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Seat of Choice: The Advantages of Flexible Seating

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Seat of Choice: The Advantages of Flexible Seating

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Abstract

The focus of this Capstone Project is the advantages of Flexible Seating. This is important because students thrive off of choice in the classroom and Flexible Seating offers many ways for a student's success. It is argued that teachers should implement Flexible Seating because of the increase in collaboration, student engagement, and overall success. The primary stakeholder perspective chosen was a veteran teacher who has implemented Flexible Seating and their fifth grade class, this is because of their experiences with this classroom design. Three themes emerged from an analysis of the data and were explored as ways to address the issue presented. Based on an analysis of the interviews and the relevant research literature, the researcher used what they learned to formulate an action that responded in a way that inspires, informs, or involves a particular audience.

Keywords: flexible seating, collaboration, student choice, student autonomy

Seat of Choice: The Advantages of Flexible Seating

Six years ago when my mom decided to transform her classroom to be flexible, it was a whole family ordeal. Boxes of random furniture and wood that would later be used for standing tables covered our garage floor. She would have been going into her 14th year of teaching, and my little sister was in fifth grade. Most of my sister's friends were in my mom's class that year, which she likes to call the "test run". This specific group of kids were all around special. There were hardly any issues in the entire grade level, which in intermediate school is very rare. My mom started by lowering some tables and introducing rolling chairs. This all went well during the school year and she felt confident to implement more the following year. Which is where my story begins.

Every child of an educator understands going into their parent's classroom during the summer just wanting to be hanging out with friends, swimming, or honestly doing anything but being at *school*. The swimming pool in late summer was out of the picture most years and especially not the summer six years ago. My mom, dad, sister, and I were in my mom's classroom where on one side of the room there were the typical stacks of desks and chairs and on the other was the brand new furniture my mom had planned to use. Our mission was to transform her classroom into a space where her students felt like they had a say and where their say mattered. My mom is a type A kind of person, meaning we all observed while she did all of the work. Even after simply watching her put the vision to life, it was something I will always remember. The way she had a plan and executed it perfectly for her future students was amazing.

Each year, my mom continuously adds new furniture and pieces to keep transforming her room into exactly what she wants it to be. She would describe her classroom as having "coffee shop vibes", which I would definitely agree with. Edison string lights are strung along the

center of her room from hard wire my dad installed. There are two futons in a corner with a coffee table and rug. The overhead lights are always kept off and there are a variety of different lamps and lighting around the room. Lighting has been such a huge change in her classroom, as the environment without overhead lights is very calming opposed to the fluorescent lights most teachers use. The biggest difference in my mom's classroom rather than a traditional classroom is the fact there is no seating chart. Each morning, she facilitates a morning meeting. This is for students to reflect on yesterday's choice and decide if they should switch up where they are sitting. There are sticks with the student's number on them which she pulls one by one randomly. Once a student's stick is pulled, they are to decide their seat for the day. My mom has plenty of rules set in place which are posted in the classroom for students to see everyday. One of those rules is that she has the right to move anyone throughout the day if they are off-task, causing issues, or any other reason she seems fit. Most days this works out for her fifth graders, but not to discredit the days which may be harder.

Flexible seating is so important to me because it is so important to her. She does it for her students with the hope they have the best possible experience in school. The effort, money, and dedication she has dispersed throughout this journey is inspiring. Being a teacher is not just about going into work and teaching your students, there is a deeper meaning which my mom exceeds. Her students, their parents, the administrators, and her district all thank her for what she does and for setting the standard of education- and I get to look up to her and only hope I will be half of what she is.

Literature Review

Flexible seating is a classroom design that allows students autonomy in selecting places in the classroom that best suits their learning style. Although this concept is fairly new, teachers have either implemented this or not- the choice being entirely up to their teaching style and own opinions. There are several definitions of what makes a classroom “flexible” or if their furniture would be considered “flexible seating furniture”. Flexible seating can be described as introducing a variety of seating and furniture options at different heights, different positions, and easily moveable so students can work in collaborative groups (Grimm, 2020). Regarding this alternative seating, it is well known that the reason behind this change from the traditional desks and chairs is the student’s engagement, success, and overall learning capability. Student engagement can mean the student’s ability to be attentive, curious, interested, optimistic, and the degree of passion a student shows while learning (Grimm, 2020). Whether it is engagement or classroom management strategies, teachers must make their decision before the school year begins. What will it be, traditional or alternative? Student choice may lead to an important component of a comprehensive classroom management system (Bicard, 2012).

