The Educational Leader's Role in Guiding Teachers to Declutter Their Classrooms

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Abstract: Classrooms are often cluttered, creating overstimulated students and overwhelmed teachers, which does not lead to optimal learning environments. A teacher's role is to optimize the learning environment; however, not all teachers are aware of the connection between the physical learning environment and learning outcomes. Of particular concern is the link between cluttered spaces and poor learning outcomes due to distraction (Granito and Santana, 2016). Unfortunately, not all instructional leaders recognize this connection either or those who do may not always know how to provide support. The educational leader's responsibility as an instructional leader is to help teaching staff enhance their ability to establish ideal learning settings. Thus, educational leaders need to prioritize support for teachers in creating school spaces that are intentionally decluttered for optimum learning and teaching. In this paper, I provide best practices using research and personal observation to describe how to support educational leaders in this process. This paper also includes a section on how to support teachers during decluttering as suggested by practitioners writing on the internet.

Résumé: Les salles de classe sont souvent encombrées, ce qui engendre une surstimulation des élèves et une surcharge des enseignants, ce qui nuit à l'optimisation des environnements d'apprentissage. Le rôle de l'enseignant est d'optimiser l'environnement d'apprentissage ; cependant, tous ne sont pas conscients du lien entre l'environnement physique d'apprentissage et les résultats d'apprentissage. Le lien entre espaces encombrés et faibles résultats d'apprentissage dus à la distraction est particulièrement préoccupant (Granito et Santana, 2016). Malheureusement, tous les responsables pédagogiques ne reconnaissent pas ce lien, ou ceux qui le reconnaissent ne savent pas toujours comment apporter leur soutien. La responsabilité du responsable pédagogique est d'aider le personnel enseignant à améliorer sa capacité à créer

des environnements d'apprentissage idéaux. Ainsi, les responsables pédagogiques doivent prioriser le soutien aux enseignants dans la création d'espaces scolaires délibérément désencombrés pour un apprentissage et un enseignement optimaux. Dans cet article, je présente les meilleures pratiques, issues de la recherche et de mes observations personnelles, afin de décrire comment accompagner les responsables pédagogiques dans ce processus. Cet article comprend également une section sur la manière d'accompagner les enseignants dans le désencombrement, comme le suggèrent des praticiens écrivant sur Internet.

Introduction

In a world full of distractions, particularly among children, reducing the distractions within the classroom is an extremely important factor for creating an effective learning environment. With the emergence of new initiatives and technologies, classrooms have become increasingly cluttered spaces. For example, movable tables and chairs replaced desks, whiteboards replaced chalkboards, active screens stream information and images, group interaction is the norm, and even the lighting has changed. Shelves and filing cabinets often overflow with materials, and the walls and boards are covered with posters, group work, and various other materials. The result is an overstimulating environment in which distraction is the norm and teachers struggle to keep the students focused on their learning (Noddings, 2017). To facilitate improved learning, visual and auditory stimulation must be reduced (Fox et al., 2013). Yet, with the ever-growing range of issues that teachers are expected to address in the classroom, decluttering should be prioritized.

In response to the growing issue of distractions in the classroom, teachers need to be aware that their classroom environments can be overstimulating and cause distractions.

Educational leaders must also be aware that cluttered classrooms can cause distractions that are impeding student learning (Fox et al., 2014). Given the rise in student neurodiversity including autism spectrum disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, bipolar disorder, sensory processing disorder, anxiety, and trauma it is crucial to gain a deeper understanding of how the physical classroom environment influences learning (Butera et al., 2020; Delisio et al., 2022). As Noddings noted (2017) noted, this is an issue of concern as "Approximately one child in twenty is severely impacted by sensory issues" (p. 40). However, only a few studies

have specifically examined whether clutter contributes to distraction in the classroom (Zazzi & Faragher, 2018; Granito & Santana, 2016). Although the relative scarcity of data about the relationship between a decluttered classroom and educational outcomes is concerning, research from other disciplines such as speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, and psychology suggest that student processing and learning competes with the visual, tactile, or auditory sensory stimuli in the learning environments (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, as cited in Zazzi & Faragher, 2018). Butera et al. (2020) state that "sensory needs should be considered as factors influencing academic performance. More research is needed to extend these findings to examine the best way to address these issues in school settings" (p. 251).

This paper provides personal insight from my 3 decades of experience as an educator and leader. As well, this paper includes a review of the literature on the relationship between distracted learning and clutter, examines the role of clutter in student distraction, and offers evidence-based solutions for educational leaders to guide teachers in addressing this important issue in the classroom.

Classroom Design and the Importance of a Decluttered Learning Environment

The physical and sensory environment of the classroom significantly mediates the teaching and learning process. Over decades, classroom design has evolved from rigid, functional spaces intended for individual, quiet work to highly flexible, vibrant settings that prioritize collaboration, movement, and resource accessibility. While these modern design shifts are rooted in progressive pedagogy, they often result in the unintended consequence of sensory and informational overload.

This section examines the critical balance between supportive classroom features and detrimental environmental stimuli. To establish the case for intentionally decluttered and sensory-aware learning spaces, this discussion will first define the concept of classroom clutter (visual and auditory), trace the historical evolution of classroom design, and finally discuss the negative implications of overstimulation on student focus, well-being, and learning outcomes.

