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Stop Classroom Clutter

Think Before You Paint or Hang that Poster

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 Decorating a classroom? Remember, a cluttered classroom may be overwhelming for some students. Bob Stevens/GETTY Images

By **Colette Bennett**

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Despite a teacher's best intentions, a cluttered classroom environment could be distracting students from learning. Too much visual stimulation in the classroom can be distracting, the layout may be unwelcoming, or the classroom wall color may have a negative impact on mood. These elements of classroom environment can have a negative or positive effect on student academic performance. This general statement is supported by a growing body of research on the critical impact that light, space, and room layout have on a student's well-being, physically



The Academy of Neuroscience for Architecture has collected information on this impact:

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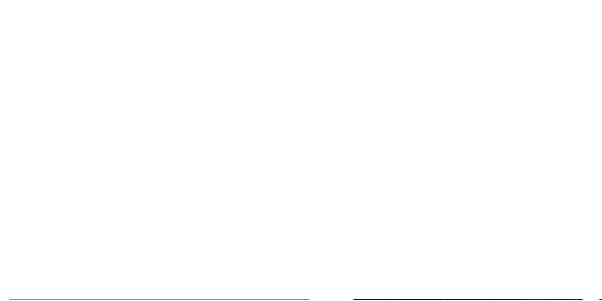
"Features of any architectural environment can have an influence certain brain processes such as those involved in stress, emotion and memory" (Edelstein 2009).

While it may be difficult to control all factors, the choice of materials on a classroom wall is the easiest to manage for a teacher. The Princeton University Neuroscience Institute published the results of a study, "Interactions of Top-Down and Bottom-Up Mechanisms in Human Visual Cortex," they conducted that discusses how the brain sorts out competing stimuli. One heading in the research notes:

In other words, the more stimulation in an environment, the more competition for attention from the part of a student's brain needed to focus.

Michael Hubenthal and Thomas O'Brien reached the same conclusion in their research *Revisiting Your Classroom's Walls: The Pedagogical Power of Posters* (2009). They found that a student's working memory uses different components that process visual and verbal information .

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They agreed that too many posters, regulations, or information sources could have the potential of overwhelming a student's working memory:

"The visual complexity caused by an abundance of text and small images can set up an overwhelming visual/verbal competition between text and graphics for which students must

For many students, the text and graphic-rich classroom environments begin in their early education (Pre-K and elementary) classrooms. These classrooms may be decorated to an extreme.

Too often, clutter passes for quality, a sentiment expressed by Erika Christakis in her book *The Importance of Being Little: What Preschoolers Really Need from Grownups* (2016). In Chapter 2 ("Goldilocks Goes to Daycare") Christakis describes the average preschool the following way:

"First we'll bombard you with what educators call a print-rich environment, every wall and surface festooned with a vertiginous array of labels, vocabulary list, calendars, graphs, classroom rules, alphabet lists, number charts, and inspirational platitudes - few of those symbols you will be able to decode, a favorite buzzword for what used to be known as reading"(33).

allergy procedures, and emergency exit diagrams. She writes:

'In one study, researchers manipulated the amount of clutter on the walls of a laboratory classroom where kindergarteners were taught a series of science lessons. As the visual distraction increased, the children's ability to focus, stay on task, and learn new information decreased" (33).

Researchers from The Holistic Evidence and Design (HEAD) support Christakis's position. They assessed hundred fifty-three U.K. classrooms to study the link of classroom environment to the learning of almost four thousand students (ages 5-11). Researchers Peter Barrett, Fay Davies, Yufan Zhang, and Lucinda Barrett published their findings in *The Holistic Impact of Classroom Spaces on Learning in Specific Subjects* (2016). They reviewed the impact of different factors, including color, on student learning, by looking at measures of progress in reading, writing, and math. They found that reading and writing performances are particularly affected by levels of stimulation. They also noted that math received the most positive impact from a classroom design that is student-centered and personalized spaces.

Environment Element: Color in the Classroom

The color of the classroom can also stimulate or overstimulate students. This environmental element may not always be under the teacher's control, but there are some recommendations teachers might be able to make. For example, the colors red and orange are associated with negative impact on students, making them feel nervous and unsettled. In contrast, blue and green colors are calming colors.

The color of an environment also affects children differently according to age. Younger children below five may be more productive with bright colors such as yellow. Older students, specifically high school students, work better in rooms painted in light shades of blue and green which are less stressful and distracting. Warm yellows or pale yellows are also older student appropriate.

"The scientific research into color is extensive and color can affect children's moods, mental clarity, and energy levels," (Englebrecht, 2003).

