



Yanina C. Jimenez

# Flexible and Alternative Seating in Classrooms

**M**uch about schooling has changed since the 1800s. The curricula, seating configurations, and discipline methods have changed; and so have books, technology, and many other resources. Unfortunately, one thing has not changed: the amount of time young students are required to sit in the same chair.

Just imagine, during the school year, being seated for about seven hours on a hard chair every single day. Imagine being 7 years old and being told to remain seated and still while doing your work! While for generations students have been expected to do this, current research in the areas of movement and learning shows that children need *and* deserve flexible and alternative seating in an environment where they spend almost the whole day five days a week.

Recent reports on the dangers of sitting for long periods of time<sup>1</sup> com-

bined with readings from *Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students* about the need to preserve mental strength and exercise all organs while studying<sup>2</sup> led me to consider how I might integrate flexible seating options for my students. I truly believe that in educating young people, teachers need to combine physical and mental activity.<sup>3</sup> So I decided to join the many teachers globally who are changing the way children learn at school.

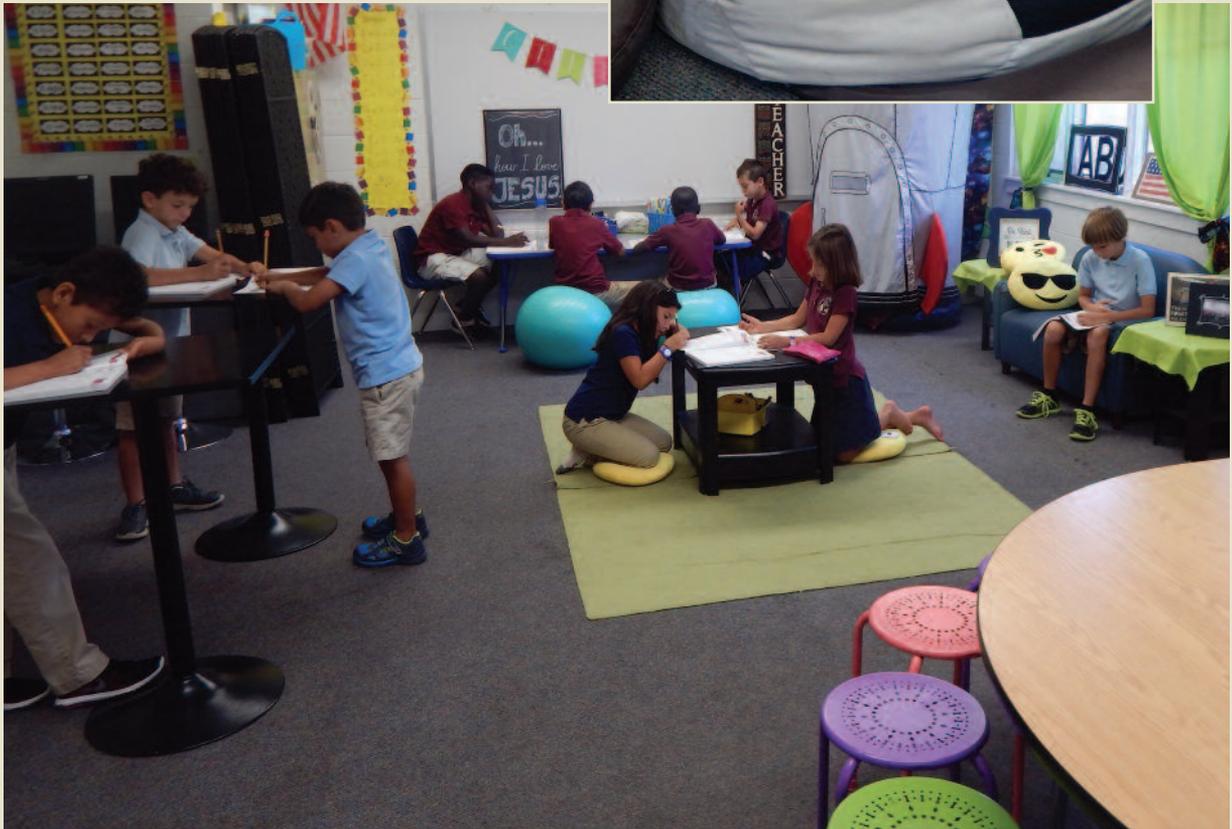
As a teacher, I believe that providing flexible, soft seating alternatives for children will enable them to move, release their energy, and feel happier and more comfortable while doing their work. Now, just imagine that stu-

dents come to school knowing that they will be learning in a movement-friendly environment. They need and deserve to feel at home. After all, school IS their second home!

