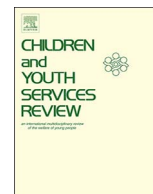




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Children's activities and time use: Variations between and within 16 countries

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ABSTRACT

This article explores similarities and differences in the daily activities of children aged around 12 years old in 16 diverse countries, focusing on themes identified in previous comparative research on this topic. The analysis suggests systematic differences between countries in the frequency of children helping around the home and caring for family members, with these activities being more common in lower-income countries. There is a diversity of patterns of educational-related time use across countries – including taking formal classes, doing homework and studying with family and friends. Leisure activities such as sports, watching television and using computers are more common in high-income countries. In these countries there is not necessarily a simple trade-off between physical and screen-based activities. Finally there is evidence of fairly consistent gender differences in time use across this diverse range of countries, with girls typically spending more time helping in the house, doing homework and reading; while boys tend to spend more time playing sports and using computers.

1. Background

1.1. Introduction

One of the strengths of the Children's Worlds survey is that it covers a diverse range of cultural and economic contexts which enables the development of understanding of the diversity of children's lives around the world. Although much of the focus of the Wave 2 survey was on children's subjective well-being and evaluations of different aspects of life, the survey questionnaire also included questions about how children spent their time. This data provides some important new insights into how children's daily lives vary in different countries. This paper analyses 16 questions about time use from the survey of 12-year-olds in 16 countries.

1.2. Key themes in the literature on children's activities and time use

There has been substantial research and policy interest in recent years on how children spend their time. [Larson and Verma \(1999\)](#) reviewed research undertaken globally on this topic and identified an important theme of difference between less and more industrialized countries. In less industrialized countries, children spent more time on household chores and on work-related activities (paid and unpaid). They argue that, as countries develop economically, there is a greater focus on children attending school rather than working, and also increased leisure opportunities for children. These kinds of distinctions

have continued to be made in more recent literature. Research has tended to focus on individual countries or groups of countries of similar levels of economic development, and different sets of concerns are evident within the literature on low-income and high-income countries ([Vogler, Morrow, & Woodhead, 2009](#)).

In low-income countries, there has been a focus on measuring time spent by children on work-related activities, including helping in the home, doing paid or unpaid work as part of a family farm or business and undertaking paid work outside the family. A central concern has been the extent to which this adversely affects children's educational development. A lot of valuable work has been done through the Young Lives research project which includes four countries – Peru, Ethiopia, Vietnam and India (Andhra Pradesh). Various reports from this project ([Cueto & Escobal D'Angelo, 2011](#); [Dornan & Woodhead, 2015](#); [Duc & Nguyễn, 2011](#); [Galab, Kumar, Reddy, Singh, & Vennam, 2011](#); [Woldehanna, Gudisa, Tafere, & Pankhurst, 2011](#)) suggest that for some children there is a trade-off between educational engagement and time spent on forms of work within and outside the home, which can restrict time spent on school-related activities and is also sometimes linked to early school leaving age. There is also evidence of gender differences in work, with girls being more likely to undertake work within the home and boys being more likely to work outside the home. However, these issues can vary according to the specific context. As [Dornan and Woodhead \(2015\)](#), p.44 summarise 'the shifting balance of attending school and/or working within and outside the home affects children very differently according to their situation, and is one of the factors

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Table 1
Selected social, economic and political indicators^a for the 16 countries in the survey.

	GNI per capita (internat \$) 2012	Gender Inequality Index (0–1) 2013	HDI rank (1–187) 2013	Mean deprivation index score	SD deprivation index	% having access to computer	% having access to a television
Algeria	13,280	0.425	93	3.57	2.13	51%	82%
Colombia	11,560	0.460	98	2.64	1.80	76%	96%
Estonia	24,270	0.154	33	0.64	0.91	97%	0%
Ethiopia	1250	0.547	173	6.32	1.22	3%	25%
Germany	44,640	0.046	6	0.66	0.84	86%	na
Israel	31,070	0.101	19	0.74	1.08	96%	97%
Malta	26,410	0.220	39	0.59	0.94	98%	98%
Nepal	2170	0.479	145	4.18	1.37	14%	67%
Norway	66,910	0.068	1	0.14	0.43	99%	100%
Poland	22,600	0.139	35	0.53	1.00	98%	na
Romania	18,100	0.320	54	1.33	1.56	88%	97%
South Africa	12,260	0.461	118	2.23	1.82	61%	96%
South Korea	32,350	0.101	15	0.43	1.05	96%	96%
Spain	32,160	0.100	27	0.85	1.07	95%	98%
Turkey	18,030	0.360	69	2.17	1.74	84%	97%
UK	37,630	0.193	14	0.50	0.85	95%	99%

