

Creating Equity in Learning Environments

DISCOVER PRACTICAL SOLUTIONS FOR
CREATING INCLUSIVE SPACES

By Demco



In today's educational landscape, fostering equity in learning environments is a crucial goal for every school and library. Equity means more than just accessibility; it means ensuring that all kids, regardless of their background or abilities, have the same opportunities for success. Achieving this success requires a multifaceted approach that addresses various aspects of the learning

environment — from physical spaces to teaching methodologies.

In this article, we explore how prioritizing classroom acoustics, adding active seating, providing sensory and calming areas, and implementing ADA-compliant solutions can help create learning environments that empower everyone.



ACOUSTIC SOLUTIONS: CREATING A SOUNDSCAPE FOR LEARNING

Often overlooked, poor classroom acoustics impede learning, making it difficult for kids to concentrate and understand others — especially those with learning disabilities like ADHD, auditory processing disorders, and kids who are learning English as a second language. In addition, background noise like loud HVAC systems, lawnmowers outside, and passing traffic can add to the distractions.

These challenges in learning are further explored in a study done by Speech-Language & Auditory Canada in 2019. It states that “noise and poor reverberation adversely affect typical young children more than typical adults. These factors, in addition to the inherent high demands on listening and auditory processing in classrooms and the immature listening skill of children due to neuromaturation, create barriers to learning that place all children at educational risk.” Implementing acoustic solutions can help with these challenges and enhance the learning experience for everyone. This can include installing sound-absorbing decor such as acoustic panels or ceiling tiles to reduce noise levels or changing a classroom’s layout to better control sound. For example, arranging desks in clusters rather than rows can help minimize noise propagation. Another study done by Pam Millett at York University discussed the benefits of these types of changes by going on to say that “the minute or two saved in getting students’ attention, or providing an instruction only once instead of multiple times may seem inconsequential as an individual event, but over the course of a day, these minutes add up to significant time devoted to instruction rather than classroom management.”

In addition, technology can be leveraged to improve acoustics. Hearing assistance systems, such as FM

systems or loop systems, can amplify sound for kids who are hard of hearing, ensuring they can fully participate in classroom or library discussions and activities with their peers. A York University article highlights the importance of this technology by quoting a teacher who said, “There’s a big difference between ‘side’ versus ‘size’ in geometry, but I have to use both word all the time and without [acoustic solutions] sometimes students had misunderstandings about things like that.”



ACTIVE SEATING: ENGAGING BODIES AND MINDS

Traditional classroom seating often fails to accommodate the diverse needs of kids. Sitting still for extended periods is challenging, and can lead to restlessness and decreased focus among kids. Active seating solutions, such as wobble stools, balance balls, or standing desks, provide kids with alternative options that promote movement and engagement.

By incorporating movement into a learning environment, educators create a more inclusive space. These diverse seating options allow kids to expend excess energy while remaining focused on learning. Additionally, active seating promotes better posture and core strength, benefiting kids’ physical health. An article from Learning Environments Research supports this ideology by describing how “students who experience flexible furniture reported greater satisfaction with the learning environment than did peers with traditional furniture.”

It’s always essential to offer a variety of seating options to cater to different preferences and comfort levels for optimal learning. Some kids may prefer standing desks for certain tasks, while others may find balance balls more conducive to concentration. Flexibility in seating arrangements empowers kids to choose the option that works best for them, promoting autonomy and self-regulation.



SENSORY/CALMING AREAS: PROVIDING REST AND SUPPORT

For kids with sensory sensitivities or neurodiverse conditions such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD), traditional learning environments can be overwhelming. Bright lights, loud noises, and crowded spaces can trigger sensory overload, leading to anxiety and distress.

Creating sensory or calming areas within the school or library allows kids to take breaks and regulate their sensory experiences. These spaces provide a soothing environment with dim lighting, comfortable seating, and sensory tools like fidget toys or weighted blankets.

Sensory areas serve as retreats where kids can decompress and recharge before returning to the classroom. They provide essential support for kids who may need extra assistance in managing their sensory needs. Additionally, these spaces promote self-awareness and emotional regulation skills, empowering kids to advocate for their well-being.

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CREATING THE RIGHT SPACE FOR YOUR KIDS' NEEDS: ENSURING ACCESS FOR ALL

ADA-compliant solutions include modifications and accommodations to remove barriers to access. While all schools must meet minimum requirements (such as installing ramps and elevators for wheelchair accessibility, providing tactile signage for kids with visual impairments, and incorporating assistive listening devices for kids with hearing impairments), creating more equitable learning environments is an ongoing process. A thoughtful, holistic approach can help address the diverse needs of kids. And by implementing acoustic treatments, active seating, sensory areas, and a wider-range of ADA-compliant modifications, educators can cultivate inclusive spaces where all kids feel valued and supported in their learning journey. 🌞

