

A Qualitative Analysis of Elementary Teachers' Perceptions of a Non-Traditional
Classroom

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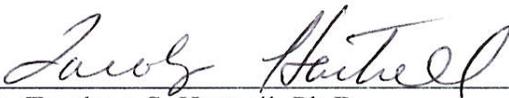


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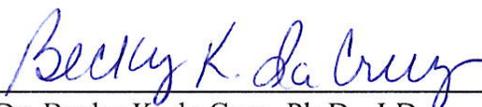


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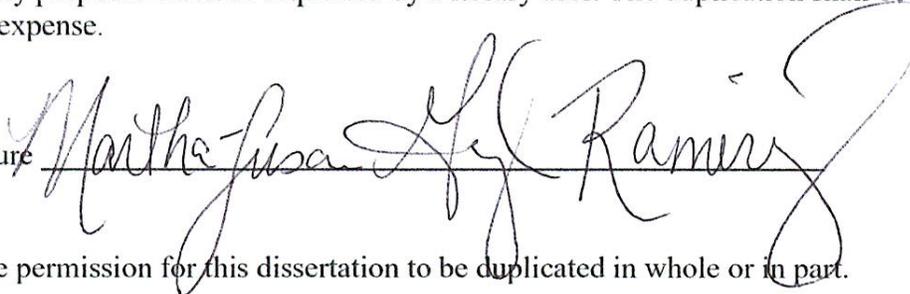
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ABSTRACT

Although researchers have reported benefits from a non-traditional educational approach, where the teacher is merely a facilitator in the learning environment, there remains a need for a paradigm shift among educators. This needed paradigm shift calls for more than simply restructuring schools and classrooms into a collaborative meeting space, but also calls for a change in mindset among educators. This mindset shift will allow teachers to become more comfortable acting as facilitator, allowing students to guide the learning through interaction with peers and exploration. Students need to be equipped with 21st Century skills such as written and oral communications, thinking and problem-solving skills, teamwork, personal skills, and creativity in order to be successful citizens (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2009). A flexible seating environment provides a space where learning is student-centered and social, providing students with opportunities to implement soft skills.

Five elementary school teachers shared their voices in this interpretive qualitative study by participating in one-on-one interviews as well as a 6 week focus group conducted through an online Facebook forum. The results from the study yielded four themes that addressed the two research questions. These themes were student comfort, community and collaboration, teachers letting go of control, and teachers acting as facilitators. The significance of this study was the potential to improve confidence among educators to create a space of collaborative learning and ease the fears of unstructured chaos. The voices of the teachers in this study can be used to inform educators on the benefits from implementing flexible seating as well as on the drawbacks, disadvantages, and struggles experienced during the implementation of flexible seating.

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DEDICATION

This is dedicated to my children, Reed, Noel, Rose, and Baby Ramirez – May you always work hard to achieve your dreams and always remember “Your choices today, affect your tomorrow.” May all your tomorrows be joyful!

Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

An issue plaguing today's schools is outdated seating methods that explains the motivation to examine the need for an educational evolution concerning the classroom environment, "Most of today's schools are yesterday's schools, built for purposes and contexts disappearing or gone" (Smylie, 2010, p. 2). Inspired by the work of John Dewey and Maria Montessori, Cornell (2002) called for a pedagogical paradigm shift. He encouraged teachers to discontinue the industrial-age classroom structure consisting of rows and columns of desks and instead evolve into a more alternative-style seating environment. He believed this would positively impact the classroom environment.

Smylie (2010) stressed a need for schools to become more flexible and prepare for the complexity of things to come. Currently, they are ill-suited for the magnitude of change occurring, not to mention the changes that are still yet to come. Toffler (1980) spoke of old ideas and strategies being outdated and no longer relevant to the quickly changing technologies and life-styles. Horn and Evans (2013) agreed with Toffler that old strategies and ways of thinking no longer work for today's students. They further explained that the education system in place was outdated and did not meet the needs of 21st Century students.

As Harvey and Kenyon (2013) stated, learning was traditionally an act of a student listening while the expert, or teacher, provided necessary information. There was a necessity for a pedagogical shift from teacher-centered classrooms to student-centered classrooms where learning involved the active engagement of the learner. Wilson, Miles,

Baker, and Schoenberger (2000) stressed the importance of identifying competencies and strategies appropriate for gaining 21st Century skills. Students need to be equipped with 21st Century skills in order to be successful citizens (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2009). These skills include both the traditional “hard” skills of literacy, mathematics, and technological skills as well as the “soft” skills necessary for the 21st Century learner (Wilson, Miles, Baker, & Schoenberger, 2000). These soft skills include written and oral communication, thinking and problem-solving skills, teamwork, personal skills, and creativity. In order to address 21st Century skills, classroom environments and teacher behaviors need to change to provide a student-centered, social environment providing opportunities to implement soft skills among students.

Although innovations have taken place under educational reform, McLaughlin (2009) found many have failed. McLaughlin (2009) argued that many of the failures in implementing new innovations derived from a lack of organizational change, which resulted in teachers that were reluctant to change in roles, behavior, and structures in the classroom. Many researchers echoed this reluctance and found that classrooms lacked an environment conducive to the 21st Century (Campbell, Saltmarsh, Chapman, & Drew, 2013; Cingel Bodinet, 2016; Hargreaves, 1994; Lieberman & Pointer Mace, 2010). To meet the needs of the 21st Century, students must be provided environments in which to explore and learn through comfortable, social interactions. As Sir Ken Robinson (2017) stated in his TED Talk Conference, we must move from an industrial model of education into a model that creates the conditions for students to flourish. This child-centered ideology will not exist with marginal changes in the organization of classrooms, implementation of new technologies, or even teacher behaviors (McLaughlin, 2009). We

must continue to design classrooms that support and encourage a positive learning environment conducive to meeting the needs of 21st Century students. As Cornell (2002) warned, we must create environments less like the 19th Century classroom of rows and columns and focus more on the importance of social learning.

Morrone, Ouimet, Siering, and Arthur (2014) found students in a non-traditional classroom felt a sense of community, resulting from an increased amount of social interactions. Malik (2016) reported seating arrangements that impacted interactions between students as well as between students and teachers. In addition to the positive impact on social interactions, much work has been done to contribute to the research on flexible seating with great focus on students with differences such as Autism or attention disorders (Bagatell, Mirigliani, Patterson, Reyes, & Test, 2010; Fedewa, Davis, & Ahn 2015; Fedewa & Erwin, 2011). With this study, I will add to the growing body of research on non-traditional classroom-seating environments.

Statement of the Problem

Herman Miller Inc. (2008) stated that a revolution has yet to occur to rid classrooms of students sitting in “immovable desks—'soldiers in a row'” (p. 3). Research supported active learning environments where students were engaged in small, collaborative groups (Cornell 2012; Fedewa et al., 2015; Hannah, 2013; Malik, 2016; Morrone et al., 2014). Many researchers have documented the necessity for an educational paradigm shift and have supported a shift to student-centered educational approaches to create an active learning environment and build a sense of community among learners (Cingel Bodinet, 2016; Harvey & Kenyon, 2013; Herman Miller, Inc., 2008; Luther, 2000). Luther (2000) reported that this collaborative method of teaching

and learning began to emerge in the 1970s; yet, many classrooms continued to resemble an outdated 19th Century approach. Luther (2000) argued that this “new” teaching method allowed students to develop higher-order thinking methods beyond rote memorization.

In order to provide spaces that foster active and engaged learning and support the incorporation of not only the familiar “hard” skills such as literacy and numeracy, but also the “soft” skills such as problem solving and communication necessary for contemporary scholars, a change must occur in the classroom environment (Wilson et al., 2000). Such a paradigm shift requires an entire shift in the mindset of the educator (The Deskless Tribe, 2017; Delzer, 2016). Although some schools and teachers are using flexible or alternative seating, there is limited research documenting the impact of flexible seating on the students and teachers.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this basic interpretive qualitative study was to understand the perceptions of elementary teachers regarding the impact of implementing flexible seating on their teaching, student learning, and their classroom community. The primary goal of this research was to understand how teachers perceived the effects of flexible seating on their personal teaching mindset as well as how they perceived flexible seating impacts the soft skills of students in flexible seating classrooms. The research specifically explored student communication skills, problem-solving skills, their ability to work collaboratively with classmates, and student self-awareness in flexible seating classrooms.

Significance of the Study

Although researchers have reported benefits from a non-traditional educational approach, where the teacher is merely a facilitator in the learning environment, there remains a need for a paradigm shift in educator mindset and the classroom environment. Many researchers shared a sense of urgency for schools to move away from a 19th Century design, replicating an industry-style setting and toward a more modern setting that will benefit the 21st Century learner (Campbell et al., 2013; Cingel Bodinet, 2016; Hargreaves, 1994; Harvey & Kenyon, 2013; Luther, 2000; Robinson & Aronica, 2009). Rogers and Freiberg (1994) even went so far as to compare schools to prisons, stating “schools, factories, and prisons look remarkably alike” (p. 332). They further stated the purpose of such was to meet the needs of the industrial development at a time in our country when industries were booming.

This needed paradigm shift calls for more than simply restructuring schools and classrooms into a collaborative meeting space, but also calls for a change in mindset among educators. This mindset shift will allow teachers to become more comfortable acting as facilitators, allowing students to guide the learning process through interaction with peers and exploration. The significance of this study was the potential to improve confidence among educators to create a space of collaborative learning and ease the fears of unstructured chaos. The voices of the teachers in this study can be used to inform educators on the benefits from implementing flexible seating as well as on the drawbacks, disadvantages, and struggles experienced during the implementation of flexible seating.

Theoretical Framework

The theory of social learning has been around for years. Social constructivists believe in shared learning through social interactions. Teachers implementing constructivist teaching strategies and practices are an important part of educational reform (Powell & Kalina, 2009). Hein (1991) defined constructivism as learners constructing meaning for themselves as they learn both individually and through social interactions. Brophy and Good (1994) further explained constructivism as the development of new knowledge students make through active learning.

The constructivist learning theory supports the beliefs of John Dewey, Jean Piaget, and Lev Vygotsky (Hein, 1991). John Dewey and Jean Piaget believed that learning was no longer a student sitting passively and accepting the knowledge given to them, but instead the construction of knowledge for oneself (Hein, 1991; Powell & Kalina, 2009). The theory further supported the beliefs of John Dewey and Lev Vygotsky in that learning is inherently social (Creswell, 2009; Hein, 1991; Powell & Kalina, 2009). Harvey and Kenyon (2013) agreed by explaining that the outdated and passive transfer of information from teacher to student must be replaced with more active learning. Lieberman and Pointer Mace (2010), reported similarly in their study of teacher learning and professional learning communities stating working together with colleagues proved to be a productive way to learn not only about their own practices, but about other teachers' practices as well. Rogers and Freiberg (1994) encouraged a shift to occur where the teacher was no longer solely responsible for student learning. Instead, the classroom environment would shift from a teacher-centered environment to a person-centered environment where there was shared leadership between the teacher and

students, and students would think for themselves freely. They further suggested this would create a community-friendly environment.

The constructivist learning theory encouraged a student-centered approach to learning in great contrast to the traditional-style instruction, which began during the industrial-age to meet the needs of students who would work in the industrial realm. Hein (1991) encouraged more progressive teaching strategies that identified the need for social interactions as an integral part of the learning process. Garrett (2008) further explained constructivists principles of learning as student-centered classrooms that provided a learning environment where knowledge is less about receiving information from a teacher and more about the construction of knowledge through interactions.

Powell and Kalina (2009) believed that providing a classroom for students based on the understanding of Vygotsky's theories would develop more effective classroom environments. They strongly believed that social interaction provided more effective internalization of knowledge and that cooperative learning was vital to providing a social constructivist classroom. Hein (1991) identified an intimacy in learning between participants. He further believed that intimacy cannot be obtained through the traditional-style classroom where learning was isolated and individual.

To provide 21st Century students with an environment rich in language as Vygotsky encouraged, a social constructivist setting must be provided (Powell & Kalina, 2009). Brophy (1999) expressed the importance of the physical environment when creating a place where students were free to engage with one another as a learning community, constructing knowledge and shared understandings. There has been much research on ways to provide more appropriate learning environments (Clayton &

Messinger, 2014; Cornell, 2002; Fernandes, Huang, & Rinaldo, 2011; McMullen, 2015; Mead, Scibora, Gardner, & Dunn, 2016). Fernandes et al. (2011) expressed a lack of communication in a traditional classroom arrangement that was detrimental to student learning. Hannah (2013) agreed stating that rows and columns-structured seating did not encourage the essential interaction with students that encourage them to be successful members of society. Further, the social constructivist methodology stressed the necessity for classroom environments to provide a learning environment where children have room and freedom to work and play together (Jones, 2012). In order to provide students with environments conducive to meeting 21st Century needs, many educators face the necessity to change. A flexible seating environment, although requiring some potentially uncomfortable change for teachers, provides students with opportunities to interact with each other while freely moving and engaging with peers in order to meet their individual learning and social needs.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study combined research on the change process (Fullan, 2001) and the Concerns Based Adoption Model (Hall & Hord, 2001; Hall & Rutherford, 1976; Hord & Roussin, 2013; Tyson, 2013) to guide my development of interview/focus forum questions and my interpretation of participant's perceptions of implementing flexible seating in their classrooms. There are three broad phases of the change process according to Fullan (2001): (1) initiation (the process of deciding to implement the change; (2) implementation (putting the new ideas into practice, and (3) continuation (sustaining use of the innovative practice). In this study, I interviewed teachers who have made the decision to implement flexible seating (Phase 1) and have

implemented flexible seating for at least a year (Phase II). My study explored how these teachers made the decision to try flexible seating, what they did to implement it, and how they made meaning out of those experiences.

Change is a difficult concept for some teachers, especially veteran teachers that have been in the field for twenty or more years, “Just imagine ... educators in the 21st century who *respect* and *embrace* change” (Hord & Roussin, 2013, p. 1). Hord and Roussin (2013) had a vision of educators excited about change. They encouraged change and warned that change is easier to maintain when participants partake in social learning. To avoid teacher burn out, Fullan (1995) encouraged educators to be prepared for some discomfort before finding themselves in a comfortable spot on the other side of change.

Kouzes and Posner (2012) expressed there was a lot of trial and error involved when trying out new concepts and ideas. Hord and Roussin (2013) agreed, stating that change can be stressful due to feelings of confusion. Fullan (2001) explained that reformers must have patience as new concepts were implemented and those implementing the change experience the preparation and adjustments to the changes that often cause frustration and stress.

Although change can be stressful, several researchers emphasized the importance of the individuals implementing change (Baglibel, Samancioglu, Ozmantar, & Hall, 2014; Hall & Hord, 2001; Hord & Roussin, 2013). The researchers acknowledged that organizations and schools cannot experience change until the individual implementing the change experiences change themselves. There is great importance in recognizing that “change is a process, not an event” (Hall & Hord, 1987, p.8).

There are several phases that an organization or individual must experience that help to guide change. Change facilitators must understand the processes while equally understanding the importance of, when implementing new innovations, the starting point being the individual (Hord & Roussin, 2013). Additionally, one must understand and expect that any change, even if it is mandated, will bring resistance from certain individuals (Hall & Hord, 2001). Some individuals may even feel a certain sense of grief when experiencing change as they shift from an old way of doing things to implementing the new innovation (Hall & Hord, 2001).

