

Sofija GEORGIEVSKA

UDK: 159.954-057.875:37(497.7)

159.954-057.875:316.362.3(497.7)

Original research paper

## CREATIVITY IN SOCIAL WORK AND SOCIAL POLICY EDUCATION: THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS AND A STUDY OF STUDENT ATTITUDES

### **Abstract:**

*Creativity is a key component in contemporary education, especially within the field of social work, where professionals face complex and ever-changing societal challenges. The aim of this study was to examine students' perceptions of their own creativity, the educational climate, and family support as factors that either foster or hinder their creative potential. The research was conducted in May 2025 with a sample of 57 students from the Institute of Social Work and Social Policy. A questionnaire consisting of 20 Likert-scale items was used, divided into three dimensions: self-perceived creativity, school climate, and family support. The results revealed a moderately high level of self-perceived creativity ( $M = 3.84$ ), a strong sense of support from the family ( $M = 4.11$ ), but a weaker perception of institutional support ( $M = 3.21$ ). Correlation analysis indicated a significant relationship between self-perceived creativity and family support ( $r = 0.62$ ), as well as a moderate link with the educational climate ( $r = 0.44$ ). These findings confirm the importance of contextual influences in the development of creativity and point to the need for institutional changes to encourage it more actively.*

**Keywords:** *creativity, students, social work, family support, school climate*

## Introduction

In today's rapidly changing world, the ability to think and act creatively is essential for professionals in the fields of social work and social policy. The challenges facing modern societies—poverty, social exclusion, violence, migration, demographic shifts—demand new approaches, fresh solutions, and, above all, innovative thinking. Although creativity is often associated with the arts, innovation, or individual genius, it is also a fundamental competence for every professional who works with people, for people, and in the public interest.

This paper explores creativity not as an abstract talent, but as a practical and socially relevant skill—especially within higher education programs in social work and social policy. Through a review of relevant literature, theoretical models, and findings from a study conducted among students at the Faculty of Philosophy in Skopje, it lays the groundwork for a deeper understanding of the role of creativity in the social professions.

The goals of this paper are threefold: first, to establish a theoretical framework for understanding creativity as a social skill; second, to investigate students' perceptions regarding how much they feel supported and encouraged to be creative in their education; and third, to provide recommendations for fostering creative thinking as an integral part of the educational process in the humanities and social sciences.

Here is the English translation of Chapters 2 and 3, expanded for fluency and academic tone:

## Theoretical foundations: creativity as a social skill

creativity is often defined as the ability to generate new and useful ideas. However, in the context of social work, its value extends beyond idea generation to include the ability to identify needs, respond with empathy, and design interventions tailored to specific social contexts. This means that creativity is not only an intellectual process but also a value-driven and social capacity—part of the broader professional competencies of the social worker.

The literature identifies several models that explain creativity. Guilford (1950) introduced the distinction between convergent and divergent thinking, with the latter being the foundation of creative potential. Divergent thinking involves free association, originality, and flexibility—qualities essential for professionals dealing with complex human situations. Wallas (1926), on the other hand, proposed a model of creativity that includes four stages: preparation, incubation, illumination, and verification. This process can be observed even in the simplest social interventions—from the birth of an idea to its application in practice.

In social work, creativity often manifests as an alternative approach—a creative adaptation of methods to a specific client or group. It is expressed through the initiation of new services, program design, policy development, or

innovative practices in the field. Its foundation is not merely personal inspiration but also professional education that does not confine the individual within rigid procedural frameworks, but instead encourages critical and flexible thinking.

### **Social and educational factors in the development of creativity**

Creativity is not merely an individual capacity—it is a product of the interaction between the person and their social environment. Research shows that the family atmosphere, parenting styles, teachers' approaches, and societal expectations play a significant role in whether and how creative thinking will develop in children and young people.

While autonomy and a competitive spirit can stimulate creativity, they must be carefully supported. Excessive emphasis on performance and achievement—without room for play and experimentation—can stifle the natural impulse of a child to explore and create. Conversely, interdependence and strong family bonds can provide a sense of security and acceptance, forming the foundation for creative freedom. A study by Olszewski-Kubilius (2002) found that individuals with high academic and scientific achievement often came from cohesive families that offered strong parental support and identification.

