



DESIGNING Intentional Classrooms

*How to Create Inclusive
Learning Environments*



Carla Dabau Padrosa

Foreword by Kimberly L. Mitchell

HEINEMANN • Portsmouth, NH

For more information about this Heinemann resource, visit <https://www.heinemann.com/products/designing-intentional-classrooms-1909240.aspx>.

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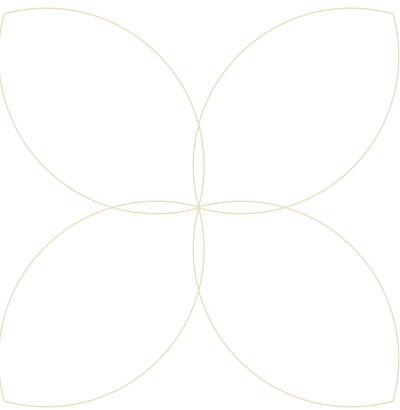
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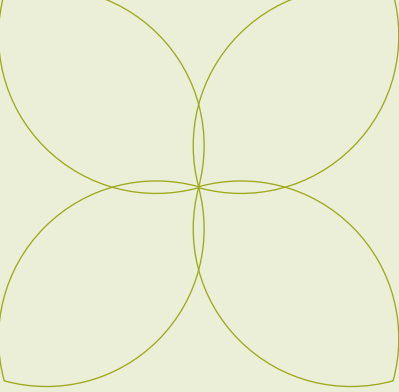
To my family, the most important thing.

To my friends, especially Maria Ballester and Mari Peña, for their unconditional love and help.

To Claire Bethlehem for believing in me.

To my colleagues for their support and patience.

And to educators and school leaders—because change is possible.



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ESSENTIALS TOOLBOX

These **online resources** include printable checklists, reflection questions, and planning templates.

OR 1 Unclutter Your Walls

OR 2 Designing Classroom Areas:
A Guide for Early Years and
Primary Grade Teachers

OR 3 Flexible Seating Guide:
Step-by-Step for Teachers

OR 4 Teacher Desk Organization

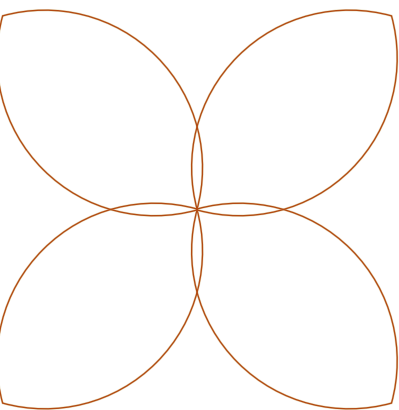
OR 5 General Classroom Supply List for Early
Years and Primary Grade Teachers

OR 6 Nature-Inspired Classrooms

OR 7 A Guide to Peaceful Moments in a Busy
Day: Mindfulness Practices for Teachers



To access these resources, please visit
<http://hein.pub/designcr> and click
on Companion Resources.



FOREWORD

My sixth-grade teacher's classroom wasn't just a room; it was an experience. A large fish tank noisily gurgled on the back table. The small lamp with a long silver pull string sat near a reading nook making a soft *ting, ting, ting* sound when hit with a breeze. Potted Swiss cheese plants and philodendrons scaled up and down every available ledge.

There were only a couple of windows showcasing the petrichor weather, lovingly framed with gauzy curtains that played with any available light. A birdfeeder hung outside and offered endless entertainment. Hands down, the most popular class monitor job was refilling the feeder, accessed by a noisy tin can inside the back closet. The seed mix dust permeated the classroom air, giving off a nutty and earthy smell.

This room taught me that birds get hungrier depending on the season; black oil sunflower seeds are the most preferred variety. I learned that cleaning fish tanks is a dirty job and nitrogen is important so fish don't die by ingesting their own waste. I learned that light and shadow can play tricks on the senses. My sixth-grade classroom, in essence, was my second teacher.

For several years I taught an undergraduate course on the history of teaching as a profession at the University of Washington. One of my first

assignments at the beginning of every quarter involved my students naming all the teachers they had prior to entering university. This wasn't an easy assignment (unless they were homeschooled!), but it helped set the stage for reconciling their memories of being a student with the experiences of their teachers. Memories would flood back in a rush for some. Others would stare off into space perplexed at their impaired memory.