Classroom Design

Classroom design has undergone a profound historical evolution, shifting from rigid uniformity to flexible complexity. Historically, classrooms were defined by uniform wooden desks and chairs arranged in straight rows, a design emphasizing function, longevity, and individual, quiet work with minimal student movement (Kilbourne et al., 2017). Instructional tools were limited to chalkboards, and illumination came from sparse main lights, often making visibility difficult away from natural light sources.

Over time, this model was revolutionized by a shift toward collaboration and group problem-solving. Teachers began replacing individualized desks with tables, fundamentally altering the expectation of student interaction. Chalkboards gave way to whiteboards, and walls evolved from bare surfaces to spaces covered with chart paper showing evidence of group work. This pedagogical shift directly impacted the classroom's sensory profile: the noise level changed from quiet to a consistent chatter of problem-solving students, and the lighting standard transitioned to ubiquitous fluorescent lights. This transformation marked the beginning of the highly flexible, resource-intensive classroom environment seen today.

Today's classrooms reflect the peak of this evolution, characterized by flexible seating options ranging from bean bags and rocking chairs to standing and floor desks that accommodate varied student needs (Kilbourne et al., 2017). The physical environment is highly vibrant, with walls and ceilings often filled with student work, instructional posters, projects, and personal photos. Lighting is equally diverse and complex, utilizing fluorescent tubes alongside floor lamps, lava lights, and even occasional novelty items like disco balls. Furthermore, modern pedagogy relies heavily on movement breaks and fidget tools to aid student regulation, and instructional delivery frequently involves Smart Boards or large television screens playing content in the background.

However, these rich, resource-intensive environments have produced a critical practical challenge: physical clutter. Over years, teachers have accumulated materials often characterized by "someday thinking" leading to overflowing shelves, contents spilling onto floors, and classrooms that are generally overfilled (Paas & van Merriënboer 2020). This tendency to "hoard anything educational" is perpetuated by limited classroom storage and the inheritance of random materials from school divisions, former teachers, and

families, resulting in a complex, stimuli-saturated environment.

Types of Classroom Stimuli

From a sensory perspective, classrooms are typically cluttered both visually and auditorily, thereby creating an overstimulating environment. Overstimulating environments have many negative implications for the student and teaching staff. Implications in the classroom include distractions from learning and teaching, increased anxiety, reduced focus, cognitive overload, reduced productivity, increased stress levels, and negative student behavior (Delisio et al., 2022; Fox et al., 2013).

Visual Clutter

Visual clutter occurs when various objects of multiple sizes, types, or colors, are left arbitrarily on shelves, floors, or walls, which can make a space feel untidy, cluttered, and messy (Sara, 2024). However, even though educators and students need designated spaces and places for their personal belongings and classroom materials, it is possible to maintain a clutter-free environment. For example, well organized and clutter-free desks can help both teachers and students stay focused and efficient. Similarly, walls need to be balanced with some empty space and quiet space scattered throughout the classroom (Noddings, 2017). Teachers need to ensure visual displays contain only relevant materials to lessen distractions (Martin & Wilkins, 2021).

Auditory Clutter

Auditory clutter is described as constant noise playing in the foreground or background internally in the classroom and externally of the classroom such as chatter, sounds of technology, light fixtures, traffic in the hallways, toilets, outside vehicles, and so on. Auditory clutter impacts students' speech perception such as impeding their understanding of speech, discriminating words, and recalling information (Murgia et al., 2023). The American Speech-Language- Hearing Association suggests reducing noise by using absorbing sound materials such as adding carpets, hanging curtains, replacing noisy light fixtures, and placing soft tips on the bottom of chairs and tables (American Speech-Language-Hearing-Association, 2024).

Lighting

Lighting is an essential part of learning as it affects students' focus

and learning experience (Noddings, 2017). Fluorescent lights have typically been the standard in classrooms due to their efficiency; however, the flicker produced by fluorescent lights can create eye strain and headaches and can emit a distracting glare and reflection (Martin & Wilkins, 2021). Natural, halogen, and incandescent lighting is recommended (Noddings, 2017). For example, when sound absorbing walls and halogen lighting were used, Butera et al. (2020) noted an increase in academic performance among students with autism.

The Impact of Cluttered Classrooms on Learning Outcomes

It is important for educational leaders to be aware of the impact of clutter on staff and students as it affects learning, mental health and well-being. The concern about a decluttered classroom goes beyond simply preferring a neat space; it directly impacts the learner and their ability to focus as well as the mental health and well-being of teachers. Berglund et al. (1999, as cited in Mealings et al., 2024) observed that noise can have negative effects on mental health and well-being, "producing symptoms like anxiety, emotional stress, argumentativeness, changes in mood, social conflicts, psychiatric disorders as well as changes in heart rate and blood pressure" (p.356).

Accordingly, when classrooms are cluttered, students may struggle to concentrate on the teacher due to the presence of distracting visual elements that compete for their attention and which, as a result, will impede learning (Zazzi & Faragher, 2018). This is particularly important for students on the autism spectrum, who tend to become overstimulated and hyper focused on visual stimuli rather than the teacher (Martin and Wilkins, 2021). In my professional experience, teachers also feel distracted, unfocused, and mentally cluttered in their classrooms if there is so much "stuff" in the space.

Definition of Decluttering

Oxford Languages defines decluttering as "removing unnecessary items from an untidy or overcrowded place." Decluttering classrooms often involves the removal of many items such as old fluorescent lights, outdated and irrelevant wall displays, cords dangling recklessly, excess repurposed furniture, overstuffed cabinets, retired textbooks and learning materials and dated technology.

