



# The transformation of parent-child leisure time in primary school during the COVID-19 pandemic

Monika STRÍTESKÁ

<sup>1</sup> PhD student, Palacký University, Faculty of Education, Institute of Education and Social Studies

Email: [monika.striteska01@upol.cz](mailto:monika.striteska01@upol.cz)

Orcid Id: 0000-0001-9804-3225

Tomáš ČECH

<sup>2</sup> Asst. Prof.Dr, Palacký University, Faculty of Education, Institute of Education and Social Studies

Email: [tomas.cech@upol.cz](mailto:tomas.cech@upol.cz)

Orcid Id: 0000-0002-8248-1375

Jana HRADILOVÁ

<sup>3</sup> student, Palacký University, Faculty of Education, Institute of Education and Social Studies

Email: [jana.hradilova02@upol.cz](mailto:jana.hradilova02@upol.cz)

## Abstract

This paper examines the transformation of parents' and children's leisure time in primary school during the COVID-19 pandemic. The aim of the paper is to analyse the transformation of parents' time spent together at home during the pandemic with at least one child in primary school from 1st grade to 4th grade. For this project, we selected those parents who worked from home while caring for at least one child who was a distance learner. The research was planned as qualitative and data were collected through semi-structured interviews among parents. The research sample includes 5 women (4 teachers and 1 non-teacher) who had at least one child in distance education at any time. The grounded theory method, which includes open, axial and selective coding, will be used to analyze the information. The data obtained will be subjected to further analysis with conclusions for possible future research.

**Keywords:** Leisure, parent-child interaction, primary school, covid-19 pandemic

## Introduction

The Czech Republic itself was one of the countries that had the longest closed schools and leisure facilities, and protective measures were very strict. This meant that everything possible was transferred to the online environment. The rise of all kinds of portals and platforms has begun (MŠMT, 2020, pp. 8-9). There people could meet, work, learn; even most of the official meetings were transformed so that they could be done online without being in the office. Families dealt with this period very individually, as there were many factors on which it depended.

One of them was employment. At this time, a lot of parents lost their jobs and therefore their income, which could lead to various financial and existential problems. On the other hand, there were parents whose jobs remained, could be transferred to work from home, but there was the factor that the children were in distance learning. All of them had to learn to function in this situation. However, a lot depended on the age of the children. The older children can somehow take care of themselves, but the younger ones need more attention, help (at that time mainly with school), and even, for example, making sure they have something to eat during the day. All of the above have, of course, had an impact on the mental health of adults and children, and in most cases, as far as we could tell from the research, these are negative phenomena.

However, there is another part of life affected by the pandemic that we have not yet mentioned, and that is leisure. How leisure has been affected, more specifically whether and how it has changed during the pandemic, is the main focus of this paper. As mentioned above, for our project we selected parents working from home who had children in distance education. For them, two factors emerged as significant. The first is that the parent was in almost continuous contact with the child. In addition, he or she had not lost his or her job, so income was still flowing into the family and there was usually no financial crisis.

## 1.1 Current family

The family is basic social unit that has been there since the beginning of time. Throughout history, it has undergone many changes and its social status has varied, but this does not change the fact that it has an irreplaceable place in society.

It is generally defined that a family is *"a small group of people living together, connected by blood ties and close emotional ties"* (Kraus & Poláčková, 2001, p. 78). Emotional ties and the way one member behaves towards another is one of the most basic elements that gives a person the right feeling of family, that he belongs somewhere, feels safe there and can rely on these people. If we think about it in general, there are many cases where a person has a family but feels as if they don't have one, and then they suffer. Furthermore, they don't learn the necessary skills and roles they need to live during their development (if we are talking about children), and they carry these deficiencies with them throughout their lives. For this person (child), someone else can become a family in this way, someone who offers him these emotional bonds and with whom he feels comfortable.

Many factors influence, and have influenced, the appearance of the present family. The political developments themselves, with the acquisition of greater rights for women, for example, being an important element, and the long-term pro-process of democratisation within the family have in many cases led to a decline in the former position of power of men. Children are increasingly taking an active part in the organisation of family life. *"The relationship between parents and children develops not in terms of authority and subordination, but in terms of friendship. Ordering, forbidding, corporal punishment and other similar 'traditional' educational methods are falling into the background and are being replaced by an exchange of opinions, persuasion and communication of views. Authoritative decision-making is replaced by discussion, in which all family members usually participate"* (Bauerová, Bártová 1987, p. 65 in Kraus, Poláčková 2001, p. 81). However, this factor could often turn into an overly liberal upbringing. Children are allowed everything, the authority of parents and the respect of children towards them is reduced, which can also lead to a general change in traditional values and attitudes towards authority figures and adults in general.

