



IV. The Learning Environment

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The Learning Environment

As we all know, a well organized classroom doesn't just happen. It obviously takes a lot of advance planning and hard work. Each year, we are faced with the challenging task of deciding how to best utilize the space provided in order to set up an effective classroom. Students and teachers spend many hours per day in the school setting. In order to gain a positive attitude towards learning and school, children must be in an organized, visually stimulating environment where they feel warm and secure. The overall set up sets the stage for a productive year where students are invited to explore, interact and investigate as they acquire new knowledge, skills and values.

How you will arrange your classroom will ultimately depend in part on:

- What furniture you have at your disposal
- The configuration of your classroom/physical space available
- Fire codes and other specific safety procedures applicable to your school/board
- The needs of your students
- Your instructional objectives
- Your personal teaching style



The Learning Environment



Sample Seating Arrangement



Use of Wall Space

You Value:

- gospel teachings
- organization
- nurturing and supporting students
- respect for all people
- creativity
- self-discipline and autonomy
- interdependence
- the pursuit of excellence

So, Your Classroom Will:

- respect the dignity of each student
- be neat and orderly
- be bright, positive, and invitational
- be inclusive and reflective of the community from which the students have come
- be stimulating and thought-provoking
- be filled with opportunities for student discussion, exploration or relevant issues and decision-making¹.

Strategies for Successful Planning

- Don't hesitate to give your room a personal touch. What will give your room a distinctive ambiance and still be functional?
- Use graph paper and try out different arrangements.
- Keep high traffic areas clear and avoid putting desks, chairs and other pieces of furniture in front of doors, sinks, etc. Remember to check out any fire codes or safety regulations for your school/board.
- Collegial support is invaluable. Visit the classrooms of a few colleagues and remember to invite them to visit your classroom set up.
- If you are sharing the classroom with other teaching partners remember to involve them in the overall planning.
- Be ready on the first day since first impressions really do count. However, don't worry about having "everything" in place since you will want to wait until class rules and routines are established prior to beginning any learning centers, etc.

- Involve students – What can they add/contribute to make it their space?
- Continually reflect on the use of space, organization & accessibility to materials. View the room for any trouble spots. Sit in various locations to get a bird's eye view of the classroom. Don't be afraid to make changes if the arrangements doesn't work.
- Work gradually to make any changes and remember to teach any new routines required.
- Don't change it too often! Let students have time to adjust and thrive between changes.

Classroom Organization

A. Seating Arrangements

Different seating arrangements are needed to accomplish different tasks. Tasks and/or activities may include:

- sitting to hear a story
- paired problem solving
- viewing a video
- demonstrations
- cooperative learning
- small group work
- taking a test
- whole group instruction
- independent work
- experiments

Since the types of activities students are involved in vary greatly, it is not unreasonable to expect that a variety of seating arrangement may be required to support student learning. Some possible arrangements may include:

- half circle
- u-shape
- traditional rows
- full circle
- group seating
- centers

Regardless of the format used, it is important that teachers remember some key features when determining the appropriate seating arrangement for students.

- Arrange seating to accommodate students with special needs (e.g., visually impaired students may need to be close to the front of the room, etc). Do your best, however not to isolate any special needs students from the rest of their peers.
- Place desks/tables so that all students can easily see you during whole class instruction.
- Try to arrange work areas so that you can easily see and monitor all of the students regardless of where you are in the room.
- Whenever possible, allow sufficient aisle space so you can move around easily.
- Maximize proximity to students. The closer you are to your students, the more you will minimize your classroom behavioural problems.
- Separate students who should not be together for social and/or behavioural reasons.
- Assign seats, especially on the first day of school. Although many students would like us to believe that they would like to select their seating partners, this unfortunately can lead to feelings of peer rejection and rarely promotes diverse collaborative partnerships. One way students can provide input is by filling out a preference card (see sample A).

