

Inclusive Learning Spaces: Preparing Pre-service Teachers in Culturally Responsive Classroom Management

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ABSTRACT

This study is a work in progress addressing the critical need for pre-service teachers to develop competencies that promote student engagement and inclusivity in early childhood education. It emphasizes the role of culturally responsive design, highlighting how thoughtful classroom layouts can reflect and celebrate the diverse backgrounds of young learners. The research data was gathered using a Qualtrics survey and semi-structured interviews to address the following questions: What are pre-service teachers' perceptions of physical learning space and their potential to impact student engagement, sense of belonging, and culturally responsive practices? How does the physical learning space promote culturally responsive practices in early childhood education? By focusing on practical skills, theoretical knowledge, and reflective practices, this research aims to equip pre-service teachers with the tools necessary to foster engaging and inclusive learning environments for all young learners. The upcoming phase will allow pre-service teachers to collaborate with mentor teachers to redesign a classroom. Ultimately, this study will provide knowledge that will help pre-service teachers discover strategies and enhance their competencies to create inclusive environments that encourage interaction, promote active learning, and support the cultural identities of all learners.

keywords: Inclusivity, Engagement, Classroom Arrangement, Early Childhood Education

1. Introduction

Over the past decade, there has been a significant increase in the enrollment of culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students in the United States public education system. For this article, CLD students are defined as individuals who speak languages other than English and come from diverse social, cultural, and economic backgrounds (Gonzalez et al., 2011). However, the demographic composition of individuals enrolled in teacher preparation programs does not align with the increasingly diverse student population found in general education classrooms. The most recent data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2023) on the racial and ethnic composition of public school students and teachers can be found in Table 1.

Table 1. Teacher and Student Racial Demographics in the United States

Racial Demographics	White	Hispanic	Black	Asian	American Indian/Alaska Native	Pacific Islander	Two or more races
Student	44%	29%	15%	5.5%	.9%	Less than .5%	5%
Teacher	79%	9%	7%	2%	Less than 3% combined		

Source: National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). (2023). *Racial/ethnic enrollment in public schools*. U.S. Department of Education.

Many teacher preparation programs have aligned with state requirements by integrating culturally responsive pedagogy and differentiation into their course curricula. These efforts reflect a growing recognition of the need to prepare educators who can meet the academic needs of students from marginalized backgrounds. Despite these efforts, there is a disconnect between teacher preparation programs and the realities of classroom practices, which instruct theoretical content, but limit opportunities for experiential learning, leaving many educators feeling unprepared to effectively support students from diverse backgrounds in their classrooms (Hansen-Thomas et al., 2016). According to Smigielski (2025), limitations such as insufficient funding, resource constraints, and institutional resistance prevent new teachers from developing the skills to embed culturally responsive classroom management in their classrooms.

In this study, culturally responsive classroom management is defined as an approach that addresses the cultural, emotional, social, and cognitive needs of learners by fostering a structured environment that minimizes misbehavior and maximizes learning opportunities. Inspired by the work of Gloria Ladson Billings' theory on culturally relevant teaching, educators utilized students' cultural identities as the vehicle for learning (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 161). Through the lens of her research, culturally responsive classroom management is an approach that requires teachers to be intentional in designing a learning space, procedures, and interactions that recognizes students' identities and supports equitable learning. In 2024, a research grant was awarded to conduct a yearlong qualitative study involving students (N = 58) enrolled in a classroom management course. This study was designed to explore how pre-service teachers critically analyze classroom arrangements through the lens of student engagement and inclusivity. Furthermore, this study investigates how student teaching helps prepare pre-service teachers to address behavior challenges, establish diverse learning spaces, and foster inclusive classroom communities for all learners. Together, these insights aim to contribute to a deeper understanding of how teacher preparation programs can better equip educators to establish culturally responsive classrooms.

