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'We have our lessons in Teams' – Strategies chosen in Swedish schools during the COVID-19 pandemic and consequences for students in upper secondary education

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Abstract

In Sweden during the COVID-19 pandemic, compulsory schools were generally kept open but upper secondary schools closed and turned instead to distance education for a time during the spring term 2020. This article investigates the strategies chosen in Swedish schools, with special focus on the consequences of these decisions for students in upper secondary education. The study, built on interviews with a group of 15- to 19-year-old youths, contributes through a student perspective on learning from home during remote education. The article analyzes the strategy in the Swedish education sector during the pandemic and describes how a group of upper secondary students perceived the shift to digital and remote teaching during the pandemic with regard to the availability of the digital infrastructure and to studying under the new conditions of distance and remote education. Possible lessons to learn from the pandemic in Sweden could be that students are technically better prepared to work with computers, but less prepared to work independently.

1. Introduction

Almost two years have passed now with a pandemic that has had a strong influence on schooling in countries all around the world. National education authorities have had to seek effective strategies for pedagogical practices, the safeguarding of children, and virus transmission control during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic (WHO Europe, 2020). International actors have provided information on how to control virus transmission at schools (e.g., UNICEF, 2020). Quickly, it became obvious that education providers in different national school systems were developing very different approaches to balancing the needs for education, safeguarding, and infection control.

In Sweden, compulsory schools were generally kept open, although according to law there were possibilities for local education providers to close schools and turn to remote and distance education (SFS, 2020b; SKR, 2021a). In line with the tradition of international and comparative education we will pay attention to the context (see e.g., Sobe & Kowalczyk, 2013), specifically the Swedish school system and education policies.

Research on schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic has exploded in the past year. The international literature covers a broad range of studies on countries with different school and welfare systems, discussing a variety of strategies for and consequences of school closures. Rajmil et al. (2021) found 22 studies published already in November 2020 covering the impact of lockdown and school closures on children's and adolescents' health and well-being in low-, middle-, and high-income countries. Digital teaching from a teacher perspective in upper secondary school has been examined in a number of studies (e.g., Kim, Leary & Asbury, 2021). Other studies have investigated the situation from a parent perspective on children's motivation and ability to manage remote learning (Dong, Cao & Li, 2020).

The situation in Sweden has for example been covered in a comparative European study on psychosocial effects of so-called homeschooling during the pandemic (Thorell et al., 2020). Decision making in the education sector has been in focus (Lindblad, Lindqvist, Runesdotter & Wärvik, 2021). Teachers have struggled with questions of assessment, relationship building, and how to support students from all societal groups during (Nilsberth, Liljekvist, Olin-Scheller, Samuelsson & Hallquist, 2021; Olofsson, Lindberg & Fransson, 2021). Survey studies were conducted both with university students (Means & Neisler, 2021) and in upper secondary schools (Lidegran, Hultqvist, Bertilsson & Börjesson, 2021), but to date we have found no qualitative interview studies with school students that show their experiences of chosen strategies in the education sector during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The purpose of the study is to offer a general description of the strategy in the Swedish education sector for a period during the pandemic (from spring 2020 to summer 2021), and to describe and analyze how a group of upper secondary students experienced the strategy's implementation. We have focused on urban students who study academic programs. The intention of the study was to answer the following research questions:

1. How can the strategy in the Swedish education sector during the pandemic be described?
2. How have a group of upper secondary students experienced the digital and remote teaching during the pandemic, with regard to the availability of digital infrastructure and to studying under the new conditions?

2. A description of the Swedish school system

In this section we will first provide an overview of the school system in Sweden and then describe some specifics regarding compulsory education and upper secondary education. The Swedish education system is largely decentralized. The municipalities play a central role in the system, but general decisions about legislation, national curricula, and syllabi are made by the government and the national parliament. In addition to the Ministry of Education and Research, there are government agencies with different specific responsibilities. The most important of these is *Skolverket*,[1] which is responsible for supporting and monitoring the quality of the education in preschools, compulsory schools, and upper secondary schools. Another agency is the Schools Inspectorate, which has the responsibility of undertaking systematic and recurrent inspections of preschools and schools.

There is no regional structure within the Swedish education system; below the central level is the municipal level (SFS, 2010). Sweden has 290 municipalities, which vary in size from about a million down to 2,000 inhabitants. The municipalities are obliged to provide education to their citizens and ensure that national legislation, curricula, and syllabi are suitably implemented, but within these frames they are able to decide how to do this. Compulsory schools and upper secondary schools are financed by the municipalities and the government, with the municipalities contributing the largest proportion.

