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ABSTRACT
This study aims to consider children's perspectives about free time activity choices. Through the use of drawings, favourite free time activities of third culture kids in Albania are compared with those of children in the UK. The sample comprises four boys and three girls from four to eight years from each country. Further conversations reveal that children mainly initiated the activities themselves and yet often chose activities involving their parents. This study adds to the debate about hearing and responding to children's voices to support them effectively through activity choices. Implications for parents and carers are highlighted.

Introduction

This study compares the free time activity choices of third culture kids (TCKs) living in Albania with the free time activity choices of children living in the UK. The Albanian data gathered resulted from a year-long visit to teach a number of TCKs in a city where there is no international school. Albania is a country emerging from the strong grip of communism. It is one of the poorest in Europe (Qokaj 2013). In 2013, the GDP per capita in Albania was 4659.34 USD compared to 41,787.47 USD in the UK (Trading Economics 2016). Another measure that could be used to provide a comparison is the enrolment rate in pre-school education, which in 2013, in all regions of Albania is less than 50% (Observatory of the Rights of the Child 2013). This compares to a participation rate in 2010 of 93.3% in formal care and pre-school for children under six in the UK (OECD Family database 2014). In such a poor country, facilities and opportunities are far more limited than in the UK. This was the case even though the city where the children lived was in one of the more prosperous areas of Albania; one of the few areas where the supply of water is constant.

My purpose for visiting Albania was to set up a school for a number of English-speaking TCKs from the USA, the Netherlands, Lithuania and the UK as there is no international school in the area. A TCK has been defined as someone who has spent significant parts of their developmental years outside the culture of their parents (Pollock and Van Reken 2009). These children's first culture would be that of their parents, the second culture would be the culture of Albania, the country where they grew up and yet since these children do not feel as if they really belong in either place, they are considered TCKs. Relationships are built by TCKs with all cultures but they fail to have full ownership in any (Pollock and Van Reken 2009). Being a TCK has a huge impact on the lives of these people, especially on their identity and their view of the world. There are many challenges for TCKs such as the feeling that they do not belong, but the benefits are also numerous, including their ability to adjust to new situations (Pollock and Van Reken 2009). Zaykova (2014) has alluded to the rapid increase of the TCK

population, with the inherent migration and blending of cultures impacting on society in a critical way, such that further research on TCKs is a topic worthy of great merit.

There are many aspects of growing up abroad that could have been studied but the focus for this research is a comparison of free time activities experienced by TCKs growing up in Albania compared to children brought up in the UK. This focus was chosen because facilities like gymnastics clubs, ballet schools, sports clubs, are limited in Albania, especially when compared to the range of such facilities available in the UK. The contrast is stark. Play areas in Albania have few safety features. There are swimming pools but these only open in the summer and have questionable hygiene. In addition Albanian children do not have a culture of play dates so although the children I taught spoke fluent Albanian, making local friends was not easy. The choice of play mates was limited therefore since there were only seven English-speaking families in the area.

This research aims to discover the favourite free time activity choices of TCKs growing up in Albania compared to children growing up in the UK and in addition to discover who initiates such activities and who children usually like to play with. The TCKs concerned have lived for all of their lives in Albania. However the phrase 'free time activities' needs to be defined more clearly. Free time activities could be defined as those activities which are chosen by the person concerned based on their own judgment of how they wish to spend their time (Badric, Prskalo, and Matijevic 2015). A different definition suggests that free time activities relate solely to the time that children spend with no adult control (Mayall 2002). For this research all spare time activities have been considered whether organised or not, with the premise that the research is concerned with any activity freely chosen by the child. This research has been restricted to primary age children so in discussing what children like to do in their spare time, it could be considered an activity or it could be considered as play. Play has been valued differently in different contexts, leading to widely contrasting influences on the opportunities and availability of play for children (Bruce 2010). This study focuses on play outside of school and seeks to consider activities wholly chosen by the child.

Rationale for the study

There may be several reasons why it might be considered important to study children's free time activity choices. Children's leisure time activities are an important topic for study because 'a part of children's everyday life is to play and take part in leisure activities' (Berntsson and Ringsberg 2013, 552). Having the freedom to make choices in play and leisure activities may have a significant impact on children's development. Such choices will influence the establishing of children's identities and the quality of their future life (Badric, Prskalo, and Matijevic 2015). Research suggests that free play is the primary means by which children learn to control their lives, solve problems, make friends and become emotionally resilient (Gray 2013). Several benefits to a child's physical, cognitive, social and emotional development have been identified through free time activities (Griffiths 2011).

Historical context

Children have a right to play. This has been laid down in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in Article 31: 'Children have the right to relax and play, and to join in a wide range of cultural, artistic and other recreational activities' (UNICEF 2009). However the way children spend their free time, who they choose to spend their free time with and the amount of choice they have are all areas of childhood that have changed vastly over the centuries. An important issue to consider is whether children have more choice or less choice than in the past. Over the past 25 years different sociological factors have resulted in depriving children of play spaces, both in terms of time and location, so that few children today are involved in independent collaborative activities which would support their psychosocial development (Brook et al. 2009). In research carried out with Nordic children between 1984 and 2011 it was discovered that children had less time for unorganised leisure including time not at school or being taken care of outside the home

(Berntsson and Ringsberg 2013). We will now need to consider the main influences on the way children spend their free time today.

Influences on the way children spend their time

This is an important issue to consider but very little research has been carried out on this aspect. Politicians, dependence on the virtual world, parents, schools and the social environment all influence children's free time choices (Badric, Prskalo, and Matijevic 2015). In addition age, gender, personality and family are all influencing factors in children's free time activity choices (Lupu and Laurentiu 2014). A survey to discover parents' opinions about how their children spent their free time concluded that some parents needed to be involved in a parenting programme to be informed about the importance of both sports and cultural or artistic activities in children's lives (Lupu and Laurentiu 2014). This study was carried out in Brasov in Romania and confirmed the assumptions made that although some parents needed to be persuaded about this, sporting and cultural artistic activities succeed as a favourite leisure time activity spent in playgrounds and parks. In addition it was found that there is a gender factor whereby boys prefer sports activities and girls prefer cultural – artistic ones. It will be important to consider in more detail parents' participation in their children's free time activities as this will be a significant influencing factor in children's choices.