2. Literature Review

According to Adegbola (2021), student teaching plays a crucial role in helping pre-service teachers recognize the value of their preparation programs in equipping them to instruct diverse learners. Recent studies have examined what teacher preparation programs are doing to increase the preparedness of student teachers to handle the reality of teaching and classroom management in early childhood education. Panse-Barone et al., (2024) evaluated the impact of these programs have made to increasing the knowledge of pre-service teachers' practice in establishing family-professional collaboration in inclusive settings. A 2024 study reveals that some innovative approaches such as macro and micro-level practices helped student teachers develop specific instructional practices to navigate the field of teaching (Szocik, 2024). Lastly, Ronfeldt (2021) reports the links among teacher preparation, retention and teaching effectiveness revealed that most effective program provided high-quality clinical experiences in supportive schools by connecting student teachers with strong mentor teachers.

However, there have been mixed reviews on how teaching practices prepare pre-service teachers to transition into the classroom. Maseko's (2022) findings revealed that pre-service teachers are not adequately prepared to work in a learning environment. The 2023 Global Education Monitoring Report showed that teachers from over 19 countries were dissatisfied with their preparation program due to an overemphasis on theories, lectures, and limited practices (Burns, 2023). Identifying the specific areas where teacher preparation programs need improvement is essential to ensuring that pre-service teachers are adequately prepared to support culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) learners in their future classrooms.

In the EGP 400 Classroom Management course, classroom design is explored using Fred Steele's framework on physical learning environments. Steele (1973) introduced the idea of *environmental competence*, referring to how effectively individuals interact with and make use of their physical surroundings (p. 11). His work outlines six key functions—shelter and security, social contact, symbolic identification, task instrumentality, pleasure, and growth—which offered practical guidance for educators in shaping physical spaces to positively influence student behavior and enhance engagement (Özyildirim, 2021; Steele, 1973). In a classroom setting, teachers utilize the learning space to create a classroom that is safe and more conducive to learning and social development. According to Carol Weinstein (2007), knowing how to apply these six functions helps teachers increase their awareness of the learning space and affects learning and classroom management.

Within teacher preparation programs, pre-service teachers are provided with a framework that emphasizes key domains essential for effective classroom management. As pre-service teacher transition from their course work into the fields for student teaching, West Chester University utilizes the Danielson Framework to evaluate student teacher performance inside their mentor teacher's classroom. In particular, Danielson Framework: Domain 2 emphasizes that teachers cultivate and not manage a space that supports student learning and behavior (Danielson Group, 2024). A common challenge for first-year teachers is developing a personal interpretive framework for teaching (Kelchtermans, 2009) and then adapting their classroom environment and curriculum to maximize student learning while addressing their social and emotional needs (Alisarri et al., 2019).

Özyildirim (2021) asserts that when classroom arrangements support both academic and socio-emotional needs, they contribute to positive attitudes in both students and teachers. Furthermore, effective classroom design enhances student engagement, minimizes behavioral disruptions, fosters peer relationships, and promotes a sense of belonging. At the University of Salford, researchers analyzed over 100 classrooms in the United Kingdom, and discovered simple elements such as lighting, seating arrangement, and cultural representation can influence students' performance in the learning environment (Barrett et al., 2015). According to Gatoys (2024), a study found that teachers' seating arrangements can enhance the learning experience and complement the teacher's teaching style. Furthermore, Johnson et al. (2020) highlighted the role of teachers in shaping inclusive environments through teacher-directed strategies, however, it does not reflect the lived experiences of CLD students. Despite the growing body of research on classroom environments, no studies have specifically examined pre-service teachers' perspectives on how these spaces influence their learning and sense of belonging.

To address this gap in the literature, I piloted an eight-week program in which five pre-service teachers collaborated with educators in urban schools to create inclusive learning environments that enhance student engagement and foster a sense of belonging. This study aims to fill a critical gap in research by exploring how learning environments impact CLD students. Previous research suggests that many teachers felt unprepared to integrate culturally responsive practices due to limited resources or inadequate professional development (in-service) training. By

understanding how learning spaces influence inclusivity and engagement for diverse learners, pre-service teachers can apply this knowledge in their academic disciplines to create supportive and effective classroom environments for all students.

3. Theoretical Background

Environmental psychology explores the interconnected relationship between individuals, places, and their surrounding environments (Bonnes & Carrus, 2004). It examines how human behavior is influenced by both natural and built environments. In PK–12 educational settings, environmental psychology focuses on how factors such as wall space, lighting, and spatial organization influence students' social, emotional, and cognitive development. Over the years, extensive research has investigated the ways in which physical space affects individual behaviors and learning outcomes.

