What happened to Creativity?

My office is very close to the Pre-Kindergarten playground and often when I am walking in and out I have a peek to see what is happening. I usually see youngsters playing with an assortment of toys, building structures in the sand pit, playing pretend games with each other and generally having a great time. I imagine the classroom is similar. Students enter school being creative, they play games, use imagination and love coming to school.

My window over-looks the senior lawn. The scene is quite different - passive sedentary talking. Some boys may try to pass a football around, which is not allowed, but on the whole it is very different to the other playground. Classrooms are different as well. We reward students for the correct answer, the right way of obtaining those answers and the syllabus heading towards the HSC dictates that there is very little room for games, divergent thinking let alone creativity.

Creative thinking is dying off at an alarming rate. A study showed that 98% of students under five years of age scored as geniuses in divergent thinking but this reduces with age to only 2% in adults. Also up until 1990, CQ (Creative Quotient) and IQ (Intelligence Quotient) were rising at the same rate. Since then CQ rates are falling while IQ continues to rise.

As a work skill, there is no doubt that creative thinking is a top priority. A recent IBM poll of 1,500 CEOs worldwide has identified creative thinking as the No. 1 “leadership competency” of the future. The Boston Consulting Group found that for seven of the last eight years creativity and innovation have been the top ranked of all strategic imperatives. An Adobe survey has found eight in 10 people believe that creativity is critical to unlocking economic growth. Creative thinking has not only been essential throughout history as a survival mechanism, it has also been important for improving the quality of life.

Research shows creative thinkers are more optimistic, more confident, more flexible, able to cope with stress better, and healthier. Creative thinking is key to unlocking economic growth. Creative students tend to achieve more highly, are more engaged in what they do, and have higher self-esteem.

What is impacting on our ability to think creatively today? Most teachers will tell you it is the end point of 13 years of education - the HSC. You can’t be creative in your answers there. True it is possible to vary our teaching methods, have strategies and use tools that promote creativity even in the early years of the senior school. However, it is very difficult in Years 11 and 12. Until the HSC changes and/or business can push the powers that be to be more “creative” in syllabi and less prescriptive, creativity and innovation may be killed forever.