## Students Are Sitting Too Much

Too many hours of sitting is dangerous to children's health. Health experts and children's advocates recommend that teachers and parents become more aware of how much time children spend each day in a seated position. Most students spend between six and eight hours per day





sitting in various classrooms. And some only have a few minutes of physical activity, such as recess and physical education, built into their school curriculum.<sup>4</sup> If children and young adults don't move often during the day, their risk for diseases such as diabetes, obesity, heart disease, and other metabolic diseases increases.<sup>5</sup> Merely exercising at recess or during physical education does not prevent the physiological changes that occur as a result of prolonged sitting.<sup>6</sup>

Visualize a typical classroom. What are students doing? Sitting. James Levine,<sup>7</sup> co-director of the Mayo Clinic and the Arizona State University Obesity Initiative and author of the book *Get Up! Why Your Chair Is Killing You and What You Can Do About It*, studies how prolonged sitting affects health. His research shows several changes take place in one's physiology—within the muscles and cells—after sitting for a long time. He summarized his findings by saying: "Inactivity—sitting—is *not* supposed to be a way of life."<sup>8</sup>

### The Solution

The solution seems to be less sitting and more moving overall. Rethinking the classroom environment and providing flexible and alternative seating options are ways to address the problem. Teachers can start by having students simply stand rather than sit whenever they have the chance or think about ways to walk while they work. The impact of movement—even leisurely movement—can be profound.<sup>9</sup>

Movement can boost the learning process. Eric Jensen's article "Moving With the Brain in Mind"<sup>10</sup> provides a strong rationale for keeping classrooms active. Brain research also confirms that physical activity—moving, stretching, and walking—can actually enhance the learning process. Jensen protests against the sedentary classroom style and suggests a better way to spend the long days in our class-

rooms, not only for students, but also for teachers. He says, "Teachers need to engage students in a greater variety of postures, including walking, lying down, moving, leaning against a wall or desk, perching, or even squatting."<sup>11</sup> A slanted desk ensures less fatigue, better concentration, and less eye strain. Students experience less painful electromyogram activity in the lower back when they use slanted work surfaces instead of flat ones.<sup>12</sup>

Teachers should encourage children to stand up and move around at least every hour. A stroll around the classroom can help them retain information<sup>13</sup> and better regulate their moods.<sup>14</sup>

Alternative seating provides students with opportunities to move, yet remain on task. Studies in areas such as non-exercise activity thermogenesis (energy expended in activities such as fidgeting, typing, or anything that does not include sleeping, eating, or sports-like activities) demonstrate that reimagining classroom spaces can provide ways of keeping children moving and make teacher-student interaction easier.<sup>15</sup>

When Kayla Delzer decided to renovate her classroom, even before she purchased a single item, she thought about why she was taking this step. She says, "If we truly want to prepare our students for the real world, we need to put them in responsive, dynamic environments that reflect life outside of a traditional classroom. And what's that life outside like? Full of choices." Delzer remembers "ditching her desks" to avoid "the cemetery effect."<sup>16</sup> She cleared out tables, her desk, several chairs, and file cabinets, and explored ways to redesign her classroom. The result was a flexible seating plan and more open floor spaces to accommodate whole- and small-group instruction; stand-and-work tables; crate seats, stability ball chairs, core disks, and pillows. Her students now use work bins and supply baskets to store folders, math journals, and other personal items.

In Delzer's classroom, students de-

cide where they will work each day and can switch places based on their required tasks. She plans carefully to ensure sufficient seating options to accommodate her students' needs. At the beginning of the year, her students spend an entire day exploring the various seating choices. After that, she lets them self-select their seating daily. She says: "One big note: Students know I always reserve the right to move them. . . . They know the work isn't optional, but choosing where they work is."<sup>17</sup>

### What Flexible Seating Looks Like

Flexible and alternative seating can be accomplished in a variety of ways. Teachers must ensure that the students' postures and movements do not impede their learning or that of their peers. Seating options include the following:

- on the floor (carpeted or tiled);
- on/under a blanket, pillow, or lap-sized bean bag;
- on a couch or futon;
- on various types of chairs including easy chairs (low and high back), Papasan chairs, traditional wood chairs, raised chairs, chairs on wheels that spin, chairs that feel like they may tip (but don't), chairs that are padded on the seat and/or the back, stools (with or without back support), stools that move up and down, and scoop rocker chairs;
- on large bouncy balls;
- standing; or even
- lying down on their stomachs or backs!<sup>18</sup>