To help curb strong feelings that may occur during a change process, change facilitators may choose to use the Concerns-Based Adoption Model (CBAM). With over 30 years of research (Roach, Kratochwill, & Frank, 2009), the Concerns-Based Adoption Model (CBAM) is a useful framework when identifying how individuals feel about new innovations they are implementing (Stages of Concern) and how they are using it (Levels of Use). Tyson (2013) explained the Stages of Concern framework was useful for understanding the natural processes experienced when implementing change. The 7-levels of concern helped to identify the levels of involvement of teachers as they attempted to adapt to new innovations and respond to change (Khoboli & O'toole, 2011). Change facilitators must understand how their subordinates perceive change (Hall & Hord, 1987). Change not only has a technical side, but it also includes a human side that cannot be ignored as change must begin and end with the individuals implementing the change (Hall & Hord, 1987). See Figure 1 for a view of the Stages of Concern framework adapted for this study.

Phases	Stages of Concern	Implementing Flexible Seating
IMPACT	6 Refocusing	How can I make this even better?
	5 Collaboration	How are other teachers implementing flexible seating? How are my students responding to the change to flexible seating classroom?
	4 Consequence	How will it affect my students' learning, social interactions, and behaviors?
TASK	3 Management	How will I afford new furniture and equipment? How do I organize the space?
SELF	2 Personal	How will it affect me?
	1 Informational	I want to learn more about it.
	0 Awareness	I'm not concerned, or flexible seating doesn't pertain to me.

Figure 1. Adaptation of the Stages of Concern framework for implementation of flexible seating (Hall & Hord, 2001).

As educators try to keep up with the rapidly changing world to appropriately prepare 21st Century learners, change is inevitable (Tyson, 2013). Using the Concerns-Based Adoption Model, a research-based approach, facilitators can monitor change while taking into account not only the technical side, but the human side simultaneously (Hall & Hord, 1987). Many researchers have used the CBAM to monitor the implementation of research-based practices (Roach, Kratochwill, & Frank, 2009), the implementation of

computer use in schools (Newhouse, 2001), and various educational innovations such as team teaching (Hall & Rutherford, 1976) and learning management systems (Lochner, Conrad, & Graham, 2015). Similarly, this study implemented the CBAM to identify how teachers moved through the 7 Stages of Concern as presented in Figure 1 (Hall & Hord, 2001). All teacher participants were beyond the awareness stage (stage 0); however, personal interviews and focus group forums helped identify stages of concern identifying how teachers progressed through stages of gathering information (stage 1) and determining how it affected them (stage 2). Additionally, the interviews and focus groups addressed how teachers managed the new classroom environment (stage 3), and the consequences teachers experienced as a result of implementing flexible seating (stage 4). The focus forum further allowed teachers to collaborate with other teachers who have implemented flexible seating (stage 5). This collaboration allowed teachers to problem-solve issues together. Finally, teachers experienced the refocusing stage during the focus group forums to determine how they could improve on their flexible seating classroom (stage 6).

Semi-structured interview questions were designed to assist participants in focusing on the task phase. Participants in this study were asked to discuss the management stage and how they implemented flexible seating into their classroom environment. Additionally, they were asked to consider the impact phase while reflecting on the consequence stage, the collaboration stage, and the refocusing stage. During the impact phase, the participants were asked to reflect on how flexible seating impacted the learning, social interactions, and behaviors of their students (Consequence Stage). Participants also had the opportunity during focus groups to investigate how other

participants have implemented flexible seating as well as reflect on their experience with co-teaching situations and how students adjusted to non-flexible seating classrooms (Collaboration Stage). Finally, participants were asked to identify ways they may improve the use of flexible seating in their classroom and discuss whether they choose to implement flexible seating again in the coming year (Refocusing Stage).

Research Design

An interpretive qualitative research design was used for this study to help understand how teachers have constructed meaning through their experiences regarding implementation of flexible seating in their classrooms (Merriam, 2002). Face-to-face interviews as well as focus groups were used to identify a range of perceptions about flexible seating and uncover various factors that influenced the opinions of teachers (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Focus groups were conducted through a closed, Facebook group over a six-week period. Discussion topics were posted for participants to respond to the post as well as create an open discussion between colleagues.

Convenience sampling was utilized to select participants that have implemented flexible seating for the first time in the current school year. The participants were elementary school teachers located at an elementary school that had 48.7% implementation of full or partial flexible seating. One teacher was selected from each grade level in grades kindergarten through fourth grade. All but one teacher had only one-year experience with flexible seating, while one teacher had implemented flexible seating for two years. This limited experience was important as the purpose of the study was to identify the benefits of flexible seating as well as the drawbacks or struggles of

flexible seating, and I wanted to use the raw experiences of teachers in their first experience with flexible seating.

Based upon the purpose of the study to examine elementary school teachers' experiences and perceptions of flexible seating, the following research questions were developed.

Research Questions

RSCH Q1- In what ways, if any, has the implementation of flexible seating impacted elementary school teachers' perceptions of student learning?

RSCH Q2- How does flexible seating influence the teaching behaviors and attitudes of those teachers who have implemented flexible seating in their classroom?

Definition of Terms

To provide understanding of the terms used throughout this dissertation, the following key terms and definitions are provided as defined by the researcher.

21st Century Skills. Along with basic core instruction, students must learn to think creatively and be innovative, have skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, communication, and collaboration, and be computer and media literate. Additionally, students must be flexible and adapt well to change, manage time and goals independently, and possess social and leadership skills (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2009).

Concerns-Based Adoption Model. This is defined as, "A conceptual framework that describes, explains, and predicts probable teacher concerns and behaviors throughout the school change process" (Hord & Roussin, 2013, p. 139).

Flexible Seating. Classroom seating arrangements that are easily modified, not stationary, or assigned. Students have freedom to move when needed based on circumstances or conditions because the environment belongs to the learner and the teacher is merely a facilitator in the space (The Deskless Tribe, 2017).

Non-traditional Educational Approach. A classroom that is learner-centered where the teacher chooses tasks that focus on a goal and resonate with student experiences, but merely facilitates as the students take risks to collaboratively complete tasks (Johnson, Kimball, Melendez, Rhea, & Travis, 2009).

Traditional Educational Approach. A classroom that is teacher-centered where the student role is to “sit and receive” while the teacher role is to “stand and deliver.” (Johnson et al., 2009).

Summary

This basic interpretive qualitative study sought to understand the perceptions elementary teachers had regarding their implementation of flexible seating. Many researchers have identified the necessity for an educational paradigm shift, moving away from outdated teaching strategies and toward providing environments conducive to social interaction and collaboration. This chapter has provided the purpose of the study as well as introduced the research questions. In Chapter 2, I will provide a review of the literature addressing the four areas of concern when discussing the evolution of pedagogy. In Chapter 3, I will provide a detailed description of the methodology used throughout including details of the interview process and the online focus group. The results of the study will be documented and explained in Chapter 4. The final chapter

includes the discussion of the results, conclusion, and recommendations for future research based on the findings within this study.

Chapter II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Changes in education are inevitable. History of the American education system has demonstrated drastic changes as evidence of ever changing schools in the United States. Smylie (2010) explained that educators must continually adapt to the rapid changes and unpredictable times. Toffler (1970) discussed “the ways in which we adapt—or fail to adapt—to the future” (p. 1). There is an apparent need to make changes to prepare for the future, but many do not know where to begin. Toffler (1970) stated, “Earnest intellectuals talk bravely about ‘educating for change’ or ‘preparing for the future’ but we know virtually nothing about how to do it” (p. 2). Schools need to become more flexible to prepare for the complexity of things to come because they are currently ill-suited for the magnitude of change currently occurring, not to mention the changes that are still yet to come (Smylie, 2010). Toffler (1980) stated similar ideas decades earlier, warning of the old ways of thinking and the old ideologies used in the past no longer fit the needs of a fast-emerging world of technologies and modes of communication.

The purpose of this literature review is to provide an overview of the fast-emerging world of which Toffler (1980) addresses. In this literature review, I will address four areas of concern addressing the evolution of the pedagogy. The first section, *Paradigm Shift*, will specifically look at the educational evolution and history of classroom design. Many researchers have found that classrooms lack an environment

conducive to the 21st Century (Campbell et al., 2013; Cingel Bodinet, 2016; Hargreaves, 1994). The section on *Social Interactions and Collaboration* will identify changing needs in pedagogy and the need for teachers' mindset to shift from teacher-centered classrooms to student-centered classrooms where the students are doing most of the talking through productive, small groups. Many researchers have found the importance of social interactions in the classroom and how seating can affect relationships (Cornell, 2002; Fedewa, Davis, & Ahn, 2015; Fernandes et al., 2011; Hannah, 2013; Malik, 2016; Wang & Degol, 2014). In the section *Flexible or Alternative Seating*, the needs for children to have a comfortable learning environment that provides movement and choice is addressed. Much research has been conducted to identify how the classroom environment and flexible seating affects students on various levels with various social and academic needs (Bagatell et al., 2010; Cornell, 2002; Dillon, Gilpin, Juliani, & Klein, 2016; Erwin, Fedewa, Ahn, & Thornton, 2016; Fedewa & Erwin, 2011; Fernandes et al., 2011; Gaston, Moore, Butler, 2016; Hannah, 2013; Hood-Smith & Leffingwell, 1983; Mead et al., 2016; Meyer, 2016; Smith, 2013). Finally, *Classroom Management* will address the needs of classroom culture and control in order to provide a successful learning environment to all learners. Classroom management will be defined and what the term 'classroom management' encompasses will be identified.

The Paradigm Shift

Many researchers express the need for classrooms to provide an environment conducive to the 21st Century (Campbell et al., 2013; Cingel Bodinet, 2016; Hargreaves, 1994; Lieberman & Pointer Mace, 2010). This section further addresses those concerns and discuss the need for teachers to become more comfortable in the paradigm shift

necessary to meet the needs of 21st Century students. As Smith (2013) revealed, students spend approximately two-thirds of the time they were awake interacting in a learning environment in some capacity. This knowledge reveals an urgency for a paradigm shift to move away from outdated modes of teaching. Hargreaves (1994), Cornell (2002), Smith (2013), and Cingel Bodinet (2016) all shared concerns of how outdated education systems impacted the workforce. Cingel Bodinet (2016), a behavioral science professor, pointed out in her essay the minimal workforce experiences that currently involved people working alone as students were expected to do in traditional classroom settings. Instead, students who enter the workforce will be expected to communicate clearly, be flexible, work effectively with a diverse group of colleagues, and share responsibility for work conducted collaboratively (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2009). Cornell (2002) stressed that schools need to have expectations similar to the workforce, requiring students to not only have a certain knowledge, but also a set of skills that generated success later in life. Hargreaves (1994) declared that the education system continued to crumble under current structures, attributing it to outdated career configurations. Smith (2013) agreed with the outdated system and encouraged decisions to be made by focusing on a competitive, productive workforce.

In an interview with Naomi Thiers (2017), Michael Fullan discussed cultural legacy. He describes this as teachers being comfortable with the way things have always been and the way they have always taught. He further explained that even if there was change, teachers often slipped back into a more comfortable way of teaching instead of continuing with the change (Thiers, 2017). Smylie (2010) discussed similar points, expressing a fear of change possibly due to the rapidly changing and unpredictable times.

In their decade-long study on professional development practices for teachers, Lieberman and Pointer Mace (2010) declared concern for schools to evolve to meet the demands of rapidly changing demographics. They further identified globalization of the economy and technology which called for schools to meet the changing demands (Lieberman & Pointer Mace, 2010). Campbell et al. (2013) studied three primary schools recently implementing non-traditional, flexible classroom environments. Their research indicated necessity for schools to be aware of changes in the nature of students and their evolving needs and respond accordingly to those demands (Campbell et al., 2013).

Much like Smylie (2010) communicated concern that today's schools were outdated and were built for needs that no longer existed, Hargreaves (1994) discussed the same concerns nearly two decades earlier. Hargreaves (1994) asserted the purposes for which schools were constructed and the pedagogical practices currently used were built for other times. He further stressed concern for the outdated ideals that were once geared to preparing large groups of students to use heavy industrial machinery (Hargreaves, 1994).

Several researchers echo the same trepidation that schools are continuing ideology which is now obsolete (Brown & Lippincott, 2003; Campbell et al., 2013; Cingel Bodinet, 2016; Dillon et al., 2016; Hargreaves, 1994; Robinson & Aronica, 2009; Smylie, 2010). Brown and Lippincott (2003) described the classroom concept to be both expanding and evolving in their study of classrooms in higher education. The authors revealed a concept expanding due to new technologies and explained the evolving of new methods of teaching and learning (Brown & Lippincott, 2003). They further suggested that the term 'classroom' cannot be used as it had been in the traditional sense because it

no longer defined the options available today through teaching and learning due to the expanding access to online learning opportunities. Cingel Bodinet (2016) agreed, declaring that the educational system currently in place was created to meet the needs of knowledge, values, and norms of the industrial age. The author emphasized the drastic changes since the industrial age and further expressed that the changes were happening exponentially, while the educational system was much slower to make changes and meet the needs of a modern culture (Cingel Bodinet, 2016).

Robinson and Aronica (2009) revealed similar beliefs as Cingel Bodinet's theory of changes since the industrial age in their earlier studies. The authors used an example of the steam engine to emphasize the desperation of the educational system and the need to evolve. Robinson and Aronica (2009) explained that once the steam engine was a new and innovative form of transportation. The steam engine was more updated and powerful than the form of transportation that came before it (Robinson & Aronica, 2009). However, over time the steam engine failed to meet the needs of the people and a new engine was necessary to keep up with the needs of the changing society, resulting in a new paradigm (Robinson & Aronica, 2009). The authors compared the education system to the steam engine, indicating that the time for the old educational system had run out (Robinson & Aronica, 2009). They further expressed a need for the education system not to be reformed but transformed because the current use of the industrial education was crumbling under the fast-moving demands of the twenty-first Century (Robinson & Aronica, 2009). Dillon et al. (2016) agreed and further warned that the educational system was quickly moving toward a stage of learning-space design that will fade away.

They cautioned that a shift in pedagogy must happen to avoid falling into a pattern of high-cost, low-impact results (Dillon et al., 2016).

Authors have examined the outdated education system and changes necessary for the paradigm shift to be effective (Cornell, 2002; Fernandes et al., 2011; Harvey & Kenyon, 2013; Hein 1991; Johnson et al., 2009; Kennedy, 2016; Luther, 2000; Robinson & Aronica, 2009; Weinstein, Romano, & Mignano, 2011). Fernandes, in collaboration with two professors, wrote an essay detailing her findings on how student learning was impacted by their seating locations in the classroom. They noted less socialization in classrooms where seating arrangements employed rows and columns, yet a promotion of collaboration in environments utilizing non-linear arrangements (Fernandes et al., 2011). In his comprehensive description of constructivist ideas, Hein (1991) discussed traditional educational structures as isolating the learners from social interactions and the passive acceptance of knowledge. Similarly, in her paper examining the old vs. new methods of teaching, Luther (1991) discussed the frontal placement of the teacher and the demand for authority instead of a collaborative environment where students were members of a community. Although she believed an integrated approach between the two methods of learning was best, Luther (1991) expressed a need for the “new” method of learning in order to develop higher-order thinking skills as well as build a collaborative learning community. Kennedy (2016) agreed in his article written for *American School & University* magazine, defining classrooms as rigid and recalled an era when teachers stood at the front of a classroom of submissive students demanding obedience which resembled a court room rather than a place of learning. Cornell (2002) stressed many of the same requirements for teachers to leave the industrial-style classroom where the

teacher had complete authority and instead moved to an environment where the teacher was the facilitator. He also highlighted the need for the environment to no longer include students working passively, to an active environment full of discovery and collaboration. Lieberman and Pointer Mace (2010) pointed out that even if learners struggled together, they were more likely to master new procedures than working in isolation. Despite the awareness of the necessity of change, our education system continues to train teachers to teach in a uniform fashion rather than individualized for each learner and situation (Robinson & Aronica, 2009). Johnson et al. (2009) acknowledged the need to move from students simply sitting and receiving information while the teacher stood in the front of the room delivering knowledge. Yet, the authors warned that anything outside of these expectations may violate the perceptions that students have of their reality as students may feel more comfortable with a structured environment where students are expected to sit and listen while the teacher delivers the necessary material. Regardless of the possibility of defying perceptions, the classroom must evolve.

