

**SLAVICA MAKSIĆ & ZORAN PAVLOVIĆ****NURTURING CHILD IMAGINATION IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD:  
PERSPECTIVES FROM DIFFERENT NATIONS****Abstract**

Imagination and creativity in today's world are becoming increasingly relevant in the light of the fact that main human work products are innovations, knowledge, ideas and creative solutions. Nurturing child imagination is the most promising way of building up a creative personality and contributing to individual creative production in the future. This paper presents the results of evaluation of child imagination in Serbia and other European countries that participated in the World Values Survey. Child imagination is less valued than some other educational goals. The analysis of differences in the support of child imagination between nations pointed out to relevance of some cultural factors, while age and socioeconomic status were the most significant predictors of imagination preference on the individual level. The data show that different nations value imagination differently, which implies that chances for development of youth creative potentials depend on social setting in which children grow up.

Key words: imagination, educational goals, national education system, World Values Survey

**Introduction**

Imagination and creativity in today's world are becoming increasingly relevant in the light of the fact that main human work products are innovations, knowledge, ideas and creative solutions. The European Union has recognised this – 2009 was the year of creativity and innovations in Europe, with special emphasis on the role of education system in the development of creativity and innovation in a lifelong learning perspective (European Union, 2008). Imagination is considered as creation of something new – a capacity to combine, process, and create new representations and new behaviour (Vigotski, 2005). Educational researchers mentioned imagination as one of the aspects of creativity in their personal theories of creativity, and defined creativity during preschool years primarily through curiosity and imagination (Maksić & Pavlović, 2011). Nurturing child imagination is the most promising way of building up a creative personality and contributing to individual creative production in the future.

Encouragement of child imagination is support for the development of all capacities of an individual, but nations are also supposed to benefit. All everyday objects are in some sense externalised imagination – existing not only for its creator but for other people as well. Imaginative scientists, engineers, economists are the leading force of artistic, scientific and technical development and progress. Some human-capital theorists suggest that peoples' competences, mediated by technological progress, are the deciding factor in nation's wealth. Rindermann and Thompson (2011) argue that creative, high-ability classes are responsible for economic growth, stable democratic development, and positively valued political

aspects (e.g. government effectiveness). Florida (2002) speaks of a creative class as a main driving force of the post-industrial society's economy.

In contemporary societies, public opinion studies are one way of determining the current values and attitudes of citizens towards important social issues. Public opinion studies on child imagination can provide data on how much the given environment values imagination, while the attitude of various social groups towards the development of child imagination determines the level of its support in a certain environment. The subject of our paper is valuing of the development of child imagination, bearing in mind the importance of public opinion in defining the status of child imagination as an educational goal in individual nations/countries and among the members of different interests groups. This paper is thus an attempt to answer the following questions: (1) can it be expected that different European nations/countries will express a universal value orientation with respect to preferring development of child imagination over other family educational goals, and (2) which characteristics of an individual are important for his/her attitude towards child imagination in Serbia.

### Data analysis

The most comprehensive and systematic data on valuing child imagination around the world are available from the World Values Survey (WVS)<sup>1</sup>, a series of cross-cultural research conducted regularly in the last three decades. During the period from 1981 to 2008, 87 countries or geo-political entities from six continents and nearly 256.000 respondents participated in five waves of the survey. The first wave was conducted in the period from 1981 to 1984, the second from 1989 to 1993, the third from 1994 to 1999, the fourth from 1999 to 2001 and the fifth wave started in 2005 and ended in 2008. Serbia participated in the third (1996), fourth (2001) and fifth wave (2006). Surveys were conducted on representative national samples with standardised, face-to-face interviews. Among other things, respondents were asked to choose up to five most important qualities from the list of ten qualities that children should be encouraged to learn at home. The list contained the following qualities: independence, hard work, feeling of responsibility, imagination, tolerance, thrift/saving money and things, determination, religious faith, unselfishness and obedience.