Eventually, I would then ask them to choose just one teacher on their list: someone who had a positive impact on their lives so far. From there, they wrote descriptive reflections on four things: 1) the teacher, 2) themselves at that age, 3) the things they did in the classroom, and 4) the physical environment.

I had more than seven hundred university students representing every major from accounting to wetland science complete this assignment. From this rather large sample, I was astonished to learn that the most potent and lasting memories my students had to share were not about their teachers, themselves, or even the activities. They were the ones about the physical environments!

Some of their recollections:

I vividly remember the beginning of junior year—wondering whether studying precalculus early at 7:30 in the morning would be a good start to my day. I would soon realize it would be one of the best classes of my life. The classroom was upstairs, the first one on the left. It had a lot of windows, which allowed sunshine in the classroom, especially during first period when the sun was still on that side of the building. I remember listening to the rain hit the window and being allowed to bring in a (covered) mug of English Breakfast tea to sip on in class.

There were large footprints taped onto the carpet. I remember happily playing hopscotch on them like large rocks on a beach every morning before finding my desk.

Music! My teacher loved opera and would blast it during recess and when we walked into the classroom in the morning. To this day, I can recognize the most well-known arias like The Magic Flute's "Queen of the Night" and "The Figaro Song." These songs made me feel like a grown-up, like I was capable

of listening to something more refined than my nine-year-old friends. It also made me feel closer to my teacher. Opera reverberates in my body to this day.

Every time I smell salt and vinegar chips I think of my high school Physics classroom. No, it wasn't just that it doubled as the Chemistry lab (though that could have contributed to it). These were my favorite teacher's favorite snack, and he would often share these noisy bags of greasy deliciousness with us! They crunched under our feet and greased the tabletops. Those chips are synonymous with sharing and playfulness—two things that I now know are critical to have in science labs.

My teacher had a table of rocks that she'd collect on her beach walks. They were nested in a sandbox and would change positions daily. We would name each one and fabricate the funniest stories about their lives. On the last day of school, we'd get to pick out our favorite rock to take home and keep. It was one of the most exciting, most highly anticipated rituals I ever remember. In fact, I still have my rock that sits on my bookshelf fifteen years later.

Perhaps it's not so astonishing that these environments elicited such enthusiastic responses. Cognitive scientists have confirmed that our sensations and our attendant emotions around these sensations stick—sometimes for life.

Artist and professor Lynda Barry once wrote about the power of her favorite teacher's classroom in a first-person account in *The New York Times*, published in 1992 ("The Sanctuary of School").

In the back of her room there was always a drawing table and an easel with plenty of supplies, and sometimes during the day [my teacher] would come up to you for what seemed like no good reason and quietly ask if you wanted to go to the back table and "make some pictures for Mrs. LeSane." At the back table in Room 2, I learned to build myself a life preserver that I could carry into my home.

Author Taro Yashima's *Crow Boy* (1976) is another account that beautifully illustrates the power of the physical classroom as he follows a young boy mesmerized by everything *but* the academic lessons. He notes that "Just the ceiling was interesting enough for [the boy] to watch for hours," a line that reminds us that our students are looking in *all* directions, not just side to side.

Harnessing the power of the classroom environment is precisely what Carla Dabau Padrosa suggests we do in this generous and creative guide. Within these pages, she reminds us to focus as much on the environment as we do on our curriculum and pedagogy, as these elements are interrelated and mutually reinforcing.

In the late 1960s, Canadian philosopher Marshall McLuhan famously wrote that "the medium is the message." In other words, *how* we communicate is as important, or sometimes even more important, than *what* we actually communicate. Yes, the physical classroom communicates! The classroom communicates where to look and for how long. It communicates how much the teacher wants you to know about them. It communicates the role of students in the classroom.

The physical classroom communicates these things in big and small ways: from the paint color to how the chairs and desks are arranged. One of my professors at Stanford University, Dr. Larry Cuban, once cynically wrote that the most significant change in schools was "unbolting the chairs from the classroom floors." What does a classroom communicate when the chairs are suddenly moveable? What does a classroom communicate when the desks are large and circular rather than small and individual? Suddenly, students can talk to one another. The medium is now the message: Your teachers are only one source of information, not the only source.

Once we understand the power of the physical environment, we can interrogate it further. How do we help classrooms communicate inclusivity and care? How do we create classrooms where students feel safe enough to take risks with their questions and thinking? How do we create classrooms where students feel confident enough to persist with challenging work?