It is important to distinguish between intellectual and creative development. While attachment to parents can foster discipline and cognitive stability, creativity thrives in environments where children are encouraged to explore independently and express their ideas. Parents who allow their children to make mistakes, experiment, and create without fear of judgment are, in fact, nurturing their creative identity.

One example from the literature illustrates this point: a father who built a perfect LEGO digger for his child, while impressive, actually limited the child's space for imagination. Instead of feeling joy from their own creation, the child remains overshadowed by the parent's achievement. This example reminds us that creativity is not measured by the perfection of the product but by the joy of the process.

In this sense, parenting styles oriented toward support rather than control—those that allow expression and do not sanction mistakes as failures but rather as paths to development—are associated with higher levels of creativity among children and adolescents. This is particularly important later in the educational process, where the same values can either foster or hinder creative growth.

### **Creativity in the educational context of social work**

In formal education, particularly in higher education, creativity can either be fostered or seriously inhibited. If students are exposed to uniform

knowledge delivery, with a strong orientation toward content reproduction and standardized testing, their opportunities to develop their own approach, critical thinking, and innovation are greatly reduced.

On the other hand, educational programs that encourage questioning, project-based learning, field activities, and the incorporation of personal experience and reflection, create space for students to develop creativity as part of their professional and personal growth.

This is especially important in social work and social policy, where each case is unique and universal solutions do not always apply. Students must not only know what a particular law or procedure looks like, but also how to adapt it to a real person with real problems. Here, creativity is expressed through adaptation, initiation, and the creation of new social responses.

### **Research: students' perceptions of creativity in social work education**

#### *Research Aim*

The aim of this study was to examine:

- Students' attitudes toward creativity in their education;
- Their self-assessment of creative potential;
- The relationship between creativity and factors such as autonomy, teacher support, and opportunities for experimentation.

#### *Methodology*

The research was conducted during May 2025, as part of a broader interest in understanding the factors that influence students' perceptions of creativity in the social sciences, specifically among students at the Institute of Social Work and Social Policy, Faculty of Philosophy, University "Ss. Cyril and Methodius" in Skopje. The study included qualitative elements in the design of the questions but was primarily based on quantitative methodology in order to collect statistically analyzable data and identify trends and correlations.

#### *Sample Selection*

A purposive sample of 57 students (42 women and 15 men) from the second and third year of studies was selected. These students were chosen because they already had sufficient academic and practical experience to form opinions on the role of creativity in their education. They were also actively engaged in field placements, group projects, and presentations, which made their perceptions particularly relevant for the study's goals.

The average age of participants was 21.3 years, ranging from 20 to 25. Most students came from urban areas, though several were from rural regions, which provided a small but meaningful heterogeneity in terms of social background.

### Research Instrument

The study used a structured survey questionnaire specifically designed for this purpose. It consisted of 20 statements divided into three thematic areas:

1. Self-perceived creativity – assessing how students view themselves in terms of creativity (e.g., “I believe my ideas are often original,” “I feel free to suggest new solutions”).
2. Educational climate for creativity – assessing the perceived support for creativity within the academic environment and by instructors (e.g., “Professors support different approaches,” “Creative expression is valued in class”).
3. Family support – examining the perception of how family environments contributed to the development of creativity (e.g., “My family encouraged innovative solutions”).

All items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale:

- 1 – Strongly disagree
- 2 – Disagree
- 3 – Neither agree nor disagree
- 4 – Agree
- 5 – Strongly agree

To assess internal consistency, Cronbach’s alpha was calculated and yielded the following values:

- 0.81 for the self-perceived creativity dimension
- 0.76 for the educational climate
- 0.79 for family support

These values indicate good to high reliability of the instrument, confirming its methodological appropriateness for this study.

### Implementation Procedure

The survey was administered anonymously during regular classes, with prior oral consent and clarification that the data would be used strictly for research and educational purposes. Students had 15 to 20 minutes to complete the questionnaire. It was emphasized that there were no “right” or “wrong” answers, as the focus was on personal perceptions and experiences. Additionally, an open-comment section allowed for further qualitative insights.

