



Management of the Physical Environment in the Classroom and Gymnasium: *It's not That Different*

by Brian Culp

Although taking different forms, management in the classroom and gymnasium is quite similar. An essential component of both relates to the design of the physical environment. Creating a clean, comfortable, safe, and attractive setting allows effective teaching to positively impact learning. A common assumption is that classroom teachers and gymnasium teachers must use different methods to design their learning environments. While it is true that teachers in these settings present information differently, attention to the basic structure of the physical environment enhances a climate of classroom discipline.

This article extends information from a text by Weinstein and Mignano (2003) to address classroom organization in terms of the physical environment. That text is an extrapolation of Steele's (1973) outline of six functions within the classroom setting: security and shelter, social contact, symbolic identification, pleasure, task instrumentality, and growth. Each of these functions has potential significance for effective physical education. To examine similarities and differences between the classroom and the gymnasium, each environment is discussed separately.

Six Functions for Organizing the Physical Environment

The Classroom Setting

Security and shelter serves the most basic function within all instructional environments. In classroom subjects such as art and science, this is maintained by following state guidelines regarding hazardous materials and placing potentially harmful supplies out of the reach of students. More general concerns include entry and exit paths, particularly as they relate to procedural routines or emergency situations.

Perhaps less obvious, the concept of psychological orientation gives students the impression that the environment is a safe place to learn. In elementary classrooms, stuffed animals, movable chairs, and specific textures can be used to increase psychological security.

Social contact pertains to interactions among students. Classroom teachers improve social contact by configuring desks for specific purposes. For example, clusters allow children to have direct contact with others around them,



while rows help them concentrate on individual activities. These configurations must be planned ahead of time, taking into account students' behavioral traits and learning needs.

Another strategy to maximize participation is to provide concurrent activities for students in designated areas or stations.

Attention to differences in gender, race, and culture highlights classroom diversity as another level of social contact. Seating children in ways that encourage new social interactions has an impact on communication skills.

Symbolic identification is focused specifically on how the design of the physical environment fosters success for students. In traditional classrooms, learning objectives and rules are the most prominent postings. In more progressive classrooms, it is more common for teachers to utilize wall space for artwork and maps, i.e., student accomplishments. These materials can also be posted in other prominent areas such as student desk fronts, next to the pencil sharper, or by the door. Placing student potential at the forefront breeds further success because the students are provided with specific examples of how success is obtained.

Pleasure emphasizes students' ability to enjoy what they are doing in the learning environment. To preface pleasure, some teachers place objects such as couches, plants, and rugs in the classroom. This creates a welcoming and comfortable atmosphere for students.

Task instrumentality focuses on how the physical surroundings specifically help students accomplish tasks. As in the section on social contact, planning begins with placement of desks, chairs, and instructional equipment. After that, care must be taken to plan lessons that do not compete with school distractions, such as holidays, testing, and other school programs. These events throughout the year generally promote high amounts of traffic and stress, contributing to unusual student behaviors.

Incompatible activities should not be lumped together under any circumstances. For instance, classroom teachers should separate activities that are not compatible with each other such as reading and playing games. Failure to do this can lead to a conflict of interest because it creates no clear delineation between work and play for the student. Task instrumentality provides meaningful activities for students and justifies the methods of the teacher.

Growth is the last function that has relevance for the classroom. In particular, this function deals with how the environments discussed previously play a role in children's development. Development, whether it is cognitive, emotional, or social, is in many cases a very difficult concept to measure. Classroom teachers generally strive to stimulate development by presenting opportunities for children to explore, observe, investigate, and discover (Weinstein & Mignano, 2003). Age-related books, puzzles, and educational toys assist in facilitating this learning. The next section will discuss some of the similar roles that gymnasiums play in fostering an effective learning environment.