It was more than a century ago, in the 1920s, that Waldorf schools asked these same kinds of questions. Intentionally designed around the belief that students take in their surroundings through the "unconscious absorbent mind," Waldorf schools took the physical environment seriously.

When you walk into a Waldorf school, you'll immediately notice the abundance of wood, clay, wool, and cotton and the absence of plastic, metal, and commercially made toys. There are no computers or digital clocks. These decisions sprang from Rudolf Steiner's philosophy that knowledge is an active process of participation and that interaction with the phenomenal world ("real people, real things, in real time") is essential to learning. In a Waldorf classroom, the wall colors are muted, turned down to a soft peach color, so that stories, songs, and a child's own imagination can be more easily projected onto them. There are mandalas made of twigs, moss, and pebbles on the tables. The classroom inspires a sense of calm and encourages a sense of wonder about the natural world.

Given the amount of time we spend in formal or semiformal learning environments as children, this book reminds us not to overlook the power of physical space and sensation. And it's also incredibly timely. Where we direct our limited yet miraculous human attention is an ongoing tension today as schools around the world wrestle with powerful distractions. Paying attention feels harder than ever in our technologically enthusiastic, addicted world.

While much of our students' attention in a classroom is naturally consumed by academic activities, we can bet on moments of idle thinking and ruminating. It's probably necessary for students to occasionally gaze at the top of their desks, wander aimlessly around the room, or notice the changes that happen outside a window. Shouldn't we make those moments count, too? Carla's ten principles offer clear, well-researched, and actionable strategies to easily leverage some of that low-hanging fruit.

Finally, teaching is hard enough. You shouldn't have to walk into a classroom every day that doesn't inspire, support, or nurture *you*. And it shouldn't require you to spend a lot of your own money to achieve it. Call back that imaginative spirit you had when building forts with couch cushions and blankets, or sprucing up a sterile dorm room with carefully curated photos and twinkling lights. Help your classroom communicate *your* values.

Student autonomy needs to be nurtured. Yes, you can move chairs!

Every student should feel like they belong and are at home. Yes, you can bring in a lamp!

The natural world should be explored. Yes to hauling in a funky cactus and making desk space for the unusual rock someone found last weekend!

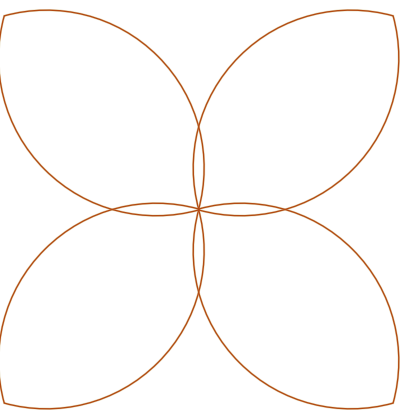
What feels good to *you* will feel good to your students. What helps calm *you* will calm your students. And when *you* feel welcome in your classroom, there's a better chance your students will feel the same.

My sixth-grade teacher knew this. He taught us to care for fish and birds by allowing us to care for fish and birds, not overwhelming or micromanaging us with directions and pamphlets. His classroom wasn't a riot of colors filled with impersonal premade posters or creating, as Kath Murdoch, author and expert on inquiry learning, puts it, the "colorful, chockful dingle dangle classrooms."

Nor was it cold and sterile. My sixth-grade classroom was a loving home where we immediately felt at ease, where we felt we had some autonomy and responsibility, and perhaps most importantly, where we belonged. This is the gift in your hands right now.

What does your classroom teach? It's time to find out.

—**Kimberly L. Mitchell**, Founder, Inquiry Partners



INTRODUCTION

Purpose of This Guide

This book is dedicated to reclaiming classrooms as nurturing environments that foster mental and emotional well-being for both educators and students. Using thoughtful, evidence-based design principles, we explore how to transform the learning space itself into a sanctuary that promotes calm, inclusivity, and focus. These principles are complementary and interconnected, building a cohesive vision for supportive classroom design. Additionally, this book is designed for flexibility. You can return to it as needed, diving into individual principles based on the issue you're currently navigating. Whether you read the book cover to cover or explore it one principle at a time, the goal is to meet you where you are as you redefine your classroom space in ways that support holistic teacher and student well-being.

My mission is to empower teachers to create learning spaces that are not only effective academically but also supportive of mental health and conducive

to genuine learning engagement. This book is more than a guide; it is a movement toward classrooms that honor the well-being of everyone in them.