Generally, the Swedish education system contains preschools from the age of one, compulsory schools from the age of 6 to 16, which includes both primary and lower secondary education, and upper secondary schools from the age of 16 to 19. Most schools are run by the municipalities, but since 1992 it is also possible to start schools run by different organizations, foundations, and companies. These schools, referred to as independent schools (or sometimes free schools), are obliged to follow the same curricula as the municipal schools but, in the same way as municipal schools, are allowed to create their own 'profile.' Independent schools, like municipal schools, are not allowed to require parents to pay any fees. Each school has a principal, who is the head of staff and responsible for seeing that the school fulfils its duties according to national legislation and municipal decisions (SFS, 2010; Skolverket, 2018).

The content of the education is regulated in the national curricula. There are curricula for preschool education, compulsory education (preschool class to grade 9) and upper secondary schools. While the curricula describe the general content of education, the individual teacher has the possibility to adapt the teaching to the needs of each group of students (SKOLFS, 2011; Skolverket, 2018).

At the age of six, all children in Sweden are expected to spend a year in preschool classes. These classes, typically placed in schools, prepare children for compulsory

school, which together with the preschool classes lasts ten years. A child starts grade 1 in compulsory school the year he/she turns seven. Students in compulsory school often spend their whole time in the same class, and for the first six years normally have one teacher who teaches all the subjects. In grades 7–9 they have different teachers for different subjects, and have the opportunity to choose between certain subjects.

Although upper secondary education is not compulsory, most students continue to upper secondary school after compulsory school. Free of charge to students and their parents, upper secondary education offers 18 different tracks. Two thirds of the students study programs that prepare them for university, while one-third study in vocationally oriented programs, which are an integrated part of upper secondary schools (Skolverket, 2021a). Students apply to the different tracks, and their grades from compulsory education will determine which track they are admitted to. Most students will finish their upper secondary education at the age of 19 (SFS, 2010).

3. Educational strategies for adjusting to the pandemic

In this section the preparedness of the education system for a pandemic and the measures taken to adjust to the pandemic within the Swedish education system will be presented, including a chronological sequence of the early developments of the pandemic with a focus on its impact on schools. Finally, we will provide a summary of evaluation reports and previous research featuring studies on education in Sweden during the pandemic.

3.1 General preparedness

When the WHO declared COVID-19 a pandemic, governments around the world started taking a number of measures. Before we specifically look at the measures taken in Sweden, it is of interest to consider the general preparedness in the world in terms of the extent to which students, teachers, and schools were prepared to work under new circumstances. As societies closed down, whether and to what extent schools should close became an urgent issue. Whatever model a government chose, they had to consider the extent to which it would be possible to deliver some kind of (distance) education.

In a document from the OECD (2020), it was asked how well students and schools were prepared for this. Based on available statistics from the latest PISA-study[2] from 2018, an attempt was made to answer a number of questions involving topics including:

– students' access to a quiet place to study,
– students' access to a computer for schoolwork,
– students' access to the Internet,

– teachers' technical and pedagogical skills in integrating digital devices in instruction.

Generally, the available statistical data from PISA showed that Swedish students, teachers, and schools were relatively well prepared to deal with distance education from the perspective of available technology and knowledge of how to operate it.

What was not covered in any of these international reports was students' preparedness to work independently. Obviously, distance education can be organized in many different ways and computers can be used in various ways, but it is a reasonable assumption that most approaches to distance education will demand that students should to some extent be able to work on their own and take responsibility for their own learning. When teachers cannot monitor students' learning in the same ways as in the classroom, this places more responsibility on the students for their own learning. The extent to which students were actually prepared for this is more difficult to get a measure of, compared with information on the availability of computers and Internet access. Self-regulated work and learning have traditionally been emphasized in Swedish schools (Österlind, 2010).

3.2 Measures taken in schools

When COVID-19 was declared a pandemic in March 2020, several measures were taken in Sweden. Folkhälsomyndigheten[3] issued a number of recommendations on how to limit the spread of the virus in society in general as well as in schools. According to law, it was possible for municipalities and other local education providers to close schools in consensus with the district physician, and turn to remote and distance education (SFS, 2020b). National legislation was changed so that it would also be possible for the government to decide about closing schools (ibid.). These initiatives were always based on self-governance rather than only on central decisions. A great deal of responsibility for decisions regarding opening or closing schools, or other strategies such as regularly screening teachers, was placed on the local authorities (SFS, 2020a; SKR, 2021a). This made for a variety in policies across the country.