Other influencing factors include the political system, the economic situation, urbanisation, globalisation, the influence of the media, social networks, digitalisation, parents' education, the social status of the family, employment, amount of free time, etc.

## 1.2 Children and leisure

The Convention on the Rights of the Child refers to the right of children to leisure and access to leisure activities (1989, Article 31): *"States Parties to the Convention recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to participate in play and recreational activities appropriate to his or her age, and to participate freely in cultural life and artistic activities."* (Vyhnáková, 2013, p. 24).

Children learn from their parents to understand the leisure as a certain value, to manage it and to fill it with meaningful activities. Of course, we cannot compare the family with school facilities that focus on this area; we cannot expect a professional approach from the parents, but instead, strong emotional ties function (ideally) between the members. *"The quality of these relationships, is essential for the educational impact of the family. The family determines to a large extent the lifestyle of its members. The use of leisure time is one of its indicators"* (Pávková, 2014, p. 29).

As Pávková (2014, pp. 29-31) states, parents' (family) leisure time with children has many aspects (meanings):

- Parents should act as positive role models - they themselves should know how to manage their leisure, not overestimate or underestimate it. A parent who spends most of his/her time at work and even afterwards is dedicated to his/her duties to the point of exhaustion and has no time to "switch off" will not be a good role model. A stuffy atmosphere is not good for children (Hamberger, 2021). Conversely, a parent who does not go to work and spends the day doing nothing is also a bad example. Parents' actions should make it clear that doing chores and leisure are a natural part of life, that free time includes not only rest and relaxation but also interests, hobbies, etc. It is good for the child to see that the parents also

have their own interests and tolerate each other's interests, but at the same time they also have interests in common.

- Spending time together is important for forming good family relationships - it is necessary to choose activities so that everyone can participate in them and everyone has a pleasant experience. It is good when parents pass on their interests to their children, but it is not necessary that they share them. What is important is that children learn from their parents that having personal interests is part of normal life. However, it is not necessary that all of the leisure time will be used by joint activities; each member should also have his or her own personal space. Even a child should have space to "just play".
- Parental support for children's interests - those who know their children well can guide them non-violently towards appropriate interests. Parents should be able to listen to their children, show genuine interest, and show joy in success. There should also be an effort to participate in events where children present the results of their activities, e.g. performances. Parental sensitivity to children's hobbies is very important, there is a need to respect voluntariness, if the child does not meet the parents' expectations, this must not disturb the relationship. The parent plays the role of helper, guide and motivator.

However, there are also various problems related to children's leisure time and family. These can be the place of residence (which is far away from various opportunities for leisure time), parents being too busy to spend as much time with their children as they should, or, on the contrary, not knowing how their children spend their leisure time. There should be an effort to avoid psychopathological phenomena (Miovský, 2015; Gabrhelík & Lukavská, 2020). Another and very common problem may be finances, where the family may not be able to afford leisure activities. For a significant number of families, buying learning materials, paying for leisure activities and equipment for them (after-school clubs or leisure facilities, outdoor school, ski trip or summer camp) may be unaffordable. For the same reason, regular family visits to various cultural events are also limited. This can undermine children's status in the classroom or peer group, lower their self-esteem and cause frustration.

*"A total of 17% of children and adolescents aged 11 to 19 in the Czech Republic spend 4 or more hours a day playing digital games"* (Téměř jedna pětina, 2019). However, over time, fewer and fewer children are able to use digital devices and the internet. *"For children, activities related to information technologies are easily accessible and very attractive, allowing them to chase away boredom, experience excitement, unwind, and quell sadness"* (Miovský, 2021). In summary, everything should be balanced; too many extremes often do not lead to benefit. Free time is something we should value, know how to use it well and properly, take care of it and, most importantly, be able to pass these values on to our children.