Researchers stress the importance of the classroom moving from an individual, isolated environment to one of community and collaboration (Cingel Bodinet, 2016; Cornell, 2002; Fernandes et al., 2011; Luther, 2000). Learning is active and collaborative (Luther, 2000). In order to create a sense of community, a shift must happen, and classrooms must become student-centered (Cingel Bodinet, 2016). Communication and social interaction is a key component to learning (Fernandes et al., 2011). This shift can help build a positive learning environment where students are allowed to learn from each other (Cingel Bodinet, 2016).

Hall and Hord (2001) expressed concern that even mandated change could be met with resistance. This paradigm shift must happen to provide learning environments that are updated and meet the needs of the modern-day students. Weinstein et al. made a reference to over-crowded classrooms resembling prisons (2011). Rose (2012) encouraged moving beyond focusing so much on the design of so many new technologies and instead focusing on the design of new classroom models. Robinson and Aronica (2009) warned against the mistake that many policymakers make, believing that improving on what had been done in the past will improve the future. Smylie (2010) identified that schools were not prepared for the magnitude of change that was facing them. Smylie (2010) encouraged schools to become more flexible to become proactive rather than reactive to change. Campbell et al. (2013) further encouraged schools to become more responsive to the changing needs and to be more open to redesigning their approaches. Dillon et al. (2016) charged that the time had come to end this stronghold of traditional schools. One suggestion for schools to meet the ever-changing needs was to identify new classroom arrangements necessary to meet the needs to students and “turn the learning space on its head” (Dillon et al., 2016, p. 2).

Flexible seating supports this idea of a needed paradigm shift. Flexible seating moves classroom environments out of the 19th Century industrial-style classroom and provides an environment where students can work to enhance their 21st Century skills such as collaboration, social skills, and problem-solving abilities. Flexible seating further supports the paradigm shift of teachers becoming facilitators while students explore and problem-solve through collaboration with peers.

Social Interactions and Collaboration

The following section addresses the importance of classroom environments providing a student-centered, dialogue-friendly atmosphere conducive to social learning. One of the biggest factors in this paradigm shift is that of social relationships. Johnson, Johnson, and Holubec (1990) strongly emphasized the importance of leaving behind a competitive era and moving toward an era where schools encourage interdependence and mutuality. Visser (2001) agreed when discussing the insufficient social areas available to students in schools and further stated how physical provisions can have depressing effects on not just the students but can also negatively impact faculty and staff. Dillon et al. (2016) identified these same concerns and further asserted that the learning spaces provided to students can impact the entire teaching and learning community. Providing environments conducive to social learning will allow students 21st Century learning opportunities which can positively impact the culture of the school.

Many researchers discuss how seating arrangements can affect social relationships (Cornell, 2002; Fernandes et al., 2011; Hannah, 2013; Malik, 2016; Wang & Degol, 2014). Cornell (2002) declares that the classroom environment should be a welcoming atmosphere where people want to be rather than a place of required attendance. He further asserts that the classroom environment should promote interaction and create a sense of community among its members. Marzano (2003) agreed and further explained the importance of teacher-student relationships in addition to student-peer relationships. Hannah (2013) contended the classroom environment where desks were lined neatly in rows, stating that it did not encourage interaction among the members of the environment. Appropriate classroom seating arrangements inspire a school culture

that promotes social relationships and community that extends beyond the classroom and state expectations.

Fedewa et al. (2015) believed the school environment would have an impact on student performance not just educationally and behaviorally, but also affected students socially. Hannah (2013) believed the classroom arrangement was key to students finding their place in the world and helps them to focus on their future and develop who they were as people. Hannah (2013) further stated that a collaborative environment introduced the next generation to what was expected for students to become successful members of society. Bullard (2014) included a well-designed classroom as a vital piece to allow students to participate in various forms of interactions. Classroom seating arrangements can promote social interactions which contribute to students developing socially as productive members of society.

Communication is vital in the learning environment. Therefore, providing an environment that promotes social interactions between students and students and between students and teacher is crucial to the success of students (Cornell, 2002; Fernandes et al., 2011; Malik, 2016). Parsons (2015) reported that intentional planning must take place in order to create learning spaces conducive to student-centered dialogue. In addition to providing learning environments that promote interpersonal communication, Cornell (2002) further stated that the classroom environment should be a place where students felt a sense of community and a desire to be present.

Weinstein et al. (2011) expressed:

If we want children to be seriously engaged in learning, to share their thoughts and feelings, to take risks, and to develop a sense of social responsibility, then we need to organize classrooms in such a way that students feel safe and cared for – emotionally, intellectually, and physically. If we want students to feel a sense of connectedness and trust, then we must work to create classroom communities where students know that they are needed, valued members of the group. (p. 53)

Fernandes et al. (2011) believed that classroom arrangement and seating placement had a significant impact on social interactions. The researchers believed the mere seating arrangement encouraged social interactions within the classroom or created social barriers, diminishing students' abilities to interact with peers. In addition, Malik (2016) believed that the classroom seating arrangements greatly improved the rapport among students. Seating arrangements can promote necessary interactions and further impact communication among peers, which is a key component in the learning environment (Fernandes et al. 2001).

The authors claim that student interactions are lessened in teacher-centered classrooms where the desks are arranged in rows and columns; yet, small group arrangements allow student interactions and promote a student-centered classroom (Fernandes et al., 2011). Malik (2016) agreed with Fernandes et al. and found placing students in groups instead of arranging desks in rows helped with the paradigm shift to student-centered environments. In addition, Malik (2016) found when students were allowed to change seating arrangements on occasion and pick their own seats, discipline

problems were fewer and the rapport among classmates improved. Fernandes et al. reported teachers usually dictated the room arrangement based on their individual teaching styles and preferences rather than the needs of students (2011). Malik (2016) agreed and further stated that traditional rows discouraged peer-to-peer discussion and was more conducive to teacher movement, disallowing students to move throughout the room in fluid groups. Wang and Degol (2014) expressed the dangers of exclusively focusing on academics, warning that this act neglected the school's responsibility to provide developmental opportunities to students not just academically, but also socially in order to shape their identities as "academically capable, socially integrated individuals who are committed to learning" (p. 141).

Alexander, Cohen, Fitzgerald, Honsey, Jorn, Knowles, Oberg, Todd, Walker, and Whiteside (2008) conducted an exploratory research on Active Learning Classrooms (ALC). The ALCs were constructed by the Office of Classroom Management (OCM) as a pilot project in two general-purpose classrooms with the combined seating capacity of 162 students. The goal of their study was to create student-centered learning spaces. For their study, Alexander et al. (2008) utilized survey questionnaires from both students and instructors in four courses conducted in the ALCs. Additionally, instructor interviews and classroom observations were employed to conduct the study. The data gathered during the study revealed both instructors and students were pleased with the new environments (Alexander et al., 2008). Data gathered revealed instructors were able to identify a shift in their role from delivering information to facilitating learning in student-centered, dialogue-friendly environments, resulting in teachers having closer relationships with their students. Additionally, instructors reported student-centered

classrooms encouraged collaboration, peer discussions, and movement among students reduce behavioral issues while encouraging rapport among students as well as build relationships with students and their teachers. Instructors in the study cautioned that some instructors may face major changes in instructional strategies necessary for the new learning spaces and warned that there was a need for more organizational space for personal belongings (Alexander et al., 2008). Likewise, students reported the environments as student-oriented and effective for collaborative projects. Students reported feeling more comfortable and connected, encouraging more discussion among classmates (Alexander et al., 2008). This socially connected environment helps build a positive learning community while producing effective 21st Century learners.

The National Association for the Educator of Young Children (NAEYC, 2009) emphasized the importance of communities in the classroom. While fostering the community of learners, the NAEYC stressed the importance of relationships. Much like Marzano, the NAEYC noted the importance of relationships between students, but also the importance of the relationships between students and their teachers. The NAEYC further included relationships between teachers and families as an important key to building the community foundation (2009). To encourage communal learning, the seating arrangements need to move away from the linear seating and the unspoken control that educators gain simply through classroom arrangements (Fernandes et al., 2011). Flexible seating environments support the idea of communal learning and provide an environment that encourages relationships building.

Flexible or Alternative Seating

The following section will explore some of the research that addresses flexible seating and discover how a flexible seating environment can contribute to building a 21st Century learning environment. Kennedy (2016) recalled an era when students sat straight and quietly waited for direction from a teacher in the front of the classroom. He expressed how the era focused more on the obedience of students rather than the comprehension of the material (Kennedy, 2016). Unfortunately, this classroom environment remained and an era long-passed remains in many classrooms. Although some students do well with the submissive, straight, and quiet expectations, Kennedy (2016) recognized that many modern teachers identify a need for change.

Dillon et al. (2016) referenced Maslow's hierarchy of needs when discussing a student's need to feel safe before a teacher could attempt to instruct. They further stated the urgency of creating an environment conducive to learning or instruction would be ineffective (Dillon et al., 2016). Students sitting in straight, hard seats for uninterrupted periods of time can cause drowsiness and unproductivity (Cornell, 2002). One innovative way to change the type of seating is the use of stability balls.

The use of stability balls has become more prevalent as teachers try to meet the needs of the 21st Century student (Clayton & Messinger, 2014; Erwin et al., 2016; Mead et al., 2016). Schilling, Washington, Billingsley, and Dietz (2003) conducted a study in a fourth-grade inclusive language arts class. They specifically observed the behaviors of three students with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Schilling et al., (2003) found stability balls helped decrease one student's sleeping habits in class. Additionally, they found an increase in student in-seat behaviors when comparing to the

in-seat behaviors when the students used a chair versus a stability balls. Teachers and students in the study indicated a preference for the therapy balls as a replacement to the traditional classroom chairs with teachers mentioning more focus from students regardless of the additional movement from bouncing (Schilling et al., 2003).

Erwin et al. studied fourth graders to determine if stability balls increased physical activity and if the balls influenced behavior (2016). Despite the concern that implementing flexible seating in classrooms could produce a distracting environment, Erwin et al. (2016) reported stability balls did not increase distracting activity. In a study to assess stability balls' effectiveness of participation of six boys with autism, Bagatell et al., (2010) reported teaching staff viewed the stability balls as an appropriate and effective intervention. In their study of second graders and the impact that stability balls have on inattention, hyperactivity, oppositional defiant behaviors, and anxious/depressive symptomatology, Gaston et al. (2016) found that stability balls were preferred by both teachers and students and further recognized that stability balls could have a positive impact on student attention and classroom management. Others also found the stability balls to improve attention spans, reducing anxiety, providing appropriate movement, and improving academic performance (Mead et al., 2016; Meyer, 2016). Meyer (2016) specifically found academic improvement among struggling and low-achieving students with mobile, fluid environments created using the new furnishings and also reported an improvement in student motivation.

Although in their study of the affect stability balls had on classroom management in a fifth-grade classroom Clayton and Messinger (2014) did not find a great improvement in student behavior, and the teachers in the study did not note any

significant benefits to using stability balls, they did find that students preferred stability balls over their traditional classroom seating. Many teachers are implementing the use of stability balls to use as an intervention for students with sensory deficits, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), or Autism Spectrum Disorder (Erwin et al., 2016; Fedewa et al., 2011; Kennedy, 2016; Mead et al., 2016; Schilling et al., 2003). Erwin et al. (2016) emphasized a need for these students to be engaged in more sensory input, allowing their brains to become less distracted by outside stimuli. In their 2011 study of fourth and fifth grade students identified as having attention or hyperactivity concerns, Fedewa et al., found hyperactivity levels decreased, and attention and on-task behaviors increased (2011). After assessing three sixth grade classes to see if math scores improved after including various types of exercise, Mead et al. (2016) agreed, further stating that the use of stability balls could positively impact students with communication and sensory disorders as they were able to remain engaged during lessons due to the constant movement. Sensory stimulation is vital to the development of young brains, building the ability for students to attend for long periods of time to certain activities (Merritt, 2014). The gentle bouncing provides additional stimuli that increases focus and lessens distractions during learning (Mead et al., 2016).

When furniture is designed properly, on-task behaviors improve (Smith, 2013). Many teachers found that student behaviors improved with the use of flexible seating as well as ability to complete tasks and assignments (Fedewa et al., 2011; Mead et al., 2016). Additionally, Malik (2016) reported improvement in discipline problems. Malik (2016) further noted 100% of students studied appreciated different seating arrangements.

He further identified constant, uniform seating arrangements promoted boredom and caused motivation levels to deteriorate (Malik, 2016).

The classroom environment has great impacts on students. The learning environment can play a crucial role in student engagement and performance, but also on the demeanor and emotional responses of students (Cornell, 2002; Fedewa et al., 2011; Hannah, 2013; Mead et al., 2016; Visser, 2001). Although McMullen (2015) reported that the constant changing of seating arrangements may cause off-task behaviors, Lassiter (1973) reported decades earlier that students preferred choices and do well with a variety of options such as sofas, cushions that provide a homey environment.

Dillon et al. (2016) encouraged updating learning environments. In addition to improvements in behavior and academics, Dillon et al. (2016) uncovered social and creative growth when redesigning learning spaces. The environment and culture of a classroom not only impacts the individual classrooms, but also affects the school culture and drives the curriculum (Dillon et al., 2016). Dillon et al. (2016) compared the lack of updated learning environments to the Broken Window Effect. When a classroom was outdated, had broken chairs, or was not a comfortable environment, it hindered the classroom and school culture (Dillon et al., 2016). Much like the Broken Window Effect results in vandalism once an abandoned building begins to accumulate garbage and broken windows, the classroom and school culture can become mundane and unattractive to students, teachers, and visitors (Dillon et al., 2016).

Creating an environment conducive to learning is imperative for 21st Century learners. A shift from the forest of legs created from rows (Lassiter, 1973) and hard desks and a teacher directing the students' every move to a flexible, comfortable student-

centered environment is necessary for 21st Century learners. This shift will look different for each teacher as they make the space their own. However, as Dillon et al. (2016) encouraged, one must start before they could be ready and learn along the way, “Redesign is a journey,” (Dillon et al., 2016, p. 18). A flexible seating environment can create a mobile, fluid environment necessary to engage students through movement, exploration, and social interactions.

Classroom Management

Classroom management is a familiar term in education. One cannot become a certified teacher without having spent an extensive amount of time studying and virtually implementing classroom management. However, many may believe classroom management is simply the management of student behaviors within a classroom. On the contrary, classroom management is a much broader concept. This section will address classroom management beyond the management of student behaviors and address the need for implementing an environment conducive to managing the classroom by addressing student safety through clear and detailed rituals and routines, comfort and accessibility, as well as social opportunities and the importance of classroom climate.

Weinstein et al. (2011) acknowledged that we were not managing a class for the simple sake of order. Classroom management encompassed many aspects of pre-planning and monitoring student behaviors, the learning environment, as well as various other aspects of the working classroom. Weinstein et al. (2011) expressed that classroom management was not only an attempt to sustain an orderly environment, it also focused on engaging in meaningful learning. They further explained that in addition to

intellectual growth, a need to enhance the social and emotional growth of students was required for successful classroom management (Weinstein et al., 2011).