During the pandemic, compulsory schools – which means primary and lower secondary schools from preschool to grade 9 – generally never closed down. Compulsory comprehensive schools continued to conduct business as usual as far as possible, with recommendations that both teachers and students maintain distance, wash their hands regularly, and stay home if they had any symptoms (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2021a). Information was regularly adapted to the situation but generally these were recommendation that were meant to inform decision making on the local level rather than scarp rules. Schools were encouraged to plan their activities as much as possible in order to avoid larger gatherings of students. In some cases, individual schools were

closed for shorter periods when larger numbers of students and/or staff had been infected. This strategy has been described as being in line with principles of the Swedish welfare state (Lindblad et al., 2021). The strategies chosen here differ from policies in other European countries, which makes the Swedish case interesting. Schools were recognized as an important social harbor for children to come to, to learn, to eat their school meals, and to meet their teachers and peers. Attendance was carefully followed up, both of students and of teachers (Skolverket, 2020a, 2020b; IFAU, 2021)[4]. School has a compensatory task, which means that it should take special care of vulnerable children (SFS, 2010). However, not all parents were happy with open schools and some chose to keep their children at home; this placed extra stress on teachers, who now had to teach part of their class in school while also providing material and support to the students who had stayed home. This is only one of several challenges that have been described (Dahlström & Hagman, 2020).

A different strategy was chosen for upper secondary schools, including both academic and vocational tracks. These students (grades 10–12) were treated very similarly to university students: Schools were closed from March 17, 2020 (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2021b), and all lessons were taught online. Distance and remote teaching are well established terms for synchronous and asynchronous online teaching strategies. These terms are defined in the school law (SFS, 2010, 1 ch. 3§ and 22 ch. 11§) and are defined and frequently used by Skolverket (2021b). When studying remote and distance teaching, it might be more appropriate to use the term *emergency remote education*, because what happened during the pandemic was not planned distance or remote education (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020; Shim & Lee, 2020).

In this article we aim to describe strategies chosen in Swedish schools, with special focus on the consequences these decisions had for students in upper secondary education. Beginning in March 2020, these students' lessons were delivered mainly through different types of computer programs, like Teams or Zoom. The use of distance and remote teaching during the pandemic was regulated by Skolverket (2021c). Students were often given long-term tasks to work on independently at home, while whole class gathering and group work may have been organized via Zoom or other computer programs. Generally, online learning support platforms that many schools were already using were used much more frequently.[5]

As spring 2020 passed, various problems were noticed, especially in upper secondary schools. For instance, some students were more negatively affected by the move to remote teaching than other students were. These included students who received some type of remedial education and students enrolled in vocational tracks in which practical elements constituted an important part of the teaching. In order to support these students, some activities at the upper secondary schools were opened up again (Skolverket, 2021d, 2021e).

Table 1: Measures and actions taken with regard to the Swedish education sector during COVID-19

Date	Measure/action
November 2019	First case of COVID-19 confirmed in Sweden.
11 March 2020	COVID-19 classified as a pandemic by WHO (2020).
13 March 2020	New ordinance (SFS, 2020a): – Local authorities can now close a school based on recommendations from Folkhälsomyndigheten or the district physician.
17 March 2020	Strong recommendation that all universities and upper secondary schools turn to distance and remote teaching (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2020a). All on-site education is paused at universities.
19 March 2020	New law on temporary closing of activities in the school due to extraordinary events in peacetime (SFS, 2020b): Possible to temporarily stop school activities, upper secondary schools turn to distance and remote education.
March 2020	Compulsory schools stay open, following certain routines (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2021a).
24 April 2020	Government decision (the Government, Folkhälsomyndigheten, and Skolverket): Possible (but not an obligation) to use distance or remote education in comprehensive education, even if a school is open, if many students and teachers need to stay at home to follow recommendations from Folkhälsomyndigheten.
30 April 2020	The Government, Skolverket: A new commission in Skolverket: Produce and disseminate teaching examples to support schools during the pandemic.
29 May 2020	Folkhälsomyndigheten (2020b): Upper secondary schools can resume regular teaching.
15–16 June 2020	New government ordinance – Upper secondary schools can resume regular teaching and open up after the summer holidays. – If necessary, an upper secondary school may partly organize distance education to make it easier for it to follow the general recommendations from Folkhälsomyndigheten regarding public transportation.
Autumn 2020	Compulsory schools continue with teaching in school but also provide more online and distance teaching. Upper secondary schools reopen with some adaptation to the situation, for example with smaller groups in school and part of the class learning from home. Universities continue distance teaching.
December 2020	Extended Christmas holidays: Schools are closed for a week after the holidays in order to prevent a new wave of infections. More flexible rules regarding the organization of teaching.
26 March 2021	The Swedish Work Environment Authority investigates the spread of the COVID-19 infection in schools.
19–20 April 2021	Skolverket interviews all school leaders in lower and upper secondary schools about their experiences with distance and remote teaching.
8 July 2021	SFS, 2021 – changes in ordinance SFS, 2020a: Municipalities and independent education providers shall prepare for upper secondary schools to start teaching in school again after the summer holidays in all cases, if not otherwise advised by district physician.
Autumn 2021	Upper secondary schools return to classroom teaching. Universities start teaching on campus again.
November 2021	Examples for regional transitions to distance and remote teaching in lower and upper secondary schools on recommendation of Folkhälsomyndigheten (2021c).
23 December 2021	Omicron variant of COVID-19 has strong effects on the health of students and teachers, making ordinary teaching practices difficult; new decisions by Folkhälsomyndigheten (2021d) to counteract effects.
3 February 2022	Press conference with the Government: COVID-19 to no longer be classified as a disease that is dangerous to public health and society but rather as a notifiable disease. Recommendation to remove all restrictions. Advice to schools to be published within a week (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2022).

