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# Developing Creative Thinking Skills in Students at Intellectual Schools

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**Abstract**

In Kazakhstan, the education system is transitioning from a traditional to a student-centered approach. While several studies have been conducted on various aspects of education in the Kazakhstani context, there is a lack of specific research addressing the impact of the school curriculum on students' creativity. This study aimed to investigate the effects of the educational program at an experimental school in Kazakhstan on enhancing students' creative potential. The research used qualitative methods, using semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and classroom observations. The participants included 12 students from grades 7-12 and 12 teachers in various subjects. The findings showed that the school curriculum positively influences the development of students' creativity skills. However, it was recommended that more flexibility be incorporated into the curriculum to further enhance creativity. The study suggests recommendations for curriculum developers and school administrators to consider both students' and teachers' perspectives in refining the parts of the curriculum aimed at fostering creativity. Additionally, this study suggests further research on improving creative thinking in secondary schools using a mixed-methods approach and a larger sample size.

**Keywords:** Creativity, Creative potential, Creative thinking skills, Students

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## Introduction

Creative thinking skills begin to develop in the early stages of human growth [1]. Torrance [2] suggests that even young children begin to show signs of creativity through their imagination. Kellog [3] asserts that children as young as three years old, or even earlier, begin to draw simple shapes like circles and rectangles, helping them understand and perceive abstract concepts. This, in turn, allows children to express themselves as unique individuals [4]. Creativity can also be observed in early childhood through productive skills such as drawing and speaking [3]. Torrance [5] supports Jung's view, emphasizing that children's drawings are key indicators of their creative thinking levels.

The inclusion of creativity in educational policy reflects the growing recognition that creativity is an essential component of education. O'Donnell and Micklethwaite (1999) examined the educational programs of 16 countries, including developed nations in North America, Europe, and East Asia, to identify how creativity and the arts are integrated into the education system. Their research revealed that these countries incorporate creativity at various educational levels, with some emphasizing it from early childhood education through to higher education. For instance, Canada recognizes "creative

thinking" as a vital element of the learning process, while education in Kentucky, USA, focuses on fostering creative thinking through the invention of novel and practical ideas. The Korean National Curriculum describes an educated individual as "healthy, independent, creative, and moral." Sweden's National Development Plan for Education aims to support creativity development in both preschool and adult education (1997). In France, one of the main goals of schools is to foster a "taste for creation" in children during their lower secondary school years, while primary schools in Germany and the Netherlands emphasize the development of children's creative abilities.

One critical factor that enhances students' creativity is their relationship with members of society, particularly with parents. The rapid advancement of technology, however, has reduced face-to-face interactions, increasing reliance on computers, which negatively affects children's creativity development [6]. Furthermore, the increasing reliance on the internet for quick answers has led to a lack of originality. The widespread use of technology has been criticized for promoting passive communication and stifling creativity in various fields. According to *the Guardian*, the internet has stifled creativity by encouraging passive behavior, such as using emotional labels rather than words and relying on simple actions like liking, sharing, or disliking content. These behaviors prioritize efficiency over creativity, allowing individuals to consume more content while interacting less creatively.

These insights lead us to investigate whether the instincts of creativity are nurtured alongside academic performance. When students focus predominantly on academic knowledge—due to the emphasis on school standards and performance in high-stakes testing—creativity may take a back seat. Thus, it is crucial to explore whether the school curriculum in the experimental school supports the development of students' creativity, despite the emphasis on academic achievement in this new experimental platform, where student performance in academic subjects is heavily prioritized.

According to Western literature, creativity plays a crucial role in enhancing students' cognitive abilities. Researchers argue that creative thinking is foundational to the general thinking process, and therefore, students need imaginative skills to boost their academic performance. Runco [7] emphasizes that creative thinking is not merely a way of self-expression, but rather a holistic, universal process that manifests in various forms depending on an individual's unique abilities. For example, one student may express creativity more effectively through visual means, while another may excel in verbal expression. This variation makes it essential to study students' creative potential in the experimental school, where each student is unique, having undergone a selective admission process.

