

# Environmental personalization and elementary school children's self-esteem

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## Abstract

Prior research indicates that the physical classroom environment has the potential to affect children's behaviors, academic performance, and cognitive development. However, less is understood about the effect on the socio-emotional development of children. This study investigates the potential role of one aspect of the classroom's physical environment, personalization displays, on children's self-esteem. The study employed a classroom intervention in a quasi-experiment to examine the effects of increasing environmental personalization on children's self-esteem. Thirty-eight kindergarteners and first graders in six classrooms of two elementary schools in a rural community of a north-eastern state were assessed on pretests and post-tests of the Self-Esteem Index (SEI) scale and the Children's Inventory of Self-Esteem (CISE) scale. The findings were mixed but encouraging. On both measures of self-esteem, there was a significant positive effect of classroom personalization for first graders. However, for kindergarteners there was a significant positive effect for only one measure, the CISE. Although there are limitations with the study design, the findings suggest that young children's self-esteem may be influenced and enhanced by specific aspects of the classroom's physical environment.

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## 1. Introduction

A considerable body of research addresses the role of the physical environment of educational settings in child development. Some researchers have examined the effects of noise and density on children's cognitive development and academic achievement (Ehrenberg, Brewer, Gamoran, & Willms, 2001; Evans & Hygge, 2007; Evans & Maxwell, 1997; Maxwell, 1996, 2003). Others have addressed overall school building quality effects on academic achievement as well as positive feelings about school (Ahrentzen, 1981; Duran (2002) unpublished paper; Earthman, 1998; Gifford, 2002; Gump, 1987; Moore & Lackney, 1993; Simon, 2005). Investigators have also looked at the relation of the individual classroom physical environment to cognitive development, behavior, and well-being. Classroom environments can support positive development or contribute to increased disruptive behavior, less positive

social interaction, and increased stress levels among pre-school and elementary school children (Ahrentzen, Jue, Skorpanich, & Evans, 1982; Moore, 1985, 1994). The school's physical environment can be a powerful contributor to children's overall development.

However, possible links between the school's physical environment and children's socio-emotional development, particularly self-esteem, have received less attention in the literature. Children's self-identity is purported to be, in part, influenced by the places where they spend the majority of their time, namely home, school, and neighborhood. The places where children spend their time, whether these places are of their own choosing or places society deems are necessary (i.e., school), are critical to their self-perception (Chawla, 1992). The concept of place identity (Proshansky & Fabian, 1987) links children's socio-emotional development with the physical environment. The current study examines an aspect of self-identity, self-esteem, by investigating the effect of a specific attribute of the classroom's physical environment on children's self-esteem.

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### 1.1. Development of self-esteem

Self-esteem consists of feelings and assessments that one has about his or her own self-worth (Berk, 2002). A positive sense of self-esteem, or self-worth, is an essential part of healthy socio-emotional development and it can affect other aspects of a child's life. One's sense of self-worth, or self-esteem, can have a strong influence on behavior, competency, and overall socio-emotional development and psychological adjustment. Research suggests that children who have high self-esteem exhibit the following characteristics (Amundson, 1991; Rubin, 1999; Wiggins, Schatz, & West, 1994):

- feel more accepted,
- set high goals,
- are better students,
- are better decision-makers,
- are less likely to engage in risky behaviors,
- assume responsibility,
- tolerate frustration,
- are proud of their accomplishments, and
- enthusiastically try new things

The development of self-esteem can be viewed as a constructive process (Stetsenko & Arievidt, 1997) whereby individuals learn to define themselves through their own actions and their interaction with others (Rogoff, 1998). In a child's life this includes interaction with parents, other family members, teachers, other adults, and other children. Another source, however, for interaction is the child's physical environment. One way in which the physical environment's role in self-esteem may be seen is in the way it either supports or hinders a child's level of competency. This was examined in a preschool setting by rating classrooms on the adequacy of seven attributes of the physical environment: social spaces, boundaries, privacy, personalization, complexity, scale, and adjacency (Maxwell, 2007). When the physical environment permitted children to get their own supplies, provided them with a task-appropriate work space, was personalized to permit children to observe aspects of themselves in the environment (artwork, mirrors, photographs), had moderate levels of stimulation, and was shielded from constant interruption then they were more likely to complete tasks and therefore have a sense of competence and accomplishment.

This sense of accomplishment can lead to a sense of mastery thus enhancing a sense of self-worth.

School-aged children with a positive self-perception of their own academic competency are more likely to be academic achievers than their peers who do not have the same self-perception (Harter, 1988). Although the current study does not address the relationship among the physical environment, self-esteem, and academic achievement, it is anticipated that if a positive link is found between specific physical attributes of the classroom environment and self-esteem then this will be an initial step toward addressing how the physical environment and self-esteem may relate to academic achievement. The proposed relationship is illustrated in Fig. 1.

The development of self-esteem is a life-long process; however, children between the ages of 6 and 9 years are at a critical stage in the development of the self. Children in this age group are beginning to make comparisons between themselves and others (Flavell, Miller, & Miller, 2002; Ruble, 1987). As they acquire these comparative skills there may be a drop in self-esteem from the earlier period in childhood when self-esteem was higher. Children in this age cohort, 6–9 years, are an excellent group for examining the relation between self-esteem and the physical environment because this is an especially critical period for potentially boosting self-esteem.

### 1.2. Self-esteem and the physical environment

The school and classroom physical environment may not only communicate to the students the school's values but also the larger society's values as well. If the message is conveyed that children are a low priority, children's self evaluation may eventually reflect that message in a variety of ways including lower self-esteem, lower achievement levels, or lower participation in school or community affairs (Cooper-Marcus & Sarkissian, 1986; Fine, Burns, Payne, & Torre, 2004; Maxwell, 2003). Children and young people can articulate how physical attributes of the school environment relate to them. Middle and high school youth in a New York City public school used terms such as “flat”, “boring”, and “colors are for adults” when describing the displays in their school corridors (Maxwell, 2003). One youth noted that he was proud of his classroom because his teacher kept it interesting, neat and clean, “like home”. He interpreted this to mean that his teacher cared about her students (Maxwell, 2003). In one California

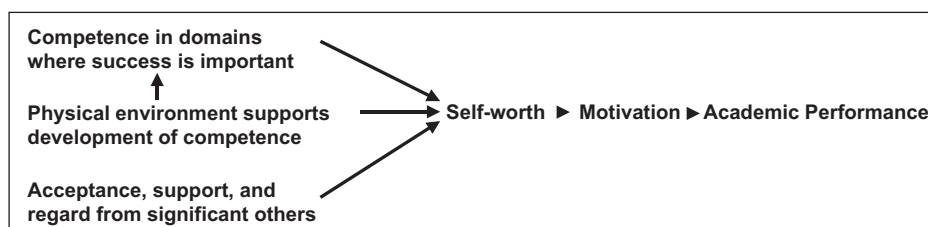


Fig. 1. Modified version of Harter's proposed relationship between competency and performance to reflect the role of the physical environment.

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