Ode to Rows
March 30, 2015

Walk into any American elementary school classroom – public or private, urban, suburban, or rural – and you're likely to see an archipelago of student groups with no designated 'front of the room.' Classrooms in the more affluent schools tend to have students positioned around tables, while the institutions still clinging to their 20th century furniture (and in some cases teachers) form two-desk by three- or four-desk rectangular pods.

Walk into any American elementary school staff room – public or private, urban, suburban, or rural – and you'll likely hear teachers mention students who don't pay attention and/or follow directions well. The kinder teachers will seem exasperated while others will bicker. Ask these same teachers if their student behavior is related to their seating arrangement and you'll likely get a dismissive answer from the former and a combative one from the latter. A teacher new to the profession might admit that situating students in rows never crossed their mind. Others will cite "research", stating that the 21st century workplace demands that students collaborate on projects and thus develop the interpersonal skills of working together. Frontal seating becomes stigmatized as antiquated, unfriendly, and even militaristic.

Growing up, I didn't like going to school. I felt emotionally disconnected from my teachers, unengaged in their lessons, and I always sat in rows. All but the latter were big reasons I chose to become a teacher and for the past 13 years, I've met a lot of educators whose professional impetus was the same as mine. Together, we joined an educational movement geared towards making school a more enjoyable place for our nation's children.

I think the field of education has succeeded in this regard. Engaging children's literature has supplanted basal readers, and Science and Social Studies lessons are taught less and less frequently by reading a textbook. But in an effort to improve upon the educational system that my generation passed through, most of us have lost perspective on the contributions our teachers made.

Eager to distance ourselves from our elementary school climates, we have gone to great lengths to make our learning spaces not come close to resembling the ones we passed through. Similar to a young parent abandoning all child discipline so as not to be like their parents who spanked, this pedagogical logic is arrogant and fundamentally flawed.

I hated going to school in third grade. But sitting in rows wasn't the reason. My teacher was strict and I rarely felt academically successful. She shamed me in front of the entire class when I repeatedly forgot my homework and rarely complimented me when I tried my hardest. Still, it would be shortsighted of me to assume that everything she did was wrong. Looking back, I realize that she was organized, efficient, and gave every one of her students a great chance to learn. She never allowed us to opt out of work and demanded that we produce our personal best. However, if I followed the logic that so many teachers ascribe to, I would attempt to provide the exact opposite of my third grade learning environment, creating an inefficient, chaotic climate in which students don't try hard and fall far short of their aptitude. This silly logic would also imply that I'd have to seat my students facing each other instead of in rows.

Few teachers go an entire class period without addressing their students either through direct instruction, group work projects, or at the very least making announcements. During this time, it's challenging to hold collective student focus if they're not facing the person speaking. When addressing students I often say, "I don't want to talk to the top, side, or back of any heads." Holding student eye contact doesn't ensure that a child is listening, but it drastically improves the likelihood that they are.

Different subjects require different levels of focus and also different focal points. When reading, student concentration is centered on their book. While doing a Science experiment, the materials being manipulated become the students' focus, and thus, pod seating makes greater pedagogical sense. But if a teacher is pointing to a map or demonstrating how to solve a mathematical word problem attention should be centered in a uniform direction. This is hard for students to do if they're not positioned to comfortably look at their teacher.

As a sixth grade Math/Science teacher, my students had separate Math and Science seating configurations. The Math configuration was four rows of six desks. Science was six four-desk pods. It took the students 30 seconds to convert from one formation to the other. They were able to develop their interpersonal, collaborative skills in both arrangements, but class would always start and end in rows. This helped me more efficiently guide students into the room, take role, give instructions, distribute materials, collect materials, and guide them out of the classroom, saving me hours of instructional minutes over the course of the school year.

Many American children inhabit ultra-stimulating environments. Inside their homes, they watch television, play video games, and constantly listen to music. Outside the home, those who aren't insulated by IPods and smarts phones frequently find themselves in fish bowls of rumbling traffic, shrilling sirens, and pedestrian noise. Although functioning at an enormous economic disadvantage, the third world child who reads by the light of a paraffin lamp, while only hearing sounds of the night emanating from a forest is at an extreme advantage when it comes to concentrating on their teacher's lessons.

Regardless of whether or not they've been diagnosed with ADHD, elementary-aged children tend to be social, fidgety, and easily distracted. Pod seating incubates this distractibility, because the simple act of looking straight ahead puts them in direct eye contact with a classmate who – by percentages – doesn't concentrate well. When sitting in rows, however, the simple distraction is eliminated and it takes a greater effort (not to mention uncomfortable body contorting) to initiate distractibility.