
Flexible Seating In Elementary School Classrooms

Introduction

For many years, educators have researched and implemented numerous techniques to help their students stay engaged during lessons or class activities. Recently, teachers and administration have begun making drastic changes throughout their classrooms to help contribute to what is referred to as the “21st century classroom.” This term refers to a supportive classroom that is designed to increase student growth in several ways, such as, creativity, collaboration, and leadership. Flexible seating is the idea of allowing a classroom to operate more from a student perspective rather than the teacher. This creates an environment that provides the opportunity to move and learn more effectively while letting students exercise independence through, among other things, choice and physical control of the environment around them.

What is Flexible Seating?

Flexible seating is a classroom design that involves the replacement of typical classroom furniture with seating arrangements that reduce the period where students are stationary, or desk bound (3:12). It is the utilization of several alternative options for the standard chair and desk that maximize the learning of each individual student while giving them a sense of ownership and a desire to become completely involved in their own education (8:y53fp8lk). This gives each student the chance to discover how they work best in the classroom and allows students to create an environment where they can make the best choices for themselves. Flexible seating ensures that using an “agile physical setup” accommodates both independent and group learning. Permitting students to learn and interact in a free-flowing environment, such as a flexible classroom, lets students to use their space to find a customized learning space teaches them how to utilize their environment to be successful. However, flexible seating goes far beyond just the arrangement of seating options. Flexible seating is about hearing student voice, utilizing and heightening collaboration, and putting the needs of students first in their learning environment (5:y6xx64ot).

Classroom Environment

“One cannot have a community of learners without having a positive instructional climate” (2:yykozz44). A successful classroom environment, particularly in elementary schools, should mimic the various skills students will encounter in upper level schools as well as in career fields. It is important that the place a child learns should allow them to experience something of real-world collaboration, critical thinking, and problem solving (2:yykozz44). The world outside the classroom is dynamic and constantly changing, young students simply have to have a learning environment that teaches them how to make independent decisions without someone solving their problems for them (9:ztqd68j). A classroom with flexible seating options allows for student choice and input within their classroom where they are able to work efficiently in a way that ensures their success and in a space that reflects them (1:y66q7kem).

Typical Classroom Set-Up

For years, classroom seating has been an ordinary component in a school's physical environment and for centuries the setting of a classroom has stayed relatively the same. Typically, a traditional classroom consists an arrangement of identical tables, or desks, and chairs that face the instructor's desk, as shown in Figure 2 (10). These desks and chairs are usually lined up in rows with enough room for someone to walk in between (11:37). Traditional seating can lead to the inability of a student to effectively use the classroom the way required to meet learning goals (2:yyk0zz44). Standard rows do not allow for adequate, personalized communication and collaboration necessary for students to participate with their peers and are too rigid to accommodate modern learners (5:y6xx64ot).

Issues Related to a Typical Classroom Structure in Elementary School Students

The typical classroom structure requires students to sit stationary for the majority of the school day. Studies have shown that sustained sitting at desks in traditional school chairs is unhealthy for the bodies of young children, exclusively their lower backs (3:13). Students spend roughly 30% of their day at school and approximately 15,000 hours are spent sitting in a chair. This provides little to no opportunity for children to move leading to pent up energy resulting in restlessness and the inability to remain on-task. A lack of physical activity due to prolonged sitting during instruction causes an unchallenged neuromuscular system which can result in degeneration (8: y53fp8lk).

Along with physical issues, there are several mental issues effected by sedentary sitting. The absence of movement has been shown to lead to an increase in sensory issues that can negatively impact that child's attention span and result in disruptive behavior (11:37). As more research is conducted related to adolescent learning, there has been evidence showing that young children with attention and focus issues who do not receive help may have their condition worsen greatly over time (3:13).

Types of Students and Their Learning Styles

Every individual, young or grown, learns in a way unique to them. As shown below in Figure 3, there are several ways in which the brain works and hardly ever does someone just learn in one way. This is Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences. This theory states that "students possess different kinds of minds and therefore learn, remember, perform, and understand in different ways" (6:yypnk2m8). Since not all students require the same amount of attention and have such different learning styles, each child needs some variation of education to allow them to be successful. Beginning as early as age 4, children develop a sense of understanding what is going on around them. As they start to realize and be able to interpret their own opinions and the opinions of others, a sense of confidence and self-awareness become prevalent (6:yypnk2m8). Becoming self-aware can help them determine in what way they learn best. For example, some will determine they learn best by putting pencil to paper while others will learn by using their hands.

Utilizing Flexible Seating

While implementing alternative seating arrangements, it is important to understand that some students prefer and do learn better in a traditional setting and though making accommodations

to those who would rather sit in a nontraditional way, it is necessary to make arrangements for those who like standard desks (2:yykozz44).

There is no set rule, or blueprint for a classroom with flexible seating. It is up to the instructor and the students to determine what works best for them. Most educators allow student input as they are the focus in the classroom.

Flexible Seating Classroom Structure

When designing flexible seating arrangements, it is crucial that the space is configured to allow students to work most efficiently in whichever area of the room they are working in at any given time. Most flexible classrooms are created with the idea that no student will be in one spot for a prolonged period of time but will move from spot to spot when participating in different activities. These classrooms are built with the intentions of mobility and collaboration and a common goal to magnify learning to keep students engaged and productive (5:y6xx64ot).

Along with numerous seating options, activities can vary too. For example, one spot or kind of seating may allow for the use of technology, one might require group collaboration and communication, and another may be ideal for silent reading. Some educators prefer different sections of the room be for the different subjects. In this case, there may be a spot for instruction, a place for whole class collaboration, a place to work with math manipulatives, a place for silent or small group reading, counter space for science experiments, and a designated area with flat surfaces to take tests.

Different Seating Options and Uses

Alternative seating furniture comes in a wide variety of shapes, sizes, and functions each unique to their purpose and those who may use them. The most common piece of flexible seating is the standing desk which allows students to stand while working with the option to move their feet or sway back and forth to keep themselves busy while working to release energy. In addition to standing desks there are plenty of other options to incorporate into flexible seating arrangements (11:38).

Stability balls, as shown in Figure 5, are essentially giant bouncy balls that allow kids to gently bounce up and down or roll back and forth while seated. While this allows students to keep busy while staying on task, it also helps enforce good posture (12:y572tvn4).

Classroom Management

Managing the space your classroom provides and the way your students interact with the shift in structure are key to ensuring a flexible classroom will be used to its greatest potential.

With such a change in furniture, there becomes limited space in which things like backpacks and school supplies can fit. Different options include designing efficient spots such as trays or a mailbox system for spiral notebooks and different reading materials as well as utilizing supply bins for crayons, markers, glue sticks, etc. This will allow each student to know where their belongings are no matter where they choose to work in the room or what activity they are working on (1:y66q7kem).

When it comes to managing students, clear and predetermined guidelines are crucial to allow the flexible classroom to be of its optimal potential. In order for flexible seating to do its job, teachers must take the necessary time to get to know their students and each individual personality, that way they can determine what their students can or cannot handle and their capabilities (1:y66q7kem). It is more likely than not that at least one student will not be able to work well with a particular type of seating. In this case, limited access to that option and new accommodations may be necessary.

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