Brophy (1999) discouraged classroom management principles that merely focus on the compliance of students with their teacher's demands. Teachers must consider all aspects of the learning environment in order to maintain good classroom management. A comfortable, safe classroom environment must be established through both the physical environment and also through the social and emotional needs of the participants in the classroom (Bullard, 2014; Evertson & Emmer, 2013; Marzano, 2003; Weinstein et al., 2011). According to Rathmann, Herke, Hurrelmann, and Richter (2018), class climate denoted the social interactions of students and teachers.

The teacher has the duty to cultivate a positive classroom culture to provide an environment conducive to learning for all students. Much of this cultivation begins before students arrive to the classroom. The pre-planning process is crucial to successful classroom management (Brophy, 1999; Enz, Kortman, & Honaker, 2008; Guardino & Fullerton, 2010; Visser, 2001). Creating an environment conducive to learning and appropriately managing student behaviors are critical in the process of providing a positive classroom culture (Enz et al., 2008). Guardino (2010) agreed and further stated that a well-organized and planned environment could encourage positive interactions among students. Major elements to suitable classroom management include preparing the physical environment of the classroom (Brophy, 1999). Visser (2001) further warned that the physical environment could have a positive effect on learning or hinder the process. A carefully designed classroom environment can encourage independence and control among students (Bullard, 2014).

Evertson and Emmer (2013) discussed the need for classroom management to be both preventative and interactive. They further stated, “Good classroom management has mutually supporting relationships with the effective teacher of content, the development of healthy student-teacher relationships, good communication, and a positive classroom climate (Evertson & Emmer, 2013, p. 9). Marzano (2003) stressed that a poorly managed classroom could not provide the social environment conducive to effective teaching and learning. Rathmann et al. (2018) discussed the importance of social context impacting students’ life satisfaction. They further noted that classrooms were the most important psychosocial environment for students (Rathmann et al., 2018). Martin and Rimm-Kaufman (2015) discussed the importance of both internal and external supports of students. External supports would be the classroom experiences that are present or absent in the students’ classroom learning environment.

Enz et al. (2008) believed the classroom environment greatly reflected the classroom teacher. They further stated that the design of the classroom reflected the teaching style and beliefs of the teacher. Bullard (2014) stated that one could also identify a reflection of the teacher’s values and teaching philosophy, resulting from purposeful design or through an apathetic overlook. Garrett (2008) stressed the multi-faceted concept of classroom management that included the physical classroom environment, rituals and routines, effective social opportunities, as well as responding to classroom misbehaviors. When considering a pedagogical paradigm shift, classroom management should be considered to ensure the needs of 21st Century students are being met and a change is shifting from the mere control of a classroom to include social relationships and the entire learning environment. Flexible seating classrooms provide an

opportunity for classroom management by merely creating spaces for meaningful learning through social and emotional growth and independence among learners.

The classroom environment plays an integral role in the management of the classroom. According to Rathmann et al., (2018) school provided a key component to the development of a child both in intellect and social wellbeing. The climate in which the student partakes contributes to the social and intellectual development of the student. Teachers' ability to create the boundaries and flexibility within the classroom correlate with the climate in which the room is set. Well-equipped facilities within the classroom have been supported as key to class climate conditions that may better support a powerful instructional process (Kausar, Kiyani, & Suleman, 2017). Flexible seating is no different in such a case. Kausar et al., stated, "learners achieve excellently in an encouraged and stimulated classroom environment and feel protected and contented" (2017, p. 1). The climate or environment of the classroom supports the ability of the student to maintain stimulation. A study conducted by Barrett, Zhang, Moffiat, and Kobbacy (2013) found a positive impact with student learning progression and environmental factors such as color, choice, complexity, flexibility, and light within the classroom climate. This revelation continues to support the effect of student learning by simply creating a positive learning environment within the classroom. In addition, the climate of the classroom is strongly supported by the relationship between the teacher and student as well. Kearney, Smith, and Maika (2016), concluded relationships that were emotionally positive between teacher and students resulted in fewer disciplinary problems and higher levels of positive interactions with peers. Studies including Kearney et al. (2016), have suggested improved peer interactions correlates with improved academic achievement. This would

further support the importance of classroom climate in relationship to class room management tactics.

Summary

Although the world is quickly evolving, the education system has an opportunity to keep up with the quickly changes needs and expectations. This chapter has addressed that a paradigm shift is necessary for teachers to experience a mindset shift from being the authoritarian to be the facilitator of student learning. Through this mindset shift, teachers can release the sole liability of learning to students and allow collaboration and the building of social skills in order to prepare students for the 21st Century demands they will face in the workplace. Additionally, flexible seating can provide passage for these changes to occur. An environment free of rigid seating arrangements allows students to collaborate and problem-solve through exploration and communication. The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of teachers that have implemented flexible seating and explore the successes and struggles regarding flexible seating. The following chapter will discuss how the methodology use the stories of teachers to achieve the purpose of the study.

Chapter III

METHODOLOGY

Change can be difficult at any level of implementation. As Hord and Roussin (2013) claim, it can lead to stress and confusion. The fear of failure may attribute to some of the difficulty to change. However, as Kouzes and Posner expressed, “there’s a lot of trial and error involved in testing new concepts, new methods, and new practices,” (2012, p. 200). This study sought out teachers new to implementing flexible seating to identify the trials and errors teachers experienced during their first year implementing the new classroom environment.

The purpose of this basic interpretive qualitative study was to understand the meaning elementary teachers have constructed regarding the impact of implementing flexible seating on their teaching, student learning, and their classroom community. By using focus groups and semi-structured interviews to uncover both the successes and struggles of teachers newly implementing flexible seating, other educators on the cusp of making a change to their classroom environment could benefit from their stories.

The following chapter outlines the methodology used to achieve the purpose of the study. The chapter includes the research design and research questions guiding the study. A description of the setting, participants, and data collection methods is presented as well as the data analysis procedures that were used.

Research Design

The purpose of this basic interpretive qualitative study was to understand meaning teachers have constructed through their experiences (Merriam, 2002) while implementing flexible seating in their elementary classrooms. Unlike a case study that investigates a phenomenon in real-world context, I wanted to examine the experiences of teachers implementing flexible seating for the first time. I chose an interpretive qualitative study in order to understand the lived experiences through social contexts.

Research Questions

The following research questions were generated to guide this study:

RSCH Q1- In what ways, if any, have the implementation of flexible seating impacted elementary school teachers' perceptions of student learning?

RSCH Q2- How does flexible seating influence the teaching behaviors and attitudes of those teachers who have implemented flexible seating in their classroom?

Research Setting

This study took place in a public elementary school located in the southeastern United States. The elementary school served approximately 740 students in grades pre-kindergarten through fifth grade students. The school included 14% of students with disabilities, 3% of students were English language learners, and 54% of students received free or reduced lunches. The school was chosen for the study because 48.7% of classrooms within the school have implemented either full or partial flexible seating in the 2017-2018 school year.

The semi-structured interviews took place either in the teacher's classroom or another location preferred by the classroom teacher such as researcher's classroom,

teacher's lounge, or location off campus. In addition to the interviews, participants were invited to participate in a closed, private Facebook platform where a series of focus groups were held (Yin, 2016). A new discussion was posted each week for six weeks. The discussion opened on Monday morning at seven o'clock and remained open throughout the duration of the focus groups. This allowed the teacher to participate in discussion boards as their schedule permitted and return to add any additional information throughout the focus group as needed. Additionally, the use of an online focus group allowed teachers an opportunity to tell their stories. This is an aspect often lost during traditional focus groups since all teachers are engaged in the discussion simultaneously and the discussion sometimes lead to subconversations (Barbour, 2007). A live conversation may naturally lead away from initial discussion questions or topics and neglect returning to allow participants to tell their complete story.

Participants

A convenience sampling design was used in the selection of participants for this study. Five teachers were selected to participate in this study, including one teacher from the kindergarten, first, second, third, and fourth grades. Criteria for participant selection was teachers who had implemented flexible seating for the first time during the 2017-2018 school year. Participants may have implemented a fully flexible classroom or partially introduced some flexible seating options in addition to the traditional seating options. Multiple teachers meeting the criteria for participant selection received an invitation email. The first teachers that willingly responded to the invitation email from each grade level was chosen as that grade level participant. Choosing teachers in grades at various levels gave a variety of perspectives based on student abilities to adapt to the

flexible seating environment. Only one teacher responded for one grade level that had implemented flexible seating for two years, so this teacher joined the study to represent her grade level.

Data Collection

Approval to conduct the study and methods used to gather consent from participants is described below. Details about the closed Facebook focus group, as well as information detailing the procedures regarding interviews with teachers, are also discussed. There are two phases to this study: individual interviews with the 5 participants and a series of 6 online Facebook Focus Forums.

Approval to Conduct Study

Prior to the initiation of the study, full IRB approval was attained by Valdosta State University and by the school district where this study was situated. This study adhered to the guidelines involving human subjects and compliant with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Code of Federal Regulations, 45 CFR § 46.102(2009) (see Appendix A for IRB approval).

Consent to Participate in Study

Before beginning the interview, participants were asked to verify that they were 18 years or older. I read the consent script to them and asked if they were willing to participate in the interview. Their participation in the interview was deemed consent to participate (see Appendix C for the consent script). Additionally, the consent script was provided to the participants as a post in the closed Facebook focus group. The posted script was locked on the page feed to ensure it remained at the top of the page feed, thus

reminding participants of their ability to decline to answer or to discontinue participation at any time.

Phase I: Interview Process

Recorded, semi-structured interviews were used during the interview stage of the study. During the interviews, I also wrote field notes. As recommended by Yin (2016), I spoke in modest amounts, allowing the participant to extend their monologues.

Individual face-to-face interviews provided insight to the individual teacher's experiences and revealed themes or discussion topics used during the Facebook focus group forum.

Semi-structured interviews carefully script the interaction between an interviewer and an interviewee (Yin, 2016). Interviews were conducted with teachers to begin the data collection process. The interviews lasted between 30-60 minutes and were audio recorded on a voice recorder. The verbal consent script (see Appendix C) was read at the beginning of the interview. Teacher participation in the interview served as consent to participate. Interviews took place in each teacher's classroom.

Teachers were asked a series of questions to gain a better understanding of the teacher and the teacher's philosophy of teaching and experience toward implementing flexible seating. The participant responses were used to help refine the semi-structured protocol for the online Facebook focus groups.

The semi-structured interview questions were based on research related to innovation and change for teachers, behavior management, 21st Century skills, and philosophies of teaching, learning and pedagogy strategies gathered from literature related to the subject. I also used my own experience as a teacher who has implemented flexible seating for two years (see Appendix D for Interview Protocol). The interview

protocol helped guide the interview; however, the sequencing of questions was shaped by the participants as they expressed how they have constructed meaning through their experiences (Merriam, 2002).

Phase II: Facebook Forum

Six focus group sessions were conducted through a closed, private Facebook platform. The Facebook page was private and only the five participants from the face-to-face interviews and the researcher had access to view the page and comments. Teachers were asked to share their narrative and respond to other participants through the Facebook page. Teachers had five days to respond to each new discussion presented on the Facebook page. Each new discussion forum began on Monday morning at seven o'clock. This allowed me to provide reminders and encouragement to participants to become involved in the week's discussion. I acted as the moderator of the focus group, encouraging participants to share their opinions while giving as little direction to the group as possible (Yin, 2016).

Questions presented to participants during each focus group were carefully sequenced to allow participants to build their own opinions based on conversations and opinions presented by other participants. This sequencing of questions prevented the researcher from presenting key questions too early in the process and allowed participants to become more familiar with the topic naturally (Krueger, 1994). For example, the researcher allowed open conversations to prompt discussions leading to 21st Century skills before defining 21st Century skills for participants.

In the first focus group, teachers were reminded that their participation was voluntary, and they could change their mind about participating in the focus group at any

time. A consent script was locked on the page so that it was always visible for the participants. Teachers were also reminded of the confidentiality of the focus group and assured that the information they shared in the group would not be shared with anyone including their administration. They were also asked not to share Facebook discussions outside of the Focus Forum on Facebook.

There were six discussion topics, one provided each week. These topics were chosen based on the literature reviewed and my personal experiences with flexible seating, (see Appendix E for Facebook Focus Forum Discussion Topics and Probes). Additionally, the Discussion topics were refined based on data collected during the interviews. The Focus forum served as a way to validate themes that emerged from the face-to-face interviews as well as to generate new themes as participants collaborate and compare experiences.

Data Processing and Analysis

Analysis of Interviews

After each interview, the recordings were transcribed. Interview recordings were destroyed once the interview had been transcribed. After interviews were transcribed I began examining the documents based on Creswell's (2002) process for data analysis. Part of this process included: (1) open coding or reading the transcripts several times and then created tentative labels for chunks of data that summarized what I read, (2) highlighting the text that was pertinent to the research questions, (3) coded the data by placing labels on the noted text, (4) grouped similar themes from the coded text, (5) connected the interrelated themes, and (6) formed a narrative that brought together the themes that were prevalent (Creswell, 2002).

Analysis of Data from Facebook Focus Forum

Data gathered through the online Facebook page remained on the page until the completion of the study. Therefore, the documentation remained available as it happened live and remained open until the completion of the six-week duration of the focus group forum. This allowed the researcher to use an analysis strategy similar to the transcript-based analysis for focus forums. Transcript-based analysis uses a complete transcript that involves transcribing tapes recorded during focus group sessions to use to code data (Krueger, 1994). This study employed the transcription of the entire focus group conversation in order to analyze the gathered data.

The data from each focus forum was transcribed into a narrative summary and shared with the group as part of a participant verification process. This participant verification process ensured that the researcher understood and has presented the information shared by the participants in an accurate manner (Krueger, 1994). This process, referred to as member-checking by Creswell and Plano Clark, allowed participants to respond to the summary, and make any corrections or additions to the data as needed (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011).

Once the initial summary for each focus group was verified, the final narrative for each focus group was analyzed and coded. The researcher looked for common terms or themes shared by the participants throughout the week-long process. The common themes were color-coded and labeled for easy identification. These common themes helped guide the questions presented by the researcher for later focus groups because qualitative research requires situational responsiveness throughout the study (Krueger, 1994).

Trustworthiness

As Maxwell (2005) discussed, there was no magical charm to prevent validity threats. “A credible study is one that provide assurance that you have properly collected and interpreted the data, so that the findings and conclusions accurately reflect and represent the world that is studied,” (Yin, 2016, p.85). Maxwell (2005) further identified the need to be aware of ways you, as the researcher, may be wrong. Krueger and Casey (2000) emphasized that researchers should be concerned with good practices and carefully following the steps to quality research. To ensure internal validity, researchers must make sure the study measures the goals intended (Shenton, 2004). The strategies used to ensure the validity and trustworthiness of the study are described further.

Researcher as Interviewer

As an educator, I have always been considered nontraditional. My personal philosophy on teaching is more similar to that of a collaborator or facilitator of learning rather than a superior that commands from the front of the classroom. Kouzes and Posner (2012) explained, “leading by example is more effective than leading by command” (p. 17). Even before my knowledge of flexible seating, my classroom offered students a variety of seating options and mobility to provide an environment conducive to collaborative learning.

I believe a teacher’s responsibility is to create an environment where children feel safe to learn. I believe students deserve the opportunity to be comfortable not only physically, but also socially, emotionally, and academically. Implementing flexible seating in my own classroom has allowed me to provide a learning community for my

students where they are comfortable in their environment, less restricted by seating assignments, and free to socialize and communicate with their peers.

