From the Height of a Child: Looking Again at the Primary Classroom Through Cavendish Space

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Inspired by building the Cavendish Primary Classroom on Stimpunks.World together in November 2026, and by the chapter on neuroqueer learning spaces we have written together (Edgar & Boren, 2027). Where it says "I", that is Helen.

Kneeling down

If you kneel on a classroom floor until your eyes are about a metre from the ground, the room changes. The tables are at your chin, the displays are a long way up, the adults are mostly legs and voices, and the door to the outside, if there is one, is the brightest thing you can see. This is the height of a child of seven, and it is the height from which we drew the Cavendish Primary Classroom, an example mainstream room for a class of thirty, built as somewhere for people training to teach to walk around in and argue with.

I come to it as a late-identified Autistic and ADHD person, a parent of neurodivergent children, and a teacher who worked for over twenty years in early years, primary and SEND settings, including with children described as having profound and multiple learning disabilities. I was trained in reward charts and sanctions, and I used them before I knew better. So this is not a neutral review. I helped to make the room, and I want to look at it honestly from four directions: Universal Design for Learning, Cavendish Space, anti-behaviourism and neuroqueer learning spaces. What can each of them see from down here, and what might each of them miss?

What is in the room, and what if the room is small?

The room has garden doors glazed to the floor, lamps on a dimmer that start switched off, blinds, a fan, and walls left mostly bare. There are standing desks, ordinary chairs, wobble stools, beanbags and floor cushions, so that there are more places to be than there are children. There are three caves: a cloth over a frame in

the far corner, a den under a table and a small tent in the garden. There is a movement corner with a crash mat, a balance board and a rocking chair. Nobody is drawn in it, because it is set up for whoever comes in.

It is a roomy example, and most classrooms are not roomy. Thirty children fill a room quickly, and I do not think the answer is guilt about floor space. What matters is that every child can reach each kind of place, not that every room holds all of them. The small things can live in every classroom: headphones on a hook, a basket of fidgets, a wobble cushion, a lamp turned down, one nook under a table. The big things can be shared in the hall, a wide corridor, a spare room or outdoors, as long as getting there is easy and nobody has to explain themselves or wait until break.

What Universal Design for Learning can see

Universal design began in architecture, as design that is "usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design" (Center for Universal Design, 1997). Universal Design for Learning carries that into teaching, and CAST (2024) asks for multiple means of engagement, of representation, and of action and expression. From a child's height the room does well by this. Light, sound, seating and place can all be changed, the timetable is in pictures as well as words, captions are on, signing and symbols sit beside speech, and nothing that helps is kept back for children with a label.

There is some research to stand on, and I want to be careful with it. Barrett et al. (2015) studied 153 primary classrooms in England and report that "seven key design parameters have been identified that together explain 16% of the variation in pupils' academic progress achieved" (p. 118): light, temperature, air quality, ownership, flexibility, complexity and colour. That figure is a share of the range of progress across the classrooms they measured, not a promise about any one room, and the stimulation they recommend is an appropriate level, not the lowest possible, which is a caution against stripping a room bare. Fisher et al. (2014) found that kindergarten children "spent more time off task, and demonstrated smaller learning gains when the walls were highly decorated than when the decorations were removed" (p. 1362), but that was a laboratory classroom, and neither study was about Autistic children.

The evidence for UDL itself is modest. Capp (2017) concluded that it improves the process of learning while an effect on outcomes had not yet been shown, and King-Sears et al. (2023) later found a moderate positive effect on achievement across

twenty controlled studies, while Boysen (2024) compares it uncomfortably with learning styles. Flexible seating is thinner still: Attai et al. (2021) found more satisfaction and autonomy and did not report attainment, and Bluteau et al. (2022) found mixed effects on wellbeing. So I do not think we can honestly say this room will raise attainment. I think we can say it widens the ways in. What UDL cannot easily see is who holds the controls, because it is usually something a teacher designs for children, and Hamraie (2017) reminds us that there is a politics to who the "universal" user is imagined to be.

