

This is the first post in the 7-day Where Do I Even Start Series. [Click here to listen to the podcast version.](#)

I clearly remember setting up my first classroom. I was a brand new teacher and I had no idea what to do, so I spent that first day wandering the halls and modeling my classroom after the kindergarten and first-grade classrooms. Guess what, that didn't end up working out because the needs of my students were different!

There is no cookie-cutter plan that works for self-contained classrooms. Each classroom is going to be customized, based on the needs of the students in that class. This podcast will give you six areas to consider as you start to plan your own classroom set-up.

Area 1: Instruction

This is going to be one of the main focuses of your classroom. How will we go about providing instruction in our classrooms? The traditional desks in rows or in small groups might not work for your classroom. This is what I quickly found.

One of the things I should have done in the beginning was to make use of the whole group, small group, and independent work settings in my classroom. Each one serves a different purpose. While most of my lessons were taught in small groups, a lot of my students needed individual workspaces. I also needed to utilize whole group models when my staffing was short and I needed all of the students together.

Whole Group: One of the things I always did in a whole group setting was the morning calendar. This was ideal when I was short on staffing during this block because I often added music and YouTube videos to the calendar, making it super engaging for my students. I also liked using whole-group for doing read-alouds, science and social studies, and hands-on activities like art class. Even though whole group settings can be very tough for some classrooms, it provides endless opportunities for important skills like waiting, taking turns, sitting in group settings, and more. Find a time in the day where Whole Group makes

sense so you can work on it and have it as an environment to access when you need to.

Small Group: Small group was the best way for me to tackle the main content areas. This model won't work for everyone, but I typically took my class and split them into two groups. I did not do this based on the ability level for a very specific reason. If I had ALL of my students who needed the highest level of support in a group together, that made it difficult for me to give them the support they required.

I ended up taking my two students who required the highest level of support and put one in group A and one in group B. I continued to split my class until I had two groups. For content areas, group A would be with me for direct reading instruction while group B would be with a paraprofessional in a reading center. We would flip the groups and repeat the lessons. This worked wonderfully for reading, math, and writer's workshop. When I was short-staffed, I would have one group do independent work while I met with group 2. It's not always seamless and not all of my students could work independently, but when I had the staffing to make that model work it helped.

Independent Work Settings: Being able to work independently is a vital skill for students. You will see in many significant needs classrooms a row of independent workstations set up. These are great places for students to work on IEPs goals or individualized programs. You can opt to have a designed independent workstation for a student (this is Johnny's workstation). That might look like a 3 drawer system next to Johnny's desk with a crate of file folders aligned to his needs next to it. You can also opt to have a generic station that any student could use. This might be an empty table and chair and you might stock it with some basics like scissors, glue, and pencils. This could be a space that any student utilized when they needed a quiet workstation.

One thing I really want to emphasize is to make sure your own classroom is inclusive. This makes me sad to share because I am still upset with myself for this, but it's worth sharing to help others learn from my mistakes. One year, I had put 7 desks together in one part of my room. 7 of my students sat in that section for ALL PARTS OF THE DAY. I had a table in another part of the room for another student.

On the surface, it made sense. That student needed to utilize an independent work area for all parts of the day. His setup made sense for him, but the problem was I had NO place in the room where he could be included with his own peers. I remember it clear as day. Two moms came in together. They searched for their children's desk names. Mom 1 found her child's name quickly. Mom 2 kept looking at the desks and finally realized her son's name was not there. When I showed her his work space she understood, but it still made me feel awful. Let's talk about why that is an issue.

I wasn't fostering an inclusive setting in my own classroom. How would "Jake" ever get to practice being in a whole group setting if I never gave him the opportunity to work with his peers? I wanted to share this, especially for the autism classroom teachers tuning in. Even if an independent work center is best for every single child, make sure the setup is designed in some way that all of the kids can be brought together for something. If 90% of your class has the opportunity to sit together and work, and the other 10% never get that same opportunity, then your classroom isn't inclusive. We can't expect our schools and communities to be inclusive if we are not even doing it ourselves. Make sure to think about this as you set up your classroom.