Why is it an Issue/Opportunity?

The main miss in education is for learning to occur. Thus, the main concerns of many teachers comes down to their students’ success and the classroom environment- one where teachers can teach and students may learn in. The question is, could flexible seating benefit students with ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder), ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder), or other disabilities more than a traditional desk and blue plastic chair? Here lies the issue. Flexible seating also goes hand in hand with classroom management strategies (Having, 2017). Teachers should be asking themselves, ‘Would it be smarter and more beneficial to create a seating chart or have students choose their own spot carefully each day?’. Collaboration is a

selling point of a flexible design as teachers have realized the benefits of collaboration. A classroom with easily movable tables that can create different sized groups has found to be a huge benefit of a flexible design. When the design of the classroom is open, it allows for collaborative work. Students feel more comfortable and view their classroom as a safe space rather than a rigid environment. Easily transitioning from individual, to partners, to small or large groups is crucial for successful collaboration (Cole et al., 2021). The study between students being assigned an individual seat in a non-collaborative approach to a seating chart and a student who is allowed to choose where in the classroom suits them shows disruptive behavior happens more when students are assigned (Bicard, 2012). With choice happening in the classroom, what this is about is finding whether or not a student benefits from this type of classroom design.

What Has and/or Should Be Done?

Although the concept of Flexible Seating is new and evolving, teachers are finding what fits best in their own classroom. The fear of causing chaos in the classroom might be holding teachers back from bringing flexible seating into their own class, which is why Flexible Seating may not be receiving the attention it should. Kennedy (2017) gives the example of teachers seeking to expand their classroom setting towards a more flexible design that has taken inspiration from coffee houses. People can be seen sitting in a booth talking, standing, or sitting alone on a sofa. Usually people choose where they will sit that day depending on the type of work they are doing. Kennedy points out that this is how a flexible design classroom would work as well. Classrooms are seen without a “front” because teachers are not expecting their students to face the front of the classroom all day long. It is about moving around, collaborating with neighbors, and experiencing hands-on learning (Fittes, 2017). What should be done is more research on flexible seating and tips on how to begin implementing. There cannot be a couch or

comfy chairs thrown into a classroom for this concept to thrive. It is important to note that the teacher's style also plays a role in the successful implementation of flexible seating as stated by Alzahrani (2021). If a teacher doesn't have the proper training or information on the management of a flexible design it may not be successful. Klein (2020) suggests the need for professional development for teachers as well by stating, "You can put a teacher in a brand-new innovative space, and that teacher may teach the way they've always taught, and therefore, the kids will probably learn much the way they've always learned."

Conclusion

Flexible seating can be modern, engaging, and overall powerful in an elementary classroom. Implementing a flexible design can be really beneficial in a student's overall engagement and behavior in class. The difficult part is having some educators who strongly believe that traditional seating is the most effective way of learning and some who have implemented flexible seating into their classrooms. If this cycle keeps going "flexible seating, traditional, flexible seating, traditional", what will happen to the students ability to keep routine and engagement? Although this trend is becoming more popular, it is inevitable that there will be a teacher who will strictly have rows of desks and chairs. The effects of flexible seating may be important to note for teachers who are thinking about bringing this idea into their own classrooms. Will this better engage their students, make it easier for them to learn, stay focused, and be able to easily collaborate with one another?

Method

Flexible Seating is a tool which can help student engagement, motivation, and success in the classroom. For this Capstone Project, the researcher has investigated how a teacher and their students view flexible seating and what they think could be considered beneficial and negative opinions regarding this opportunity. Based on an analysis of the data and the relevant research literature, the researcher has used what she has learned to formulate a result that responds to the topic of flexible seating in a way that inspires, informs, or involves a particular audience.

Context

The location my study will be taking place at is an elementary school in the central valley, which I will be calling “Mustang Elementary”. This specific school is very diverse with 44 percent of the population being Hispanic, 17 percent being Asian, 22 percent White, along with other ethnicities. This school also serves socioeconomically disadvantaged students, which makes up around 30 percent of the students. The classroom which this study is going to be held is a flexible classroom with different types of seating arrangements and areas of the room. This includes yoga ball chairs, futons, squishy chair toppers, stationary bicycle pedals, roly chairs, and other non-traditional seating. The students put their backpacks in the very front of the classroom on designated hooks for a more open concept classroom. There are also drawers used like a locker for students to use for books, notebooks, and personal materials because of the fact they move seats everyday (if they choose to do so).

