

*Contact or distance learning, this is the question! Political decisions in education challenging children's well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic: children's perspectives in Estonia*

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**Thematic importance:** The ISCWeB COVID-19 Supplement Study from Spring 2021 in Estonia revealed significant deterioration of children's subjective well-being during the pandemic. Schools as important life domain in children's lives have fluctuated between distance and contact learning according to the political decisions made on the grounds of the pandemic situation. The impact of preferring distance or contact learning on schoolchildren's subjective well-being is under-studied.

**Introduction and objectives:** The World Health Organisation declared a state of international public health emergency on 30 January and a global pandemic on 11 March 2020. In Estonia, according to the political decision schools went online overnight and since then started to fluctuate between distance and contact learning depending on the pandemic situation. Although children in Estonian schools had collected former experiences of e-school the new situation revealed that there were children who liked distance learning however there were also children who disliked it. The aim of the presentation is to reflect children's preferences of distance or contact learning and reveal the impacts on children's subjective well-being.

**Method:** Data are drawn from the ISCWeB Supplement study of 1169 schoolchildren (10-13 years old) from Spring 2021 in Estonia. Children answered to the statements "I like distance learning" and "I like going to school" and assessed their overall well-being (OLS) before the pandemic and in the moment (during the data collection schools were on distance learning). Several methods of statistical analysis (e.g., cluster analysis) were processed.

**Results:** About one third of children prefer contact and the other third distance learning; close to one fifth like and one sixth dislike both forms. Children who like both forms of learning, enjoy support from family and school and show high self-efficacy. They have experienced small deterioration of subjective well-being during the pandemic. The highest deterioration in wellbeing is among the children who prefer contact learning and are worried about their life as a student. Children who prefer distance learning have the smallest decrease in subjective well-being. They receive some support from family but not that much from school; they are "lonely walkers" who do not miss much friends or classmates.

**Conclusions and implications:** Liking or disliking different forms of learning are complex phenomena including individual and relational aspects that determine the impact on children's subjective well-being. Close to one sixth of children disliking both forms of learning deserve a special attention in terms of the risks of school dropout while students preferring going to school carry risks of deteriorating mental health during the school closures.

**Key words:** COVID-19 pandemic, subjective well-being of children, children's perceptions, contact and distance learning