This paper will present the results of some recent studies based on the data collected in WVS pertaining to valuing of child imagination. One study (Maksić & Pavlović, 2010) used data collected in the fifth wave (2005–2008) of WVS, with the following nineteen European countries as participants: Andorra, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Finland, France, Great Britain, Italy, Moldavia, Holland, Norway, Poland, Romania, Russia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Serbia, and Ukraine. The analysis showed that among the citizens of these European countries in general imagination was at the bottom of the list of the preferred qualities – it was ranked tenth, all other offered qualities being more valued. The support for imagination was lowest in Russia (14%), Italy (15%) and Bulgaria (17%), while the citizens of Norway (55%) and Sweden (57%) valued child imagination most. In these two countries, child imagination was placed in the upper half (ranked fourth) of the preferred child

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<sup>1</sup> [www.worldvaluessurvey.com](http://www.worldvaluessurvey.com)

qualities. On the average, 22% of citizens in these nineteen countries said that imagination was important; an equal number of Serbian citizens agreed with that (22%). Other previous studies also showed that imagination was usually viewed as one of the least important child qualities (Joksimović, Maksić & Pavlović, 2007; Maksić & Pavlović, 2008; Maksić & Pavlović, 2009a). Some other qualities, such as responsibility and tolerance (Joksimovic, Maksic & Pavlovic, 2007), were viewed as far more important and urgent; probably because parents and education system saw themselves as more responsible for and more obliged to encourage these.

The same study also analysed the influence of certain macro-level characteristics on the European nation's level of support for imagination, as well as some of its individual correlates. The level of socioeconomic development (as indicated by GDP *per capita*), whether the country had been under communist rule after the World War II or not, dominant religious denomination (Catholicism, Orthodoxy, Protestantism) and the aggregate level of the acceptance of postmaterialist values were included as predictors in the regression model. Although zero-order correlations between the nation's level of support for imagination and all of the afore-mentioned variables were highly significant ( $p < .001$ ), dominant religious denomination was the most important and only significant predictor ( $\beta = .503$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) in the model ( $F = 5.34$ ,  $df = 4$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $\text{adj. } R^2 = .62$ ). Imagination was most highly valued in protestant countries (e.g. Sweden, Norway, Great Britain, Finland). Similar findings can be found elsewhere (Maksić & Pavlović, 2009b).

Some individual correlates of imagination preference were also analysed, although only on the Serbian subsample, using data from the fifth wave of WVS. Gender, age, educational level, personal religiosity, marital status, number of children, and family income were included as predictors in the regression model. The model was significant ( $F = 10.56$ ,  $df = 4$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $\text{Adj. } R^2 = .035$ ) and respondent's age ( $\beta = -.081$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) and family income<sup>2</sup> ( $\beta = .134$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) proved to be the most significant predictors of individual support for imagination. Younger and more affluent individuals were more inclined to view imagination as important. Some other studies based on different applied methodology have also found evidence of the relevance of age and socioeconomic status for valuing child imagination (Maksić & Pavlović, 2008; Pavlović & Maksić, 2009a).

The current political, social and economic situation can, at least partially, explain the fact that younger and more affluent citizens of Serbia are more inclined to encourage child imagination. Serbia is an ex-communist country in a prolonged transitional period, with the constant devaluation of collective goals and common good, a decline in the standard of living and impoverishment of the educational sector. Unsuccessful privatisation caused polarisation within society. A small minority of citizens gained enough wealth that enabled them to shift from emphasis on survival and material values. On the other hand, the majority of citizens are constantly facing the risks of losing job and are obliged to work low-paid and under-qualified jobs. One consequence of such circumstances is greater emphasis on

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<sup>2</sup> The respondent was asked to estimate the average monthly income of his/her household, bearing in mind all of the household members and all sources of income (salaries, rents, pensions etc.). The income level was operationalised as a ten-point scale, from the lowest (1) to highest (10) income range.

fulfilment of material than non-material needs. It can be argued that similar circumstances in other ex-communist European countries had similar effects on value priorities.

## Discussion

Citizens of some European countries obviously value child imagination more explicitly than others and Protestantism has had a very important role in it. Protestant European countries are some of the most developed and wealthiest countries in the world. Those are post-industrial societies whose economies heavily depend on the creative class. Nurturing imagination and creativity in such social setting is probably the main productive force and the cornerstone of maintenance of a high level of development. Furthermore, Western countries are precisely those societies where the major value shift had occurred in the past several decades, which some scholars have described as “humanistic transformation of modernisation” (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005: 47). Welfare state has removed material, cognitive and social obstacles for the sense of and expression of individual autonomy. As a result, there are rising levels of emancipatory and self-expression values in Western countries.