What Cavendish Space can see

Cavendish Space starts from that question. Its shortest version is that "you meet a need by shaping the surroundings, not by changing the person" (Cavendish Space, n.d.-d), and it zones a room into five places: the **cave**, the **campfire** and the **watering hole**, which are Thornburg's (2014) primordial learning spaces, and the **library** and the **habitat**, which complete them. In this room the caves are for being alone and low, the campfire is a small circle on the rug, the watering hole is the tables and the tray of loose parts, the library is the shelf and the picture timetable, and the habitat is the whole room and its garden.

It is also where the room meets sensory difference most directly. Dunn (1997) describes seeking and avoiding as patterns of responding, not kinds of child, and the same child may seek movement and avoid noise within the same hour. The first version of this room was dim, soft and quiet, which suits a child who is overwhelmed and leaves out a child whose bodymind needs more, so the movement corner, the heavy jobs, the chew tools and the garden were added for them. Sensory experience shapes school life for Autistic pupils: Ashburner et al. (2008) found associations between sensory processing and classroom outcomes in a small sample, the parents and teachers in Jones et al. (2020) described distraction and distress, and the young people who spoke with Goodall (2018) described mainstream school as hostile to their senses and asked for simple changes. Mostafa (2014) offers design principles that point the same way. Stimming belongs here too. Autistic adults told Kapp et al. (2019) that it regulates them and that they object to having it trained away, and I have written about it as an embodied sensory language (Edgar, 2026a).

The ethics matter as much as the furniture. A card lies face down until a child turns it, because "The turn is the consent" (Cavendish Space, n.d.-e), and "Nothing here sorts a child. Everything here sorts the room" (Cavendish Space, n.d.-c). The risk I

can see from the floor is capture. A cave becomes a time-out the moment an adult sends a child into it, and a crash mat becomes a reward the moment it has to be earned. The furniture cannot prevent that. Only the adults can.

What anti-behaviourism refuses

This is why the room carries a list of things it will not do: no "behaviour" chart, no traffic lights, no taking away play, breaks, the garden or the cave, no rewards for sitting still or looking at the speaker, and no asking permission to drink, move or go to the toilet. The cave is "A retreat, never a time-out" (Cavendish Space, n.d.-a).

Kohn (1993) set out the case against rewards decades ago, and Deci et al. (1999), in a meta-analysis of 128 experiments, found that expected tangible rewards reduced intrinsic motivation, with stronger effects for children. Those were mostly experiments and not classrooms, so I hold them carefully, but they sit beside self-determination theory, in which autonomy, competence and relatedness are needs to be met and not privileges to be earned (Ryan & Deci, 2000). For Autistic children the stakes are higher. Walker (2021, as quoted in Boren & Edgar, 2024) describes freedom of embodiment as an essential element of cognitive liberty, and I have written elsewhere that compliance is not connection (Edgar, 2025a) and that teacher training still leans on behaviourist compliance (Adkin & Edgar, 2025). Stimpunks keeps a growing library of the research on this (Stimpunks Foundation, n.d.).

What the room cannot do is remove behaviourism from a school. A classroom like this inside a school with a points system, public sanctions and attendance rewards is a cave in a storm. Interest-led learning can be captured too, when a child's passion becomes leverage, something offered after the "real" work, and I have argued that interest-led is not enough without an understanding of monotropism (Edgar, 2025b). So an honest appraisal has to look at the school's policy as closely as the room's design.

What neuroqueering asks of us

Neuroqueer learning spaces ask for something more unsettling than good design. Walker (2021, as quoted in Boren & Edgar, 2024) writes that "The classroom must be declared a zone of freedom from the dominant culture's pervasive requirement that everyone strive to constantly perform neuronormativity" (pp. 152–153), and that conflicts between access needs "should be negotiated in class as part of the

learning process" (p. 152). The room makes space for that. When one child needs the lamps up and another needs them down, the answer is a task lamp, a different place and a conversation, not a rule.

