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# Cultivating Classroom Spaces as Homes for Learning

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# Cultivating Classroom Spaces as Homes for Learning

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## Abstract

Our action research ethnography explores sixth grade students' perceptions of their classroom space as conducive or distracting to their learning experiences. Issues of physical environment, students' self-governance, and disciplinary management are explored. We conclude by offering recommendations for other educators to consider.

## INTRODUCTION

In the spring of 2014, Sherri designed her home gardens after the aesthetics Pollan (1991) described as the "Genius of this place" (p. 234): a place to wander, a place to contemplate, a place to restore—yet, most importantly, a place to be. She thoughtfully stacked the meandering curved stonewalls, situated sitting areas for rest and nourishment, and arranged the plants for texture, shape, and color. Tantamount to a mindful gardener, Laura crafted her sixth-grade classroom space, with considerations of room design and routines, on the emotional and psychological wellbeing of her students. In essence, she created a classroom home as a place for learning, a space for belonging.

Our action research ethnography explores early adolescent students' views of the co-construction of classroom space, conceived through a partnership between the teacher (Laura, who served as a participant researcher) and her students. Our aims in this paper are three-fold: first, to explore students' insights regarding the co-construction of classroom space; second, to offer a model of teacher action research for educators to understand their work; third, to share implications for classroom implementation. In this report, we describe three themes derived from the data: students' perceptions of physical space, student choice, and classroom management.

### Framework

Carl Rogers' research began in the field of psychotherapy where he became the founder of the term "client-centered" (Rogers, 1980; Rogers, Lyon, & Tausch, 2014). Rogers soon made the connection that the theories applied in psychotherapy were also applicable to education; thus, he developed a framework that asserted that individuals would become increasingly trustworthy when they perceived their subjective experiences were respected and understood. According to Rogers, the personal relationship between the teacher and the learner proved essential for meaningful learning. The main goal of education should be the facilitation of learning and engagement of students in experiential learning (Rogers & Freiberg, 1994). Rogers recommended that educators become facilitators of learning by actively establishing a healthy classroom climate, serving as guides, and ultimately becoming participant learners throughout the process.

Rogers and Freiberg (1994) argued that learners could actively engage in learning if the content reflected their needs and desires. They argued that facilitators should help clarify and elicit individual purposes, as well as group goals, thereby transforming the group into a community of learners and creating the ideal environment. If given the proper environment, Rogers asserted, individuals have a great capacity for self-direction and self-initiation. Even when the stimulus is external, Rogers claimed that the sense of discovery came from within; thus, providing a safe and supportive environment allowed for every person to experience self-directed learning and self-discovery.

Applying Roger's ideas to current educative practices means teaching students, with the guidance of a wise teacher, to become self-directed learners. For instance, students develop a sense of responsibility when they are empowered to make choices directly associated with their learning. Students need to be shown the process of making learning choices and how to evaluate the positive and negative outcomes

of those choices (McCombs, 2016). Teaching students how to make decisions is a responsible privilege educators possess, because "as children learn to make decisions for themselves and to develop autonomy, they learn to behave morally and to take the needs of others into consideration when making choices" (Grossman, 2016, p. 2). As stated by Freiberg and Brophy (1999), "The teacher provided the structure, but students had freedom of choice within that structure" (p. 14).

A gradual release of responsibility teaches students to be in control of their own learning by prioritizing and task managing, a skill needed throughout life. Accordingly, Graves and Fitzgerald (2003) explained, "It is through this process of gradually assuming more and more responsibility for their learning that students become competent, independent learners" (p. 98). Notably, autonomous students can show an initiative for learning and a higher level of engagement as shared by Reeve (2006): "A teacher can present a highly structured learning environment in an autonomy-supportive way by providing students with clarity of what to do along with a freedom for choice, voice, and initiative" (p. 226). Students must be taught how to effectively use their time as "choice, managing one's time, setting goals and priorities, and a sense of order, are part of self-discipline" (Freiberg, 2007, p. 7). In this study, we apply Roger's ideas by emphasizing the students as co-constructors of classroom spaces.

## Methodology: Action Research Ethnography

Referring the metaphor of the classroom garden, teacher action research constitutes careful cultivation:

> This view of the teacher-researcher as a careful gardener is the image we hold in our minds of the ideal teacher-researcher–not a scientist in a lab coat, staring down a research subject (a kid!), but a human being in the midst of teaching, carefully weighing the value of different ways of teaching and learning. (Shagoury & Power, 2012, p. 5)

In caring for the garden, the thoughtful gardener observes the shifts in climate, tests for healthy soil composition, and seeks to understand the conditions needed for healthy plant growth. Likewise, the teacher researcher seeks to understand her students in order to foster healthy educative development.