Sample A	
	Term 2
	Joshua
I can work well with the following students:	
1.	_____
2.	_____
3.	_____
4.	_____
5.	_____

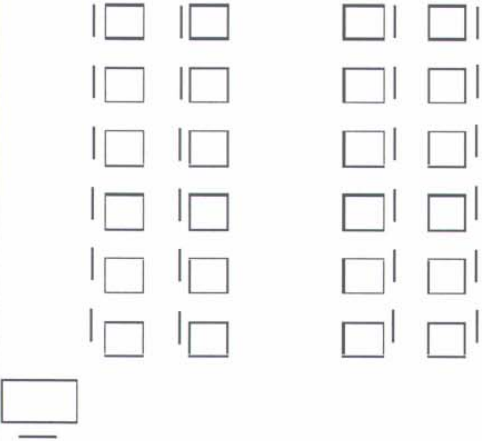
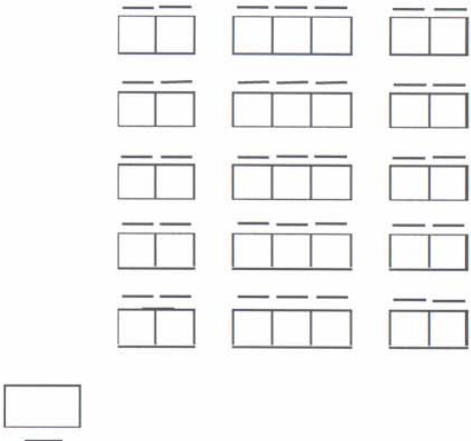
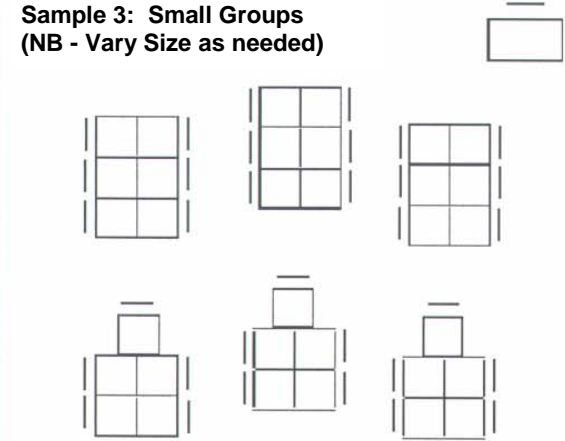
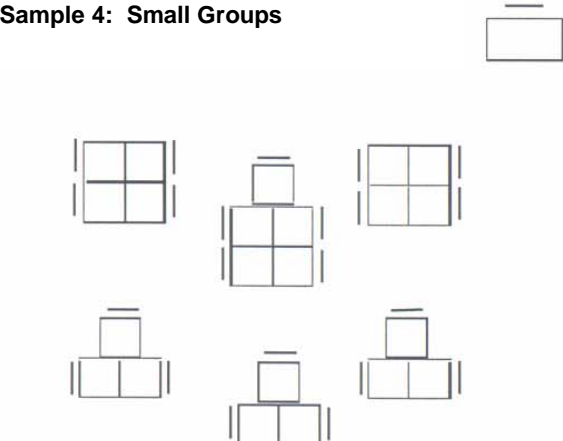
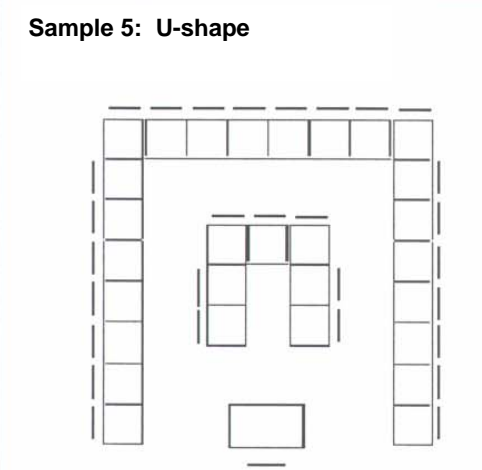
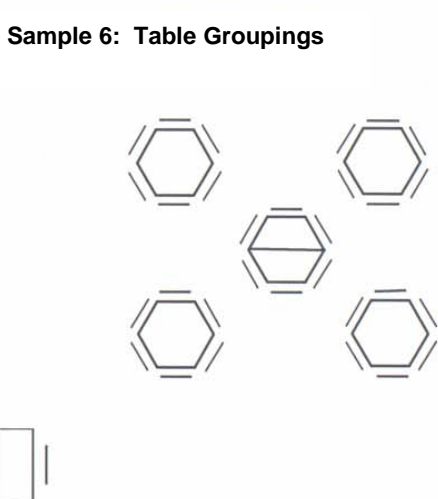
Letting students know that you will be referring to their preference card as seating arrangements are changed throughout the term provides some reassurance and comfort. Trying to place at least one peer from the list is probably manageable. Allow students to fill out new cards frequently, especially during the first few months of school when new friendships are developing.