### **1.3 The impact of distance learning on younger school-age children**

Thus, traditional teaching had to be transferred to a setting that is not so typical for it, which is the home. A space that is primarily a place of rest and preparation for school has suddenly become a school. This, of course, began to affect the mental health of the children but not only this factor. The children were not able to socialise with anyone, they stopped seeing their friends, leisure activities that were previously commonplace were suddenly forbidden, people had to be confined to their homes as much as possible, some parents couldn't go to work, lost their jobs, and, or worked from home, which also had an effect on them as adults, and then it was passed on to the children.

But for schools, as has already been partly mentioned, it also meant a lot of changes. They had to find a way to continue teaching, it was not possible to give the children holidays for such a long period of time, it would have meant a huge gap in the curriculum but also big problems in general in terms of the age distribution of the children. The method that was chosen was to move all the teaching to an online environment, i.e. connecting the children and the school via the internet, through special portals (e.g. Microsoft Teams, Google class, Edookit, etc.), virtual environments, online classes using cameras. The term distance learning has become commonplace, defined as a form of learning *"where teaching does not take place in classrooms and does not require the personal presence of teachers and students in the school. The student communicates with the school e.g. via computer interactive programs, e-mail, internet, depending on the possibilities of the school, especially its technical equipment. All teaching aids are methodologically and didactically adapted to the information technologies used"* (Jaký je rozdíl, 2012). However, *"teachers and pupils lack direct contact during it, it is not easy to find internal motivation and a*

*strong will to self-study or systematically perform the tasks assigned. Last but not least, access to education can be complicated by insufficient technical equipment or the lack of an internet source.*" (Lánská, 2020). This has led to children starting to spend more time on the computer, laptop or similar technologies, which has also started to affect them. It has been proven that adults and children who do some exercise have better quality sleep, experience a reduction in mental tension, improved mood, and blood circulation to the brain. Children are setting themselves up for problems in the future by being inactive. Muscular imbalances can occur - children's musculoskeletal system will not develop ideally and later in life they will start to develop various ailments such as back pain, spinal pain and various musculoskeletal disorders. Overall, the muscles start to weaken and of course, what also comes with the lack of exercise is weight gain, which can lead to obesity leading also to negative consequences (Krbcová, 2021).

However, some children have been given the opportunity to organize their learning process more on their own, alternating activities as they please, but so that the work is always done on time. Some encouragement of learning responsibility is related to this. *"Distance learning also came in handy to a greater extent for introverted children and children who prefer to be independent and, on the contrary, felt that they were disturbed by their classmates at school. Online learning also helped some children to relieve stress and shyness, so that they were more 'reported' in the classroom"* (Dopady distanční výuky očima rodičů, 2021).

## **Method**

The aim of the theoretical part was to theoretically anchor the topic so that the reader could better orient himself in the text, get acquainted with the basic concepts and also realize what other concepts the topic of the thesis may be related to. The aim of the practical part is to analyse the transformation of the time spent together by parents working from home during the pandemic with at least one child in primary school between grades 1 and 4 and to outline conclusions.

## **Research questions**

Each family coped with the pandemic differently and it affected their leisure time differently. For this paper, we chose those families where the parent who was caring for the child at distance learning was also working . So there from home. So there are two significant factors here. The first one was that the parent was in almost constant contact with the child. Another one is that they did not lose their job, therefore income was still going into the family and usually no financial crisis emerged. The research questions were then derived from these factors:

- How did the amount of leisure time a parent spent with their child change?
- How has the content of leisure time changed?
- What new things did the parent notice or discover about their child that they had not noticed before?
- How has communication between parent and child changed during this time?
- How has the relationship between parent and child changed during this time?

## **Research strategy**

Since every family works differently and every parent has a different time schedule and spends time with their children, we chose qualitative research for this thesis. Of course, quantitative research could also be carried out, but in this way the depth and reach of the whole phenomenon would not be affected. We were very interested in the stories and how people (informants) think and how the pandemic has affected them. *" The researcher first immerses himself in the reality under study, in the lives of the objects under study, and thus gains a deep understanding of the phenomenon under study."* where the researcher's goal is actually *"to understand the situation as the actors themselves understand it."* (Švaříček & Šed'ová, 2007, p. 18).

## **Method of the research**

One of the most common methods of data collection in qualitative research, namely the interview, specifically the semi-structured one, was used for data collection. *"In this type of interview, the researcher usually specifies the questions or the categories of questions he or she wants to ask the participants. The skeleton of the semi-structured interview consists of the main questions, composed of the themes forming the core of the research, and the answers obtained are developed by follow-up questions"* (Čech, undated (b), p. 2). The undeniable advantage of this type of interview is that the order of questions can be changed and varied during the interview depending on the situation and in order to get a comprehensive answer to the question or topic under investigation.

