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Creativity in Standardized Systems: Sub-Creation as Pedagogical Resistance

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how J.R.R. Tolkien's theory of sub-creation can address contemporary creativity constraints in education, using Japan's failed yutori-kyoiku reforms and Italy's struggles with standardized assessment as comparative cases. The research asks: How can structured imaginative engagement provide culturally responsive alternatives to institutional creativity deficits? Using qualitative-interpretive methodology that combines narrative literature review with hermeneutic-phenomenological analysis, this study analyzes educational policies, empirical research, and cross-cultural practices across Japan and Italy. Findings reveal three critical insights. First, Japan's yutori-kyoiku failure stemmed from attempting broad structural changes without accounting for cultural values—sub-creation offers focused pedagogical tools that operate within existing frameworks while honoring relational creativity practices. Second, Tolkien's "Secondary Worlds" function as psychological sanctuaries that foster structured meaning-making rather than digital fragmentation, with measurable benefits for emotional regulation and cognitive flexibility. Third, successful creative education requires culturally embedded approaches: Japan's collaborative world-building practices (manga fandom, monogatari traditions) and Italy's humanistic legacy provide scaffolding for sub-creative pedagogies that transcend Western individualistic models. The research demonstrates that practices like manga fans' "what-if" scenarios and tabletop role-playing games serve as psychological sanctuaries, supporting creative agency within institutional constraints. Rather than requiring systemic overhaul, sub-creative frameworks can transform classrooms into collaborative "world-building" spaces. These findings offer educators and policymakers practical alternatives to failed approaches, positioning structured imaginative engagement

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as a bridge between standardization pressures and creative development across diverse cultural contexts.

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1. Introduction

Japan's yutori-kyoiku (relaxed education) reforms of 1998–2002 exemplified global tensions between fostering creativity and maintaining academic standards. By reducing rote learning and introducing an interdisciplinary "period for integrated study" (*sōgōteki-na gakushū no jikan*), these reforms aimed to cultivate students' creative thinking and "zest for living" (*ikiru chikara*). However, when PISA scores declined — reading literacy falling from 8th to 14th place between 2000 and 2006 — policymakers reversed course, reintroducing standardized testing and structured curricula [1, 2]. This policy oscillation reflects deeper cultural tensions between nurturing individual creativity and maintaining collective academic achievement. The yutori-kyoiku reversal coincided with broader concerns about declining creativity among young people globally. Kyung Hee Kim's analysis of 300,000 Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking scores revealed declining creativity among American children [3], particularly in originality and fantasy measures. While some scholars challenge this "creativity crisis" narrative [4], empirical evidence suggests digital saturation and educational standardization may constrain creative engagement. In Japan, only 8% of adolescents consider themselves "creative," compared to 47% in the USA, while only 2% of Japanese teachers describe their students as creative [5]. These patterns extend beyond Japan. Italian research, for example, shows similar concerns about reduced imaginative play among digitally saturated adolescents [6, 7].

To frame the subsequent analysis, it is important to briefly outline the educational structures and philosophies shaping these two countries' current contexts. Japan's education system is nationally standardized and emphasizes collective achievement, rigorous examinations, and orderly classrooms rooted in Confucian and postwar meritocratic values. Since the late 20th century, policymakers have oscillated between rote memorization and experimental reforms, most notably with yutori-kyoiku ("relaxed education," 1998–2002), which tried to foster creativity by reducing mandatory content and introducing interdisciplinary study time. However, following a drop in PISA scores, this approach was reversed in favor of renewed standardization and testing, reflecting ongoing tensions between fostering innovation and maintaining collective academic performance. Italy's education system, meanwhile, is centrally administered and historically grounded in humanistic and Catholic traditions inherited from the Renaissance. The curriculum favors classical knowledge and analytic rigor, culminating in the maturità—a high-stakes national examination based on essay writing and oral defense. While policies like the Piano delle Arti seek to enhance creative and artistic education, implementation is uneven due to regional and socioeconomic disparities, and traditional academic priorities still often outweigh creative experimentation. With this comparative context in mind, the following sections examine how each system's unique history and philosophy have influenced policies and classroom realities, setting the stage for the challenges—and opportunities—of sub-creative pedagogy.

The failure of yutori-kyoiku to sustain creative education highlights the need for alternative frameworks that can operate within existing institutional constraints. J.R.R. Tolkien's concept of "sub-creation" — the deliberate crafting of internally consistent "Secondary Worlds" — may offer such a framework. Unlike the broad structural changes attempted by yutori-kyoiku, sub-creation provides focused pedagogical tools for fostering imaginative engagement without requiring systemic overhaul. For Tolkien, sub-creation enables "literary belief" where individuals actively participate in meaning-rich imaginative spaces, processing complex emotions and developing resilience [8]. This study examines how Tolkien's sub-creation theory can address creativity constraints in contemporary education, particularly in Japan and Italy. Rather than viewing these nations' struggles through deficit models, this analysis explores how sub-creative pedagogies might work within existing cultural frameworks — Japan's relational creativity practices and Italy's humanistic traditions — to foster psychological resilience and imaginative engagement. By analyzing the intersection between

yutori-kyoiku's limitations and sub-creation's potential, this research aims to contribute to educational scholarship on creativity, cultural adaptation, and alternative pedagogical frameworks.

2. Materials and Methods

This study employs a qualitative-interpretive approach combining a narrative literature review with hermeneutic-phenomenological analysis grounded in Gadamer's notion of the hermeneutic circle [9]. The methodological framework integrates textual analysis of Tolkien's works with institutional data and cross-cultural educational contexts, mediating between Tolkien's Western theoretical framework and Japanese and Italian educational realities through Gadamer's concept of the "fusion of horizons".

Materials were thematically curated from academic databases, including CiNii, JSTOR, PubMed, and J-Stage, using keywords such as "creativity crisis," "creativity education," and "yutori-kyoiku." The search process began with an investigation of the "creativity crisis" in Japan and expanded as thematic connections to Tolkien's idea of sub-creation emerged, incorporating works on Italy's educational challenges and pedagogical applications of sub-creation theory. Given the study's cross-cultural scope and access constraints, priority was placed on open-access peer-reviewed articles, published books, and reputable academic reports available in English, Japanese, and Italian. Included sources primarily address youth and educational settings; studies focusing exclusively on workplace or professional/artistic creativity outside formal or non-formal education were excluded. Paid-access or unavailable sources were omitted. In response to reviewer feedback, approximately 10 additional studies were incorporated into the literature review. These new sources were selected to enhance the manuscript's theoretical foundation, provide stronger empirical support, and improve the cross-cultural contextualization of the key arguments.