Another compelling reason to explore this area is the increasing interest in the role of creativity in education. Creative thinking is considered a key factor in addressing several challenges related to students' motivation and academic achievement [8]. This is because creative potential not only contributes to higher academic performance but can also enhance economic success by helping individuals navigate the growing global competition. This underscores the importance of integrating creativity into education, making it a central focus in teaching and learning processes [9]. Furthermore, creativity is vital in inclusive education, where students with diverse abilities and talents learn together in the same classroom. Despite the ongoing transformation in education to better meet the needs and skills of every student, critics argue that the current educational system still falls short of fostering creative and original thinkers [10].

Key features of creativity potential by Runco [7], Torrance [5], and Jung [4] are presented in **Table 1**.

**Table 1.** Key features of creativity potential by Runco [7], Torrance [5], and Jung [4]

| | |
|---|---|
| **Common features of creativity potential** | Imagination |
| | Perceiving abstracts |
| | Creative thinking |
| | Original thinking |
| | Unique skills |

Education has often been criticized for diminishing creativity rather than nurturing it, primarily due to its "spoon-fed" approach and insufficient differentiation in teaching methods [11]. The dominant focus on academic achievement often sidelines creativity in schools, where knowledge acquisition is prioritized. Nevertheless, educational paradigms are beginning to shift, recognizing the importance of creativity alongside traditional academic success. In response to this, school curricula are increasingly incorporating components aimed at fostering students' creative potential. This is not limited to classroom lessons but extends to extracurricular activities and special events such as concerts, roundtable discussions, seminars, and interactions with influential figures. Teachers in the experimental school are generally aware of the significance of these activities. However, there is a gap in research regarding the actual impact of these curricular and extracurricular activities on students' creative development. It became essential, therefore, to explore whether these initiatives effectively enhance students' creativity and how they contribute to the overall creative thinking process.

To address this, a conceptual framework was developed, based on a comprehensive review of relevant literature. This framework focuses on the key elements of creativity and its integration into the educational experience. Drawing on the work of Cropley (2001), it categorizes creativity into two distinct levels: sublime creativity and everyday creativity. Teachers often interpret and cultivate creativity in various ways depending on their approach, and they must address both levels in their teaching practices. Ensuring alignment with these categories allows for more effective development of students' creativity and mitigates challenges in the process **(Table 2)**. The study aimed to examine how teachers and students at the experimental school understand and implement formative assessment in the classroom, particularly concerning creativity, and to identify the challenges faced during its application.

**Table 2.** Conceptual framework (adapted from "Creativity in education and learning," by Cropley (2001))

| Aspects of creativity | Characteristics |
|---|---|
| **High-level creativity** | Individuals who achieve significant recognition in their field, whether in the arts or professions. These include winners of prestigious awards such as the Nobel Prize, Booker Prize, Archibald Prize, or Pulitzer Prize. |
| **Everyday creativity** | Individuals who engage in creative activities but without necessarily producing notable, impactful, or ethical results. Examples include hobbies like knitting or gardening. |
| **Participants in creativity development** | Teachers, students, peers, parents, and mentors or tutors are involved in nurturing creativity. |
| **Timeframe for creativity development** | Creativity is cultivated both within the classroom (during lessons) and through extracurricular activities outside of class. |
| **Approaches for teachers to foster creativity** | Teachers implement creativity development through various types of planning, including long-term, medium-term, and short-term lesson plans, as well as relevant school documentation. |
| **Teacher-student interaction** | Interactions between teachers and students are built upon both formal and informal roles. |
| **Motivation** | Motivation for creativity can stem from both external (extrinsic) and internal (intrinsic) sources. |
| **External influences on creativity** | External factors typically play a significant role in refining creativity practices. |

Source: "The practical implications of educational aims and contexts for formative assessment"

## Materials and Methods

This chapter details the research methodology and design implemented in this study, which aims to assess the impact of an experimental school's educational program on the creative potential of its students. The chapter also discusses the participant selection process and the sampling strategies used to explore the primary research question: How does the educational program at the school foster the development of students' creativity skills?

