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## Article abstract

This study focuses on children's voices as they were presented in Swedish newspapers during the COVID-19 pandemic. It explores the ways in which journalists featured children's experiences of everyday life during a time of crisis. A descriptive, thematic text analysis of 83 articles resulted in four prominent themes: children's voices as a mouthpiece for or against school closure, children as cocreators of a new normal daily life, children as responsible and caring citizens, and COVID-19 as a magnifying glass for existing vulnerabilities in everyday life. The selection and representation of children's viewpoints was adult led and limited, and the study thus calls for further research on media constructions of children/childhood and related consequences.

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## Children's Voices on the COVID-19 Pandemic as Presented in Swedish Junior and Daily Newspapers

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**Key words:** children's voices, COVID-19, newspapers, Sweden

The COVID-19 pandemic turned into a public health crisis influencing all people and societies. Borders closed, nations were locked down, individuals were socially isolated, and daily life was permeated with multiple decrees pertaining to the "right" COVID-19 behaviour (Stjernswärd, Ivert, & Glasdam, 2021). Whereas numerous newspaper articles have been written about the pros and cons of closing schools, general COVID-19 regulations, and the possible effects of these edicts on children, this article focuses on the voices given to children about their everyday lives during the COVID-19 pandemic, as presented in selected Swedish junior and daily newspapers.

As historians and cultural scholars have demonstrated, the way children are perceived and communicated about has changed radically in the last century (Ariès, 1962). Especially in the 1980s and 90s, a shift took place in the way children and childhood were understood and in how children and childhood were studied (James & Prout,

2015). The ratification of the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 1989) was part of this paradigmatic shift in the approach to children. Children are now seen as social actors and active citizens and regarded as *beings* instead of *becomings* (James & Prout, 2015). Characteristic of the changed approach to children in a Western context is a general movement from external descriptions of children as passive, toward

increasing inclusion and, from 1960 forward, a stronger public interest in childhood as an independent field of study (de Coninck-Smith & Gutman, 2004). In childhood studies, children are now approached as active research participants with their own perspective and agency, worthy of study in their own right and with a penchant for participatory research methods (Hammersley, 2017; Wall, 2022), although Hammersley (2017) pinpoints a tension arising from childhood studies, which at times plays down differences between children and adults and at other times emphasizes them. Moreover, Hammersley argues that viewing “children” as the key identity of those being studied tends to subordinate children in society, especially when the definition of children relies on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. This classification as children may result in treating children as a homogenous category, which Hammersley argues is too simplistic. The overall tendency is nonetheless a strengthened focus on children’s needs, rights, and emotions. This study focuses on how these societal tendencies are at play in a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic.

During the pandemic, many countries’ kindergartens and schools closed down, and possibilities to participate in leisure, physical, and social activities were restricted (Harjule et al., 2021; Mukherjee, 2021). In Sweden, however, only high schools were closed periodically. Unlike other Nordic—and many other European—countries, Sweden’s government did not impose severe restrictions or regulations. Instead, it relied on individual citizens’ sense of responsibility and solidarity to act in accordance with measures promoting (self)protection and virus containment (Nygren & Olofsson, 2020; Regeringen & Regeringskansliet, 2020). Lockdowns prompted concerns about negative effects on mental health, physical activity, and socializing (Harjule et al., 2021; Theis et al., 2021). Moreover, a dominant societal narrative of vulnerability and vulnerable children was raised by politicians and researchers that regarded the pandemic as a potential source of anxiety for children, especially in combination with frequent exposure to fear-inducing news and potentially misleading information about COVID-19 (Roccella, 2020; Sahoo et al., 2020). National health policy initiatives were established to support and provide assistance for children. For example, the three Scandinavian countries’ national health boards constructed specific content on their websites targeting children (e.g., Public Health Agency of Sweden, 2020). Most such articulations stem from psychological understandings of health and health-related behaviours and from the perspective of authorities and adults, whereas narratives from children themselves seem to be lacking (Spray & Hunleth, 2020).

Communication processes orient people’s feelings and behaviour and affect institutional measures. Studies show that children’s own voices are poorly represented in the media in general. For instance, a study of representations of disabled children’s experiences in Irish newspapers found that children’s voices were predominantly absent (McAndrew et al., 2021). Similarly, Huws and Jones (2011) analyzed representations of autism in British newspapers (1999–2008); they found that newspapers focused on children with autism and that many of the stories about autism were not based on interviews with those children. In relation to the pandemic, studies show that younger children have been represented as “controlled pupils and joyful players,” while teenagers have been represented as “future-oriented graduates and reckless partygoers” in newspaper photographs (Martikainen & Sakki, 2021). Children’s narratives pertaining to the pandemic have been observed and reported on across the globe, for instance, in the form of teddy bear hunts and rainbow drawings in windows for all to see (Mukherjee, 2021). Media representations of these narratives may obfuscate systemic inequalities and childhood poverty, as leisure activities are embedded in social and cultural contexts that may not be accounted for in such representations (Mukherjee, 2021). The pandemic has produced and created vulnerabilities both in the ways in which children are described and in relation to whose voices are raised in the understandings of children during the pandemic. Against this background, this article focuses on children’s voices in Swedish junior and daily newspapers and explores the ways journalists have featured children’s views on their everyday lives during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Materials and method

This article is based on an article search in Retriever and a descriptive, thematic text analysis of articles from one Swedish junior and four daily newspapers where children's voices were represented in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic.

