International Journal of Science and Research (IJSR)
ISSN: 2319-7064
Impact Factor 2025: 7.089

Perceived School Experiences and Creative Self-Concept Among Young Adults: A Retrospective Study

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Abstract: ***This study examined whether young adults' retrospective perceptions of their school climate were associated with their creative self-efficacy (CSE), creative personal identity (CPI), and current creative engagement (CCE). In a cross-sectional retrospective online survey, 75 young adults aged 18–25, recruited through voluntary and snowball sampling, rated their remembered school climate on a 12-item researcher-developed questionnaire and completed CSE and CPI items adapted from or informed by the Short Scale of Creative Self, three researcher-developed CCE items and two open-ended questions. A more rigid or less supportive remembered school climate was associated with lower CPI ($r = -.33$, $p = .004$). The association with CSE was negative but not statistically significant ($r = -.21$, $p = .067$), and the association with CCE was weak and not significant ($r = -.11$, $p = .331$). Thematic analysis identified six themes, including encouragement, conformity, social–emotional barriers, and creativity developing beyond school. The findings are correlational, come from a small non-random sample using measures that need further validation, and do not establish causation.***

Keywords: school climate, creative self-efficacy, creative personal identity, retrospective study, young adults

1. Introduction

Schools are among the first settings in which young people produce and share ideas and have them judged, and these experiences may shape how they later see their own creativity. Reviews of creative learning environments point to flexible use of space and time, learner autonomy, respectful teacher–learner relationships and non-prescriptive planning as supportive conditions [1], whereas extrinsic constraints such as expected evaluation, surveillance, competition and restricted choice tend to undermine creativity [2]. In India, the National Education Policy 2020 aims to move schooling away from rote learning and an emphasis on examination marks towards critical and creative thinking [3]. These sources describe learning environments and policy intentions; they do not show how school experiences relate to the way young people see their own creativity as adults.

School climate is a multidimensional construct covering safety, relationships, teaching and learning, and the institutional environment [4]. Creative self-beliefs are usually divided into creative self-efficacy (CSE), the belief that one can produce creative outcomes, and creative personal identity (CPI), the belief that creativity is an important element of self-description [5], [6]. This study asks whether remembered school climate is related to these beliefs, and to current creative engagement (CCE), among young adults who recall schooling in the Indian education system.

2. Literature Survey

Among 1,322 middle and secondary school students, those who reported more teacher feedback on their creativity had higher CSE [7]. Among 780 university students in Indonesia, a learning-oriented educational climate was positively associated with both CSE and CPI, whereas performance-oriented and passive memorization-oriented climates showed limited associations [8]. In a retrospective qualitative study, young adults' narratives of school life linked a cohesive, safe school climate to self-esteem, well-being and belonging, but did not address creativity [9]. Retrospective reports have a legitimate role in research but contain substantial measurement error [10], so remembered school climate is treated here as what people now recall, not as a record of what school was like.

In the sources reviewed, studies relating educational environments to creative self-beliefs concerned people who were still students [7], [8], and none examined how young adults' retrospective perceptions of school climate relate to CSE, CPI and current creative engagement, or did so for recollections of Indian schooling. Because the review was purposive, this is stated as a gap in the sources reviewed and not as a claim that no such study exists.

3. Problem Definition

The study aimed to examine the associations between young adults remembered school climate and their CSE, CPI and current creative engagement, and to explore how they describe school experiences that encouraged or discouraged their creativity. **H1: A** more rigid or less supportive remembered school climate is associated with lower CSE and with lower CPI. **H2: A** more rigid or less supportive remembered school climate is associated with lower current creative engagement. The qualitative question was exploratory and had no hypothesis.

4. Methodology

4.1 Design and Participants

A cross-sectional, retrospective, correlational survey design with a small qualitative component was used. Seventy-five young adults aged 18–25 ($M = 21.68$, $SD = 2.12$, $n = 72$ with age recorded; 68.0% female; 54.7% undergraduates and

34.7% postgraduates) were recruited online by voluntary (convenience) sampling with a snowball element, through Google Forms (n = 42; 6 August to 22 October 2026) and the survey-exchange platform SurveySwap (n = 33; 22 September to 21 October 2026). All 75 answered all 26 scale items and all were retained; the ages of four participants rest on the researcher's knowledge rather than the data file. The proposal required schooling in India, but country of schooling was not recorded, so eligibility beyond age could not be confirmed for every participant. The sample was below the target of 80 and roughly 85 needed for 80% power to detect r = .30.

4.2 Measures

All items were rated from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5) and scored as item averages after reverse scoring (11 items). **Creative self-concept:** six CSE items and five CPI items were adapted from or informed by the Short Scale of Creative Self [5], [6]; two items correspond to published items, one is a close rewording and eight were written for this study, so equivalence with the published scale is not claimed. **School climate:** a 12-item researcher-developed questionnaire with three items each on academic and rote-learning pressure, creative freedom, fear of mistakes and judgment, and teacher influence; higher scores indicate a more rigid or less supportive remembered climate. It was not expert-reviewed, piloted, or validated. **CCE:** three researcher-developed items on currently making or creating things. **Open-ended questions:** one asked for a school experience that encouraged or discouraged creativity, and one asked how schooling has shaped current creative engagement.

4.3 Procedure and Analysis

The online questionnaire opened with an information sheet and a mandatory consent item. No names or contact details were collected, but because the researcher knew some respondents the data are described as de-identified rather than anonymous. Analyses were run in Python. Reliability was estimated with Cronbach's alpha and distributions with the Shapiro–Wilk test. The primary analyses were two-sided Pearson correlations between the 12-item school-climate total and each outcome, without correction for the three outcomes, with Spearman correlations as a robustness check; the outlier and nonlinearity criteria set in advance for departing from Pearson correlations were not met. Exploratory analyses examined recruitment route and the exclusion of participants with low-variation response patterns. Open-ended answers were analysed with inductive thematic analysis [11] by a single coder. A mediation analysis listed in the proposal was not conducted, because all variables were measured once, retrospectively, by the same respondents [12].