Leisure Areas and More

There are some other areas of your classroom that you might consider, if space permits. I really enjoyed having a designated play area. I had toys and books that students could use in this area. I wanted it to be clear to my students when they were on a break versus when they were expected to work. I also had a work task system set up in part of my classroom. This was ideal for students who had graduated from an Independent Work System and needed to generalize that skill. Instead of the tasks being already prepared in their drawer cart, they would go to the shelf. They had a schedule that told them to get the blue square box, the red circle box, and the yellow triangle box. They would complete these three tasks in more of a community setting.

Calm Down Corner

I also found it very helpful to have a calm-down corner. This is a place a student could go when they were escalated. Ideally, the calm down corner is a separate

space that has nothing else in it. In some classrooms, you might have to combine your play areas and calm down area. In this scenario, it might be best to have all the toys in a crate that you can quickly pull out, or have them put away and just bring them out for play time. The idea is you can quickly make the calm down area empty in an attempt to make it a safe space. Try having some tools in the calm-down corner that can help. This can include visuals, fidgets and more.

Storage

I know that storage is a luxury not everyone has. My biggest tip is functional storage ideas. If you can, have your file folder library near your independent work centers and have your math manipulatives near where you teach math. The idea is you don't want to be running across the room to get counting cubes when you have all of your students at the table for small group math.

Something to keep in mind is it is all about making it easy for your students to understand. You might love to have a separate whole group and small group areas but you can't make that happen. Try color-coding to help students understand. When you have a green sign on the table, that means it is time for the morning calendar. When you switch the sign to blue, that makes it time for math.

Another thing I did was add storage to the bathroom. I had a handicap bathroom in my classroom but no students in wheelchairs. This gave me room to store file cabinets in the bathroom and make space in the room. I always had a decent sized classroom so I never deal with big storage issues, but try searching on pinterest! You will see tons of pictures and examples of teachers (both general education and special education) who are making space in their tiny classrooms!

Space for Staff

I opted to get rid of my teacher desk. This helped save a lot of room. Instead, I stored my bags in my cabinet and everything else I needed was strategically stored where I taught. Don't forget to make a space for your paraprofessionals as well! We made sure to find room to store their bags and materials. I even bought a couple of cheap extra rolley chais from target, one for each of my assistants. It

was a huge treat when my students earned the rolley chairs already in the classroom. By designated ones for the staff, it made them feel more respected as team members and when they were sitting next to a desk helping kid A they never got booted from the chair because kid B has earned it.

Problem Solving

Keep in mind the strategic classroom layout options. If you have students who elope, you might opt to have them sit on the opposite side of the classroom from the door and have several things laid out to help make it more challenging to get out of the classroom. Use furniture to block your classroom, when possible. I loved using bookshelves and rolling storage units to create separate spaces in the classroom. My dad even built me a simple divider out of PVC pipe and a shower curtain that I could use to divide the classroom.

Also, consider classroom decor. A vibrant classroom or a theme with things hanging from the ceiling and all over the walls might be too busy or too stimulating for your students. I had a safari classroom one year and my occupational therapist recommended I take down some of the decocration. I remember being really offended because I had put so much time and money into my decor, but it turns out she was right. When I took down all of the zebra and cheetah patterns and removed the animals on the walls, my students were able to focus better.

I am now a huge fan of functional decor. My classroom at the end of my career was rainbow themed for a very specific reason-absolutely everything was color-coded. Everywhere you turned you saw color-coded bins, folders, binders, desks, containers, and more. This helped my classroom run smoothly and efficiently. Another idea is to do your classroom in soft blues and greens or just stick to black and white. If you have bright colors, they should serve a purpose. If it doesn't serve a purpose, might be best to leave the colors out.

I know this is a lot to process! Be sure to go into the Day 1 folder of the free resource to access the downloads that go with this blog that will help you as you navigate setting up your own room. [Grab the resource here!](#)