Three prominent theorists have contributed significantly to the understanding of how environmental factors shape student's behavior in the classroom. Egon Brunswick (1903–1955), regarded as a key figure in this field, strongly advocated for the idea that psychology should consider the environment as a crucial determinant of human behavior (Steg et al., 2012). Similarly, Kurt Lewin (1890–1947) expanded the field of social psychology through his development of field theory, which posits that human behavior is influenced by both personal and environmental factors. This principle is expressed mathematically as $B = f(P, E)$, meaning behavior (B) is a function of both the person (P) and the environment (E) (Jones, 2024). Lastly, Roger Barker (1903–1990), the founder of Behavioral Setting Theory, sought to understand the dynamic relationship between individuals and their environments by challenging traditional dualistic perspectives that separated individuals from their surroundings (Avram et al., 2024). Collectively, these theorists explored the intersection between environmental space, human behavior, and social interactions.

The alignment of environmental psychology with educational spaces further highlights the impact of learning environments on students' emotional and cognitive development. According to Graetz (2006), the design of learning spaces significantly affects students' emotions, cognition, and behavior. Ideally, the classroom environment should serve as a space that elicits positive emotional responses, fostering a supportive and engaging learning experience. By examining how learning spaces influence student's behavior and engagement, teacher preparation programs can design coursework that equips future educators with the skills necessary to meet these specific needs.

4. Research Question

The research questions for this study examined how teacher preparation programs prepared student teachers to establish a learning space that promotes a sense of belonging and enhances students' level of engagement in the classroom. The specific questions for this study were as follows:

- What are pre-service teachers' perceptions of physical learning space and their potential to impact student engagement, sense of belonging and culturally responsive practices?
- How does the physical learning space promote culturally responsive practices in early childhood education?

5. Methodology

5.1. Design and Procedures

An IRB application was submitted in Summer of 2024 for approval to conduct this research study. Letters of support were obtained from the participating school districts affiliated with the student teaching placements. Grant funding supported the development of a survey tool aimed at assessing pre-service teachers' perceptions and self-efficacy regarding classroom environments. A brief open-ended survey was created using Qualtrics and administered to the selected teacher candidates at the beginning of the Fall 2024 semester.

In the early stages, recruitment emails were distributed to university supervisors, who shared them with eligible student teachers. Those who expressed interest were provided with a consent form and completed a pre-assessment survey consisting of seven open-ended questions before attending the first workshop. Mentor teachers also received consent forms requesting permission for student teachers to observe their classroom environments.

In Spring 2025, the observation phase took place. Student teachers collaborated with their assigned mentor teachers to explore how the physical classroom environment influenced student learning and classroom management. Each student teacher was given a journal to record observations, focusing on how the classroom layout aligned with Steele's (1973) six environmental functions: shelter and security, social contact, symbolic identification, task instrumentality, pleasure, and growth. Throughout the Spring semester, student teachers attended bi-weekly workshops where they collaborated with peers and received instructional content and resources related to effective, culturally responsive classroom design.

5.2. Intervention Phase

In the final phase of the study, student teachers shared their classroom redesign proposals with their mentor teachers. Grant funds were distributed to each student teacher to purchase materials such as books, educational tools, and flexible seating from local retailers (e.g., Target, Amazon, Walmart) to support the implementation of a culturally responsive classroom environment.

After implementing the redesign, student teachers observed the updated classroom and documented their findings in their journals, paying close attention to student engagement. Engagement was assessed based on behavioral indicators of active involvement and motivation to learn, following the framework established by Cents-Boonstra et al. (2020). All journals were collected, and the qualitative data is currently being coded for themes. In conclusion, this final phase is intended to provide actionable insights that explain how classroom design influences teaching effectiveness and student engagement.

6. Population

The population selected for this study consisted of pre-service teachers enrolled in EGP 400: Classroom Management, a course designed to equip future educators with the tools and strategies necessary for effective classroom leadership. The demographic composition of the participants was predominantly white (non-Hispanic) females, comprising over 89% of the group. Fewer than 10% of students identified as members of minority racial or ethnic groups, including African American, Asian American, and Latina backgrounds. Regarding geographic residency, the majority (97%) of participants were residents of Pennsylvania, while an additional 2% came from neighboring states such as New Jersey, Delaware, and New York. International students represented less than 1% of the cohort (Bennett, 2025). All participants

were in their fourth year of study, a critical stage in their teacher preparation, as they transitioned from coursework to practical teaching experiences.

