

# Teaching as Creative Endeavour

An approach to foster positive wellbeing in education

## Introduction

Wellbeing has garnered increasing attention internationally and nationally in the field of education, evidenced in Ireland by the publication of the Wellbeing Framework for Practice in 2018. While the stated vision of this policy focuses on promoting wellbeing in education, the high-level actions encourage schools to work in creative and innovative ways to identify and realise wellbeing in their organisations. However, of particular note is the absence of recognising or encouraging creativity as a conduit for wellbeing in our schools and classrooms across the continuum of education.

Creativity has been defined as the ability to produce new ideas and work (Sternberg & Lubart, 1999) through a sequence of thoughts and actions that result in novel approaches and production (Lubart, 2001). Robinson and Aronica (2016) suggested that it is 'the process of having original ideas that have value'; while imagination is the root of creativity, creativity is the putting to work of imagination.

Creativity is role-modelled and embedded in our schools through pedagogies and practices that develop the skills and competencies our children and young people require to be creative and innovative citizens contributing to the continuous (re)shaping of our society.

## Creativity and wellbeing

This article draws on data from a qualitative research study (CreatEd) using semi-structured interviews conducted with 11 teachers working in primary and post-primary schools across Ireland. The main aim of the



**Dr Deirdre McGillicuddy**

Primary School Teacher and Assistant  
Professor in Education, University College  
Dublin

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**This article explores the role of creativity in fostering wellbeing across the continuum of education. It draws on findings from the CreatEd study to interrogate how creativity is defined and supported in education and the potentialities it presents for nurturing wellbeing across our school communities, particularly in supporting how young people understand who they are as citizens in an increasingly complex and globalised world.**

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CreatEd study was to explore the role of creativity in education. Wellbeing emerged from data analysis as one of the key themes.

Creativity was defined by participants as an ‘expression of self, the process of creating ‘something unique’ that was of ‘benefit to others’, and of ‘putting something into the world that wasn’t there before’. It is interesting to note that teachers placed equal emphasis on creativity as process, as pedagogical approach, as they did on creativity as distinctively arts-based. Creativity was considered a key methodological approach to meeting children’s needs by embracing individual forms of expression, while also contributing to enhancing student engagement, bringing learning to life and making it fun. Key characteristics of this approach included busy, noisy, active classrooms filled with pupils/students and teachers who are full of excitement and enthusiasm.

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The symbiotic relationship between creativity and wellbeing identified by participants was of particular note. While some believed that positive wellbeing was essential to nurturing creativity, others suggested that creativity fostered positive wellbeing. Adopting creative pedagogical practices evoked strong psychosocial responses, ‘sparking curiosity and happiness’ and a sense of ‘excitement in coming up with new ways of doing and learning’. This is especially important when contributing to the eudaimonic development of pupil/student wellbeing, with creativity perceived to play a critical role in allowing them to ‘express self and feelings’ as they come to understand their true selves in the world around them.

## Connection

The world’s longest-running longitudinal lifecourse study, the Harvard Study of Adult Development, identified a strong correlation between relationships and wellbeing, with positive relationships significantly contributing to happier, healthier, and longer lives. Participants in the CreatEd study identified creativity as a really effective and impactful way to build and nurture relationships in the classroom both between peers and between educators and pupils/students. It was seen as a way to ‘build trust between student and teacher’ to ‘enable creativity through connection’.

Such connection through creativity allowed everyone to ‘get to really know each other and have fun’, which contributed directly to ‘breaking down barriers and enhancing communication’. Indeed, one participant suggested that to ensure a ‘creative journey, there’s a trust element there between teacher and students and building that kind of relationship to really allow a creative space to happen in the classroom’. The potential of creativity to nurture positive relationships between teachers and pupils/students cannot be overstated, particularly when considering the importance of positive wellbeing for all members of school communities.

## Leadership and growth

Teacher agency and school leadership were identified by participants as key drivers in creating environments conducive to facilitating creative approaches and pedagogical practices. It was argued that it is critical to give teachers the freedom to be creative in their approaches to teaching and learning, supporting and fostering creativity in our education system. One participant said that a key aspect of realising creativity in our schools is recognising and valuing creative practice. School leadership and national policy were identified as crucial in realising such an aspiration. Creativity was said to contribute positively to school improvement, but 'confident and secure leadership' was required to allow for freedom – 'and you need to know that you're supported by your school leader to deliver that bit of creativity'.

If play is 'the free expression of what is in a child's soul' (Froebel, 1826), creativity creates places, spaces, opportunities, approaches, and methodologies through which children and young people can explore who they are as citizens in the world, developing their sense of true self; it thereby contributes positively to their sense of wellbeing. Indeed, teaching is a creative endeavour, encompassing transformative possibilities for our teachers and pupils/students, especially in fostering positive wellbeing and sense of self in education and beyond. In an increasingly complex and globalised world, it is incumbent upon us to prepare our children and young people to respond in creative ways.

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