### *Inclusion and exclusion criteria*

The study was carried out with a primary criterion of including all articles with a focus on children during the COVID-19 pandemic where children's voices were represented. The specific inclusion criteria were texts published between 15 March 2020 and 28 June 2021, equivalent to the period of the pandemic's start in Sweden to when this article search was conducted. Exclusion criteria were actors other than children and their articulations/viewpoints of children related to the pandemic.

### *The search and screening process*

The article search was conducted through the database Retriever Research, the largest media archive in the Nordics that collects news from print and digital editorial media. The search was limited to four daily newspapers in Sweden—*Svenska Dagbladet*, *Aftonbladet*, *Expressen*, *Dagens Nyheter*—and the junior newspaper *Kamratposten*. *Svenska Dagbladet* is a daily newspaper that covers (inter)national news, including the Greater Stockholm area. The subscribers are concentrated in the capital; however, the newspaper is distributed across most of Sweden. *Svenska Dagbladet*, considered to be independently moderate, can be read in print or digitally. *Expressen* is one of two nationwide evening newspapers in Sweden and is offered daily in print and digitally. It is an independently liberal evening newspaper. *Aftonbladet*, accessible in print and digitally, is one of the largest daily newspapers in Sweden. It describes itself as an independent social-democratic newspaper. *Dagens Nyheter* has the largest circulation among the Swedish morning newspapers, being the only morning newspaper distributed daily to subscribers across the entire country, in print and web editions. It is regarded as an independently liberal newspaper. *Kamratposten*, published every third week and accessible in print and digitally, is part of *Dagens Nyheter* and is Sweden's oldest newspaper for children in Sweden (founded in 1892).

The search was conducted with Swedish search words and the search string: (coronavirus\* or COVID\* or corona\* or pandemi or epidemi) AND (UNGA\* OR UNGDOM\* OR TONÅRING\* OR BARN\* OR \*BARN OR ELEV\* OR TONÅR\* OR MINDERÅRI\* OR OMYNDIG\* OR GYMNASI\*). In English, it corresponds to: (coronavirus\* or COVID\* or corona\* or pandemic or epidemic) AND (YOUNG\* OR YOUTH\* OR TEEN\* OR CHILDREN\* OR \*CHILDREN OR STUDENT\* OR TEEN\* OR MINOR\* OR IMMATURE\* OR HIGH SCHOOL\*). The total number of articles derived was 3865. They were all screened manually to select the articles in which children's voices related to the pandemic were expressed. Eighty-three articles matched the study's aim and were included for analysis. As a pragmatic choice, we excluded articles featuring youth suspected to be over 18 years old. The articles were published in *Expressen* (n=4), *Svenska Dagbladet* (n=5), *Aftonbladet* (n=8), *Dagens Nyheter* (n=33), and *Kamratposten* (n=33).

### *Analytical strategy*

A descriptive, thematic textual analysis was made, inspired by Braun and Clarke (2006). First, the entire empirical material was read several times by the authors for familiarization with the contents and to get an overall picture of the articles regarding children's voices relating to the COVID-19 pandemic. Second, the articles were tabulated, one by one, in a matrix consisting of three columns: (1) the article's title, (2) date, and (3) text passages consistent with the study's aim. Third, initial themes were constructed based on the coded material. We constructed themes based

on similarities and differences in the coded material, all the while keeping the excerpts' context and the articles' framing in mind. Similar codes were gathered into themes, which were reviewed and developed in a consensual process of analysis among the authors. The analysis process encompassed an iterative process through which the authors went back and forth between the constructed themes and empirical data. This was done to ensure that the themes appropriately reflected the empirical material and that the empirical material answering the study's aim was covered by the constructed themes. Initially, all authors carried out the described steps separately, then co-jointly. The analysis included ongoing discussions that focused on comparisons of the thematic constructions and the study's aim. Thus, the four themes were refined, defined, and named: *children's voices as a mouthpiece for or against school closure*, *children as cocreators of a new normal daily life*, *children as responsible and caring citizens*, and *COVID-19 as a magnifying glass for existing vulnerabilities in everyday life*. The articles' contents were briefly described in the results to facilitate an understanding of the contexts within which the journalist-selected children's voices were presented. Illustrative quotations from the newspaper articles as featured by the journalists supported the analysis. For the purposes of this article, the authors translated and edited the article quotations from Swedish to English.