The second phase of the study focused on a subset of participants: five pre-service teachers from West Chester University (WCU) enrolled in the Department of Early and Middle Grades Education. These candidates were intentionally selected based on their demonstrated interest in teaching in urban and culturally marginalized communities—an area that requires educators who are both skilled and culturally responsive. To provide hands-on teaching experience, these candidates were placed in a local school district in Pennsylvania, where they engaged with diverse student populations and applied culturally relevant pedagogical practices.

Additionally, the study included five primary-grade (K–4) mentor teachers who worked with culturally and linguistically diverse learners. These mentor teachers were selected for their expertise in addressing the unique needs of diverse student populations and their ability to guide pre-service teachers in developing effective teaching strategies. Their participation was integral to the program, as they provided mentorship, shared best practices, and supported the pre-service teachers in their field placements.

7. Findings

On Qualtrics, students were asked a series of questions to capture their perspectives on creating an inclusive classroom environment. The purpose of these questions was to assess their level of competency and understand how physical learning spaces may influence students' social and cognitive behaviors. Below is the data from five questions posed to pre-service teachers.

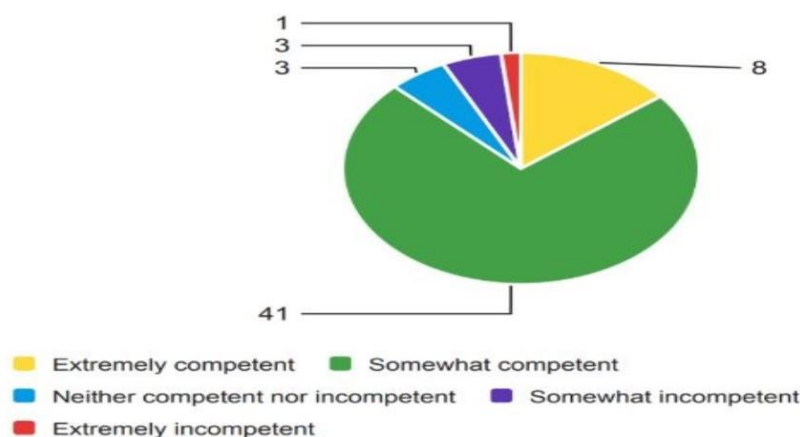


Figure 1. Competency to design a classroom environment for all learners

The first question asked pre-service teachers to assess their level of competency in designing a classroom for all learners. Approximately 84% of pre-service teachers reported feeling somewhat competent or more in creating a learning environment, based on the knowledge gained from their university courses and field experiences. Fewer than 15% of participants indicated feeling neutral, citing a lack of classroom exposure as a factor in their uncertainty about their ability to design an effective learning space.

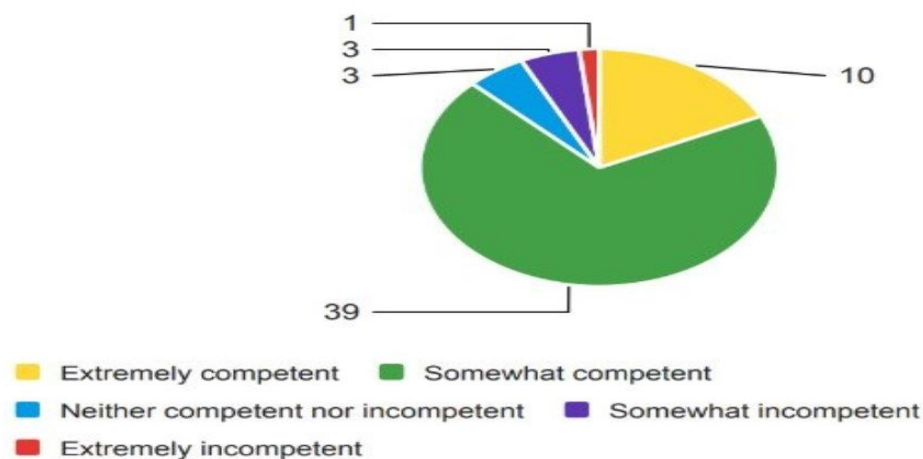


Figure 2. Competency to design a classroom that meets students' academic needs.