The Features of a Decluttered Classroom

Decluttered classrooms contrast significantly with cluttered classrooms. Decluttered classrooms use the natural light from the windows as the main light source. Wall displays are minimal and current with the learning topic. To encourage thinking, displays are placed strategically, and are appealing to the eye with coordinated, tasteful, and calming colors and shapes. Furthermore, technology in a decluttered classroom is operable and updated. The shelves are streamlined with learning material that matches the current curriculum; the physical furniture is coordinated and purposeful. Decluttered classrooms contain less paper as learning units are transitioned to digital copies.

Theoretical Foundations

The call for intentionally decluttered classrooms is supported by several key theoretical frameworks from education, psychology, and occupational therapy. These theories provide a scientific basis for understanding how the physical environment directly impacts students' cognitive functions, mental well-being, and ability to learn.

Cognitive Load Theory

Cognitive Load Theory (CLT) provides a framework for understanding the importance of decluttering classrooms. CLT asserts that working memory has a limited capacity for processing information; exceeding this limit causes cognitive overload and hampers learning (Paas & van Merriënboer, 2020). Learning is most effective when mental effort is focused on grasping new ideas, rather than being diverted by activities unrelated to the learning goal (Cooper, 1990).

CLT identifies three types of cognitive load: intrinsic, germane, and extraneous (Feldon et al., 2019). Extraneous cognitive load is particularly relevant to classroom design. It is an unproductive load imposed by the way information is presented or by environmental factors that require learners to engage in mental activities that do not contribute to learning (Paas & van Merriënboer, 2020). Classroom clutter is a prime example of poor environmental design that imposes extraneous cognitive load (Hu et al., 2021).

Visual clutter (e.g., overly decorated walls, disorganized materials) and auditory clutter (e.g., background noise) force students to split their attention between the lesson and irrelevant environmental stimuli (Castro-Alonso et al., 2021). Mental effort spent integrating unrelated information consumes resources that

should be used for learning new material (Kalyuga et al., 1997). Research has shown that decorated classroom environments can increase off-task behavior and result in lower test scores compared to sparse environments (Paas & van Merriënboer, 2020). This is because students must use their limited cognitive resources to filter out distractions, which interferes with processing essential information (Krieglstein et al., 2021). By intentionally decluttering, teachers reduce this extraneous load, freeing up students' mental resources for the essential and generative processing required for deep learning (Stull & Mayer, 2007).

Sensory Integration and Processing Theory

The concept of "sensory processing issues" is grounded in the work of occupational therapist A. Jean Ayres (1972) and her Sensory Integration Theory. Sensory processing refers to "the mechanism by which the central nervous system receives input from the senses and integrates this information to generate an appropriate behavioral response" (Jones et al., 2020). Atypical sensory processing, common in individuals with ASD, ADHD, and other neurodivergent profiles, can manifest as hyper-sensitivity (over-responsiveness) or hyposensitivity (under-responsiveness) to environmental stimuli (Jones et al., 2021).

For students with sensory sensitivities, a cluttered classroom provides a constant barrage of sensory input that can be overwhelming (Shanker, 2010). Fluorescent lights, multiple sound sources, visually complex displays, and physical proximity to peers can lead to sensory overload, which heightens anxiety, impairs concentration, and can trigger challenging behaviors (Jones et al., 2020). A decluttered, organized, and sensory-friendly environment helps these students regulate their sensory systems, which is a prerequisite for academic engagement and participation (Shanker, 2010).

Environmental Psychology

Environmental psychology examines the relationship between environments and human behavior, cognition, and well-being (Hu et al., 2021). A core tenet is that the physical environment can act as either a stressor or a restorative agent (Ancora et al., 2022). Cluttered, chaotic, and noisy environments are linked to negative psychological outcomes, including increased stress, anxiety, and feelings of helplessness (Marchand et al., 2014). Conversely, environments that are orderly, coherent, and contain natural elements are considered "restorative," promoting mental restoration and stress recovery (Ancora et al., 2022). Applying this

to the classroom, a decluttered space reduces the number of "irrelevant stimuli" that must be filtered, thereby lowering stress and creating a calmer psychological state conducive to learning (Marchand et al., 2014). Features like natural light, organized materials, and clear-to-navigate spaces contribute to a positive mood and reduce the cognitive and emotional burden of navigating a complex environment (Shanker & Hopkins, 2017).

Enhancing Methodological Rigor: From Principle to Evidence-Based Practice

While the principles of creating a calm, alert learning environment provide a compelling theoretical framework, their practical implementation requires empirical validation to be considered an evidence-based practice. Descriptive accounts of strategies, such as decluttering a classroom or improving lighting, are valuable for illustrating concepts but do not establish a causal link between the environmental change and improvements in student outcomes. To demonstrate efficacy, it is crucial to move beyond these descriptive reports and incorporate rigorous research designs with quantitative data, while also acknowledging the limitations and confounding variables inherent in classroom-based research.

