



The Third Teacher



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“There are three teachers of children: adults, other children and their physical environment.” (1)

— Loris Malaguzzi

What do your schools look like? Are they inviting, exciting, attractive, colorful? Are they places you would want to spend time in if you were a child? Are they fun? Do they encourage imagination? Do they encourage students to get together in both social and educational groups? Are the spaces flexible? Do the students have a say in how the space is used? Did the kids get to pick the colors on the walls? Are the kids allowed and encouraged to write on the walls? Is the seating in the classrooms comfortable? Is the seating movable? Do students get to choose from standard classroom desks to tables to standing desks? Does the furniture accommodate technology? Is there adequate display space in the classroom? Is there enough storage in the classroom? Is there enough storage for each student at their workspace? Is student workspace surface/desktop area large enough to accommodate a laptop computer? Does the teacher workspace permit and encourage a variety of media and/or devices? Is the teacher workspace movable? Can

it be located anywhere in the classroom? Is there a “front” to your classrooms? Do your classrooms accommodate response boards such as displayable personal student whiteboards?

These and dozens more questions like these could and should be asked to all of us involved in providing education for schoolchildren. Why does it matter? Because all of us are involved in a battle for mindshare. We are competing for the attention of our students. Our competition is small but mighty. It comes packaged in student’s hands. It is quick, colorful and interactive. It allows and encourages collaboration, social and otherwise, among students individually and in groups. It connects them beyond the walls of their rooms. And it is always fresh.

In this case, the victory doesn’t go to the swift, but to the prepared and engaged. To compete, our teaching has to be relevant and engaging; so too, do our learning spaces.



“What children learn does not follow as an automatic result from what is taught, rather, it is in large part due to the children’s own doing, as a consequence of their activities and our resources.” (2)

— Loris Malaguzzi, *The Hundred Languages of Children*

“The author of these words, Loris Malaguzzi, was the founder and director of the renowned municipal preschools of Reggio Emilia, Italy. Malaguzzi passed away two decades ago, but we hope he would be pleased with the progress early childhood educators in North America have made toward understanding his pedagogical lessons. His philosophy – a blend of theory and practice that challenges educators to see children as competent and capable learners in the context of group work (Fraser & Gestwicki 2002) – differs from the widely accepted Piagetian perspective that views child development as largely internal and occurring in stages (Mooney 2013). Malaguzzi emphasized that ‘it was not so much that we need to think of the child who develops himself by himself but rather of a child who develops himself interacting and developing with others’ (Rankin 2004, 82). As such, at the core of the Reggio Emilia philosophy is its emphasis on building and sustaining relationships.” (3)

About a decade ago, three firms came together to study Malaguzzi’s ideas. They are Cannon Design, VS Furniture and Bruce Mau Design. When they were finished, they created a project called “The Third Teacher.” Much of their work has been captured in a book of the same name. It is available directly from Cannon Design or, of course, Amazon.



Besides the research background of the project, the book contains 79 practical ideas to help transform your learning spaces into new and vital environments that excite and encourage kids to participate, focus and learn. Here are just a few of the ideas from the book: (4)

- **Make classrooms agile**

A learning space that can be reconfigured on a dime will engage different kinds of learners and teachers.

- **Swivel to attention**

Give students furniture that lets them twist and lean safely. The movement will increase their ability to concentrate.

- **Decide on dynamic**

When classroom chairs wear out, invest in new ones that absorb rather than restrict the movements of growing bodies.

- **Make peace with fidgeting**

Think of it as brain development, which it is, then think of how to make room for it in the classroom.

- **Unite the disciplines**

Art and science need each other. Discoveries – great and small – happen when the two come together, so give students places for cross-disciplinary work. Who knows what creative genius will flourish!

- **Form follows function**

It seems obvious but is often forgotten: Teaching and learning should shape the building, not vice versa.

- **Support great teachers**

Free teachers from the traditional desk at the front of the classroom and encourage new settings for teaching and learning.

- **Make them proud**

The rich cultural traditions of a school's students offer design opportunities. Embracing them is a mark of respect that tells students where they come from matters as much as where they're going to.