Teacher research is filled with personal stories and is most often written in a first-person tone as revealed by Sagor (2001), "Action research is a disciplined process of inquiry conducted *by* and *for* those taking the action. The primary reason for engaging in action research is to assist the actor in improving and/or refining his or her actions" (p. 1). Teacher action research often focuses on issues or problems with the researchers' own students: "It's no wonder that teacher research has emerged not only as a significant new contributor to research on teaching but also as a source of systemic reform within individual schools and districts" (Shagoury & Power, 2012, p. 2). Although teacher researchers tend to focus on the close and immediate needs surrounding them, they can offer broader insights by sharing their research in a global manner (Shagoury & Power, 2012).

In addition to the many strengths and values of working with one's own students, there are also weaknesses with serving as a teacher researcher. The teacher researcher is fulfilling the role of being part of the action, but also being detached from the action in an effort to analyze and evaluate the data gathered. Within the paradigm of teacher action research, a teacher's subjectivity is acknowledged as a limitation. Efforts to counter this limitation include using member checking (outside reviewers) for data analysis, sustaining a period of prolonged engagement, acquiring an in-depth knowledge of the participants (Shagoury & Power, 2012)–all of which were employed in this study.

In ethnography, the researcher analyzes and describes the beliefs and behaviors of the group or culture (or a subset of the group) by focusing "on an entire culture-sharing group...and is a way of studying a culture-sharing group as well as the final, written product of that research" (Creswell, 2013, p. 90). The researcher immerses herself in the daily lives of the participants, becoming a part of the research environment as stated by Mills and Morton (2013), "We live in self-reflexive times. We can no longer pretend that our research personae are separate from the places and contexts we seek to understand" (p. 2). Combining action research with ethnography enables the researchers to explore cultural experiences as valuable to the work of thoughtful practitioners.

**Participants**

The setting for our inquiry occurs in a sixth-grade classroom, located in a North Texas suburban community. The students were at a Title 1 campus located in a suburb outside of a major metropolitan city. The school has approximately 925 students, with 100 of those students being sixth graders. The racial/ethnic makeup of the campus is: 17.8% African American, 62.2% Hispanic, 17 % White, and 3% other.

This study included a purposeful sample selection of students, chosen by their abilities to articulate their perceptions, and representative of a range of academic abilities and the cultural demographics of the school. The participants were limited to eight students in order to keep the interviews and data manageable. Participants ranged in age from 11 to 13; the ethnic composition of the participants consisted of four white, two Hispanic, and two African American students. The students' willingness to participate in the interviews led to alterations in the selection.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

This study aimed to answer the following question:  What are sixth-grade students' perceptions of co-constructing a classroom space? To answer this question, during the first week of school, students responded to journal prompts about their perceptions of classroom space. The journals remained with the students to use throughout the year. Students were instructed to use the journals to note any suggested changes they think should be made in the classroom. Students were also asked to use these journals to reflect upon their own growth with managing work and becoming more self-disciplined. The same journal prompts were administered again during the last six weeks of the 2015-2016 school year.

The students were placed in the focus groups randomly and the groups were different during each of the six sessions. Each group of students participated in six interview sessions, each lasting approximately 30 minutes. Two sessions were devoted to classroom environment, two sessions focused on student choice, and the final two sessions focused on classroom management. Each focus group was comprised of four students in order to allow enough time for each student to fully participate. The interviews were conducted before school, during lunchtime, and after school in the counselor's office. The interviews were recorded using an audio recorder and were then transcribed by the counselor and the transcriptions were then given to the teacher researcher (Laura) for analysis.

Table 1

*Participant Demographics*

| Student Pseudo-nym | Ethnicity | Special Programs | Additional Information |
|---|---|---|---|
| Patty | Hispanic | ESL | Moved to school mid school year; exited bilingual |
| Mary | African American | Gifted & Talented | |
| Chase | White | ADHD | |
| Shea | White | ADHD | Repeating 6th grade |
| Addy | African American | | Moved to school mid school year |
| Daisy | White | Gifted & Talented | |
| Jessica | Hispanic | Gifted & Talented | First year exited from bilingual |
| Jason | White | ADHD | |

To attend to trustworthiness, Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommend the techniques of prolonged engagement in the field, triangulation of data, thick description, and member checkers to establish credibility–techniques used throughout this study. As outlined by Creswell (2013), two member checkers were solicited for this research study in order to assure credibility of the researchers' interpretations and findings. In this process, one of the member checkers shared with the participants the data, analyses, interpretations, and conclusions.

