

# Chapter 27

## Physical Classroom Environment and Anxiety: Primary School Teachers' Consideration of Their Physical Classroom Environment



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**Abstract** As a young child, I suffered from anxiety so that even a classroom with walls that were covered with academic work, the ceiling with artwork and the floor with blocks would set my mind off into a panic. As the classrooms became more structured and bare in secondary school and at university, I thought I was over this, but on my fourth practicum, the classroom environment was so 'noisy' that my problems with anxiety returned, and I found that one of the students seemed to be affected in much the same way I was. This led me to examine the literature on the significance of the physical classroom environment and its effects on student outcomes, leading me to hope that my experiences can encourage readers to self-reflect and reconsider their beliefs about physical classroom environments and how they may affect the students in their classrooms.

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I walked into the classroom, and all my senses were overwhelmed with noise. It was so loud! "How can students concentrate in here?" I thought. I looked around the classroom more to see posters covering every section of the wall; couches, pillows, carpets in a clump on the floor; the roof had items dangling everywhere. I had to take a moment to try hearing my own thoughts. "OK," said my mentor, "The children will be coming in soon."

### Introduction

For as long as I can remember, I have suffered from anxiety. From the earliest years of transition, I would immediately become physically sick if I had left my homework at home. I would beg my mother to drive back home with my baby sister to get it, often resulting in a 1 h round trip. She would go and get it every single time, as she knew if I did not have it I would be sick with migraines for the rest of the day. My mind was always thinking of how I could be better, smarter, faster and funnier from

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an extremely young age. I just always wanted the teachers to think I was the best. My mind has always been filled with ideas, buzzing at all times of the day and night.

Whether a young child might have anxiety was not even considered by teachers when I was younger, and unfortunately, is still not a major priority for them. Walking into a classroom where the walls were covered with academic work, the ceiling with artwork and the floor covered in blocks would set my mind off into a panic. Whilst there was not a single sound, the room would be so loud I could not stand it.

This chapter will aim to look at how primary school teachers consider their physical classroom environment when teaching, and whether the potential effects on students are understood.

## **Who Did I Think I Was?**

Even in my earliest memories of primary school, I knew I was extremely different from my peers. I struggled on a daily basis to get myself to school, scared of the unfamiliar: ‘What subjects would I be doing today? What would I be learning? Do I know about this topic already? Everyone else will think I’m stupid if I don’t know about it’. These thoughts occurred on a daily basis from the age of about 4 through to 12. I dismissed them thinking it was just who I was, and thankfully as I went further into high school, my anxiety and fears slowly diluted into nothingness. When I got into Year 11, I was completely fine; nothing bothered me anymore. What I did not realize at the time was that as the classrooms became more structured and bare, so did my mind. The clarity in the classroom duplicated itself in my head, and the university was the same.

After my first three practicums, I thought I would be able to complete my final one without concern, and I was wrong. As described previously, I entered an environment, which would end up having a dramatic effect on my mental health. All the issues I had as a primary school child came back with a vengeance. In my third week at the school, I completely fell to pieces. I tried to force my mind to not hear, not to see and not to feel the chaos, but it was more difficult than I ever thought it could be. I began to suffer severe panic attacks where I could not catch my breath, I would cry every day before I went to school, I stopped eating, sleeping, and eventually had a complete meltdown. I began medication in an effort to control my anxiety, and had to start seeing a psychologist once a week.

When walking into an early primary school classroom, it is typical to see student work covering the room, displays of the alphabet, numbers, words and various other resources and visual displays (Martin 2002). These elements comprise a classroom’s physical environment. The environment that I entered on my fourth practicum was completely new to me. It was that of a play-based classroom which did not have enough desks or chairs for each student. There were two coloured desks with six chairs around each of them for the class of 25. Along the walls, there were posters, student work, student drawings, words, letters, numbers, data, student levels, calendars, learning scales and just all-round stimulation. The classroom had yellow, blue

and green chairs sitting on a pale blue floor with a bright orange, red and green carpet. My teacher described it as 'welcoming and developmentally appropriate', however, all my brain was able to process was noise. It took me at least five days to begin hearing my own thoughts whilst I was in the classroom.

I would spend my recess and lunch times outside with the students just to get some air and headspace. Moreover, it was every recess and lunchtime I spoke to one of my students, John [the name has been changed]. John was a Year 1 student in my class who I immediately got along with. He sat with me at recess and lunchtime every single day of my practicum and would talk to me about various things. He was highly articulate and extremely intelligent, particularly in mathematics. His father was a high school mathematics teacher, and it showed dramatically in his abilities. John was capable of Year 2–3 work, and he could grasp mathematical concepts almost immediately. His literacy and reading levels were not quite as high as his mathematics, but he was still achieving above average results.

In class, John would sit by himself and practice mathematics whilst the other students were building, painting, arguing or chasing each other. He would practice addition, subtraction or, his favourite, skip counting. He would do this every single day. Once a week the students were tested on their reading levels, and he would all of a sudden become a recluse. He sometimes refused to complete the tests at all and would be unable to 'skip' words he could not read. He had to be told what the words were.