The Gymnasium Setting

Maintaining *security and shelter* in the gymnasium brings about unique challenges that involve the resources that students use. As a parallel to hazardous materials found in the classroom, teachers in the gymnasium must eliminate ways that students have access to equipment. The threat of students hurting themselves or others is lessened by securing areas where equipment is located, keeping a record of items borrowed by other teachers, and developing rules regarding appropriate times that students use equipment during instruction.

In addition to serving as part of a procedural routine or emergency situation, entry and exit paths serve as visual reference points whereby a teacher can instruct students to report to begin or end activity for the class. It is important that these paths are designated, ingrained in the procedures of the class, and free of obstructions. Attention to detail on this matter is a routine that should



be practiced for management purposes and for the purpose of avoiding legal action, should someone get hurt.

Like the classroom, the gymnasium is also an environment where principles of *psychological security* can be demonstrated. The teacher has the opportunity to acknowledge group and individual work in front of peers and involve the class in setting and adhering to goals that are posted. Greeting students upon their entering and exiting the gymnasium can promote a climate of dignity and respect. Younger learners in this setting benefit from using foam mats and balls, as well as having bright accents for the gym (i.e., posters and targets) to complement creative lesson plans and props.

Social contact in physical education gymnasiums differ in that there are no desks for students to be assigned to, but this does not lessen the importance of seating arrangements. Opportunities exist for teachers to spread out students by instructing them to report to designated areas in the gym. Physical educators have the opportunity to improve upon social contact by allowing students to work in groups to complete activities and changing groups regularly to pair students with different skill abilities with one another. The same attention to gender, cultural, and racial differences apply in the gymnasium as in the classroom.

Symbolic identification and pleasure in the gymnasium can be witnessed by having postings of signs, progress charts, rules, and goals in visible sight. Having sections in the gym dedicated to presenting highlights of activities and student accomplishments aids in keeping students motivated. Another way that teachers can personalize space is by displaying materials that reflect the cultural backgrounds or personal athletic interests of the students in the program. As in the classroom, this attention to detail helps educate students by fostering an appreciation for differences. Physical educators can continue to contribute to the appearance of the gymnasium by putting up signs, posters, and pictures that include age-appropriate models and themes. However, care should be taken so that these objects are colorful, relevant, and placed in areas where they do not interfere with instruction or create hazards.

Task instrumentality in the gymnasium leaves the opportunity for physical educators to answer several questions. First, will the lesson for that day's activities dictate that the child participate in independent or cooperative work? Second, are students required to rotate from one station to another? Third, will activities take place in the gym or outside? Also, is there enough equipment to successfully meet learning goals and keep students on task?

In the gym, consistent routines and procedures are equally as important. Ideally, participants in small group activities should have adequate room to decrease the



possibility of distraction. As in the classroom, equipment that will be put into use for that day is placed in appropriate areas ahead of time. Also, as in the classroom, suitable activities are presented. Task instrumentality in the classroom should never involve an activity such as instruction dance to one group of students while others are working on striking skills.

Growth is a final function that is relevant to the gymnasium and children's development, encompassing all of the environments discussed earlier. Perhaps one of the most important things that physical educators can do is to make sure that lessons are creative and stimulating to students. There are many avenues to help spice up the gymnasium by implementing interdisciplinary topics, cultural activities, and guest instructors. This focus on curriculum outcomes creates cognitive benefits in the physical education environment that leaves a lasting impression.

In conclusion, the comparisons presented in the preceding paragraphs demonstrate that management in the classroom and gymnasium share many of the same qualities. The teacher has the power to shape the learning environment regardless of the class setting. By attending to the details of the environment, coupled with a commitment by teachers to meet the needs of the students in their classes, the potential exists for education that is engaging, fun and rewarding.

References

- Steele, F.I. (1973). *Physical settings and organization development*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Weinstein, C.S., & Mignano, A.J. (2003). *Elementary classroom management: Lessons from research and practice* (3rd ed.). Boston: McGraw-Hill.

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