### **Analysis techniques**

As the intention was to analyse the issue in more depth, the grounded theory method was used to analyse the information found, which includes open, axial and selective coding. The role of grounded theory is not to describe singular phenomena but to generate new theory. *"This theory is to be grounded in the data - that is, the researcher approaches the data with a maximally unbiased and open mind. The goal is not a dense description, as in ethnography, for example, but a conceptual scheme that captures the relationships between variables. It is therefore a matter of first identifying the relevant variables from the data and then operationalizing the relationships between them. The resulting theory is then a set of propositions about the relationships between variables."* (Švaříček & Šedřová, 2007, p. 86).

In open coding, individual categories emerge that are composed of concepts. These categories denote individual elements (events, ideas...) that are compared and classified with each other (Miovský, 2006, pp. 228-229). Axial coding is then a technique that builds on open coding in order to make connections between categories and sub-categories, where the researcher considers causes and effects, conditions and interactions, strategies and processes, thus forming 'axes' that link the categories. Last in the series we have selective coding. This is a process whereby, having identified a central category, we systematically relate this category to the other categories described.

### **Population-sampling**

In a qualitative type of research, the researcher chooses the informants himself, but according to certain criteria. Here, the conditions were that the subject had to be working at home during the pandemic, but also had at least one child at home on distance education, which had to be a child of younger school age between 1st and 4th grade. Our informants were 5 women (4 educators and 1 non-educator) who always had at least one child in distance education. Informants were approached either verbally or through Facebook. They were given the criteria and the topic of the thesis. It was then a matter of whether they agreed and wanted to participate or not.

### **Research ethics**

Each of the informants was informed in advance about the topic of the thesis and the subsequent processing of the data provided. They all entered the interviews voluntarily and consent was subsequently taken with each of them to process the data verbally. During the interviews we tried to adopt a friendly, open and above all understanding approach, trying to get to the bottom of the ideas and thought processes and to understand the other person. On the basis of data protection, no specific names or details are given anywhere that could lead to a breach of privacy. Informants are referred to as I1 - I5 in the text.

### **Description of the research process**

Once the informants had been engaged and the terms of reference for when and how the interviews would take place had been agreed, it was possible to move on to their follow-up. The interviews were conducted by telephone, depending on availability or other influencing circumstances. The actual conduct of the interviews was very warm and open. We learned a lot of interesting information that helped us to better understand the situation of the interviewees, get to the heart of the matter and realize how individual each person is. In the course we worked with the questions according to the actual situation and adapted them to the mood of the interviewees. This was followed by transcribing the interviews into written form. We then tried to evaluate the interviews using open, axial and

selective coding to extract all the necessary information from them, which then enabled us to find answers to the research questions.

### **Pre-research**

Pre-research is an important part of research and should not be omitted in any research. By using preresearch, the researcher becomes more familiar with the issue under investigation, delves deeper into the topic and also has the opportunity to check the clarity and explicitness of the questions (Diesman, 2000, p. 122). The knowledge gained during the covid period from talking to other people as they had it at home during this time, from reading various articles and research on the issue, was used as a preliminary research for this paper. In addition to the pre-research itself, the processing and reading of the materials for the theoretical part, during which we learned a lot of interesting information that helped us to understand the connections between the topics and made us think even more about the issue. The last point was to conceptualize and conduct interviews together in order to get all the data that could contribute to the paper and lead to the research objective.

### **Findings**

Whether we like it or not, the Covid-19 pandemic has impacted our lives in different ways, affecting everyone differently and with different consequences. Mostly, many researches focus on mental health during the pandemic, sports activities or the amount of time spent on electronic devices, specializing on a specific category of the population e.g.: children, workers, adolescents, etc., when only examining their perspective. Fewer existing researches examine different pandemic facts of multiple groups together, taking them as a whole, as in this work, where we examine changes in the leisure time of parents with their children. However, avoiding any separation of these groups in the research is difficult, as they have often ridden their line for a day without the other. For example, when parents were working or finishing up something at work, the children were already free from their responsibilities, so the children's own leisure time played a primary role here. However, let's look at other research or surveys in this area, even if they were not 100% focused on the same topic, and try to compare them to this one.