## Ethical considerations

A main ethical consideration was that the study's empirical material was publicly available journalistic material, potentially including health-related data that is viewed as so-called sensitive information (European Union, 2016) whose use differed from the journalists' original publishing intentions. The authors could not find a study that served as a precedent to argue for the (non)need of ethical approval for studies of this kind, where Sweden seems to be a loner in comparison to other countries' ethical legislation (Stjernswärd, Tilgmann, & Glasdam, 2024). The study was ethically approved by the Swedish ethics review board (Dnr 2021-05828-01). Journalists reporting on children adhere to journalists' professional ethics (International Federation of Journalists, 2019), thereby avoiding putting children's integrity and security at risk. However, the media-featured children were unaware that their published expressions were being used as empirical material in research. This was the authors' reason for anonymizing and editing quotes, without changing their intrinsic meaning, to avoid traceability.

## Results

### *Children's voices as a mouthpiece for or against school closure*

Several of the articles were about the changed school conditions during the pandemic, where children's voices were presented as a small part of larger stories. *Dagens Nyheter*, for example, published an article about a museum that had a digital collection focused on how children portrayed their lives during the pandemic and their ideas about the future. There, a pupil noted that "*school days are only half as long as before.*" In an article about schools closing, *Expressen* published a child's voice that supported the strategy to close schools for safety's sake as a response to the child's school being open:

(Would you have wanted the school to be closed?) Then we would probably have been home-schooled and we would also have had to go to school this summer. However, I might still have wanted them to close, just in case.

The junior newspaper *Kamratposten* had several articles about children's different viewpoints on changed school conditions. *Kamratposten* also published articles where children's voices were presented as a small part of a larger story. However, it also published articles highlighting only children's voices, but their stories were based on specific questions from journalists. Children expressed their viewpoints on changed school conditions on a personal level.



For example, the question “Do you think the schools should have closed?” elicited the following answers:

No, that would have been boring. My cousins’ school closed for a while. They fell behind in several subjects.

It seems too relaxed to have school from home. You don’t even need to wear pants.... I think most of them (fellow pupils) slept during the breaks.

How nice it is to avoid sports, music, and handicrafts. Because those subjects don’t work remotely.

*Kamratposten* also published children’s political criticism about decisions not to close schools, such as the opinion below, in its viewpoint section:

The national health board claims that open schools strengthen the health of children and young people. I do not agree. Distance education means that children with parents or siblings in a risk group do not have to be afraid of bringing corona infection home. And for children who are bullied or feel bad at school, everyday life becomes easier. Perhaps, on the contrary, the health of many children has improved through the possibility of distance learning.

Furthermore, journalists featured children who described experiences of inconsistencies regarding implemented measures to minimize the infection’s spread at school, as seen in *Kamratposten*’s viewpoint section:

In my school, we are not allowed to shower or change after sports, because of corona.... I think this rule is weird. Everyone in the class is crowding the lockers anyway. And we played a game in sports where you hold each other’s hands. Then I don’t understand why the infection would spread so much more because we shower?

The selected children’s voices also marked social class differences, for example, in an article focusing on schools closing, with statements indicating that (upper) middle-class people’s travelling patterns might cause more frequent incidences of infections and of schools closing down. None of the other newspapers had children’s expressions on that topic. A child expressed it in this way:

I think they (specific schools) were hit harder because there are pupils from families with a lot of money. Many go to Italy, the Alps, luxury ski resorts. That may be why those schools had more shutdowns than others. (*Expressen*)

Children’s viewpoints on both advantages and disadvantages related to homeschooling as a consequence of the pandemic were published. For example, regarding distance studies in *Dagens Nyheter*, a high school pupil was quoted saying:

Gets more done now [at home] than during school time.... One also has more freedom, for better and worse. It’s not a big problem for me.... But if one doesn’t finish one’s tasks, it has consequences on one’s grades, and that motivates me.

Journalists quoted both children who appreciated the home environment’s calmness and reduced stress from not having to commute to school and children who reported difficulties related to lost routines and difficulties focusing and being disciplined. In an article about the closing of high schools and universities in Sweden, a young student was quoted in *Svenska Dagbladet* as saying:

One should be allowed to go to school if symptom free. It feels nice and safe to be at school; one doesn’t want to stay in bed all day.

However, journalists also highlighted that the decimated pupil crowd at school seemed to have affected the breadth and quality of education, which was exemplified by a quote from a high school pupil in *Svenska Dagbladet* in another article about the closing of high schools and universities in Sweden: “*Approximately half of the pupils and teachers were in [at school], so there hasn’t been any real teaching.*” The newspapers also presented children who experienced advantages with homeschooling, as it gave peace and time for reflection. This was for instance shown through a child’s quote in *Dagens Nyheter* in an article about how distance teaching revealed social inequalities:

Teachers have become much better at handling everything online and at setting up the system. There are many disruptions at school.... I could have imagined always having distance studies, at least half at school and half at home.