A triangulation of the data was used to comprise themes and patterned regularities relating to student perceptions, "Unquestionably the backbone of qualitative research is extensive collection of data, typically from multiple

sources of information" (Creswell, 2013, p. 52). Triangulation is used to evaluate multiple and varying sources and theories to provide corroborating evidence for the study, "When qualitative researchers locate evidence to a document a code or theme in different sources of data, they are triangulating information and providing validity to their findings" (Creswell, 2013, p. 251).

According to Creswell (2013), creating categories and codes are the core of qualitative data analysis; thus, a researcher should "build detailed descriptions, develop themes or dimensions, and provide an interpretation in light of their own views or perspectives" (Creswell, 2013, p. 184). During the first level of coding, we looked for commonalities within the students' journals and interviews, while at the same time being open to what the data revealed overall. In the second round of coding, the data was categorized into a table listing terms and phrases used by students and then looked for commonalities throughout the teacher researcher's archived journals and field notes. The process of determining the themes moved from broad labels to well-defined themes as outlined by Creswell (2013), "Qualitative researchers build their patterns, categories, and themes from the bottom up, by organizing the data inductively into increasingly abstract units of information" (p. 45). During the third round of coding, irrelevant data was sifted and not used in the final analysis. Creswell (2013) describes this sifting of data as "winnowing...when not all information is used in a qualitative study, and some may be discarded" (p. 184). After winnowing data, the themes and categories that remained were used to write the final narrative (Creswell, 2013).

**Description of Setting**

**Renovating the classroom space.** Before beginning the school year, Laura, recognizing the negative stereotypes associated with portables in disadvantaged communities, sought to improve the portable's functionality and aesthetics. After inspecting the portable, she turned in work orders for missing roof shingles, loose ramp boards, broken floor tiles, missing ceiling tiles, broken drawers, dysfunctional wall maps, and most importantly an air conditioner that ran constantly to a temperature of 60 degrees. After completing the exterior and interior renovations, Laura wrote:

I love the room I have setup this year. It feels cozy and very *home like*. I hope that my students will feel the same as they walk through the door for the first time tomorrow. I will try to do even better this year to keep students needs at the forefront of all that I do and not let testing standards overwhelm me. Remember that I want these kids to leave my room in June knowing how to make their own decisions and take charge of their academic success. I want to help them get out of poverty and get out of this neighborhood. I want them to be successful contributing members of society.

**A tour of Classroom 54.** The tour of classroom 54 describes the intentionally created classroom space, like a camera panning through the eyes of the teacher, on the first class day. As students enter the horseshoe shaped room (*Figure 1*), they see a variety of seating options, including chairs, yoga balls, beanbags, and stools, which they may select and change at any time. This may seem somewhat intimidating for teachers who like to have a quiet and still classroom; however, with all the procedures and routines that are put in place at the beginning of the year, students are able to handle and to manage this type of freedom. According to Clayton and Forton (2001), students are capable of being involved in the problem-solving portion of room arrangement; allowing students to provide requests and suggestions gives them a sense of ownership and belonging.

*Figure 2* shows a possible shift in the room the arrangement, as chosen by a group of sixth grade students. Several students chose yoga balls; other students orchestrate their seating around the outer edge of the room; some sit on beanbags and using clipboards as their desk. As Clayton and Forton (2001) explain, classroom arrangements impact students' behavior:

> In a classroom filled with eleven-year-olds who crave autonomy from teachers and interaction with peers, it might mean that desks have been arranged in clusters with children choosing where they will sit based on the kind of work they're doing. (p. 11)

Hence, students are allowed and encouraged to choose their seats based on the type of lighting level, peers they wish to sit by, speakers

overhead, comfort of the space, or any other needs they may have.



*Figure 1.* View from Teacher's Desk. This photo provides a view of the classroom arrangement.



*Figure 2.* Flexible Seating. This photo shows the different seating options students chose throughout the day.

Traffic patterns also play a role in considering what type of room arrangement works best. Traffic patterns, structured for easy flow and movement, allow for better communication and therefore less disruptive behaviors. Unclear traffic patterns can lead to students literally running into classmates, resulting in non-academic, off-task communication (Loughlin & Suina, 1982; Proshansky & Wolfe, 1975).