The flexible seating environment provides students with opportunities to problem-solve and collaborate with classmates. The social learning environment creates a less stressful environment that traditionally restricts learners from movement and collaboration. Providing students with a comfortable environment in which to learn, relieves stresses that may impede the learning process.

The teachers in this study and I are housed in the same school building. I have worked with most of the teachers for two years. Although we teach in the same building, none of the teachers were selected from the fifth grade, the grade level I teach. Most of the teachers included in this study have implemented flexible seating after finding interest in my flexible seating classroom.

Understanding that I possess certain beliefs about flexible seating and have a working relationship with the participants in the study, it was important to carefully monitor the data collection and analysis stages of the study. The strategies discussed in the following sections assisted in eliminating any bias I may have as a result of my own experiences with flexible seating and the participants in the study.

Tactics to Ensure Honesty

One step to ensure validity were the tactics used to encourage honesty in participants (Shenton, 2004). Participants were given opportunities to decline participation in the study (Shenton, 2004). Additionally, opportunities for building rapport between the participants and among the researcher and participants to allow

forthright and candid responses without the fear of repercussions or loss of credibility is provided (Shenton, 2004).

Member-Checking

Because the researcher had a personal passion for flexible seating as a teacher and a researcher, there was potential for researcher bias in the asking of questions and interpreting data. To help decrease the threat of bias, the researcher implemented member-checking to ensure all transcribed notes from focus groups as well as information gained from interviews matched the beliefs of the individual. Member-checking allows the researcher to check back with the interviewed participants to share the results of the transcribed reflections, ensuring accuracy of the interviewed participants' experiences (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011).

Frequent Peer Debriefing Sessions

In addition to member-checking, the researcher also employed frequent debriefing sessions. These sessions were between the researcher and the researcher's dissertation chair. The dissertation chair reviewed the recorded accounts and ask questions about the study (Creswell, 2009). The sessions ensured that the researcher's account and interpretation included various perceptions (Shenton, 2004). The sessions also allowed opportunities for the researcher to share ideas with her dissertation chair and identify any of her own biases.

Disconfirming Evidence

An approach used to avoid any threats to validity with the study was to report any disconfirming evidence (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). When a researcher includes

disconfirming evidence in the study findings, the varying perspectives allow for readers to confirm accuracy of the research analysis.

Triangulation

Triangulation was used by gathering data from several individuals using a variety of methods (Maxwell, 2005). I used data from classroom teacher interviews, online focus group forum discussions, and my own notes gathered during the interviews and focus group. Patton (2002) explained triangulation was not simply looking for the same results, but instead testing for consistency. By obtaining stories from each participant, I was able to look for such consistencies across grade levels and various teaching styles.

Transferability

Transferability was used to ensure trustworthiness. Transferability was important because it helped the reader compare the phenomenon detailed to phenomenon they had experienced themselves (Shenton, 2004). In order to ensure transferability, I detailed information such as site descriptions, participant number and descriptions, methods used throughout the study, and duration of data collection sessions.

Dependability

Guba (1981) referred to dependability as equivalent to consistency. This study provided rich details of the processes used in order for others to duplicate the study. Additionally, this study provided “overlapping methods,” by using both the individual teacher interviews and the focus group discussions as suggested by Shenton (2004).

Confirmability

Practicing reflexivity was encouraged by Guba (1981). Guba defined reflexivity as a researcher revealing his or her own assumptions. Guba (1981) explained the

opportunity reflexivity gave to the researcher to inform the audience of how certain questions for formulated. Patton (2002) warned to be cautious and self-analytical when conveying perspective. I used reflexivity to self-assess my own perspective and views and ensure the message I conveyed was that of the participants and not my own.

Summary

In this chapter I described the research design, methods of data collection and analysis, and discussed procedures that were used to validate the trustworthiness of the study. The experiences of the participants allow the readers of the study to recognize both the possible struggles and successes of implementing a flexible seating classroom. In Chapter 4, I will present the results of the study and in Chapter 5 I will discuss the findings and present recommendations.

Chapter IV

RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to understand the perceptions of elementary teachers regarding the impact of implementing flexible seating. The first three chapters provided an introduction to the problem of a needed paradigm shift to student-centered approaches that provide an active and collaborative learning environment, a review of literature relevant to the study, and the methodology utilized during the collection and analysis of the data. This chapter will provide the results of the findings that emerged as well as brief profiles of the teacher participants.

Five teachers participated in individual face-to-face interviews. The interviews were voice recorded and recordings were transcribed by the researcher at the completion of the interview. As part of the data analysis process, the interview transcriptions were entered into a matrix based on the research questions addressed. Commonalities were discovered among the participant answers by looking for key phrases that represented a connection to the interview questions and themes were identified using those commonalities.

Additionally, the five participants participated in a six-week online focus group. Teachers logged in to a closed, Facebook focus group forum to answer questions provided each week (see Appendix E). Teachers were encouraged to respond to questions presented as well as comment on the responses of other group participants. Similar to the face-to-face interviews, the focus group interviews were also transcribed, and results were color-coded to identify common themes. The focus group interview

results were examined to find commonalities that revealed key phrases connecting to the research questions to identify connecting themes. The interview results were then analyzed regarding connections and commonalities revealed during the face-to-face interviews.

Data Analysis and Findings

Five elementary classroom teachers participated in the study through two separate phases. In phase I, teachers participated in face-to-face interviews with the researcher. Face-to-face interviews consisted of semi-structured interviews allowing teachers to share their experiences implementing a flexible seating classroom (see Appendix E). During phase II of the data collection process, teachers participated in a closed, online focus group. The focus group was conducted through a closed, private Facebook page. Teachers participated in weekly conversations using prompts provided by the researcher each Monday morning. Teachers had the opportunity to share their experiences, help other participants problem-solve issues they have experienced while implementing flexible seating, or ask questions of other participants to gain ideas or problem-solve issues of their own. During the face-to-face interviews, participants chose a pseudonym which was also utilized for the focus group.

Brief Profiles of Participants

Rachel. Rachel has been teaching for nine years. She was currently teaching kindergarten. Previously, she has taught pre-kindergarten, early intervention kindergarten, second grade, and fourth grade. Rachel prefers teaching either kindergarten or second grade. She felt the younger grades were still sweet, yet still excited to learn. Rachel was prompted to implement flexible seating in her classroom after seeing how

successful it was in a co-worker's classroom. As Rachel was new to her grade level, she decided to fully implement flexible seating in her classroom. After conducting some research and searching kindergarten-specific ideas on Pinterest, she began searching for items for her classroom at yard sales and through Facebook Marketplace. In addition, she used Donor's Choose, a non-profit crowdfunding organization, for more costly items. Rachel planned to fully implement flexible seating in the upcoming school year.

Carol. Carol had been teaching for 13 years. She was currently teaching first grade. Carol has also taught kindergarten and second grades yet claimed that second grade was her favorite grade to teach. She liked second grade because she felt second graders were more independent learners. Carol had implemented flexible seating for two years. She explained that she did not implement flexible seating in one instance, but that over her 13-year teaching career she had experienced how children have difficulty sitting still. She stated, "They were bored staying in that one spot all day long, and I know as an adult, I do better if I can move around." Carol describes herself as being a non-traditional teacher even before using flexible seating because she was always looking for different ways for her students to learn and not have to sit still all day. Carol planned to fully implement flexible seating for a third year in the upcoming school year.

Trish. Trish had been teaching 21 years. She was currently teaching all grade levels in a pull-out accelerated learning environment. She expressed a love for all grade levels, but if forced to choose one, she would choose third. She stated that they are still sweet, but they are embarking on becoming independent with their own personalities. Trish describes herself as always having a traditional classroom. She was introduced to flexible seating by a colleague and after seeing what her colleague did with her students

and seeing how relaxed and comfortable her students looked, Trish decided to try it for herself. She started out partially implementing flexible seating by simply adding a couch to her room. Trish planned to fully implement flexible seating in the coming school year.

Renee. Renee had been teaching for two years. Both years had been spent teaching third grade. Renee shared that she enjoyed third grade because they are more responsible, and they can handle more, but they are still at the age where they are sweet and give hugs. Renee expressed that she had always preferred non-traditional seating for herself such as sitting on a couch or floor to do college assignments. Her first year of teaching, she noticed students liked to sit on top of their desks or in arrangements other than the traditional desks provided to them. Additionally, when Renee observed other flexible seating classrooms, she wanted to give it a try. To get started, Renee looked up ideas on Pinterest as well as visited other flexible seating classrooms. Over the summer following her first-year teaching, she wrote and received a grant to help fund some of her supplies. She began her second-year teaching fully implementing flexible seating and planned to fully implement flexible seating in the coming school year.

Felicia. Felicia had been teaching for nine years. She was currently teaching fourth grade, but she had also taught second grade. She did not express a favorite grade level. Felicia's interest in flexible seating was peaked when she observed a colleague's flexible seating classroom. She expressed the students' excitement about the classroom and noted that the students always seemed to be more engaged during lesson throughout the day. Felicia did not begin her year with flexible seating but implemented partially after winning a contest to receive several pieces of non-traditional furniture. Felicia

would be moving to second grade but planned to fully implement flexible seating in the coming school year in her new grade level.

Themes from Research Question I

Research Question 1: In what ways, if any, has the implementation of flexible seating impacted elementary school teachers' perceptions of student learning?

The first research question for the study was designed to understand elementary teachers' perceptions of the impact flexible seating had on student learning.

Additionally, through research question 1, teachers discussed how flexible seating impacted 21st Century learning readiness of students in flexible seating classrooms.

Face-to-face interviews with teachers were conducted and recorded. Interview recordings were then transcribed and analyzed by identifying central ideas, common phrases, or comments that were common across all participants. Similarly, focus group discussions were transcribed and analyzed identifying central ideas, common phrases and comments, and connecting the responses to the responses gathered during face-to-face interviews.

Common themes addressing research question 1 from Phase I, the face-to-face interviews, and Phase II, the online focus group, are listed below in Table 1.

Table 1

Perceptions of Elementary Classroom Teachers of the Impact of Flexible Seating on Student Learning

Theme	Quotes
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Student Engagement

“They’re doing what they should be even though it looks different than how we all grew up.” (Rachel, Phase I interview)

“He (an adult visitor in the classroom) just couldn’t believe that they were all doing what they were supposed to despite the movement, noise, and chaos.” (Rachel, Phase II focus group)

“Students would stay on task longer if they were in a more comfortable seating arrangement instead of their regular desks.” (Carol, Phase II focus group)

“They kind of get innovative but they’re still working and focused. I love that.” (Renee, Phase I interview)

“They stayed on task and completed the assignments. Also, students in my group were more engaged because they “created” their own learning environment.” (Felicia, Phase II focus group)

“It does take a lot of planning and set-up to get things just right. However, it’s worth every minute to see how much better students stay engaged and work better because they are in a more comfortable setting.” (Felicia, Phase II focus group)

Comfortable/Natural

“I really think that’s natural because that’s real life. When they go places, they don’t have anyone say to them, ‘you sit

here.’ When they go to McDonalds for example, they don’t have anyone to say, ‘today you’re going to sit at the bar stools’ or ‘today you’re going to sit in the booth.’ I kind of think it’s natural that they walk in, they see what’s comfortable to them, like when I go to a restaurant, I like the booth. I think they come in and see what’s natural to them and that’s what they gravitate to.” (Trish, Phase I interview)

“I feel like a lot’s come out in him this year because he’s not been told ‘stay here, don’t move, don’t go anywhere else.’” (Carol, Phase I interview)

“When kids walk in and, literally, they walk in and say things like, “Uh, I’ve been waiting to get here all day.” And they come in and they sit down. And they just look so at home. But it just, it makes me feel like this is good, because it’s an environment where they feel safe, they feel comfortable. But again, its natural and they don’t have to be robotic.” (Trish, Phase I interview)

Impact on Classroom

Management

“The first time I saw a student get up and switch out seats on her own made it all worth it for me. Since I have designated seat types at each center (balls at the computers)

kids just use what's there. One day a kid just got up and moved the ball and got a regular chair instead. She got right back to work and never missed a beat. My paraprofessional and several other kids all looked shocked and even asked if it was ok for her to do that. I just beamed with pride and said that it was perfectly fine and showed that she knew what she needed in order to do her very best work. After that point the kids were much more comfortable with changing out seats without any interruption or direction from me or my para. They just did what was best for them.” (Rachel, Phase II focus group)

“Flexible seating has actually made the management of my classroom easier on me. Since starting flexible seating, I've noticed I'm stopping teaching less to correct inappropriate behaviors.” (Carol, Phase II focus group)

“The positive behaviors that come to mind for me are when I would hear students working out who could sit in a seat without me having to tell them to work it out.” (Renee, Phase II focus group)

“When I started using flexible seating I noticed that students were way more talkative, but not in a bad way. They were collaborating with one another and getting

Social Interaction

excited about what we were working on.” (Trish, Phase II focus group)

“I feel that my students were more open to helping one another when they were in the flexible environment.”

(Felicia, Phase II focus group)

“I feel like flexible seating opened up an opportunity for more collaboration than a normal seating classroom might. Students feel more comfortable and more apt to share.”

(Renee, Phase II focus group)

“I think it (flexible seating) has opened them up to communicating more. They seem more comfortable to move about the classroom for things they need or assistance from others.” (Carol, Phase II focus group)

“I think about the diversity of race and cultures in our classrooms. These kids’ social norms can be very different from what ‘we believe’ is ‘appropriate.’ But, I think that just like with other aspects of our teaching and classroom environment, we have to be cognizant of our responsibility to be culturally responsive in our seating. I believe that flexible seating gives students from diverse backgrounds an opportunity to feel comfortable talking, discussing, and asking questions.” (Carol, Phase II focus group)

“My Hispanic student appeared very shy before I implemented flexible seating. I think the seating arrangement made her feel like it was ok to socialize, and that she wouldn’t be judged. She bonded with her classmates and was soon not afraid to relax and be herself.”
(Trish, Phase II focus group)

“I think a classroom with flexible seating is the perfect place to foster collaboration and communication, creativity and problem solving. My spaces allow for a lot of movement because I want the kids to be able to move about to get the materials they need and to talk with different people in their groups.” (Trish, Phase II focus group)

Student Engagement

Many teachers revealed students were more engaged in the flexible seating environment. Although teachers acknowledged that there was more activity and movement in their flexible seating environment, they identified students were more engaged in appropriate conversations and were on task more often than they were off task. Teachers found students to stay engaged in a single activity longer when having the freedom to move or stand and more frequently were able to follow through and finish assigned tasks.

Comfortable/Natural

Teachers made a connection with students' on-task behaviors and their level of comfort in the flexible seating environment. One teacher discussed students acting more naturally in the environment due to less pressure of expectations in a traditional seating classroom. Many teachers shared that children seemed comfortable and compared the comfort level as to how the students would feel at home. One teacher further discussed when the students are comfortable in their space, they became more innovative and create new spaces that meet their needs.

Impact on Classroom Management

Teachers discussed both the successes on student behavior and classroom management as well as the negative impact flexible seating has had on student behaviors and classroom management. When discussing the successes of implementation on student behavior and classroom management, many teachers reported students seemed to work more productively in the flexible seating classroom. One teacher specifically discussed the ease of working in collaborative groups in a flexible seating classroom as opposed to a classroom where desks were in straight rows and columns. Another teacher expressed how she had to stop interrupting instruction less to correct behaviors and was able to spend more time and attention on small group instruction. Many teachers discussed students' ability to self-correct their own behaviors because of the increased self-awareness in the flexible seating environment. One teacher warned that sometimes students can become too comfortable and begin talking at inappropriate times, but found these issues quickly resolved. Teachers found once the expectations were in place, they

had to intervene with student behaviors or disagreements over seating less than they had in previous years in a non-flexible seating classroom.

