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Creativity and Creative Thinking: Are We Neglecting These Skills in the Education of Young People?

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Abstract

This paper explores the extent to which creativity and creative thinking are being neglected in contemporary education systems, particularly in the context of increasing emphasis on examinations and measurable academic outcomes. It argues that the prioritisation of factual knowledge acquisition has led to reduced opportunities for students to engage in imaginative, exploratory, and collaborative learning. Drawing on existing literature and a small-scale discussion group involving primary and secondary school teachers, the paper examines current practices, challenges, and gaps in the provision of creative learning experiences. Findings suggest that limited training, insufficient funding, and systemic pressures contribute to the marginalisation of creativity in schools. The paper highlights the importance of embedding creative approaches across all subjects and emphasises the need for improved teacher training and policy support. It concludes that fostering creativity is essential for developing adaptable, confident, and innovative individuals capable of contributing meaningfully to society.

Keywords: creativity, creative thinking, education policy, teacher training, curriculum development, student engagement

Introduction

Many educators wish to encourage creativity and creative thinking in the young people with whom they work. However, over the years, the acquisition of knowledge and success in tests and examinations appear to have pushed these two ambitions aside to a considerable extent. In many cases, this has led young people to become bored and resentful of learning within the school setting, leaving them disillusioned and feeling that formal education is neither enlightening, adventurous, nor enjoyable.

It can be argued that, over time, the education of young people has narrowed into the absorption and regurgitation of facts as and when re-

quired. This has contributed, in many cases, to disillusionment with the whole process of being educated, with little excitement, limited discovery of new ideas, and insufficient stimulation of curiosity. Without encouraging young people to be ambitious in creating new ideas, following new paths of discovery, and producing work that interests and excites others, learning can become reduced to the mere collection and absorption of facts. The result is often boredom and disinterest in learning, as education appears not as something that inspires the learner to explore new things, but rather as a process of absorbing and collecting the material desired by the teacher.

Creativity: What Is It and How Do We Achieve It?

When asking this question, we have to move away from thinking of education simply as the absorption of facts, led by a clear and structured pedagogical approach driven by the teacher. Instead, education needs to be understood as a form of exploration, where teachers facilitate learning by encouraging individual and group thinking and, above all, by inviting students to question the true purpose of learning.

This involves students exploring and realising that there is not only one right answer, but several ways of investigating a range of ideas and producing a useful response (Hoffmann et al., 2020). To do this, the teacher needs to act as a facilitator of varied and changing responses to a question, leaving final ideas open-ended and exploratory.

Included in this open-ended approach to problem-solving is a way of learning that is often project-based and undertaken by groups working together and exchanging ideas. Collaboration and working together to find a solution are generally far more successful than thinking alone, and are also of much greater use later in life when young people enter the world of work. Collaboration encourages creativity, discussion, and the development of solutions from several different angles, all of which support creative thinking.

Working together encourages divergent thinking. However, working and thinking alone also has an important part to play, especially when individual ideas and approaches are later brought together in pairs, groups, or across the whole class. Learning in this way can be very helpful in preparing students for the world of work, where teamwork and creative thinking combined can help to produce strong results. It is therefore essential that teachers understand the part played in learning by a variety of approaches, whether individual or collaborative, and that students are given experience of these different ways of learning.

However, supporting teachers in this approach requires changes in how they are prepared for their role. Teachers need to be equipped not only to deliver knowledge, but also to act as facilitators, encouragers of divergent thinking, and guides who help students explore questions from a variety of angles.

The above comments raise important questions, one of which is how teachers should be trained to undertake this approach in their teaching in order to encourage creativity and creative thinking in their students. Clearly, different subject areas require varied approaches. Creative subjects such as art, music, drama, and writing may appear more naturally suited to encouraging creativity than others. However, creativity should not be confined to these areas alone.

Staff at the University of Leeds produced a report in 2025 promoting the need to embed creativity in the curriculum. This report underlines the importance of an inclusive approach to creativity in schools, as the current system does not appear to be providing equal access to creative subjects for all children. This can affect the opportunities of children who may otherwise aspire towards careers in creative fields. Disadvantaged children and those with SEND may be particularly affected when creative learning is not fully included in schools. As Mon-Williams (2025) states, "It is time to recognise that creativity is not an optional extra – it is a fundamental pillar of an inclusive, opportunity-rich society."

An evidence-based approach to creating a culture of inclusive opportunity through arts and creativity is the twelfth and final monthly report in the Child of the North/Centre for Young Lives series, edited by Professor Mark Mon-Williams and Dr Megan Wood at the University of Leeds. The report suggests that schools should provide free music and singing lessons for three years for every child who wishes to learn. It also argues that time for children to be creative in schools is essential. However, affording specialist teachers in these areas, and supporting children who may lack facilities to practise at home, present enormous challenges. In many cases, these challenges prevent forward progress.

Mon-Williams (2025) also insists that embedding creative approaches in learning changes lives and achievement levels. There are claims that, in Britain, creative learning experiences can increase the possibilities of social mobility, help equip children more equally with the skills they need to progress in the challenging world they face, and enable them to contribute to the growth of the economy. It appears that private schools have often provided access to creative subjects, whereas state schools have fallen behind to some extent because of limited funding, poor attendance, and the widening attainment gap between children.

The country employs many people in creative careers, but poor funding for creativity in state schools means that many students are deprived of this important area of learning. The challenge, therefore, is to provide sufficient finance and, in addition, to find teachers who understand creativity and are equipped with the skills to develop it in children.