While no rigid inclusion or exclusion protocols were applied—consistent with the study's exploratory and theoretical nature—the literature selection process was iterative and interpretive, reflecting the hermeneutic lens. Care was taken to define topical, linguistic, and access boundaries to mitigate selection bias and increase transparency. Additionally, data interpretation incorporated personal observations from teaching experiences in Japan and institutional data such as OECD reports to examine constraints on creativity across the cultural contexts of Japan and Italy.

The interpretive process was guided by Gadamer's concept of the "fusion of horizons," which served as a theoretical tool for bridging differing cultural and disciplinary perspectives [9]. Textual analysis began with a close reading of Tolkien's primary works, identifying core themes related to sub-creation, imagination, and education. An important initial omission was the exclusion of Tolkien's Letters [10]; thanks to an anonymous reviewer's insightful suggestion, the manuscript was re-examined to incorporate key reflections from this correspondence, thereby enriching the theoretical framework and deepening engagement with Tolkien's pedagogical and imaginative philosophy. These themes were then juxtaposed with policy documents, academic literature, and empirical data concerning creativity crises and educational reforms in Japan and Italy. Rather than employing formal coding as in grounded theory, the analysis followed an iterative, dialogic procedure: insights from Tolkien's literary context and philosophical background were brought into conversation with institutional realities and cultural frames of the two education systems. Throughout, interpretations were continually re-evaluated in light of both personal teaching observations and evolving theoretical understanding, allowing preconceptions to be challenged and new meanings to emerge. This hermeneutic process enabled the integration of Western and local perspectives, resulting in a nuanced analysis that mediates between literary theory and comparative education.

2.1. Limitations

This study has several key limitations. First, methodological constraints include non-standardized source selection influenced by linguistic accessibility and open-access availability, limiting comprehensive coverage of relevant literature. Second, researcher subjectivity poses risks of overinterpretation, as personal experiences in Italy and Japan shaped initial hypotheses despite triangulation efforts with institutional data. Third, cultural validation gaps emerge from analyzing creativity concepts through secondary sources rather than through direct cross-cultural fieldwork or participant interviews. While the Adobe survey remains a notable

reference for international comparisons of student creativity self-perception [5], its findings should be interpreted with caution due to potential shifts in technology, policy, and cultural attitudes since its publication. Scope limitations include the theoretical nature of the analysis, which generates hypotheses about sub-creation's educational applications without empirical validation. The study's focus on Japan and Italy, while justified by comparative policy analysis, cannot capture full intra-national diversity in educational practices or creativity conceptualizations.

Theoretical limitations stem from applying Tolkien's Western-derived framework across different cultural contexts, potentially overlooking indigenous creativity paradigms. While this approach offers analytical utility for examining institutional constraints, it requires future empirical studies to validate cross-cultural applicability. Finally, this analysis does not resolve debates about creativity decline but examines emerging concerns as risk factors worthy of educational consideration, following Barbot and Said-Metwaly's critique of "crisis" narratives [4].

2.2. Some Empirical Evidence

While this text is primarily theoretical and the methodology's limitations include the lack of direct empirical data, my experience as a Teacher Assistant may offer a partial and illustrative overview of how the theory of sub-creation can manifest in educational practice, and it was a part of the reasons that pushed me to draft this article. During my experience as a teaching assistant, I have observed marked differences between classes employing project-based, collaborative approaches and those following traditional, lecture-oriented instruction. In project-based learning environments, students are regularly tasked with working in groups to tackle open-ended challenges that require imaginative thinking, collaborative negotiation, and—at times—elements of role play to devise solutions or simulate real-world scenarios. This contrasts with more conventional classes characterized by standardized content delivery, where student engagement often centers on rote responses and fixed outcomes. The collaborative projects not only foster more active participation but also create a space where students are encouraged to co-construct knowledge and experiment within structured imaginative frameworks, echoing Tolkien's notion of "sub-creation" as guided creativity within constraints. From my personal perspective—which is of course subject to bias—it seems that in PBL classes, teachers themselves become more involved in the creative processes of students, actively fostering creativity and cooperation. This dynamic appears especially significant in classrooms with both local (Japanese) and foreign students, where collaborative and creative tasks can bridge cultural differences and enrich mutual understanding. While such experiences remain context-dependent, they powerfully illustrate how structured collaborative and creative tasks can function as psychological sanctuaries, enabling students to develop creative agency, adaptive problem-solving skills, and a forward-looking mindset within the institutional realities of higher education. This pedagogical contrast underscores the value of embedding sub-creative frameworks into educational practice, elucidating avenues for future research and innovation in curriculum design.

Two complementary studies from different cultural settings, Taiwan and the UK, provide a basis of empirical validation for sub-creation pedagogy, demonstrating measurable impacts of imaginative pedagogical engagement. Chen and Yuan's study of 861 teachers across 65 elementary schools offers robust statistical evidence using Hierarchical Linear Modeling [11]. Their research demonstrates that teacher imagination positively impacts creative teaching at statistically significant levels. Their definition of imagination as "mental ability that transcends spatial and temporal limitations to form images based on experience" aligns with Tolkien's sub-creation concept. Crucially, vision feedback plays a positive moderator role in how creative imagination contributes to interactive discussion and open-mindedness, providing quantitative support that structured imaginative exercises enhance creative thinking—validating sub-creation's emphasis on guided assignments as "psychological sanctuaries." Schwittay's three-year ethnographic study at University of Sussex, instead, documented how "critical-creative pedagogy" enabled 30 undergraduate students to move beyond cynicism to imaginative engagement with global challenges [12]. Students creating scenarios for "Brighton 2050" using physical materials demonstrated "generative theorizing" that "opens spaces for possibilities. Both studies validate that guided assignments function as psychological sanctuaries supporting creative agency. Cross-cultural evidence suggests sub-creation pedagogical principles operate across diverse contexts, demonstrating enhanced creative thinking, increased

engagement, and future-oriented agency development.

Other practical evidence comes from Fujii et al.'s study with 63 fifth-grade students, which demonstrates measurable impacts of structured creative engagement through guided imaginative tasks that balanced freedom with clear parameters[13]. Their creativity education intervention showed significant improvements in students' "extensibility, logic, positiveness, and concentration" through collaborative problem-solving activities requiring internally consistent solutions within given constraints—directly paralleling Tolkien's sub-creation as "freedom within the law" of Secondary Worlds, validating structured imaginative engagement's pedagogical value.