For children in crowded home environments, however, finding a quiet space to do homework was presented as a challenge. Through the use of children’s expressions, some home environments were described as positive for children’s schooling and grades, while other children were reported on as easily falling behind and fearing academic failure, for example, due to difficulties focusing, lack of access to teachers for help, and school being held up. Journalists also highlighted children’s worries about the closing of schools during the regular term being replaced by summer school during the holidays. Schooling online was thus reported as both successful and less successful, partly depending on teachers’ skills and on the children’s own motivation to be active and not busy themselves with other things, such as their mobile phones. As a child expressed it in *Dagens Nyheter* in an article about the lockdown in France: “*The first day, nothing worked, all sites were overburdened. But now we have access to a portal with all the school books, instructions ... and assignments.*” Another child was quoted as saying:

No one checks that one doesn’t look for answers online, but it worked rather well anyway.... We’ve had lectures through a voice chat program where we could ask the teachers questions. (*Dagens Nyheter*).

When schools reopened for schooling in the classroom, journalists wrote that children were quick to adapt to the new rules in school, for example, by keeping their distance from each other when standing in line and being served food in the canteen, or wearing face masks, although this was experienced as burdensome. In *Dagens Nyheter*, for example, a child from Denmark, who was happy to be back at school after the reopening, was quoted as saying: “*I’ve longed for my friends. But now it’s important not to be too close to each other, because the virus can spread.*” Not seeing friends during periods of homeschooling was also expressed as a loss, as seen in an article about schools closing in France in *Dagens Nyheter*:

In a few weeks, it’s going to be difficult. Because one is completely isolated. I miss my friends. We try to keep in touch through messages, but it’s not the same thing.

Journalists also presented a story about youth in Sweden who had made their voices heard by claiming their right to hang out with friends and expressing that they wanted their graduation to take place in traditional ways. In newspapers, high school students were featured as expressing a strong disappointment at not being allowed to celebrate their graduation in traditional ways with friends and family. The pandemic-related restrictions prevented this, as exemplified in the following quote in a section where readers commented on the changes to the graduation ceremonies:

I’m graduating this year [...] maybe we’ll run out into a schoolyard empty of people. Either way, graduation time, which many people say is the most fun time, is affected. (*Svenska Dagbladet*)

### *Children as cocreators of a new normal daily life*

The articles revealed several perspectives on children’s adaptation skills in relation to the pandemic. Children

were depicted as both open to new possibilities and as capable of letting go of everyday life as they knew it. Some children were presented as swift at adapting to the new rules of daily life that followed the pandemic's regulations and recommendations, for example, as expressed in *Expressen*:

Family and friends gathered via a video call. They sang and cheered for X, when the new ten-year-old blew out the candles and got to make a wish. It was different, but beautiful, says X about the celebration.

Several children, especially teenagers, were quoted describing new ways of socializing with peers and family, for example, through online media, phone calls, and outdoors activities. New digital friendships also appeared during the pandemic.

Last year, I got the best (pen pal) friend in the world, even if we have a hard time seeing each other because of COVID-19 and eight hours by car between us. We didn't write so many letters, but more and more on Snap instead! (Viewpoint section, *Kamratposten*)

Some of the presented statements from children also conveyed how they played online games with grandparents, whom they were not allowed to meet face to face, or how they made video calls and sent text messages using their mobile phones: "I try to make them (grandparents) happy in other ways, for example, by making video calls and often texting them" (Viewpoint section, *Kamratposten*). Some children were also quoted as missing their grandparents:

Grandpa (suffers from dementia) is happy to see us.... His world is so small right now. He doesn't even have a cell phone. The visits are the biggest thing that happens.... How would it help Grandpa that we mourn? It's better to see opportunities.... Now we get to meet outdoors. But we still have to keep our distance. I can't wait until me and Grandpa can hug again. (*Kamratposten*)

However, journalists also described children missing their pre-pandemic daily life. "We used to go shopping after school. With distance studies ... instead we sit at home in pyjamas," said youngsters in an article in *Dagens Nyheter* about COVID-19 related restrictions becoming a daily habit. The pandemic's focus on people suffering due to social restrictions, as highlighted in several newspapers, made some children feel guilty about not missing their elderly family members:

It seems as if everyone misses their grandparents. But I haven't missed mine at all. I feel guilty about feeling that way. Is there something wrong with me? (Q&A section, *Kamratposten*)

In some articles, journalists showed children worrying about passing on the virus to family and friends and at the same time missing their friends and social life from school and their leisure time. Other articles focused on the pandemic's effects on children's spare-time activities. An article in *Dagens Nyheter* about children's daily life during the pandemic, as part of a documentary project by a museum, described a child saying that he "can't see his grandmother, nor can he play ice hockey, which he loves." Another article in *Dagens Nyheter* about the spreading infection's effects on a small municipality where summer jobs for youngsters had been cancelled, gave voice to an adolescent:

"It used to be packed here," says XX (about a restaurant), with her summer holidays ahead of her.... (How will your summer be now?) "Boring," she says.

In an article in *Expressen* focusing on youngsters' entrepreneurship, which was accelerated during the pandemic, an adolescent whose summer plans had been cancelled was quoted as saying:

I made the final decision after getting information about my flight being cancelled. Otherwise I wouldn't



have started my company this summer, but absolutely in the future.