Social Interaction

Teachers shared experiences that demonstrated positive social interactions that are different than non-flexible seating classrooms. All teachers discussed that students seemed to be more comfortable in the space. The comfort level of students encouraged students to talk and collaborate more with their peers. Additionally, students seemed more comfortable and more open to asking questions. One teacher shared the comfort level of students from all backgrounds in the flexible seating environment seemed to level the playing field for students, allowing students equal opportunities to become leaders in the classroom. She stressed the importance of classroom teachers being “cognizant of our responsibility to be culturally responsive to our seating.”

Teachers further discussed positive experiences with students demonstrating 21st Century skills such as enhanced communication, collaboration, problem-solving, and socialization skills. Most teachers mentioned students self-correcting their behavior or the ability to problem-solve issues with peers or with assignments. One teacher discussed the flexible seating classroom being “the perfect place to foster collaboration and communication, creativity, and problem solving.” The teacher also recognized that the students would consult with each other more than she experienced in a traditional seating classroom. One teacher warned that with the increase of student communication and collaboration that it becomes difficult to monitor every conversation in the room. The classroom environment seemed to provide a space where all students could build their

communication skills as it provides more opportunities to communicate with peers in collaborative groups, in social circles, and when problem-solving issues among peers.

Themes from Research Question 2

Research Question 2: How does flexible seating influence the teaching behaviors and attitudes of those teachers who have implemented flexible seating in their classroom?

The second research question for the study was designed to understand how teaching behaviors and attitudes were influenced in flexible seating classrooms. As with research question 1, transcriptions were analyzed to identify common themes between participants. Common themes identified as addressing research question 2 from the face-to-face interviews and the online focus group are listed below in Table 2.

Table 2

Teachers' Behaviors and Attitudes that were Influenced by Implementing Flexible Seating

Theme	Quotes
Student Excitement	<p>“The first few days, they were all excited to get to one place.” (Carol, Phase I interview)</p> <p>“One of my favorite reactions so far has been when one of my students walked in and said, “I’m finally home!” All of the students seem to be relaxed and more comfortable.</p> <p>Because, I have slowly added new seating, they are always</p>

excited when there is something new.” (Carol, Phase II focus group)

“I was excited because the students walked in, they got to that door and just stopped and went ‘Wow a couch’ and it was amazing.” (Trish, Phase I interview)

“They were VERY excited and I think my thing was trying to keep some sort of organization, especially with them never having been in that type of classroom.” (Renee, Phase I interview)

“There was so much excitement in the room. They were a little more wobbly on the stools just because they were brand new. They adjusted very well.” (Felicia, Phase I interview)

“When they’re there, they’re excited about that seat, but they know if they’re going to be sitting there, you have to be using it properly. And you know, I just feel like it brings us close together.” (Felicia, Phase I interview)

My students were extremely excited when the stools arrived. (I told them about us winning them.). I had the room set-up when they arrived the next morning with the futon, the stools, and a new rug. It was like Christmas morning!! (Felicia, Phase II focus group)

Changes/Adjustments

“I had to buy extra work tables and clip boards because that was a hot item for them to sit on the ground.” (Carol, Phase I interview)

“I had the balls at the back table and I ended up using that back table for my sped kids that came in as a small group meeting place, so we kind of had to change up how we were going to do the seating back there.” (Renee, Phase I interview)

“I actually added a couple more like I added some more little tables and the stools.” (Felicia, Phase I interview)

Teacher Role

“Take the step back to let them live it, learn it, experience it, and what not. So, that’s just like, I’ve never felt like me as a teacher was a stand up and lecture type teacher but more of one like let me get you started. Now, okay, I’m going to let you go okay I might need to step in but I’m going to let you go again.” (Rachel, Phase I interview)

“I feel like teacher’s role is like more of a guide. I mean, you have to introduce the topic. You do a lot of modeling, but I feel like it is more of guiding students through their learning more than just cramming information down their throats. Kind of giving them information and seeing where they take it.” (Carol, Phase I interview)

“I think she’s a facilitator. I think that her job is to find out where students are at and go from there to help advance their learning, um, I don’t think it’s a situation where it’s all teacher-led and I model, and you do. Um, I think it’s an inquiry-based type of process.” (Trish, Phase I interview)

“I think the teacher’s role is to introduce the topic and the content and what we’re learning and then to kind of facilitate the kids as they are learning it.” (Renee, Phase I interview)

“I think it’s easier for them to learn from each other. I mean, I have a role obviously as a teacher, but you know, once I’ve presented content to them, sometimes I’m not able to reach them, they can, you know, their peers can help them in other ways.” (Felicia, Phase I interview)

Changes in Teachers
and students

“I do feel like I am more facilitator hands off, less of a stand up and lecture. I don’t feel like I was, but like I am more laid back and flexible and less rigid.” (Rachel, Phase I interview)

“It (flexible seating) can fit into any teaching style and in a way as to be developmentally appropriate for any age level.” (Rachel, Phase II focus group)

“I was very nervous on how they would adjust and if I could even make it work with total chaos. I was very strict

with my rules and expectations from the beginning. I moved students quickly if they didn't pick a "smart seat." They quickly learned what a good working environment needed to be for themselves and things ran pretty smoothly from there." (Carol, Phase II focus group)

"I believe they (the students) learned to use each other as a resource because of it (flexible seating). Because I have allowed them to move around the room and everyone is not supposed to be sitting quietly. As soon as I see someone move, I'm not like, 'Where are you going? What are you doing?' So, they get to go over to that friend and say, 'Hey, how do you spell that word?' or 'What do I do next?' I feel like it's opened up to them to learn to be self-sufficient versus needing me for everything." (Carol, Phase I interview)

"I think the desks, a classroom with especially rows of desks, signifies to them (the students) that the teacher is in charge. And she is in charge, but I think that her role as far as being in charge needs to look a little bit different. I think desks are like, come in, you sit down, you're quiet, the teacher does all the talking. I have to raise my hand and I wait to respond only when asked a question, and that's not

a natural, ‘think about how you think’-process.” (Trish, Phase I interview)

“It’s definitely helped me opened me up. I think flexible seating lends itself to more of the small group kind of intimate working. And so, I think that’s help me let go a little bit of the whole, ‘teacher at the front of the room’ thing, because you can’t always, you know that doesn’t always work with flexible seating. So, yeah I think it’s kind of helped me shift my perception of that a little bit.”

(Renee, Phase I interview)

“I feel like my philosophy has slightly shifted just because of experience. I think we as teachers have a hard time ‘letting go.’ I think flexible seating opens up more opportunity for our classes to be student centered due to the freedom of choice, easier collaboration, and the encouragement from teacher to make changes if things aren’t working.” (Felicia, Phase II focus group)

“My philosophy all stems around relationships and positive environment. Take care of social-emotional needs of the kids and the academics will come. I don’t think I’ve had a mindset shift so much as I just feel like flexible seating better suits my beliefs for how a classroom should be run.”

(Rachel, Phase II focus group)

“My philosophy on teaching is that my job is to facilitate learning, using student centered approaches that allow for creativity, independent thinking, and collaboration. I do think I have had a mindset shift because I started my career as a teacher of students with behavior disorders. I was in complete control and didn’t allow any choice. After this, I wish I could go back and do it all over again.” (Trish, Phase II focus group)

“My goal going into flexible seating was to have a more student-centered classroom. I don’t always like to have a lecture-style set up. I know sometimes it’s necessary, but kids are so much more engaged when they are included in the process of instruction. It was hard sometimes to turn over control to the students for a worry that it might not work, they might not be engaged, or learn what they should. I learned that it can work, and I hope to put a student-centered classroom more into practice this next school year.” (Renee, Phase II focus group)

Struggles in Implementation “Increased stimuli in the room would occasionally make it difficult for other kids in the room to work.” (Rachel, Phase II focus group)

“I have several students who can’t handle specific spots, like the balls!! I just tell them that’s not a smart seat for

them and to choose something else. They move quickly and usually pick somewhere that does work.” (Carol, Phase II focus group)

“Since they are communicating more, the negative is that you can’t monitor everything that is being said.” (Carol, Phase II focus group)

“A student was in tears once because her favorite seating option was not available to her. The quiet student did not protest aloud.” (Trish, Phase II focus group)

“I did have a student who would come in and not always act appropriately or pay attention. She loved choosing her seat though, so I began to use seating as a behavioral motivation for her to do her best in the class.” (Renee, Phase II focus group)

“I really only had one student that I feel ever had any issues. She had some psychological issues and would “zone out” sometimes and would not behave appropriately on the Oodle stools.” (Felicia, Phase II focus group)

“My biggest struggle when implementing FS was storage of stuff that usually stays in their desk. Everyone has an assigned drawer to store their things in. We use community supplies for most things.” (Carol, Phase II focus group)

“My biggest struggle has been space. When you are a resource teacher the room size is much smaller than a homeroom teacher’s room.” (Trish, Phase II focus group)

“My biggest struggles ... getting my parapro on board and making accommodations for my students with special needs. I also realized I had some issues with line of sight.”

(Rachel, Phase II focus group)

Response to Negative

Feedback

“I have had a teacher say that she doesn’t like the idea of flexible seating because ‘the kids need structure.’ She says the kids forget how to behave when seating is no longer an option. A lot of teachers run their classrooms with an iron fist, which takes away from the student centeredness that needs to be occurring. Flexible seating gives the kids autonomy (behaviorally and academically) that many teachers fear because they don’t believe the kids can ‘handle it.’” (Trish, Phase II focus group)

“I just had a conversation last week with one of my colleagues about flexible seating. She said that flexible seating wasn’t real world and that in real life you don’t get a choice about where and how to work. Which is sooooo NOT true. Then she went on about her ‘traditional’ classroom and how she has flexible seating because during

centers she tells them a place to go that isn't their desk. It seems that many have a misconception about what flexible seating truly is and how real world it can be. (Carol, Phase II focus group)

“The real world statement makes me think about the AT&T store or the new McDonald's. I've tried all the seatings at McDonald's and prefer the tall stools. That's my choice. At AT&T I choose the bench because I hate to stand and wait. My husband doesn't like to be still and prefers to stand at the counter and walk around a little. It's flexible because the options fit our unique needs. I even think about the work spaces at Google and Facebook (yes, some of our kids will be working in these places). The bosses aren't telling employees that today your group will be working in this space. Employees are choosing and sometimes creating spaces that are their optimal work environments. It's important (I think) to remember that we aren't trying to prepare kids for work in factories anymore. We are preparing them to be innovators and to work globally. That means they most certainly will get a choice about where and how to work.” (Trish, Phase II focus group)

“Our world has and is continuing to change. I think flexible seating is just one way we can help our students take some ownership, make decisions, and learn responsibility. Although it’s hard to ‘let go,’ that’s what we are coming to in education now. As educators, we have to encourage our kids to make choices and step outside of the norm.” (Felicia, Phase II focus group)

Strengths of Flexible Seating “Some of the strengths of FS I saw in my classroom were the opportunity for independence; a development of responsibility as students chose a ‘good fit’ seat; an environment of comfort and community was created because it felt more ‘homey’; students developed more self-awareness as they learned what worked best for them; communication and problem solving skills were developed as students collaborated in working and in maneuvering seats in the classroom.” (Renee, Phase II focus group)

“Some of the strengths for me have been small group and paired collaboration, students learned to make decisions for themselves, problem-solving skills were improved, and self-discipline. The students were also looking out for each other.” (Felicia, Phase II focus group)

“I think the biggest strength is allowing students the opportunity to learn in their best environment to me it just

makes sense that if kids are comfortable, they are going to be more attentive to the task. It also allows for collaboration without the hassle of taking 10 minutes of class time moving desks around. And it tells students that you trust them to make choices. I've found that kids perform better when we show that we believe in their ability to make good decisions." (Trish, Phase II focus group)

"I feel that independence and collaboration are the strengths of FS!" (Carol, Phase II focus group)

Student Excitement

Most teachers shared that their students were excited about the flexible seating classroom environment. They explained that the student excitement spread throughout the classroom and fostered an excitement about learning in the new space. One teacher explained how the excitement of the classroom and the new classroom arrangement seemed to bring their class closer together as a community.

When discussing student reactions, most teachers discussed an excitement among the students. One teacher addressed how students seemed more relaxed and comfortable than normal. Likewise, teachers discussed how parents seemed to feed off of the students' excitement about the new seating arrangement. One teacher discussed parents feeling mixed reactions with the seating arrangements with some parents being excited with their children while others were anxious about how the room would work.

Additional comments that teachers reported hearing were “comfortable, home-like, and inviting.”

Changes/Adjustments

All teachers discussed areas in which changes were made throughout the year with the flexible seating space. One teacher discussed the ways that she had to alter her expected classroom environment to meet the needs of her special education students and the special education teacher that pushed into her classroom each day. Teachers discussed items they added to the classroom after the students began to use the space. One teacher found that her first graders tended to gravitate to the floor and needed to buy clip boards and lap tables to accommodate that need. Each teacher reflected on incidences that required them to make adjustments to the seating choices, the classroom arrangements, or expectations throughout the year and stressed the need for teachers to be flexible and comfortable making changes. Teachers became aware of their own need to become flexible in the space and the demand for a willingness to let go of control and allow students to form the space that works best for them.

Teacher Roles

All five teachers shared similar teaching philosophies and views on the role of the teacher in a classroom, mentioning the teacher acting as facilitator at some capacity. Many of the teachers believe all teachers should model or introduce a topic and step back and allow students to take the lead in the learning process. One teacher further believes the teacher should model less and allow students to explore and experience activities themselves and to engage in inquiry-based activities. They expressed that the flexible seating environment afforded opportunities for those types of student-led activities.

Although all five teachers shared similar teaching philosophies, most teachers expressed that implementing flexible seating altered their views on teacher roles. Most of the teachers shared that the implementation of flexible seating had contributed to them letting go of power and authority in their classrooms. One teacher mentioned that the implementation has taken part in her becoming less rigid as a teacher and feeling more comfortable with the noise and chaos of a busy flexible seating classroom. One teacher stressed how the experience with implementing the flexible seating environment has helped open her up as a teacher.

Teachers shared common teaching philosophies of creating a student-centered environment. Two teachers shared a shift in their own mindset as they released control of the classroom and became a facilitator as students worked collaboratively. One teacher felt her personal mindset had not shifted, but that flexible seating had created an opportunity for her to implement her own beliefs.

Changes in Teachers and Students

Teachers discussed the mindset shift they experienced when implementing flexible seating in their classrooms. Although all teachers identified themselves as facilitator-style teachers, many of the teachers reported events where they had to “let go” of control in the environment. Teachers reported being less agitated in the noisy, busy environment and found themselves to be “more laid back and flexible and less rigid.”

When discussing mindset shift, teachers shared advice with other teachers considering implementing flexible seating. The teachers encouraged interested teachers to start small if they are nervous about the change and chaos of the flexible seating environment and to implement new things to find out what works for best for the

individual teacher. Most teachers also expressed the importance of teachers understanding that the space had to be practical for the teacher as much as it was for the students. Participants encouraged teachers to go for it, but not to be afraid to change things around that did not work for the teacher or the students. There was no one way to create a flexible seating space. Teachers warned to have clear expectations and make sure students understood the rituals and routines for each seating area. The teachers warned that the flexible seating environment is not the typical “Pinterest-ready” classroom that many teachers dream of creating in their classroom. Teachers interested in implementing flexible seating should understand that the flexible seating environment does not require perfection and encouraged teachers to take a chance and be okay having to make frequent changes in the space.