The second question asked pre-service teachers to assess their level of competency in designing a classroom for academic purposes (e.g., workstations, whole group learning). Approximately 84% of pre-service teachers reported feeling somewhat competent or more in creating a learning environment, drawing on the knowledge gained from their university courses and field experiences. Fewer than 15% of participants expressed neutrality, citing a lack of understanding on how to accommodate the diverse learning needs of every student as the reason for their uncertainty.

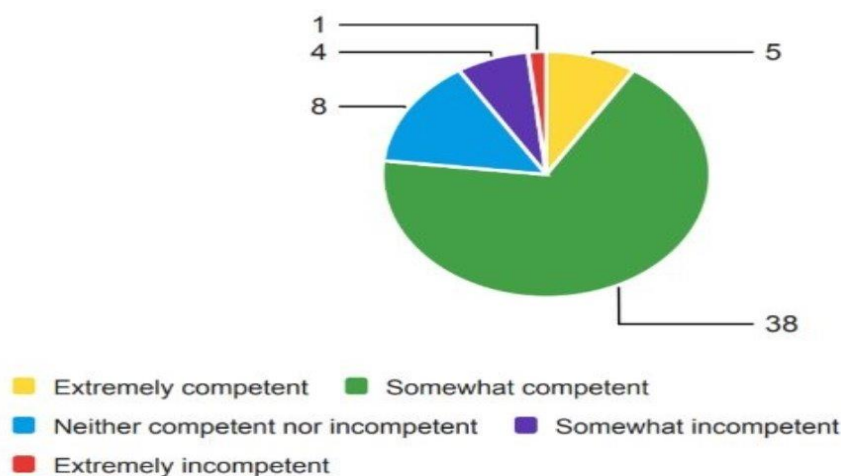


Figure 3. Competency to design a classroom environment that meets students' behavioural needs.

The third question asked pre-service teachers to assess their level of competency in designing a classroom for behavioral management. Approximately 75% of preservice teachers reported feeling somewhat competent or more in creating a learning environment, based on the knowledge they gained from their university courses and field experiences. About 25% of participants expressed neutrality, citing uncertainty about how to address various types of misbehaviors as the primary reason for their lack of confidence in managing classroom behavior effectively.

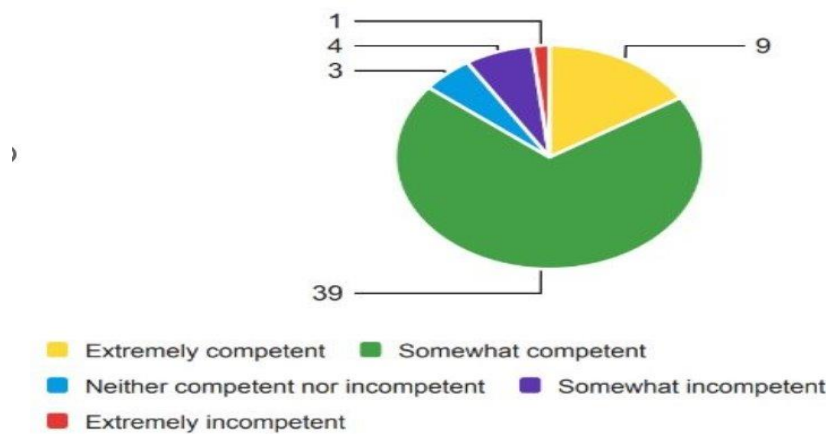


Figure 4. Competency to design a classroom environment that meets students' social and emotional needs.

The fourth question asked pre-service teachers to assess their level of competency in designing a classroom to support students' social and emotional needs. Approximately 82% of pre-service teachers reported feeling somewhat competent or more in creating a learning environment, drawing on the knowledge gained from their university courses and field experiences. About 18% of participants expressed neutrality, feeling neither competent nor incompetent in designing a learning environment that addresses social and emotional learning.

Q5 - Rank the factors you consider most important when designing a learning space...