Parents' participation in their children's free time activities

Research carried out in 2012 to study the involvement by parents in their children's activity choices found out that this was dependent on the level of parents' education, their workload and their financial condition (Biedron 2012). Three models of parent's participation were suggested (Biedron 2012). In the support and bilateral model, the parents would suggest activities, provide equipment, transport and care. The paternalistic control model comprised many parents who had an average level of education and financial standing and normal workloads and children of such parents were considered to have less control over their spare time. Most free time would be spent with adult supervision with children rarely allowed to plan or select their own activities and only being allowed to invite certain friends over. The third group, the separative model comprised parents with low or average levels of education on lower incomes, with heavier workloads. Children of such parents were considered to be more self-reliant, with a lack of supervision over their free time with activities mainly centred around the home and the neighbourhood. It is possible that a lack of understanding of the merits of freedom of choice for children could be a significant factor in parental behaviour (Biedron 2012). Having established that parent's attitudes will influence their children's free time choices we now need to consider how much freedom of choice children have in play.

Children's freedom of choice in play

The United Nations issued a General Comment No. 17 (CRC 2013) on Article 31 of the UNCRC (UNICEF 2009) that play is 'initiated, controlled and structured by children themselves', it is 'non-compulsory, driven by intrinsic motivation' and its key characteristics are 'fun, uncertainty, challenge, flexibility and non-productivity'. We need to consider if this is true for our children and whether their play is really 'initiated, controlled and structured by children themselves'. There is a growing adult perception that children have less time and control over their free play (King and Howard 2010). There are many restricting factors such as increasing numbers in childcare both before and after school, fear of keeping children safe, with increased traffic, dogs and stranger danger. It has been considered strange that parents' fear of strangers on the streets is not matched by fear of strangers online, allowing very young children to go online unprotected (Palmer 2006).

When children spend more time in after school clubs or other forms of childcare they are more likely to be under adult supervision and have less time for unsupervised play with free choice

(King and Howard 2014) and the fact that children spend less time playing outdoors and more time under adult supervision has been highlighted by many (Gill 2007; Santer, Griffiths & Goodall, 2007). This research seeks to focus on whether children prefer play that is supervised by adults or is without adult supervision and whether they prefer play which is organised by an adult or completely free play. Palmer (2006) suggests that for children over four years old, we need to let go of excessive control over the children's lives especially in the areas of play and exercise so that by the time children move up to secondary school, they can be confident in themselves and the choices they make leading to greater independence. Gray (2013, 6) suggests that when children 'are provided with the freedom and means to pursue their own interests, in safe settings, they bloom and develop along diverse and unpredictable paths, and they acquire the skills and confidence required to meet life's challenges'. This statement is supported by Play England (Santer, Griffiths, and Goodall 2007, 12) who maintain that free play is about 'children choosing what they want to do, how they want to do it and when to stop and try something else. Free play has no external goals set by adults and has no adult imposed curriculum'.

Perhaps we should place more emphasis on children's voices, allowing them more opportunities for participation and time without adult control (Griffiths 2011). However children are rarely asked about their favourite play experiences, where they like playing, and the resources they like to use (Santer et al., 2007). This is confirmed too by McEvilly (2015) who suggests that research into physical activity and physical education has rarely sought the perspectives of the young children themselves. When asked, children have suggested that the friends they make and the choices they have within their play are really important to them and they would like more choice in relation to their play, especially as this affects their opportunities for outdoor play (Santer et al., 2007).

Two interesting questions were posed by Griffiths (2011, 192) in her research comparing activity preferences for children in the UK and the USA. The first was whether there is a '"universal childhood" of common experiences'. The conclusion made was that although the children's free time preferences were very similar across the sample, it was the family, school and peer group which were the main influences on spare time activities. The everyday experience of childhood for those children was structured, facilitated and defined by their immediate social world (Griffiths 2011).

The second question related to 'whether activities chosen by children could be considered to be unstructured/child-initiated or structured/adult-constructed' (Griffiths 2011, 199). It was concluded that although some children were almost apologetic in their enjoyment of 'doing nothing' or just 'hanging about', children mainly preferred activities which involved spending time with their parents in adult structured activities (Griffiths 2011, 199–200). This conclusion compares with the results of a study carried out by Kapasi and Gleave (2009) in which data was collected from 71 children from different parts of the UK. Some of the children who attended extracurricular activities felt that this left them with little time for free, self-directed play (Kapasi and Gleave 2009). It appeared that for the children in the sample (aged 7–14 years) the most enjoyable play was when they had friends to play with, time to play and freedom to play without structure (Kapasi and Gleave 2009).

A consideration of who children like to play with

Children play with a variety of people, including peers, family members or on their own (Kapasi and Gleave 2009). Who the children played with was partly based on their own preference, but also dependent on the community they lived in and their family structure. Distance away from school was particularly influential, as those who travelled a long way to school tended to have fewer available playmates in their own area (Kapasi and Gleave 2009). When asked about their favourite play experiences, children reported that a very valuable and rewarding element of play was the chance to be with friends (Brooker and Woodhead 2013).These studies highlighted above were carried out in the UK. There do not appear to be any similar studies carried out in Albania.

Interestingly, it has been discovered that where an adult is involved in a child's play there are likely to be lower levels of performance, motivation and engagement than when an adult is not present

(McInnes et al. 2009). In addition having more choice or even perceiving that there was more choice in play resulted in improved motivation and outcomes (McInnes et al. 2011). In a study by King and Howard (2014) the presence of other children or adults resulted in less choice. The highest choice was recorded when playing alone, reducing when another child was present and reducing further still when playing in a group. Children's perceptions of choice in their free play was also significantly reduced if an adult was involved in the play activity (King and Howard 2010). According to children themselves, play is understood as activities that have been chosen by them and are completely controlled by them (Brooker and Woodhead 2013). Having a clearer understanding of the significant determinants that contribute to children's choices in play would help practitioners in supporting such choices (King and Howard 2014), thus highlighting the immense significance of research in this area and the implications for practice.

Further considerations

This literature review has highlighted the fact that children's free time activities can influence their social, motor, cognitive and affective development in a positive way (Badric, Prskalo, and Matijevic 2015; Berntsson and Ringsberg 2013; Gray 2013; Griffiths 2011). For children in the primary school age range little research has been carried out on this topic.