Fujii et al.'s study with 63 fifth-grade students demonstrates measurable impacts of structured creativity education through a comprehensive program that included guided ideation techniques[13], drawing exercises, and collaborative problem-solving activities. Their intervention showed significant improvements in students' logic and extensibility, persistence and concentration, precision, and curiosity and positiveness[13], as well as enhanced inquiry mind and emphasis on evidence. The study's methodology — which balanced creative freedom with structured parameters through techniques like Ueki's *hatsumei-gaku* and systematic ideation methods — directly parallels Tolkien's concept of sub-creation as "freedom within the law" of Secondary Worlds[14], validating structured imaginative engagement's pedagogical value in fostering measurable creative development. In Italy, instead, Marsili et al.'s research on inclusive education reveals how collaborative creative projects function as "psychological sanctuaries" for marginalized students[15]. Structured artistic activities enabled students with disabilities to participate meaningfully in classroom communities through guided creative expression. When creative tasks provided clear frameworks while allowing imaginative agency, they fostered both inclusion and creative development, with students exhibiting increased confidence and social integration through collaborative storytelling and arts-based projects.

Although this article remains primarily theoretical, both my personal reflections and experiences, alongside empirical evidence from diverse research settings, underscore the potential of adopting a sub-creation framework as a valuable pedagogical approach in educational projects.

3. Tolkien's Concept of Sub-Creation: A Theoretical Framework

J.R.R. Tolkien introduced the concept of "sub-creation" in his poem Mythopoeia[16], written in September 1931 after a pivotal conversation with C.S. Lewis and Hugo Dyson at Magdalen College, Oxford[17]. During this discussion, Lewis famously argued that myths were "lies and therefore worthless, even though breathed through silver," to which Tolkien responded by defending myth as a vehicle for profound truths about human experience and reality[17]. As Carpenter explains, Tolkien believed that in making myth through the practice of "mythopoeia" and the creation of worlds populated by elves, dragons, and goblins, the storyteller, or "sub-creator," fulfills a divine purpose, reflecting "a splintered fragment of the true light" of the Creator[17].

Tolkien's theological perspective is explicit. While God is the prime Creator, humans participate in creation as "sub-creators". This subordinate relationship is central to Tolkien's philosophy, as he saw human creativity as a reflection of the divine image-an act of worship and a means of expressing the divine spark within humanity[18]. The poem Mythopoeia articulates this idea for the first time in the lines[16]:

> "Dis-graced he may be, yet is not dethroned,
> and keeps the rags of lordship once he owned,
> his world-dominion by creative act:
> not his to worship the great Artefact,
> man, sub-creator, the refracted light
> through whom is splintered from a single White
> to many hues, and endlessly combined
> in living shapes that move from mind to mind"

Tolkien's "sub-creation" is not merely an artistic endeavour but a metaphysical and spiritual act: humans, made in the image of the Creator, are called to participate in creation, not ex nihilo, but by recombining and reimagining the elements of the primary world. This idea is also present in Tolkien's later works, such as The Silmarillion, where Eru Ilúvatar creates the world but invites the Valar to participate in its shaping through music, i.e., with a process that is both creative and open to corruption (as with Melkor's discordant notes). Similarly, the themes of stewardship and corruption are central to The Lord of the Rings[19], further illustrating

Tolkien's conviction that sub-creation is a profound, morally charged participation in the divine creative act.

The idea of sub-creation was further explored in Tolkien's seminal essay "On Fairy-Stories"[8], originally delivered as a lecture in March 1939 at the University of St Andrews, Scotland. Written against the backdrop of rising global tensions and his own work on The Lord of the Rings, the essay defends fantasy as a legitimate literary form while articulating a philosophy of creativity with profound implications for resilience and emotional well-being. Central to Tolkien's argument is the idea that fairy stories satisfy primal human desires, enabling individuals to confront existential challenges through imaginative engagement. He writes:

> "The magic of Faerie is not an end in itself; its virtue is in its operations: among these are the satisfaction of certain primordial human desires. One of these desires is to survey the depths of space and time. Another is [...] to hold communion with other living things. A story may thus deal with the satisfaction of these desires, with or without the operation of either machine or magic, and in proportion as it succeeds it will approach the quality and have the flavour of fairy-story"[8].

For Tolkien, these desires — i.e., to transcend temporal and spatial limits and to connect empathetically with other beings — are not trivial. They reflect a profound human need to situate oneself within a meaningful cosmos, a need increasingly stifled in modern societies dominated by standardized education and digital fragmentation. The act of sub-creation, by fulfilling these desires, may become a form of psychological stewardship. A passage from "On Fairy-Stories" in general regarded as the clearest statement on sub-creation by Tolkien, may help in understanding this process:

> "Children are capable, of course, of literary belief, when the story-maker's art is good enough to produce it. That state of mind has been called 'willing suspension of disbelief'. But this does not seem to me a good description of what happens. What really happens is that the story-maker proves a successful 'sub-creator'. He makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is 'true': it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside. The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed. You are then out in the Primary World again, looking at the little abortive Secondary World from outside. If you are obliged, by kindliness or circumstance, to stay, then disbelief must be suspended (or stifled), otherwise listening and looking would become intolerable. But this suspension of disbelief is a substitute for the genuine thing, a subterfuge we use when condescending to games or make-believe, or when trying (more or less willingly) to find what virtue we can in the work of an art that has for us failed"[8]

This immersive belief in a Secondary World, Tolkien suggests, is not escapism but a form of psychological stewardship, enabling individuals to process reality's complexities through structured imaginative frameworks. When the sub-creator succeeds, the reader's engagement is not a temporary suspension of disbelief but a transformative participation in a coherent, meaning-rich world. Immersive engagement with a secondary world has profound implications for addressing the modern creativity crisis. By providing a structured yet liberating space for imaginative exploration, sub-creation may become a form of psychological stewardship, i.e., a means of nurturing cognitive flexibility, emotional resilience, and moral agency. When individuals fully inhabit a Secondary World, they are not merely escaping reality, but actively renegotiating their relationship with it. The process of constructing or engaging with internally consistent narratives allows them to experiment with problem-solving, confront existential fears, and rehearse ethical dilemmas in a safe environment. This process mirrors the construction of narrative identity, wherein individuals integrate autobiographical memories into evolving life stories to reframe adversity, foster resilience, and provide coherence to their sense of self[20]. Like Tolkien's sub-creators, people craft narratives that impose coherence on experiences — that may be fragmented —, transforming chaos into meaning. Such narrative structuring aligns with research demonstrating that creative engagement reduces anxiety or improves mental well-being by enhancing meaning-making and adaptive coping mechanisms[21–24].