When discussing changes in students, the teachers reported that students quickly identified their individual needs to create a good, working environment. Students became less reliant on the teacher and became more self-sufficient, seeking out peers when needed to answer questions instead of interrupting the teachers’ small group instruction. One teacher stated that the students “learned to use each other as a resource.” The teachers reported that the students quickly adjusted to the classroom and understood the expectations and requirements within the space.

Struggles in Implementation

When discussing negative impacts from flexible seating, some teachers discussed arguments between students regarding seating. All teachers quickly helped students solve the disagreement with a quick reminder of flexible seating expectations. Additionally, one teacher discussed students falling off of alternative seats due to

improper use. A couple of teachers discussed students with special needs requiring more attention in the flexible learning space due to overstimulation or special needs. Each teacher adjusted their learning space to meet the overstimulation needs or gently reminded the student of flexible learning space expectations.

Teachers also discussed any struggles they experienced during set up and implementation of flexible seating. One difficulty that many teachers experienced was the issue with the line of sight. Teachers discussed the need to ensure each child could be seen in every area of the classroom throughout the day. Teachers problem-solved by either reminding students to find a smart seat that works best for them or by simply rearranging the structure of the room in order to eliminate blind spots.

One of the most common issues discussed with teachers implementing flexible seating was the organization or storage of supplies. Many teachers discussed ways to problem-solve issues with materials. Several teachers discussed their use of community supplies. Teachers provided caddies with materials for small groups as well as community supplies stored in a central location. Additionally, many teachers use tubs, plastic storage drawers, or drawer organizer mobile carts to assist with storage for individual students. Although storage seemed to be the biggest issue discussed, each teacher had found innovative ways to problem-solve this common issue.

When asked to discuss the limitations of flexible seating, many teachers struggled to list the confines of implementing a flexible seating environment. Two teachers discussed the time it takes to properly implement a flexible seating classroom. One teacher warned that it takes much trial and error. Another teacher mentioned that it was not about having a cute classroom, but about providing an environment that meets the

needs of the students. Additionally, teachers discussed limitations with other teachers understanding the flexible seating theory. One teacher specifically discussed other teachers' inability to change in order to appropriately implement flexible seating. Two teachers discussed limitations with space. Another teacher discussed the limitations with furniture. Although several teachers took advantage of grants or received their furniture in various ways, the cost of furniture for a flexible seating classroom was also discussed as a limitation.

Response to Negative Feedback

When discussing coworker reactions, teachers discussed apprehension expressed by other teachers and coworkers. Many teachers discussed coworkers expressing they would be uncomfortable having to sit in the flexible seating environment all day. One teacher shared a colleague expressing, "I couldn't stand kids rocking on these all day!" While many teachers shared apprehension from colleagues, participants also felt if coworkers had an opportunity to observe the flexible seating classroom in action that they may not feel quite so hesitant.

When teachers discussed some of their encounters and reactions they have received from other classroom teachers who are not implementing flexible seating, one teacher shared some colleagues seemed to be interested but were too nervous to try. Two teachers found that other teachers stated an inability to handle the chaos of a flexible seating environment. One teacher quoted a colleague as saying, "Oh my nerves couldn't handle kids being all over the place. I might could handle a random chair here or there, but I definitely couldn't do kids bouncing on balls all day!" Another teacher quoted a colleague saying, "kids need structure," and, "the kids forget how to behave."

Teachers shared a belief that the biggest deterrent from teachers trying flexible seating was a fear of behavior issues. This teacher stated, “A lot of teachers run their classrooms with an iron fist, which takes away from the student centeredness that needs to be occurring. Flexible seating gives the kids autonomy (behaviorally and academically) that many teachers fear because they don’t believe the kids can ‘handle it.’” Another teacher stated, “the teachers I know that have been more vocally against flexible seating do seem to have quieter and more rigid rooms.”

Participants reported colleagues that did not believe in flexible seating. One teacher experienced a colleague stating, “flexible seating wasn’t real world and that in real life you don’t get a choice about where and how to work.” This statement resulted in various comments from participants including one teacher stating:

The real world statement makes me think about the AT&T store or the new McDonald’s. I’ve tried all the seating at McDonald’s and prefer the tall stools. That’s my choice. At AT&T I choose the bench because I hate to stand and wait. My husband doesn’t like to be still and prefers to stand at the counter and walk a little. It’s flexible because the options fit our unique needs. I even think about the work spaces at Google and Facebook (yes, some of our kids will be working in these places). The bosses aren’t telling employees that today your group will be working in this space. Employees are choosing and sometimes creating spaces that are their optimal work environments. It’s important (I think) to remember that we aren’t trying to prepare kids for work in factories anymore. We are preparing them to be innovators and to work globally. That means they most certainly will get a choice about where and how to work.

Another teacher reported, “Our world has and is continuing to change. I think flexible seating is just one way we can help our students take some ownership, make decisions, and learn responsibility. Although it's hard to ‘let go,’ that’s what we are coming to in education now. As educators, we have to encourage our kids to make choices and step outside of the norm.”

Strengths of Flexible Seating

When asked about the strengths of flexible seating, each teacher shared the strength of communication and collaboration among students. Most teachers further discussed the independence of students and the increased responsibility among students as they became more self-aware in the environment and of their needs. Along with independence and responsibility, teachers also discussed increased ability to problem-solve with academics as well as social situations. Teachers further discussed that the independence and freedom felt among students seemed to allow self-awareness in decision making opportunities as well as improved self-discipline. All teachers have repeatedly discussed comfort in the flexible learning space and how that comfort level seems to improve the classroom community.

Due to the numerous strengths of implementing flexible seating reported by the teachers, each participant shared they would all implement flexible seating in the 2018-2019 school year. Even the teachers that were partially flexible seating would fully implement flexible seating in the coming year. Each teacher planned to make minor adjustments by changing furniture arrangements, adding to, or taking away certain types of furniture.

Summary

This chapter disclosed the themes that emerged to address the research questions in this study. Several themes emerged through the face-to-face interviews as well as through the online Facebook focus group forum. All five participants had similar teaching philosophies where each believed the role of a teacher was to act as a facilitator, guiding students and providing opportunities for students to take ownership in the learning process. All teachers discussed how the flexible seating environment helped them change to act more as a facilitator and less 'in charge' of the classroom. One teacher shared that it did not necessarily change her mindset, but the flexible seating classroom allowed her the space to provide her students with a classroom that better met her philosophy. The teachers discussed an increase in student engagement and social interactions. Teachers also discussed the flexible seating environment providing a more natural and comfortable environment, decreasing behavioral problems and the necessity for teachers to be as involved in correcting unwanted behaviors. Additionally, teachers discussed the struggles of implementing flexible seating. In Chapter 5, I will provide a conclusion that includes an overview of the study as well as the limitations and recommendations for future research.

Chapter V

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This chapter includes a brief overview of the study. The overview includes the study's purpose, research design, data analysis, limitations, and recommendations for future research based on the results of the study. The discussion will include conclusions of the research questions and recommendations for future studies on the flexible seating environment.

Purpose of the Study

The primary goal of this research was to understand how teachers perceived the effects of flexible seating on their personal teaching mindset as well as how they perceived flexible seating impacted the soft skills of students in flexible seating classrooms. The research specifically explored student communication skills, problem-solving skills, their ability to work collaboratively with classmates, and student self-awareness in flexible seating classrooms.

Research Design

An interpretive qualitative research design was used for this study to help understand how teachers have constructed meaning through their experiences regarding implementation of flexible seating in their classrooms (Merriam, 2002). Face-to-face interviews and focus groups were used to identify a range of perceptions about flexible seating and uncover various factors that influenced the opinions of teachers (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Focus groups were conducted through a closed, Facebook group over a

six-week period. Discussion topics were posted for participants to respond to the post as well as create an open discussion between colleagues.

Convenience sampling was utilized to select participants that have implemented flexible seating for the first time in the current school year. The participants were elementary school teachers located at an elementary school that had 48.7% implementation of full or partial flexible seating. One teacher was selected from each grade level in grades kindergarten through fourth grade. All but one teacher had only one-year experience with flexible seating, while one teacher had implemented flexible seating for two years. This limited experience was important as the purpose of the study was to identify the benefits of flexible seating and the drawbacks or struggles of flexible seating, and I wanted to use the raw experiences of teachers in their beginning implementation of flexible seating.

Based upon the purpose of the study to examine elementary school teachers' experiences and perceptions of flexible seating, the following research questions have been developed.

Research Questions

RSCH Q1- In what ways, if any, has the implementation of flexible seating impacted elementary school teachers' perceptions of student learning?

RSCH Q2- How does flexible seating influence the teaching behaviors and attitudes of those teachers who have implemented flexible seating in their classroom?

Data Analysis

For both Phase I, the face-to-face interviews, and Phase II, the Facebook focus group, 5 teachers in grades kindergarten, first grade, second grade, third grade, and fourth

grade participated in the study. All but one teacher had only one year of experience implementing flexible seating while the fifth teacher had implemented flexible seating for two years. For phase I, teachers participated in face-to-face semi-structured interviews. Each interview was recorded and then the recordings were transcribed. After listening to the recordings several times and transcribing the interviews, the recordings were destroyed. After the interviews were transcribed, I used Creswell's (2002) process for data analysis to examine the results from the transcriptions. For Phase II of the study, teachers participated in a Facebook focus forum lasting 6 weeks. The data from each focus forum was transcribed and I used a strategy similar to the transcript-based analysis to analyze the gathered data.

Before analyzing and coding the data, a narrative summary from each focus forum was shared with the participants to allow for participant verification and to ensure I understood and presented the information as expected by the participants. Once participants verified the narrative, the data was analyzed and coded similar to the methods used for the face-to-face interviews. I looked for common terms and themes that emerged through both phases of the study, color-coded them, and labeled them for easy identification.

Discussion

The results from the study yielded four themes that addressed the two research questions. While concentrating on research question one which addressed teachers' perceptions of student learning, teachers were asked a variety of questions in regard to student behaviors in the flexible seating environment. Teachers discussed student

reactions to the classroom, the ease or difficulty of students adapting to the flexible seating classroom, and how flexible seating promoted increased learning for students.

Through these interviews and discussions, two themes emerged. The first theme that emerged was the students felt comfortable in the flexible seating environment. The participants found that students were more relaxed and felt safe in the learning environment. The second theme that was constructed from research question one was the ease of collaboration and the increased feeling of community in the flexible seating space. Participants shared that students would create new spaces to work collaboratively and were more willing to work with their learning communities in the flexible seating environment.

While concentrating on research question two which specifically addressed teacher behaviors and attitudes, two themes emerged. The first theme addressed teachers' difficulty of letting go of control in the flexible seating classroom. Teachers discussed the need for students to feel free to move and adjust furniture as needed, which released control of a structured environment for the teacher. The second theme that emerged was the ability for teachers to act as facilitators in the flexible seating classroom and provide a more student-centered classroom.

I'm Finally Home

Although there was a fear of students becoming out of control in a free-to-move learning environment as the flexible seating classroom provided, participants in the study found that students were more comfortable in the space and did not display behaviors that were unusually out of control. Teachers discovered that giving students less structure and allowing them to freely move and communicate with peers created a more natural, real-

world environment. This correlates with a statement from Kausar et al. that, “learners achieve excellently in an encouraged and stimulated classroom environment and feel protected and contented” (2017, p. 1). One participant quoted a student arriving at her classroom proclaiming, “I’m finally home.” The flexible seating environment provided students with a safe, comfortable, homey environment, ridding the space of rigid and uncomfortable seating options. The participants found this comfort level to improve classroom participation in students and provided a safe place for students to feel comfortable to take risks academically and socially.

Community/Collaborative Learning

In addition to the increased levels of comfort that participants noticed in the flexible seating environment, participants also reported an increased sense of community and willingness to work collaboratively in the flexible seating environment. Studies have suggested that improved peer interaction correlates with improved academic achievement (Kearney et al., 2016). Participants found that free movement and the ability to collaborate with peers increased the student willingness to participate in classroom activities. Fernandes et al. expressed the importance of social interaction in the classroom and how communication and social interaction is key to the learning process (2011). Participants reported students were more active, yet on task and that social interactions and communication with peers were typically on task as well. Teachers reported less incidents where they had to correct learners in the flexible seating environment, but that students were more self-directed. Cingel Bodinet (2016) reported that such an environment could help build a positive learning environment where students were allowed to learn from each other.

Letting Go

Participants in the study disclosed some discomfort in “letting go” of control and providing a less structured environment. Participants expressed their fears of implementing flexible seating. They discussed being nervous about how the new environment would work and one teacher even shared an open house experience that was utter chaos. One teacher stated, “It was hard sometimes to turn over control to the students for worry that it might not work—or they might not be engaged, but I learned that it can work.” Each participant expressed the importance of implementing rituals and routines and practicing those with the new space. Once the teachers were able to let go and allow students the freedom required for the new environment, they were surprisingly pleased with the outcome. One teacher stated, “When I started my career, I was in complete control and didn’t allow any choice. After this, I wish I could go back and do it all over again.” There is a necessity for schools to be aware of the evolving needs of students and respond accordingly (Campbell et al., 2013). Luther (2000) warned against the frontal placement of the teacher, demanding authority and encouraged the movement to a collaborative environment where students were allowed to be members of a community. The participants in this study agreed with the researchers but did note a slight difficulty in ‘letting go.’ When teachers have the ability to let go and provide a flexible learning environment, they are providing an environment conducive to the 21st Century (Campbell et al., 2013; Cingel Bodinet, 2016; Hargreaves, 1994; Lieberman & Pointer Mace, 2010).

Teaching as Facilitating

The participants each shared their teaching philosophy and expectations for the role as teachers in the classroom. Each teacher subscribed to the notion that the teacher should be the facilitator in the classroom environment. One teacher stated, “My philosophy all stems around relationships and a positive environment. Take care of the social-emotional needs of the kids and the academics will come. I just feel like flexible seating better suits my beliefs for how a classroom should be run.” Many researchers agree, reporting that a comfortable, safe classroom environment is imperative and must be established to meet the social and emotional needs of the classroom participants that also includes the importance of the physical environment to meet those needs (Bullard, 2014; Evertson & Emmer, 2013; Marzano, 2003; Weinstein et al., 2011). Teachers shared that the flexible seating environment created a space that allowed them to provide an environment for their students which was student-centered, allowing for “creativity, independent thinking, and collaboration.” One teacher quoted the article by Deltzer (2016) and stated, “‘If it’s best practice for our kids, do it now.’ That is so important! My goal for flexible seating was to have a more student-centered classroom.” The classroom environment greatly reflects the teaching style and beliefs of the classroom teacher (Enz et al., 2008). The participants in this study reflect their teaching philosophies as teachers as facilitators through the structural make up of their classroom environment. A teacher’s values and teaching philosophy can be identified from the purposeful design of their classroom environment (Bullard, 2014).

Limitations of the Study

This study was limited because it was only conducted with elementary school teachers at a single school. The findings were not generalizable to all elementary schools, nor were the findings generalizable to all classrooms within the same school. Additionally, the findings were not generalizable to middle school, high school, or college students. Another limitation in the study was the aspect of the open forum on the social network site. Some teachers might have been nervous to share some experiences since the focus group includes colleagues, may have forgotten some experiences, or may not have told the complete truth about some experiences. The study also had limitations based on the perceptions on students were based solely on teacher experiences and observations and not student perceptions.