Participants and Participant Selection

I will invite 28 students to take a survey and one teacher to participate in this study. These students will have experience in both a traditional and flexible style classroom. The

teacher will have taught for 20 years in fourth- sixth grade, but currently teaching in fifth. The teacher who will be interviewed is a veteran teacher with over 20 years of experience. She is a white female. There will be 19 female students and 15 male. The demographics of the students are: 11 percent African American, 11% Asian-Indian, 44% Hispanic/Latino, 23% White, 11% Cambodian/Filipino/Pacific Islander. This group of prospective participants is being invited to participate because of their relevant experience or expertise.

Researcher

This is a personally meaningful topic for me because I have watched my mom incorporate the concept in her classroom for many years now. I find it extremely impactful for her students and this is something I am very passionate about. I am similar to the teacher who I will be interviewing since I have also chosen this to be my career pathway. I also credit myself to be pretty creative, which is similar to the teacher who has incorporated flexible seating. I am different from the students who were interviewed because I am no longer in elementary school. These students were in fifth grade. The particular demographic of the group of students varies amongst many different races and I am a white female. I need to be mindful of my bias. I am pro flexible seating which I do not want to get in the way of going in with an open mind both opinions on the seating choices. I want to have a clear slate going into my interviews and observations.

Semi-Structured Interview and Survey Questions

Teacher Interview:

1. What do you know about flexible seating? What do you see as the challenges with flexible seating; or What are you most concerned about when it comes to using flexible seating as an alternative to traditional seating in your classroom?
2. What is currently being done to address flexible seating- by whom - and what are the strengths and weaknesses of these efforts?
3. What do you think should be done about incorporating flexible seating in the classroom?

4. What do you think are the challenges to doing something like flexible seating?
5. Is there anything else that you would like to say about flexible seating and/or the improvement of this non-traditional alternative?
6. With your experience, tell me some challenges you have endured with flexible seating. Tell me some successes you have encountered.
7. How did you first learn of flexible seating?
8. Why did you decide to implement flexible seating?
9. Describe how you implemented flexible seating in your classroom at the beginning of the year.
10. Describe how you manage flexible seating in your classroom.
11. Have you had to make adjustments from how you originally implemented flexible seating?

Student Survey:

1. I like flexible seating. _____
2. It is easy for me to choose where I'll sit each day. _____
3. Flexible seating helps me pay attention. _____
4. I like sitting in a variety of spots in our classroom. _____
5. I would prefer everyone had desks in our classroom. _____
6. I would prefer my teacher assigning where everyone sits in our classroom. _____
7. Flexible seating frustrates me. _____
8. It is difficult for me to choose where I'll sit each day. _____
9. I worry about where I'll sit in our classroom. _____
10. I am happier in a classroom with flexible seating than in other classrooms. _____
11. I am always able to pay attention in the spot I've chosen to sit. _____
12. I do not like flexible seating. _____

13. I feel comfortable with flexible seating in our classroom. _____
14. I believe flexible seating helps me focus while the teacher is teaching. _____
15. I believe flexible seating helps me focus while I'm doing independent work. _____
16. Flexible seating makes me feel nervous. _____
17. Flexible seating makes me feel uncomfortable. _____
18. It is often difficult to pay attention in the spot I've chosen to sit. _____
19. I always choose a good spot to sit and work in our classroom. _____
20. I often need to be moved to a different spot to sit and work. _____
21. I like sitting at a desk when doing my independent work. _____
22. I choose to sit close to my friends. _____
23. I choose a place in the classroom that helps me learn. _____
24. I like sitting on normal classroom chairs. _____
25. I like sitting on different types of seats. _____

Procedure

Only the teacher was interviewed. The interview was completed individually. Face-to-Face interviews took less than one hour, was audio-recorded (with participant consent), and took place at Mustang Elementary. A semi-structured interview format was used for face-to-face interviews, to allow for follow-up questions to unclear, interesting or unexpected responses. All interviews/surveys were scheduled at the convenience of the interviewee and should take approximately 20 minutes to complete. The students interviewed were given a survey to answer and all surveys were confidential. This survey asked students to reflect on their previous years and different classrooms in comparison to this year's classroom.