For instance, structured creative activities-such as writing fantasy narratives or participating in role-playing games-have been shown to improve emotional regulation and social connectedness, particularly among adolescents facing digital overload and academic pressures [24].

4. Secondary Worlds as Psychological Sanctuaries

It is important to begin by highlighting why Secondary Worlds and creativity can serve as forms of pedagogical resistance. According to Freire [25], resistance begins with rejecting technocratic education and recognizing that there is no education that is neutral or non-political. Here, "political" does not necessarily imply authoritarianism; rather, it acknowledges that educators inherently act as political subjects. In other words, all educational practice is infused with values, dreams, and aspirations, and is directional—always pointing toward something [25]. In this view, educators and learners are both active participants who co-create knowledge, bringing their experiences, dreams, and worldviews into the process. Political education, then, is inseparable from cultivating individual ethical sensibility, solidarity, and critical consciousness.

Freire critiques technocratic education—characterized by the "banking model"—where education is delivered as a neutral, technical process focused on the transmission of predetermined knowledge and skills designed to fit within existing economic, social, and political systems [26]. I believe that the standardization of education, particularly when it deprives learners of creativity, exemplifies this technocratic approach. Freire describes the "banking model" as one in which the teachers are depositors [26], and the students are mere receptacles, passively receiving, memorizing, and repeating content. This model values students who adapt uncritically to the logics and demands of the socio-economic order in which they are embedded, rather than encouraging them to challenge or transform it. Clearly, this approach stifles creativity.

As a personal reflection, this banking model appears widespread in higher education, at least from my observations in Japan and Italy. More troublingly, students often seem to accept this model out of fear of failure or the consequences of non-conformity within educational and employment systems. This reflection, while shaped by my own ideal of education—firmly opposed to the banking model—and my hopes as a student, underscores why I have been motivated to explore the critical importance of "psychological sanctuaries" that nurture creative agency.

Secondary Worlds are not escape routes from reality, but psychological sanctuaries where individuals can process complex emotions and experiences in a contained, yet meaning-rich environment. As Tolkien envisioned, these worlds are crafted with internal coherence and depth, offering a space where readers and creators alike can safely explore, rehearse, and ultimately integrate challenging aspects of their lived reality. This transformative function of Secondary Worlds is rooted in Tolkien's conviction that successful sub-creation enables "literary belief" — the state in which the reader is not merely suspending disbelief, but actively participating in a world that feels internally true [8]. Within these imaginative realms, individuals can experiment with alternative identities, confront fears, and rehearse solutions to real-life dilemmas, all within the safety of a constructed narrative framework. This engagement is not passive nor active escapism. Passive escapism, in fact, typically involves the consumption of entertainment or distraction without meaningful personal involvement or transformation, such as mindlessly watching television or scrolling through social media feeds [27, 28]. Active escapism, instead, involves seeking activities that require personal engagement and often creativity, such as participating in role-playing games, writing stories, or engaging in artistic pursuits [28, 29]. While both forms of escapism serve as coping mechanisms, active escapism is generally associated with adaptive outcomes, as it allows individuals to process emotions, develop new skills, and gain a sense of mastery or accomplishment. Research suggests that when individuals immerse themselves in imaginative or creative activities, they are more likely to experience psychological growth, enhanced well-being, and improved resilience [29, 30].

While participation in a Secondary World may superficially resemble active escapism, it differs from it fundamentally in both purpose and effect. It is not, in the end, a form of escapism at all. Active escapism can be adaptive, fostering self-expansion, skill development, and even emotional regulation, but its primary motivation is compensatory. It is used to fill gaps or alleviate discomfort originating in the primary

world, in a different way, but ultimately a similar compensatory purpose as passive escapism. Tolkien's sub-creation, by contrast, is not merely a compensatory or diversionary process but a deeply participatory, meaning-making act that aspires to mirror divine creativity and enrich reality itself[31]. Sub-creation is the deliberate crafting of a Secondary World with its own internal logic, coherence, and moral depth — a world that the reader or creator enters not just to escape, but to encounter truth, beauty, and new perspectives that illuminate and transform their understanding of the primary world[8]. As Tolkien himself argued, the value of fantasy and sub-creation is not in fleeing reality — "the flight of the deserter" —, but in the "escape of the prisoner", i.e., a restorative engagement that enables recovery, renewal, and a return to reality with greater clarity and hope[8]. This restorative engagement with a Secondary World serves not only as a means of temporary relief but as a profound opportunity for personal growth and transformation. By actively participating in the sub-creation and/or exploration of internally consistent worlds, individuals are invited to grapple with ethical dilemmas, confront fears, and imagine alternative outcomes to real-world challenges. In this way, sub-creation becomes a rehearsal space for life itself, or a psychological sanctuary where one can safely process emotions, experiment with identity, and cultivate adaptive coping strategies. Thus, rather than viewing fantasy as a retreat from reality, Tolkien's concept of sub-creation invites us to recognize the transformative power of imagination as a vital resource for navigating the complexities of modern life.

The significance of such psychological sanctuaries becomes especially apparent in periods of uncertainty, stress, or rapid societal change. Secondary Worlds, by virtue of their structured yet imaginative nature, offer a refuge where individuals can temporarily step back from external pressures and gain the cognitive and emotional distance necessary for reflection and renewal. This "safe remove" is not a denial of reality, but a strategic withdrawal that allows for the rehearsal of alternative responses to adversity, the processing of complex feelings, and the imaginative reconstruction of personal narratives[20, 29]. This is valuable for adolescents and young adults, who are often negotiating questions of identity, belonging, and future direction under the weight of academic, social, and digital pressures[24–30]. The ability to "try on" different selves or to envision eucatastrophic turns — sudden, positive reversals in the face of despair, as Tolkien described — can foster hope, resilience, and a renewed sense of agency when returning to the primary world[8]. The communal dimension of Secondary Worlds-whether experienced through collaborative storytelling, creative arts, or shared fandoms-can mitigate feelings of isolation and foster social connectedness. Research has shown that participation in creative communities not only enhances well-being but also provides a supportive context for meaning-making and emotional regulation[21, 23]. In this way, psychological sanctuaries are not merely private refuges but can serve as collective workshops for empathy, cooperation, and the co-construction of hopeful futures.

