

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL SCIENCE ASSOCIATION  
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# newsletter

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## A Classroom To Grow On In The Middle School

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## A Classroom To Grow On In The Middle School

Gregory Grambo

When we stroll by a kindergarten classroom we see vivid colors, vibrant images and creative learning going on. As we move passed our middle school classrooms towards our eighth grade classrooms, however, we see that the color of the walls has been muted, exciting bulletin boards are almost non-existent thus the students become bored and so do their teachers. Children do not achieve success in an environment where boredom is nurtured by a lack of stimuli. Something has happened there; we seem to have made such an effort to treat our youngsters as adults, that we took away an energetic atmosphere for learning, and replaced it with one that is drab and numbing. We have, in a sense, created and institutionalized this boring non-learning environment. When we force our youngsters to grow up too fast, we take away the children's desire to explore, touch and learn by over-structuring and compartmentalizing their learning environment. Children in the higher middle grades still love to get their hands dirty with clay, glue or any other tactile messy substance. I've witnessed this sense of abandon when I have older students working along side younger students. The older middle school children do, however, want to protect their "cool image". They keep peering about to see if anyone is observing their actions. If seen, they tone down the involvement. If, on the other hand, everyone were getting just as involved so that no one had clean hands, and no one was standing aside in a judgmental way then all could have a grand time without the worry of the "uncool image."

I have found that middle school youngsters do not learn well if information is just pressed into their heads. You can only teach a child by awakening an interest in that child, thereby creating in that child the urge to learn. Hence, when children need to investigate something for their own needs, they will learn through self motivation. At that moment that topic interests them personally and the urge is there to seek additional information. Surrounding children with resources and equipment that allow them to play will also bring about the urge to learn.

If children have fun with a material you have introduced, they may want to learn more about the subject being investigated. These engaging materials are the seeds from which will sprout a lifelong desire to learn.

Our job as teachers is threefold: to help create this desire for learning, to be a catalyst in the learning process, and to set up an atmosphere where learning can take place. When the children enter your classroom they should be awed. The children's eyes should open wide and the room itself should pique their interest. Classroom activities and experiences should be shaped by the richness of your classroom setting. Materials should be available at stations around your room. These materials and resources should set up questions in your students' minds. When attractive materials are around, students imagine the possibilities of using them. Messing around with equipment and materials also helps to clarify subject content for your middle school children. The teacher should give the children the first hand experiences that they want and need. Remember, clay by itself does not make a crafted pot, potters with skill and imagination make pots. Allowing children to play with clay may spur an interest not yet awakened, thereby making something from clay that may express an idea or fulfill a desire. The clay is only a vehicle through which learning about possibilities and talents take place.

While a library has an atmosphere of quiet, with individual research going on, your middle school classroom should have an atmosphere where children feel free to explore and learn. Your classroom should be an inviting place with things going on all around. Since children have questions all the time, place your children into work groups of five or six. This allows your children to share experiences, work cooperatively and to ask each other questions or to voice their ideas. Your students will learn even more by explaining and sharing their knowledge with others in their group. Your classroom should have a work area capacity so five or six groups can work simultaneously on the same task. There also needs to be a large open area, where you can work with your class as a large group, removing them from their work stations and

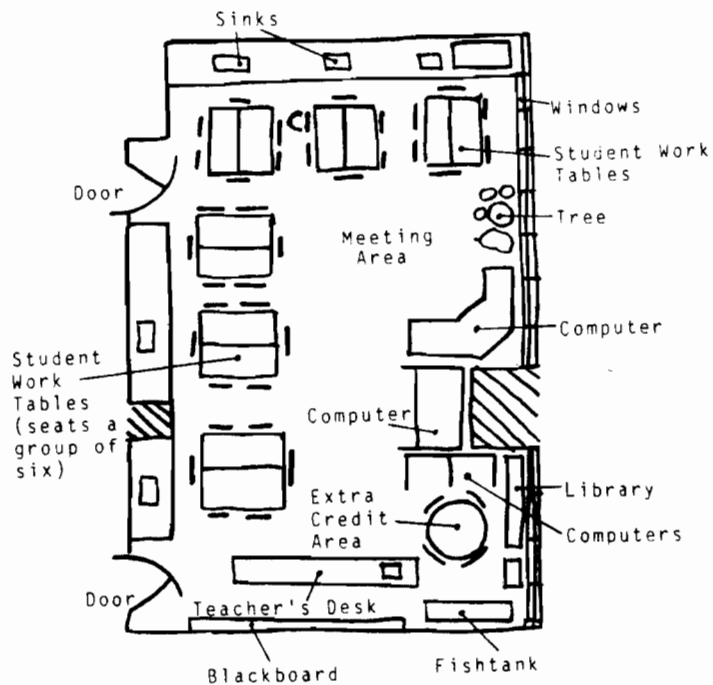
materials (see diagram of classroom set up). You should also have in your classroom, an area where students can go to work independently on special projects.

In my classroom, I also have an extra credit area. Students can come up on their lunch period to work with hands-on science kits or on unfinished work while my class continues with their own tasks. This area of the room also gives children, or a group of children, who have finished their work, a place to gather. In this area they can keep experimenting, playing with materials and learning. The extra credit area has computers, a classroom library, video tapes, computer programs and filmstrips. Video players with monitors, filmstrip viewers, envelopes with extra credit worksheets, a work table with chairs and several different science kits are also available there. All the activities in this area are self directed, which frees me to circulate around my classroom. Work to be handed in should be placed into a designated folder or homework drop spot by the students. Children need to learn about being responsible. We as teachers should not have to go through our student's bookbags to find their work. Students handing in their own work also frees the teacher from collecting work. This time can now be spent on discovering and learning with my students.

Located around your classroom should be attractive bulletin boards with students' current work. Students love to see their work displayed, it strengthens their self esteem. Another great way to get your students attention is to display photographs of them at work on your various bulletin boards. Walk around with your camera snapping two or three photographs of each class at work. Students are amazed to see themselves at work. Even the most hard to handle students will want their pictures to be hung up. For this to happen they too need to actively participate, which may be a positive influence on their classroom behavior.

If children are interested in your room and what goes on in it, you will have given them the opportunity to learn by creating and nurturing a desire in them. Your classroom will give them a place to grow academically while what goes on in your classroom will give them a direction to grow in.

Distribution of work space showing student work stations and learning centers.



This is another example of a classroom showing student work space.