Note: Lindblad et al. (2021) have previously presented strategic responses to the pandemic by the Swedish Government and relevant agencies for Spring 2020.

During autumn 2020 and spring 2021 most schools, both primary, lower secondary and upper secondary, were kept open, but different measures were taken to prevent transmission of the virus. When larger numbers of students and/or teachers were infected by COVID-19 whole schools, or sometimes parts of them, were closed and the teaching was offered online (Skolverket, 2021d, 2021e). Measures and actions that were taken with regard to the Swedish education sector during COVID-19 are outlined in Table 1. In autumn 2021 schools were generally expected to get back to 'business as usual' which also happened until December (e.g., Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2021c). With the outbreak of the omicron variation of the Corona virus larger numbers of students got infected than earlier. The intension was still to keep schools open (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2021d), but many schools have had to close or move to remote education due to large number of infected students and/or staff from late November 2021 (Olsson, 2021). Both government agencies and media investigated critically the role of children in the pandemic and are still positive to keeping schools open. However, in January 2022, many schools had to close shorter periods because many teachers are quarantined or ill in COVID-19 and post-COVID.[6] A number of lower and upper secondary schools went back to online and remote teaching – or sometimes students were in school, but teachers taught from home, for example when they were quarantined (Öhman, 2022). Almost all restrictions in society and the education sector are removed February 9, 2022 (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2022, see Table 1).

3.3 Official evaluations of implications of measures

Presently, there are several evaluations being conducted in attempts to estimate the impact of the pandemic on education. In an evaluation report, Skolverket (2021d) has concluded that the access to education has worked fairly well during the pandemic, but that there have been some problems. They note that there has been a higher degree of absence in compulsory schools during the pandemic and that this increased absence may have led to some students missing out on parts of their education. It is also noted that the occurrence of distance education may have created problems for some students; it is specifically noted that groups of students with more need of support may not have received it in the same way they do when teaching is offered in the schools (ibid.).

In a special evaluation report on upper secondary education, Skolverket mentions the same issues as in the more general report, but some points are elaborated on more (Skolverket, 2021e). Specific problems are noted in vocationally oriented upper secondary programs and in subjects such as mathematics, biology, chemistry, and physics, where laboratory work is part of the education. Further, the grading of students

has been less reliable than under normal circumstances. A higher number of students are also reported to have had psychological problems during the pandemic (ibid.).

The Swedish School Inspectorate has covered issues related to the pandemic in their annual report (Skolinspektionen, 2021), and its general conclusions are the same as in the evolution reports from Skolverket. It is noted that the use of digital tools has generally increased in the schools, rather than only in upper secondary schools during the closure. A number of measures have been taken in most schools to reduce transmission of the virus.

In a more general attempt to evaluate the impact of COVID-19 on education in Europe, Di Pietero, Biagi, Costa, Karpinsky & Mazza (2020) emphasize the risk that the pandemic will negatively affect specifically students who have problems adjusting to the new learning environment created by the use of distance education. They further suggest that students from a more advantaged background may go to schools that are better equipped with ICT to a greater extent than other students do.

3.4 Previous research on education in Sweden during COVID-19

Lindblad et al. (2021) aimed to understand how decisions on education in Sweden responded to the pandemic and what influenced these decisions during spring 2020. Many of Folkhälsomyndigheten's policies built on pedagogical programs, and responsibilities were delegated to other institutions and individuals. The closure of upper secondary schools and universities went into force on March 17, 2020, and they all immediately had to change to distance and remote teaching. At the same time compulsory schools generally stayed open, although it was possible to stop school activities temporarily. Lindblad et al. analyze how Skolverket acted through information, guidelines, and recommendations to schools and local authorities, and point out that scientific expertise was an important ingredient in the public discourse.

Thorell et al. (2020) have investigated the psychological effects of homeschooling on children and youth in seven European countries. Based on an online survey of parents, the researchers found that there was great variation among the parents regarding how they perceived the effect of homeschooling on their child's well-being (ibid.). While some parents reported that their child felt more isolated, had more conflicts within the family, and used digital media more often for things besides schoolwork, others reported that remote studying had had a positive impact on their child's daily life functioning (ibid.). Furthermore, the study showed that parents' perceptions varied significantly between countries. In Sweden, parents reported fewer adverse effects on themselves compared to their child, and fewer parents reported negative effects of homeschooling (ibid.).