<http://www.peaklearn.com/newteach/arrangement.html>

<http://www.teachvision.com/lesson-plans/lesson-6507.html>

<http://www.huntcol.edu/education/lessonplanning/seating.html>

SAMPLE SEATING ARRANGEMENTS

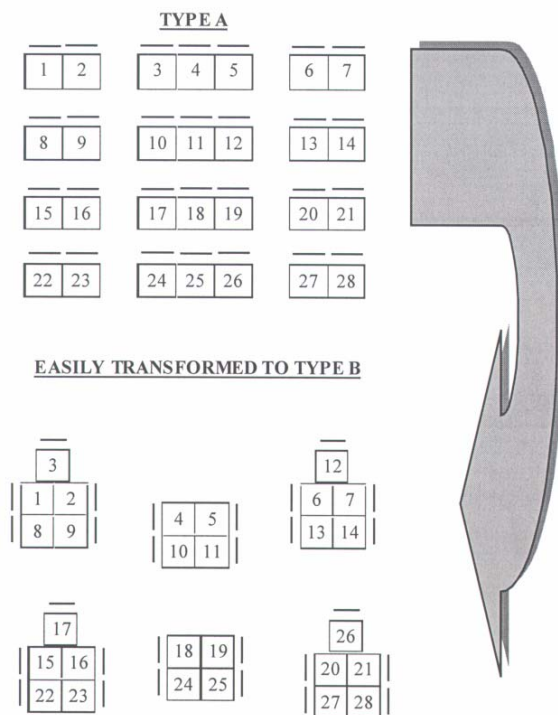
<p>Sample: Debate Style</p> 	<p>Sample 2: Modified Traditional Arrangement</p> 
<p>Sample 3: Small Groups (NB - Vary Size as needed)</p> 	<p>Sample 4: Small Groups</p> 
<p>Sample 5: U-shape</p> 	<p>Sample 6: Table Groupings</p> 

Although there are a multitude of possible combinations for classroom seating arrangements, they usually fall within two distinct categories:

Type A: *Whole group teaching, paired, and individual work (rows, u-shape, etc.).* This type of seating arrangements is useful during direct instruction and test taking. It also assists with controlling behaviour since students are usually not sitting close to one another.

Type B: *Collaborative group work (centers, groupings of desks/tables, etc.).* This type of seating arrangement facilitates collaboration and interaction. It is also useful for small group instruction.

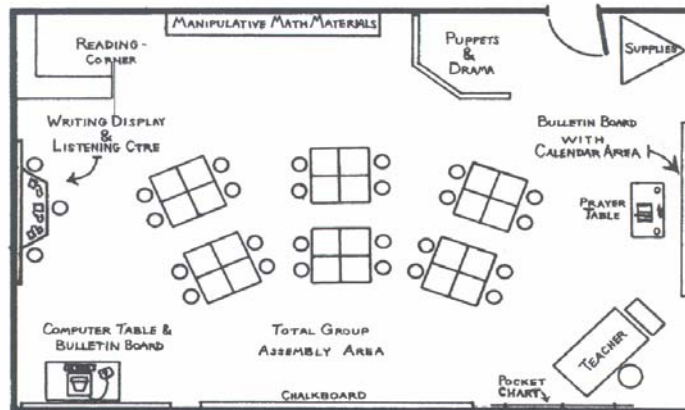
If you would like the flexibility to benefit from both types of layouts, you may want to consider having two basic room set ups. Studies have shown that student are actually able to rearrange the classroom seating arrangements with 1-2 minutes once the routine is established. This is most often done at the end of a session just before a natural break such as lunch, recess, gym class, etc. Rotating team captains can also ensure that desks/tables are moved in a safe and organized manner².



