A comparison of free time activity choices of third culture kids in Albania and children in the UK

Introduction

 This study compares free time activity choices of third culture kids (TCKs) living in Albania with free time activity choices of children living in the UK. The Albanian data gathered resulted from a year-long visit to teach some TCKs in a city where there is no international school. Albania is emerging from the strong grip of communism. It is one of the poorest countries in Europe (Qokaj, 2013). In 2013, the GDP per capita in Albania was 4,659.34 USD compared to 41,787.47 USD in the UK (Trading Economics, 2016). In terms of the enrolment rate in pre-school education, in 2013, in all regions of Albania this 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 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 teach 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 third culture kid 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, 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 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, such that further research on TCKs is a topic worthy of merit.

The focus of the research

The focus of free time activity choices was made 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.

As well as discovering favourite free time activity choices of TCKs growing up in Albania compared to children growing up in the UK , the aim is also to discover who initiates such activities and who children usually like to play with. 'Free time activities' could be defined as those activities which are chosen by the person concerned based on their judgment of how they wish to spend their time (Badric, Prskalo and Matijevic, 2015). A different definition suggests free time activities relate solely to the time children spend with no adult control (Mayall, 2002). For this research all free 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 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.

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, p552). Having freedom to make choices in play and leisure activities impacts 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). 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).

The methodology and methods

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. This research hopes to examine the extent to which differing social contexts influence free time choices. Drawings have been used as the main basis for data collection, as these have been found to work 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 allows children to express emotions and perceptions, helping them to differentiate between reality and their sensory world (Hsu,2014). The process of drawing provides opportunities for researchers to consider broader issues relating to children's culture rather than becoming confined by smaller details (Griffiths, 2011). Children's drawings give an insight into children's lives and their understanding of their experiences (Mayaba and Wood, 2015). In researching a sports education soccer unit, Mowling, Brock and Hastie (2006), have suggested that drawings help children feel at ease and encourage expression of feelings.

The drawings also provide a starting point for further discussions (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, a 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 unable to complete this independently. The ability to gain an understanding of individual's perceptions of the world in which they live is the aim of qualitative research (Bell, 2010).

Using 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 require a tick. Although the use of open-ended questions can make it harder for the researcher to make comparisons, it does ensure the ownership of the information is with the respondent rather than the researcher (Cohen,

Manion and Morrison, 2011). In addition, in case study research, using the children's own words allows the data to be rich in detail and enhances validity (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007).

The sample comprised children living in Albania and children living in the UK, all from cities. Data was collected from seven children living in Albania aged between 4 and 8 years; four boys and three girls and seven children known to the researcher from the same city in the UK also aged between 4 and 8 years; also four boys and three girls for parity. Data was collected on one occasion for each child at the child's home between October 2015 and January 2016.

At every stage, ethical considerations need to be highlighted and where possible addressed (Mukherji and Albon, 2010; Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007). The parents signed 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. At all stages 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, p337). This will be considered when analysing data.

When evaluating the reliability and validity of research, it is important to be aware of the fact that the children's answers to the questions could have been influenced by adult values and beliefs. In addition when using drawings as a method of collecting data, one needs to consider children's relationships with the adults concerned. They may draw what they think their parent would wish rather than providing an authentic response (Backett-Milburn and McKie, 1999) although in contrast 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, p1), which involves translating the meanings in the data of interest to the researcher into categories of a coding frame, then classifying successive parts of the data according to those categories. (Shreier, 2012). Qualitative content analysis was carried out on both drawings produced by the children and answers to additional questions as the basis for initial analysis and coding.   In this research thematic analysis has also been used as a method of analysing the data involving searching through data for themes or repeated patterns of meaning (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This has been used after the initial coding process with similar codes amalgamated to form major concepts or themes. This has enabled the researcher to study children's choices of free time activities and the meaning

and importance they ascribe to these. The researcher also intends to consider the impact on these choices of the social context of the children.

Results and Implications

One of the more interesting observations is that choices made by TCKs from Albania included more outdoor play activities whereas choices made by children from the UK included more indoor activities. Another observation was that choices made by girls across both samples included more outdoor activities and choices made by boys across most samples included more indoor activities. Interestingly these results match other research carried out such as Griffiths' (2002, p171) research which shows that 'whilst the boys…might *conventionally* be outdoor-action oriented their free time *preferences* did not seem to echo the convention.' In addition, for the girls, outdoor activities were most popular, which also challenges the stereotype of girls' preference for indoor activities (Griffiths, 2002).

The types of activities chosen in this study seem close to the activities chosen by 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. 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. 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, mirroring the 'conventional portrait of western childhood evident in broader social discourses.' (Griffiths, 2011, p196).

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 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Unicef,1990). In this sample, most of the play was initiated by children themselves, but in terms of who was involved in the play many of the activities always or sometimes involved adults. Sometimes the adult involvement was for supervision and help and sometimes it seemed to be because the children liked spending time with their family. Many 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 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 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). For children from the UK, learning the violin and the trumpet, playing archery and rugby are the only structured extracurricular activities chosen as favourite activities. So this is only four activities out of 21 activities chosen in total, a very small percentage. This concurs with the results of the Kapasi and Gleave study (2009) 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 Gleve, 2009). Influencing factors 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. 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 facilitated their play (Kapasi and Gleave, 2009). One boy in the UK mentioned his grandparents going with him to walk Grandpa's puppy. However the TCKs growing up in Albania saw their wider family rarely as they lived so far away.

Research has suggested that children like to spend their free time with their parents (Griffiths, 2011). In this study, only four 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 (McInnes et al., 2009; McInnes et al., 2011, King and Howard, 2014, King and Howard, 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.

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 for this. 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 factors that have an impact on children's free activity choices in order to advise early year's practitioners, parents and carers (King and Howard, 2014).

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

When asked to draw three activities they liked best, children in the UK chose very few organised, structured play activities. It is clear that young children from 2 to 6 years of age benefit from having few activities organised (Bertsson 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 (McInnes et al., 2009; McInnes et al., 2011, King and Howard, 2014, King and Howard, 2011) then it could be argued that further research is necessary to establish levels of involvement in different free time activity choices.

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