Based on the data from WVS, Inglehart (Inglehart & Baker, 2000) identified two orthogonal value dimensions of cross-cultural variation: (1) traditional versus secular/rational values and (2) survival versus self-expression values. Traditional values, among other things, include attitudes that children should be encouraged to learn obedience and respect for elders. Secular/rational values are related to greater emphasis on responsibility and thrift as important child qualities. The main component of the second value dimension is (post)materialist orientation – valuing economic and physical security versus valuing self-expression and the quality of life. As one moves from survival to self-expression pole there is a change from preference of hard work towards valuing of child imagination as an important child quality.

All of the protestant European countries in the analysis above (Finland, Norway, Sweden, Holland and Great Britain) are positioned in the secular/self-expression quadrant of the Inglehart’s global cultural map (Inglehart & Baker, 2000). Higher support for imagination in these countries can be understood as a manifestation of valuing creativity as a channel of self-expression and pursuing one’s autonomy. Value shift brings changes in preferred educational styles, encouraging child’s imagination being one of them.

Certain global trends (interdependence of world economies, transnational mobility of workers etc.), as well as some general trends in the job sphere (lifelong learning, between-jobs mobility etc.) and their influence on all spheres of social life, make creativity equally important for the developing (and non-protestant) societies. Joining the flows of modern, knowledge-based economy is practically the only path to welfare in today’s globalised world. It is almost unthinkable to accomplish this without innovation, flexibility and creativity. However, the countries that value child imagination to the least extent are poor, mostly unstable or only formal, and not effective democracies – exactly those who could benefit the most from it. In a world which is more and more dominated by cognitive capitalism (Rindermann & Thompson, 2011) and creative economies (Howkins, 2001), where people make

money out of ideas, those who cannot lead, or at least follow, are bound to be “cognitively enslaved” or “cognitively colonised”. The nations who cannot keep pace are left behind in the circle of poverty and stagnation, importing technologies and creative products instead of creating and exporting them.

This could imply that certain types of societies lack the structural prerequisites for the support of imagination to become widespread and for its workforce and economy to become globally competitive. Creativity is, so to speak, not enough – it is only one among many factors of society’s progress. Florida (2003) speaks of 3T’s of economic development: talent, tolerance and technology. Although his findings were somewhat criticised (see, for example, Montgomery, 2005), the idea that creativity and welfare are closely interconnected is rarely called into question. The underlying and unanswered question of the causal relationship – whether more developed societies value imagination more because they are more affluent or they are more affluent because they value imagination more – is not as important as its implication: the two are mutually reinforcing, helping the rich to remain rich and the poor to remain poor.

## Conclusion

Analysis of data on valuing child imagination collected in the World Values Survey showed that the wealthiest European societies and social groups tend to value imagination more strongly. This finding is also supported by the results of previous studies. Such a conclusion is not without limitations: in spite of the same applied methodology and instrument, the questions of respondent’s motivation, comparability of similar findings from different social context etc. still remain. The chances for development of one’s creative potentials largely depend on the wider social context. Physical, social and cultural environment “can serve to spark creativity or to squelch it” (Lubart, 1990: 39). It takes a lot of effort to nurture it, but it is always worthwhile. Supporting the imaginative and innovative can only be beneficial, both to those who are creative and to the wider community. When resources are scarce, it seems that spending them on creativity is a high price to pay. However, the price for not supporting it is actually much higher. It is up to relevant social agents to acknowledge the need for the support of imagination and creativity and to find the most appropriate mechanisms to encourage them through various forms of family, formal and informal education in the lifelong learning perspective of every citizen. Only then the workforce and its products would be globally competitive in the contemporary world.

Several mechanisms are available for nurturing child imagination in an unsupportive social context: national strategies and programs for the gifted and talented, their more prominent social and media promotion, appeals to elites, governmental officials and institutions etc. One of the most salient channels of personal social promotion and related improvement of socioeconomic status (which, at least in Serbia, has effects on the encouragement of imagination) is education. Furthermore, some studies have shown that the more educated strata in population value imagination more (Joksimović, Maksić & Pavlović, 2007), which implies that imagination and creativity can be encouraged indirectly – by expansion of education and increasing its availability. This bears special relevance for those segments of

population who think that child's imagination is rather a waste of time than human capital or a valuable resource.

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