Students often use the reading corner (*Figure* 3) as a place to sit on the floor and work with other students, away from other distractions. Designed for students' comfort, the reading corner provides natural lighting, a restful beanbag, and a bookshelf with reading material. The walls will eventually be filled with anchor charts and learning projects created by students. When students see that their work is valued, they often see themselves as contributors within the learning community. Accordingly, classrooms that display the products of students' intellectual work often promote a higher level of participation and involvement (Ulrich, 2004).



*Figure 3.* Reading Center. This photo shows a view of the reading corner, the lighting within the room and some of the seating available within the classroom.

Notably, adding live, healthy plants to the environment can convey a sense of comfort for some students. Also, adding other homelike items, such as area rugs, floor pillows, and curtains can also add a cozy feeling to the typical sterile classroom environment (Doll, Zucker, & Brehm (2004). Most classrooms can be fairly small in regards to actual size; making sure that windows are clean and that the blinds are open creates an expansiveness within the room. Keeping the room organized and free of clutter helps create an aesthetically pleasing room, teaching students, by example, organization and responsibility.

Table 2

*Students' Perceptions of the Physical Classroom Environment*

| Teacher Researcher's Objectives For Physical Environment | Words Students Used to Describe Classroom Environment | Analysis/Summary |
|---|---|---|
| Clean, safe aesthetically pleasing, overall soothing environment | Classic, clean, nice Peaceful, welcoming, everything is positive, no negative energy The room makes me feel like I'm at home Cute and cozy Colorful, The room is so Cool; Comfortable Love the cozy smell Fun, energetic, enthusiastic Nice atmosphere Smells heavenly Play music when we're working; Music is too loud I get fresh air in this room Matching colors throughout the room More of our stuff needs to be hanging up | Students perceptions are that the room is a pleasant environment.  However, students would like to have more of their work displayed. |
| Lighting promotes comfortable atmosphere | Leave the lights off Regular lights give me headaches, these are great Talk to subs about using lamps I like all the lamps | Students perceive the lighting as soothing. |
| Variety of seating available | Yoga balls are awesome More areas to stand and work Arrange desks in groups instead of rows | Students appreciate multiple seating options, but want the room arranged in groups instead of a horseshoe shape. |

**Findings**

**Theme:  Students' perceptions of physical classroom environment.** Table 2 describes the students' perceptions of the physical classroom environment as representative of the students' comments during the interviews and writings from their journals.

The interviewer asked the students, "Tell me what you like most about the classroom environment in Mrs. Flynn's class."

- "The lighting," offers Jessica.
- "Yes, but the lights could be a little bit darker," says Mary.
- Shea states, "I know I don't like when I walk in other classrooms and all the lights are on and if I stay in there very long, I get a headache."

As shared by the students, the overall ambiance and colors within a room has an impact on their comfort and well-being. Regrettably, the lighting

provided in most schools is fluorescent overhead lights. By using only half of the overheads, combined with lamps strategically placed around the room, and combined with any natural light available, the look and feel of a room can be transformed instantly (Taylor & Gouise, 1988). Notably, Wurtman (1975) suggests that daylight has positive biological effects on the body, such as increased attentiveness and alertness. Warm colors can increase blood pressure and movement; whereas cool colors foster the opposite effect. Colors found in nature, such as greens and browns can create a calm and relaxed environment (Taylor & Gouise, 1988).

Teachers may arrange the room lighting as follows: the open work areas are infused with natural light from the windows; the walls of the room are illuminated with floor lamps; the rest area is darkened for students' occasionally needed breaks. The exterior door can be left open whenever appropriate to let in fresh air and sunlight throughout the day. It is critical that educators understand, "The enhancement of human performance requires the optimum environment. Educators must recognize the fact that surroundings are never neutral" (Grangaard, 1995, p. 6).

When asked about his impressions on the first day of school, Chase responded, "I thought it was pretty cool because it was calm and everything. When I walk in other classrooms, there are always kids screaming and being really loud. This year was much different." Another student, Mary, stated, "It's not blank in there. In the other classes, there's not much stuff on the walls."

The students also offered comparisons between Ms. Flynn's class and other classroom experiences. For instance, Shea shared, "Ms. Smith doesn't have anything on the walls, it's so boring and depressing"; Jason, who consistently struggled to focus, added, "Ms. class is always jumping around and yelling, and she's yelling at them, but they don't listen. It makes me stressed to be in there." Accordingly, Daisy, who thrives on order and structure commented, "In Ms. Akin's class the desks in there are really unorganized. It's like they're just all over the place. And there's trash, and it's messy."