Incorporating Quantitative Data to Demonstrate Efficacy

To validate the impact of environmental modifications, quantitative measures can and have be used in pre- and post-intervention designs. These measures can be categorized into three main areas:

Academic and Cognitive Performance

The most direct way to measure the academic impact of an environmental intervention is through standardized and task-specific test scores. For instance, research on visual environments has shown that students in a sparse, decluttered classroom achieved higher test scores than their peers in a highly decorated one (Brink et al., 2023; Shield & Dockrell, 2008). Similarly, studies on lighting have used Oral Reading Fluency (ORF) scores to demonstrate that students' reading performance improves at a greater rate under specific lighting conditions (Mott et al., 2012). Beyond academics, specific cognitive functions such as attention, problem-solving, and memory can be assessed using targeted tasks before and after altering environmental conditions like lighting and acoustics (Brink et al., 2023).

Behavioral Outcomes

Systematic observation is a powerful tool for quantifying changes in student behavior. A primary metric is the measurement of on-task versus off-task behavior. As noted, Moffett and Morrison (2020), found that students in heavily decorated classrooms spent significantly more time off-task. This aligns with meta-analytic findings that "off-task and disruptive classroom behavior," often measured via direct observation, are key outcomes for evaluating classroom interventions (Gaastra et al., 2016). The quality of classroom interactions can also be quantified; for example, Zhan et al. (2021) coded over 17,000 observable behaviors to analyze how smart classroom environments influenced teacher-student interaction patterns.

Perceptual and Affective Outcomes

Surveys and questionnaires can effectively measure students' subjective experiences. Studies have used surveys to assess how students in suboptimal environments report more negative moods and perceive sound and temperature as having a detrimental impact on their performance (Marchand et al., 2014). Student engagement is also commonly assessed through self-report measures (Martins et al., 2022), and more sophisticated approaches like the Experience Sampling Method (ESM) which can capture students' in-the-moment engagement as instruction unfolds (Martins et al., 2022).

Acknowledging Limitations and Confounding Variables

To ensure the credibility and transparency of research, it is essential to discuss potential limitations and confounding variables that could influence the results. Key considerations include:

Sample Size and Demographics

Findings from studies with small or homogenous samples may not be generalizable to different student populations or educational contexts. It is a common and necessary practice to acknowledge these limitations (Cantin et al., 2010).

Teacher Effects

The teacher is one of the most significant variables in any classroom. A teacher's experience, pedagogical style, and relationship with students can heavily influence outcomes,

potentially confounding the effects of an environmental intervention. This is particularly challenging in quasi-experimental designs where classrooms are randomized instead of individual students, making it difficult to separate the teacher's effect from the environment's effect (Havik & Westergard, 2020).

Selection Bias

The method of selecting schools, teachers, and students can introduce bias. For example, using principal nominations and teacher volunteers may result in a sample of unusually effective and confident teachers, whose success might not be replicable in a general population (Shernoff et al., 2016).

Methodological Rigor

The strength of any causal claim depends on the rigor of the research design. Many studies in this field have methodological weaknesses, such as the lack of a control group, which makes it difficult to rule out alternative explanations for observed changes (Verzeletti et al., 2016). Employing randomized controlled trials (RCTs) or strong quasi-experimental designs with baseline equivalence is critical for establishing causality (Halfon et al., 2018).

By integrating these methodological considerations, research on the impact of the classroom environment can transition from descriptive accounts to robust, evidence-based analyses that provide credible and actionable insights for educators.

The Role of the Educational Leader in Decluttering Classrooms

The roles of educational leaders are vast as outlined by the Leadership Quality Standard (2023). To implement change akin to moving from cluttered classrooms to decluttered classrooms, the educational leader is accountable for fostering effective relationships, modelling a commitment to professional learning, embodying visionary leadership, leading a learning community, and providing instructional leadership. This next section aligns decluttering with the Leadership Quality Standard.

Foster Effective Relationships

The Leadership Quality Standard (2023) states, "The leader builds positive working relationships with members of the school community and local community" (p. 3). Teachers need to feel supported by their administration, confident in themselves, and

respected, motivated, and empowered when transitioning from cluttered classrooms to decluttered classrooms (Dudar 2017; Heath, 2017). In addition, as the educational leader is accountable for the health and well- being of staff and students (Leadership Quality Standard, 2023), attending to factors that negatively impact teachers and students clearly falls within their purview.

Model a Commitment to Professional Learning and Embodying Visionary Leadership

The school leader models a commitment to professional learning through ongoing data collection and reflection based on current practices (Robinson & Gray, 2017). The leader seeks to improve practice through feedback, research, evaluation, brainstorming, and sharing of best practices with others about creating optimal learning environments for students (Dudar et al., 2017; Leadership Quality Standard, 2023). The Leadership Quality Standard (2023) states "The leader collaborates with the school community to create and implement a shared vision for student success, engagement, learning and well-being" (p.3). To embody visionary leadership, the leader communicates the need for improvement for student learning. The leader is accessible and supportive through this change (Dudar et al., 2017). Further, school leadership encourages a collaborative culture when conversations are encouraged to grow and learn (Robinson & Grey, 2019).

Lead a Learning Community

The Leadership Quality Standard (2023) states, "A leader nurtures and sustains a culture that supports evidence-informed teaching and learning" (p. 3). Accordingly, the leader creates and supports an inclusive learning environment where all staff are collectively responsible (Leadership Quality Standard, 2023). The leader collaborates with the staff to create an action plan based on data with specific goals (Dudar et al., 2017). Effective leadership, collective responsibility and collaboration impacts student outcomes in creating optimal classrooms for all students (Robinson & Gray, 2019). The educational leader can lead a learning community to create a clutter-free culture to enhance teaching and learning.