The report mentioned above also notes the reduction in the number of creative subjects being studied at GCSE level, including music, drama, and dance. As a result, there are serious concerns that Britain's standing in the creative world is weakening, as those who have talent and ability may

not have access to creative learning and qualifications. This is mainly due to inequalities in children's backgrounds and opportunities.

Providing these opportunities can be impossible for families with several children or those on low incomes. Music lessons, for example, are expensive, and an instrument also has to be provided. In some areas, local groups attempt to provide creative experiences outside school hours, but generally there is a cost for each child, which can be impossible for some families to meet. The author has a granddaughter who attends a Saturday group, run by volunteers, which provides singing practice and experiences of drama and dance. However, there are still costs involved, as the hall used for these activities has to be paid for through parental contributions. If schools are unable to provide such opportunities, many children will miss an essential part of the learning process that encourages creativity and creative thinking.

The report's conclusions recommend that more funding should be provided for creative subjects. They also recommend that Ofsted inspections should examine and inquire into the provision of creative subjects within a school's curriculum, and that teaching for creativity should be embedded into that curriculum. The report further recommends funding for teacher training in this area, both during initial teacher education and through professional development courses for experienced teachers, so that they can embrace creative teaching and learning for their students.

This would require schools to offer arts and music education to all students. In addition to these recommendations, it is essential that creative thinking is included in subjects where it may appear less obvious, such as history and science. In primary schools in particular, all children should have opportunities to sing, paint, draw, create, and act. In addition, storytelling, the exploration of local history and heritage, and the use of local cultural institutions can enable schools to broaden their curriculum and deepen students' understanding. To achieve these aims, children need to be engaged and actively doing, rather than merely being told about the work of others or seeing it from a distance.

These recommendations cannot be achieved unless teachers are helped to improve their own creative skills and feel confident to teach those skills to their students. Therefore, all teachers in infant and primary schools need opportunities to develop their own creative abilities, as well as to learn how to develop such abilities in children. They should experience creative skill enhancement within their own training programmes. In addition, teachers already working in schools need regular updates on approaches to the teaching of creative skills, so that they develop increased competence and confidence in this important area of learning.

It appears that, once again, the programme for training teachers is not sufficiently supplied with opportunities for prospective teachers to improve their own abilities in thinking and learning creatively, and to pass these understandings and aspirations on to the children they teach. The

country, and those who shape education, the National Curriculum, and teacher education — including the Department for Education, governments, local authority education departments, and Ofsted — need to address this apparent gap in the school curriculum and in teacher training. The difference between schools and their approaches to the question of creativity is striking, as provision is far from equal, particularly for disadvantaged children.

Research

In order to explore this area, a discussion group was established between the author and a selection of teachers from primary and secondary schools. Questions were asked about opportunities for creative learning experiences in schools, the practicalities of delivering a curriculum rich in creative experiences, the confidence of teachers in their own abilities in this area, and the training and support they had received in order to approach this aspect of the curriculum.

Six participants, three from primary schools and three from secondary schools, agreed to meet to discuss their experiences, achievements, and difficulties in this area of the curriculum. One school in South East England, within easy travelling distance of the other schools involved, offered the use of a room after the school day, once a week. A day was agreed with the participants, and questions were prepared. The group were interested in and supportive of the research, for which the author is most grateful.

When asked about the provision of creative subjects in their schools, there was a marked difference between the responses of primary teachers and those of secondary teachers. Generally, the primary schools had a choir, and two had drama clubs, as well as some opportunities for children to learn musical instruments in school. The latter were paid for by parents, and instruments, mostly the piano, were available during school breaks and after school if children did not have them at home.

Among the secondary school respondents, only one school had a choir and an active small orchestra, which was much valued by staff and parents. One secondary school had an active drama club and occasionally put on plays for parents and students. Another secondary school had visiting music teachers and a headteacher who was very keen to develop creativity in students. To some extent, this placed pressure on staff to become involved, although some were not at all happy about this, as the group was informed by that school's representative.

When questioned about their own training in creativity, most of the group laughed and said, "What training?" Some representatives had trained quite a long time ago, but three had trained within the last four years. Discussion of their training produced responses that demonstrated a gap in teachers' learning in this area. Little, it appeared, was being offered in schools. Three members of the group said that creative thinking and the

encouragement of creativity were rarely mentioned in their schools. Much more importance was given to writing, mathematical skills, and science. The secondary teachers all said that the pressure to achieve good examination results was paramount in their schools. One participant also stated that a recent Ofsted inspection had not raised any questions about creativity in the curriculum.

Conclusion

It appears from these limited findings that much needs to change in schools and in the training of teachers if stronger efforts are to be made to develop creativity and creative thinking in educational establishments, including those that train teachers. It would also have been helpful to hear the views of private school staff and to compare these with state school provision. However, attempts to involve some private schools in the discussion produced no response.

It does appear that this area of the curriculum, which is not often explicitly stated in Department for Education activity, is not attracting the attention it requires. With the current strong pressure on schools to achieve high-level results in national examinations and inspections, and with these tests being largely directed towards subject knowledge and the ability to reproduce and apply it, the outlook for creativity and creative thinking appears limited.

This can strongly affect the ability of students to look at the world from a different perspective and to be ready to adapt to the many challenges they will face as they move towards adulthood. Creativity has the potential to enlighten, stimulate, and bring enjoyment to learning. We therefore need to examine what type of adult we wish education to develop, and how that adult might contribute to improving the future of the country.

If education is to support young people fully, learning strategies need to move beyond factual repetition and towards creative approaches that improve thinking, confidence, adaptability, and enjoyment in life. Creativity and creative thinking should not be seen as additional or decorative aspects of education. They should be recognised as central to the development of young people who are capable of questioning, imagining, collaborating, and contributing meaningfully to the future.

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