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**Movement and its Necessity in the Classroom**

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## **Abstract**

In considering where children and adolescents spend the majority of their time, it is impossible not to think of a classroom. These classroom settings typically take on the form of a teacher standing at the front of the room lecturing while the students sit and listen. There is little to no movement and this is not okay. The classroom environment, being the place where students spend most of their time, is the perfect setting in which to make sure students are staying active and engaged. Research shows that movement in the classroom leads to an increase in concentration skills and general enjoyment of school. There are multiple ways in which movement can be incorporated into the classroom and we will take a look at some within this paper.

## **Key Words:**

English

Education

Movement integration

Physical exercise

Concentration

Focus

## Movement and its Necessity in the Classroom

### **Introduction**

Every day when we wake up, the first thing we do is move. We open our eyes, we stretch, we brush our teeth. Movement is one of the things that we do mindlessly. It comes so naturally to us because it's how we live. We see advertisements on tv and youtube telling us about the benefits of getting outside and walking around, even if it's only for ten minutes a day. Society tells us to be active, but it is the same society that keeps us sitting in cubicles and behind desks, passively working, listening, and learning. We are set up in a way that movement is neglected and the benefits of it become overlooked. Movement is not a given. It has become a hobby, or something that we have to set aside extra time for in our busy lives and extra time is usually something that most of us don't have. We become numb to the voices telling us to take a walk or go for a swim because we are forced to.

Movement is really important. According to the Mayo Clinic Health System, "excessive sitting is a fairly new problem in human history" (Jagim). They make a good point, sitting for 7+ hours a day is not something that we are used to as humans. In the past, a majority of the world was up and doing manual labor to work, eat, and maintain their livelihoods. Sitting only occurred to take a break from working for a couple of hours. Historically, we are not designed to sit for extended periods of time every day. A study conducted by Yale Medicine states, "... research has linked prolonged sitting or other sedentary behavior to diabetes, poor heart health, weight gain, depression, dementia, and multiple cancers" (Katella). Along with this, they found that after surveying the amount of time spent sitting across age groups, adolescents had notably high numbers. They were one of the top groups of people who had spent the most time sitting which is concerning. Within this article, they spend some time making suggestions as to how we can

incorporate movement into the time we spend working on a daily basis. But what happens to the adolescents who are stuck inside a school building all day with little to no say in when they are allowed to get up and move around the room? The age group that is being affected the most, is also the group that has the least amount of choice and opportunity to fix this.

When I was first trying to figure out what to write about I was thinking about what I had read most recently in my classes that really grabbed my attention and the article, “A veteran teacher turned coach shadows 2 students for 2 days - a sobering lesson learned” came to my mind. One of the biggest insights that the coach makes is that students barely move throughout the day. The article states, “I could not believe how tired I was after the first day. I literally sat down the entire day, except for walking to or from classes... students move almost never. And never is exhausting. In every class for four long blocks, the expectation was for us to come in, take our seats, and sit down for the duration of the time. By the end of the day, I could not stop yawning and I was desperate to move or stretch” (Wiggins 3). This really impacted me because of the truth in this statement. When we think of the typical classroom environment we envision students sitting in their seats listening to a teacher lecturing or giving a lesson at the front of the room. There is little to no movement with the exception of a student raising their hand to answer a question or getting up to use the bathroom. We hold students to an extremely high, and truthfully unfair standard to sit and listen passively all day, which completely goes against basic human nature. We hold adolescents to standards that we wouldn't want or expect of ourselves.

In researching the incorporation of movement into the classroom, it seemed that there were two primary ways to use movement: using movement as a break from learning in order to aid in learning later and using movement as a part of classroom learning at that moment. I spoke

to two teachers who incorporate movement into their classrooms on a daily basis and represent these two different strategies.

### **Using Movement as a break from learning activities**

Using movement in the classroom as a break from learning might sound counterintuitive, but in fact, it is the exact opposite. I first encountered this idea when I sat down and talked to Denise Maltese, an English teacher at Onteora Middle School who uses yoga to teach writing. When I asked her what initially got her interested in teaching writing through yoga, she explained that the two were separate entities for her in the beginning. What sparked her writing side was her work with the Hudson Valley Writing Project as one of the first major players within the organization. Yoga was something that she picked up as a hobby with her friends after moving back to the East Coast after graduating from UC Santa Barbara. Additionally, she cited author James Moffet, as one of the biggest influencers of her work.

Getting back to her work specifically she explained that yoga, and mindfulness, in particular, were good ways to remind students to get into their bodies and out of their heads. She described a technique called the “mindfulness minute” where students take a minute to be mindful and aware of their state of being. This mindfulness minute was practiced through a series of grounding exercises. There was an emphasis on finding ways for students to focus on themselves and work on concentration. A lot of the time she noticed that the students were super wired, especially when they had just come back from lunch. She found that simple movement exercises such as having students raise their shoulders up to their ears and back down and focusing on their senses would help ground them.

Denise explained that the impact of yoga and mindfulness can be seen in the students' writing processes. After using the techniques the students seem to be more focused and centered. Their health and well-being seemed to have improved as well and their general sense of the world around them had gotten better. Having the students take a minute to themselves improved their writing in the long run.