Data Analysis

Transcribed interviews were coded and analyzed for emergent themes.

Results

For this Capstone Project, one teacher and 28 students were interviewed to see what they think could be done for the opportunity of implementing Flexible Seating in the classroom. This is important because the need for student autonomy, collaboration, and success is huge. Creating an environment that encapsulates this is important and needs to be seen more. Based on an analysis of the data and the relevant research literature three themes emerged (see Table 1).

Evidence-based decision-making required evaluating each potential Action Option by the following criteria: creating an informational poster and posting it to social media; a training on implementing flexible seating in the classroom; and creating a manual for teachers to refer to while starting their flexible seating journey. All are important because of the information being provided. The poster would be easy to read, the training would be hands-on, and the manual would be detailed for teachers who want to dive in. Based on the evaluation of each Action Option an action will be recommended and justified.

Table 1

Evaluation of Action Options

	REACH	COST	REASONABLE
TRAINING	HIGH	HIGH	LOW
SOCIAL MEDIA POSTER	HIGH	LOW	LOW
INFORMATIONAL MANUAL	HIGH	LOW	MEDIUM

Action Option 1: Trainings

My interview data shows that maybe flexible seating is not implemented in more classrooms because there is not enough information being handed out about it. My interviewee was saying how important it is to have necessary information about flexible seating before throwing furniture into a classroom and thinking everything will work out. Action option one which is to have professional training run by teachers or experts in the field of innovative classrooms (this includes flexible seating). This of course is a great option, yet very expensive as opposed to the other action options. The amount of money spent for teachers to stand by their beliefs and disregard flexible seating would be ruining the whole idea. Yet the reach for this option is really high. The entire school district could set aside dates for ranges of grade levels and teachers could sign up for their certain date. The reasonability of this proposal would be pretty low just because of the time needed to set up professional development days and work with the school district. All in all, the trainings may provide teachers with the hands-on experience with flexible seating that is needed.

Action Option 2: Social Media Poster

The power of social media as we know is incredible. The reach received through the option of a poster shared widely could be incredible. However the reasonability that a teacher with a very busy schedule will look at a social media post and soak in the information is very low. The great part about creating a social media post with the flyer/poster attached would be the cost would be next to nothing. All I would need to do is create an informational post through a website like Canva which is free nonetheless. Social media is a great way to spread the word, because it definitely has helped so many issues and opportunities in the past and shed light on the situations. The poster shared through social media could be an important action option.

Action Option 3: Informational Manual

Teachers need to have tools in order to create the classroom environment they strive to have. My interviewee told me how she researched so much online when she was first starting to implement flexible seating in her own classroom. A manual will give teachers the opportunity to read in detail about starting flexible seating and the possible complications that go hand in hand. The cost to make this would be on the lower side if printed out and would cost pretty much nothing to be viewed digitally. The reach in my opinion would be high unless for some reason the manual be disregarded or thrown away. The reasonability for this action option is medium, just because it is definitely possible to design a manual but I am not sure if it would be taken seriously by teachers if I were to make it.

Conclusion

Recommendation.

Creating an instructional manual for teachers to refer to while starting their flexible seating journey. This manual will provide 5 sections called: Why Flexible Seating, Classroom Management Strategies, Seating Chart, Furniture Arrangement, and Storage Solutions. This will all be clear and detailed to use both while beginning and throughout implementation.

Concessions.

The other two action options that I had thought of are strong candidates. Both showcase reasons for helping with the opportunity. A professional training would be extremely beneficial for teachers to grasp concepts and tools for flexible seating. A poster shared through social media is always beneficial because it would be widely spread throughout teachers across the country.

Limitations.

Something to note is I am not a teacher nor have I ever implemented flexible seating in a classroom. So the information in the manual I have created may not be what is the very best tips or procedure recommendations. Not to discredit the fact my capstone project was based on my mom's classroom which means I have been able to freely discuss this topic in great detail.

Potential negative outcomes.

A negative outcome I could foresee is teachers disregarding the manual or throwing it away. This could always be shared through email and digitally but that does not mean recipients will not do the same as they would with a physical copy of the manual.