One day after school, his father rang my mentor teacher and told us that John felt as though he was 'failing as a student' because he was not advancing high enough in his reading levels. Then it finally dawned on me. I realized we got along so well because we were the same student, the overwhelmed, anxious and nervous student that kept to themselves and suffered in silence. I began to look at his relationship with his classroom and realised he was easily distracted by the visual elements around him. Observing him, I could see his attention shift from the teacher to the walls, to the carpets or to the windows almost every 30 s or so.

Hannah (2013, p. 1) describes classrooms as 'where [students] will learn the various skills deemed necessary and proper for them to achieve success in the global society' and that the classroom 'is where they will gain an understanding of their place in the world and the gifts they have to offer it'. The importance of students' classrooms is emphasized in these words. However, teachers' consideration of its physical elements is often given much less attention. Fisher (2011) attributes this lack of consideration as a flaw in the teacher education system, stating that 'environment-behavior research and evidence-based design with regard to educational settings is not ordinarily part of teacher education, and is unlikely to be a factor when districts undergo strategic planning processes to improve outcomes' (p. 10). Unfortunately, these holes leave students like John and myself vulnerable, with little help available to us.

## Who Do I Think I Am?

At this point, I am a few short weeks away from finishing my final practicum. I am still seeing a psychologist, and am on medication to help me settle my anxiety. Whilst my final placement has been one of the hardest hurdles of my life, it has taught me a lot about who I am, and who the students are that are quietly suffering. Whilst we, as teachers, focus heavily on inclusivity and embracing differences. Unfortunately, there are often students that can go ‘under the radar’ and will deal with their symptoms in isolation. My anxiety was evident in my first year of schooling at age 4, but it was dismissed as my ‘being a perfectionist’, causing it to become an untreated time bomb. Costello et al. (in Ruocco et al. 2016, p. 29) state that ‘estimates of anxiety disorder prevalence for children aged between 2 and 8 years range from 6.1 to 14.8%’ Ruocco et al. (2016, p. 29) describe these children as ‘at greater risk of academic underachievement, social withdrawal and school refusal’, and state that untreated anxiety places these children at a ‘greater risk of developing future mental health problems such as depression’. They furthermore agree that early childhood is an extremely important target for intervention.

In my own experience, I found that the environment around me would affect my anxiety levels either positively or negatively. Walking into any room would dictate my emotions for the duration of my stay. My fourth practicum truly opened my eyes to the dramatic need for teachers to consider their physical classroom environment for all their students. Baker and Bernstein (2012) discuss the physical classroom environment and its effects as becoming a growing topic of research. The need for continuing research regarding the interconnectivity between physical classroom environment and student outcomes is also highlighted by several researchers with Hensley-Pipkin (2015, p. 115) stating that it ‘holds the potential to positively impact student skill and engagement levels, and therefore, academic achievement’. Hand (2014) furthermore underlines the need for teachers to consider their physical classroom environment and the gap in teacher education for its lack of emphasis on the topic. She also states that physical classroom environment needs to be a ‘key part of [teacher’s] overall thinking and practice’ (p. 14). Martin (2002) also argues this point, stating that teachers who fail to acknowledge their classroom environment do not ‘prize wisdom above ignorance’ (p. 153).

## Of This Much I Am Sure

I am a person who reacts to what is around them, and so are many other students. In particular, I react to my physical environment. In order to fulfil my dreams of becoming a primary school teacher, I understand that my anxiety is not ideal. However, I am lucky to have got a mentor teacher willing to support me through difficult times. Despite my troubles, it has been interesting to witness the effects that the physical classroom environment had on me. All this time was it my environment

that had caused my anxiety? Can I control it now? What can I change to make this environment better?

Of this much I am sure, I had a breakdown. I became physically ill, and I am still on medication to overcome it. However, whilst this has been one of the most difficult times of my life, it has been one of the biggest lessons of my life. It has taught me who I am, whom I want to be, and how there are others exactly like me. More than anything it has taught me about a teacher I want to become, and the classroom I want to have. I want to be the teacher who can create a calm environment for my students that can allow them to come in and relax. I want to have a more holistic approach to the classroom, not one where students are constantly bombarded with visual, verbal and physical stimulation. We, as educators, need to remember that each child has a different interpretation of their environment, and we need to cater for these children, particularly when they cannot vocalise their feelings. As their teachers and mentors in life, we need to be there to carry them through their journey in education.

To fulfil my desire of becoming a primary school teacher, I need to finish my education and be open to different learning environments and the requirements of other schools. I also need to be more accepting of the varied methods and pedagogies of these schools. However, I also believe that teachers need to place more of an emphasis on their physical classroom environment. Its impact is still not considered to the extent that it should be.

## Conclusion

The discussion surrounding the physical classroom environment and its effects on me were illustrated to provoke thought and consideration among teachers. I never expected that a school practicum would have such a dramatic effect on my physical and mental health, but hopefully, my experiences can create a catalyst in the minds of readers to self-reflect, and consider their beliefs about physical classroom environments, as well as about the students in their classrooms. This will not only benefit the students and their mental and academic outcomes, but it will also provide an opportunity for teachers to enhance their practices through self-reflection and evaluation. As well as this, teachers can develop a deeper consideration of students who may be sensitive to over-stimulation, and the possible harmful effects of this.

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