From the little research that has been carried out the conclusion can be made that children have less time for free play than in the past. This change has been identified as noticeable in the last 25 years through research in the UK (Brook et al. 2009), in the last 50 years through research in the USA (Gray 2013) and in the last 30 years through research carried out in Sweden with children aged 2–17 years (Berntsson and Ringsberg 2013). In terms of activities available for children, many of these are highly structured and led by adults (King and Howard 2014). It has been suggested that children's own voices need to be considered as they have rarely been asked about their free time activity preferences (Griffiths 2011; Santer et al., 2007). Differing opinions have come to light about whether children prefer activities which involve spending time with their parents. In the research comparing children's activity preferences in the UK and the USA based on research with children aged 9–11 years, Griffiths (2011) found that children did prefer spending their free time with their parents. However, it has also been discovered that where there is considerable adult involvement, the engagement and motivation of the children is often reduced (King and Howard 2010, 2014; McInnes et al. 2009, 2011).

As more is known about the play of 3–5-year-olds than older children, further research should be carried out to investigate free play experiences of children aged 5–7 years (Santer et al., 2007). This study will make comparisons and highlight the contrasts that exist between my research and the existing literature, in particular to find out what are the children's favourite free time activities, who initiates their activity choices and who the children like to play with. By making comparisons between free time activity choices of TCKs and children living in the UK we will be able to consider whether there is a '"universal childhood" of common experiences' as suggested by Griffiths (2011, 192).

Methodology

The aims of my research are as follows:

(1) What are the favourite free time activity choices of TCKs growing up in Albania and what are the favourite free time activity choices of children growing up in the UK?
(2) Who initiates the free time activities perceived by the children to be their favourite activities?
(3) When involved in their favourite activities, do children usually play alone, with siblings, with peers, with parents or with other adults?

A socio-culturalist approach influences my perspectives on early childhood practice recognising the significance to children's learning and development of social context. In this particular piece of research, we hope to discover the extent to which the differing social contexts in which these children grow up influence their free time choices. In seeking to discover children's free time activity choices, drawings have been used as the main basis for data collection, as these have been found to work so well in stimulating conversation with children (De Lange et al. 2012; Driessnack and Furukawa 2012; Einarsdottir, Dockett, and Perry 2009; Mayaba and Wood 2015). Drawing is a non-verbal method of communicating, which allows children to express their emotions and their perceptions, helping them to differentiate between reality and their sensory world (Hsu 2014). The process of drawing can provide opportunities for researchers to consider broader issues relating to children's culture rather than becoming confined by smaller details (Griffiths 2011). As a method of data collection children's drawings give us an insight into children's lives and their understanding of their experiences (Mayaba and Wood 2015). In using children's drawings as an evaluative tool for researching a sports education soccer unit, Mowling, Brock, and Hastie (2006), have suggested that drawings help children to feel at ease and encourage expression of feelings especially as there are no right or wrong answers.

The drawings also provide a starting point for further discussions with the children (Griffiths 2011). Mowling, Brock, and Hastie (2006) have explained that methodologically, for the accurate interpretation of drawings, student narrations were essential. So in addition to the three drawings of their favourite free time activities, a simple questionnaire was used to ask children why they liked the activities, whose idea it was to do the activity and whether an adult was involved. This was administered like an interview as the children were not able to complete this on their own. This data should provide an understanding of children's perceptions of their choices in free time activities. The ability to gain an understanding of individual's perceptions of the world in which they live is, in terms of methodology, the aim of qualitative research (Bell 2010).

In the questionnaire there are three questions. Using a number of different types of questions has the benefit of keeping the interest of the respondents and also providing varied evidence from which to draw conclusions (Roberts-Holmes 2005). Some of the questions are open-ended and some just require a tick in the relevant place. Although the use of open-ended questions can make it harder for the researcher to make comparisons, it does ensure that the ownership of the information is with the respondent rather than the researcher (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2011). In addition, in case study research, by using the children's own words it allows the data to be rich in detail and enhances its validity (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2011).

The sample comprised children living in Albania and children living in the UK. Data were collected from seven children living in Albania aged between four and eight years; four boys and three girls. The TCKs parents came from the Netherlands, the USA, Lithuania and the UK. However the TCKs had spent all their lives in Albania apart from a few weeks each year visiting their parents' home country. Data were also collected from seven children known to the researcher from the same town in the UK also aged between four and eight years; also four boys and three girls for parity. Data were collected on one occasion for each child at the child's home between October 2015 and January 2016.

At every stage of the research process, ethical considerations need to be highlighted and as far as possible addressed (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2007; Mukherji and Albon 2010). The parents of the children concerned were asked to sign letters of consent and it was explained that the researcher wanted no pressure to be put on the children to participate. When one parent explained that their children did not like drawing, data was requested from a different family. Confidentiality was maintained through anonymity as no names were used in the data collection. At all stages of the research honesty is vital (Walliman 2005). 'Silently rejecting or ignoring evidence which happens to be contrary to one's beliefs constitutes a breach of integrity' (Walliman 2005, 337). This will be considered when analysing data.

When evaluating the reliability and validity of research with young children, it is important to be aware of the fact that the children's answers to the questions could have been influenced by the adults' values and beliefs; in this case their parents. In addition when using drawings as a method of collecting data, one needs to consider children's relationships with the adults concerned. They may be inclined to draw what they think their parent would wish them to draw rather than providing an authentic response (Backett-Milburn and McKie 1999) although in contrast to this drawings can also be considered to empower children to make their own decisions and become independent thinkers respected by others (Hsu 2014).

Qualitative content analysis 'is a method for describing the meaning of qualitative material in a systematic way' (Shreier 2012, 1), which involves translating the meanings in the data that are of interest to the researcher into the categories of a coding frame, then classifying successive parts of the data according to those categories (Shreier 2012). Qualitative content analysis was carried out in this study on both the drawings produced by the children and the answers to the additional questions as the basis for the initial analysis and the coding process. In this research thematic analysis has also been used as a method of analysing the data involving searching through the data for themes or repeated patterns of meaning (Braun and Clarke 2006). This has been used after the initial coding process as similar codes have been amalgamated to form major concepts or themes. This has enabled the researcher to study the children's particular choices of free time activities and the meaning and importance which they ascribe to these. The researcher also intends to consider the impact on these choices of the social context in which the children find themselves.