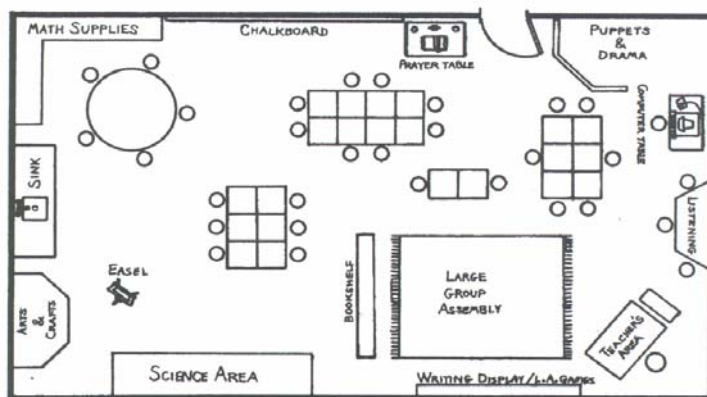
B. Use of Floor Space

You are only limited by your own imagination when it comes to designing the floor space in your classroom. Think about providing areas for whole group instruction, small group work, learning centers/area, and quiet work spaces.

Sample Layouts



3



4

A Few Tips to Help Get You Started

- Use dividers and/or shelves to define small work areas
- Remember to clearly label all items for easy access and place object close to areas where they will be needed
- Short dividers tend to create a more open space and allow for an unobstructed view
- Place tall bookcases against the wall whenever possible
- Using a pocket chart with a stand can also help define a learning area
- Try to group related centers and/or materials while trying to separate noisy and quiet areas
- Give special consideration to high traffic areas
- Place learning centers/area around the perimeter of the room
- Provide additional chairs, if available, at various learning centers/area
- Ensure that children can move around freely without disturbing others
- Prominently display important signs and symbols
- Place craft area near sink, if available
- Avoid glare from sunlight by facing computers away from windows
- Use masking tape to mark out meeting area on the floor
- Provide small sample carpets for students to sit on (many stores provide old ones free of charge to teachers)
- A study carrel provides a good quiet work place (one can also be made by placing tall cardboard on 3 sides of a desk)
- Only leave out what you want students to use



<http://www.nea.org/helpfrom/growing/work4me/organize/baords.html>

<http://www.nea.org/helpfrom/growing/work4me/organize/posters.html>

- Add thematic work to windows (science, literature, seasonal, etc.) by painting them with a mixture of tempera paint and about ¼ cup of dish detergent for easy cleaning
- Keep blackboards clean by putting lemon oil or spraying a small amount of furniture polish on a clean rag. Store in a plastic baggie and wipe board clean (only use a very small amount – keep almost dry).
- Draw lines on your blackboard using a white pencil crayon to keep your writing nice and straight. As the lines begin to fade with washing, simply trace over.



C. Use of Wall Space

- Create a print rich environment for your students.
- Post rules and routines and teach your students to become responsible for their learning by using these charts.
- Display work, whenever possible at the children's eye level.
- Displaying your students work will send them a strong message that you value and appreciate their effort.
- Ensure a balance of student and teacher created material.
- Select a consistent place for posting the day's schedule and assignments.
- Dry erase sheets that are torn off a large pad and stuck to the wall by static electricity are now available at office supply stores.
- Locate helpful information as close to learning centres/areas possible.
- Hot glue clothespins to a painted cinder block wall to hang student work (you may need to ask for permission first!)



- Rain gutters installed on the walls of your classroom help display a variety of books “face-out” (install the brackets to the wall or if you are concerned about safety and/or the additional cost simply drill screws and washers right through the rain gutter into the studs), check out http://www.trelease-on-reading.com/whats_nu_raingutters.html to see how a school has transformed its walls with this inexpensive building material!



D. Staying Organized

- Store leveled books on shelving units or in bins. Remember to clearly identify levels for easy access.
- Students will take pride in their learning environment if they are involved in the process. Provide each group with a numbered spray bottle filled with water & vinegar. Students love using these to keep their desk/table clean. On Fridays, the cleanest team might be the first to select an activity or choose from a class raffle box.
- Assigning students to a variety of classroom jobs on a rotation is also an effective way to encourage student responsibility and pride.
- Setting up mail slots for each student is a great way to ensure that absent students receive any missed work. It's also a super place to store all of the notices to be taken home at the end of the day.
- A great way to keep from losing the caps to markers is by filling an old bowl with Plaster of Paris and inserting the caps about $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way into the plaster. Once dry, just pull out and return markers as needed. If you buy the same brand of markers, these will last for a few years.
- Use a variety of bins, crates, magazine holders, stacking boxes, cans, baggies, pizza boxes or just about anything you can get your hands on to organize your classroom.