Provide Instructional Leadership

The educational leader's role as an instructional leader is to facilitate teaching staffs' capacity to create optimal learning environments. As stated in the Leadership Quality Standard, (2023), "A leader ensures that every student has access to quality

teaching and optimum learning experiences" (p. 4). The Teacher Quality Standard (2023) maintains, "Teachers need to establish inclusive learning environments by employing classroom management strategies that promote positive, engaging learning environments" (p. 6).

This means that teachers must understand how to best optimize their classroom environments and materials, as their environment significantly impacts students' learning and success. However, teachers often neither know the research nor acknowledge the value of a clutter-free classroom space and how it relates to teaching and learning experiences (Fox et al., 2014) Teachers are unknowingly and may be potentially creating or adding to learning problems or triggering students to become unregulated in their cluttered classrooms. As stated by Fox et al. (2014):

> Teachers observe children in structured learning environments where sensory processing difficulties may occur but be unrecognized as such. Furthermore, teachers could learn strategies for adapting the classroom environment to address children's sensory needs. This might involve reducing the complexity of visual and auditory stimulation (p. 83).

As stated previously—and required by the Quality Learning Standard—educational leaders are responsible for building teachers' capacity to respond to the learning needs of all students. Educational leaders need to bring awareness and support in this area as the classroom environment may create exasperating learning challenges. Thus, educational leaders need to know the relevant research and acknowledge the value of clutter-free spaces. If optimal learning spaces are a priority and supporting positive mental health for staff and students is required, then this work of decluttering classrooms will be regarded as essential.

The purpose of this paper is to emphasize the critical role educational leaders play in supporting teachers' capacity for creating decluttered learning environments and how it positively impacts student learning. Using research and personal observations, the remainder of this paper discusses evidence-based strategies on how to create decluttered classrooms for enhanced student learning.

Strategies for Educational Leaders to Support Teachers in Decluttering Classrooms

From my own observations as a practicing educational leader and teacher, the best approach to implement change involves modelling, professional development, creating a school wide plan, offering individualized support for teachers, and creating a culture of reflective practice.

Modelling Decluttered in Administrative Spaces

The administration team needs to model decluttered office spaces as often offices are the heart of the school where everyone gathers. Offices that are clutter-free and organized foster professionalism, calm, positivity, and productivity, which impacts staff members, students, and families. School administrators should also model decluttering in other areas of the school that are visually and auditorily cluttered.

Providing Professional Development

According to the Leadership Quality Standard, (2023), "A leader is expected to provide instructional leadership to enhance teachers' ability to address the diverse learning needs of all students" (p. 4). Well designed and implemented teacher professional development positively influences student learning (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Professional development will ensure that capacity will be developed in staff as they see the importance and impact of decluttering and will have the knowledge and skills needed for changing from cluttered classrooms to decluttered classrooms (Dudar et al., 2017).

To build capacity, professional development must be specific, ongoing, and focused on practical strategies that teachers can implement to improve the classroom learning environment (Mitchell et al., 2017). To achieve this, professional development should be structured around key modules that directly address the link between the physical environment and student outcomes.

Training should focus on how to arrange the physical layout of a classroom to support a variety of learning activities, such as small-group collaboration, independent study, and whole-class instruction (Korpershoek et al., 2016). Teachers can learn how to create "activity-permissible" classrooms with movable furniture that allow for quick and efficient transitions between different pedagogical approaches, thereby maximizing instructional time and supporting student choice and movement (Kilbourne et al., 2017).

A sensory-friendly classroom setup module would train teachers on the principles of evidence-based classroom organization,

emphasizing the importance of minimizing environmental distractions that can hinder learning (Brink et al., 2021). Research indicates that factors such as poor acoustics, improper lighting, and thermal discomfort can negatively affect students' cognitive performance and academic achievement (Brink et al., 2021). Training should provide strategies for creating learning environments that are visually calm, organized, and free from excessive noise, which supports working memory and attention for all students (Paas, F & van Merriënboer 2020).

Professional development should connect environmental design to effective classroom management. An organized classroom with predictable routines is a foundational, preventive strategy that reduces disruptive behavior and enhances student engagement (Gunersel et al., 2023). Teachers can be trained to use their physical space to facilitate active supervision, provide frequent opportunities for student response, and deliver behavior-specific praise which are evidence-based practices for creating a positive classroom climate (Gunersel et al., 2023).

For these modules to be effective, the delivery must move beyond single-day workshops and incorporate proven methods for sustained teacher learning. Research shows that coaching, which includes modeling, practice, and performance feedback, is significantly more effective for skill transfer than traditional training formats (Moore, 2023). This approach should be supplemented with ongoing, job-embedded support structures such as peer coaching, data-driven team meetings, and professional learning communities (PLCs), which allow teachers to engage in reflective dialogue and receive feedback on their practice (Mitchell et al., 2017). Such collaborative models help ensure that new strategies are implemented with fidelity and adapted to the specific needs of students, ultimately leading to improved engagement and academic achievement (Korpershoek et al., 2016).

Creating a School-Wide Plan for Decluttering

Ideally, leaders will create and implement a school-wide approach that involves a culture of collaboration of educational leaders, office administration, teachers, educational assistants, and students (Robinson & Gray, 2019). In a school-wide approach, school teams work together—collaborate—to establish goals, roles, guidelines and timelines for creating a decluttered environment (Dudar et al., 2017). An important part of this collaboration is allotting time for sharing successes and best practices amongst the school community (Dudar et al., 2017). As noted by the Association of Alaska School Boards, (n.d.) "Schoolwide practices make it clear that everyone in

the school community has a role and responsibility in creating a safe and respectful learning environment" (n.d.).

