

TEACHERS AS PLACEMAKERS: HOW PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHERS
DESIGN, MANAGE AND MAINTAIN LEARNING SPACES AS PART OF
THEIR DAILY WORKFLOW

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Abstract

This inquiry is a hypothesis generating study that explores how a group of fifteen primary school teachers across five sites in rural Queensland, Australia, design, manage and maintain learning spaces, as they go about the business of their daily work. The study uses qualitative data in the form of photographs taken by the participants and in-depth interviews using photo-elicitation methods, to generate a substantive theory that accounts for how the participants engage in placemaking. Placemaking is proposed as an integrating concept to explain theoretically, how participants achieve their central purpose in relation to learning space design, management and maintenance. The application of the holistic, contextual, transactional and systems oriented perspective from environmental psychology, is a key contribution of this study.

Given the important social functions of schools, the public capital invested in education facilities, and the shift from 20th to 21st century learning environments being driven by social, economic, technological and political factors, furthering our understanding of how the occupants of school spaces experience these spaces is considered a worthy endeavour. In the past decade, there has been an increased interest in the design of learning spaces presumed to improve learning, especially academic outcomes for students. This interest has sparked a range of investigations across the economically developed world into how environmental variables influence learning. Scant attention has been given to how the same environments affect the behavior of teachers who have agency to design, manage and maintain the learning spaces in which they operate in on a daily basis. The aim of this study is understanding how teachers think about and act in learning spaces to achieve the outcomes of schooling they strive for on behalf of students and the community. Primary school teachers in the context of their daily design, management and maintenance of learning spaces form the substantive field for this investigation as these teachers are often allocated bounded spaces for significant periods of time and with the same cohorts of students.

The primary research questions were constructed in classic, Glaserian grounded theory terms as:

1. What is the main concern of primary school teachers as they design, manage and maintain learning spaces as part of their daily workflow?
2. How do primary school teachers resolve their main concern as they design, manage and maintain learning spaces as part of their daily workflow?
3. What theoretically accounts for the ways that primary school teachers resolve their main concern as they design, manage and maintain learning spaces as part of their daily workflow?
4. What practical implications for primary school teachers and education facilities planners, derive from understanding how primary school teachers resolve their main concern associated with their engagement with learning spaces as part of their daily workflow?

The term, main concern, in this context refers to the intentions of participants and how they achieve these intentions through categories of behaviour. 'Main concern' is used as a technical term consistent with Glaserian grounded theory methodology.

Grounded theory analysis methods were used to generate the core intentions ('main concern' in classic grounded theory terms) of fifteen rural based primary school teachers in relation to the primary research question. Four substantive categories or patterns of behavior reported by teachers as core to the achievement of their intentions as learning space managers, were generated along with a theoretical category, 'Placemaking', that accounts for the variability in primary teacher behavior in context. 'Placemaking' is proposed as a basic psychosocial process engaged in by teachers as they interact with learning spaces on a daily basis.

Implications of the perspective of teachers as 'placemakers' are outlined and include: the protective nature of establishing a positive psychological sense of place; the possibilities that 'placemaking' has for enhancing the teaching / learning subjective experience and therefore the long-term holistic outcomes of schooling; and the possible impact of place-making on combating student alienation, enhancing resilience, reducing student disengagement and increasing a sense of belonging. These are seen as protective factors in student development and wellbeing. They are likewise protective factors for teacher health and wellbeing.

Recommendations are offered to help teachers, education facilities planners and school communities to engage proactively in developing a 'placemaking master plan' for schools and learning spaces. Contributions to the fields of education, environmental psychology and research methodology are offered.

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