Once again, it is critical to emphasize that psychological sanctuaries are not escape routes but transformative spaces where individuals engage with reality through imagination, rather than fleeing from it. This distinction is vital in a cultural climate where creativity—and fantasy in particular—is often conflated with avoidance or dismissed as frivolous. Unlike escapism, which prioritizes distraction or compensation, engagement with Secondary Worlds fosters restorative engagement: a structured process of confronting, reframing, and ultimately integrating real-world challenges within a coherent imaginative framework[20, 32, 33].

5. Cultivating Sub-Creation in Contemporary World

If the Secondary World offers a sanctuary for the imagination, the next challenge is how such spaces can be intentionally cultivated in the routines of modern life. In an era marked by digital saturation, educational standardization, and widespread anxiety, the deliberate fostering of sub-creation becomes not merely desirable, but may be essential. As Tolkien's theory suggests, and as contemporary research confirms, the capacity to engage with structured, imaginative frameworks is not an innate gift reserved for a few, but a universal human need — one that can be supported, taught, and sustained across educational, digital, and therapeutic contexts[30, 34]. It is hence important to understand how sub-creation and psychological sanctuaries can be integrated into schools, digital platforms, and community life, highlighting both the opportunities and challenges of reclaiming imagination as a resource for resilience and well-being.

The debate over declining creativity, while often framed in Western terms, transcends cultural boundaries. In Japan and Italy, concerns about diminishing imaginative capacity have emerged with distinct cultural contours, reflecting broader anxieties about globalization, educational practices, and digital saturation. These cases illustrate how the "creativity crisis" narrative — whether empirically validated or culturally constructed — intersects with local values, institutional pressures, and technological change. Moreover, it may suggest how the transformative potential of Tolkien's Secondary Worlds is not confined to literary theory but manifests in real-world practices that address the creativity crisis. Japan and Italy, despite distinct cultural contexts, exemplify how structured imaginative engagement can counteract declining creativity, offering lessons in fostering psychological sanctuaries through education, technology, and therapeutic interventions.

Japan's effort to balance its collectivist values with the need for creative innovation provides a compelling case study in the global creativity crisis. The yutori-kyoiku (relaxed education) reforms of the 1990s–2000s sought to foster creativity by reducing academic pressure through lighter course loads and interdisciplinary projects. However, when Japan's performance declined on international assessments like PISA (Program for International Student Assessment)—with reading literacy falling from 8th to 14th place between 2000 and 2006—policymakers partially reversed course, reintroducing standardized testing and structured curricula [1, 35]. This shift highlights the fundamental tension between nurturing individual creativity and meeting societal demands for academic achievement, a conflict embedded in Japan's cultural and institutional fabric. Relevant Japanese studies, such as Nishizawa's analysis of inquiry-based learning (*tankyū gakushū*) in Kagawa Prefecture schools [36], demonstrate how structured yet flexible pedagogical frameworks can foster sub-creative practices akin to Tolkien's 'secondary worlds' — even within standardized systems. Nishizawa's findings reveal that students engaged in collaborative, inquiry-driven projects exhibited heightened imaginative engagement [36], mirroring the transformative potential of Tolkien's theory within institutional constraints. To better explain the tension between culture and individual creativity, it is important to underline that Japanese young people tend to conceptualize creativity as a relational, process-oriented act stemming from group activities, rather than something connected with individualistic innovation. Japanese youth display weaker individual agency and stronger interdependence-oriented tendencies, as shown by Hatanaka [37]. Creativity is often mediated through group contexts rather than individual expression, aligning with communal values. Similar findings emerge from Oie as she explains that relational creativity manifests in practices like koto ensembles [38], where students collaborate to adjust rhythms and harmonies, prioritizing collective cohesion over individual virtuosity.

Kinoshita's (2022) research on manga fandom provides a critical lens for understanding how relational creativity operates outside formal educational structures in Japan [39]. Kinoshita demonstrates that manga fans engage in collaborative creative practices that align with Japan's collectivist values while still fostering innovation. For instance, she describes how fans on platforms like Pixiv collectively reimagine manga narratives through "what if" scenarios, such as reinterpreting character relationships or blending fictional worlds with real-life photography. These practices exemplify possibility thinking, which Kinoshita argues aligns with McConnon's eight core elements — posing questions, play, immersion, innovation, risk-taking, being imaginative, self-determination, and intentionality [39, 40]. Crucially, however, these practices emerge from group-driven processes rather than individual creativity. Much like Tolkien's subcreators, manga fans use structured imaginative frameworks to reinterpret existing narratives, transforming passive consumption into active meaning-making—a process that fosters resilience amid societal pressures.

In particular, building on Kinoshita's insights [39], there are at least three tensions that emerge between creativity and the Japanese education system. First, there is a tension between agency and structure. While standardized curricula prioritize measurable outcomes over organic, group-led exploration, manga fans exhibit self-motivated creativity through collaborative platforms like YouTube. The second tension is between formal and informal learning. Yutori education attempted to institutionalize creativity through interdisciplinary projects — resulting in failure — while manga fandom thrives through informal learning that is self-directed and spontaneous [39]. Tolkien himself recognized different creative modes, noting, in a Letter to Unwin, that while he "usually composed only with great difficulty and

endless rewriting," some works came effortlessly: "I woke up one morning with that odd thing virtually complete in my head"[10], suggesting that sub-creative pedagogies should accommodate both structured and intuitive approaches to imagination. A third tension is between cultural authenticity — as creativity is embedded in Japanese daily life and is culturally contextual — and PISA's individualistic benchmarks that fail to capture such collectivistic practices. This tension creates a disconnection between local values and global assessments, underscoring the need to redefine creativity through culturally grounded frameworks like Tolkien's sub-creation.