While journalists reported on children who described the new normal as idle in some ways, other children were described as appreciating what they experienced as a calmer and less stressful daily life, both as observed in their parents and in the children themselves. This included daily life with school and work, and holidays, which were now spent at home instead of, for example, travelling. *Kamratposten* published a child's reply to a question about the pandemic's advantages: "I could really rest during the summer holidays. We used to travel a lot, but this summer I was mostly at home." Another child's reply to the same question was also published: "I think many people have more time to relax. My mother was sick from stress. She can take it easier now." Children were also quoted about highlights they had experienced in everyday life, such as getting a new pet.

Articles also gave voice to children who came up with creative solutions related to the pandemic. For example, an article in *Dagens Nyheter* about producing visors with 3-D printers stated:

Her friend XX is just about to create her first visor arc. After persistent work, the splinters are soon gone. "It feels really good to be able to help against the infection. I hope it calms down soon," a child expressed.

Articles such as the one below in *Kamratposten* stated that the pandemic had led to illness and death among children and their significant others, focusing on, for example, children with COVID-vulnerable parents whom they had to shield from the risk of infection:

X has tried to be extra careful since her father belongs to a so-called risk group. "He has a problem with his lungs. If he were to be infected, he would become seriously ill. So far, no one in the family has been seriously affected."

Other articles focused on children who had lost parents or grandparents during the pandemic, which changed their lives. Some of those children were presented as expressing vulnerability and strength in their loss, as seen, for instance, in an article about a nurse's COVID-19 related death:

She leaves behind three daughters. "One day when I have children myself, I will tell your grandchildren about their amazing grandmother," writes the daughter. "I have so many things to say, but I have to be strong." (*Aftonbladet*)

As reported in an article about COVID-19 in children, the infection can also strongly affect the younger population:

XX [child] used to be in the stable several times a week and she used to talk to her friends on the phone late at night.... Now she hardly copes with anything. She tried to go to school a few times during the autumn, but got so tired that she had to lay down for several days afterwards. "Her absence has not affected her grades," YY says. XX: "I miss them (friends) all the time. One ends up being an outsider." (*Dagens Nyheter*)

### *Children as responsible and caring citizens*

Children were quoted as reporting fear of the virus and the world situation and of being contagious. However, they were also portrayed as being capable of turning their concern into responsible and attentive actions. On the one hand, children were presented as being eager to keep their distance from, for example, older relatives and parents. Such worries were featured as affecting the children's well-being and mental health, as exemplified by a child that wrote to the Q&A section in *Kamratposten*: "I am extremely worried about the coronavirus. I am afraid that my family and I will be affected. People die. I cry at night because I am worried.... Do you have any advice to feel calmer?"

In a feature story in *Dagens Nyheter* about a family who jointly started an online news program about COVID-19, a child was presented as showing awareness about COVID-19 related rules of behaviour: “*One shouldn’t touch things when shopping if one doesn’t want it. It’s enough to look at them.*” On the other hand, children were also presented as caring for their family, and some children were featured as taking on a caregiving responsibility for ill parents/siblings when a parent was ill, and for behaving safely to prevent the virus’s spread. This is seen, for instance, in the following examples from articles about suspected infections in a refugee camp in Syria:

They (COVID-infected siblings) wash their hands every two hours, and drink a lot of cumin and lemon drink to try to protect themselves from the coronavirus....

(Brother) surfs the family’s only mobile to get news and learn more about the coronavirus. (*Dagens Nyheter*)

Another article described how children in the Middle East interpreted virus-related information for their parents: “*I translate (COVID-related information) for my parents even if it means that this would prevent me from going out to play*” (*Dagens Nyheter*). Some children, nevertheless, were presented as seeming less concerned, as seen in an example from *Aftonbladet*: “*I think that no one of my age cares anymore. None of my friends care anymore.... I can see from the people I hang out with that they are rather careless.*” Journalists also depicted children as questioning the information and news they accessed about the COVID-19 situation. The junior newspaper *Kamratposten* had a Q&A section, where children could ask questions about the pandemic and invite dialogue with other children. Published Q&As, selected by journalists/editors, can be seen in the example below:

Can you write more about the coronavirus? I think it’s pretty scary. Everyone talks about it online and at school, but I don’t know what to believe. I don’t want to google it, because I think that would only make things worse.