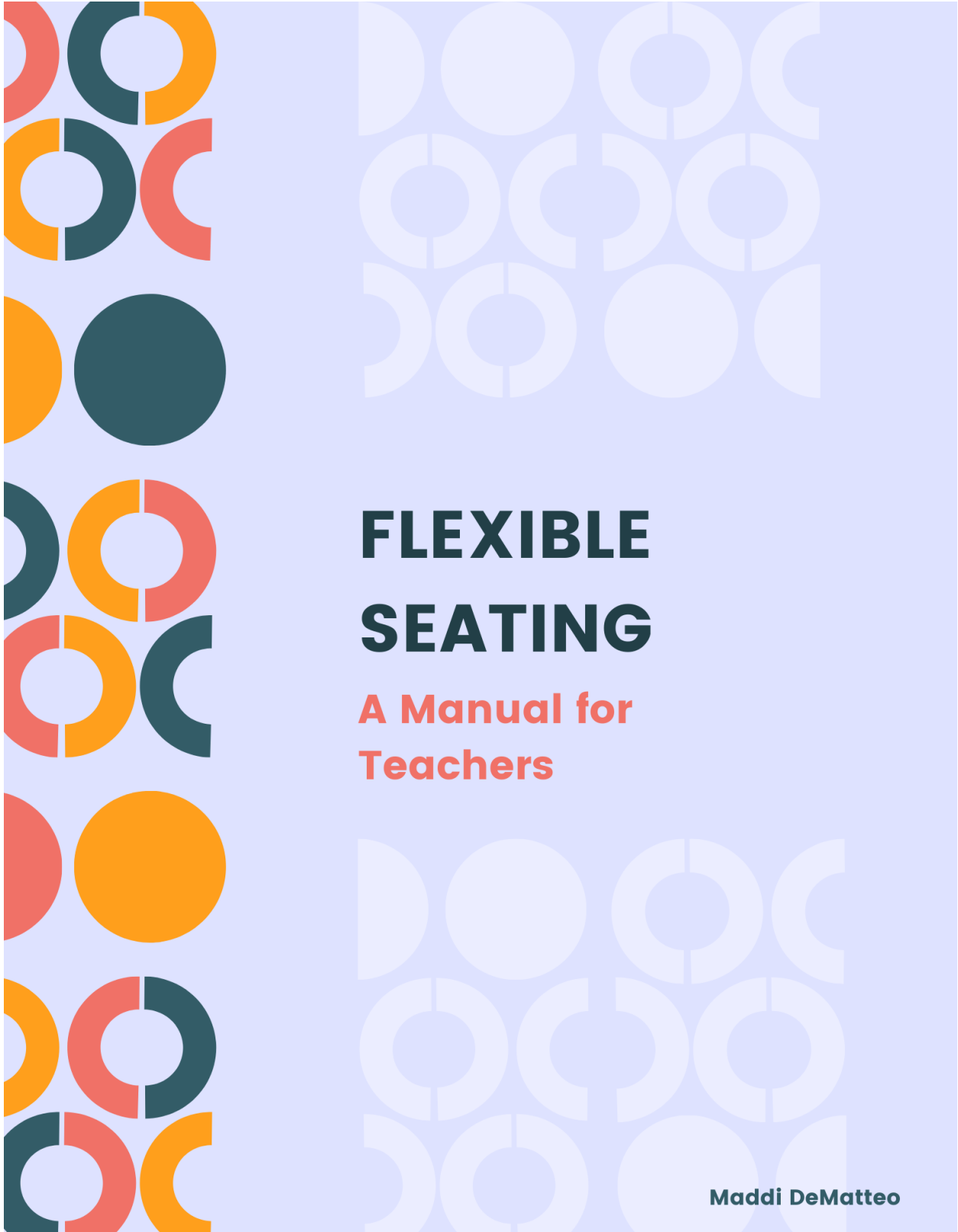
Conclusion.

Overall, a manual in my opinion would serve all of the needs to be beneficial to a teacher either interested, starting, or trying to maintain a flexible seating classroom. This will have the tools the teacher needs to be successful in addition to their own research on what it takes to have a very unique classroom fit for students and their successful learning careers.