The Learning Environment

Grouping Strategies

The task of grouping students for instructional purposes requires a lot of advance thought and preparation. Organizational and management questions arise in addition to the concerns of how to 'best' group our students for maximum effectiveness.

It is important for us to remember that working groups provides students with vital learning opportunities. William Glasser's work certainly supports the value of group work. We remember:

10% of what we READ
20% of what we HEAR
30% of what we SEE
50% of what we both SEE and HEAR
70% of what we DISCUSS WITH OTHERS
80% of what we EXPERIENCE PERSONALLY
95% of what we TEACH TO SOMEONE ELSE

Recognizing the overall value of group work, however, doesn't come without its challenges. In fact, some studies have reported possible harmful effects relating to the overuse of certain grouping strategies. For example, Fountas and Pinnell, authors of *Guided Reading: Good First Teaching for all Children* have found that reading ability groups do not seem to meet individual needs⁵. They highlight that:

1. Once a child is assigned to a low reading group, the chances of moving to a higher group is very low (Hiebert 1983; Good & Marshal 1984)⁷.
2. Students' self-confidence & self-esteem are damaged by their assignment to low groups, since no matter how hard we try to name groups, students inevitably figure out which is low and which is high (Filby, Barnett & Bossart 1982)⁸.
3. Minority groups are more likely to be assigned to low groups (Elders 1983;⁹ Good & Marshall 1984¹⁰; Sorenson & Hallinan 1986)¹¹.

Consequently, many teachers and researchers have become increasingly aware of the importance of keeping group membership flexible in order to provide students with the opportunity to work with as many different peers in a variety of situations.

Here are a few items to consider when forming groups:

- vary the size of the groups according to the specific activity rather than on the total number of students participating
- assign specific tasks to all students to ensure maximum participation by all members
- limit teams to 4-6 students since research indicates that this is a good, manageable size so that all students participate while reducing the risk of one person dominating the activity
- try to group students who work well together
- clearly explain how and why the group is formed as this will directly influence how quickly your students will move into their designated groups
- teach the necessary concepts and/or skills to be used during group activities
- vary the length of time the group is together depending on the nature of the task
- match the grouping strategy to the purpose of the task (e.g., interest groups, social groups, peer-helping groups, needs groups) however, as often as possible ensure that they are heterogeneous in terms of gender, ability and ethnicity
- remember that constant reinforcement, time and patience are required for success

Highlighted below are some specific features relating to a variety of grouping strategies. These were compiled by the Waterloo Catholic District School Board to provide additional strategies for combined grade classrooms¹².

- *Ability Groups*

Teachers may group some students together from the two grades who are at the same level of achievement. These groups, for example, might be formed in the area of mathematics or language. The students in one ability group would be working on the same concept or skill or be at the same developmental stage. Teachers are to be cognizant that sustained ability groups could negatively influence the self-esteem of the lower ability group members.

- *Interest Groups*

Teachers may form interest groups based on common topics of interest. The students in each group may agree to investigate a problem or examine a subject. The interest group may focus on a project and be motivated to produce a product. Again the members of each group may be in different grades and achieving different expectations while working on the same project.

- *Cooperative Learning Groups*
The teacher may place students in cooperative learning groups randomly or based on his/her knowledge of the children and their strengths. The students assigned to each group usually complement each other. The group and the teacher may identify the task or tasks to be accomplished. Each member of the group has an assigned role and responsibility to carry out the task or discussion.
- *Cross-Class Groups*
If a school has two or more combined grade classrooms with the same grades, the teachers may at times decide to combine the students from the same grade in groups to attempt to form a homogeneous group. The teacher may need to utilize this grouping for instructions in the Sacraments or other purposes such as the Grade 3 testing. In other cases, teachers may group students of the same grade temporarily to re-establish friendships or to teach common concepts for that grade. Sometimes, two teachers of combined Junior Kindergarten and Kindergarten classrooms, which are adjacent, may have a common activity time in order that same-age peers from both classes may interact.
- *Individual Work*
The teacher should incorporate much independent, individual work in the classroom to allow students to work at their own pace and to demonstrate individual strengths, needs or interests. A time for personal reflection and personal choice is important. When involved in individual work, the student can progress at his/her own pace. Teachers often use contracts or student education plans to formalize the expectations of each student and to monitor progress and accomplishment of previously established tasks and timelines.
- *Pairs*
Teachers may encourage students to form pairs or assign students to pairs for a given task. Sometimes weak/strong students are paired together, just as students from two grades could be paired together to encourage peer relationships and to stimulate each other's cognitive growth. The pairs are sometimes more effective groups than small groups and can be used for peer evaluation, shared reading, study partners, reader/actor roles, etc.