In an article about ethical issues related to the (non)vaccination of children, some children were presented as wanting to be vaccinated because they understood this as a responsible act of solidarity:

In Sweden, the health authority has not decided (if children should be vaccinated). If they asked us, we would probably get vaccinated. (*Svenska Dagbladet*)

In viewpoint sections, children appeared eager to take on the responsibility for behaving according to pandemic-related rules of behaviour, regulations, and recommendations, and some children were quoted as reacting negatively to people who deviated from these, thereby not being respectful nor showing solidarity toward fellow citizens:

I know, corona IS boring. But everyone understands that you have to keep your distance, right? I’m not overly scared of the virus, but I don’t want my grandma to die! (*Kamratposten*)

Other children were quoted as reacting with ignorance towards or challenging the restrictions, as illustrated in *Svenska Dagbladet*: “*We are young, we want to hang out, we want to have fun,’ explains a young man.... He is not afraid of possibly infecting older relatives because they do not live in town.*”

### *COVID-19 as a magnifying glass for existing vulnerabilities in everyday life*

Some articles reported children reacting strongly to adults who held them responsible for spreading the virus by behaving riskily. Journalists pointed to children who were aware that they were viewed as “spread agents” in schools, for example, and they worried about spreading the virus. Nonetheless, journalists also showed that some children reacted to views of them as uncaring and careless, making them feel stigmatized, while they did not want to be responsible for infecting others with a potentially deadly virus. Children were also quoted as experiencing

unfair situations when individuals with Asian origins were being stigmatized and blamed the virus and its spread. As expressed by a child in a viewpoint section in *Kamratposten*:

I'm from China, and people at school say lots of things without the teachers noticing. Once [...] some guys called me a dog eater.... I've also noticed that some seem particularly suspicious now during the pandemic.

According to journalists, overcrowded home environments could reinforce problems, not least for children whose schooling had been moved to the home. For example, in an article in *Aftonbladet* focusing on those most affected by the pandemic, a child who was worried about her home situation and her hungry, younger siblings was quoted:

My family was vastly affected. My mother lost her job and we didn't have enough money. It was all about food and surviving.... It was a really tough time.

Furthermore, children in homes with scarce resources were depicted as being even more exposed, which could also affect their future prospects. This is exemplified through a quote by a child in an article in *Dagens Nyheter* about the pandemic exposing inequalities:

"I am afraid I've missed the opportunity to improve my grades. It's impossible with distance studies and the national tests were cancelled, which was my chance to get into the high school I wanted," he says, disappointed. "My mother helps me sometimes (with homework), but she must first learn herself in order to be able to help me."

Some articles focused on the fact that the pandemic also hindered the completion of regular preventive health campaigns in developing countries, leading to increased risks and incidences of other diseases, such as malaria. These articles implied that children who were already at risk faced even greater health risks during the pandemic. This was exemplified by a quote from a child from Syria in *Dagens Nyheter*, who was suspected to be the first child with COVID-19 in a Syrian refugee camp: "*Do I have this disease? Will I die (asking the mother)?*" Another example was an article in *Dagens Nyheter* about malaria causing more deaths than COVID-19. It referred to a child from Uganda affected by malaria because new mosquito nets had not been distributed during the pandemic. The child's mother had to carry him on her back to the nearest hospital for emergency care. She was quoted as saying, "*I wish I could have flown, but God did not give me any wings.*"

## Discussion

This study did not truly examine the voices of children, but rather children's voices as presented through adult-filtered media in daily newspapers and a junior newspaper in a Swedish context. The children's voices were not heard as a primary source of information. The empirical material consisted of adult-constructed, media-led representations of children's voices, thus placing the children in an adult-led context, potentially mirroring tensions in adults' versus children's own constructions of childhood. This became especially obvious in the multiple ways children's presented responses to the closing or opening of schools were used to support or emphasize the pros and cons of school closures as assessed by adults, thereby using the children's voices as a mouthpiece for or against the closing of schools. Such interpretations potentially mirror the adults' considerations and expectations related to children's learning styles or possible vulnerabilities when facing new modes of learning (Chao et al., 2022; Jeffs et al., 2021). Studies show that adults often carry nuanced presumptions about children and childhood that are shaped by their historical time and cultural context, and that these presumptions affect the children's emotions and self perceptions (Alexander & Sleight 2022; Vallgård, 2015). Our findings show that children's voices about everyday life during the COVID-19 pandemic were, in general, relatively sparsely represented in the chosen newspapers. However,

as the thematic analysis demonstrates, the published voices were diverse. Children were sometimes invited to express themselves, while other times children took their own initiative and wrote viewpoints or questions and answers, representing varying levels of autonomous engagement with the media on the children's part. Most of the included newspapers were nonetheless both produced by and aimed at an adult population, thereby automatically positioning children in an adult context, or at least in a context viewed from adults' perspectives. In the following discussion we reflect on the results and main findings in relation to other studies on children/childhood and the media's part in presenting children's voices.

*Dagens Nyheter* and *Kamratposten*, which is a part of *Dagens Nyheter*, published most of the articles that represented children's voices. This must be understood in light of the fact that *Kamratposten* is the only included newspaper with an explicit children's profile, presenting the children's voices most often and in the most nuanced ways. It may appear that newspapers with adults as the primary target audience did not prioritize children's voices in relation to the pandemic, not even when the described issues related to children. Nevertheless, some of the included articles presented children as active social actors, in line with several researchers' perspectives within childhood studies (e.g., Fitzgerald, 2023; Suleiman et al., 2021), also in relation to the pandemic. The children were presented as relating actively to societal changes and actively expressing opinions (e.g., for and against school closures). These presentations of children as having agency were also confirmed in the articles that presented children as innovative and responsible citizens who participated actively in creating their daily lives, even though they were subordinate to, for example, their parents, the school system, and so on.