Classroom design is not a one-size-fits-all solution. There is no finish line. No single approach works forever, and the reality of schools, whether urban, rural, or suburban, is that they are living, breathing environments that evolve with each class, teacher, and policy change. Instead of treating this book as a formula, think of it as a mindset shift, a way to continuously reassess, adapt, and create spaces that reflect the needs of your students and of you as an educator.

To be honest, my passion for learning environments didn't come early. During the first few years of my teaching career, I was just trying to keep my head above water with lesson planning, grading, and finding my own voice as a teacher. During the COVID-19 pandemic, teaching and learning were turned upside down. Suddenly desks had to move and the classroom layout had to change to create more space. I realized that we don't have to accept the classroom environment as it has traditionally been designed. Later, when I moved to the Netherlands, I began playing with the classroom space in a new way. I started rearranging my classroom just by following my instincts—no blueprints, fancy theories, or Pinterest® boards. I just watched, listened, asked my students, and noticed what worked. It wasn't perfect, but it was *real*. And it made a difference.

This book is about choice. About intention. About giving students (and teachers!) spaces that help, not hurt . . . because here is the part we can't ignore anymore: The mental health numbers are heartbreaking. We are seeing rising levels of anxiety, stress, burnout, and depression in students and in teachers. We are losing brilliant, creative, empathetic educators because of a system that's not supporting them. Something is deeply wrong when a profession built on connection and care leads so many to exhaustion and disillusionment.

Reading James Clear's concept in *Atomic Habits* (2018), in which progress is built through small, intentional changes that compound over time, reinforces the view that classroom design is an ongoing process of learning, iterating, and refining. Your space should be flexible, responsive, and personalized to the reality you face, whether that's an underfunded school with thirty students in a cramped room or a high-tech setting with an overabundance of digital distractions. Wherever you teach, this book offers principles, not rigid rules, to guide you in shaping an environment that serves both learning and well-being.

How to Use This Guide

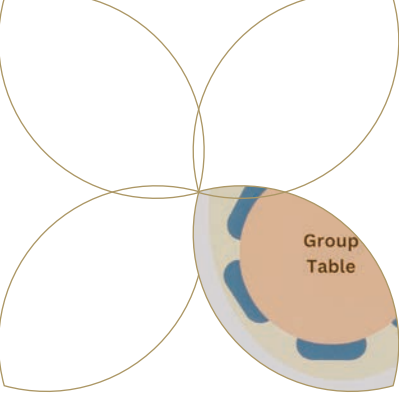
By diving into the pages of this book and exploring the resources and ideas shared here (and on Instagram® @Carladabaup), you are taking a significant step toward enhancing your teaching journey. This book is a guide, a companion, and a source of inspiration for designing learning environments that truly support well-being and growth for your students and yourself.

The insights shared within are rooted in practical experience and research, offering you ways to create spaces that act as a “third teacher.” These principles create environments that naturally encourage calm, inclusivity, and mental wellness, empowering everyone in the classroom to thrive.

Think of this book as a toolkit you can return to time and again, something to keep on your desk or classroom bookshelf, ready to support you through every school year. Designing effective classroom spaces isn’t about achieving perfection on day one. It’s a process, one that grows as you learn about your students’ needs and your own. As you read, grab some highlighters to mark the ideas that resonate with you or a pen to write notes about how to adapt the ideas to your classroom in the Reflection section at the end of each chapter.

Feel free to take a picture of your space and post it on Instagram, tagging me @Carladabaup.





PRINCIPLE 4

Embrace Flexibility

Purpose

Create a flexible, adaptable space that can shift with different activities and learning styles, for both students and teachers. No classroom stays still for long. One minute you're running a calm reading session, and the next you're trying to manage twenty-eight kids in a whole-class activity.

This principle is about shifting our mindset from “set it and forget it” to “let's see what today needs.” A flexible space doesn't just look good in photos; it *feels* good to teach in and learn in. It can grow with a unit, pivot with your mood, and support those beautifully chaotic moments when a student asks a question that takes the entire lesson in a new (but way better) direction.

By embracing flexibility, we give students the chance to choose how they learn best, and we give ourselves permission to not teach from the same spot we've been glued to since September. Spoiler: The floor is sometimes more productive than the teacher desk. True story.