In 2021, the Czech National Library undertook research with the Nielsen Atmosphere Agency on the impact of the pandemic on the child and youth population (*Čtenářství dětí v době koronavirové pandemie*, 2021). Just as parents were informants in that research, here parents were asked to evaluate their child. In terms of the rather negative impacts, we can see mainly the correspondences with informant 5, where she perceived a certain loss of motivation and routines in her children, their non-focus in learning, and certain gaps in the curriculum that led to her having to supplement her children's learning herself so that they did not miss out. Informant 4 also directly mentioned the lack of social contact with friends that a child normally experiences at school. Another stepping stone can be seen in the fact that the younger children in particular have learned to use digital technology better. As was mentioned in several accounts, some children were more or less unexposed to any sophisticated work on digital devices until the pandemic and often had to learn to use them somehow with the help of their parents. For informant 3, there is a visible consensus in the elimination of shyness in children, while for informant 4, the child was more comfortable with distance learning due to a more individual approach and thus improved in school. What is evident not only from this research and others, the children's overall time online increased, whether it was through distance learning, completing assignments or having these technologies fill their free time. Moving to the non-online environment, the same results occurred in the areas of playing board games and reading, with an increase in leisure time, in this work, and in parents' time with their children combined.

From the Czech Republic we are moving abroad. The Canadian non-profit organisation ParticipACTION conducted a survey (*Impact of the COVID-19 virus outbreak on movement...*, 2020) that assessed changes in movement and play behaviour during COVID-19, where the respondents here were parents of children aged 5-11 or 12-17, and this research is more focused on the two groups together. According to this research, parental support for the child to be active in leisure played an important role. This approach could be compared to our findings that parenting style and how the family functions overall influenced their leisure time together. In this research it was found that parents' encouragement and participation in activity led to children being more physically active, playing outside and even, for example, participating in household chores. There were also new hobbies that

families started to take up. The most common were puzzles, board games, creating, painting and physical activity. Thus, although this is a different country, we find some similarities.

However, in terms of leisure activities and their time span, there are similarities with a survey from Germany conducted by FORSA, an agency that deals with public opinion polls and panel research (Leisure time sports and exercise..., 2021). Parents with children working full-time during the pandemic saw a reduction in the amount of time they spent on leisure activities, specifically from 132 min per week to 113 min, and only women working full-time saw a reduction from 118 min per week to 85 min per week, with a smaller difference for men. As we mentioned, this is only a similarity in the idea that there was a reduction in the amount of leisure time. For our female informants, this difference could have been as much as 50% of their total former free time.

Lastly, we note research from the UK, endorsed by the University of Buckingham from Frontiers, one of the largest and most cited academic publishers in the world, which examined creativity and leisure during COVID-19 (Creativity and Leisure During COVID-19..., 2021). It focused on the population over the age of 16, but we can still see some consistencies here. In terms of time, students were more likely to spend their time on leisure activities, while parents who stayed at home had less time spent in this way than before the pandemic. In terms of content, the top 10 activities that were most likely to have increased during the pandemic, or to have been started as completely new activities, include: watching TV, watching movies, reading, cooking, playing video games, playing a musical instrument, and sewing. There has therefore been an increase in both passive and active leisure time.

As we can see, changes in leisure time can often be similar in different countries. If, however, we went more in depth we might start to see divergent results, if only because of the anti-pandemic measures over time that each country has managed itself. In the research we have focused on a group of people with specific characteristics, but if we were to change some of these characteristics, we think that there could be differences. For example, if the parent in question was not working from but had lost their job and was at home with their children, the amount of free time spent with them would be greater as work responsibilities would be removed. However, this could lead to financial difficulties and this could have an impact on other family aspects such as relationships. One of the facts of this research is the similarity of professions of the three informants, hence this could have also influenced the statements where some similarities occurred. On the other hand, this contributed to the greater specificity of the research population.

The further we move in time away from the main period (core) of the pandemic, the less detailed the accounts can become and gradually what happened will be forgotten. Thus, research of this kind, we might say, is time-limited, at least in terms of the richness of the accounts. However, this does not detract from their value. These times have had an impact on us as a human race globally, and have and will continue to have consequences, both positive and negative. The point of this research, and research in this area in general, can be seen in its application for the future. It allows us to see what has changed and to reflect on it in our future actions or activities. Where we have things to fix, what we need to work on, what new things to develop or, conversely, what to support, what to continue and what to build on.

