

Classroom Design with Movement in Mind

Classroom design is so important to how well children can learn and function. Think of your classroom as a blank slate filled with potential and promise. Map out areas where you want to create some comfortable reading nooks. Decide if each child in your class will have a desk, and what percentage of the room will be teacher space. So that students can find places that are most comfortable for them, think about establishing “learning zones” or “neighborhoods” in your classroom community. It’s easy to section off areas using furniture placement, an inexpensive room divider, an open book case, a chalkboard on wheels, or even a curtain. At the beginning of the school year, provide signage for these areas. On the signs, use symbols to indicate high traffic versus low traffic areas and talking versus quiet zones. As you train students in each of the Daily 5, invite them to think about the best places in the classroom to work based on their personal needs and preferences (Boushey & Moser, 2014, pp. 88-89).

Your list of classroom must-haves might look something like this:

- A gathering space
- A high interest library filled with good fit books
- A teacher central station with a cart (preferably with wheels) for supplies
- An easel with chart paper
- A variety of reading nooks
- An array of student work areas with seating options
- A few tables for student work

Since open spaces provide freedom to move and a sense of calm, consider maximizing the space in your classroom by asking:

- What furniture is merely taking up prized real estate in my classroom?
- What areas of the room are just holding “stuff” that is never really used?
- Do all of my students (or *any* for that matter) really need an assigned desk?
- How much space and furniture (including a teacher desk) do I really need for my own use?
- Are there any ways that I can multi-purpose classroom furniture so that I can “make do” with less?

Prepare to make your classroom a place where all students can succeed by reflecting on these questions:

- In my current classroom, what types of special needs do my students have?
- How will I meet the needs of students who require movement in order to learn?
- Are there ways that I can use my classroom design to create zones of comfort and acceptance?
- How can I encourage my students to do their best learning by being open to a less traditional classroom set-up?
- How will I counter pre-existing beliefs about the necessity of rows of desks with students seated for the majority of class time?

Reflect on Differences

Since *student learning*, rather than *student seating*, is what is most important, decide on the type of classroom design that will promote collaboration, co-operation, and critical thinking. In any classroom, there is a good chance that you will encounter some barometer children who may find it especially difficult to sit and to concentrate. Ask yourself—doesn’t increased movement help *all* students to channel their energies? If students had seating options that felt right for their bodies, would sitting be less challenging

for them? Be ready to use your teacher creativity, which is in high demand every single day in the classroom to find the answers for your class. Problem solve ways to give students permission to be themselves and learn in the ways that are best for them. As you think about your room, keep in mind the type of design that will be serviceable for all learners. Whenever possible—think movement! That movement can be as simple as scheduling “walk and talk” times when students can share their responses to books or asking students to stand when they turn and talk.

Focus on the Furniture and the Function

You have probably heard the expression, “less is more” many times. In terms of classroom design, especially *small* classroom design, that statement should be hung on the wall. Before placing any piece of furniture in the room, be sure that children will use it. Just like at home, keep clutter to a minimum so that children can have the space they need to move.

Vary the Tables and Their Heights

- Cut or adjust table legs for children who want to sit on the floor but need a hard surface for work.
- Use counter height tables (similar to breakfast bars) for students who want to stand for their work time (many counters have stools so that children can alternate between standing and sitting).
- Think outside of the box and use furniture like card tables that can be easily stored when not needed. Or pull out those Thanksgiving banquet tables that fold in half (remember to tell your guests to bring their own trays come November!)
- Repurpose used coffee tables and cabinets by painting them with chalkboard paint. This will permit children to write and draw on the surfaces, and add to the variety of furniture heights in your classroom.
- Use child-sized picnic tables with attached benches, plastic sandboxes (empty, of course), or even small plastic wading pools as seating for younger learners.

Evaluate the Comfort of the Seating

- Provide stools so that children can alternate between standing and sitting positions at counter height tables.
- Have folding chairs (upholstered if permitted) available for use when needed. Find out your school’s policy about soft surfaces in the classroom, and plan accordingly.
- Consider outdoor furniture such as gliders that allow for movement as children read.
- Investigate special chairs that move with children’s bodies (these are available at specialty companies and resemble typical classroom chairs, so children do not feel singled out).
- Gather a few ever popular bean bags for a comfortable and relaxing reading experience.
- Improvise a few chairs from buckets or crates using pillows for cushions. Use the containers for welcomed storage.
- Since children (just like teachers) come in all shapes and sizes, incorporate furniture that reflects this. By offering a variety of chair sizes, each student can feel comfortable in the ones that fit best.
- Remember that students learn best when they are comfortable and not distracted by the back and neck pain that can result from sitting in a hard chair or ill-fitting desk.
- If your classroom has high ceilings, think about adding a lofted area for student use.

Consider the Most Active Students

Some of your most active children may be barometer students who will make good use of the many tools (play dough, sand timers, fabric squares, and other manipulatives) that the Sisters recommend for helping them to increase stamina (Boushey & Moser, 2014, pp. 145-150). Since students who have difficulty sitting still may occasionally need room to roam, brainstorm some ways that your classroom design will accommodate them. Make clear that you respect their need for movement, and that they must be considerate of others as they move around the classroom or use special tools that help them to get the activity that they need. Be sure that all learners understand that *motion* does not have to cause *commotion*.

- Leave space around the perimeter of your classroom for a mini-walking track if the child feels the need to get up. If there is not room in the classroom, check if you might be able to designate a nearby hall for this purpose.
- Establish a “need a movement break” area in a corner of the classroom. Think about adding a rocking chair or glider to the space. Offer a yoga mat or exercise ball for sitting, along with a basket of fidgets and stress balls. Provide a timer in this area for student use. Consider if this area will work well for barometer children.
- In a designated area, consider a semi-enclosed area such as a children’s pop-up tent or a card table with a tablecloth draped over it for readers who are easily distracted.
- For children who struggle with choosing appropriate places to read, consider bounded choice. This allows them to select from two or three predetermined choices that will help them to be successful. Depending on your classroom flooring, explore whether carpet or fabric squares or areas framed by masking tape or chalk would be most effective. You can also look into using anti-fatigue kitchen mats, soft bathroom memory foam rugs, or rubber welcome mats.
- When a child with high movement needs is seated at the gathering place (or school assembly for that matter), talk with the student about choosing a place that provides an easy exit. The student should be able to move to the back of the room quickly and quietly and stand for a while until he or she is ready to sit again.

Offer More Physical Activity for Those Who Need It Most

In addition to the brain and body breaks that you offer to all children, consider ways to incorporate even more physical activity and sensory input for those who need it. Some easy ways to accomplish this include:

- Have students stack some heavier books or blocks in a rolling suitcase and pull the suitcase through the hall or around your classroom minitrack.
- Enlist the students’ help in rearranging a bookshelf, cleaning the board, or carrying a basket of classroom supplies or lunch bags.

By implementing even a few small changes, you may discover that your students do not have as much trouble sitting still because they do not have to—instead, they can meet their bodies’ needs for comfort and movement through your thoughtfully designed classroom environment.

References

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