

Supporting Student Learning: The “Ins” and “Outs” of the Classroom

Educators are always trying to discover and use new academic strategies to increase student learning. Sometimes the best approaches are not academic, but they are supportive in nature. According to *Awaken the Learner*, published by Marzano Research, as well as recent articles in *NEA Today*, attention should be paid to the *inside* climate of the classroom in addition to the activities that take place *outside* of the regular classroom setting.

The “Ins”

The classroom climate is a physical setting made up of three areas: the décor in the classroom, items that affect the senses, and student seating. Research shows that the most effective classroom settings are individualized to student needs, stimulating, and comfortable. In order to have a natural feel, attention should be paid to the following:

Bulletin Boards and Wall Posters

Classrooms that have meaningful and relevant bulletin boards help to engage the students even when they are not in a formal instructional setting. Too much stimulation, caused by an overload of information displayed on the walls, can contribute to attention problems. Along the same line, too much wall décor can also pose other problems such as being a fire hazard. It is okay to have open space on the wall.

Lighting.

Natural lighting, when possible, is the best choice for a classroom. Classrooms with flickering fluorescent bulbs are distracting to the eyes and ears, especially to those students with attention problems. Too little light can also cause trouble when eyes strain to the point of fatigue.

Temperature Control and Air Quality

The temperature of a classroom should be comfortable. In order to save on heating and cooling costs, some districts keep the room temperatures too cool in the winter or too warm in the fall and spring. Students may be physically unable to focus on learning when they are shivering or sweating. Another factor to consider is the scent of the classroom. While fire codes ban burning candles in classrooms, they are often replaced by potpourri, warmers, and plug-in units. Be sensitive to students with allergies and make sure the scents aren't too strong.

Standing instead of sitting

Some students benefit from standing desks and work stations. Recent research has determined that students with attention problems are less likely to get off task when they are allowed to stand. Not only does this improve classroom management, it also decreases stress on spinal structures and is may help reduce childhood obesity.

The “Outs”

Activities taking place outside the classroom can have a negative or positive influence on learning. While the master schedule cannot be controlled by the regular classroom teacher, recess and exercise can be regularly scheduled within the teacher’s instructional plan, even if it occurs inside the classroom. If students engage in less than twenty minutes of unstructured play per day, cognitive, emotional, and physical development are not as great as they could be. Physical energy needs to be expended. Research indicates that being more physically active throughout the day increases cognitive ability and leads to higher academic achievement. Think about the following areas and their implications on student learning:

Physical Education

As mentioned earlier, standing in the classroom does have benefits. However, it cannot replace exercise provided through physical education and recess. The national recommendation for all students is for a minimum of sixty minutes of physical activity daily. Physical education classes can count for some of the desired time, but it is usually structured with no room for free play.

Recess

As defined, recess is the temporary withdrawal or cessation from usual activity. Most states do not mandate recess; however, students need breaks from academics. Allowing unstructured recess contributes to creativity and opportunities for social interactions. Research shows that students have a greater focus in class following a recessed break. It is not uncommon to allow a table-based activity to be used during inclement weather as a substitute for recess; but, playing board games just does not have the same effect as increasing the heart rate through a cardiovascular activity.

Socialization

In past practices, it was common to keep students inside for recess as a disciplinary measure or to provide them more instruction.

This is not only detrimental but counter-productive! Adults usually expect to have some type of break during an eight-hour workday. Why wouldn’t we allow the same for our young learners? Like adults, they need to spend some time off task to socialize so they can refocus later.

Ideal time for exercise

Another recommendation is to allow at least one 20-minute block of recess a day—preferably before lunch. Studies show that students who have recess before lunch tend to eat healthier food, including milk, fruits, and vegetables. A combination of exercise and eating healthy food helps combat the increasing concerns over childhood obesity.

Making it happen

The Every Students Succeeds Act (ESSA), an update of the original Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), has identified health and physical education as a vital part of a “well-rounded” education. This declaration also allows the utilization of Title IV federal funding for health, physical education, and physical activity programs. In return, the ESSA helps to alleviate the possible cuts to these programs and it places emphasis on establishing healthy living practices.

Although few of these areas receive the same attention as publicized academic assessment results, they are nevertheless essential to the experience of a young person’s overall education, which can indeed determine whether every student succeeds.