Elementary school teacher Carrie Jean Braniff echoes many of Denise's points in her article, "The Effects of Movement in the Classroom". Throughout her career she has strived to make the classroom environment active and one in which physical exercise is deemed essential. One way she suggests making the classroom active is during transitional periods. One example is if students are transitioning from one station to another, she might have the students do some sort of stretch to get from one place to the next, or she might ask them to perform an energizer of their choice such as 30 second intervals of air guitar or jumping jacks. She explains that, "These frequent breaks can enhance learning" (Braniff 2). Physical implementation does not have to overlap with instruction to be constructive.

Braniff also talks about active classrooms helping students with ADHD, "There is evidence that providing students with ADHD with exercise may actually solve some classroom-related problems" (Braniff 2). This caught my attention because I have ADHD and while I was in school I had a lot of trouble staying focused or engaged in the lessons that my teachers were giving. I always needed to be moving and tried to find ways to move that would not distract the people around me. This was challenging as one of my favorite ways to move was by taking two pencils and drumming on surfaces. I was very interested in music at an early age and after I had started learning how to drum, that was all I wanted to do. A lot of the time I could see that my drumming was getting in the way of other people focusing and I would stop. I

eventually started drumming on my leg which made less noise or I would try to wiggle my feet by keeping my toes on the floor and not letting my heels touch the ground so that it wouldn't make much noise. This helped me and the people around me, but I still felt like the odd one out. In a room full of kids who were able to sit still, even if they didn't want to be, I was unable to. I truly believe that if movement in the classroom was normalized when I was in school, I would have felt more comfortable in a classroom setting and I would be able to focus more on the work in front of me. Taking small breaks throughout the day in between lessons would have helped and also figuring out a way in which the whole class was up and moving during lessons would have been collaborative and constructive.

Christopher Mulrine talks more about the impact of movement in the classroom on students with ADHD in his article, "The Active Classroom: Supporting Students With Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder Through Exercise". As he explains in his article, students with ADHD typically have a lot of trouble concentrating or staying focused on one task for an extended period of time. Especially for younger students, a lot of the time when students with ADHD are not able to move throughout the day, classroom problems can occur. An easy fix is figuring out how to encourage movement in the classroom for all students which will especially benefit students with ADHD. As Mulrine states, "It is especially appropriate to allow the student with ADHD opportunities for controlled movement and to develop a repertoire of physical activities for the entire class (such as stretch breaks; LD Online, 1998). Sitting quietly in a chair and staying focused requires effort for all students, especially those with ADHD. Conventional wisdom tells us that students need breaks from learning and can focus better when provided breaks throughout the day; unstructured breaks from demanding cognitive tasks seem to facilitate both learning and social competence..." (Mulrine). If something as simple as allowing students

movement breaks throughout the day can help improve so many things in the classroom and will foster learning, why don't we do this more often?

### **Using Movement to Help Stimulate Ideas and Aid Learning**

Using movement during class time might seem daunting to teachers at first. It might seem like an impossible task to have to design a lesson for 25 or more kids in which all of them are up and moving around, but I talked to Andrew Stock, an active member of the Hudson Valley Writing Project and a social studies teacher at Arlington High School, to understand how he does this.

Movement in the classroom was not always Andrew's philosophy. He decided to make it his philosophy when he realized that kids were moving and wanted to move anyway. Instead of viewing their natural inclination in a negative light, he decided to use what the students were doing to their own advantage. His integration of movement in the classroom started in 2016 when he was selected as a Hudson Valley Writing Project (HVWP) teacher leader and focused his research on the connection between movement and writing. As part of his work for HVWP, he took part in a leadership project where he and a partner were tasked with developing a professional development workshop for teachers. They decided on the topic of incorporating movement into writing which was initially where he researched the topic.

One example of how Andrew has incorporated movement into the classroom is he uses the "popcorn method". He typically uses this to get students to generate ideas. These ideas can be for an upcoming project or essay or in response to a prompt that he writes on the board. How the popcorn method works is Andrew gives the students a prompt and they have to write an idea

down from where they're sitting. After they have written down one idea, they have to get up and find a new seat before they can write down another idea or response, and it repeats until it seems like there has been enough brainstorming for everyone. He explained that in his own life, he has found that moving and talking is a powerful precursor to writing as it helps to spur ideas. He admitted that some students find "the popcorn method" unhelpful as it interrupts their thought process, but for others having the ability to move helps them think. "Kids can get stalled out when they write. They get to a place they think is a dead-end, moving helps them expand on their ideas" (Stock). Andrew goes on to explain that it is hard for him to document the movement process in order to determine whether or not it benefits student learning holistically, but he has seen it improve their ability to think. He likes to think of movement as another tool in the students' toolbelt to utilize when they need it.