Other articles, though, presented children as adults in the making, where children did not yet have adult competencies, a stance that several researchers (e.g., Gheaus, 2015; Larcher, 2017) question. Furthermore, some children were presented as challenged by the altered school conditions, with embedded societal expectations on parents and teachers to take over and help structure their days. In other words, children's position and status in society were portrayed in terms of not yet being real people, with the result that children's viewpoints, capacities, experiences, and competences often went unrecognized by journalists in those newspapers. This finding points to a weak democratic inclusion of children's voices in newspapers, which contrasts with other democratic movements and inclusion strategies in relation to children that we see in today's Western societies (Lindquist-Grantz & Abraczinskas, 2020; Norozi & Moen, 2016; Suleiman et al., 2021). Moreover, the results convey that children, as their voices were presented in the included newspapers, described a variety of resources and vulnerabilities during the pandemic, presenting a nuanced picture of children during the crisis. Children were presented both as active agents and cocreators of their own lives and as victims of hardship and inequalities.

In some cases, social position came through as a significant factor. When children were appointed as victims and vulnerable citizens, their resources were played down or absent in the journalists' presentations. However, the journalist-constructed children's voices also presented children as responsible and adaptable citizens, as caring family members, and as creative in new life situations, not least demonstrating the ability to find new ways to socialize from a distance. Simultaneously, some of the selected children's voices constructed children as vulnerable in relation to specific situations, such as missing significant social and physical relationships with friends and relatives or when facing life-threatening conditions. This finding raises the issue of vulnerability, which is not an inherent characteristic of a group of people, not even when it comes to children, but rather varies within the group and over time. Being designated as particularly vulnerable can in itself reduce a group's capacity for action if the resources at hand are not concurrently recognized (Seeberg et al., 2022). A recent literature review about children's strategies and (inter)actions in their everyday life when facing critically ill parents also shows that children are resourceful, even in vulnerable situations (Fu et al., 2023). It thus seems important to contextualize what is understood and interpreted as vulnerabilities and to consider children's specific situation, resources, and



potential sources of growth in different cases. Children, just like adults, are individuals whose respective individual prerequisites and circumstances will affect them differently. Studies argue that mainstream, normative discourses on children's circumstances during the pandemic and their handling thereof ought to be nuanced and illuminate all their complexities. This implies that one should not take discourses on, for example, children's "learning loss" for granted as the sole construction of, for example, children's education and childhood literacies (Arnott & Teichert, 2023; Gourlay, 2021; Pahl et al., 2023; Reimer et al., 2021). Several studies also present creative and resourceful narratives related to children's learning (Pahl et al., 2023; Yoon, 2023), thereby nuancing dominant discourses. Srivastava (2014) argues that each child is an individual and that children participate in social groups to create a culture of their own. It is therefore necessary to explore nuances in children's experiences and how such nuances are (or are not) presented in media, not least since potential gaps can be identified in terms of what daily newspapers choose to present.

What newspapers write about children, and how children's voices are presented, as the current study shows, can influence societies', groups', and individuals' views on children and children's own self-perceptions, behaviours, experiences, and resources, etcetera, during the pandemic (Holt & Murray, 2022; Pascal & Bertram, 2021). There are many ways to do and/or construct childhood, not only one. Perspectives on children might also vary depending on children's respective social position and context (Wall, 2022). Bearing the United Nations' convention on children's rights (UNICEF, 1989) in mind, journalists are also obligated to consider how their decisions and priorities in journalistic work may affect children and views on children in society. Further, from UNICEF's perspective, children have the right to give their opinion freely on issues that affect them. Adults, including parents, other relatives, governments, and so on, ought to listen to and take children's voices seriously. In this light, journalists are meaning makers in society (Grunwald & Rupa, 2010; Koivunen et al., 2021) who have contributed to the construction of views on children during the pandemic. In line with the included junior newspaper, journalists at daily newspapers could benefit from involving children from different social and (inter)national backgrounds and providing a platform for children to express their views, influence decision making, and cocreate understandings of childhood in society. This might ensure that journalists do not opt for easy stereotypes of children and childhood. Our study results also show that some children were affected by media narratives. Some children displayed a critical assessment and questioning of such narratives, for example, through the featuring of children's voices in daily newspapers' Q&A sections. Through their voices' visibility in the media, children showed that they could be critical of adults, authorities, and pandemic-related regulations. In this way, children demonstrate that they are responsible citizens, in contrast to the often-presented pictures of children as dangerous disease carriers (Dattner et al., 2021; Glasdam et al., 2021) and/or passive, helpless victims (Favretto et al., 2023).