A study of Bergdahl and Nouri (2021) showed that teachers' preparedness was mainly related to technical aspects while they, with limited experience of their own

of distance teaching, lacked pedagogical strategies for the emergency remote teaching. The sample included teachers from all age groups from primary to adult education, about 40% of them teaching in upper secondary school and 45% in grades 4–9. About half of the teachers expressed that they had access to digital teaching material and that they also usually taught to a (very) high extent using digital learning resources. However, despite this high degree of digital habits for teaching, the study's open-ended questions showed that enabling student interaction and collaboration for learning was experienced as a challenge (ibid.; SKR, 2021b). The researchers discuss that, while having a well-developed digital infrastructure is a 'prerequisite,' it is not sufficient for pedagogically satisfying solutions for teaching.

4. Upper secondary school students' experiences of their distance and remote education – an empirical study

4.1 Method

4.1.1 Study design

This study employed in-depth semi-structured individual interviews with upper secondary students. In order to explore students' experiences of their remote studies, we interviewed 13 upper secondary students, eight girls and five boys aged 16–19, from different schools that had rapidly ceased their face-to-face teaching in the classroom and moved to studying from home via Internet platforms.

4.1.2 Recruitment procedure and study participants

The recruitment of students was done via advertisement on the websites of youth organizations, and upper secondary schools in Stockholm. Initially, an information was sent via e-mails to principals of various upper secondary schools, as well as to various youth organizations, with information about the aim of the study, and the need for coming in contact with students. Six principals and four youth organizations replied to our request and agreed to inform students about the study.

In order to reach a variety of experiences, an effort was made to interview participants who varied in terms of gender, grade, the subject of their educational program (natural science, economics, social science, art, music), type of school (public or independent), and type of family (live with two parents, live with one parent, have siblings, only child). However, we have not managed to achieve a variation among participants in term of type of educational program, as all participants were attending theoretical and esthetical study programs and not vocational ones.

4.1.3 Data collection and analysis

The aim of the semi-structured individual interviews was to achieve descriptions of the students' thoughts, beliefs, emotions, and behaviors relating to their remote studies. The interview guide was treated as a flexible tool, and was revised according to the interview content. Interviews were conducted from April 30, 2020 (about a month after the start of remote teaching) to May 28, 2020, three weeks before summer vacation. The interviews, conducted by the authors via the digital platform Zoom, lasted 25–50 minutes and were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

A thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun, Clarke, Hayfield & Terry, 2019) was used as a guide for the data analysis. According to this reflexive approach, the analysis involves several stages. In the first stage, we familiarized ourselves with the data by listening to the interviews and reading and re-reading the interview transcriptions. In the second stage, we generated initial codes by breaking up the data into their component parts and properties, and, third, defined potential themes. In the fourth stage, we reviewed the themes and subthemes, and in the fifth one we named and revised themes so they would constitute answers to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun et al. 2019). In order to increase the trustworthiness and transparency of the analysis, two of the authors (NR & SKS) repeatedly discussed and negotiated the various possible categorization and interpretation of the data. In this process we used the material in the original language, Swedish, and only quotes used for the illustration of different themes in the article were translated.

4.1.4 Ethical considerations

No ethical approval was needed from the Ethical Approval Authority as no sensitive personal data, as defined by Swedish law, were obtained during the interviews. However, ethical issues were carefully considered and addressed. Before the interviews, participants were given information about the study's aim and method, as well the conditions of confidentiality and anonymity. They also signed an informed consent form. When participants were under the age of 18, their parents were given information about the study and were asked to give consent for their child's participation. Empirical data were protected according to the General Data Protection Requirements (VR, 2017).

4.2 Results

The analysis resulted in five themes, namely (1) the experience of online teaching and learning, (2) informal feedback, (3) distraction from classes, (4) workloads and (5) lacking motivation.

4.2.1 "We have our lessons in Teams"

With regard to the availability of digital infrastructure, all participants experienced that they had sufficient conditions to study remotely from home. These conditions included technical facilities such as one's own computer provided by the school, a fast Internet connection, a camera, and access to a learning platform through which they could participate in lessons (which were carried out according to the regular schedule) as well as receive information and instructions from their teachers.

