The impact of colour in education

When it comes to designing a classroom or educational environment, durability and maintenance factors often outweigh the aesthetic considerations of a space. However, with research proving that well designed classrooms can boost learning progress in primary school pupils by 16%[1], it is vital to strike a balance between an engaging and inspiring classroom design and one that is cost-effective. Kayleigh Whybrow, senior technical colour consultant at Johnstone's Trade discusses some of the ways this can be achieved...

Using colour as a canvas for better design

Colour can directly influence our mood and the way we think and feel. For schools, certain colour palettes and tones can improve student's health and wellbeing. The International Association of Colour Consultants – North America[2] states that: "Appropriate colour design is important in protecting eyesight, in creating surroundings that are conducive to studying, and in promoting physical and mental health."

For each age group, colour preference will vary. For example, findings show that primary school students prefer primary colours that are fun and stimulating. However, it is important colour isn't too bold or overpowering, as this can leave children feeling overstimulated, too energetic or anxious. Meanwhile, young adults prefer more mature colour palettes with greater depth, that provide some relief and energy.

Keeping these preferences in mind and understanding the psychology of colour before designing or renovating a space can help ensure a suitable colour scheme is chosen.

Colour for collaboration and creativity

When it comes to creative spaces, students need to feel energised and inspired. Hues from the active or warm side of the colour spectrum – reds, yellows and oranges – are found to be stimulating, both physically and mentally.

Red can have a physical effect on people – raising pulses and heart rate. It is warm, energetic, and can boost physical courage, so is good for stimulating lively conversation in communal or canteen areas.

Being around the colour yellow can provide a sense of optimism, as the colour has creative and confident attributes that are suggested to help raise self-esteem and motivate students. This colour can be effectively used to brighten up areas which lack natural light, and is a great addition to art, music or languages classrooms.

Orange is the most flamboyant colour within the colour spectrum, as it combines the physical and energetic nature of red with the emotional stimulus of yellow. It can work well in creative spaces, however, bolder orange colours should be avoided if learners are young and naturally energetic as it can overstimulate their minds.

Colour for concentration and calm

Shades from the cooler side of the spectrum, for example blues, greens and purples help promote restfulness and calm, and are therefore better suited to academic subject classrooms.

Blue is linked to the mind. Soft pastel shades can aid concentration, while strong blues have been known to stimulate clear thought. It is said to be the colour of communication, intelligence, trust and logic and, therefore, a good choice for educational spaces.

When you imagine the colour green, nature always springs to mind. The colour sits on the visible spectrum meaning the eye doesn't require any adjustment to register the shade, making it calming and peaceful. Vibrant tones can inject some energy, without overly distracting pupils.

Meanwhile, the shade purple is passive in nature and links back to sophistication, importance and quality. Strong hues are best suited for feature areas, while pale hues encourage tranquillity. This colour can work well in academic spaces such as religious education, or creative spaces such as music and drama.

Avoid competing colours

Bringing colour to a school does not need to be on a huge scale – in fact it can be more cost-effective and impactful to balance between brighter zones and more calming spaces.

When it comes to painting walls, large, brightly coloured areas have been found to rate poorly amongst students, as well as plain white walls with few colour elements. Instead, the combination of lightly coloured surfaces with a feature wall in a bright colour was found to the be the most effective for learning[3].

In most classrooms, there are many other things competing with wall colours, such as posters and artwork. This can lead to overstimulation, as students don't know where to focus their attention. To reduce the amount of nervousness and anxiety in pupils, competing colour schemes should be avoided, and a less-is-more approach should be taken to items on display in the room.

Energising colours on the floor, blinds and furniture can be added to insert flashes of colour to rooms with a lighter coloured backdrop to create a more appealing and exciting learning environment.

Colour as a tool

Colour is not only visually pleasing on the eye – it can be used as a tool to aid with zoning and wayfinding through a space by outlining areas using different shades and textures. Injecting colour into entrance halls and corridors can immediately set a positive tone for the day ahead, and can help lift the energy levels of students walking between classrooms.

However, it is important to remember that there is no one rule that must be followed when it comes to applying colour. The geographic location of a school, character of the building or cultural background of the students can all influence the choices made.

The most important point is that an holistic approach to design must be taken, with careful consideration given to the impact of colour. By taking these elements into account, a truly inspiring environment that will energise and support the learning of those using a space can be created.

[1] University of Salford Clever Classrooms report (2015) www.salford.ac.uk/cleverclassrooms/150 3-Salford-Uni-Report-DIGITAL.pdf

[2] https://iaccna.com/color-in-environs/

[3] University of Salford Clever Classrooms report (2015) www.salford.ac.uk/cleverclassrooms/150 3-Salford-Uni-Report-DIGITAL.pdf

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