See Figure 4.1

- *Whole Group*

There are many opportunities for whole class instruction in a combined grade classroom. The whole class might be involved in a presentation by a writer, a discussion, a dual reading, a shared story read by the teacher, cooking or science experiences, open-ended art activities, etc. When addressing the whole combined class, the teacher should be aware of the various cognitive levels of the students. The vocabulary can be enriched, but some statements could be reworded in order to be understood by all children. For example, "The political implications of an imminent election are numerous" could be repeated as "If our country has an election soon, there could be a new government and some new rules." Teachers need to ask students open-ended questions which could be answered correctly with a variety of answers. Also, "wait time" is very important in allowing children time to process the questions and formulate an answer.

Classroom Discipline

One of the greatest challenges faced by teachers is determining how to maintain a positive classroom environment with a minimum of disruptions. In order to teach successfully, it is critical to have the necessary circumstances which make it possible to teach effectively and for learning to take place. It is important to note that what occurs during the first few weeks of school impacts greatly on the rest of the year. That is not to say, however, that classroom behaviour cannot be improved later in the year, it will just be more difficult once the stage has already been set.

Positive Expectations

A key feature of good classroom management is expecting students to do well. It is a well studied fact that:

“Students tend to learn as little or as much as their teachers expect. Teachers who set and communicate high expectations to all their students obtain greater academic performance from these students than do teachers who set low expectations.”¹³

Knowing that students do better when high expectations are in place, it is important to spend a considerable amount of time up front teaching and modelling good behaviour.

In OECTA's (Ontario English Catholic Teachers Association) Beginning Teachers, they suggest using the following strategies to help reduce classroom conflicts:

- show faith in each child and build on strengths
- believe that all children are capable and lovable
- insist that everyone be treated with a wholesome respect
- listen to student opinions and consider their feelings
- arrive in the classroom before students
- organize and prepare before each lesson
- maintain a sense of humour and a tolerant attitude
- help children make appropriate choices
- teach students decision-making skills
- help students live with mistakes and take them in stride
- use a quiet, friendly tone of voice

Here's a great site which links other sites on classroom management:
www.expage.com/page/classmanagement

www.student-wea.org/misc/displ.htm

- help children to increase their feelings of self-esteem
- have a low-key, consistent and matter of fact manner
- use realistic, logical consequences and enforce them

Guidelines for Effective Discipline

When looking at effective discipline, there are a variety of models available for teachers to draw upon. Presenters such as Lee Canter and Fred Jones, for example, have very specific philosophies of addressing classroom behaviour. Seven systematic models can be found in *Building Classroom Discipline: From Models to Practice*¹⁴.

A simple model to start with is presented in OECTA's Beginning Teachers manual (p.c/9). Their three guidelines include:

1. *Monitor student behaviour*

Use an active eye. Watch what is going on. Don't become preoccupied with someone or something and ignore the rest of the class. It's said that one teacher on his/her feet is worth two sitting down. This benefits your discipline program as well as being an effective teaching strategy. Simply looking the student directly in the eye for prolonged contact while you continue your lesson sends a non-verbal message that says, "I saw what you did and I want it stopped."

2. *Be consistent*

Have the same expectations for appropriate behaviour for all students. Your students should know that you will enforce rules consistently. Your goal is to be fair, but that might mean differing consequences for students. If one student frequently fails to return homework, you may choose a different consequence than you would for a student who forgets his/her homework for the first time. In knowing that you will be fair, but not equal, your students should understand that being equal is not always fair. In order to be consistent, be certain that the consequences for student behaviour are reasonable, and known in advance.

www.humboldt.edu/~thai/discip-options.html

<http://falcon.jmu.edu/~ramseyil/disciplinebib.htm>

3. *Promptly manage inappropriate behaviour*

Effective classroom managers know that misbehaviour must be handled immediately or there is a risk of a snowballing effect. Instead of one or two students involved, soon there may be several.