> Then when the lesson starts, I go into Microsoft Teams, because we have our lessons in Teams, and I go into the lesson … And then the teacher usually gives a lecture or gives us instructions for what to do during the lesson. (Axel, 17 years old)

In most cases, students had access to an additional device that they could use when unable to use their computer. In cases of technical problems, participants were able to take immediate contact with a special department at the school that had the role of assisting students in such cases, as exemplified in by the following quote:[7]

> Just today the mike decided not to work, so when I was going to take part in the video meeting with my class and, like, in the lessons, people couldn't hear me when I was talking and I couldn't hear them at all … so I called IT, our IT department at the school, and the IT department is still working at the school so they asked me to come in and so they had to look at it, like, at school and offer me a new microphone. (Maria, 17 years old)

In addition to the available technical facilities, all participants experienced that they also had sufficient skills for managing the necessary technology and learning platforms.

4.2.2 "It's easy to make mistakes"

Generally, participants experienced more insecurity about their performance, and perceived that it was easier to make mistakes during their remote education compared to the classroom education. There were several sources of this insecurity.

Firstly, when working in the classroom, with their classmates and teachers physically around them, the students perceived that it was easier to get direct and spontaneous feedback from others. Meanwhile, when they worked on an assignment at home their classmates and teachers could not see them, which meant that the direct and spontaneous feedback was unavailable.

A second source of insecurity involved the lack of possibility to observe and compare one's performance with that of others' in order to regulate one's own efforts. While working on the same assignment in the classroom, students typically observe other classmates and compare their own invested efforts with the efforts and engagement of others. When working in separate locations, however, an effective compari-

son with others was impossible, leading to insecurity about their own performance. This is illustrated in the following quote:

> And then you have to think about, also, that if the teacher or other classmates aren't around, you have no idea if you're working too much or if you're working too little. And it can also affect you mentally. I mean, if you have an assignment you think is really big and really important, and then a friend calls after an hour when the lesson's over and you've come a third of the way, and he says 'No, this wasn't important at all, didn't you hear what the teacher said?', that affects me mentally … this sounds weird, but the teacher can't stop you if you do something too much when it comes to home education. (Simon, 18 years old)

A third source of the insecurity and the perception that it was easier to make mistakes was that the students felt it was embarrassing and cumbersome to ask questions during lessons in distance education. Several participants perceived that spontaneous questions, such as a student raising their hand during a lesson and asking a question in front of the rest of the group, disappeared with distance education. These spontaneous questions, which were common in the classroom, were often an important source of knowledge and clarified expectations. The disappearance of the spontaneous questions prevented students from hearing others' questions and from learning from the teachers' answers to them.

4.2.3 "There's always something else you want to do instead"

The experience of doing other activities that were more appealing in the moment, instead of participating in school activities, was described by all participants. The temptation of other activities, such as watching a movie, eating, social media, or playing a video game instead of participating in class, was much stronger in distance education than in the classroom. In addition, as shops and restaurants were kept open in Sweden during the pandemic, participants also mentioned that other activities outside the home were available during school time. As their teachers and classmates were not able to see what they were doing, several participants perceived that negative consequences in the form of criticism from others for not participating were less prominent. However, even if the lack of control from teachers was sometimes perceived as a possibility, it was generally experienced as a source of stress and an obstacle to focusing on their studies, as one of the participants illuminated:

> At home you only have your own judgement to think about, and then it's really easy to think 'I'll go get something from the fridge' or 'Maybe I can go buy that outfit and I'll do that lesson later'. At school that's not possible, because somebody would tell you 'No, you really shouldn't ditch this lesson, that's crazy'. (Daniel, 17 years old)

4.2.4 "It feels like you never get a break"

Many of the participants experienced that there was an ambiguity in distance education regarding time for regular school activities, working with extra school assignments that needed to be done after school time, and time for leisure activities. This ambiguity led to pressure on the students due to not being able to take breaks, perceiving that every part of the day should be seen as a potential time for studying, and blaming themselves when they took part in other activities besides studying. In addition, this ambiguity was difficult to manage, as illustrated in the following quote:

> Then, I could, like, separate school and home. At school I knew that I have to do that during the lesson, and I knew that when I get home I have to sit and study because I have these tests next week. Here it's school at home, free time at home, study at home, everything's at home, sort of. (Nora, 17 years old)

4.2.5 "I just do the minimum" / "not having the motivation"

Many participants experienced being less motivated to work on their school assignments and to participate in the remote teaching. Students described this experience in terms of a lack of energy, being less serious or disengaged, expending the minimum effort to receive the minimum grade, and not having the drive.

There were several reasons for being less motivated. Firstly, participants perceived that not being with their teacher in the same room decreased the possibility to get positive acknowledgement of their efforts. In the same way, as teachers could not see their efforts, there were no negative consequences for their disengagement.

A second reason for the lack of motivation was that students perceived that they were less encouraged by their classmates. According to several participants, the spontaneous reassurance they received from peers in a classroom education stopped when they moved to education from home.