Students were most vocal about the things they disliked when it came to answering the questions about the classroom environment.

"Some of that music has got to go," offered Jason. "Sometimes the music is really loud in certain parts of the room if you sit under the speaker. But then in other parts of the room, you can barely hear it," exclaimed Patty. As evidenced, the acoustics within the classroom environment may affect students' daily routine, "Comfortable and clear auditory perception, along with freedom from background noise not only improves communication, but also promotes working and learning efficiency" (Barrett et al., 2015, p. 24). Providing students with small, quiet, and secluded areas within the room can allow students to have some quiet time when needed. A listening station could be provided for students to use a study area, a reading area, or even a time-out relaxation area.

**Theme: Students' perceptions of choice.**
Table 3 provides some of the words and phrases used by students to describe their views of the choices within the classroom.

Jessica's favorite thing about the class was:

> When we can sit anywhere and work with anyone and umm work on any assignment. I also like that she asks us when we want the due date I really like doing that, because I don't really like to read with the whole class, and like math you have to just sit and wait until everyone finishes because some people take longer.

This sitting and waiting time afforded Jessica the opportunity to engage in self-selected reading; however, she indicated that she often got tired from sitting and reading with no interaction among peers.

Mary, Daisy, and Jessica often finished their work before everyone else; they were given the opportunity to explore additional projects of personal interest to them. Accordingly, when a teacher serves in the role of facilitator within the classroom, then the focus is no longer on presenting the curriculum, but rather the focus is on designing better learning opportunities for students (Tomlinson, 2001).

Table 3

*Students' Perceptions of Student Choice*

| Teacher Researcher's Objectives for Student Choice | Words Students Used to Describe Student Choice | Analysis/Summary |
|---|---|---|
| Students have the opportunity to move around the room as needed | Sit where we want at lunch<br>Sit where we want all day<br>Sitting under the window on a beanbag while I work<br>Free-range teacher | Students perceptions are that the class is offered many options and opportunities to make choices. |
| Students manage and prioritize their own work | Work on assignments in any order<br>We all work on different stuff at the same time<br>Can't keep up with all the work<br>Give more time when we have multiple projects<br>Give us plenty of time to do our work<br>We have our own paced work<br>Too much work | Some students are overwhelmed by multiple assignments at one time. |
| Students are self-sufficient learners in charge of there own success | Freedoms that other classes don't have<br>more freedom to prepare us for the real world<br>Independent<br>Choose my own topics<br>I don't like figuring out what to do, just tell me<br>Research what I want | Some students would rather be told exactly what assignment to do, where as other students value making their own choices. |

Choices about technology, whether it was iPods, Chromebooks, or desktop computers, facilitated perceptions of freedom and trust as indicated by Patty:

> In the beginning of the year when we customized our iPads, and Mrs. Flynn lets us change it about every nine weeks, the other classes don't get to do that. They have to just put their picture on there and leave it all year. Also, they don't get their iPads every day like we do. Sometimes they don't use them all week. I don't really understand how they do the same work we do without their iPads.

Patty's comment above refers to the fact that students in Mrs. Flynn's class used their iPads as frequently and as easily as they used their textbooks. Students often were given assignments, then a choice of how they would like to complete the assignment, using paper, iPads, laptops, or desktop computers. The students were allowed to choose the media used to complete an assignment and to select the final product as well.

Other students experienced discomfort with too much choice. In his journal, Jason wrote, "My least favorite thing about sixth grade is having a lot of work at the same time, like it all comes so fast!" Laura spent time with him every couple of days physically organizing papers, writing due dates at the top, and writing down the assignments in an assignment journal. At first, Jason felt like this was extra work and he was not very attentive; however, after just three weeks he began to initiate the organization meetings. In a very rewarding conversation, Laura reflected, "Today Jason told me he

thought he was ready for middle school and felt certain he could keep up with his work. I am so stinkin' excited! Guess he was actually listening to me the whole time" (Flynn, reflective journal, 2016).

Jason was not the only student who struggled with too much student choice. During the interviews, Shea offered the same sentiment by stating:

> Sometimes it's a little overwhelming because you have a lot of work and you're just trying to get through it all by the due dates. It is nice that she keeps the assignment list up everyday, because sometimes I forget what assignments are due when and it's helping me learn how to do it myself.

