

Colour Design for Better Classrooms

April Cottreau, Teacher, Avalon Adventist Jr. Academy, Port Hardy, BC

What colour is ideal for classroom walls? Here are some guidelines you may want to consider as you create an atmosphere for growth.

1. Choosing wall colours is an important decision in business, medical and retail facilities.¹ It only stands to reason that those in the educational business give the issue serious consideration as well. We should approach colour, not from an aesthetic standpoint, but rather from a functional standpoint. Do certain colours result in genuine benefits? **Mood is very important in the school, in the work place and in daily life; therefore, it is pertinent to understand how colour affects mood.**
2. Studies show that monotone environments may induce anxiety and lead to irritability and an inability to concentrate.² It's suggested that the proper use of colour in schools can convert an atmosphere that is depressing and boring into one that is pleasing, exciting and stimulating, promoting more positive feelings about school. This does not mean we must choose the perfect colour and paint every classroom that colour. Several colours within the school are beneficial. We should tailor the learning environment to be attentive to individual children rather than following a course of mass instruction. **Too much sameness does not convey the value of diversity.**
3. It is recommended that stairways and corridors use bright colours to provide variety and stimulation while passing between other spaces. Hallways serve for movement rather than engagement.³ They should be more colourful and provide both vibrancy and personality through complimentary colours. Examples include light orange walls, offset by blue doors, or light green walls with low-chroma red doors. Frank H. Mahnke summarizes his experience with institutional white: "During my many years of collecting reference material on color and light, I have not yet come across any pronouncement that supports white and off-white on psychological or physiological grounds for prompting its wide use." (Interestingly, although black represents mourning in our culture, the colour of grief in China is white.) **Since brighter colours encourage activity, we would do well to consider those colours for areas in the school created for movement such as the hallways, stairways, and gymnasium.** Using school colours in certain areas may promote more school spirit.
4. Lighting is too closely connected to room colour to exclude it from this discussion. Glare from the sun must be avoided from surfaces of televisions, whiteboards and monitors. But humans need and want natural sunlight more than

¹ www.peterli.com/archive/spm/551.shtm-23k

² asumag.com/mag/university_classroom_colours/-39k

³ www.coe.uga.edu/sdpl/researchabstracts/bestpractices/visualbp.html

artificial lighting. Positioning windows and reflective furniture properly and having light-coloured blinds will solve this in part. Brightly coloured walls (as well as high light levels) may increase glare. **Therefore, the wall colour in a classroom should not be too bright.**

5. Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) and Winter Blues are genuinely debilitating conditions that act against learning. Its treatment through exposure to particular light is one of the “light therapies” that is well grounded in research. These problems affect up to 20% of people above the 40th parallel⁴ (including Canada) leading to some depression and reduced productivity. The lighting used to help is full-spectrum lighting – fluorescent lighting that more closely resembles sunlight, enriched in blues and violets. The change in lighting, in connection with simple changes in room colour, minimizes the effects of the shorter days. **Ideally, children would be outdoors in natural lighting a good part of the day, especially throughout the winter when the days are so short. Since they are largely confined to indoors instead, it’s best to simulate the natural lighting and colours in the classroom to aid in mental well-being.**
6. “Consider home as a template for school”⁵ was a recurring theme in my research. Colours that reduce tension and anxiety produce a home-like atmosphere in contrast to an “institutional” one. Wall colours are important and just hanging colourful artwork will not compensate for otherwise dull wall colours. **Homes generally utilize wall colour more than institutions and we can learn from them in recreating a welcome place for children to spend much of their life.** Home is where you would also tend to see the softening effect of using textured paint effects through sponge paint, air brush, etc. On a side note, using natural wood furnishings, baskets, fabrics and cushions, incandescent lighting, plants, and water (fountain/fish tank) add other “homey” effects to a classroom. The idea is to recreate a more home-like environment where children want to be. After all, the classroom is their second home and we will find them more teachable if they want to be there.
7. Most institutions would find this somewhat inconvenient and less economical, but the fourth wall, the teaching wall, should be painted a different colour, complementary or at least a darker hue than the other walls. This is not merely for aesthetics. **The different hue and colour at the front helps to reduce student’s eyestrain as they look up and down to write notes.**⁶ Have you noticed how many more children are wearing glasses each year?
8. The following are generally accepted effects of colours on moods:
 - Red and orange are stimulating
 - Yellow or gold evoke feelings of warmth and cheerfulness.

⁴ www.isu.edu/ctl/nutshells/

⁵ www.essentialschools.org/cs/resources/view/ces_res/210

⁶ www.isu.edu/ctl/nutshells/IdealClass_files/IdealClass.html

- Blues are calming. Some suggest the best colour for a classroom is sky-blue, tinged with red. This combination is conducive to thoughtful study, but also to alertness. Blues relax.
 - Green suggests hope, restfulness and calm and is associated with nature, giving a peaceful, secure feeling.
 - Light pink, coral and pastel colours soften energy. Pink relates to sensitivity and love.
9. Warm and cool colours make people perceive temperature differently – either warmer or cooler as their name implies.⁷ **A room that tends to be warm may give the impression of coolness with a cool room colour; a room that tends to have a cool temperature may give the perception of warmth by warm-coloured walls.**

My conclusion after this burst of colour insight is that a variety of colours are needed in a school and a variety of colours are also quite suitable. It seems one has to start by deciding between warm and cool colours: “Should I choose a cool colour with the goal of relaxing students?” or “Should I choose a warm colour to energize them?” Ellen Bell, the former principal of College Height Christian School, had been encouraging a variety of changes in class design. She plans to develop a palette of colours carefully selected for teachers to choose from for wall colour and trim.⁸ My personal purpose in teaching grade 5 & 6 is to create a warm, friendly environment that is mildly stimulating. I am considering the benefits of a warm colour such as light golden- yellow or a light pink-violet. My primary choice of a cool colour would be a light green. But for now, I’m ready to leave the blasé whites and creams behind.

⁷ www.peterli.com/archive/spm/551.shtm

⁸ Interview: Ellen Bell, Lacombe, AB