Ethical Considerations

The research was conducted in accordance with the fundamental ethical principles of the University, including:

- voluntary and informed participation,
- protection of participants' identities,
- use of data solely for academic purposes.

No personal data (such as names, student IDs, or addresses) were collected, and participants were informed that they could withdraw from the survey at any time without any consequences.

Statistical Analysis

The data were processed using SPSS (version 26). First, descriptive statistics were calculated (means, standard deviations, minimum, and maximum values), followed by Pearson correlation analysis to explore relationships among the three dimensions.

Additionally, a normality check was conducted for the distribution of scores using skewness and kurtosis analysis, as well as the Shapiro–Wilk test, to justify the use of parametric tests. All distributions were within acceptable ranges, allowing for the application of Pearson's correlation.

*Research Results*

The study included 57 students, of whom 42 were women (73.7%) and 15 were men (26.3%), in their second or third year at the Institute of Social Work and Social Policy. The average age of participants was 21.4 years ( $SD = 1.2$ ). The research focused on exploring three key dimensions: self-perceived creativity, the educational climate for creativity, and family support.

*Descriptive Statistics*

The table below presents the mean scores and standard deviations for each of the three dimensions:

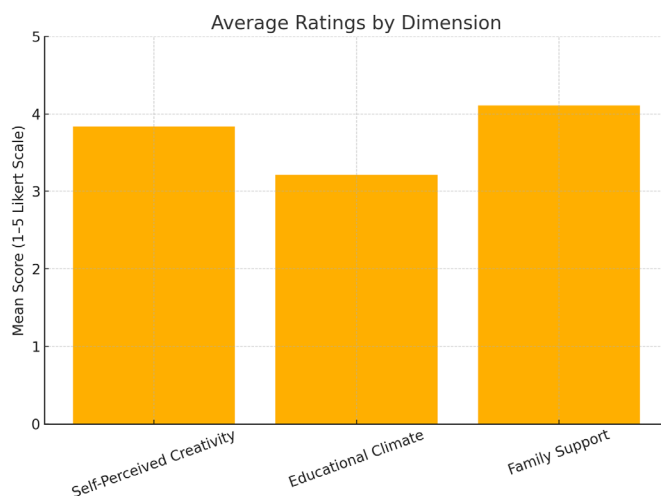
**Table 1.** Mean Scores and Standard Deviations by Dimension

Dimension	Mean	Standard Deviation
Self-perceived creativity	3.84	0.66
Educational climate for creativity	3.21	0.79
Family support for creativity	4.11	0.58

These results indicate that students perceive the highest level of support for creativity from their families, while the lowest-rated dimension was the climate for creative expression within the educational process.

The bar chart illustrates the average values reported by students for each of the three main dimensions assessed in the study: self-perceived creativity, educational climate, and family support. The results show that family support received the highest average score ( $M = 4.11$ ), indicating that students strongly feel encouraged to think creatively within their home environments. Self-perceived creativity follows with a solid average of  $M = 3.84$ , suggesting that students generally view themselves as creative individuals. In contrast, the dimension of educational climate for creativity scored the lowest ( $M = 3.21$ ), pointing to perceived limitations within the academic setting in terms of fostering and supporting creative expression.

These findings highlight a potential gap between personal and family-based support for creativity and the institutional framework within which students are educated. They underline the importance of adapting teaching methods and institutional policies to better support the creative potential of students in the field of social work.



**Figure 1:** Average Scores by Dimension

### *Normality Analysis*

Prior to conducting correlation analyses, normality of the distribution was assessed using skewness and kurtosis values. All three dimensions showed skewness between -1 and 1 and kurtosis below 2, indicating approximately normal distributions. Additionally, the Shapiro-Wilk test yielded  $p > 0.05$  for all dimensions, justifying the use of Pearson's correlation.

*Correlation Analysis*

Below is the correlation matrix showing Pearson coefficients for the relationships among the three dimensions:

**Table 2.** Correlation Matrix

Dimension 1	Dimension 2	Correlation Coefficient (r)	p-value
Self-perceived creativity	Educational climate for creativity	0.44	< 0.01
Self-perceived creativity	Family support for creativity	0.62	< 0.01
Educational climate	Family support for creativity	0.39	< 0.05

The results indicate a significant positive relationship among all three dimensions. The strongest correlation was found between self-perceived creativity and family support ( $r = 0.62$ ), suggesting that students who feel supported by their families also exhibit higher confidence in their creative abilities. The connection with the educational climate was moderate but still statistically significant.