On a daily basis, Laura would sit with Shea and work on prioritizing her schoolwork and the chores and tasks that she was required to complete at home. Shea was given a student planner, and Laura modeled the use of the planner in decision making.

Notably, multiple studies have shown that giving students too many choices can be overwhelming and discouraging to students; limiting choices to just three to five is ideal (Patall, Cooper, & Robinson, 2008). Educators have the ability to encourage students to make choices and be confident in the choices they make. In turn, students can learn to take control of their own learning.

Accordingly, Rogers (1980) asserts that students are often afraid to take responsibility and control of their own learning, "Nothing in their background has prepared them to make choices...to try to select directions in which they wish to move" (p. 305).

If given the proper environment, Rogers and Freiberg (1994) claim that individuals had a great capacity for self–direction and self-initiation even when given external stimuli. Hence, providing a safe and supportive environment enables students to experience self-directed learning and self-discovery.

**Theme: Students' perceptions of classroom management.** Table 4 provides synthesizes the words and phrases used by the students to describe their views of classroom management.

The interviewer asked the students, "In general what is your favorite thing about your classroom?" Mary and Jason responded:

> Mary: I like how Mrs. Flynn lets us do our work while she walks around and helps people. She doesn't make us sit and wait for everyone to finish. We can work on whatever we want as long as we turn stuff in by the due date. Our teacher from last year just sat all day and told us stories all day about her life and her family, and we never got to learn anything. She just kept talking about her son and how he was so great.
> Jason: Yes and it was so boring!

Creating a relationship with students by building rapport through story telling indeed has a place in contributing to a positive classroom environment (Freiberg & Brophy, 1999). However, when students become bored, disinterested, or feel the sharing of story telling is only allowed on the side of the teacher, then the intent behind sharing is not in the best interest of the students. As Clayton and Forton (2001) suggest, a morning meeting place is the optimal situation for both teacher and student to share equally each day.

When asked about the policies and procedures that were set forth at the beginning of the year, Mary commented:

> I liked how [Mrs. Flynn] told us we would have the freedom to sit anywhere as long as we could handle it. I also liked how she said we were in control of the classroom and that it was ours and not just hers.

Conversations with Mary throughout the school year revealed that Mary was often bored in school and that her gifted needs were not being met. If a procedure or process was not working well, then Mary would take it upon herself to create a plan to change whatever it was. Similarly, Rogers and colleagues reveal, "The structure that occurs in a person-centered classroom is an organic structure that grows out of the situation, not an imposed structure by someone who simply knows the subject matter" (Rogers et al., 2014, p. 61).

Table 4

*Students' Perceptions of Classroom Management*

| Teacher Researcher's Objectives For Classroom Management | Words Students Used to Describe Classroom Management | Analysis/Summary |
|---|---|---|
| Students contribute to decisions about rules and procedures | We make the rules<br>Like knowing all the procedures<br>Very good rules<br>Not near enough recess<br>Stop missing recess, we're not that busy | Students value the opportunity to contribute to procedures. Students desire more recess time. |
| Students communicate and function as adults within the environment | We can talk in class<br>Talk while working<br>Don't raise our hands, just have conversations | Students enjoy the freedom to have conversations and participate without raising their hands. |
| The environment is engaging and inviting to all students | Freedom<br>I'm now very excited to come to school<br>Mrs. Flynn is fun and energetic I love the talks we have during class | Students perceive the environment as fun and engaging. |

Teaching students to participate and engage in adult type conversations is a skill that is needed through life. Many students are never taught the socially acceptable way of participating in a group conversation without interrupting and taking into consideration what others are saying. Regarding classroom discussion, Jason added, "Yeah, and what about not having to raise our hands to talk. That was hard to do at first, but sometimes we get in trouble in other classes because now we forget to raise our hands." Laura later recorded in her journal:

> In this classroom, students are taught to participate in academic conversation and not the process of raising their hands every time they wish to speak. I'm so excited that one of my novel ideas has finally paid off! Jason's mom told me tonight that she's watched him interact with his friends and siblings and noticed how he no longer interrupts conversations and seems to be able to better control his impulses and she thinks it's because of what he's learned in my class...very cool. (Flynn, reflection journal, 2015)

If students know there is a chance to participate in a conversation, without providing a necessarily right or wrong answer, then they are more likely to remain engaged in the discussion and therefore learn more from the conversation than they would from just straight right or wrong answers (Tomlinson, 2001).

"What are some of the other things you like about how Mrs. Flynn runs the classroom?" asked the interviewer.

