
RESPONSIVE CLASSROOM NEWSLETTER

Spring 2001

Vol. 13, No. 2

Classroom Spaces That Work

Adapted excerpts from a new book for teachers

By Marlynn K. Clayton with Mary Beth Forton

Imagine spending every day in a physical space designed for people much bigger than you. To wash your hands or get a drink of water, you'd have to drag a chair over to the sink or ask a friend for a boost. Your feet would dangle in mid-air when you sat down and you'd have to crane your neck and stand on tiptoe to read the bulletin board. After the novelty wore off, it's likely that you'd end up feeling uncomfortable, insignificant, and out of place.

Unfortunately, this is how many children feel every day in their classrooms. Whether it's because the chairs are too big or too small, the aisles too narrow, the tables too low, or the displays too high, the message is clear: "This room was not made for you."

The sad fact is that most classroom spaces are far from ideal. Perhaps they were originally designed and built with little or no consultation with the teachers who would be working in them. Or maybe they were designed for another purpose, or with tight budgetary restrictions. And while teachers probably won't be able to transform an inadequate classroom space into an ideal one, they can make dramatic improvements.

So, where to begin? The most obvious place is by thinking about the students. Before moving a single piece of furniture or clearing a wall for a display, learn as much as you can about the particular needs of the children you'll be teaching by talking with families and former teachers.

Below are some general guidelines to help you create a physical environment that makes children feel comfortable and significant and that best serves their needs.

Make the Classroom Fit the Children's Bodies

Too many times I have watched students struggle with attention and behavior problems that were clearly the result of being in spaces that were too small, too crowded, or otherwise unsuited to their physical size.

So, before you even meet the students, estimate the range of sizes based on what's typical for that age. Use this estimate to:

- Choose desks, tables, and chairs that fit the children. Check out school furniture catalogues that offer standard height and width calculations based on grade ranges. Also, consider making modifications to the furniture you currently have.
- Select and arrange bookcases and shelves. In general, children should be able to see and be seen over any shelves. Taller shelves should be placed along the perimeter.
- Determine where to locate display areas. Displays meant for children should be at their eye level whenever possible.
- Plan the amount of space needed for class meetings. When children are sitting in a circle, there should be approximately three inches between children.
- Plan enough space for table work. Keep in mind that when children sit at a table to work, they need "elbow room" and space to spread out materials.
- Plan enough space for the children to line up at the exit door. For comfort and safety, it's best to allow about nine inches between children.
- Plan passageways—the aisles children use to move about the room. In general, a passageway should allow two children to walk past each other comfortably.

After students arrive, observe how they use the room. Make necessary adjustments and invite the students to be part of the design process whenever possible. This gives children a sense of ownership and increases their investment in making the design work.

Plan for Children's Special Needs

It is essential that teachers consider how the classroom design will accommodate children with special needs and help them to feel a sense of belonging in the community. To learn about a child's needs from many perspectives, begin by having a conversation with the child, the child's family, and the team that is developing the child's education plan.

Depending on the child, adjustments may range from minor changes to major adaptations. A student in a wheelchair, for instance, might require additional space when sitting in a group or maneuvering around the classroom. A student who exhibits impulsivity might need two distinct work environments—one among classmates (at a table or desk group) and one by him/herself.

Having one or more one-on-one teachers aiding children with special needs will also impact the room design. Often, these teachers will need desk space of their own with access to adaptive computers and materials.

There are excellent resources available on teaching children with special needs and making accommodations for them when arranging classroom spaces. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Technical Assistance Program offers many excellent resources on their website: www.adata.org.

Consider Children's General Developmental Needs

Although every child is unique, there are clearly predictable stages of development which most children go through. Take, for instance, the newly discovered independence of the two-year-old, the expansiveness of the six-year-old, the inward-looking tendency at seven, or the social awkwardness at eleven.

Understanding developmental patterns will help you to create classroom spaces that work for the students. Ask yourself, "What are the general developmental traits that I can expect from the group of children I'll be teaching?" (A list of developmental traits for children ages 4–12 and their classroom implications can be found in chapter one of [*Classroom Spaces That Work*](#).)

Of course, there will always be a range of chronological ages and developmental ages in any classroom. While teachers must meet the needs of every student, knowing the dominant age of the class lets you make rough predictions about the children's developmental needs. Do you have a particularly young group of children this year? A particularly old group? Or a group with half of the children clustering in the young range and half in the older range?

This information will allow you to be more effective in creating a space that works for most of the children. As the year progresses and you come to know the students individually, you can make adjustments to best meet their changing needs.

Less is More

From Chapter two of *Classroom Spaces That Work*

In my twenty years of working with teachers on classroom setup, one of the biggest and most frequent problems I see is too much furniture and too many materials crowding the classroom. Not only does this create safety hazards, it creates an environment that is overstimulating, conducive to behavior problems, and difficult to keep clean. Children need uncluttered spaces to do their work and clear, safe pathways for moving about. There's an old adage that I always try to keep in mind when organizing a classroom: *Less is more*.

Deciding What's Essential

Deciding which materials and furniture to keep and which to discard, recycle, or place in long-term storage can be difficult. While there isn't a specific formula that can be applied to every classroom, here are some general criteria that can help.

Furniture

- All furniture should have at least one clear purpose—and preferably more than one—that is relevant to children's development and the curriculum.
- All furniture should be actively used for some part of each day—and preferably for most of each day.
- Children should be able to move safely and easily around any furniture in the room.
- All furniture should be easy to clean and allow for easy cleaning of the room.
- All furniture should be in good condition and be safe for children to use.

Materials

- All materials should have a clear purpose that is relevant to children's development and the curriculum. It's best if the same material can be used for more than one topic or activity.
- All materials should be used at least every two years.
- All materials should be in good condition and be safe for children to use.

Storage Space

- The criteria listed above for furniture can be applied to storage space as well.
- Every child should have at least one individual storage space, and preferably two spaces—one for learning materials and one for personal belongings such as backpacks and coats.
- Storage that is accessible only to the teacher should consume no more than a quarter of all available storage. If it consumes more, consider storing some teacher materials at home or create a teacher resource shelf in the teachers' room or in the school library.

Two Simple Rules for Reducing Clutter

Two-Year Rule:

If you haven't used a teaching material, looked at the periodical sitting in the corner, or referenced that article pinned to your bulletin board for two years, then chances are you never will. It's probably safe to get rid of them.

Two-Inch Rule:

No pile of papers should get higher than two inches. If that pile on your desk grows two inches high, it's time for you to sort, file, and throw away.

©2001 Northeast Foundation for Children
39 Montague City Road
Greenfield, MA 01301
800-360-6332 413-772-2066
www.responsiveclassroom.org