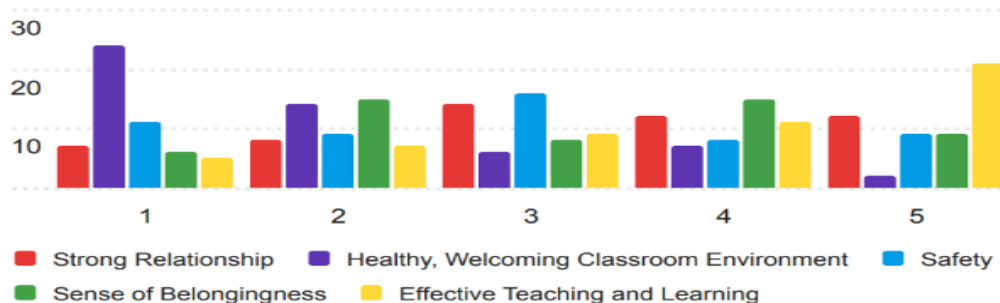


Figure 5. Rank the factors you consider most important when designing a learning space for culturally and linguistically diverse students.

For the final question, pre-service teachers were asked to rank the factors they considered most important when designing a learning space. From lowest to highest, pre-service teachers indicated that effective teaching and learning were not as critical as creating a classroom space that is healthy and welcoming for students. Other relevant factors that aligned with creating a healthy, welcoming environment included establishing a space where students feel safe and have a sense of belonging, with acceptance from both their teacher and peers. For pre-service teachers, the priority in classroom design centered on the well-being of students, followed by teaching and learning. Based on this finding, teacher preparation programs should place greater emphasis on equipping pre-service teachers with the resources and knowledge needed to create supportive classroom environments that address the needs of all learners.

8. Discussion

This qualitative study provides valuable insights into how teacher preparation programs should equip pre-service teachers to address student engagement and inclusivity through effective classroom design. Throughout the data, terms such as *engagement*, *inclusivity*, *safety*, and *representation* were frequently used by preservice teachers when describing their perceptions of culturally responsive classroom management. These reflections underscore the growing recognition among emerging teachers that classroom environments are not simply neutral spaces, but rather dynamic settings that can both support and hinder student participation and academic learning.

The perceptions pre-service teachers held regarding classroom management and design were influenced by two key factors: (a) course content and (b) field experience. All fifty-eight participants enrolled in the classroom management course had previously observed up to three PK-4 classrooms as part of their coursework requirements. This blend of theoretical instruction and practical exposure allowed pre-service teachers to bridge abstract concepts with real-world applications. Observing in-person classroom dynamics appears to have reinforced the importance of physical and emotional learning environments as central to effective classroom management.

Pre-service teachers emphasized that, in the context of culturally responsive classroom management, the learning environment plays a pivotal role in fostering a welcoming space where students feel safe and comfortable enough to engage with the curriculum and with their peers. The classroom setting is not merely seen as a backdrop for instruction but also an active influence in shaping behavior, inclusion, and engagement. Several participants emphasized this point through their reflections:

Participant 23: “A classroom environment can affect student engagement in multiple ways. If the classroom environment is not welcoming, or if children don't feel safe or seen, their engagement will decline. However, if the environment is safe and welcoming, students are more likely to engage.”

Participant 12: “Classroom environment is extremely important for student engagement. The way the room is set up and how the teacher interacts with students are key factors in how students behave in the classroom.”

Participant 4: “A classroom environment in which students feel safe and comfortable will decrease bad behavior and increase their engagement and willingness to learn.”

These responses collectively highlight the idea that classroom design is not only about organizing a physical layout but also about creating an emotional climate conducive to learning. When PK-4 students feel emotionally and physically secure, they are more inclined to actively participate, display positive behavior, and take intellectual risks. This connection between environment and engagement aligns with existing research, further validating the reflections of these preservice teachers. In addition to promoting engagement, pre-service teachers provided trivial insights into what inclusivity looks like within a classroom setting. Their responses revealed that inclusivity extends well beyond simply accommodating diverse learners — it requires intentional design, representation, and pedagogical practices that validate all students' identities and experiences. The following excerpts illustrate these perceptions:

Participant 10: “Inclusivity in a learning environment looks like lessons and activities that can be adjusted to fit the needs of each individual student.”