Analysis of the data

The drawings

Since each child was asked to produce three drawings and there were seven children in each sample, there were 42 drawings in total to analyse. The initial overall analysis of the 42 drawings showed many similarities and contrasts, with some skilful drawing skills evident for the age range. Prevalent similarities included children in both countries drawing active outdoor play such as archery, swings and slides and skateboarding in the park (Figures 1–3).

Children from both countries also drew indoor activities such as computer games, playing with trains and lego (Figures 4–6).

Prevalent contrasts were drawings of musical instruments by children in the UK but not those from Albania and the prevalence of drawings of inside activities compared to outdoor activities by children in the UK (Figure 7).

More detailed analysis enabled five broad themes to be identified which is mirrored in other research carried out on children's free time activities (Griffiths 2011). They are all freely chosen activities/play but have been given different themes. The first theme identified was outdoor play involving sports activities (Theme 1) and this was followed by outdoor play as a more general activity (Theme 2). Activities related to engagement with the media included time spent watching or playing games on TV, ipads, the wii or computers (Theme 3). Some children expressed enjoyment in playing a musical instrument (Theme 4). Other children enjoyed playing indoors including playing with such things as trains, cars, lego or drawing (Theme 5). Another theme identified was time spent on special trips with family (Theme 6).

Table 1 shows how these themes have been identified in order that the coding process is clarified.

In Table 2, the number of children who drew these activities, classified by theme, is shown including the breakdown of girls and boys and the country where they grew up, in order to provide details of frequency.

Table 2 shows us clearly which activities children liked to be involved in but Table 3 shows which activities occurred the most frequently. When comparing the children who grew up in Albania with the children who grew up in the UK, it is interesting that the children from Albania chose outdoor play

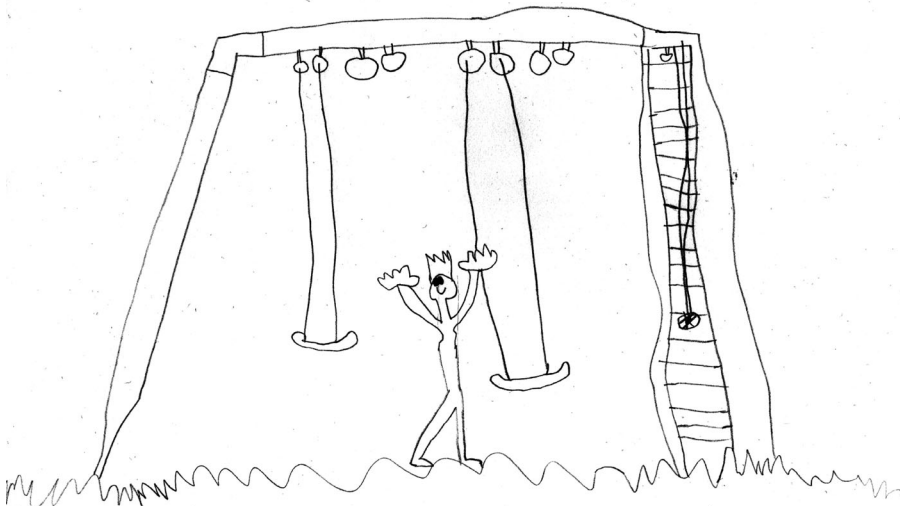**Figure 1.** Archery by a boy from the UK.

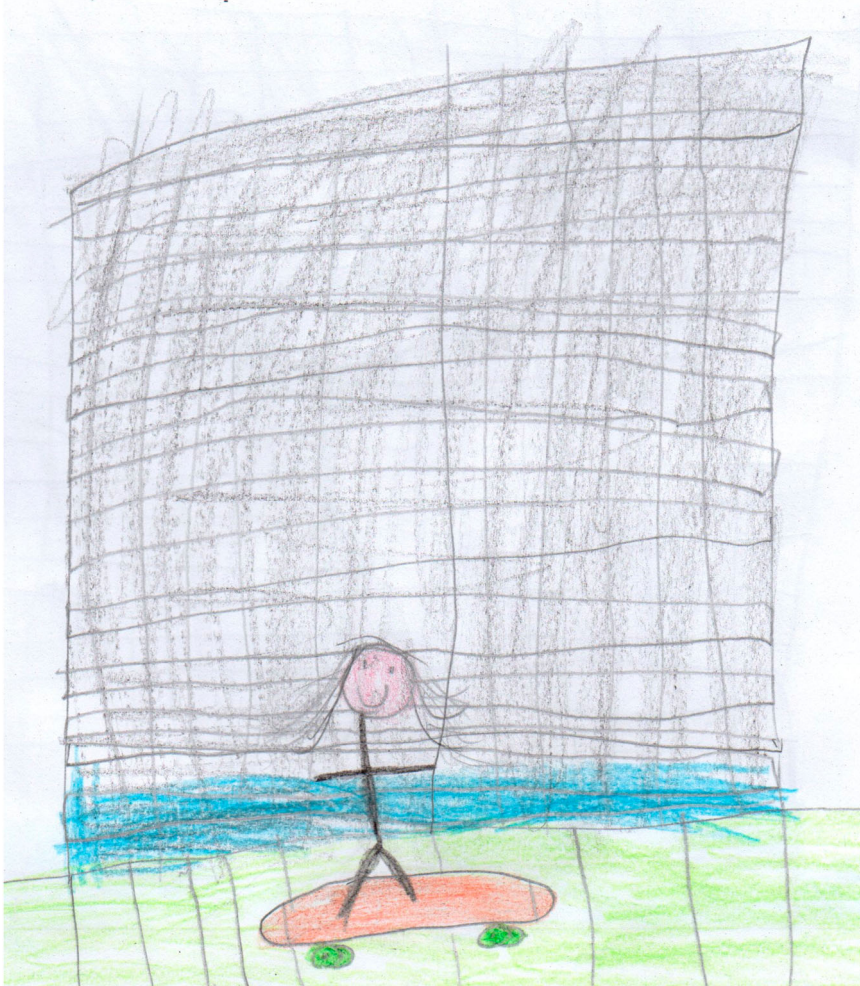**Figure 2.** Swings and slides by a boy from the UK.