☒ These students use a wobble cushion and a fit ball, a great deal from a secondhand shop. When these items are limited, students have learned to ask, take turns, and check in with each other.

WHY IT MATTERS: Flexibility Offers Choice, Movement, and Calm

Classrooms aren't built for everyone, and yet they're expected to work for everyone. From students who fidget in their seats to teachers trying to juggle lessons, grading, and emails, we need spaces that can bend, move, and adapt to meet our needs. That's where flexibility comes in.

Flexibility in classroom design isn't just about having trendy furniture: It's about creating options. It's about giving students and teachers the tools

to do their best work, no matter the task. For students with ADHD, for example, movement isn't a distraction, it's a lifeline. Research shows that tools like wobble stools, stability balls (also called fit balls), and standing desks allow them to move while staying focused. And here's the kicker: Teachers need this, too. A rolling desk or a standing workspace can make all the difference when you've got twenty things on your mind and thirty students to keep engaged.

Snapshots from Real Classrooms

When we think about flexibility in classrooms, we might picture sleek rolling desks and Pinterest-worthy setups, but let's get real. Most of us don't have the budget for that. When I decided to make my classroom more flexible to meet my needs and the needs of my students, I had to get creative. And you know what? It worked.

I started by swapping furniture with other teachers. Tables of different heights allowed me to give students options for sitting, standing, or kneeling while they worked. Then I ventured into the school's garage, where unused furniture lived. There I found treasures: cushions, meeting chairs, individual armchairs (you know, the kind that parents sit on in waiting areas), and even an old bench. I dragged everything back to my room and got to work.

Conversations with Experts

Trevor MacKenzie on the Power of Movable Spaces

I spoke with Trevor MacKenzie who shared how his understanding of classroom design has transformed across the years. His first teaching experience took place in an old building with rigid layouts, fixed furniture, and very little room to move. He did his best to align that space to his values. Then came the contrast: a newer school with bigger spaces, warmer colors, and more flexibility. The impact was immediate. "It was a drastic change," he said, "a huge part of the puzzle." For Trevor, it wasn't about fancy resources; rather, it was about being able to move things around. Flexible seating, movable desks, and the simple freedom to "push the tables out of the way and sit on the floor" gave both students and teacher the agency to shape the space according to their needs in the moment.

For teachers, flexibility reduces logistical headaches. Need to switch from group work to independent study? Push a few desks together. Planning a hands-on activity? Roll out the mats and make space. When your space works with you, not against you, so do your students.

Conversations with Experts

Misty Paterson on Embracing Flexibility

In our conversation, Misty Paterson said something that completely reframed the way I think about our work as teachers: “We are learning architects.” Every time we shift a table, try a new prompt, or experiment with a new rhythm in our day, we’re not just managing a classroom—we’re designing experiences. And to design meaningfully, she reminded me, we must first tune in to our own creative frequency. Misty shared a quote from Rick Rubin’s *The Creative Act* (2023) about the “antennas” we each carry as artists and educators: a sensitivity to the unseen, a way of choosing with intention. That metaphor stuck with me. Empowering students doesn’t just mean that we hand over power to our students. It’s about showing them how to use their own power. That kind of empowerment begins with knowing our own creativity and creating with it.

It didn’t stop there. My neighbors were throwing out tree trunks, and the preschool classrooms had extra ones: They became stools. I picked up a secondhand fit ball and higher stools from IKEA®. Somehow I pieced it all together. And then came the boldest move: I got rid of my desk.

Yes, I let go of the teacher desk that was taking up too much space and turned it into a standing desk. I paired it with stools and the bench for a multifunctional workspace. When I worked one-on-one with kids or met with small groups, I used a fit ball or stool or just plopped onto the cushions. When I needed a spot to work on my computer by myself after school, I used an armchair (donated by kind friend and colleague Claudia Kirk) and a cushion (like at home). And on days when I needed more of an office vibe, I just headed to the teachers’ workroom.

What I learned through this process was that flexibility isn’t about fancy equipment. It’s about making the most of what you have and, especially, thinking outside the box. My students noticed the change immediately. They embraced the options that worked for them. One preferred the bench, another loved the fit ball, and still others found their focus sitting on the tree trunks. And me? I finally felt like I wasn’t stuck in one place all day.

This experience taught me that when we create classrooms that adapt to us, everyone benefits. My students were happier and more engaged, and I could work in a way that felt comfortable and productive.