Effectively managing misbehaviour takes a little practice. Here are a few techniques worth trying out:

1. Win students over:
 - Politeness
 - Meet and greet them at the door
 - Demonstrate personal interest
 - Smile
2. Use a signal to begin:
 - Develop a signal or routine that means “quiet please”.
 - Pause until silence or near silence is attained.
 - Make the pause active not passive.
3. Be on alert. Stop things before they go too far. Know when to ignore:
 - Eye contact is crucial
 - Use of visual motions (hands, eyes, body)
 - A shake of the head
 - A quiet “no” and nothing else
 - Using students’ names from the start
 - Model and/or reward appropriate behaviour
4. Proximity:
 - Regularly move about the room while teaching and during student activities.
 - Move toward the inappropriate behaviour
5. Deal with the problem not the student:
 - Remove object causing distraction
 - Distract allies
6. Come Back In
This is done after an intervention. Allow the student back into the group activity.

Establishing An Effective Discipline Plan

Taking the time to develop an effective discipline plan that will match your personal teaching style as well as the learning styles of your students will be time well spent. Two important components of any plan include rules and consequences.

Classroom Rules

Setting up classroom rules early in the year is a good way to provide structure and guidelines for your students. Students need to clearly understand the boundaries and expectations. Simply stating rules, however, is not very efficient. For maximum effectiveness, it is important to:

- teach the necessary rules
- review rules on a regular basis
- consistently and promptly enforce identified rules

Although class rules can be predetermined prior to beginning school, involving students in the process can lead to increased ownership. In Classroom Management: A Thinking and Caring Approach Bennett and Smilanich suggest the following five key components when establishing classroom rules:

1. Rules are few in number – five seems to be a common upper limit.
2. A rationale is established for each rule.
3. Ambiguous terms are explained.
4. Roles and responsibilities are learned.
5. The rules are stated positively rather than negatively. (e.g., “Treat each other with respect.” Rather than, “Don’t put each other down.”)¹⁵

Sample Classroom Rules



Other ideas:

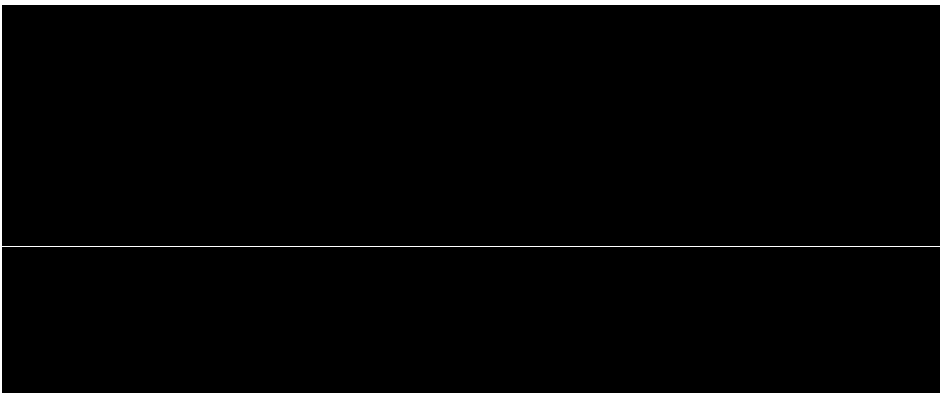
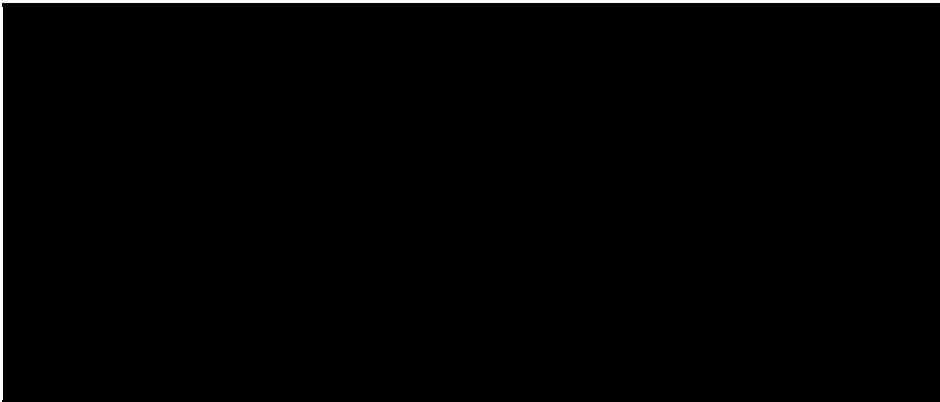