### **Results, Conclusions and Recommendations**

After introducing and presenting the results of our research interpreted in this paper and their individual chapters, we come to the conclusion and summary of the results obtained. In this paper, the main objective was to analyze the transformation of the leisure time spent together by a parent and a child in the first grade of primary school during the Covid-19 pandemic, both in terms of time, its content, communication in it or the change in relationships.

The timing of free time was one of the things most affected by the pandemic. The anti-pandemic measures caused parents to move their work from home (as was the case in this paper) and children experienced distance learning, i.e. all activities moved to the home environment. For parents, in most cases this meant an increase in the amount of work that needed to be done and therefore there was not much space left for leisure activities with the children afterwards. Work often took up 12-13 hours of the total day during the week, with pure free time with the children

only occurring in the evening before the children went to bed. Thus, the main space for leisure activities became mainly the weekend, but here the time span could also be reduced.

In terms of leisure time, there were new activities as well as an increase in the frequency of some activities that the family had already been doing. The most frequently mentioned was being outdoors. Many parents sensed a need to get their children moving and outdoors after spending a large number of hours in distance learning or inside the house due to the mandated lockdown. It was one of the best forms of relaxation for the children. Looking at indoor activities, the proportion of playing board games, reading, creating, drawing increased. On the other hand, staying in front of electronic devices such as TV, tablets, etc. As a complete novelty, some children started learning to play a musical instrument with their parents or in one case a small gym was set up for the children. However, as mentioned, parents' free time was less than before the pandemic, so children often became more independent and somehow filled their free time with whatever they invented themselves.

Communication stayed the same during the pandemic in terms of its quantity, but sometimes its quantity increased, which was due to all family members staying at home or children not showing up at school. There were also new topics that parents started to discuss with their children, the most common ones were those brought by the times. Whether it was the topic of interpersonal relationships, organizational conversations about running a household, or the number one topic of the time, the covid-19 pandemic. A topic that was more talked about, but not new, was school. Parents were helping their children with homework, online tutoring, tutoring, and generally whatever was needed. Yes, we can argue that these activities are not related to free time, but they often replaced it. So the quality of communication remained the same for these families. The deterioration only occurred when the parent was under mental strain due to work or stressful situations.

Not only during the leisure activities, but also overall during the pandemic, parents noticed various new characteristics in their children and, or were surprised by them in different ways, both positive (of which there were an excess) and negative. The positives were the increase or ability of children to be independent, whether in terms of school, getting their needs met, filling their free time, or finding a new pastime. Many children found a way through digital technology to stay in touch with their friends and to play with them, even if they were not allowed to meet in person. As another there was an increase in the ability to absorb learning, increase in concentration, decrease in timidity. In some cases, however, informants were unsure whether the pandemic or the developmental maturation of their children was responsible for these changes. Negatives experienced by some children included becoming more comfortable, losing their daily routine, increased time on electronic devices, reluctance to exercise, or decreased interest in social interactions.

Overall, family relationships were not so much affected by the pandemic, in terms of being altered in any way after the main waves of the pandemic, and for some they even improved. We would attribute this to the style of upbringing in the family and how families functioned - they were used to communicating with each other, trying to spend time with each other, spending leisure time together, etc. Other factors included maintaining employment, stable financial security, opportunities to spend leisure time, or even where they lived. If there were difficult moments, there was always an effort by the informants to find a way out of the situation and to restore the right family atmosphere.

The overall attitude of the informants towards the pandemic was mixed. Here it was evident how each person and family is individual, how the pandemic affected everyone differently as we have mentioned before. Some did not see it as beneficial, largely because of the children, who started to develop many new negative traits that may have consequences for them in the future, or the fact that the parent did not have as much time for the children as they would have liked and sometimes had to prioritise work at their expense. On the other hand, there is the view that one was grateful for the pandemic because of the family bonding and the general slowing down, where one could suddenly realise where one's gaps were and learn something about oneself. A lot of things came to the surface here, which may have given us a subtext to start working on them.

As mentioned in the discussion, we see the potential of this paper for future use and for working with the aftermath of the pandemic. It can serve as a stepping stone in solving a particular problem, as a resource for further work on the topic, or even as a source on the covid era for those who want to know what that era was like. The paper does



not cover the whole issue of the covid era and its aftermath, but it is at least a small piece in its overall picture, a picture of a time when the whole world came to a standstill.

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