Figure 3. Skateboarding in the park by a girl in Albania.

the most; both play-based activities and sports activities, whereas the children from the UK chose outdoor play sports-related activities and media-related activities the most (Table 3).

In terms of gender, the girls over both samples liked outdoor play best; both sports-related and play-based activities, whereas the boys across both samples liked inside play best.

A further comparison has been made in Table 4 where the figures have taken into account the fact that each child had three activity choices to make. Table 4 shows the total number of outdoor activity choices (Themes 1, 2 and 6) and the total number of indoor activities choices (Themes 3, 4 and 5). In this way an analysis can be made of the total number of indoor and outdoor activities chosen making a comparison across cultures and across genders.

The data from Table 4 has been presented in four pie charts to show the results more visually (Table 5).

The first two pie charts show that outdoor activities made up 67% of activity choices by children from Albania, compared to 48% of activity choices by children in the UK. The second two pie charts show that outdoor activities made up 78% of activity choices by girls over both samples, compared to 42% of activity choices by boys across both samples. These are interesting comparisons.
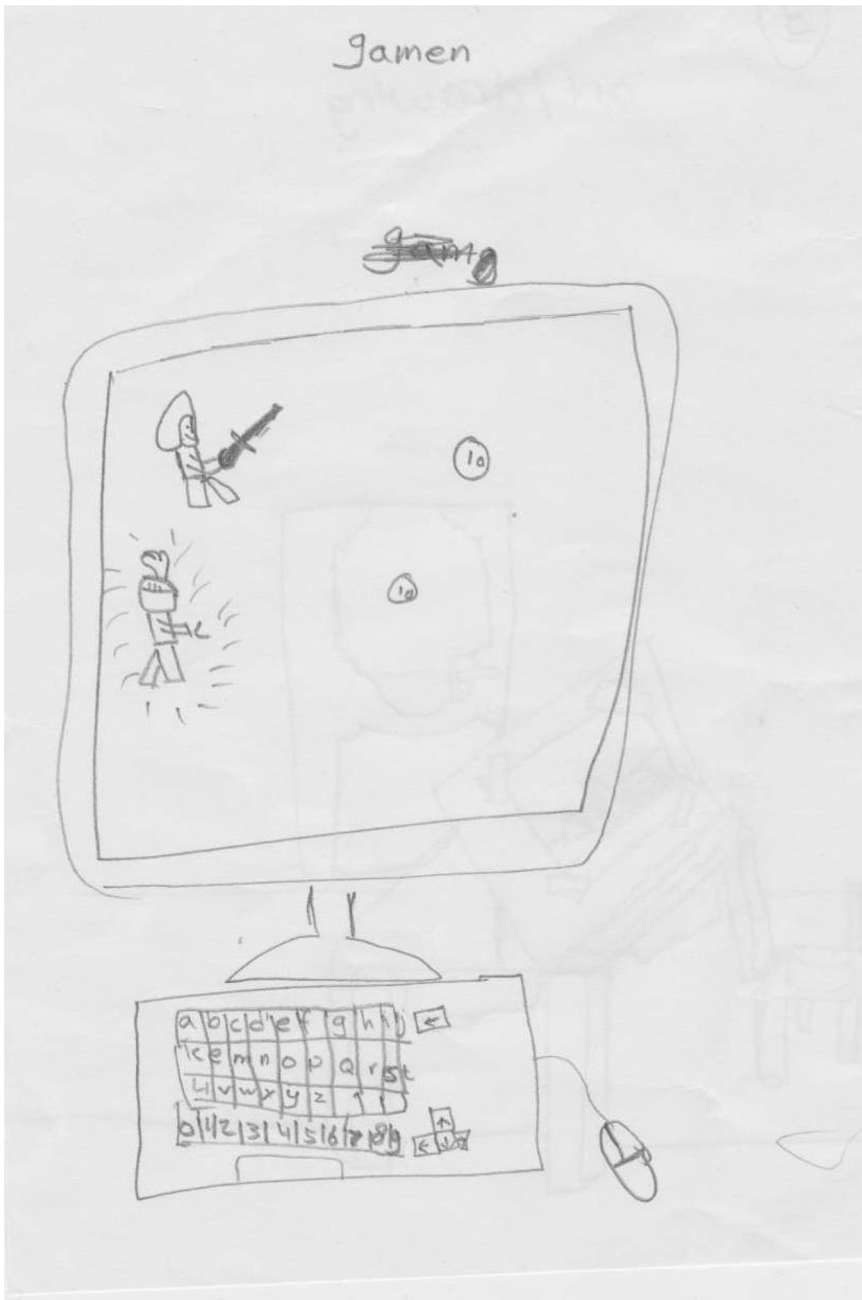
Figure 4. Computer games by a boy in Albania.

To return to Table 3, at the lower end of the ranking children from Albania chose playing musical instruments, media-related activities and special trips the least number of times. Similarly children from the UK also chose playing musical instruments and special trips the least number of times. In terms of gender, at the lower end of the scale, across both samples, boys chose musical instruments and special trips the least whereas interestingly the girls chose inside play and then special trips the least number of times.

Figure 5. Playing with trains by a boy in Albania.

Figure 6. Playing with the wii by a boy in the UK.

Since the sample for this study was quite small this type of comparison must not be overemphasised. Perhaps more interesting is the fact that many of the activities chosen by children growing up in Albania and those in the UK were very similar. There were only three specific activities chosen by
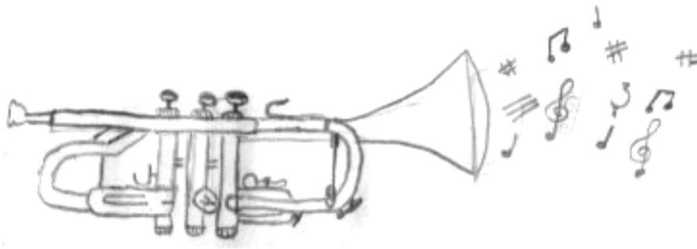
Figure 7. Playing a trumpet by a girl in the UK.

Table 1. List of themes identified.

