

made available, and to provide a channel through which suggestions from other teachers could receive careful consideration. One teacher who had worked zealously on a committee said, "It doesn't make much difference what you start to work on in education, you soon find yourself involved in the whole problem. In trying to find out what equipment and supplies would be of most help to a teacher and children in the fifth grade, I have had to think about the objectives of education, the characteristics of children ten and eleven years old, methods of teaching and methods of individual guidance."

In this school system as in many others, teachers were learning about the importance of creating an environment favorable to learning. But they were receiving the full support of under-

standing colleagues who recognized that the creation of the physical setting for learning is a responsibility shared by teachers, administrators, curriculum and guidance specialists. The community at large also has responsibility through its official representatives on the board of education and its unofficial representatives the parents of children enrolled in the schools.

The past decades have witnessed great attention to the studies of the growth and development of children. The best records of optimum development come from situations which provide an environment favorable to learning. The good gardener makes the soil right and leaves the plant to grow with such protection, nurture and guidance as is necessary for it to reach full fruition.

A Classroom for Living

LUCY NULTON

What teacher has not longed for a pleasanter, more effective classroom? This article suggests a practical, yet exciting, approach to improvement of the school setting for learning—and living.

WHAT can we do in a situation which is, in any way, poor for children?

Know in *what* ways we would like it to be better and *why* we consider these ways better for children and learning.

Make the most of what we have.

Hold to the dream of what and why.

Know where and how to seek help in making the most of what we now have and in achieving realization of the dream.

Each of these is a challenge! Each is exciting! Each is exploration!

The room is small, dank and crowded with dark desks or possibly dark tables and chairs. The woodwork may once have been varnished a glowing mahogany, but now it is encrusted with cracking or greasy dull brown paint of the cheapest kind. The floor reeks of generations of floor oil and dust down. (No child or teacher dare sit there. Be careful not to drop your handkerchief or a paper you want to keep

clean.) Walls are lined with blackboards high, wide, scratched and glaring with reflections. Were some of these reflections more distinct, less mingled, as they glare against our eyes, Charles Dickens, himself, would rise to cry out against them.

There is nothing beautiful in the room. There is nothing alive in it except tired, dull, unhappy children. It is crowded, stifling, dark and smelly. There are windows on only one side of the room, largely above the children's eyes, one door on the other side. Walls above and below the blackboard are hung with dust and scars. The walls are not all that bear scars; there are the spirits of the children—imagination snuffed out, resentment, mean words, harsh acts pressed in.

Along the top of the blackboard, all around the room, small, pinched pages of tight little drawings and small, pinched pages of cramped little writing flutter, flutter, flutter.

What Can We Do?

What are the needs of the people who live here? How is this schoolroom to function in meeting these needs?

They need to feel a sense of rightness and beauty about the world—their world; a sense of just enough relaxation plus just enough stimulation to produce that balanced tension which creates. They need a sense of external and internal balance, stability and organization which facilitates concentration yet never becomes a fetish.

They need elbow-room, space to move and work easily, space joyously to skip a bit when creation is achieved. Space to sit on the floor in a group and plan, dramatize or experiment.

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Space now and then to lie on one's tummy and read with heels kicking excitedly through climaxes of adventure. A little space here and there where one can slip away awhile to be with oneself, to work things out inside.

They need color—raw color, brash color, vibrant color to splash in, mix and fling against paper, clay, blackboard—while in the room, creating the atmosphere in which they breathe, they need subtle color, color harmony, color for the growing mood and tempo.

They need aliveness—their own, accepted and enjoyed—and other live things to watch, touch, caress and care for. It is poor space, indeed, which does not nurture liveness.

They need to feel identity—this is *my* schoolroom—*our* schoolroom—*teacher's* with us. And identity only comes for children, parents, teachers, community, as we do something about this place and share the doing.

Beauty and Harmony

This room? Obviously its worst points are lack of cleanliness, lack of space, lack of beauty and—can we say, “lack of things to do”? When so much needs to be done?

We will scrub and clean—all of us, children, parents, teacher, neighbors and friends. But first we will get down that fluttering, distracting, gibberish along the blackboard. No human being can concentrate effectively or maintain inner balance with forty-seven pieces of paper hanging over his head all day long, even if they were not fluttering.

There, that is better! The place looks bigger, smells fresher for its cleanliness—though that floor will take many scrubblings and a thorough sanding.

Now to bring in beauty, color harmony, an atmosphere of repose and balance.

But it is still so dark, so small! We will have to think carefully and sensitively of arrangement; consider all we use in relation to its value and to the whole room. Even then the room will still be small. This year we can't push the walls out farther apart (but there's a year coming when we will!) so we shall be clever, inventive, ingenious in creating illusions of space.

Dark colors soak up the light, making walls and objects seem small. Dark colors are the small end of the telescope making everything look small, narrowed. Light, neutral colors or quiet pastels are spacious background colors. We must consider the psychological effect of color and the room's exposure. Reds, warm colors related to red, stimulate and excite. They may be challenging used in small amounts or blended and grayed. In pastel they may be good in a cold room. Blue and those colors related to blue are cool, restful, though in certain shades they may become depressing. Nature uses greens, light (very light) tans, and the blue of the sky where she exposes us to large expanses of color.

Remembering these principles of color, we shall paint these walls so as to bring in more light, create a sense of more space, and cause a feeling of natural serenity, as well as make them clean. We will paint the woodwork with a flat, washable finish, also light and harmonious in color.

Who Will Paint?