^a Sources: Columns 2: <http://databank.worldbank.org/data>. Columns 3 and 4: <http://hdr.undp.org/en/data>. The Gender Inequality Index is calculated by the UN based on the maternal mortality rate, the adolescent birth rate, the proportion of women and men with at least secondary education, the gender share of parliamentary seats and of labour force participation rates. Columns 5 to 8: Summary data from Children's Worlds 12-years-old survey.

contributing strongly to diverging life trajectories’.

Amin and Chandrasekhar (2012) in Bangladesh and Ersado (2005) in Nepal, Peru and Zimbabwe also found evidence of trade-offs between children working and attending school. Ersado found different patterns in urban and rural areas, with poverty being the main cause of child labour in rural areas, but other factors such as labour market conditions being more salient in urban areas. Amin and Chandrasekhar found evidence that boys spent more time on educational activities than girls. Putnick and Bornstein (2015) review a range of evidence generally supporting the notion that child labour is associated with lower school enrolment in low- and middle-income countries.

In high-income countries the main research focus has been on a very different set of issues relating to leisure activities and their possible effects on child well-being. Concerns have been raised about the amount of time that children spend on sedentary indoor screen-based activities, whether this time is increasing at the expense of outdoor physical activity, and whether there are adverse impacts on children's health. In addition the growing availability of new technologies has raised questions about the risks of children's exposure to cyberbullying and to other negative experiences related to internet usage.

There is evidence to support the notion that different kinds of activities have different health outcomes – for example a systematic review of health benefits of physical activity (Janssen & LeBlanc, 2010). It is less clear whether there are consistent time trends in different activities among children and young people across countries. The most recent HBSC report based on the 2013/14 survey (Inchley et al., 2016) shows no clear evidence of a decline in physical activity or an increase in watching television within a sample of European and North American countries in comparison with the previous wave of the survey in 2009/10 (Currie et al., 2012), although there were small contrasting increases and decreases within some countries individually. A review by Ekelund, Tomkinson, and Armstrong (2011) also did not support the idea that physical activity has generally declined among young people. There is evidence of an increase in time spent using computers but this may have been balanced by a decline in time spent watching TV (e.g. Bucksch, Inchley, Hamrik, Finne, & Kolip, 2014 in Germany).

Thus, while there are some common issues about the balance of children's time between work, education and leisure across countries, the research debates around children's time use have developed in distinct ways for more or less economically prosperous countries. Much of the research on this topic has been conducted either within low-income or high-income countries. The Children's Worlds data offers the opportunity to make comparisons across countries with very different

levels of wealth.

2. Research questions

Given the above background, the research questions to be addressed in this article are:

1. To what extent do the patterns of children's daily activities vary between countries and is there evidence of systematic differences between low-income and high-income countries in terms of the balance of time spent on household-related activities, education-related and leisure-related activities?
2. Is there evidence of differences in the frequency of engaging in educational-related activities outside school in different groups of countries?
3. To what extent is there evidence of a trade-off between the frequency of screen-based activities and physical activities in higher-income countries.
4. To what extent do children's daily activities vary within countries according to household economic status and what are the similarities and differences across countries in this respect?
5. To what extent do children's daily activities vary within countries by gender and what are the similarities and differences in gender-related patterns across countries?

3. Methods and data

3.1. Data

The analysis makes use of data from the 16 countries which have so far completed Wave 2 of the Children's Worlds survey – Algeria, Colombia, Estonia, Ethiopia, Germany, Israel, Malta, Nepal, Norway, Poland, Romania, South Africa, South Korea, Spain, Turkey and the UK. Data was gathered from late 2013 to mid-2015. This article uses data from the 12-years-old survey because there was a more extensive set of time use questions for this age group than for the younger two age groups in the survey. The total sample consisted of 19,212 children with sample sizes in individual countries ranging from 852 in Germany to 2597 in South Korea. Some summary statistics for the 16 countries are shown in Table 1.

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