

Strategic Use of Classroom Seating

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Statement of the Problem

It is now common practice in almost all primary and some high schools to seat students in table groups. The aim is to encourage discussion and collaboration when students are engaged in group work. Such seating may be counterproductive, however, when individual work is required since it facilitates unwanted student interaction. It may also cause problems when students are required to attend to the teacher since many will have their backs to the teacher.

Proposed Solution/ Intervention

Classroom seating should be deployed strategically to facilitate the required behaviour from students. Table groups are appropriate for group work but counterproductive for individual work or when attention to the teacher is required. In these circumstances, alternative seating arrangements may be preferable.

The theoretical rationale – how does it work?

Behavioural theory states that behaviour is influenced not only by its consequences (such as praise or reprimand) but also by what precedes the behaviour ie the antecedents. It can sometimes be just as, or even more, effective to change the antecedent conditions that precipitate a certain classroom behaviour than it is to change the consequences, and may take less effort. It may be more effective to inhibit the behaviour from occurring in the first place. Classroom seating arrangements are a good example of such functional antecedents.

What does the research say? What is the evidence for its efficacy?

There is not a great deal of reported research on classroom seating arrangements and most of it has been concerned with comparing student behaviour when seated in table groups with behaviour when students are seated in rows. While table group seating may be more conducive to group work where discussion and collaboration are required, the research evidence demonstrates clearly that when individual work is required, without distraction by others, then seating in rows is associated with higher levels of appropriate student behaviour (usually measured as time spent on-task). Moreover this effect is particularly pronounced for less able and more behaviourally troublesome students. Research has also shown that much of the classroom talk of students seated in table groups is not work related. Seating male and female primary students together is also associated with higher levels of appropriate behaviour.

Conclusions

While it would be difficult to conduct group work other than in table groups, more time is spent appropriately engaged in individual work when students are seated in rows facing the teacher. Teachers should arrange the classroom seating strategically and be prepared to change the seating arrangements according to the task in hand.

The MUSEC verdict

Recommended

Key references may be found at:
http://www.musec.mq.edu.au/co_brief.aspx

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