Theme	Types of Activities shown in the children's drawings
(1) Outdoor play – sports	Rugby, football, bikes/scooters/skateboard, trampolining, archery, swimming
(2) Outdoor play – other activities	Building snowmen, going to the park, pushing dolly in pram, hiking, walking in the woods, watching waterfalls, hide and go seek, walking the dog
(3) Media-related	TV, ipads, wii, computers
(4) Musical instruments	Violin, trumpet
(5) Inside play	Trains, cars, lego, drawing, playing with toys, knex, using ink stamps
(6) Special trips	Going on the beach, going to the outdoor pool

Table 2. Number of children who drew these activities.

Theme	Albania boys (n = 4)	Albania girls (n = 3)	Albania both (n = 7)	UK boys (n = 4)	UK girls (n = 3)	UK both (n = 7)	Total boys (n = 8)	Total girls (n = 6)
(1) Outdoor play – sports	2	2	4	3	2	5	5	4
(2) Outdoor play – other activities	2	3	5	2	1	3	4	4
(3) Media-related	1	0	1	3	2	5	4	2
(4) Musical instruments	0	0	0	0	2	2	0	2
(5) Inside play	3	0	3	3	0	3	6	0
(6) Special trips	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	1

the children from the UK which the researcher knows from having lived in that region of Albania were not available for the TCKs in Albania to carry out and these were archery, rugby and learning the trumpet.

Answers to the questions

The drawings were a prompt to ask the children three questions: why they liked the chosen activity, whose idea was the chosen activity and whether an adult was involved. In considering the first of these questions, some additional themes have been identified. These are as follows: because its fun (Theme 1), it involves being with the family (Theme 2), to be with my friends (Theme 3), because its my talent (Theme 4), because I use my imagination (Theme 5), because I like playing on my own (Theme 6) and because I just like it (Theme 7). These themes are shown in Table 6.

It is interesting that only one child expressed the view that they chose the activity because they liked playing on their own. 'I like playing in my bedroom because I like playing on my own.' It is also interesting that out of the sample only two girls from the UK expressed the view that they liked the opportunity to play with their friends. One response was: 'I like playing with my bikes and scooters because I get to meet up with my friends'. Across the sample it was mainly the girls who explained that they liked their chosen activity because it involved being with the family. One response was: 'Because I like to play in the big park with my family'. Across the sample one boy and one girl

Table 3. Frequency ranking of the themes identified.

Frequency ranking	Albania boys (n = 4)	Albania girls (n = 3)	Albania both (n = 7)	UK boys (n = 4)	UK girls (n = 3)	UK both (n = 7)	Total boys (n = 8)	Total girls (n = 6)
1	Inside play (3)	Outdoor play – other activities (3)	Outdoor play – other activities (5)	Outdoor play – sports (3) Media-related (3) Inside play (3)	Outdoor play – sports (2) Media-related (2) Musical instruments (2)	Outdoor play – sports (5) Media-related (5)	Inside play (6)	Outdoor play – sports (4) Outdoor play – other activities (4)
2	Outdoor play – sports (2) Outdoor play –other activities (2)	Outdoor play – sports (2)	Outdoor play – sports (4)	Outdoor play – other activities (2)	Outdoor play – other activities (1)	Outdoor play – other activities (3) Inside play (3)	Outdoor play – sports (5)	Media-related (2) Musical instruments (2)
3	Media-related (1)	Special trips (1)	Inside play (3)	Musical instruments (0) Special trips (0)	Inside play (0) Special trips (0)	Musical instruments (2)	Outdoor play – other activities (4) Media-related (4)	Special trips (1)
4			Media-related (1) Special trips (1)			Special trips (0)	Musical instruments (0) Special trips (0)	Inside play (0)
5			Musical instruments (0)					

Table 4. Comparison of outdoor and indoor activity choices.

Activity	Albania boys (n = 4) Activity choices 4 × 3 = 12	Albania girls (n = 3) Activity choices 3 × 3 = 9	Albania both (n = 7) Activity choices 7 × 3 = 21	UK boys (n = 4) Activity choices 4 × 3 = 12	UK girls (n = 3) Activity choices 3 × 3 = 9	UK both (n = 7) Activity choices 7 × 3 = 21	Total boys (n = 8) Activity choices 8 × 3 = 24	Total girls (n = 6) Activity choices 6 × 3 = 18
Outdoor play (Themes 1, 2, 6)	5	9	14	5	5	10	10	14
Indoor play (Themes 3, 4, 5)	7	0	7	7	4	11	14	4

Table 5. Pie charts to compare indoor and outdoor play activity choices.

Activity choices of children from Albania

indoors 33%
outdoors 67%

Activity choices of children from UK

indoors 52%
outdoors 48%

Activity choices of girls

indoors 22%
outdoors 78%

Activity choices of boys

outdoors 42%
indoors 58%
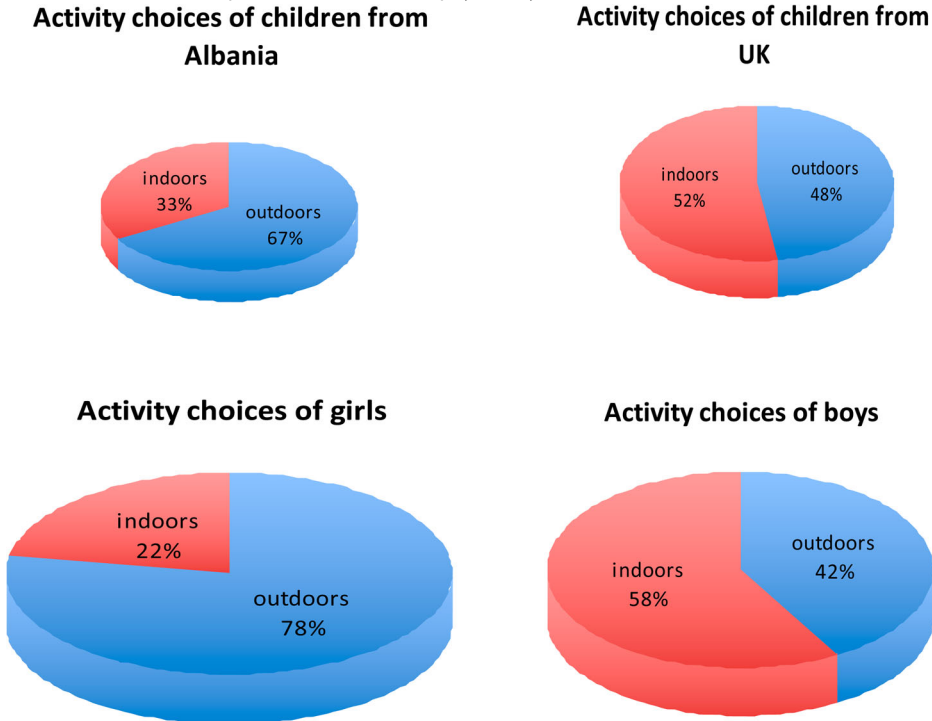
chose an activity because they considered it to be their talent. 'I like playing with my violin because it's my hobby and it's my talent.' In relation to drawing, a boy from Albania stated: 'I've got lessons. It's my talent'. Using imagination was important for two children in the UK: 'It's like you're actually inside the adventure. I like using my imagination'; 'I like playing games on my tablet because I get to imagine things'. The predominant reasons for choosing the activities across the sample were because they were considered to be fun or because the children simply liked them.