### *Research design*

A qualitative research approach was adopted for this study, as it was intended to gain a deep understanding of the perceptions and practices concerning creativity within the school's curriculum. This approach provides rich insights into the experiences in the classroom, particularly regarding the development of creative thinking skills. Elliot [12] and Eisner [13] argue that qualitative research offers a unique advantage by allowing researchers to explore schools and classrooms in a way that benefits broader educational contexts while also providing valuable feedback to individual teachers about their practice. This aligns with the goals of the current research, which seeks to examine how creativity is implemented in the experimental school setting. Additionally, qualitative research allows teachers to receive feedback that is more relevant and specific to their unique teaching environments, as opposed to generalized information typically provided through professional development programs or academic publications [12]. The choice of a qualitative approach is thus justified by the desire to explore how creative thinking skills are being cultivated within an innovative school model, which has the potential to influence mainstream schools in Kazakhstan.

### *Research site*

The study was conducted at an experimental school in Kazakhstan, which has been employing a student-centered teaching approach since 2013. The focus of the research was on understanding how both teachers and students engage with and develop creativity skills within the framework of the school's educational program. The selection of this particular school was based

on two key factors. Firstly, the experimental school is at the forefront of adopting international educational practices and has been instrumental in sharing these methods with other schools in Kazakhstan. As such, it was crucial to examine how creativity is being nurtured among students at this school, particularly because these students are expected to serve as models for other educators across the country. Secondly, the school was chosen for its accessibility, both in terms of location and willingness to support research that contributes to the ongoing development of educational practices.

### *Research participants*

This section outlines the participants and sampling methods employed in this study. Maxwell [14] emphasizes that the purpose of research is not just to generalize findings to a larger population but to gain a deep, accurate, and relevant understanding of the phenomenon being studied [14]. Similarly, Patton [15] asserts that sampling should focus on obtaining an in-depth understanding of the data, rather than the number of participants involved.

The target group for this research consisted of students in Grades 7-12 and teachers from various departments in an experimental school in Kazakhstan. The study utilized purposeful sampling to explore how students and teachers at this school perceive creativity and how they integrate it into their practices to enhance students' creative thinking skills. As noted by Emmel (2013), purposeful sampling enables researchers to obtain meaningful data from participants who are knowledgeable and experienced in the subject matter, making it an effective strategy in qualitative research. Therefore, teachers from different departments and students from Grades 7-12 were invited to participate voluntarily. In total, 12 teachers (one from each department) with 1 to 6 years of teaching experience at the experimental school, along with students who have been studying there for 1 to 6 years, were selected. Gender and grade level representation were ensured during the participant selection process.

### *Data collection instruments*

Given the qualitative nature of the study, which allows participants to express their experiences in depth, multiple data collection methods were used: semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. These instruments enabled a comprehensive understanding of how creativity is cultivated within the school's curriculum.

### *Semi-structured interviews*

The interview questions were designed to explore the teacher's and school administration's approaches to improving students' creative thinking skills. Semi-structured interviews are known for their flexibility, allowing interviewers to adjust questions based on the discussion [16]. They are particularly suitable for small groups and provide a deeper understanding of participants' perceptions. These interviews enabled the researcher to gather rich, detailed responses from teachers, offering insights into their creative practices. The interviews were conducted in the participants' preferred languages (Kazakh, Russian, or English), ensuring comfort and clarity for all participants.

### *Classroom observations*

One classroom observation was conducted for each teacher, and one for a student, to examine the ongoing practices aimed at enhancing creative thinking in the classroom. The objectives of the observations were: 1) to complement and verify the interview data regarding participants' perceptions and practices of creativity; 2) to identify any discrepancies or alignments between perceptions and practices; and 3) to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges and methods related to fostering creativity. The observations provided valuable insights into real classroom dynamics, revealing how creativity is implemented and the challenges faced by both students and teachers.