☒ Different types of seating support students' comfort and engagement during activities.

PRACTICAL TIPS: How to Create a Flexible Classroom

Students have diverse needs when it comes to how they learn best. Some thrive sitting on the floor, others need a standing desk, and some prefer a quiet nook where they can focus with a clipboard. Providing a range of seating options makes the classroom more adaptable, accommodating different learning preferences and fostering a sense of autonomy and comfort. If space is limited, consider stools, cushions, or designated table spaces that promote individual responsibility and focus.

Flexibility isn't just about the space, it's about how that space supports the people in it.

Here's the thing: You don't need a giant budget to make your classroom flexible. Start small and think about what works for you and your students.

Movable furniture

Get desks and chairs you can move easily—even rolling carts for supplies. Teachers, a mobile cart can save you trips across the room when juggling multiple tasks.

Seating options

Add variety: beanbags, fit balls, wobble stools, cushions, and standing desks. Students with ADHD aren't the only ones who benefit here; sometimes we all need to stand or bounce to stay focused.

Open spaces

Keep part of the room clear for group work, mindfulness activities, and just moving around. Teachers, this can be your recharge spot during breaks, too.

Visual organization

Use labeled bins, soft color-coded folders, and rugs/mats to organize spaces. This works for students and for teachers (especially if you tend to misplace things in the middle of a busy day; we've all been there).

Ask for input

Want to know what works? Ask your students and colleagues. Teachers with ADHD might prefer standing workstations, while some students might need a quiet nook. Flexibility starts with listening.

Learning from Research

Research consistently supports the benefits of flexible seating in enhancing both student engagement and teacher well-being. Gremmen et al. (2016) found that alternative seating arrangements encourage positive student interactions and cater to various learning styles, making the classroom a more inclusive and dynamic environment. This aligns with findings from Dorman (2003), who highlighted how classroom environments impact teacher burnout, suggesting that a well-designed, flexible space doesn't just help students but also contributes to a healthier, less stressful teaching experience.

☒ To accommodate the needs of all students, try to keep your seating flexible. Notice the fit ball at one of the desks. Using fit balls has been shown to provide several potential benefits, particularly for attention, posture, and engagement.



FLEXIBILITY ENHANCES FOCUS, COGNITIVE FUNCTION, AND ENGAGEMENT

For students with attention and hyperactivity concerns, seating alternatives can be transformative. Fedewa and Erwin (2011) demonstrated that using fit balls instead of traditional chairs improved on-task behavior and reduced hyperactivity, offering an effective strategy for students who benefit from movement while learning. The connection between physical movement and cognitive function is further supported by Mehta et al. (2016), whose research on stand-biased desks suggests that movement-based seating can enhance executive function and

Providing choice and movement within the classroom empowers learners and creates an environment that adapts to their needs.

working memory. Similarly, Mullender-Wijnsma et al. (2015) found that incorporating physical activity within seating arrangements positively influenced academic performance, reinforcing the idea that learning and movement are deeply interconnected.

Ultimately, flexible seating is more than just a trend: It's a research-backed approach that supports focus, engagement, and well-being for both students and teachers. Whether it's through standing desks, floor cushions, wobble stools, or simply allowing students to choose where they work best, providing choice and movement

within the classroom empowers learners and creates an environment that adapts to their needs rather than forcing them to conform to a rigid structure.

FLEXIBILITY TO CREATE AN INCLUSIVE CLASSROOM

Flexibility isn't just about moving furniture. It's about creating an environment where every student feels included, valued, and safe. For example:

- **Diversity:** Support all learning needs. Quiet zones and sensory-friendly seating help neurodiverse students and teachers focus.
- **Accessibility:** Make sure all areas of your classroom are navigable for students with mobility challenges. This includes keeping pathways clear and considering desk heights.
- **Representation:** Use displays, materials, and seating choices that reflect the diversity of your students to help them feel seen.

