

Classroom Organization: The Physical Environment

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Arranging Space

The physical layout reflects your teaching style. If you want students to collaborate in small groups, for example, organize them around tables or clusters of desks. For frequent whole-group discussions, try a circle or U-shaped desk configuration. If you plan on an individualized, self-paced curriculum, you might set up learning stations.

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"Creating a caring, child-centered environment takes lots of thought and planning," says fifth-grade teacher Frank Garcia. "Basic bulletin boards are not enough. I believe in a very colorful classroom with posters, functional bulletin boards, and other 'interesting' items to enhance the environment, such as a small refrigerator, TV, and a stereo system with a CD player."

In Reggio Emilia, a northern Italian town whose early childhood programs are internationally acclaimed, classrooms feature displays of children's work, collections of "found" objects, ample space for supplies (all aesthetically arranged), and clearly designated spaces for large- and small-group activities. Reggio Emilia educators stress the need for a classroom environment that informs and engages the child. They consider the physical environment to be "another teacher." And in the sense that it can motivate children, enhance learning, and reduce behavior problems, environment really is an extra teacher.

Author and educator Mike Hopkins points out that personal teaching style and specific educational needs should largely determine how you design your classroom space.

Hopkins urges teachers to forget about the way things have always been done and to visit museums, libraries, other schools, and colleagues' classrooms to identify different ways of organizing learning space. Many teachers prefer to create different areas within the classroom. For example, a classroom might feature a quiet reading corner, a music area where students can play soft music while completing work, a discussion/conversation center, a large table for cooperative projects, spaces for wet or messy projects, multimedia spaces, learning centers or stations, and individual work areas.

Easily accessible materials and supplies can eliminate delays, disruptions and confusion as students prepare for activities. In poorly arranged classrooms, students spend a lot of time waiting — waiting in line, waiting for help, waiting to begin. To eliminate some waiting, store frequently used items such as scissors and paste in several different areas.



Desk Placement

In many classrooms, the largest amount of space is devoted to the arrangement of individual student desks. Teachers vary greatly on their preferred arrangements, but most agree that the days of 30 desks lined in neat rows and facing the teacher's desk up front are long gone. Instead, some teachers like to arrange desks in cooperative groups of four, while many others prefer a U-shaped configuration, where everyone has a front row seat.

"Arrange the room so that you can make eye contact with every student and reach each student with ease," suggests sixth-grade teacher Jane Baird.

But no matter how you arrange desks, don't be afraid to make changes.

"Set your room up, and at the end of each unit or each month, evaluate and make changes," advises fifth grade teacher Laurie Borger. "Move the students' desks on a regular basis so all children learn to cooperate with all children."

Second-grade teacher Pamela Shannon agrees: "Don't be afraid to make seat and desk changes if the arrangement doesn't work. You are in charge."

Environmental Preferences

Other important environmental features include temperature, lighting, and noise level. These factors affect students in different ways and are directly related to individual learning styles. Studies suggest

that when teachers adjust the environment to students' preferences, the students perform better academically and are better behaved.

How can you address environmental preferences in the classroom? Here are some tips from research and practice:

- Create both well-lit and dimly-lit areas in the classroom by using bookcases, screens, plants, and other furniture. Some children learn best in bright light, but others do significantly better in low light. Bright light actually makes some students restless and hyperactive. Try allowing students to sit where they feel most comfortable, or try placing fidgety children in low-light areas and listless children in brighter areas.

- Provide opportunities for children to move around while visiting learning centers and other special classroom areas. Most of us have the mistaken impression that children learn best when sitting still, but research now proves that many children need extensive mobility while learning. These children learn significantly more if they move from one area to another as they acquire new information.

- Establish informal furniture arrangements where students can sit on soft chairs or pillows, or lounge on the carpet. Another myth is that children learn best when sitting up straight in hard chairs. About 75 percent of the total body weight is supported on only four square inches of bone when humans sit up straight in a hard chair, so it is easy to understand how the resulting stress on the buttock tissues causes fatigue,

discomfort, and the need for frequent changes in posture. Research supports the common-sense notion that many students pay better attention and achieve higher grades in more comfortable settings.

- Establish listening stations with headsets for children who need sound, and quiet study areas for those who work best in silence. Many children disprove another commonly held conception: that silence helps kids concentrate better.

- Help students become aware of their own temperature preferences and encourage them to dress accordingly. Temperature preferences vary dramatically, and most children can't concentrate when they are either too cool or too warm.



Source:
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