### *Document analysis*

The document analysis involved reviewing the school's policy, curriculum, and course plans, as well as the mid-term and short-term lesson plans of the interviewed teachers. These documents were crucial in understanding the strategies and approaches embedded in the school's curriculum aimed at enhancing students' creativity potential.

## Results and Discussion

The primary focus of the study was to explore teachers' and students' understanding of creativity and their perceptions regarding the impact of school activities and lessons on the development of creative thinking skills. Based on the data collected, it was found that nearly all participants, both students and teachers, held positive views and attitudes toward the use and enhancement of creativity in the experimental school setting **(Table 3)**.

**Table 3.** General data about research participants

| Group | No. | Participant | Duration of work/study in the experimental school | Areas of creativity improvement |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Group 1: experienced teachers** | 1 | Participant A | 4.5 years | Lessons, extracurricular activities, research, and project works |
| | 2 | Participant B | 4.5 years | Lessons, extracurricular activities, research, and project works |
| | 3 | Participant C | 4 years | Lessons, extracurricular activities, research, and project works |
| | 4 | Participant D | 4 years | Lessons, extracurricular activities, research, and project works |
| | 5 | Participant E | 3 years | Lessons, extracurricular activities, research, and project works |
| | 6 | Participant F | 3 years | Lessons, extracurricular activities, research, and project works |
| **Group 2: Less experienced teachers** | 7 | Participant G | 2 years | Lessons, extracurricular activities |
| | 8 | Participant H | 2 years | Lessons, extracurricular activities |
| | 9 | Participant I | 1.5 years | Lessons, extracurricular activities |
| | 10 | Participant J | 1 year | Lessons, extracurricular activities |
| | 11 | Participant K | Less than 1 year (novice teacher) | Lessons, extracurricular activities |
| | 12 | Participant L | Less than 1 year (novice teacher) | Lessons, extracurricular activities |
| **Group 3: Grade 7-9 students** | 1 | Participant A1 | Up to 1 year | Inside and outside the classroom |
| | 2 | Participant B1 | Up to 1 year | Inside and outside the classroom |
| | 3 | Participant C1 | Up to 2 years | Inside and outside the classroom |
| | 4 | Participant D1 | Up to 2 years | Inside and outside the classroom |
| | 5 | Participant E1 | Up to 3 years | Inside and outside the classroom |
| | 6 | Participant F1 | Up to 3 years | Inside and outside the classroom |
| **Group 4: Grade 10-12 students** | 7 | Participant G1 | Up to 4 years | Inside and outside the classroom |
| | 8 | Participant H1 | Up to 4 years | Inside and outside the classroom |
| | 9 | Participant I1 | Up to 5 years | Inside and outside the classroom |
| | 10 | Participant J1 | Up to 5 years | Inside and outside the classroom |
| | 11 | Participant K1 | Up to 6 years | Inside and outside the classroom |
| | 12 | Participant L1 | Up to 6 years | Inside and outside the classroom |

The participants of the study generally shared a positive view of creativity, emphasizing its significant role in enhancing students' motivation, enthusiasm, and learning experiences. This perspective was evident in their responses when asked about their overall understanding of creativity. One participant stated:

"In my opinion, creativity is the key element that inspires both students and teachers, making them feel motivated and excited about what they are teaching or learning. Lessons become more engaging when creative techniques like drawing, singing, and imagination are incorporated. This is something we frequently do at our school" (Participant F).

Another participant explained:

"Creativity is present in every aspect of the classroom: from how we present topics, how we convey our knowledge, to the kinds of questions we ask students and much more. Creativity isn't limited to activities like singing or dancing; it's a broad concept that includes various elements. Many of these elements are successfully applied by both teachers and students here" (Participant C).