Participant 19: “Every student should feel that their presence, participation, and points of view are not only welcome but also necessary for the learning experience to be complete in an

inclusive learning space. It's about creating an environment where everyone feels they belong and can succeed, regardless of their background, skills, or identities.”

Participant 31: “Inclusivity includes students being represented throughout their classroom. Every student should be able to see themselves in the room, whether through posters with different ethnicities or languages, or a teacher providing content in the students' primary language.”

These statements make it clear that inclusivity in the classroom is not just a conceptual goal but an ongoing practice that must be reflected from the materials displayed on the walls, the learning curriculum, the language used, and the instructional strategies employed. Overall, the insights shared by preservice teachers reinforce the importance of equipping future educators with both the theoretical frameworks and practical tools to design classrooms that are both engaging and inclusive. These environments require deliberate planning, reflection, and responsiveness to the diverse needs of students. When teacher preparation programs prioritize culturally responsive classroom design, they empower pre-service teachers to become advocates for equity and inclusion in their future classrooms.

9. Conclusion

In conclusion, this ongoing qualitative study highlights the role of classroom design in fostering both student engagement and inclusivity as two essential components of culturally responsive classroom management. The findings indicate that preservice teachers recognize the importance of a classroom environment that promotes safety, comfort, and a sense of belonging, which are critical to students' willingness to engage in the learning process (Oryildirim, 2021; Steele, 1973). As demonstrated in their responses, pre-service teachers, a well-designed classroom is more than just a physical space—it is a dynamic environment that supports students' emotional, social, and cognitive needs. This aligns with previous research conducted by Graetz (2006), which emphasizes that learning spaces significantly impact students' emotional, cognitive, and behavioral outcomes. Furthermore, this study underscores that teachers should consider individual variables (i.e. student characteristics) when organizing floor arrangement in early childhood education.

The results highlight the need for preservice teachers to be equipped with the skills to design classrooms that are both conducive to learning and reflective of the diverse needs of their students. Pre-service teachers in this study, influenced by both their coursework and field experiences, consistently emphasized that an inclusive classroom environment inclusivity where every student feels safe and appreciated, is key to effective classroom management and student engagement. These findings support Adegbola (2021), who asserts that preparing preservice teachers for diverse classrooms must extend beyond traditional pedagogical techniques to include cultural responsiveness and the ability to design learning environments that accommodate the needs of all learners.

Moreover, this study further suggests that teacher preparation programs should place greater emphasis on equipping future educators with the knowledge and skills necessary to design classrooms that support the social, emotional, and cognitive development of all students. As suggested by Kelchtermans (2009) and Alisarri et al. (2019), argue that teacher preparation programs need to include explicit instruction on the relationship between classroom design, behavior management, and student engagement. Teacher preparation programs should also continue to integrate culturally responsive practices into the curriculum to ensure that pre-service teachers are well-equipped to support diverse learners in their future classrooms.

Moreover, the pre-service teachers' responses suggest that classroom inclusivity extends beyond physical arrangements to include diverse cultural representations and equitable access to learning materials. This aligns with the work of Gonzalez et al. (2011), who emphasize the importance of culturally responsive pedagogy in addressing the needs of linguistically and culturally diverse learners. A culturally responsive classroom that reflects the diversity of its students not only fosters inclusivity but also enhances engagement, as students are more likely to feel a sense of ownership and pride in their learning space when they see their identities represented within it.

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Appendix

Q1: On a scale 1-5, how competent are you in designing a classroom environment for all learners?

Q2: On a scale 1-5, how competent are you in designing a learning space that meets students' social and emotional needs?

Q3: On a scale 1-5, how competent are you in designing a learning space that meets students' academic needs?

Q4: On a scale 1-5, how competent are you in designing a learning space that meets students' behavioral needs?

Q5: What do you consider most important when designing a learning space for culturally and linguistically diverse students? Rank Order (1 most- 5 least)

1. Strong Relationships
2. Healthy, Welcoming Classroom Environment
3. Safety
4. Sense of Belongingness
5. Effective Teaching and Learning

Q6: Student engagement is the extent to which students show curiosity, attention, and interest in the content being taught. In your own words, how does a classroom environment affect student engagement?

Q7: In your own words, what does inclusivity look like in a learning space?