While Japan's creativity crisis stems from tensions between collectivist values and globalized innovation metrics, Italy presents a contrasting paradox: a nation celebrated for its Renaissance heritage now grapples with adolescent disengagement and digital passivity. Unlike Japan's relational creativity, Italy's struggles reflect a fragmented individualism, where artistic legacy coexists with modern educational stagnation and institutional inertia. Yet, grassroots initiatives like the EcoCraft Challenge—where students design sustainable cities in Minecraft — embody Tolkien's vision of sub-creation, transforming digital tools from distractions into workshops for ethical stewardship[41]. This shift from digital passivity to active sub-creative engagement underscores the broader pedagogical potential of technology when harnessed within thoughtfully structured educational frameworks. Rather than viewing online platforms solely as obstacles, it is essential to recognize their capacity to facilitate imaginative agency, collaborative problem-solving, and ethical learning experiences. Although digital saturation is frequently described as a threat to sustained creative engagement—especially in contexts where screen time is associated with distraction or disengagement—emerging evidence from both Japan and Italy suggests a more nuanced reality. Initiatives like EcoCraft demonstrate that platforms such as Minecraft can serve as dynamic catalysts for collaborative learning and imaginative experimentation. In EcoCraft, students are not simply gaming or consuming content; instead, they co-create virtual cities, negotiate collective visions, and grapple with real-world dilemmas such as sustainability and resource management. This process echoes the principles of sub-creation, shifting digital participation from passive absorption to active, communal world-building. Similarly, in Japan, manga fans on platforms like Pixiv engage in collaborative storytelling, remixing familiar narratives and characters through "what-if" scenarios and art, cultivating a shared imaginative space that honors both individual contribution and group creativity. These examples illustrate that, when intentionally integrated into pedagogy, digital tools can become powerful enablers of sub-creative agency—transforming online environments from sources of passivity into workshops for ethical, collaborative, and culturally contextualized meaning-making. Recognizing this dual potential is crucial for educators and policymakers seeking to harness technology in service of resilient, imaginative, and future-oriented learning.

Italy's case thus offers critical insights into how cultural heritage, digital saturation, and policy reforms intersect in shaping imaginative resilience—or its erosion. Also, in the case of Italy, it is possible to find at least three key tensions between creativity and the education system. In Japan, there exists a tension between formal and informal learning. Cachia and Ferrari conducted a survey (7659 answer) collecting data from teachers in obligatory school in 27 countries of EU[42], to understand how teachers in Europe perceive and understand creativity, foster creativity through their teaching, use ICT to encourage creativity, and what kind of context and support are necessary for teachers to cultivate creativity in their students. Their findings suggest schools tend to prioritize disciplinary rigor as traditional assessment method over interdisciplinary projects, relegating creativity to extracurricular activities, even when most of the teachers seem to believe that creativity not only can apply to every domain of knowledge or every school subject, but also sustain the idea that everyone can be creative[42].

Another directly connected tension is the one between standardized and creative pedagogy. According to OECD[43], the PISA 2022 Creative Thinking assessment reveals a global pattern where education systems excelling in mathematics, reading, and science often struggle to foster creativity, highlighting systemic prioritization of academic rigor over imaginative engagement. In Italy, this tension is strong as, while the *Maturità* exam (the high-school final exam) enforces rote memorization of historical dates and literary analyses, only 8% of Italian students self-identify as creative, despite 87% acknowledging its applicability across subjects[6, 43]. A third tension emerges between policy aspirations and their

practical implementation within Italy's education system, particularly regarding creativity and inclusion. Despite legislative frameworks like the *Piano delle Arti* (Arts Plan) and inclusive education mandates (Law 107/2010, Ministerial Decree 2012), empirical studies reveal systemic barriers that dilute their transformative potential. Italy's *Piano delle Arti*, renewed triennially, allocates funding for schools to integrate arts and creativity into curricula, aiming to revive the nation's Renaissance humanist legacy (Italian Ministerial Decree, 2021). However, Marsili et al. identify critical problems [15], such as the fact that only 33% of schools effectively implement these programs because of economic constraints, uneven teacher training, and a lack of standardized evaluation metrics. Affluent regions, like Lombardy in northern Italy, have schools that partner with cultural institutions, a stark contrast to schools in the South that struggle with limited resources, thus increasing geographical inequality.

Similarly, inclusive education policies — such as Personalized Instructional Plans (PIPs) for students with learning disorders — face "cultural resistance" from educators accustomed to standardized pedagogies. This, of course, loops back to the first tension, as educators, while they may perceive the importance of creativity, fail to implement it in formal education. As Mentini shows [44], standardized tests are linked to transmissive, lecture-based teaching, especially in lower-performing schools, which limit student-centered or experimental pedagogies. However, this may be also due socio-economic context as high-performing schools in affluent areas often integrate innovation (e.g., competence-based teaching, digital tools) without significant tension, as they face less pressure to "prove" results — including the risks for the teachers —, while disadvantaged schools with working-class students prioritize structured, practical instruction aligned with standardized tests.

The divergent trajectories of Japan and Italy in addressing creativity crises stem not only from institutional differences, but are deeply rooted in cultural practices that shape how individuals express creativity. While both nations grapple with digital saturation and institutional barriers, their cultural frameworks produce distinct patterns of engagement. In Japan, collaborative creativity fosters collective imaginative practices, while in Italy, individualistic norms prioritize personal expression over communal innovation. For example, Kinoshita demonstrates that manga fans in Japan engage in collaborative creative practices—reflecting creativity as a collective process—while Italy traditionally links creativity with individual genius and personality [39]. However, Taddeo and Tirocchi's research reveals that Italian adolescents primarily act as "functional prosumers" who remix existing content (such as TikTok trends) rather than generating original works [45]. Their study found that 75% of teens engage in imitation or adaptation of online content, indicating a lack of confidence in their creative agency. From this research, it also emerges that creativity in the digital age involves not just individual expression but strategic consideration of social contexts and audience expectations. In particular, the authors suggest that "the pressure of social norms in the use of media seems to weigh heavily on Italian teenagers: these pressures prompt moderate and critical attitudes, not so much as consumers (where passive use can easily go unnoticed and anonymous), but in their role as active producers of content" [45]. These results may lead to considering creativity as practices that emphasize collaboration, social awareness, and strategic communication rather than individual artistic expression, suggesting that digital creativity requires different evaluation criteria than traditional creative practices, also in a context such as Italy.

6. Bridging Theory and Practice: How Sub-Creative Pedagogies May Work

While institutional reforms such as yutori-kyoiku have struggled to sustain creative education, evidence suggests that sub-creative practices nonetheless thrive in informal environments. For instance, as Kinoshita demonstrates [39], Japanese youth actively engage in collaborative world-building through "what if" scenarios, reinterpreting character relationships and blending fictional worlds with reality. These practices mirror Tolkien's sub-creation as structured imaginative frameworks that transform passive consumption into active meaning-making, fostering resilience amid societal pressures. This relational creativity aligns with Japan's collectivist values, where imagination emerges through group contexts and collective collaborative practices, rather than individual expression [46]. Such practices suggest that sub-creative pedagogies must honor cultural frameworks rather than imposing Western individualistic

models. A closer look at Japan and Italy reveals that, despite their structural differences, these education systems face remarkably parallel tensions. Specifically, challenges arise from the interplay of formal and informal learning, the balance between standardized and creative pedagogy, and the pressures of global metrics on cultural authenticity. Yutori-kyoiku's failure demonstrates that broad structural changes cannot sustain creative education without cultural alignment. Conversely, manga fandom's success suggests that sub-creative frameworks can operate within existing systems when they honor relational values. To synthesize these cross-national dynamics, **Table 1** provides a comparative overview of the major tensions surrounding standardization and creativity in Japan and Italy[5, 43]. Each dimension is accompanied by a brief explanation to clarify its educational and cultural significance.