Conclusion

Many researchers have found that classrooms lack an environment conducive to the 21st Century (Campbell et al., 2013; Cingel Bodinet, 2016; Hargreaves, 1994). There is great necessity for classrooms to shift from a teacher-centered approach where students are required to sit quietly and listen to a student-centered approach where learning involves the students taking responsibility of their learning in an active and collaborative environment. Although still quite necessary to focus on the building of “hard” skills such as literacy, mathematics, and technologies, equally important is to build “soft” skills in students that are necessary for the 21st Century learner (Wilson et al., 2000). Students need to be equipped with 21st Century skills such as written and oral communications, thinking and problem-solving skills, teamwork, personal skills, and creativity in order to be successful citizens (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2009). A flexible seating

environment provides a space where learning is student-centered and social, providing students with opportunities to implement soft skills.

Kauser et al. (2017) reported that the physical arrangement of a classroom environment is crucial in the instructional process. The teacher participants in this study experienced improved student engagement in the flexible seating classroom due to the freedom and flexibility afforded the students in the classroom environment. Students took ownership of their space and often self-corrected inappropriate behaviors. One participant stated, “the biggest strength is allowing students the opportunity to learn in their best environment. It just makes sense that if kids are comfortable, they are going to be more attentive to the task.” The flexible seating classroom environment allows for opportunities for students to be independent, responsible, and build communication and problem-solving skills.

Recommendations

This basic interpretive qualitative study explored the experiences of elementary school teachers’ implementation of flexible seating. This study examined teacher perceptions regarding the impact on teaching, student learning, and classroom community when flexible seating was implemented in their elementary classrooms. The primary goal of this study was to reveal how teachers perceived flexible seating impacted their personal teaching mindset and how they perceived flexible seating impacted their students’ soft skills. The following recommendations are based on findings during face-to-face interviews with teachers and during a Facebook focus group forum.

Teachers should discontinue the industrial-age classroom structure consisting of rows and columns of desks and evolve their classrooms into a more alternative-style

seating environment (Cornell, 2002). A flexible seating environment creates such an environment, providing students freedom and flexibility to move and meet their learning needs. Creating a flexible seating environment takes more than replacing traditional desk arrangements with couches and other alternative seats. In order to provide spaces that foster active and engaged learning and support the incorporation of not only the familiar “hard” skills such as literacy and numeracy, but also the “soft” skills such as problem solving and communication necessary for contemporary scholars, a change must occur in the classroom environment (Wilson et al., 2000). Such a paradigm shift requires an entire shift in the mindset of the educator (The Deskless Tribe, 2017; Delzer, 2016).

Creating a new space can create some discomfort and uncertainties for some teachers. The fear of creating a space of more chaos instead of an environment that promotes learning can deter teachers from stepping out of the industrial-style classroom structure and into a more modern environment. Teachers that are interested in making a change to their environment but fear taking on such a large task should start small. Adding one or two new seating options and teaching proper use of each before adding another new element may help relieve the fears of going full-implementation with flexible seating. This will give the teacher time to adjust to the space as well as allowing time for the students to learn the appropriate use of the new seating options. Teachers should be prepared for this change by understanding that it is a situation of trial and error. Teachers should have patience with themselves as they adjust the things that do not work and be willing to make changes when necessary to the space, structure, and expectations of the new classroom environment.

When implementing a flexible seating environment for the first time, teachers should take the time to teach to expectations for the use of each new seating option. When addressing classroom management, Weinstein et al. (2011) expressed that it is not only an attempt to sustain an orderly environment, but when done correctly can allow focus on meaningful learning. Taking time to appropriately address rituals and routines can cut down on instructional time lost later on. During the introduction stage, teachers have the opportunity to teach students appropriate ways to use each new piece of furniture, and also teach students appropriate social skills. The teacher should use this time to discuss collaboration and what communication is considered appropriate and which is inappropriate in the space. Additionally, the teacher can introduce students to problem-solving skills that will be imperative in the collaborative learning space provided by flexible seating. This time spent teaching appropriate use of the flexible seating space teaches students how to display self-corrected behaviors, providing less interruptions for the teacher to have to intervene to re-direct student behaviors, disrupting the allotted instructional time.

The change in the classroom environment can create uncomfortable experiences for the teacher implementing the change. Teachers should expect movement and noise as a result of the flexible seating environment. Additionally, teachers should expect a hum of voices as students collaborate in their new learning environment. Although there is much noise in a flexible seating space, teachers should expect that the noise and discussions are positively connected to student learning. The flexible seating environment provides an opportunity for students to demonstrate independence, collaborating with students to problem-solve and utilizing the teacher as a facilitator

instead of a dictator of the space. Flexible seating provides an environment for students to take ownership of their space, make decisions to problem-solve, and learn individual responsibility. Providing this environment to the fullest, requires teachers to “let go” of control and allow students to take responsibility in making choices and being actively involved in the learning process. This includes allowing students to change the space as needed to meet the needs of each learning experience, especially during collaborative work in their learning community.

One common struggle shared among teachers implementing flexible seating in their classrooms was the challenge of keeping the space organized. Because the space was active and busy, disorganization often resulted in the learning space. Teachers can help alleviate some of the disorganization by creating appropriate storage for student supplies and belongings. Additionally, utilizing community supplies where all students share materials from a central location or various locations in the classroom helped to create a more organized space. Proper use and storage of the community supplies should be a part of the introduction to the space.

When confronting the anticipated change in a classroom environment to provide flexible seating to 21st Century learners, teachers must prepare themselves for discomfort during the change. Teachers must make constant changes to the space to adjust the environment when something does not work in the classroom. Teachers must also remember that the learning environment should not just work for the students but must also work for the teacher implementing the change. If the teacher is uncomfortable in the space, it will become increasingly difficult to execute productive instruction that will in turn hinder the learning process. The space should work for both the teacher and the

students, providing comfort and allowing each resident in the environment to work productively.

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APPENDIX A:

Institutional Review Board Approval



Institutional Review Board (IRB)
For the Protection of Human Research Participants
PROTOCOL EXEMPTION REPORT

PROTOCOL NUMBER: 03632-2018 **INVESTIGATOR:** Ms. Martha-Susan Gayle Valdez
SUPERVISING FACULTY: Dr. Karla M. Hull

PROJECT TITLE: *A Qualitative Analysis of Elementary Teachers' Perceptions of and Lived Experiences in a Non-traditional Classroom.*

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD DETERMINATION:

This research protocol is Exempt from Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight under Exemption Category 2. Your research study may begin immediately. If the nature of the research project changes such that exemption criteria may no longer apply, please consult with the IRB Administrator (irb@valdosta.edu) before continuing your research.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS:

- *Upon completion of the research study all data (transcripts, data lists, email address list, etc.) must be securely maintained (locked file cabinet, password protected computer, etc.) and accessible only by the researcher for a minimum of 3 years.*
- *The researcher must read aloud the Research Statement of Consent to participants at the start of audio/video recording and documented in the transcript as having done so.*
- *In an effort to maintain the confidentiality of participants – please remind them that they are to avoid identifying themselves, or others, during the focus group (recorded) session.*
- *Exempt Protocol guidelines prohibit the collection, storage, and/or sharing of audio (or video) recordings. Interview/focus group recordings must be transcribed and immediately deleted from the recording device.*

If this box is checked, please submit any documents you revise to the IRB Administrator at irb@valdosta.edu to ensure an updated record of your exemption.

Tina M. Wright *05.11.2018*
Tina M. Wright, Research Compliance & Integrity

Thank you for submitting an IRB application.
Please direct questions to irb@valdosta.edu or 229-253-2947.

APPENDIX B:

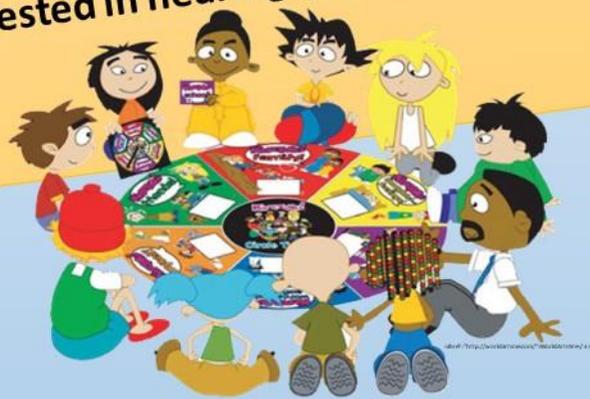
Flyer Invitation

Research Participation Opportunity

How can you be eligible to participate?

- 1- You are a teacher in grades Kindergarten through Fourth Grades.
- 2- You implemented flexible seating for the first time in the 2017-2018 school year.
- 3- You are willing to share your flexible seating stories.

We are interested in hearing your voice!



**Interested in
participating?**
Contact Gayle Valdez
at
mgvaldez@valdosta.edu

Questions regarding the purpose or procedures of the research should be directed to Gayle Valdez by sending an email to mgvaldez@valdosta.edu. This study has been approved by the Valdosta State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Research Participants (IRB-03635-2018). The IRB, a university committee established by Federal law, is responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of research participants. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the IRB Administrator at 229-253-2947 or irb@valdosta.edu.

APPENDIX C:

Consent Script

Verbal Consent Script (script for use at beginning of interviews)

You are being asked to participate in a qualitative research project entitled “A Qualitative Analysis of Elementary Teachers’ Perceptions of and Lived Experiences in a Non-Traditional Classroom ” which is being conducted by Gayle Ramirez, a doctoral student at Valdosta State University, in the department of Curriculum, Leadership, & Technology.

I will be asking you a series of questions about your experience with flexible seating. You will be assigned a pseudonym that will be used in any written documents associated with this study. The data from this study will be reported by combining the interview responses of all participants, and the information will not be associated with participants by name or school.

I will be recording this interview using a voice recorder. The recordings will be erased after they have been transcribed. Transcriptions from the interviews will be kept on a password protected computer file, and paper copies will be kept in a locked file cabinet in the researcher’s home and saved for the designated time frame of three years. After 3 years, all data will be permanently erased and paper copies will be shredded.

You must be at least 18 years of age to participate in this study. Your completion of the interview serves as your voluntary agreement to participate in this research project and your certification that you are 18 or older. You may be contacted after the interview if I have any additional questions to ask relating to your experiences and feedback.

Your participation is voluntary. You may choose not to partake in the interview, to stop responding at any time, or to skip any questions that you do not want to answer. Do you have any questions?

If there are no questions. A piece of paper with the information below, will be given to the participant.

Questions regarding the purpose or procedures of the research should be directed to Gayle Ramirez by sending me an email at mgvaldez@valdosta.edu. This study has been exempted from Institutional Review Board (IRB) review in accordance with Federal regulations. The IRB, a university committee established by Federal law, is responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of research participants. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the IRB Administrator at 229-259-5045 or irb@valdosta.edu.

APPENDIX D:
Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol

Pseudonym:

Date:

Time:

Place of Interview:

Once I have read the consent script, I will ask if the participant wants to begin the interview. I will give the participant a document with the following information on it.

Questions regarding the purpose or procedures of the research should be directed to **Gayle Ramirez, mgvaldez@valdosta.edu**. The IRB, a university committee established by Federal law, is responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of research participants. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the IRB Administrator at 229-259-5045 or irb@valdosta.edu.

1. How long have you been teaching?
2. What grade are you currently teaching and what other grades have you taught? Do you have a favorite grade level? Why?
3. Describe an experience or moment that prompted you to try flexible seating in your classroom?

4. When first implementing flexible seating, can you share a description of your steps to set up your room?
 - a. Did you go full or partial implementation?
 - b. Did you begin your year with the implementation or did you introduce new seating one at a time?
 - c. Did you purchase your classroom furniture, or did you take advantage of project support sites such as Donor's Choose?
5. What advice would you give to another teacher about how to begin implementing flexible seating?
6. Describe your experience during the first days of flexible seating once your students arrived in your new classroom.
7. What adjustments did you make, if any during the first few weeks of implementing flexible seating?
8. Describe what you think the teacher and student's roles are in the learning process.
 - a. In your opinion, have these roles changed as a result of implementing flexible seating?
9. Share a story that illustrates one of the most challenging experiences you had, related to flexible seating.
10. Describe an incident that confirmed your belief in the importance of implementing flexible seating.
11. In what ways, if any, does flexible seating contribute to your ability to prepare students for 21st century skills and knowledge?

12. What is one piece of advice you would share with a teacher who is considering implementing flexible seating?
13. Is there something else I should know about your experiences with flexible seating?

APPENDIX E:

Facebook Focus Forum Discussion Topics and Probes

Protocol for Facebook Focus Forum Discussion

CONSENT SCRIPT INFO HERE (note that this will be on FB page)

Facebook Forum Discussion 1. The focus of this discussion will be the beginning experiences of teachers as they prepared to implement flexible seating. The prompts will include but not be limited to:

- a) Teachers will be asked to share a moment, or story about their experience in planning and setting up their classroom for flexible seating;
- b) Teachers will be prompted to share stories about their students' initial reaction to their classroom with flexible seating.
- c) Teachers will be asked share stories about parent/guardian's initial reactions to flexible seating in your classroom and to discuss how that evolved during the year.

Facebook Forum Discussion 2. The focus of this discussion will be the role of flexible seating on student learning. The prompts will include but not be limited to:

- a) Teachers will be asked to share their stories of critical incidents or moments related to student learning, that supported their decision to implement flexible seating. They will be prompted to identify stories where the flexible seating promoted increased learning for their students.
- b) Teachers will be asked to share stories related to any negative impact on student learning that they attribute to flexible seating (once some negative experiences are shared, the researcher will prompt the group to share if they have had a similar experience and how they addressed it).

Facebook Forum Discussion 3. The focus of this discussion will be on stories about encounters they have had with parents and colleagues regarding flexible seating.

The prompts will include but are not limited to:

- a) Share some of your stories about encounters and/or reactions of other teachers who are not implementing flexible seating.
- b) Teachers will be asked to describe any struggles, if any, they have experienced during set up and implementation of flexible seating in their classroom:

As teachers share struggles, I hope to create an online environment where teachers feel comfortable sharing how they have avoided or worked through some of the same struggles or ideas as to how to problem-solve issues with others.

Facebook Forum Discussion 4. The focus of this discussion will be the role of flexible seating in classroom management. The prompts will include:

- a) Teachers will be asked to share stories of student behavior and classroom management successes that they attribute to flexible seating;
- b) Teachers will be asked to share stories related to any negative impact on student behavior or classroom management that they attribute to flexible seating.

Facebook Forum Discussion 5. The focus of this discussion will be the role of flexible seating on student communication, collaboration, and socialization skills. The prompts will include but not be limited to:

- a) Share an experience that best demonstrates the positive differences in the type or amount of social interaction you have noticed as a result of implementing flexible seating;
- b) Share stories about social interactions that demonstrate 21st century skills such as enhanced communication, collaboration, problem-solving, or socialization skills for students;
- c) Teachers will be asked to share experiences related to any negative impact on student communication, collaboration, and socialization skills that they attribute to flexible seating (I will prompt them to share how they responded to this experience).

Facebook Forum Discussion 6. In this discussion, teachers will be asked to read a short article and respond based on their impressions and experiences. The article by Deltzer (2016) reveals why she decided to implement flexible seating into her classroom. Additionally, Deltzer discusses how the teacher mindset and philosophy must change in order to successfully implement flexible seating.

- a) The teachers will be asked to discuss their teaching philosophy and reveal if they felt they experienced a mindset shift when implementing flexible seating.
- b) What advice would you give to a teacher who is considering implementing flexible seating?
- c) In your opinion, what are the strengths and limitations of flexible seating?