According to the International Association of Color Consultants - North America (IACC-NA), a school's physical environment has a powerful psycho-physiological impact on its students:

"Appropriate color design is important in protecting eyesight, in creating surroundings that are conducive to studying, and in promoting physical and mental health."

The IACC has noted that poor color choices can lead to "irritability, premature fatigue, lack of interest and behavioral problems."

Alternatively, walls with no color can also be a problem. Colorless and poorly lit classrooms are often considered boring or lifeless, and a boring classroom maybe likely to cause students to become disengaged and uninterested in learning.

"For budget reasons, a lot of schools don't seek out good information on color," says Bonnie Krims, of IACC. She notes that in the past, there was a common belief that the more colorful the classroom, the better for the students. Recent research disputes past practice, and that too much color, or colors that are too bright, can lead to overstimulation.

An accent wall of bright color in a classroom may be offset by muted shades on the other walls. "The goal is to find a balance," Krims concludes.

Natural Light

study found that patients who had access to a scenic view of nature had shorter hospital stays and required lower amounts of pain medication than those patients who had windows that faced a brick building.

The official blog of the U.S. Department of Education posted a 2003 study (in California) that found that classrooms with the most (natural light) daylighting had a 20 percent better learning rate in math, and a 26 percent improved rate in reading, compared to classrooms with little or no daylighting. The study also noted that in some cases, teachers needed only to reposition furniture or move storage to take advantage of the available natural light in their classrooms.

Overstimulation and Special Needs Students

Overstimulation is an issue with students who may have Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The Indiana Resource Center for Autism recommends that "teachers try to limit auditory and visual distractions so that students can focus on the concepts that are being taught instead of details that may not be relevant, and reduces competing distractions." Their recommendation is to limit these distractions:

"Often when students with ASD are presented with too much stimulus (visual or auditory), processing may slow down, or if overloaded, processing may stop completely."

This approach may prove beneficial for other students as well. While a classroom rich in materials may support learning, a cluttered classroom that overstimulates may be too distracting to many students whether they special needs or not.

Color also matters for special needs students. Trish Buscemi, the owner of Colors Matter, has experience in advising clients what color palette to use with special needs populations. Buscemi has found that blues, greens, and muted brown tones tend to be appropriate choices for students with ADD and ADHD, and she writes on her blog that:

"The brain remembers color first!"

Let the Students Decide

At the secondary level, teachers could have students make contributions to help shape a learning space. Giving students a voice in designing their space along will help develop student ownership in the classroom. The Academy of Neuroscience for Architecture agrees, and notes the importance of being able to have spaces that students can "call their own." Their literature explains, "Feelings of comfort and welcome in a shared space are vital to the level in which we feel invited to take part." Students are more likely to take pride in the space, and they

Also, teachers should be encouraged to feature student work, maybe original pieces of art, displayed to elicit trust and student worth.

What Decorations to Choose?

To reduce classroom clutter, teachers could ask themselves the following questions before putting that velcro or removable tape onto the classroom wall:

What purpose does this poster, sign or display serve?

Do these posters, signs, or items celebrate or support student learning?

Are the posters, signs, or displays current with what is being learned in the classroom?

Can the display be made interactive?

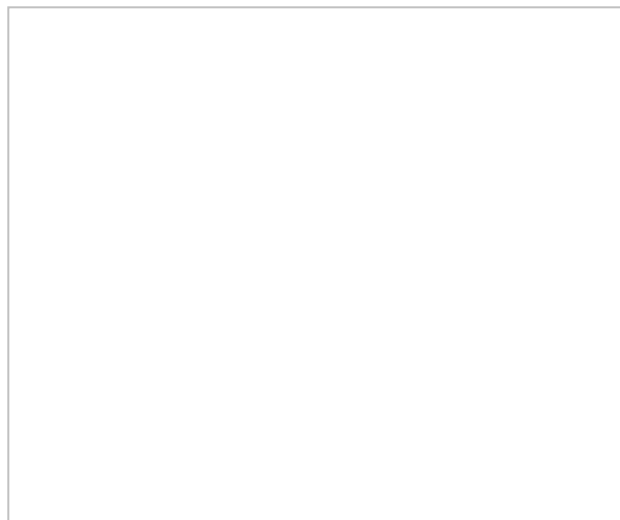
Is there white space in between wall displays to help the eye distinguish what is in the display?

Can students contribute to decorating the classroom (ask “What do you think could go inside that space?”)

As the school year begins, teachers should keep in mind opportunities to limit distractions and reduce classroom clutter for better academic performance.

Cite this Article 

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