It could be said that the environment in which a child lives also plays a part in influencing their activity choices. The activity choices can illustrate what it is like to grow up in different contexts (Griffiths 2011). One girl growing up in Albania chose going to the beach despite the fact that the Albanian coast is about seven hours drive away and the coastline in Greece is about four hours away. So this activity could not happen very regularly; perhaps that made it more special. In contrast a boy growing up in Albania liked building snowmen in the winter. The climate is such that it often snows for long periods of time in Albania so this activity is available to the child regularly. In addition this same child liked hiking to the cross which was a long walk up a steep hill to a cross set high above the city giving tremendous views over the landscape. Other responses from a girl in the UK included: 'I choose walking in the woods because I like playing on the trees and steeping stones' and 'I choose watching waterfalls because I like watching the fast water'.

The second question posed was whether the children had initiated the activity themselves or whether the activity was chosen by someone else. The results of this question can be seen in Table 7.

From this table it is clear that most of the activities across both samples were initiated by the children themselves. Parents initiated a few activities but only for children in the UK. Siblings, grandparents and friends were significant in suggesting activities for some of the children across both samples.

The third question posed was whether the activity was carried out by the children on their own or whether an adult was involved in some way. This data is shown in Table 1.

Table 6. Why the children liked the activities chosen.

Theme	Albania boys (n = 4) Activity choices 4 × 3 = 12	Albania girls (n = 3) Activity choices 3 × 3 = 9	Albania both (n = 7) Activity choices 7 × 3 = 21	UK boys (n = 4) Activity choices 4 × 3 = 12	UK girls (n = 3) Activity choices 3 × 3 = 9	UK both (n = 7) Activity choices 7 × 3 = 21	Total boys (n = 8) Activity choices 8 × 3 = 24	Total girls (n = 6) Activity choices 6 × 3 = 18
(1) Because its fun	2	4	6	3	2	5	5	6
(2) Because it involves being with the family	0	3	3	1	0	1	1	3
(3) Because it involves being with friends	0	0	0	0	2	2	0	2
(4) Because it's my talent	1	0	1	0	1	1	1	1
(5) Because I can use my imagination	0	0	0	1	1	2	1	1
(6) Because I like playing on my own	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	0
(7) Other including just I like it	9	2	11	6	3	9	15	5

Table 7. Whose idea was it to do this activity?

Theme	Albania boys (n = 4) Activity choices 4 × 3 = 12	Albania girls (n = 3) Activity choices 3 × 3 = 9	Albania both (n = 7) Activity choices 7 × 3 = 21	UK boys (n = 4) Activity choices 4 × 3 = 12	UK girls (n = 3) Activity choices 3 × 3 = 9	UK both (n = 7) Activity choices 7 × 3 = 21	Total boys (n = 8) Activity choices 8 × 3 = 24	Total girls (n = 6) Activity choices 6 × 3 = 18
My idea	9	9	18	6	3	9	15	12
A parent's idea	0	0	0	4	4	8	4	4
A sibling's idea	1	0	1	0	2	3	1	2
The grandparents' idea	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	0
A friends' idea	1	0	1	1	0	1	2	0
Didn't answer the question	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	0

Table 8. Was an adult involved in your activity?

Was an adult involved in the activity?	Albania boys (n = 4) Activity choices 4 × 3 = 12	Albania girls (n = 3) Activity choices 3 × 3 = 9	Albania both (n = 7) Activity choices 7 × 3 = 21	UK boys (n = 4) Activity choices 4 × 3 = 12	UK girls (n = 3) Activity choices 3 × 3 = 9	UK both (n = 7) Activity choices 7 × 3 = 21	Total boys (n = 8) Activity choices 8 × 3 = 24	Total girls (n = 6) Activity choices 6 × 3 = 18
Yes	2	6	8	8	3	11	10	9
Sometimes	4	2	6	0	0	0	4	2
No	6	1	7	4	6	10	10	7

There is a fairly even split between those activities which children play with adult involvement and those activities where children play on their own (Table 8). Perhaps of more interest is to consider from the children's responses, which activities are the ones where adults are involved and for what reason. Some of the responses suggest the adult involvement is for supervision and help: 'The adults stay close to me because I'm not a good rider'; 'An adult helps me climb the tree'; 'My mum inspired me to play the trumpet because she plays the trumpet and completed all her grades'; 'Dad supervises me with the bow. I'm not allowed to do it on my own'. Other responses suggest that the activity is special because it involves spending time with the family: 'I push the stroller with momma'; 'Momma and dad play in the park with us'; 'Grandma, Grandpa, Mummy and Daddy come for a walk'; 'Yes, they lay on their chairs and they swim'.

Discussion and conclusion

The types of activities chosen by children in this study seem very close to the activities chosen by the children in the study by Griffiths (2011) with similar categories of activities identified: outdoor activities – sport, outdoor activities – play, family/pet and peer group oriented, media-related, special occasions and other. The activities chosen in this study also matched research carried out by Kapasi and Gleave (2009) who found that children liked various imaginative and physical games including playing outdoors, exploring nature as well as playing computer games. The commonalities in free time activity choices cross-culturally were highlighted by Griffiths (2011) in her study of UK and US children. Perhaps a similar conclusion can be made from this study, that there exists a 'universal' childhood, which mirrors the 'conventional portrait of western childhood evident in broader social discourses' (Griffiths 2011, 196).

