Similarly, there is evidence that wide-ranging negative shocks at later stages in life leave long-lasting imprints — both when entering working life and when already working. For example, income remains lower in the long term than among those who entered working life in circumstances other than crisis or those who became jobless at a time other than crisis. In the context of the corona crisis, interrupted study paths, more difficult transitions to working life, and interruptions in one's own or parents' careers have similar effects.

In Finland, special restrictions have focused on the population over the age of 70 years, which has been encouraged to stay at home in quarantine-like conditions. It has been exceptional that the possibilities for adult individuals to function are limited on the basis of age. In fact, old age has shifted to a later age, and at the same time middle age has lengthened. More broadly, life stages should be perceived in a new way and simplifications in setting upper age limits should be avoided. A healthy and functional life is 10 to 20 years longer than it was 50 years ago.

In normal everyday life, too, loved ones are lost owing to various causes of death. In the corona crisis, it is especially difficult if one is unable to hold a memorial service and gain the support of other people at a time of grief. There is also concern that an old relative will die alone and that the situation will not be noticed for a long time.

Art and culture as part of recovery

Art and cultural events have been cancelled almost completely. Unemployment in the sector is rising rapidly, especially in the performing arts. On the other hand, consumption of some fields of art and culture — such as film, television, recorded music, literature, plays podcasts, games — is increasing. Making and experiencing art remotely is continuing to evolve, which can have positive consequences for the accessibility of certain art forms in the long run as well. On the other hand, people who do not have the tools needed to experience and make art remotely may be left out altogether.

People are burdened by the corona news, and they need something else to think about. Humour and simple experiences of beauty are of great importance, as is how fears and death can be handled and confronted. People's bodily experiences change as they avoid each other and possibly monitor themselves neurotically.

The meanings of communality and sharing come strongly to the fore when they are drawn against being in isolation. When their views of self and the world views begin to ferment, people start thinking about what is really meaningful and durable. A crisis situation may reveal something that has a noteworthy impact on the development of our culture and lifestyle in the longer term.

Proposed measures

- The INVEST flagship will carry out a survey of basic education students' experiences in this exceptional situation during the spring of 2020. The survey is conducted instead of the annual KiVa School survey. This will investigate experiences and the need for support experienced by children and young people themselves.
- In order to recover from the crisis and minimise its effects, additional resources will be allocated immediately to support those in a weaker position: pupils and students, regardless of age; continuing education and retraining opportunities for those laid off or unemployed; especially for those at the articular stage of studies; the provision of postgraduate education and retraining opportunities for those graduating and having difficulties transitioning into working life.
- A study will be launched on the possibilities of utilising psychologist expertise in early childhood education and care, and on the necessary resourcing.
- A study will be initiated on how children and young people, in the event of new crises, can be taught ways to engage in independent and self-organised activities. At the same time, the integration of hobby activities into the school day/afternoon activities will be promoted, the aim being that every child and young person can get involved in a hobby.
- A national programme will be started to promote emotional skills, self-regulation skills and friendship skills in early childhood education and care. The programme is mentioned in the Government programme.
- A national digital skills programme, aimed at people of all ages, will be launched to promote equal participation in society, recovery from the corona crisis and coping with potential future crises. Digital civic skills for all. The elderly population will be raised as a special group.
- A programme that provides individuals and communities with the tools to process the epidemic crisis and related experiences through the arts and arts education will be launched.
- Additional resources will be directed to outreach youth work, which can be used to reach and empower as many young people on the fringes and in the margins as possible, thus strengthening the experience of belonging in society and caring. Online and mobile forms of youth work and outreach will be developed.

- As the crisis persists, contact teaching will be maintained in types of teaching where the transition to distance learning is the least successful (for example, student counselling, special education).
- The necessary resources will be directed to early childhood education and care and schools so that these communities can process experiences associated with the corona epidemic and can effectively identify those in need of support. Attention will be paid to the number of workers in school care (psychologists, social workers, nurses and doctors in schools and education institutions). The resources of maternity and child health clinics, family counselling centres and child and adolescent psychiatry must also be secured.
- Research funding will be directed to investigate the generational impact of the coronary crisis.
- Long-term support packages will be introduced for artists and art institutions paralysed by the corona epidemic.
- A mobilisation centre of scientific evidence based methods will be established to support, for instance, organisers of early childhood education and care and education in assessing children's and young people's need for community and individual support and, on that basis, in implementing quality evidence-based measures.
- Foresight skills, i.e. systematic future thinking, will be integrated into education at all levels. This will create future preparedness to encounter the current crisis and possible new crises.
- The preconditions of peer learning and peer care based on solidarity will be explored in society, both in daily life and during crises.