5. Results & Discussion

5.1 Quantitative Findings

Mean CSE and CPI were moderately high, CCE was near the scale midpoint, and the mean school-climate score indicated a remembered climate that was, on average, neither strongly rigid nor strongly supportive (Table 1); academic and rote-learning pressure (M = 3.48) and fear of mistakes (M = 3.40) had the highest dimension means. Reliability was good for CPI and the school-climate total, acceptable for CSE, and low for CCE and for the creative-freedom (α = .54) and teacher-influence (α = .37) dimensions, so the dimensions were not analysed separately. Only CPI departed from normality (W = .963, p = .027), and only modestly.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics, reliability and correlations with remembered school climate (N = 75)

Measure	k	M (SD)	α	r [95% CI]	p	ρ (p)
School climate, total	12	3.18 (0.68)	.86	–	–	–
Creative self-efficacy (CSE)	6	3.68 (0.61)	.81	−.21 [−.42, .01]	.067	−.13 (.266)
Creative personal identity (CPI)	5	3.73 (0.79)	.87	−.33 [−.52, −.11]	.004	−.24 (.034)
Current creative engagement (CCE)	3	3.41 (0.72)	.58	−.11 [−.33, .12]	.331	−.08 (.521)

Note. k = number of items. Scores are averaged (1–5). Higher school-climate scores indicate a more rigid or less supportive remembered climate. r = Pearson correlation with school climate (Fisher z CI); ρ = Spearman correlation; p-values are two-sided and uncorrected; df = 73.

H1 was supported for CPI: a more rigid or less supportive remembered climate was associated with lower CPI (r = −.33, p = .004; 11.0% of variance), close to a medium effect, and the result held under the Spearman check (ρ = −.24, p = .034). For CSE the association was in the predicted direction but small and not significant (r = −.21, 95% CI [−.42, .01], p = .067; 4.5% of variance), so H1 was only partly supported. H2 was not supported: the association with CCE was weak and compatible with zero (r = −.11, p = .331; 1.3% of variance).

In exploratory analyses, adding recruitment route changed each estimate by less than .01, although Survey Swap participants scored higher on CSE and CPI at the same level of school climate; because route is confounded with timing, channel and form version, this cannot be attributed to the platform. Excluding participants with low-variation response patterns left the CPI correlation stable (r = −.36 with n = 71 and n = 69) and moved CSE to a borderline r = −.23 and −.24 (p = .050 and .049); these exploratory results are not treated as confirmatory.

5.2 Qualitative Findings

Of the 75 participants, 64 gave at least one codable answer, grouped into six themes (counts are participants, and themes overlap). Supportive accounts described *encouragement, recognition and confidence* (32), often from teachers ("my English teacher made it a point to praise me for it in front of the whole class", P46), and *autonomy and creative opportunity* (23). Constraining accounts described *conformity, fixed answers and limited space for creativity*

(26; "there was more importance given to getting the 'right answer' than expressing my own ideas", P72) and *social–emotional barriers: scolding, favoritism and neglect* (22; "Spoke up in class and got laughed at by the teacher.", P5). Many described *creativity beyond or despite school* (25; "School had 0 influence on my creative growth.", P66), and some saw *structure and discipline as a double-edged resource* (11). Themes were not linked to scale scores, so they describe experiences and do not test the correlations.

5.3 Discussion

Participants who remembered a more rigid or less supportive school climate tended to see creativity as less central to who they are. This is consistent with studies linking supportive learning environments to creative self-beliefs among current students [7], [8], but the design cannot show the direction of influence: people who see themselves as less creative may remember school less favourably, and a general tendency to view the past negatively or shared-method variance could contribute to both [13]. The weaker CSE association may reflect a real difference between the two components of creative self-concept or the limits of the measure, which included a general self-confidence item and several adapted or researcher-written items. The weak CCE result does not show that school climate and creative engagement are unrelated: the CCE measure had low reliability, and many participants located their current creativity outside school. Practical suggestions from participants' accounts, such as recognising students' creative work sincerely, offering open-ended tasks and treating mistakes with curiosity rather than ridicule, need testing in stronger designs before they are recommended.

6. Conclusion

In this sample of 75 young adults, a more rigid or less supportive remembered school climate was associated with a weaker creative personal identity ($r = -.33$, $p = .004$); the association with creative self-efficacy was small and uncertain ($r = -.21$, $p = .067$), and that with current creative engagement was weak ($r = -.11$, $p = .331$). Participants described both encouraging and constraining school experiences, and many located their creativity outside school. These are preliminary associations and do not show that school experiences caused differences in creative self-concept or creative engagement.

7. Future Scope

The findings are limited by retrospective self-report and possible recall bias [10], the cross-sectional design, a small convenience sample that was two-thirds female and below the planned size, unverified eligibility beyond age, researcher-developed or adapted measures without validity evidence and with low reliability for some scales, confounding of recruitment route with timing, and single-coder qualitative analysis. Future studies should use larger, systematically recruited samples that record country and type of schooling; the full published Short Scale of Creative Self and a validated school-climate measure; longitudinal or multi-informant designs to examine the direction of influence and the proposed role of fear of mistakes; and independent coding of the qualitative data.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent: Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants through a mandatory item in the online questionnaire; the questionnaire and procedures were approved by the supervising professor before data collection. **Conflict of interest:** none. **Funding:** none. **Acknowledgement:** The author thanks Dr. Shivam Bhartiya for guidance and all participants.

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