*Additional Observations*

At the end of the questionnaire, students were given the opportunity to leave open comments. Although optional, 19 out of 57 participants shared their thoughts, experiences, or specific examples related to creativity, which highlights their engagement with the topic.

*Individual support, but lack of a systemic culture*

Nearly all comments referencing faculty distinguished between individual teacher initiative and the broader institutional culture. As one student noted:

“There are a few professors with whom you can talk and share new ideas, but as a faculty, there is no real culture of encouraging creativity. Traditional lectures and fear of making mistakes still dominate.”

This observation aligns with the lower average score for the “educational climate for creativity” dimension and signals a need for wider institutional changes that promote creative thinking.



### Fear of mistakes and perfectionistic expectations

Several students reported feeling unable to make mistakes or experiment with new ideas during lectures, which limited their freedom of expression. One participant commented:

“I feel like every word must be perfectly stated, or I’ll be corrected in front of everyone.”

Another shared:

“My creativity is blocked by the fear of saying something stupid.”

These remarks emphasize the importance of psychological safety in the classroom—a concept that allows people to speak without fear of judgment or humiliation. Research confirms that psychological safety is a key condition for creativity and innovation (Edmondson, 1999).

### Family encouragement as a source of inspiration

Some students used the comment section to highlight the positive influence of their families, often referring to encouragement to “dream big,” “think outside the box,” or explore artistic and personal interests from an early age. One student shared:

“Since I was a child, my mother would tell me there’s nothing wrong with having a wild idea—sometimes the best solutions come from there.”

This supports the high quantitative scores for family support and confirms that families continue to play a crucial role in students’ development—not just for emotional support, but as sources of inspiration and secure bases for expression.

### Implications for Future Research

These comments provide valuable qualitative insight and suggest areas for further exploration through focus groups or interviews. Questions that could be explored in the future include:

How do students perceive informal communication with professors in relation to creativity?

Which learning methods most encourage their freedom of thought?

How do earlier experiences in primary and secondary education influence their current creative expression?

The open-ended responses reveal a rich spectrum of experiences that complement the quantitative analysis and affirm that both emotional and structural support are essential for fostering creativity among social work and social policy students.

## Discussion

The results of this research raise important questions concerning the development of creativity among students at the Institute of Social Work and Social Policy. The findings show that students generally have a positive self-perception of their creativity ( $M = 3.84$ ), which reflects the presence of intrinsic motivation and a sense of personal ability to express creative ideas. This is especially important given that social work as a profession demands innovative approaches to solving complex problems, designing individualized interventions, and creating context-sensitive strategies.

### The Role of Family Support

The highest mean was observed for the dimension of family support ( $M = 4.11$ ), which aligns with numerous studies that suggest creativity is nurtured early in life and is deeply influenced by parenting style. A supportive and encouraging home environment—where mistakes are permitted, experimentation is welcomed, and personal ideas are valued—has a lasting impact on how individuals perceive their own creative potential. This echoes the work of Runco (2003), who emphasized that freedom of expression and emotional warmth in family communication foster ideal conditions for creative development.

Likewise, Olszewski-Kubilius (2002) notes that supportive parental interaction is essential in the social and emotional development of gifted youth. In our study, the strong correlation between self-perceived creativity and family support ( $r = 0.62$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) confirms this theory and highlights that students who have received validation for their ideas from their families are more confident in their ability to think creatively.

### School Climate as a Challenge

The lowest score was recorded in the school climate for creativity dimension ( $M = 3.21$ ), suggesting that the institutional environment may not always be conducive to creative expression. Even though students perceive themselves as creative, a lack of systemic support from the educational framework can demotivate them over time. The academic environment may be viewed as overly rigid, rewarding “correct answers” more than innovative thinking.

This is particularly problematic in social work education, where ethical, flexible, and creative thinking is essential. According to Torrance (1995), creativity requires tolerance of ambiguity, openness to alternative ideas, and encouragement of originality—elements that must be embedded into teaching practices to cultivate professionals capable of real innovation.