Providing Individualized Support to Teachers

Teaching staff may experience all kinds of feelings about decluttering ranging from joy to sadness to anger, feeling overwhelmed, and engaged in a hopeless task. To mitigate the negative feelings, the educational leader should provide individualized support to teachers. The educational leader's role will be to encourage, model, and work alongside; they may need to provide extra individualized professional development to help teachers trust in themselves and professional knowledge (Heath, 2017).

Creating a Culture of Reflective Practice

Creating a culture of reflective practice will be ongoing and continuous with the understanding that the purpose for decluttering is to promote improved learning and teaching in the classroom (Dudar et al., 2017). According to the Ministry of Education and Child Care (2024),

> Reflective practice refers to the on-going observation and consideration of the environment, interactions, experiences and processes of a program. This practice supports professional learning for the educator and promotes continuous improvement for the program itself. Educators who regularly incorporate reflective practices into their professional practice are better able to make informed decisions about their pedagogy and the program, and as a result often feel more engaged and satisfied with their work. Programs involved in regular observation and reflection are better able to respond timely and informed to the emergent interests of children and the multi-faceted needs of families (p.4).

The Ministry of Education and Child Care of British Columbia (2024) created a *Reflecting on Quality Tool*, a thorough document including quality indicators that supports educators in self-reflection on the learning environment. Section 2 focuses on the learning environment specifically and claims that the learning environment is the "third teacher" where the environment is intentionally planned and prepared to support children's learning.

This is a tool for educators to use to reflect on their classroom space. Included here is a sample from the document

that describes how to create an organized and accessible environment. This document provides a rating scale on a continuum from '*needs improvement*' to '*adequate*' to '*exemplary*.' This reflective process serves as a support for self-assessment and improvement.

Creating Equitable and Inclusive Classrooms Through Sensory-Supportive Design

Creating an organized, sensory-supportive classroom is a fundamental practice of equity and inclusion that removes significant learning barriers for diverse student populations (Fredricks, 2004). By intentionally managing the classroom's visual and auditory environment, educators provide necessary accommodations that support regulation, attention, and comprehension (Crawford, 2020).For Neurodivergent Learners (e.g., students with ASD, ADHD):

> *Reduces Sensory Overload and Anxiety:* A calm, decluttered space minimizes overwhelming visual and auditory input that can cause anxiety and distraction for neurodivergent students (Jones et al., 2020). This helps students to feel regulated and safe, which is essential for learning (Leithwood, 2021).

> *Lowers Cognitive Load:* An organized environment reduces the amount of irrelevant information students have to process (Paas & van Merriënboer, 2020). This frees up crucial working memory and attentional resources, allowing them to focus on the academic task rather than filtering out environmental noise (Paas & van Merriënboer, 2020).

For Multilingual Learners (MLLs):

> *Provides Clear Visual Scaffolds:* Multilingual learners (MLLs) are already managing a high cognitive load by learning content in a new language. Simple organizational systems, like color-coding materials and classroom areas, act as non-linguistic guides that make the environment predictable and easy to navigate (Kalyuga et al., 1999).

> *Decreases Cognitive Burden:* These visual systems reduce the mental effort needed to find resources and

understand classroom routines (Kalyuga et al., 1999). This allows MLLs to conserve their cognitive energy for the more demanding tasks of language acquisition and academic learning, consistent with the principles of cognitive load theory (Castro-Alonso et al., 2021).

In essence, managing the classroom's physical and sensory environment is a powerful, proactive strategy to remove learning barriers, making academic success more accessible for a diverse range of students (Leithwood, 2021).

Table 1

Creating a well-organized and accessible environment in the classroom (Ministry of Education and Child Care, 2024, p.17).

2.3 **Quality Statement:** The environment is well organized and accessible.			
Needs to be Improved	**Adequate**	**Exemplary**	**Supporting Evidence**
☐ Materials are not easily accessible to children.	☐ Most materials are accessible to children, so that they can choose activities independently.	☐ Age appropriate materials are visible and accessible to children so that they can choose activities independently.	
☐ Learning resources are not labelled or displayed in an orderly way.	☐ Most learning resources are organized, labelled and stored in an orderly way.	☐ All learning resources are thoughtfully and intentionally organized. Resources and materials are labelled and stored in an orderly and aesthetically pleasing way, and invite children and adults to use them.	

Barriers and Challenges for Educational Leaders in Maintaining a Decluttered Learning Environment

Educational leaders face significant obstacles in creating and maintaining clutter-free learning environments that are conducive to learning. These challenges extend beyond simple organization and touch on fundamental issues of time, funding, spatial limitations, resistance to change, and the need to support staff well-being throughout the process. Effective classroom management, which includes the physical organization of the space, is crucial for fostering student engagement and academic success.

Time and Competing Priorities

School leaders must allocate sufficient time for teachers to engage in professional development, reflection, and dedicated work periods focused on improving the classroom environment (Mitchell et al., 2017). Creating an organized space is a time-consuming process that involves the thoughtful evaluation of materials and layouts. However, this effort often competes with other high-priority initiatives, such as implementing new curricula or addressing students' social-emotional needs (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015). A successful approach requires framing environmental organization not as an additional task, but as a foundational element that supports all other educational goals. A well-organized classroom creates a more effective learning environment where students know what is expected, spend less time in non-instructional activities, and demonstrate greater gains in literacy and behavioral regulation (Day et al., 2015).