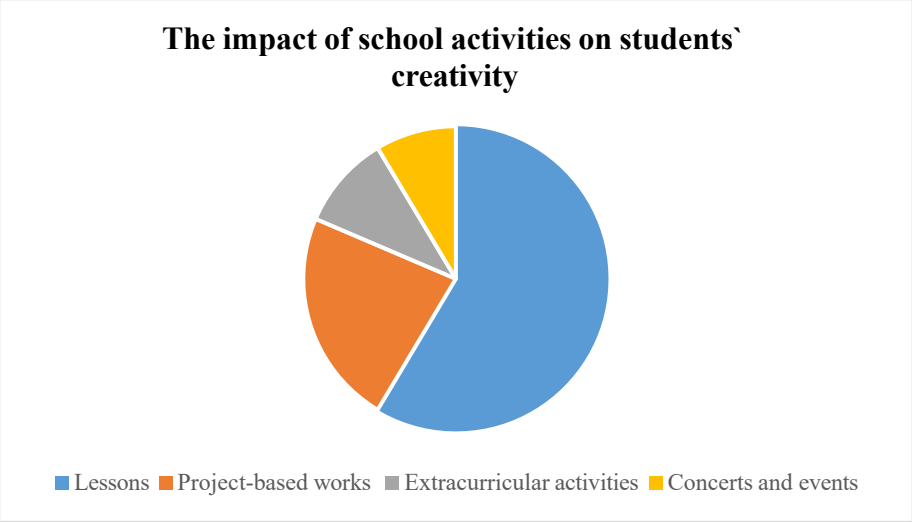


**Figure 1.** The impact percentage of school activities on students` creativity potential

**Figure 1** summarizes the findings from the interviews with both teachers and students. According to the research participants, the lessons in the experimental school are pivotal in developing students' creativity. Since a significant portion of the school day is dedicated to lessons, these are seen as the primary means for cultivating creative potential. Creativity is enhanced through activities such as problem-solving tasks, projects, debates, role-plays, games, and other engaging exercises conducted in class. Both teachers and students shared their views on effective strategies for fostering creativity:

Participant E shared, "Creativity is essential in the teaching and learning process. Teachers should foster an environment that supports creative thinking. By presenting different problem-solving methods or offering creative solutions to real-life situations, teachers can enhance creativity."

Participant A stated, "In my lessons, I strive to apply the most effective strategies. I am inspired by Torrance's work, which suggests that meta-analysis is one of the best ways to improve students' creativity, and I integrate this approach in my teaching."

Participant L commented, "For creativity to flourish, teachers must pay attention during class discussions. Some students tend to ask more questions than others. Though answering all these questions can sometimes be time-consuming, it's important to engage those students and provide them with the space to express their curiosity and receive answers."

To explore the topic further and gain insights into the students' views on creativity development strategies, the same question was asked to them. The aim was to understand which strategies they felt were most effective in enhancing their creative abilities, as students are the focal point of this research.

Participant G1 explained, "In my opinion, when teachers give us tasks, they should focus not only on the outcome but also on the process of solving the problem. Even if a student doesn't reach the correct answer, the steps they take to find it should be acknowledged. This would motivate us more and encourage us to be more creative."

Participant A1 added, "Students should have more freedom in class. We shouldn't be afraid to give one answer. Students should be encouraged to think creatively and express answers in their way."

Participant K1 noted, "Creativity boosts our confidence. When teachers nurture our creativity, we begin to take control of our learning. Giving us tasks like designing projects or exhibitions for our final works helps us feel proud of what we've created, and we also gain valuable insights from presenting our work to our peers."