Action Documentation and Critical Reflection

For this capstone project, I chose to focus on Flexible Seating and what advantages emerge while implementing this type of seating in a classroom. My interviewee is a veteran teacher with twenty years of experience, who has had a Flexible Seating classroom for seven years. The main concern with this type of classroom is teachers questioning “how to do it and how do I maintain it”. With this in mind, the action options were creating an informational flyer distributed through social media, teachers attending a Flexible Seating training, or creating a manual for teachers. I landed with a manual, because with this, a teacher can grasp it better than seeing it on Instagram or falling asleep during a training. Manuals are an easy way to pack a lot of information in without it seeming like too much.

I have included page one of the manual on the next page. The rest of the manual can be found in Appendix A.



FLEXIBLE SEATING

**A Manual for
Teachers**

Maddi DeMatteo

Critical Reflection

This project has opened my eyes to understanding that being a teacher is not just about having a classroom and teaching students year after year. There is so much more to a student's educational journey. Just a classroom can shape a learner for years to come. Flexible seating has proven to be a successful outlook of education. This upcoming school year as I enter my very own classroom as an Intern Teacher, I will think of Mrs. DeMatteo's fifth graders who thrive in their flexible seating classroom. There is so much collaboration and strong learning happening in room 403 at Mustang Elementary. I will also think of my mom, who I based my capstone project on. She gave me insight that I did not realize I needed. I have learned so much from her, not only as a mom but as a teacher. She will always be the greatest *teacher* in my life.

Synthesis and Integration

The CSUMB's Liberal Studies Major Learning Outcomes have been involved throughout my four years here. In most of my major courses, I have referred back to these outcomes. I was sitting in my first year seminar course as a freshman hearing about outcomes, and projects, papers, and capstone thinking to myself how will I ever accomplish all of this. I have completed numerous courses with the help of these outcomes. MLO 1 which is called "Developing Educator" helped me with my own senior capstone. I have understood the responsibilities of a public educator and what pedagogy is and means for a teacher. All in all, I feel ready to jump into my own career as an educator and take all I have learned at CSUMB with me.

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Appendix A



Introduction

This manual was created to support teachers in the successful implementation of flexible seating.

CONTENT

01

Why Flexible Seating?

02

Classroom Management Strategies

03

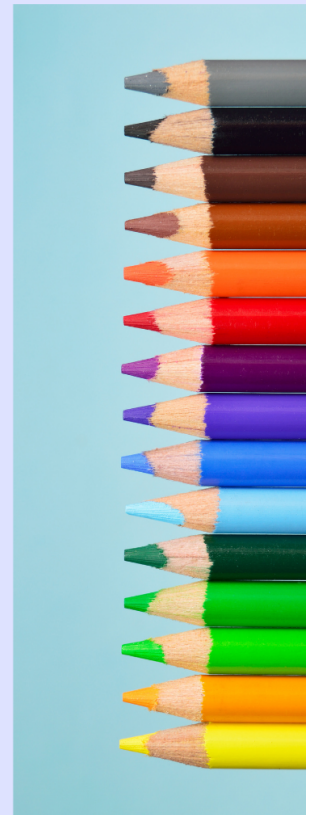
Seating Chart

04

Furniture Arrangement

05

Storage Solutions



01

Why Flexible Seating?

Over the last couple of decades, the look of classrooms has drastically changed. Learning spaces are beginning to look more like a coffee shop with comfortable seating, rather than a classroom. These flexible designs allow the classroom to be more student centered through the use of choice and collaboration. “The purpose of this type of arrangement is to meet the needs of students by providing a wide variety of furniture and workspaces, to put students at the center of learning, and to allow them to make choices based on their preferences and the objectives of the task at hand.” (Bluteau et al., 2022) These benefits to a flexible design are enough for some teachers to ditch their student desks and opt for more comfortable seating.



Why Flexible Seating?

Many teachers have noticed an increase in engagement and achievement through active learning. For some, their perceived need outweighed the management challenges.

Flexible seating offers a more 21st century approach to the traditional classroom. The students are at the center of the learning and the teacher is there to support and encourage. Students enjoy learning in a space that makes them feel welcome.

Collaboration & Choice



Collaboration

In a flexible seating classroom, students are learning in a variety of chair types. A flexible design moves away from traditional rows and desks and instead seats students in groups that are perfect for collaboration.