In terms of the types of activities chosen, one of the more interesting observations is that the choices made by TCKs from Albania included more outdoor play activities whereas the choices made by children from the UK included more indoor activities. Another observation was that the choices made by girls across both samples included more outdoor activities and the choices made by boys across most samples included more indoor activities. Interestingly these results match other research carried out in this field such as Griffiths (2002, 171) research which shows that 'whilst the boys … might *conventionally* be outdoor-action oriented their free time *preferences* did not seem to echo the convention' (emphasis in the original). In addition, for the girls, outdoor activities were most popular, which also challenges the stereotype of girls' preference for indoor activities (Griffiths 2002).

We have previously explored the premise that play is 'initiated, controlled and structured by children themselves', it is 'non-compulsory, driven by intrinsic motivation' and its key characteristics are 'fun, uncertainty, challenge, flexibility and non-productivity', as stated in General Comment No. 17 (CRC 2013) on Article 31 of the UNCRC (UNICEF, 2009). In this sample, most of the play was initiated by the children themselves, but in terms of who was involved in the play quite a few of the activities always or sometimes involved adults. It is hard to know whether the adults 'controlled and structured' the play. Sometimes the adult involvement was for supervision and help and sometimes it seemed to be simply because the children liked spending time with their family. Many of the children used the word 'fun' as the reason for liking the activity. Words such as 'challenge, flexibility and non-

productivity' were not responses provided. The fact that all the children could give valid reasons why they liked the free time activities chosen suggests that the activities were 'non-compulsory' and 'driven by intrinsic motivation'.

In Albania there are very few opportunities to attend clubs or societies with structured activities away from the home environment. For the children in the sample an organised football activity is the only one available. However in the UK there are many such opportunities. Attending too many extracurricular structured activities can leave children with little time for their own choices of play activity (Kapasi and Gleave 2009). In terms of the choices made by the children from the UK, learning the violin and the trumpet, playing archery and rugby are probably the only structured extracurricular activities chosen as favourite activities by the children. So this is only 4 activities out of 21 activities chosen in total, a very small percentage. This concurs with the results of the Kapasi and Gleave (2009) study where many children preferred activities which involved free, self-directed play rather than organised extracurricular activities.

The third question posed in this study was based on who is involved in the play. Children's free time activities can involve peers or family members or children may play on their own (Kapasi and Gleave 2009). Influencing factors related to this include the context of the children's community and the type of family as well as the child's own preferences. It has been suggested that the opportunity to be with friends was a significant factor in play choices (Brooker and Woodhead 2013). In this study there were very few references to playing with friends although there were a number of responses that mentioned the enjoyment of playing with siblings. The children in Albania did not have a huge number of friends. Making friends among Albanian-speaking children was hard for various reasons and the number of English-speaking children in the same locality was small. For many children grandparents often facilitated their play (Kapasi and Gleave 2009). One boy in the UK mentioned his grandparents and his parents going with him to walk Grandpa's puppy. However the TCKs growing up in Albania did not see their wider family very often as it would have been a long way to travel.

Research has suggested that children like to spend their free time with their parents (Griffiths 2011). In this study, only 4 out of 42 activity choices were made for the reason that they involved spending time with their parents. However more than half of the activities chosen across the sample involved their parents. Therefore despite the fact that involvement by the parents was not the main reason for their activity choice, the fact that parents were involved did not prevent them enjoying the activity. Where adult involvement is significant it has been suggested that children will be less engaged in the activity (King and Howard 2010, 2014; McInnes et al. 2009, 2011). This did not appear to have been borne out by this study although it is also to be noted that these comparative studies largely focused on play within settings compared with so-called 'leisure' activities.

Implications of the findings for early years practice

This study has shown that children in the UK chose more indoor activities as their favourite play activities than in Albania. There could be several reasons why this is the case. It is good to have a balance of activities but it is also important to encourage enough activities that have a positive impact on health (Berntsson and Ringsberg 2013). Perhaps further research is needed to find out about strategies to overcome barriers which may reduce children's choice of play. It would be of benefit for researchers to find out more about the factors that have an impact on children's free play activity choices in order to advise early year's practitioners, parents and carers (King and Howard 2014).

Although the children in this study expressed the view that the activities were mainly initiated by themselves, it is still true to say that children's own voices need to be considered more (Clark and Moss 2011; Griffiths 2011; Santer et al., 2007). It is unusual for children to be consulted about what activities they like best (Santer et al., 2007). In some small way this study has opened up conversations between parents, carers and their children to highlight their activity choices and discover why they made such choices. This would be beneficial for other parents and carers.

When asked to draw three activities that they liked best, children in the UK chose very few organised, structured play activities. It is clear that young children from two to six years of age benefit from having very few activities organised (Berntsson and Ringsberg 2013). However many children of all ages have had a reduction in the amount of unsupervised play available to them (King and Howard 2014). It is crucial that professionals, parents and carers allow children enough time and freedom to make their own play choices and opportunities to play in unstructured ways.

If children enjoy activities with their families, especially their parents, which was discovered in this study and yet it is also considered that adult involvement in play can reduce involvement (King and Howard 2010, 2014; McInnes et al. 2009, 2011) then it could be argued that further research is necessary to establish levels of involvement in different free time activity choices, perhaps using the Leuven Scale of Involvement as a guide (Laevers 2005). This scale is one which is used in some settings to gauge the levels of engagement of the children in different activities. It could be used by other early years' professionals or even by parents or carers to consider the merits of different activities.

Limitations of the study

One significant limitation of this study is the difficulty in interpreting the drawings of the children. If the drawings are merely reproducing cultural rules and conventions then perhaps we cannot learn much from them and may in fact misunderstand them (Merriman and Guerin 2006) Certainly the drawings themselves would be too ambiguous to be interpreted on their own without further data to support them. In addition, this was a small scale study and the TCKs living in Albania have a very specific context in which they are growing up. It has therefore been hard to make generalisations from this study. However the study has served to add to the literature on the importance of hearing children's voices on their free time activity choices. Further research in this area would help to support parents and carers as they facilitate such activity choices.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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