### Preparing for Implementation

Implementing flexible seating arrangements in classrooms should be a team effort between teachers and administrators. Parents should be notified early that this approach will be implemented on a given classroom or schoolwide. This can be done through letters, newsletters, open houses, or

during parent-teacher meetings.<sup>19</sup>

To ensure that classroom procedures are consistent, teachers should take time to discuss, establish, and practice procedures and rules for appropriate classroom movement. For example, what classroom signals will be used to minimize noise or off-task movement? What should students do if they complete their assignment early? What are the procedures for rearranging furniture? Consistently modeling and engaging students in discussions about classroom procedures will help to ensure that the flexible seating arrangement is successful.<sup>20</sup>

One teacher noted that in a flexible seating plan, students took fewer unnecessary trips to the bathroom and water fountains, and readily moved when they needed to remain focused. Being able to move away from other students who may have been distracting or bothering them resulted in a lower incidence of quarreling and off-task behavior.<sup>21</sup> For flexible seating to produce this type of result, attention must be given to classroom-management procedures.

### Flexible Seating in My Classroom: Reactions From Parents and Students

After securing support from my school administration, I began by communicating with parents through e-mails and letters that described my desire to incorporate flexible seating into my classroom. Their support was overwhelming. Although my students were unfamiliar with the term “flexible seating,” as I described the arrangement and the reasons for the change, they were thrilled. Together, we started looking at pictures of seating options and brainstorming ideas for new decorations. We reflected about our sedentary habits and how flexible seating could help us better concentrate and relax while doing our work. My students participated in the fundraisers for the project, which gave them a sense of ownership. I also in-

involved them in the decision-making and executive-functioning process.

### Implementing New Seating Arrangements

Assembling the equipment was a team effort (my family, students, and other volunteers). We logged many hours planning, trying the new equipment, moving things around, improving the appearance of the classroom, writing thank-you notes to those who supported our fundraising, doing presentations for visitors, and demonstrating how flexible seating works.

After all the equipment was in place, we needed to decide how to use it, so we came up with the plan of rotations. Every student had the oppor-

tunity to claim the same seat twice every week. They also could choose to lie on their stomach or their back in designated areas of the classroom whenever they felt like it, as long as that choice was helpful to their school work. They knew they could choose where to sit to feel more comfortable or relaxed, but that the teacher could change their spots(s) if they became distracted while doing their work. I am proud to say that I have *trusted* my students, and they have lived up to my expectations.

### Observations About Student Behavior

Over the past year, I have observed that my students in the new seating

### Flexible Seating and Student-centered Classroom Redesign

Kayla Delzer presents several tips for successfully implementing flexible and alternative seating, including ideas for redesigning on a budget, classroom management, and best practices: <http://www.edutopia.org/blog/flexible-seating-student-centered-classroom-kayla-delzer>.

### Flexible Classrooms: Providing the Learning Environment That Kids Need

Administrators from Albemarle County Public Schools [Virginia] describe steps for implementation and how flexible seating helped increase engagement and participation: <http://www.edutopia.org/practice/flexible-classrooms-providing-learning-environment-kids-need>.

### Rethinking the Classroom: Spaces Designed for Active and Engaged Learning and Teaching

Helpful suggestions for rethinking classroom design at the college and university level, including implementing flexible and alternative seating: <http://www.hermanmiller.com/research/solution-essays/rethinking-the-classroom.html>.

### Design Tips for a Student-centered Classroom

Sarah McKibben’s article in Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development’s *Education Update* titled “Get Rid of Rows! and Other Tips for a Student-Centered Classroom” identifies six first steps for redesigning the classroom: [http://www.ascd.org/publications/newsletters/education\\_update/jul16/vol58/num07/Get\\_Rid\\_of\\_Rows!\\_and\\_Other\\_Tips\\_for\\_a\\_Student-Centered\\_Classroom.aspx](http://www.ascd.org/publications/newsletters/education_update/jul16/vol58/num07/Get_Rid_of_Rows!_and_Other_Tips_for_a_Student-Centered_Classroom.aspx).

arrangement learned to act responsibly whether working individually or collectively. They became more aware of their own learning styles and of the spot(s) that would guarantee them deeper concentration, according to the type of work they had been assigned. I noticed that my class became quieter and more focused on their work. They had the opportunity to become more relaxed and thus maintained better focus with the flexible seating arrangement. They didn't have to move out of their place as much as they used to, since they could move in place instead. This helped everybody to better focus while enjoying more tranquility in the classroom.

Although this project did not directly target student learning, it certainly impacted it. I have observed improved student attitudes toward school, the classroom environment, belongings in the classroom, school work, team spirit, classmates, teamwork, and the teacher! Future plans include studying the effects of flexible and alternative seating on learning outcomes.

Although the world is changing, many classrooms remain much the same. Year after year, students experience the same learning environments. Rethinking how we use classroom space is one way to help students exercise choice and control over their own learning. ✍

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