

THE IMPORTANCE OF DE-CLUTTERING LEARNING SPACES

A SHORT PAPER, BY JUDE MACDONALD, HEADTEACHER, MARSHFIELDS SPECIAL SCHOOL.

As educators we have often been led to believe that the walls of classrooms should be busy, inspiring and detailed. We are also busy professionals and keeping learning spaces clean and tidy can be low on our list of priorities.

However, research and practice evidence the importance of keeping learning spaces tidy and de-cluttered for staff and students. This short paper brings together reasons why tidy, clear spaces are important and explains why, for students with SEND, cluttered spaces may lead to reduced levels of progress and increased dysregulation.

CLUTTER AND MENTAL HEALTH

There is evidence that clutter in learning spaces can reduce the productivity of staff and students, for the following reasons:

1. **Clutter causes stress.** Studies have shown that when people (women and children in particular), walk into a cluttered environment their cortisol levels increase rapidly. Put simply, clutter causes anxiety.
2. **A cluttered environment tells your brain that your work is never done.** When you see clutter, your mind begins making a huge to-do list. It keeps playing that list repeatedly in your mind like a broken record. Clutter screams to your brain “WORK, WORK, WORK.”
3. **Clutter is paralysing.** Looking at piles of books or multiple displays can cause the brain to freeze because the audience has no idea what to look at first. This freeze means that the brain ceases to take any action at all. This can also present as dysregulation.
4. **Clutter wastes your time.** Eliminating clutter reduces staff and student workload because there are fewer displays to tidy and less clutter to tidy!
5. **Decluttering makes you more efficient.** Knowing where to find everything will allow you and your students to move about your day, attending to what needs to be done in a much faster, more efficient way. For example, if you have a cluttered desk, marking books will take longer while you look for a pen, find a space, etc.

SEND

Madison House Autism Foundation states the following about cluttered or busy spaces:

- Clutter can be a huge stressor for people with autism because it can contribute to sensory overload and overall stress levels.

- A disorganised and messy space can also make simple tasks more difficult because a larger amount of time may need to be spent finding the items required to learn.
- Putting aside time for some spring cleaning can help make a learning space more autism-friendly and make daily routines easier.

The Sensory Processing Disorder Foundation states the following:

Sensory processing (sometimes called “sensory integration” or SI) is a term that refers to the way the nervous system receives messages from the senses and turns them into appropriate motor and behavioural responses. Whether you are biting into a hamburger, riding a bicycle, or reading a book, your successful completion of the activity requires processing sensation or “sensory integration.”

Sensory Processing Disorder is a condition that exists when sensory signals don’t get organized into appropriate responses.

A. Jean Ayres, PhD, likens SPD to a neurological “traffic jam” that prevents certain parts of the brain from receiving the information needed to interpret sensory information correctly.

A person with SPD finds it difficult to process and act upon information received through the senses, which creates challenges in performing countless everyday tasks. Motor clumsiness, behavioural problems, anxiety, depression, school failure, and other impacts may result if the disorder is not treated effectively.

Cara at Health, Home and Happiness goes on to explain that ‘What looks a little messy to you, looks like complete paralysing chaos to a child with SEND. Toning down the toys, clutter, and decorations can help children with special needs [and SPD] feel more at home in their own homes.’ ~ Minimalism and Parenting Children With Special Needs.

EXAMPLE CLASSROOM SPACES

Look at the following pictures, and consider the following:

- Where does the teacher want the child to look?
- What will the teacher need to do to keep the space maintained?
- How does the site team clean the space?
- Can you see any health and safety hazards?
- Can a child help keep the space tidy?
- Can a child (particularly one with SEND) find what they need to be able to work?



Ask the same questions as you look at the following:



EVIDENCE FROM SPECIAL NEEDS PRACTICE

At Marshfields School, all classroom spaces have been de-cluttered over a 2-year period to support the STEPS Therapeutic Behaviour Management system. The following principles have been applied:

- If you have not used an item for more than 2 years, it should be disposed of (the school has filled 12 skips so far).
- The front of the classroom must be kept clear so students can focus on the board.
- Displays boards have been removed from around whiteboards and screens.
- All rooms and corridors have been painted a standard magnolia, making them easy to touch up in school closure periods.
- Equipment stores have been placed in all classrooms to support students with self-help and tidying skills.
- Each classroom has a small number of display boards. No Blue-Tac can be used to put additional posters or items on the wall.
- SLT clear communal areas on a weekly basis.

The impact of these changes has been:

- Reduced staff workload, for site, teachers, support staff, SLT and cleaners.
- Covid-cleaning of a room has reduced from a 30-minute to a 5-minute task.
- 90% of students agree that the school is kept clean and tidy.
- 85% of staff also agree that the school is kept clean and tidy.
- 92% of staff agree that their workload is managed.
- Building maintenance budget will be reduced in 2021-22 as there is a new, rolling cycle of painting and decorating, made possible by reduced clutter.
- SLT time clearing communal spaces has decreased significantly over time.
- Students with SPD and ASD are reported as being visibly less anxious in these new classroom spaces.

REFERENCES

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