www.humboldt.edu/~thal/discip-options.html

Consequences

The next step after establishing the rules is setting appropriate consequences. These can be either negative or positive and involve an individual student or the entire class. It is important to remember that unless your classroom rules are enforced, they will have little value.

Sample Rewards/Positive Consequences



www.track0.com/canteach/elementary

Other Possible Strategies to Encourage Good Behaviour

- **Marble Jar** Add a marble to the jar when the class is working well. Once it's filled, the class can select a reward.
- **Class Points** Put up a tally sheet and record a point each time students are on task. Once the predetermined amount has been reached, the class can select a reward

[www.track0com/
canteach/elementary/
classman1.html](http://www.track0com/canteach/elementary/classman1.html)

Figure 4.1

Grouping Strategies in the Elementary Classroom: Language Arts

Adapted from "No More Rocks: Grouping to Give Students Control of their Learning" (Berghoff and Egawa, 1991)

	Whole Group	Small Group	Pairs	Independent
Why?	Develops the learning community; time to share culture and literacy.	Common interests; strategy instructions; opportunities to plan, think, work toward a goal.	More intimate group requires less negotiation about agenda; more opportunity to construct.	Allows sustained reading and writing; allows personal choice; time for personal reflection.
How?	Possibilities include sitting in a circle, having a special chair for authors or report givers, musical signals to call the group together.	Groups of 3 or 4 self-chosen for interest; teacher planned considering social relationships, expertise or needed language support.	Self-chosen partner; teacher assigned partner to assure success stronger/weaker, expert/novice; to encourage new friendships.	Teacher specified time for independent work; children separate themselves to work alone.
When?	Decision making – class rules, plans; problem-solving – playground issues; listening to stories; choral reading; teacher or "expert" demonstrations; shared experiences – cooking, science experiments, art activities; celebrating – completion of a major project, individual accomplishments; sharing individual scholarship.	Discussion groups; literature study; content area explorations; writing support groups; instruction groups; and inquiry project.	Shared reading; study partners; cross-age tutors; letter exchanges; skills pairings – author/illustrator, reader/factor.	Sustained reading and writing; personal investigation; journal writing; alternative sign system response; gathering personally inviting resources; time for personal reflection.
How does it foster literacy?	Provides a meaning-rich context where language is used to share meaning and students' individuality is explored and supported.	Opportunity to use oral language in social context to construct meaning; functional reasons to read and write; allows students to shape their own development of personal literacy.	Opportunities to practice making personal meanings public in face-to-face interaction with a peer; "two heads are better than one" – learning can go farther with two.	Allows the child to set a personal pace for thinking; allows the child to make personal connections to the class learning; time to savour language; time to use written language.
How does it support students with diverse language, cultural, ability, or experience backgrounds?	Shared experiences give the class a shared vocabulary and practice in social meaning making. Exposes differences and similarities of all students so that they are expected and accepted.	Develop awareness of multiple perspectives; peers provide support and language opportunities.	Opportunities to make connections with all class members; reasons to relate in spite of differences.	Allows time for the child to do what he enjoys without pressure to negotiate with the larger community; time to practice, to own new learning; time to work in the child's first language.
What does the teacher learn from the students?	What the children value. What energizes the group. Which children need more help in making their meanings public.	Can see the children try out different perspectives and roles; can see how the children's personal sense of power is evolving; can see what knowledge is constructed.	What the child can do with support; what kind of support the child needs; how the child accepts or rejects different perspectives.	What the child's interests are; what the child thinks about, what aspects of reading and writing make sense to the child and can be used for her/his own purposes.