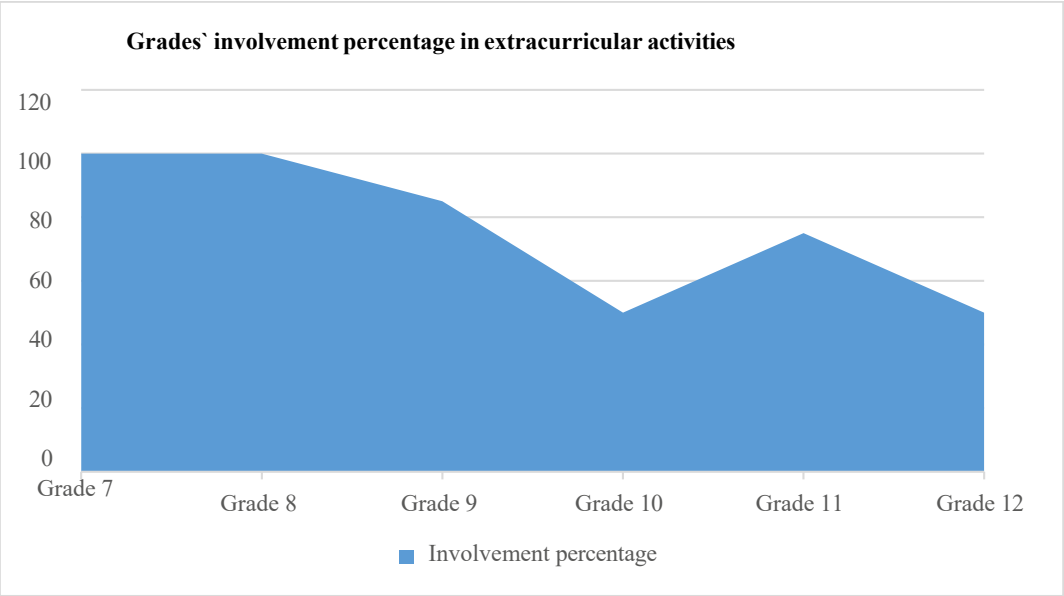


**Figure 2.** The grades` involvement percentage of school students in extracurricular activities

**Figure 2** illustrates the participation rate of students in Grades 7-12 in extracurricular activities, which include various clubs such as foreign language, pottery, robotics, and ICT design, as well as concerts, meetings with prominent figures in arts, politics, and science, and self-governance activities. Participation in these activities allows students to exercise their autonomy, helping them cultivate both their creative talents and sense of responsibility [17].

Participant C1 shared: "In my opinion, teachers should always foster curiosity. They need to remember their own student experiences and consider what matters to them. When teachers select engaging materials or tasks, it helps us enjoy learning and makes it easier. Creativity should be nurtured by considering students' interests and motivations."

Although the majority of participants expressed a positive attitude toward creativity-enhancing practices in lessons and extracurricular activities, a few raised concerns about the balance of such activities. One participant explained:

"It's great that our school focuses on developing creativity alongside academic knowledge, whether it's through playing games, drawing, singing songs, designing robots, conducting experiments, or organizing concerts. We also have plenty of extracurricular and sports activities to boost our creativity. However, sometimes it can feel like too much, especially when exams are approaching. It becomes challenging to manage everything. I think some activities aimed at improving creativity should be optional or adjusted, taking into account students' opinions, to prevent overload."