Where do we get the paint and the labor? Parents and community members are hungry to share in their schools. Ways and means are easily solved when dozens of minds get sympathetically at work on a problem. We can get the paint. There will be many who will willingly wield a brush. Children, themselves, can paint some items such as easels, shelves and occasional tables. They will learn much in the process as to choices, calculations, techniques and group living.

The grouping of furniture into centers arranged for use, in terms of relative lighting needs and balanced in relation to the whole room, can create an illusion of space.

There can be rhythm in such arrangement and rhythmic repetition of bits of color in various places in the room to tie the whole into a unity.

Let's avoid placing all large, heavy things on one side of the room. We don't want to make the ship list! The same applies to blackboards. They dominate and over-weigh.

We will get rid of so many blackboards. They also unbalance living and learning. If they can't be removed, cover some with light, cream colored composition board or light cloth tightly stretched which may serve as bulletin board. Or cloth can be tacked on old-fashioned curtain rollers so it can be rolled up or let down and this space can serve several purposes: blackboard, bulletin board, decorative area, projection space, and others. Dedicate one large blackboard area to children's drawing. Get bright, inch-in-diameter colored chalk and encourage the chil-

dren to use it. That blackboard will come alive! Older girls and boys can also use thick tempera paint on this board.

Even bulletin board materials and decorative hangings may be so mounted and placed as to add harmony and spacious effect, make attention to important points easy, and create balanced stability. When all bulletin board materials are mounted on a uniform, neutral colored mount they may be used artistically in any combination without the total effect causing one's eyes to jump and shift from point to point in confusion. If we wish to bring out a certain color in a picture or emphasize a certain brightness, the picture can first be mounted against a narrow border of that color then placed upon the larger neutral mount. This helps draw the eye directly to that color spot in the picture—it should be to the important central idea of the whole picture. Whereas, if we mount every picture on a different color, with no neutral, background mount, then place several of them on the same bulletin board, each bright mount yells for attention, the pictures, themselves, are overlooked, our eyes rush aimlessly from color to color, we feel crowded and rushed, and in the end we perceive only a confused and jittery blur from which we protect ourselves by growing shells of inattention and unresponsiveness. When the child is too sensitive to be able to grow this shell he rushes frantically about trying to get away, flailing out at whatever gets in his way, changing from occupation to occupation rapidly, not knowing what is the matter or what to do.

This same artistic principle applies

to total room arrangement. Too much crowded haphazardly into a cluttered area and left that way for days on end, overstimulates, disperses attention, exhausts and finally dulls human sensitivity.

Putting Space to Use

We shall also use all our inventiveness to put every inch of space to many uses. With cleverness and unafraid exploring we can do this.

We can build shelves which can be used on two sides. Some can be built like magazine shelves used in libraries, to hold books with bright covers looking out into the room expectantly beckoning. Backs of these shelves may be the other type of shelf to hold more books or materials or may be walled to create nook, beauty spot and bulletin area.

We can further create retiring nooks, dress-up corners, back-stages for dramatizations, walls for playhouses, or "hide-outs for the club" with screens of our own make and decoration.

We can use halls to create bright, beauty areas, for experimenting groups, for museum shelves or cabinets, for lengthy spaces where two can practice reading loudly and clearly enough to satisfy the larger audience later.

Too often we forget to expand our schoolroom space into the out-of-doors. Too often it is hard to get outdoors, but we can, nevertheless, make many rich uses of surrounding yards for learning. Every schoolroom group should have its own little plot of garden space, even though it lessens the "impressive," unused front lawn and narrows the expanse of grass. In addition to garden activities children may

build, paint, sketch, experiment, care for animals, sculpture snow, study snow crystals, write stories, dramatize and model clay while outdoors with surprising, delightful, healthy results in emotional growth as well as in other learnings. We do not have to remain prisoners within four walls.

Inside, again, we can put extra drawers and shelves under all possible pieces of small furniture—occasional tables, clay and paint containers, etc.

We can make footstools, hassocks, window seats, step stools, which are storage containers as well. They may also lift the child for a wider view, up to a level where he can look out the window and cease to feel quite so caged or they may help him reach higher on that too-high blackboard. Upholstery and decorator shops will be glad to give parents, teacher, children scraps and old sample books for such purposes. Parents happily help plan and reconstruct.

We can make chests of varied sizes and capacities which may be placed at various points in the room or in the hall. We can contrive tables which can be nested when not in use.

We can put all possible pieces of furniture on casters. The adventurous leader is not afraid of movement and change. We can explore, experiment, discover new areas in this way, too. We

will try out varied arrangements to learn which ones function best to derive some freshening of interest when we need challenge, to help us all learn useful and artistic ways of arranging a living place.

Finally, we will ruthlessly, but with sensitivity to human values, eliminate unwise extras, avoid hoarding of ephemeral things and discard the old, dusty, dead hold-overs which every teacher is so prone lovingly to cling to year after year. They are no longer valuable when the living children connected with them have moved on. Discarding them leaves us space for new growth, room for new adventures and explorations with each year's new crop of pioneers.

Now take a glance at our schoolroom and eavesdrop on the two little boys who are happily, busily watering plants and dusting the cabinet by the door in the hall. "I think this is enough for out here," says Jonny. "Now let's go to work in the living room." And both boys move in with amused giggles at Jonny's slip of the tongue.

"Schoolrooms," says Marcelene Cox, "are like living rooms: you can tell the ones that are learned in."¹

¹ Marcelene Cox, "Ask Any Woman," *Ladies Home Journal*, February 1951. p. 94. Reprinted by special permission of the Curtis Publishing Company.

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