Resistance to Change and Supporting Staff Well-Being

School leaders should anticipate potential resistance from staff when implementing new classroom management or organizational initiatives (Robinson & Gray, 2019). The shift from a traditional, teacher-centered layout to a flexible, student-centered space is a significant change, both physically and pedagogically (Bekiroglu et al., 2022). Teachers may be attached to materials they purchased themselves or view their collections as a safeguard against future budget cuts.

To navigate this, administrators must lead with empathy and a collaborative spirit:

A Supportive, Non-Judgmental Approach

Administrators should be positive and work alongside staff, framing the goal as a shared vision for an environment that fosters effective learning (Gunersel et al., 2023).

Leverage Collaborative Teams

Professional learning teams provide a structure for developing shared beliefs about student learning, facilitating collective problem-solving, and providing mutual support (Mitchell et al., 2017).

Connect to Student Needs

The initiative should be framed around its direct benefits to students. An overly cluttered or poorly designed space can be a source of distraction and inattention, hindering learning (Jones et al., 2020). A well-managed physical atmosphere promotes positive behavior, reduces disruptions, and enhances student engagement (Oliver et al., 2011).

Administrators should be positive, supportive, sympathetic, and empathetic to staff during this time of a classroom overhaul. Administrators need to work alongside staff during this process. It is imperative for educational leaders to cultivate self-awareness and engage in frequent and open discussions about these impacts.

Addressing Budgetary and Spatial Constraints with Cost-Effective Solutions

A primary barrier to improving the classroom environment is the lack of funding and resources, a challenge noted in both rural and urban schools (Brink et al., 2021). While commercial storage systems and flexible furniture are ideal, they can be prohibitively expensive. However, many teachers have developed low-cost, do-it-yourself (DIY) solutions that are highly effective for organizing materials and maximizing limited space. These resourceful strategies demonstrate that significant improvements can be made without a large budget.

DIY and Repurposed Storage

> *Vertical Shelving:* Used copy paper boxes can be transformed into sturdy, stackable shelves for drying artwork or storing papers, a solution that is both cheap and versatile 17. Milk crates, often obtainable for free from local businesses, can be connected with zip ties to create durable and colorful bookshelves (Brink et al., 2024).

> *Mobile Solutions:* For classrooms where floor space is at a premium, mobile storage is an excellent option 20. Building simple cubbies on caster wheels allows storage units to be moved out of the way to create space for active learning, which is critical for student engagement (Bekiroglu et al., 2022).

> *Individual Supply Kits:* To reduce clutter and lost materials,

teachers can create individual art boxes from inexpensive toolboxes, with each student responsible for their own color-coded supplies (Day et al., 2015). This not only keeps the room tidy but also teaches students organization and responsibility.

Creative Repurposing: Everyday items can be repurposed for specific storage needs. Such as plate holders can be used to organize student folders inside bookshelves, and a paper sorter can be modified into a charging station for Chromebooks, old containers such as baby wipe boxes or metal tins can be used for smaller items like game pieces, pencils, or art supplies (Rakesh et al., 2024).

Maximizing Limited Space

Utilize Underused Areas: The space under tables and chairs can be converted into storage by adding plastic drawers or creating bench seats from crates or inexpensive shelving units. This dual-purpose furniture provides both seating and organization without taking up additional floor space (Peng et al., 2022).

Go Vertical: Teachers can take advantage of vertical space by placing labeled storage bins on top of cabinets or by hanging items from coat racks or magnetic boards attached to the sides of metal furniture. Even windows can be used as display areas when wall space is limited.

These cost-effective and creative strategies are more than just organizational hacks; they are pedagogical tools. By creating a more organized, flexible, and student-centered physical environment, these solutions help reduce distractions, improve transitions between activities, and support a wider range of teaching methods (Kilbourne et al., 2017). An orderly and adaptable space facilitates better classroom management, which in turn enhances student engagement and learning outcomes (Li & Xue, 2023).

Future Suggestions

Drawing on my foundation as a kindergarten teacher and my current role as a school principal, my professional approach is profoundly shaped by collaboration with Occupational and Speech-Language Therapists and their explanation of Cognitive Load

Theory—the concept that students become overloaded by too many stimuli, which slows or halts their processing. This critical learning directly informed my former classroom design, which was intentionally streamlined, featuring minimal visual clutter and rigorously ensuring students only processed one auditory source at a time.

Now, as a leader, this practical insight translates into three key strategic directives for our system: First, while staffing full-time therapists is costly, I aim to increase teacher access to consultative guidance from these specialists, essential for translating complex theories into sustainable classroom environments. Second, I prioritize the fundamental strategy of outside nature play and movement at a school-wide level, as my experience shows staff and students consistently flourish when they have dedicated time for exercise, fresh air, and natural light. Finally, to ensure successful, lasting change in decluttering and improving school spaces, we move beyond strict, top-down directives and adopt a distributed leadership model by actively listening to teacher voices when setting goals, roles, guidelines, and timelines; this empowers educators and ensures initiatives are practical and responsive to the diverse needs entering the classroom.