FLEXIBILITY LEADS TO POSITIVE OUTCOMES

When we rethink classroom space with flexibility in mind, we unlock powerful outcomes for both students and teachers. Flexible environments adapt to different needs, promote movement, and reflect how people actually learn. Here are just a few of the benefits educators and researchers have seen when classrooms are designed with flexibility at the core:

- **Better collaboration:** Students are more likely to engage when they can work comfortably in groups. Flexible spaces encourage teamwork and help students feel more connected.
- **Improved focus:** Seating options like wobble stools, standing desks, and other movement-friendly furniture reduce distractions and allow both students and teachers with ADHD to stay focused. Research by Gochenour and Poskey (2017) highlights that movement-friendly seating increases focus, particularly for students with ADHD.
- **Enhanced creativity:** Open spaces foster exploration and hands-on learning, giving students the freedom to think outside the box and solve problems in innovative ways.
- **Improved academic performance:** The University of Salford (Barrett, Zhang, et al. 2015) found that well-designed, flexible spaces contributed to improved academic performance, boosting progress by up to 16 percent.
- **Increased engagement:** Teachers have observed that offering seating choices can boost student engagement. For instance, educators from Albemarle County Public Schools reported noticeable improvements in student participation and happiness after introducing flexible seating options (Minero 2015).

But you don't need research to know this: Just look around and observe your classroom. When was the last time you stayed focused sitting in a stiff chair all day?

For educators, flexible classrooms make daily life easier by reducing logistical challenges and creating a supportive environment. And here's the bonus: When teachers model adaptability, students learn how to do the same. As one



☒ Here you can see different seating styles. Students can choose seats that match their focus or comfort needs, and with a bit of teacher guidance, the system stays fair and calm for everyone.

teacher put it, “If I’m comfortable and can move freely while I work, I feel more productive and connected to my students. That’s the real win.”

Remember, flexibility isn’t about having the fanciest furniture or the largest classroom. It’s about using what you have in creative, intentional ways to meet the needs of everyone in the room. When your classroom adapts to different learning styles and activities, you’ll see more focus, collaboration, and creativity, and you’ll feel the difference, too.





Try It Tomorrow

- **Offer a flexible seating trial.** Offer a few options, like floor cushions or standing desks, for one day each week to observe how students respond. You don't need a class set of fit balls, just one. That one wobble stool or fit ball becomes a shared tool and a conversation starter. It helps kids learn to take turns, reflect on how they work best, and support each other. (And spoiler: Often, the child with ADHD knows how to use these seating options intuitively and teaches the others how.)
- **Swap, don't shop.** While most of us aren't working with endless budgets, we do have creativity and a network of colleagues. Swap furniture with another teacher (or rescue a lonely stool from the school garage). All your furniture doesn't have to be new, but it should make sense for your class and your flow.
- **Create "zones" instead of rows.** Consider arranging a cozy floor spot for independent reading, a table for group projects, and maybe even a quiet nook for kids who need less stimulation. This gives students choices and saves you from rearranging the room three times a day.
- To maximize classroom space, use rolling carts for your needs, or use a windowsill if you don't want to use a teacher desk.
- **Involve students in the setup.** When a new unit starts, ask your students how it could work better. Their ideas are brilliant, and the process helps them take ownership. A student once told me, "I feel like I built this room with you."

Flexible seating can provide crucial support for students with sensory processing needs or attention challenges, including ADHD. When students choose seats like standing desks, fit balls, or floor options, they are actively making decisions about what best supports their learning. This fosters self-awareness and encourages students to adjust their environment based on their needs.



REFLECTION

When I first began rethinking my classroom, the goal wasn't about making the classroom prettier, it was about how it *felt*. I had just started my master's degree in designing learning spaces at Blanquerna University in Barcelona, and something shifted in me. Professors like Núria Nofrarias and Mariona Genís helped me see space not just as a backdrop, but as a living part of the learning process. I started noticing the energy of the room, what invited students in, and what made me feel calm.

At that time, there was no extra money for classroom design from our school administration, so I set a spending cap goal for myself as a starting point. I asked colleagues if they were getting rid of old furniture. I picked up gently used shelves and baskets from the street on collection day. A bench that friends gave me became a new seating option. A secondhand fit ball from a thrift store became (more than) one student's go-to seat. Bit by bit, the space began to shift. And so did I.

Some days we need to move around, and other days we just want to sink into our armchairs with our laptops, documenting student learning. As we adapt our classroom to our own rhythm, the space becomes more present, more comfortable, and far less tied to one fixed spot at the front of the room. That's the thing about flexibility: It starts small. You don't need fancy tools or new, expensive furniture—just a little curiosity, a bit of patience, and the trust that your classroom can change with you.

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Want to reflect more or explore further?

You'll find additional insights in **OR 3: Flexible Seating Guide: Step-by-Step for Teachers.**