> Mary: I like that we're able to come in and talk in the mornings, it's the real world. The other sixth grade classes have to come in without talking and start on their morning work.
> Chase: Yah, and I know that Ms. Tye's class all sits and reads from the literature book together. They all look so bored that no one is even paying attention. I noticed that one day when we split and I had to go in there, they were all falling asleep.

Reflecting on classroom management, Laura wrote, "It is so important for students to be prepared to make the difficult transition to middle school. This is such a tough age in life

and preparing students for middle school transition is at the forefront of all of my classroom management decisions" (Flynn, reflective journal, 2010).

## Discussion

This study privileges teacher action research as valuable endeavor in sharpening teachers' understandings of their students. To answer the research question about students' perceptions of co-constructing classroom space, an overarching discussion of each theme (physical classroom environment, student choice, and classroom management) shall ensue.

**Physical classroom environment.** Overall, students perceived the environment as cozy and calming, with some students attributed the cozy and calming feeling to the smell a candle warmer, which permeated an essence throughout the room. According to multiple research studies, the olfactory part of the brain has endorphin receptors, which in turn improve the sense of well-being (Eversten & Faulk, 2011); thus, the candle warmer most likely improved the students' sense of comfort.

Accordingly, the lighting in a classroom can be one of the most important components for setting the tone and mood, as well as providing a healthy environment. In this study, students voiced their perception of the lighting in the room as creating a more home-like feeling; others indicated that the lighting reduced or eliminated the headaches they would often experience in other classrooms. According to a study conducted by Jensen (2003), classrooms with bright natural light had less absenteeism than classrooms with low light or overhead fluorescent light.

In this report, the most recurring positive feedback in this study came when students voiced their appreciation of the flexible seating. Not only were students allowed to choose their own seats, but also they were allowed to sit in a variety of seating options. The opportunity to sit on a yoga ball, beanbag, stool, or stand at a counter was something students truly valued and appreciated. Similarly, room arrangement and seating options are best optimized when there are multiple spaces available including workspace for individuals, partners, and both large and small groups (Evertsen & Faulk, 2014).

Regarding the displeasures of the classroom environment, students voiced their dislike of the teacher keeping their work posted for long periods of time, without rotating the displays. The greatest area of displeasure came with regards to the music playing in the background. Some students stated that at times the music was too loud, whereas other times the music could barely be heard. Students did not agree on their preferred genres of music; obviously, students' personal preferences influenced their satisfaction with the music selections.

**Student choice.** All of the students in this study valued the variety of choices provided. The students in the class enjoyed the freedom to discover their own learning preferences. Notably, student choice requires leadership, facilitating learning purposefully, and differentiation on the teacher's part, "teachers who differentiate instruction have to manage and monitor many activities simultaneously" (Tomlinson, 2001, p. 2). Accordingly, Rogers (1969) defined significant learning as "self-initiated...with a sense of discovery; and pervasive...making a difference in attitudes and personality of the learner" (p. 5). In a student choice driven classroom, students complete assignments at different rates, especially since they are often working on different assignments at the same time. In order to ensure a productive, timely work environment, teachers must teach students how to work independently and move from one activity to the next (Tomlinson, 2001). The students in this study were easily able to move from one assignment to the next at their own pace because the teacher set procedures and modeled behaviors multiple times at the beginning of the school year.

Teachers who offer student choices understand that the role of the teacher is to encourage students to become responsible for their own growth (Tomlinson, 2001); however, early adolescents often benefit from focused selection of choices, instead of a wide array of opportunities. For instance, these students unanimously agreed that they would rather be given a range of three to five choices, instead of unlimited options. This assertion correlates with other studies demonstrating that excessive choices tend to lower the quality of students' motivation (Lynegar & Lepper, 2000; Patall et al., 2008). In a student choice driven classroom, "It's necessary for learners to be active in making

decisions. It also prepares students far better for life" (Tomlinson, 2001, p. 5).

**Classroom management.** Within the class in this study, students indicated that they found it easier to stay on task and to participate because they knew the structure and expectations. According to Wong and Wong (2014), the difference between effective or ineffective classroom managers depended on established procedures. Students also appreciated contributing to the decision-making processes with regard to classroom policies and procedures. Accordingly, Brophy and Evertson (1976) explored the practices of 30 second and third grade teachers who had a history of having students who made academic gains greater than expected. The observations of these teachers found that they often "solicited or accepted suggestions from the children," (Brophy & Evertson, 1976, p. 42). Although these teachers maintained the overall control of the classroom, they allowed students to have a voice in how the classroom functioned. In return, students become very accepting and compliant. Hence, promoting student responsibility and self-discipline enables students to become independent learners (Tomlinson, 2001). In a self-disciplined classroom, students possess the ability to document their own progress as well as create their own tasks and goals as explained by Tomlinson (2001), "We often underestimate the capacity of students to be self-sufficient" (p. 38).