Teaching and leading are rewarding professions, and these suggestions, synthesized from both literature and successful personal experience, are offered to give hope and clear guidance to those supporting students and the teachers they lead, with key next steps focusing on conducting a systematic literature review to contextualize findings, partnering with schools for pilot studies to test these strategies, and advocating for policy changes to allocate resources specifically for classroom organization and sensory support.

Conclusion

A challenge in modern educational leadership is the widespread lack of awareness regarding the profound impact of the physical and sensory environment on student regulation and teacher well-being. School leaders may be inadvertently sanctioning classroom designs that contribute to learning challenges and prompt student dysregulation without realizing the mechanism at work.

From a sensory perspective, the contemporary classroom environment often leans toward overstimulation, being inherently

cluttered both visually and auditorily. This constant sensory competition creates numerous negative implications for both students and staff, including distraction from teaching and learning, heightened anxiety, reduced focus, cognitive overload, increased stress levels, and escalating negative student behavior. For the student, this perpetual state of sensory input results in a significant drain on mental resources, impeding their ability to sustain attention and process new information. Conversely, the intentional practice of decluttering provides immediate benefits. For the educator, a clutter-free space frees up mental space, reducing feelings of stress and mental clutter, and allowing them to focus fully on instructional delivery and student needs. For the student, research consistently shows that sensory-calming environments positively impact learning outcomes, leading to improved focus, increased on-task time, productivity, efficiency, and mental clarity. These intentional spaces are particularly vital for vulnerable learners—such as students with sensory processing disorders, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), or autism—who greatly benefit from an environment where visual and auditory stimuli are minimized to support self-regulation and learning engagement.

The challenge, is rooted in awareness. Teachers often do not know the research that connects environmental clutter to cognitive load, and educational leaders must fully acknowledge this value. By integrating this research into their practice, leaders can provide the awareness and support necessary to ensure the physical classroom environment actively supports, rather than hinders, the learning process.

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Appendix 1

Supporting Teachers through Decluttering Classrooms: Online Resources

Many internet practitioners have practical, insightful tips that administrators and teachers to be aware of when transitioning from a cluttered classroom to a decluttered classroom.

Summary of online resources

Durgin, J. (2024). How to declutter your classroom in 2024: Teacher organization tips to get rid of the mess. https://jodidurgin.com/reasons-to-declutter-your-classroom/. This website provides several takeaways, but I have summarized the best practices provided in the following three entries:

> 5 Reasons You need to Declutter your Classroom 10 Obstacles to Decluttering Your Classroom
>
> 7 Mistakes Teachers Make: Don't Do These when you Declutter your Classroom.

5 Reasons You need to Declutter your Classroom (Durgin, 2024)

1. Too much stuff costs you time as you try to locate lost items.
2. Classroom clutter costs money as you need to rebuy lost items or repair items that have been shoved away due to overstuffed storage.

3. A messy classroom causes stress and anxiety.
4. Clutter causes behavior issues and student distraction as students have a hard time learning in an environment filled with clutter.
5. Others may view you as a teacher hoarder or pack rat. Does your classroom reflect your effectiveness? How might a messy, disorganized class impact the way administrators, colleagues and your students' parents view you as a professional?

10 Obstacles to Decluttering Your Classroom (Durgin, 2024)

1. I'm too busy and don't have enough time to clean out my classroom.
2. I am exhausted and feeling burnt out as a teacher.
3. Getting organized is expensive. I don't have extra money to spend money.
4. I have a hard time letting things go.
5. I am overwhelmed and not sure where to start.
6. I am not sure what to let go of.
7. I don't know what to do with the stuff I am decluttering.
8. I must store old textbooks and curriculum I don't use in my classroom.
9. The clutter in my classroom doesn't bother me.
10. Even if I declutter my classroom, it's going to creep its way back in.

7 Mistakes Teacher's Make: Don't Do These When You Declutter Your Classroom (Durgin, 2024)

1. Procrastinate getting started.
2. Trying to organize before purging the excess
3. Lacking the right "tools"
4. Becoming distracted with decision making
5. Jump in without a plan
6. Tackling the process without support
7. Having unrealistic expectations

Table 2 is a summary of best practices for visually and auditory decluttering classrooms. Below are the website references for Table 2.

What Can Be Done About Noise in the Classroom?
https://avenueis.com.au/what-is-classroom-noise/.
The Importance of De-cluttering Learning Spaces
https://doi.org/marshfields.co.uk.
A Fresh Approach to Classroom Management

http://strobeleducation.com/blog/a-fresh-approach-to-classroom-management/.

Table 2
Best Practices for Visual and Auditory Decluttering of Classrooms

How to visually declutter	How to auditorily declutter
Use desk organizers to keep essentials within reach	Use sound absorbing materials such as carpets and panels
Use color coded systems by assigning different colors to resources which makes it easier to locate items	Turning off noise equipment when not in use and replacing noisy light fixtures
Use clear bins and labels for resource and material organization	Incorporate noise-cancelling technology like headphones or white noise machines
Designated and organized charging systems	Establish clear routines and procedures helps minimize unnecessary noise
Creating a filing system for student work	Encourage active listening by paying attention to the speaker
Digitizing when possible	Showing students how loud it can be when many talk at one time
Throw out anything that is broken, outdated or incomplete	Please soft tips at the bottoms of chairs and tables
Donate or recycle anything that isn't relevant to curriculum	Promoting student-led solutions by brainstorming ideas