Table 1. Comparative Overview of the Major Tensions Surrounding Standardization and Creativity in Japan and Italy.

Dimension	Japan	Italy	Explanation
Policy Framework	Yutori-kyoiku (1998–2002) introduced creativity, but reversed after PISA decline	Piano delle Arti promotes arts integration but only ∼33% schools implement programs effectively	Both countries pursued creativity reforms faced with implementation and sustainability obstacles
Assessment System	Return to standardized testing after PISA decline (2000–2006)	Maturità exam enforces rote memorization and literary analysis	High-stakes exams reinforce standardization, impeding sustained creative pedagogies
Cultural Values	Creativity often emerges in relational, collaborative group contexts (manga, *monogatari*)	Individual genius/humanistic tradition is valued, but collective creative projects are less common	Cultural frameworks shape which forms of creativity are valued and expressed
Student Self-Perception	8% of adolescents describe themselves as creative; only 2% of teachers agree[5]	8% of students self-identify as creative, despite value placed on creativity[43]	Both contexts report low creative self-efficacy among students
Digital Engagement	Creative use of digital platforms (Pixiv) for collaborative storytelling and fan creation	High digital engagement (e.g., TikTok), but more functional remixing than original creation	Digital tools enable creativity, but modes differ based on cultural and institutional conditions
Socioeconomic Factors	Less explicit but regional inequality may impact opportunities	Wealthier regions/schools more likely to integrate arts/creativity	Structural inequality affects practical access to creative curricula
Informal vs. Formal	Informal practices (e.g., manga fandom) foster relational creativity outside formal curriculum	Humanistic legacy offers dialogic, tradition-innovation synthesis mainly in formal education	Informal creativity can compensate for formal deficits if culturally embedded
Implementation Barriers	Resistance to Western-style individualism; reliance on group norms	Geographical divides, uneven training, economic constraints limit reach of reforms	Both contexts face obstacles to scaling up/upholding creative educational models

As **Table 1** demonstrates, although both countries contend with creativity constraints and institutional hurdles, these challenges manifest differently due to unique cultural and structural conditions. Therefore, effective pedagogical reform must be sensitive to these contextual nuances. Addressing these tensions requires pedagogical models—like sub-creation—that not only bridge the gap between standardization and creativity, but also honor local traditions and contextual realities.

The integration of sub-creation theory into educational frameworks requires culturally embedded approaches. In Japan, collaborative storytelling like monogatari traditions provides scaffolding for communal myth-making[47]. Italy's humanistic legacy offers similar opportunities for framing creativity as a dialogic process between tradition and innovation[48].

This recognition raises the question of how sub-creation-related practices can be authentically situated within specific cultural philosophies of creativity. While Tolkien's concept of sub-creation is embedded in a Western, theolog-

ically inflected tradition, similar pedagogical philosophies have long existed in Japanese thought. Educational pioneer Kurahashi emphasizes the importance of engaging with a child's present emotional (*kokoro-mochi*) and imaginative state [49], rather than merely preparing them for future societal roles. Kurahashi argues that genuine creativity flourishes when educators empathize with and respond to children's spontaneous play and imaginative impulses, fostering agency and wonder within structured, relational environments. This approach resonates with sub-creation's focus on building "secondary worlds" not as isolated acts of individual genius, but as communal, present-tense, and empathetically guided experiences. By foregrounding the value of play, emotional resonance, and co-created meaning, Kurahashi demonstrates that the pedagogical foundations for structured imaginative engagement are not uniquely Western but find deep roots in Japanese education [49]. This cross-cultural dialogue suggests that the framework of sub-creation, when adapted with attention to local philosophies like Kurahashi's, while not universal, can act as a valid and culturally responsive scaffold for creativity across diverse educational contexts.

While institutional standardization often stifles creativity, structured imaginative frameworks preserve agency through enabling constraints that channel creative output without rigid prescription. Ueki's "hatsumei gaku" demonstrates this balance by combining internal coherence which mirrors Tolkien's idea [14], with student-led exploration — offering an alternative to top-down mandates that precipitated *yutori-kyoiku*'s failure. In particular, Ueki's hatsumei gaku fosters structured creativity through incremental challenges, which are scaffolded risk-taking (e.g., modifying household objects before medical devices), ethical simulation (role-playing biomedical engineers to prototype safely), and cross-domain analogies (relating stent design to bridge construction). These constraints paradoxically enhance agency by channeling experimentation into manageable, psychologically secure frameworks [13]. While structured approaches like Ueki's *hatsumei gaku* offer valuable creativity scaffolds, their step-by-step methods may risk turning imagination into a formula, prioritizing small improvements over groundbreaking ideas. For instance, while inventing eraser-tipped pencils through "addition" (*tashizan*) exercises is useful, it may limit the potential discovery toward a totally new product. In Ueki's case, the medical focus equates "successful creativity" with patentable products, thereby limiting the scope of creativity to go beyond practical solutions.