A third reason for being less motivated was the decreased shared responsibility for each other when working on a group assignment, as one of the participants articulated:

> We had planned from the beginning that we would divide the whole presentation into five parts, and so we thought that those parts would be woven together or that they would stick together, so that I would build on what another person in the group has written, and a another that would build on my presentation, and so on. But in the end, it did not happen at all … The parts were not connected at all in the same way, and it almost did not feel like a group work but more like five separate works that have been thrown together. (Isabelle, 16 years old)

All these examples show that upper secondary school students perceived many challenges in relation to their emergency remote education even though their technical preconditions were good, with regard to both Internet connection and IT use, as well

as learning platforms being in place. The perceived challenges were related to a feeling of insecurity when working on assignments; difficulty managing distractions and focusing on their studies as well as managing their time the blurred boundaries between school time and leisure time; and regulating their own motivation and engagement in their studies.

5. Discussion

5.1 Discussion on the results

Following the results presented above, we return to the purpose of the study: to offer a general description of the Swedish educational policy and strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic (from spring 2020 to summer 2021) and to describe and analyze the experiences of a group of upper secondary students in remote education during the pandemic.

As described earlier, the Swedish education system was never fully closed down. Most parts of preschool, primary, and lower secondary education were kept open during the entire period from spring 2020 throughout 2021. The only part of the education system that was closed down was upper secondary education at the beginning of the pandemic in 2020, from March through the summer holidays (Skolverket, 2021d, 2021e). Compulsory schools were generally open but students' absence was about twice as high as the previous school year (Skolverket, 2021f). In upper secondary schools the absence from distance teaching was similar to the absence from school the year before (Skolverket, 2020c).

Many problems can be discussed in relation to school closures and distance education in spring 2020 (e.g., Åstrand, 2020). Schools' compensatory task was cited as a reason why schools and after-school programs should remain open. As Swedish society was not completely closed down during any period, the upper secondary students who participated in remote education in spring 2020 did not experience that they were part of a total closure of all parts of society; although they had to study from home, many other activities in society were going on more or less as usual.

The experiences presented in this article of a group of upper secondary students involving remote education during the pandemic are related to spring 2020. The students who participated in the interviews in this study did not express serious concerns about their well-being that could be interpreted as signs of mental stress. Other studies of student experiences of the pandemic have highlighted such issues (e.g., Henning Loeb & Windsor, 2020). Even if this was not directly expressed by the students we interviewed, it is obvious that they experienced elements of stress and dissatisfaction that in the long run could jeopardize their mental well-being. Preventing such risks may be related to the issue of self-regulated learning. To further discuss their

experiences, we will now attempt to answer our second research question: How have the upper secondary students perceived the shift to digital and remote teaching during the pandemic with regard to the availability of the digital infrastructure, and to studying under the new conditions of distance and remote education?

Generally, the access to technology does not seem to have been a problem. Most students had access to their own, school owned computer with a fast Internet connection and camera. According to OECD (2020), this is one of the important prerequisites for turning to online education. The schools had learning platforms that could be used as a central tool for organizing the remote education; the students do not seem to have had any major problems accessing these platforms. Through these learning platforms they could participate in lessons, get material, and deliver their completed tasks. The schools also seem to have been able to provide some technical support to the students if needed, and the students appear to have had the skills needed for operating their computers and using the necessary programs.

Working from home meant that the students were confronted with more distractions than what they normally deal with in the classroom. It was easy to do other things, such as eating, watching a movie, playing a computer game, using social media, or answering private calls from friends. In the home environment it was more difficult to draw a line between leisure time and school work. This led not only to distractions but in some cases also to more school work. Some students perceived that they had no breaks during the school day.

What has been problematic for the students – and this is one of the important findings from our study – were challenges related to their ability to self-regulate their learning and motivation. Grounded in social cognitive theories, self-regulation is seen as the process in which individuals adopt, develop, and refine strategies to monitor, evaluate, set goals, and plan their learning (Zimmerman, 1998). Self-regulated learning is guided by environmental social conditions as well as individual characteristics (ibid.). According to the results, not having direct contact with their teachers or other students, as well as having difficulties to communicate and observe teachers and other students in the same way as in the classroom, had consequences for their ability to monitor and plan their studies, as well as to manage uncertainty. The students' increased responsibility for their own education also resulted in motivational problems and a lack of energy. It was difficult to feel responsible for the work in groups when it was so easy to split the work up into individual parts. Group work is as Forslund Frykedal and Hammar Chiriac (2017) have shown an educational mode that builds on students' academic and social connections. This was difficult to achieve in emergency remote education during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In short, the students we interviewed managed the use of the technology well, and schools seem to have been able to offer the necessary technical support. The problem

has rather involved handling the new situation of increased personal responsibility for one's education, with neither teachers nor peers able to provide the support they normally do in the classroom. The students we interviewed in our study in Sweden seem to have the technical skills needed for remote education. This may be not only a matter of what they have learned in school, but might even more so be a result of their own leisure-time activities. The ability to regulate their own learning seems to have been more of a problem. The results here can be understood against the background of a European study showing that problems were related to learning, well-being, and motivation among students (Di Pietero et al., 2020). However, in contrast to that study, the students in our study described having little problem with regard to digital equipment but more problems with self-regulated learning.