Yet a room designed by two adults is still designed by adults. Neuroqueering is a practice, not a floor plan, and I worry about the day a "Cavendish classroom" becomes a checklist, a new "normal" to be inspected. In our chapter we describe the Neuroqueer Space Holder, an adult who is trusted one to one, keeps the whole group safe and co-regulates instead of controlling (Edgar & Boren, 2027), and I think regulation grows from those relationships more than from any corner of a room (Edgar, 2026b). Monotropism (Murray et al., 2005) and the double empathy problem (Milton, 2012) are theories that are true to my own life, and there is growing evidence for the second (Crompton et al., 2020), but the people who should be shaping this room are the children in it. Fletcher-Watson et al. (2019) make that case for research, and I think it holds for classrooms.

A day that bends

A room that changes needs a day that can bend. The anchors stay fixed so that the day is predictable, and the middle flexes around the children. This is one example, and the times are approximate.

Roughly	What happens	How it flexes
8:30–9:00	Soft start: arrive and settle in any place	The register is taken quietly
9:00–9:15	Campfire: plan the day on the picture timetable	Join from the rug, the edge or a cave
9:15–10:30	Learning block, with choices of how to work and how to show it	Breaks taken when needed, never earned
10:30–10:50	Watering hole outdoors	The caves stay open
10:50–12:00	Interest-led project time	Nobody is moved on mid-flow
12:00–13:20	Lunch, play and a quiet return	A quiet table, or the classroom with a friend
13:20–14:40	Learning block, often outdoors, or more project time	A choice of task
14:40–15:15	Show and share, then a campfire close	Showing is always optional

Interest-led time follows what I have called the wandering line, which may be the learning itself (Edgar, 2026d), and monotropic attention needs long, unbroken stretches to find flow and wonder (Edgar, 2026c). A flexible day is not a looser day for every child. Some children need the same order every day, and choice can itself be a demand, so changes are warned of in words and pictures and sameness is always on offer.

The whole school as habitat

One classroom is only one example. Children spend their days in corridors, halls, dining rooms and playgrounds, and our chapter asks for caves, campfires and watering holes everywhere, indoors and out (Edgar & Boren, 2027). Most schools already have them. A cave might be a nook behind the library shelves, a quiet room off the corridor that is never locked and never a place a child is sent, the edge of the hall during assembly, a willow den or a bench under a tree. A campfire might be a story corner, a small group room, the nurture room's table, a lunchtime club or a circle of logs at forest school. A watering hole might be the playground, the library at lunchtime, an art room left open or the school garden.

Nair et al. (2009) wrote about solitude as the place where learning is taken in, and McGoldrick et al. (2025) have carried the Autistic SPACE framework into schools. The habitat is then the whole building: quiet routes, no bells, soft light, signs in symbols, staff who have a cave of their own, and a door to the outside wherever one can be had.

What I am still wondering

This is a design argument and not an evaluation. Nobody has measured what happens to children in this room, most of the studies I have leaned on were not about Autistic pupils, and several of the ideas are theories or lived knowledge, not trial findings. I think that is an honest place to begin as long as we say so. I wonder what children would change first. I wonder how belonging, attendance, distress and joy would look after a year, in the children's own words and ways of communicating. I wonder how much of this survives a curriculum and an inspection system that still ask for stillness and sameness, and what teachers need in order to hold it.

Getting back up

When I get up off the floor, the room looks ordinary again, and I think that is the point. Nothing in it is expensive or new: a cloth over a table, a lamp turned down, a mat in a corner, a door left open, a day with room in it. Universal Design for Learning widens the ways in, Cavendish Space hands over the dial, anti-behaviourism refuses to make any of it conditional, and neuroqueering asks us to keep unlearning what a classroom is for. "Regulation comes before instruction. Environment is curriculum" (Cavendish Space, n.d.-e).

We need schools where every child, whether their bodymind needs less or more, can find a place that fits without having to earn it or explain it. The cards, the guidebooks and Place Explorers are free at cavendish.space. I hope you kneel down in your own room this week and see what is there.

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From the interactive whiteboard in Cavendish Primary Classroom on Stimpunks.World, https://stimpunks.world/cavendish-primary-classroom.html, where the classroom this essay is about can be walked round. Words by Helen Edgar and Ryan Boren, November 2026, under CC BY-SA 4.0. Set in Andika (SIL International) and Sniglet (Haley Fiege), both under the SIL Open Font License.