Role-play games may be a more suitable example and inspiration. Structured activities mediate creative collaboration through negotiated parameters, particularly valuable in groups with diverse epistemologies. Tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs) exemplify this dynamic, since players exercise narrative agency within boundaries set by the Dungeon Master (DM), who defines physical laws or ethical frameworks while enabling player innovation [50, 51]. What players do is not created from zero. That, to some extent, is the DM's role, even if in the case of the DM, creation may be relative to a manual, or to the real world. Yet, the sub-creation of the players is not even limited to addition or subtraction. It is more encompassing. On the side, the DM set a guided exploration of the limit (the presence of magic or not, may be a limit decided by the DM). On the other side are players who set limits through their creativity. The action of each player also influences the "in-game reality" of other players, making the narration collaborative. However, within these limits, the possibilities of the players are almost infinite. They can try whatever they can think of. The success or failure of a decision is determined by a dice. Hence, I think it is correct to hypothesize that moderate task structure may help, at least in the case of cooperative creativity, more than both standardized rigid approaches and/or unstructured ones. TRPG sessions and invention play interventions, for example, function as psychological sanctuaries by providing:

- Divergent thinking scaffolds: Defined narrative parameters enhance "what if" scenario exploration while maintaining coherence [51]
- Relational creativity frameworks: Collaborative world-building requires negotiating shared narratives while preserving individual agency [50]
- Ethical sandboxes: Simulated consequences allow moral experimentation without real-world repercussions [50]

The paradox between standardization and creativity is resolved when structure serves as a generative scaffold instead of a restrictive cage. As Rosso observes in organizational creativity studies, "[…] constraints such as standardized processes and routines can positively impact team creative outcomes, given appropriate environmental condi-

tions"[52]. Similarly, Verger et al. identify creative preservation practices where constraints paradoxically enhance innovation through focused recombination of existing elements[53]. TRPGs embody, hence, Tolkien's notion of subcreation as freedom within the law of the Secondary World. The DM's manual-derived rules (e.g., Player's Handbook stat blocks) provide a standardized foundation, but players constantly reinterpret these guidelines through creative action.

Building on this, it is possible to suggest that subcreation may offer alternatives to failed policy approaches like yutori-kyoiku by providing focused pedagogical tools rather than systemic overhaul. By transforming classrooms into collaborative "world-building" spaces, educators can foster imaginative engagement while honoring both individual development and collective meaning-making. This approach addresses Japan's educational tensions without requiring institutional revolution, positioning creativity as a socially embedded practice rather than disruptive individualism. Japan's yutori-kyoiku failure and Italy's creative education struggles reveal distinct cultural barriers—relational conformity versus fragmented individualism—yet both contexts demonstrate pathways forward through practices aligned with Tolkien's sub-creation. Rather than viewing creativity as a luxury, research confirms creative engagement activates neural pathways supporting emotional regulation, cognitive flexibility, and social connectedness[30, 54]. Conversely, systemic creativity barriers — standardized education, digital passivity, cultural stigmatization — correlate with heightened anxiety and diminished self-efficacy[43]. Sub-creation's educational integration requires culturally embedded approaches rather than imposing Western frameworks. While sub-creation originates as a Western pedagogical framework, its implementation in Japan need not replicate foreign models wholesale. Through culturally attuned adaptation — reimagining collaborative world-building practices within Japan's unique socio-cultural context — this approach can align with educational priorities of collective meaning-making while nurturing creativity as a socially embedded practice.

Critically, sub-creative pedagogies must address tensions between individual expression and collective norms. In Japan, where yutori-kyoiku's individualistic creativity emphasis failed, narrative mediation techniques and project-based group learning can reframe creativity as a socially embedded practice rather than disruptive individualism. This addresses the fundamental cultural disconnect that contributed to yutori-kyoiku's policy reversal. Italy's fragmented individualism requires different approaches: digital storytelling platforms facilitating integration of personal narratives into shared ethical frameworks. Both strategies position Secondary Worlds as "psychological sanctuaries"—spaces where learners rehearse reality through symbolic problem-solving, cultivating resilience amid sociocultural pressures. Sub-creative pedagogies require a systemic shift towards "creative ecosystems," in which policymakers, educators, and learners collaboratively envision education as world-building[55]. Unlike yutori-kyoiku's top-down structural changes that failed to account for cultural values, this approach honors both universal imaginative capacity and cultural diversity. This paradigm positions Tolkien's theory as transformative educational philosophy rather than a literary metaphor—one harmonizing imagination with cultural expression while providing practical alternatives to failed policy approaches. By creating structured imaginative spaces within existing systems, educators can foster the creative engagement that yutori-kyoiku envisioned without requiring institutional revolution.

7. Conclusions

This study demonstrates that Tolkien's sub-creation theory provides a valuable framework for addressing contemporary creativity constraints in education, particularly those exemplified by Japan's failed yutori-kyoiku reforms. The comparative analysis of Japan and Italy reveals that despite structurally different education systems, similar tensions emerge between institutional standardization and creative expression across cultural contexts. The research establishes three critical insights. First, yutori-kyoiku's failure stemmed from attempting broad structural changes in accounting for cultural values—sub-creation offers focused pedagogical tools that can operate within existing institutional frameworks while honouring relational creativity practices. Second, Secondary Worlds function as psychological sanctuaries that foster structured meaning-making rather than digital fragmentation, providing measurable benefits for emotional regulation and cognitive flexibility. Third, successful creative education requires culturally embedded approaches:

Japan's collaborative world-building practices and Italy's humanistic traditions offer scaffolding for sub-creative pedagogies that transcend Western individualistic models.

These findings suggest that creativity education failures like yutori-kyoiku can be addressed through sub-creative frameworks that transform classrooms into collaborative "world-building" spaces. Rather than requiring systemic overhaul, such approaches work within existing structures while fostering the imaginative engagement that Japanese reforms originally sought but failed to sustain. This positions creativity as socially embedded practice rather than disruptive individualism, addressing fundamental cultural tensions that contributed to policy reversal.

This theoretical analysis requires empirical validation through controlled interventions testing sub-creative pedagogies' effectiveness across cultural contexts. Future research should develop culturally inclusive creativity assessment tools that capture collective practices overlooked by Western-centric measures. Additionally, longitudinal studies examining how sub-creative education impacts student resilience and academic achievement within standardized systems would strengthen the framework's practical applications. Sub-creation theory offers educators and policymakers alternatives to failed approaches like yutori-kyoiku by providing structured imaginative engagement that honours both individual development and collective meaning-making. In an era of digital saturation and institutional anxiety, this framework demonstrates that imagination and creativity are vital processes for developing psychological resilience, positioning narrative-driven learning as a bridge between literature, pedagogy, and psychological well-being.

To effectively foster creativity within institutional constraints, educators should integrate structured imaginative activities inspired by Tolkien's concept of sub-creation—including collaborative storytelling, problem-based learning, and role-play—while tailoring these practices to culturally relevant frameworks. Policymakers, institutions, and educators must support robust professional development, empowering teachers to implement creative pedagogies and design curricula that balance standardization with genuine opportunities for student agency and exploration. In alignment with Freire's vision of knowledge as co-creation [26], students themselves should be recognized as active collaborators in shaping their learning. Together, these actions cultivate resilient, future-oriented learners and establish a foundation for pedagogical resistance to technocratic models of education.

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