Another teacher who has found movement to be helpful in her classroom is my mother, Mary Cozza, a middle school teacher at MS. 224 in the South Bronx. She uses movement in the form of what she calls the "Timer Method" to directly improve the students' ability to focus and be efficient while they are focusing. How the Timer Method works is the teacher sets a timer for a specific amount of time, typically about 7-10 minutes. For that amount of time students have to focus on the task at hand and do their best to complete it. After the timer goes off students have about 3-5 minutes where they can get up, take a walk around, get a drink of water, exercise, talk to their friends, or do whatever they need to do, and then the process repeats. Mary has found that this really encourages students to pay attention and focus when they need to. Especially after Covid, students' ability to pay attention to one thing at a time for an extended period of time has been severely impacted. Our concentration skills as a society have diminished greatly in the past decade and the timer method helps bring that back.

Mary explained that the Timer Method was inspired by her work with Brain Power Wellness, a company created by Dave Beal whose goal is to “help transform the culture of schools by promoting mindfulness, self-development, and holistic wellness” (Beal). Brain Power Wellness works with students of all ages, ranging from pre-k all the way through college. They place emphasis on self-care and working through students’ emotions through movement. One of the main ways in which Brain Power Wellness does this is by implementing small exercises and games throughout class time to keep students engaged and focused. The main way they like to do this is by taking “brain breaks”. Brain breaks allow students to identify what they are feeling in a given moment and carry out a movement that helps them through that feeling. For instance, if a student was feeling angry, the corresponding exercise to help with that is push-ups. There are multiple corresponding exercises as well that students can pick from.

Brain Power Wellness has worked with hundreds of schools and thousands of students. From their experiences within schools, they have been able to get direct statistics from educators and students about what works within their approach. They were able to determine that 88% of educators believed that “Brain Power helped them with classroom management” and 93% “agree that Brain Power exercises helped them manage the stress of teaching”. In addition to this, 98% of educators “agree that Brain Power helped their students stay more engaged in class”. Lastly, 83% of the students themselves said that the “Brain Power exercises helped them with their concentration” and 98% “agree that they like to do Brain Power activities in class” (Brain Power Wellness). I found the last two statistics to be so important. All of this is for nothing if it isn’t benefiting the students, and we can see here that it is.

## **Movement in English Classrooms**

As an English major and Education minor, I chose to take a more specific approach by zeroing in on how movement can be used in English classes. From sitting down and talking to my friends and peers about their experiences with literature in their English classes in the past, many of them expressed that a majority of the time they were expected to read a novel either sitting down silently in class or on their own time after school. Then, after they finished reading, they would either have a group discussion about the novel through a series of open-ended questions and prompts or they would have to create some sort of project or write an essay about the book. The running theme throughout everyone's story was there was not much movement. I was pretty shocked by this.

In my own experience, I have found that literature and movement can often coincide, especially through theater. One of the main reasons why I love English so much and why it is my major now is because much of my high school ELA class experience consisted of theater. At least once in every English class I took we put on some type of performance. Whether that performance was a reinterpretation of a Shakespeare classic, a scene from *The Great Gatsby*, or a performance of something we wrote based on what we were reading every year we were on stage. Most importantly, each time without fail, it improved our ability to understand what we were reading because we weren't just passively taking in information, we were becoming the characters and understanding them. We were placing ourselves into their environments and imagining their realities as if they were our own.

My first experience in turning literature into theater was in 9th grade. We had just read Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and our teacher tasked us with re-writing it. He explained that our goal was to keep the Shakespearean language alive, keep the general plotline the same, but

put our own spin on the events that occur and rewrite it in a way that suited who we were as a class. A lot of us were pretty intimidated as we had never written a play before and were still trying to come to terms with understanding what happened in the original play. We ended up all working together and the next 5 or so weeks of class sessions became constructive workshopping and rehearsal periods. Every English class period we were up and moving and collaborating, running back and forth through the classroom to check on different stations. It brought us together as a class and allowed us to get excited about something academic. In the end, we ended up turning *Romeo and Juliet* into a musical. This allowed students to bring in their passions for music and singing and put them to good use. I played the drums for the majority of the musical. Other people sang, some danced, and some even chose to make their part interactive with the audience, encouraging them to get up. By the end of the project and performance, all of us understood *Romeo and Juliet* so much better. The characters, the messages, and every seemingly small part of the play became amplified.

Theater as a form of movement, I have found, is a really beautiful thing. It promotes a greater understanding of what you are reading and physically acting out how the characters are feeling and what they are thinking and doing deepens a student's comprehension of the character and the novel or play as a whole. There are a lot of great ways that reading can be active, theater is just one of those ways.

Overall, the incorporation of movement in the classroom is a necessity. Movement encourages students to stay focused and engaged. It allows students to take constructive breaks that will further their ability to learn throughout the day. It helps students better manage their feelings and time and promotes healthy coping mechanisms that will assist in being able to remain concentrated throughout the day. Movement also fosters a more collaborative learning

environment. There are a lot of physical benefits to movement in general both inside and outside of a classroom setting. If we continue to encourage the incorporation of movement we will see classrooms in which students are focused, engaged, and happy. We will find healthier balances between work and breaks, and we will be able to create learning spaces that not only acknowledge, but work to meet the needs of all students.

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