5.2 Methodological limitations and further studies

The study has some methodological limitation to highlight. Firstly, all participants in our study were students in theoretical programs, and not in vocational tracks. Students in vocational education might have different experiences of their remote studying, experiences which are not represented in the results of the current study. In more practical fields self-regulated learning may play a different role than in academic studies. Secondly, the participants were recruited from schools in and around Stockholm. It can be assumed that students from larger cities have a different experience of remote education than students living in more rural areas, with longer distances to school. A recently published Swedish study showed that challenges during the distance education differed for urban and rural students, and for students of different social groups (Lidegran et al., 2021). This limitation has implication on the generalization of the results. For further studies it would be interesting to investigate student experiences and modes of (self-regulated) learning for different student populations.

6. Conclusions

The described experiences of upper secondary students offer us some clues as to how upper secondary students themselves may have experienced remote and distance education during the pandemic. These experiences and the results on the central role of self-regulated learning may inform future teaching, both in the classroom and online. Finally, as these lines are being written, Folkhälsomyndigheten (2021a, 2021b) has rescinded almost all its specific recommendations for education institutions that were in place at the beginning of the autumn 2021 term. There is little specific advice from the authorities, but the responsibility is placed on the individuals in the schools. This could be seen as another example of what can be described as a

soft strategy, relying on recommendations rather than commands (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2021b). Several measures against COVID-19 are expected to be phased out on February 9, but schools are advised to continue flexibly applying measures to cope with infections and absence, both of teachers and students.

With regard to an international comparative perspective, we believe that the Swedish experience was strongly shaped by the following dimensions:

– A consensus among the government, authorities, and large parts of the political opposition that compulsory schools should remain open.
– Upper secondary schools basically followed a strategy similar to that followed by universities – remote and distance education. While upper secondary education is non-compulsory, it is attended by a great majority of the age group it concerns.
– The relatively smooth transition to remote and distance education during the time of 'emergency remote education' was only possible because both teachers and students were already accustomed to using digital tools in the teaching and learning process. Students had access to computers at home, schools had the necessary infrastructure, and teachers had knowledge in how to use computers.

The experiences from the pandemic will have consequences for students and on how schooling will be organized in the future as well:

– Despite the smooth technical transition, many students were affected by how education was organized during the pandemic. The extent to which this will have an impact on their further education remains to be seen.
– The pandemic can be seen as a giant experiment in which a large number of students from one day to the next had to take up their education online. As this seems to have worked fairly well in the Swedish context, it will be interesting to see the extent to which elements of online education will be further integrated into normal teaching.
– The pandemic can also be seen as a giant experiment, testing students' ability to take more responsibility for their own education. The future may include more training in self-regulated learning, or a general lesson could be that students need more structure in their education.

Possible lessons to learn from the pandemic in Sweden could be that students are better technically prepared to work with computers than is sometimes expected, but less prepared to work independently than is often assumed. Also, in situations of remote education, it seems to be necessary to find a balance between self-regulated learning and structured learning activities. On top of the importance to understand how necessary it is for students to have contact with their teachers and schoolmates we could also understand from our study how important training in self-regulated

learning may be. It may be more important to consider how to train students in self-regulated learning than in computer skills. Another possible conclusion could be that upper secondary students still need the support of a teacher to find structures for their learning, both in the classroom and in remote education.

Notes

1. In English: The National Agency for Education.
2. PISA stands for the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment. PISA measures 15-year-olds' ability in different subjects and gathers information on their schooling experiences.
3. In English: The Public Health Agency of Sweden.
4. IFAU – Institutet för Arbetsmarknads- och utbildningspolitisk utvärdering [Institute for evaluation of labour market and education policy].
5. It was during these months we gathered the data for the study introduced below. The analysis of the data was conducted during later phases of the pandemic and on the background of the information available up to day.
6. For media reporting see for example Dagens Nyheter DN 2022-01-28: Har barn varit drivande i smittspridningen? [Have children been a driving force in the spread of infection] and Norrköpings tidningar NT 2022-01-27: Så här ser läget ut bland skolorna i Norrköping [This is the situation in schools in Norrköping] with a list of which (primary) schools were closed for the coming days.
7. Quotes are translated from the original Swedish.

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