- **Build a nest**

Children need comfort just as much at school as they do at home. Give them a soft, quiet and cozy area to play in by themselves or with a few friends.

- **Think hands-on**

Children of all ages need places where they can learn by touching, manipulating and making things with their hands.

While these are all terrific ideas, there remain some difficult realities for today's school administrators. First, many of our buildings are more than 50 years old. They have small classrooms with poor lighting and ventilation. Technology was not foreseen so the problem of data cabling is ever-present, even with Wi-Fi. Electrical power often poses a problem. Many classrooms have built-in storage facilities that cannot be moved. Worse, most district budgets are so pinched that making the kinds of changes proposed in "The Third Teacher" seem out of reach. Yet there is still much we could try. Here are a few simple cost-effective suggestions:

1. *As furniture wears out, replace it with furniture that moves and swivels.*
2. *Repaint classrooms with bold vibrant colors.*
3. *Where possible, create comfortable seating areas in public spaces.*
4. *Encourage teachers to de-clutter classrooms so there is more room for movement.*
5. *Purchase small whiteboards that can be stored next to student's desks and hung on pre-set hooks all over the room for display and interaction.*



Wherever possible, engage students in the research and planning on these and other steps you might take. A recent project by Perkins Local Schools (Erie County) involved David Jakes of David Jakes Design. During the process, Jakes had student representatives weigh in on everything from furniture to lighting and paint. Unsurprisingly, the kids had very firm ideas about what they liked, didn't like and wanted to see in their re-designed classrooms. (5)



In particular, they wanted furniture that was more comfortable—including the size, the orientation and the mobility. They wanted bold vibrant colors on the walls of their rooms. And they wanted refreshed library/media spaces that could accommodate up-to-date technology and lounge-type seating. This was all

pretty basic stuff, but nonetheless very important. The students wanted to be comfortable, just like adults. And they wanted the spaces to be attractive, just like adults.

When the state of Ohio initiated the Straight A Grant Program a few years ago, one of the first-round recipients was North Canton City Schools (Stark County). The district submitted a proposal to create “active learning” classrooms to replace many of the traditional classrooms in the district. They also worked with Jakes and a team from Steelcase Furniture. In their active learning spaces, they removed the front of the classroom and made all four corners the front of the room. They had students design four to five different furniture layouts that could be created “on the fly,” using new very mobile furniture.

They installed whiteboard hooks across the periphery of the room. Technology was updated to allow and encourage students to connect and display from anywhere in the learning space. Hallways were painted with IdeaPaint™ so students could post and share ideas. A student social lounge area with television monitors displaying news feeds and high-speed Wi-Fi encouraged newfound collaboration. Seniors named it the “Chill Zone” and clamored to use it.

The media centers in the high and middle schools were remade as interactive learning spaces modeled after the Exploratorium in San Francisco. They contained self-directed science and robotics kits, distance learning technology, an interactive music lab and more. Reviews from the teachers were as enthusiastic as those of the students. The new spaces permitted them to try new and fresh approaches to their instruction.

While money determines the degree to which these kinds of spaces are created, it should not be the deciding factor. Engaging students in ideas about paint and seating costs very little. Removing clutter and creating space for movement costs nothing. For more ideas about how to move forward revamping your learning spaces, see the resources below.

RESOURCES

The Third Teacher: <http://thethirdteacherplus.com/resources>
Steelcase: <https://www.steelcase.com/discover/information/education/>
David Jakes Design: <https://davidjakesdesigns.com/>

ENDNOTES

- (1) <https://static1.squarespace.com/>
- (2) <https://www.naeyc.org/resources/pubs/yc/nov2015/emergent-curriculum>
- (3) IBID
- (4) Cannon Design, VS Furniture, and Bruce Mau Design. *The Third Teacher*. New York: Abrams, 2010.
- (5) <https://davidjakesdesigns.com/>
- (6) **IMAGE 1:** <https://davidjakesdesigns.com/racine-unified-school-district>



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