Collaboration is a selling point of a flexible design as teachers have realized the benefits of collaboration. A classroom with easily movable tables that can create different sized groups has found to be a huge benefit of a flexible design. When the design of the classroom is open, it allows for collaborative work. Students feel more comfortable and view their classroom as a safe space rather than a rigid environment. Easily transitioning from individual, to partners, to small or large groups is crucial for successful collaboration.



Choice

The concept of choice is huge. This pedagogical shift allows students to make a responsible choice on where they will learn depending on the task at hand. This is also where the management training for teachers is of the utmost importance. Students must be taught how to make these responsible decisions. This can be illustrated by the example of assuming students know how to perform other routines in our classroom before we explicitly teach them such as how to walk in the hallway and how to line up for lunch. The same level of detailed routine should be taught in regards to flexible seating.



02

Classroom Management Strategies

Many teachers are concerned about classroom management strategies that will need to be changed in order to successfully implement flexible seating. This is definitely a valid concern.

This classroom design isn't like the traditional classroom, so management strategies will not be the same either.

We must remember that students must be taught how to use the furniture to be safe, on task, and make responsible decisions.

It is a good practice to create rules together regarding flexible seating. This buy in from students will make students feel a part of the team and that is important in a student centered classroom.

Safety

Off Task Behavior

Poor Choices



Safety

It is crucial for students to understand how to use the classroom seating and how to NOT use the seating to remain safe. The best way to accomplish this is modeling. Video clips of the correct way to use a specific seat is an engaging way to share the information. Teachers can also have students write or illustrate rules on how to safely use flexible seating offered in their classroom.

If a student isn't being safe in a seat, they will not be allowed to sit there until they can show they understand.



Off Task Behavior

Many teachers worry that flexible seating will be distracting for students. This isn't usually the case as many teachers who have used a flexible design notice that students are more engaged and able to burn off some energy while listening and learning using movement.



Poor Seating Choices

Some students do work best in a traditional school chair that doesn't move. It is important to offer these seats to students as well. If a student has made a poor seating choice, it is important to have a conversation to discuss why that seat may not allow them to be their best student. The teacher and student should discuss where in the room the student may work better. Some students will need to be placed in a seat if they continuously make poor choices. They will want that choice and must understand that it is a privilege to choose.



03

Seating Chart

One of the main draws to flexible seating is the concept of student choice. If we are creating a seating chart, that will stifle that choice. We have to remember that every student will not feel comfortable in every seat and we can't expect them to learn in a seat they aren't comfortable in.

If teachers feel a seating chart is appropriate for their class, a survey of types of preferred seats could be given to students before creating a seating chart.

Many teachers allow movement of students each day by using a random system of choosing that day's seat each morning. Another strategy could be choosing a seat each week that a student will sit in each day that week.

It is important to note that the teacher may move a student at any time if a poor choice was made.



04

Furniture Arrangement

There are many ways to arrange furniture in a flexible seating classroom. When teachers are looking to provide more collaboration, groups are crucial.

Teachers must also keep in mind which types of seats take up more space and plan that accordingly near walkways, etc.

Many flexible designs include tables and chairs that are easily moveable. These different designs will promote collaboration during different parts of the school day.

Furniture Arrangement



This is one example of how a flexible classroom could be designed.

Remember these tips when arranging furniture:

- Walkways clear for safety
- Groups for easy collaboration
- Many options of different seating choices
- "Basic" chairs remain an option for those who prefer it

05

Storage Solutions

When teachers are offering flexible seating options without backs such as a wobble stool or yoga ball, students will need places to store their backpacks. A hook on the table or cabinet is a great solution.



Cubby spaces are a great way for students to keep materials each day as well as a small bin for students to keep materials needed on that specific day and work from throughout.

Procedures... Procedures... Procedures!

- Necessary daily supplies should be posted
- Students unpack into small bins for the day
- Materials typically kept in desks stay in cubby
- Backpacks are hung on cabinets or on tables



This allows students to be completely mobile throughout the day. Trips to the cubby should be limited as they should have all necessary materials gathered in the first few minutes of the day.



Best of Luck designing your new flexible seating classroom!

**I hope that
some of these
tips will make
your transition
easier!**

References

Bluteau, J., Aubenas, S., & Dufour, F. (2022). Influence of Flexible Classroom Seating on the Wellbeing and Mental Health of Upper Elementary School Students: A Gender Analysis. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 821227. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.821227>