Another main finding is that the featured children's voices pointed to social inequalities that represent areas of vulnerability in the face of the pandemic. In response to the latter, governments and organizations generated recommendations, decrees, and laws to contain the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus. Such responses must take into account human rights obligations to be inclusive and sustainable (The Danish Institute for Human Rights, 2020), although negative effects on, for example, relationships (Luttik et al., 2020), solidarity and polarization (Stjernswärd & Glasdam, 2021), and the balancing of human rights (Glasdam & Stjernswärd, 2021) have been identified. The results indicate that the published newspaper articles testify how pandemic management strategies disrupted children's everyday lives in multiple ways, including the disruption of schooling and social activities and involuntary isolation from friends and family. While these disruptions were not necessarily detrimental for all children, as it appears from the included newspaper articles and as also shown in research (e.g., Arnott & Teichert, 2023; Burke et al., 2023; Pahl et al., 2023), other children were seemingly distressed and negatively affected by the situation, especially when already faced with vulnerabilities due to poverty, additional health threats, and/or crowded homes. Previous studies also highlight the enhanced exposure of and negative consequences for deprived



populations in facing the pandemic, pointing to and amplifying social disparity (Bajos et al., 2021; Sanrey et al., 2021). The pandemic thus acted as a magnifying glass for the national and global social inequalities that exist by making visible the conditions for societal prevention and individual treatment of COVID-19 (Anyane-Yeboah et al., 2020; Ribeiro et al., 2021), including when it comes to children and childhood (Lemkow-Tovías et al., 2023; Weyers & Rigó, 2023). This amplification is confirmed through several published children's voices in the analyzed newspaper articles. Some of the included articles highlighted serious conditions related to children's life and future prospects, such as racism, circumstances pertaining to their families' possibilities to make a living, and issues relating to life and death—conditions in which children can truly be viewed as being vulnerable, which were reinforced by the pandemic (Khan, 2022). Such significant issues were thus made visible through the journalists' presentations of children during the pandemic.

This study has both strengths and limitations. First and foremost, children's voices, as presented in the included newspapers, were filtered through adult-led media, thereby not stemming first-hand from the children. For readers, it was not possible to decipher why or how the children in question were chosen by the journalists or why the children may have had an interest in expressing themselves. Moreover, the articles often left out the children's specific life histories and social positions. These factors ought to be considered when interpreting how children experienced daily life during the pandemic. Furthermore, our choice to exclude youth suspected to be over 18 years may imply the risk of viewing children in simplistic ways (Hammersley, 2017). This choice was motivated by the fact that the authors did not have any possibility to assess the included children through any other parameters, such as level of maturity, as these were not made evident in the included articles. Moreover, the empirical data only encompasses articles from four daily newspapers in Sweden primarily aimed at adults and one junior newspaper primarily aimed at children. This calls for exploring whether a similar pattern can be traced in other newspapers and international media. However, the data searches were performed by an expert librarian (Carola Tilgmann), which strengthened the search process's accuracy and the results' trustworthiness. The analysis was performed by all authors through multiple steps and with ongoing discussions to strengthen the results' trustworthiness. Quotations from the included newspaper articles have been included throughout the results to ensure transparency of the analysis. Even though the study does not cover a broad media representation, the focus on the represented children's voices nonetheless contributes important insights about the diversity of children's experiences as featured by journalists, and it helps nuance the perception of children as a homogenous group.

## Conclusion

The present mapping of journalists' featuring of children's voices in Swedish junior and daily newspapers during the COVID-19 pandemic has brought forward several observations for further reflection and inquiry. The representation of children's viewpoints in Swedish newspapers was adult-led and sparse. Altogether, the results show that journalists featured children's ways of coping and adjusting to the pandemic and related management strategies in varied ways, bringing forward both resources and vulnerabilities in the representations of children's perspectives during the pandemic. Children's strategies were presented as most probably interdependent with other factors, such as their interaction with the media, their general life situation, and their social position, although nothing can be said about such potential interdependencies in this study. Our results nonetheless show how crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, and media presentations pertaining to children in such crises, can act as a magnifying glass to expose societal inequalities, bringing to the fore experiences of children in vulnerable life circumstances. Considering the media's responsibility and the effects on individuals, groups, and societies of what is published and how, an understanding of how children's voices were represented in the media is crucial. It might be worth probing further—using other methods and sources—how a presupposed vulnerability, as expressed in the media and contemporary research, might affect children's self-perceptions and everyday life navigation.

Furthermore, both children's resources and areas of vulnerability ought to be considered in the representation of children's voices in cases such as the pandemic, including both adults' and children's voices, to align with the human rights obligations pertaining to children's rights. Moreover, the study's results challenge the tendency to assume that most children have experienced and responded to the COVID-19 crisis with vulnerability. It also points to the importance of not classifying children as a homogenous group, and of focusing on children's resources and readiness for adjustment. The interpretation of the study findings must nonetheless consider that the presented children's voices were selected and filtered through adult-led media. This study calls for further research on representations of children's voices in international media, and on how such representations may shape children's, adults', and societies' perceptions of children, their experiences, and childhood, not least during times of crisis such as the one engendered by the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Disclosure statement**

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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