Student comments further emphasized this gap. For instance, one noted: “Professors have their own expectations and styles, and sometimes I feel like I

can't experiment because that's not viewed positively." This indicates a disconnect between institutional values and classroom practices.

### The Need for a Cultural Shift in Teaching

Amabile (1996) identifies creativity as a function of three factors: expertise, creative thinking skills, and intrinsic motivation. Teaching that nurtures only expertise—without allowing room for error, exploration, or “playing with ideas”—results in limited creative output. Modern pedagogy increasingly supports constructivist and holistic learning models, positioning students as co-creators of knowledge rather than passive recipients. Within this context, the results of this study may serve as a platform for redesigning teaching methods in social work education.

Incorporating project-based learning, open-ended tasks, design thinking, visualization techniques, and role-playing exercises could significantly enhance the perceived support for creativity. The moderate positive correlation ( $r = 0.44$ ) between self-perceived creativity and school climate suggests that institutional improvements could further boost students' confidence.

### Theoretical Framework and Connection with Prior Research

Torrance's model of creativity highlights four stages: preparation, incubation, illumination, and verification. The Macedonian educational system often focuses only on preparation (theory and facts) and verification (exams and assessments), while neglecting incubation (unpressured reflection) and illumination (intuitive leaps). This study confirms that students feel insufficiently encouraged to explore or offer unconventional ideas.

Guilford's (1967) theory of intelligence also emphasizes divergent thinking as fundamental to creativity—fluency, flexibility, originality, and elaboration. Students who are encouraged to think in multiple ways and who receive positive feedback from faculty are more likely to fully realize their creative potential.

### Practical Implications

The findings from this study suggest several practical recommendations:

- **Curriculum Reform:** Systematic implementation of teaching methods that encourage divergent thinking.
- **Improved Student Communication:** Establishing a two-way feedback loop where students' ideas are received without fear of judgment.

- **Faculty Development:** Providing training and workshops on topics such as “Assessing Creativity,” “Breaking Free from Educational Routine,” and “Pedagogical Flexibility.”

### Limitations and Future Directions

Despite offering valuable insights, this study has several limitations:

- A relatively small and non-representative sample (limited to one institution).
- Subjective assessments of creativity through self-report questionnaires.
- Lack of longitudinal tracking to assess the impact of institutional changes.

Future research should include larger and more diverse samples, in-depth interviews with students and faculty, and pre-post measures of creativity following the introduction of specific creative pedagogical practices.

### Conclusion

The research on students’ perceptions of creativity at the Institute of Social Work and Social Policy reveals that individual creative potential is indeed present, but its development is largely shaped by environmental factors—most notably, family and educational settings. Self-perceived creativity was found to be positively correlated with family support, highlighting the importance of early home-based values and stimulation in fostering creative confidence and expression.

At the same time, the relatively lower support perceived from the academic institution suggests that there is room for improvement in teaching methods, student engagement strategies, and overall institutional culture. The current educational environment does not yet provide sufficient freedom for the expression of original ideas, which may lead to decreased motivation and an underutilization of creative potential.

In an era where the profession of social work increasingly grapples with complex, dynamic, and interdisciplinary challenges, the field urgently requires a new generation of professionals who not only possess solid theoretical knowledge but are also equipped—and empowered—to think differently: creatively, flexibly, and with ethical sensitivity.

### Recommendations

#### **For Higher Education Institutions:**

- Encourage creativity through open-ended tasks, problem-based

learning, interdisciplinary projects, and critical thinking activities.

- Introduce formal training programs for faculty focused on fostering and assessing creativity in students.
- Promote an institutional culture that embraces mistakes as a natural and essential part of the learning process.

**For Families:**

- Continue supporting the creative development of young people through encouragement, freedom, and acceptance of individual differences.
- Promote activities that nurture curiosity, play, and free expression from early childhood.

**For Future Research:**

- Expand the sample to include multiple institutions and a broader range of academic disciplines to increase representativeness.
- Employ mixed methods (e.g., qualitative interviews, observation) for a deeper understanding of creative processes.
- Explore additional influencing factors such as personality traits, mental health, cultural values, and digital literacy that may play a role in shaping creativity.

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