**Implications for Practice**

We offer the following suggestions for cultivating classroom homes, as adapted and relevant to individual needs and circumstances.

1. Remove any irrelevant posters from the walls and replace with student work and anchor charts made with or by students. Allow students to display whatever they choose to share (Ulrich, 2004). The displaying of student work should be frequently rotated. This is a classroom that the teacher shares with students; therefore, try to consider the preferences and current themes students might enjoy in their daily environment.

2. Allow students age appropriate choices, such as seating and the opportunity to change seating placement throughout the day. An area of the room that may be inviting in the morning may not be so in the afternoon. Students' needs and moods change throughout the day. Show students respect and trust by allowing them the freedom to move about the room as those needs change. Educators who afford all students the opportunity to make choices throughout the school day are teaching students to become self-sufficient students (Grossman, 2016). There is such a thing as too much choice, so limit the options to prevent overwhelming the student (Reeve, 2006). Students should be given the option to choose from three to five choices.

3. Give students ownership in their classroom by allowing students be a part of creating procedures and policies within the classroom. Have procedures for the things that are important and let go of the things that do not matter. Rules that are posted should not be posted prior to the first day of school do not take into consideration the specific needs of the incoming class. Every group of students is different, and although the foundation of what rules should exist generally stays the same, each group of students may desire to realize them in a different way. Listen to suggestions students may have. Just as classroom teachers wish to have input with administrators about how procedures within the school should be handled, students feel the same way about their classroom. Adjust procedures and policies throughout the year as needed. What was set in place at the beginning of the school year may not necessarily be the best way to do things at the end of the year (McCombs, 2016).

4. Consider the environment in which students spend most of their day. Make the environment open, welcoming and comfortable. Include various forms of seating, lighting and workspaces (Wurtman, 1975). Seating should be comfortable and varied. Students sitting at a desk working by themselves does not allow students to reach their highest level of development (Vygotsky, 1978). Providing beanbags, yoga balls, stools, traditional chairs, and standing room allows for students to choose the seating that is optimal for the current task (Evertson & Neal, 2006).

5. Natural lighting is the optimal choice and can be supplemented with lamps throughout the room. Whenever possible avoid harsh overhead lighting, which facilitates an uninviting atmosphere. Workspace around the room should accommodate individuals, partners, and both small and larger groups. Make the classroom a safe place both physically and emotionally. Play a variety of music during transitions and instrumental music while

students are actively working. Create an environment that appeals to all of their sense. Create a pleasant smell in the classroom so that as students enter each time, there is a smell sensation and smell memory associated with an engaging environment.

6. Get rid of clutter within the classroom. Refrain from taking up student space to store teacher materials. Everything should have a place and all teacher belongings and equipment should be stored out of the way of students (Clayton, 2001). This is another opportunity to show students how to organize and maintain an inviting environment. Make the classroom a place where both teacher and student want to be.

7. Teach students to be responsible for their own learning. Teach them how to prioritize, organize, and multi-task (Graves & Fitzgerald, 2003). These are not skills that come naturally to everyone, and one of the best things that teachers can do is to help students learn these important skills at an early age. This release of responsibility is best learned when it is done gradually (Graves & Fitzgerald, 2003). As the child's ability to understand what is required in order to take ownership of her own learning, then the teacher gradually steps back, enabling the student to take over (Evertson & Neal, 2006).

**Conclusion**

Classroom cultivation, tantamount to gardening, involves the thoughtful design of space, routines, and rituals. Valuing students' contributions as co-gardeners of their own development offers promise for improving their educative experiences. Of caring for the life of the learner, Rogers and colleagues share:

> The heart of the person-centered approach to teaching and learning is that the content be learned out of interaction… It has a quality of personal involvement with the whole person in both his feeling and cognitive aspects. It is self-initiated. It makes a difference in the behavior, the attitudes, even the personality of the learner. (Rogers et al., 2014, p. 61)

Ultimately, the classroom home is a temporary destination in a season of a child's life, potentially bearing fruit for seasons to come.

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