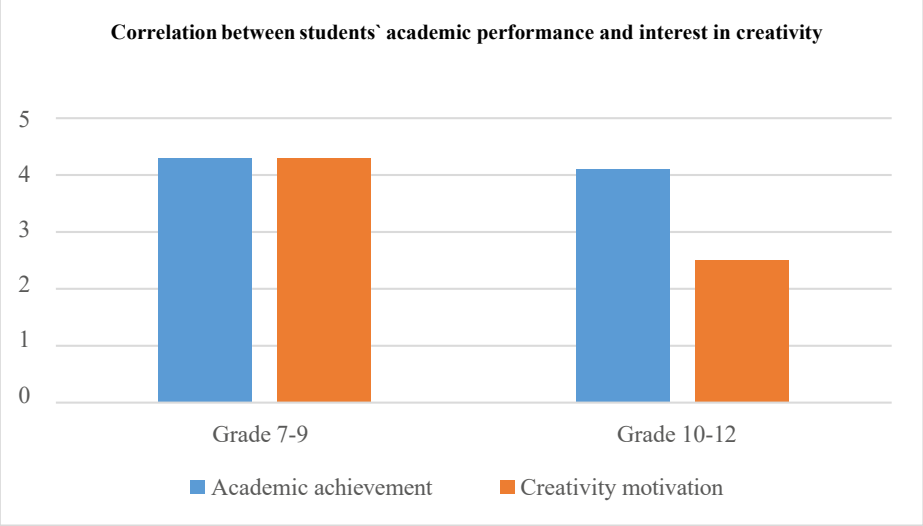


**Figure 3.** The correlation difference in students` academic performance and creativity interests

From **Figure 3**, it is clear that while the formation of creativity skills at the intellectual school, which serves as an experimental model for all Kazakhstani schools, is well-organized and structured, it still requires further refinement. This should take into account not only the opinions of students but also their skills, abilities, and needs. Addressing these factors would help prevent time-management challenges, student complaints about deadlines, and other related issues. In general, creativity should not

be reduced to activities like singing, dancing, drawing, or painting. It should also encompass how students approach tasks, analyze situations, and draw conclusions. As a result, students' creativity is not solely shaped through extracurricular activities such as clubs, games, or roundtable discussions, but also through their lessons. This means that teachers must be skilled and competent enough to effectively foster students' creative thinking skills within the allocated lesson time.

## Conclusion

To conclude, creativity should not be viewed as a single skill, but rather as a holistic process that can manifest in a variety of forms. The role of teachers is crucial in promoting creativity both during school hours and after classes. A common challenge for educators is identifying students' creativity levels and interests promptly, and nurturing them in a way that aligns with each student's unique personality and interests.

A key finding in the research was that students struggle with time management and the overload caused by planned extracurricular events within the curriculum. These events, designed to enhance students' creativity, include activities such as clubs, meetings, roundtables, seminars, concerts, coaching, competitions, debates, TEDx, and sports events. While these activities are beneficial, students commonly complain about the lack of flexibility in attending them. Participation in such activities should be driven by students' interests and motivation, not mandated by others. Forcing participation may diminish students' motivation and interest, ultimately hindering the development of their creativity. Therefore, it is essential to consider both students' and teachers' input when planning the school year and curriculum to allow for more flexibility and ensure students feel their voices are heard.

Based on these conclusions, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Enhanced cooperation: There should be stronger collaboration among students, teachers, parents, and curators. This collaboration will enable teachers to gain a more in-depth understanding of each student's characteristics, skills, and interests, providing a comprehensive view of their creative potential.
2. Parental involvement: Parents should take a more active role in communicating with the school, offering detailed insights into their children's interests and hobbies. This would allow the school community to better assess the needs and abilities of each student and tailor educational approaches accordingly.

The next recommendation is to organize systematic workshops for teachers to help them better form students' creative potential based on individual student characteristics. While teachers acknowledge the importance of fostering creativity in their classrooms, they encounter difficulties in their everyday teaching practices. A primary reason for this is that many teachers lack the professional competence needed to identify students' needs and developmental trajectories. Another issue is that some educators view creativity in a limited way, focusing on certain aspects such as games, songs, and art, rather than embracing creativity as a holistic approach. While teachers are capable of organizing creative activities like those mentioned, they often struggle to integrate creativity into academic lessons.

It was also found that most teacher training programs on creativity tend to emphasize theoretical knowledge over practical application. For example, while teachers generally understand the significance of creativity and its benefits, the research revealed that they still face challenges in implementing it effectively—such as assessing students' creativity levels, identifying their interests and talents, and fostering their development. Participants in the study indicated that many professional development sessions are theory-based, offering limited opportunities for hands-on practice in real classroom settings. As a result, teachers expressed a need for more practice-oriented training to improve their ability to nurture creativity in their students.

Based on the findings of this study, several suggestions can be made for future research. Since this research focused solely on the development of creativity in intellectual schools, future studies could expand the sample to include various types of schools, such as primary and secondary schools. This would allow for the exploration of contextual differences and identify factors that influence the development of students' creativity across different educational environments.

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