

# Maintaining Bare Walls and Clutter-Free Classrooms: Strategic Approaches to Overcoming Challenges in the Elementary Schools of Balanga City

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**Abstract**— This study explores the lived experiences of elementary school teachers in implementing and maintaining bare walls and clutter-free classrooms in the Schools Division Office (SDO) of Balanga City during the 2024-2025 school year. It examines the challenges encountered, the benefits gained, and the coping strategies employed to sustain a minimalist classroom environment. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, data were gathered through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and classroom observations involving 21 teachers from Kindergarten to Grade 6 across 18 elementary schools. Findings reveal that while the program offers advantages, it also presents challenges that require strategic management to maintain instructional effectiveness. Teachers implemented various coping strategies to address these challenges and ensure an organized and engaging learning space.

The study recommends that schools and administrators establish policies that balance minimalism with instructional needs, provide financial and material support, and conduct teacher training on effective classroom management and digital integration. Teachers are encouraged to adopt alternative teaching strategies, maintain decluttering routines, and collaborate with parents and the community to sustain the initiative. Policymakers should develop guidelines for maintaining functional yet minimalist classrooms, allocate funding for necessary resources, and implement monitoring mechanisms to assess the impact on student learning. Further research is suggested to explore the long-term effects of minimalist classrooms on student performance, engagement, and cognitive development.

**Keywords**— Minimalist Classroom, Bare Walls, Clutter-Free Environment, Student Focus, Classroom Management, Teaching Strategies, Student Engagement, Educational Policy.

## INTRODUCTION

The increasing emphasis on simplicity and functionality has significantly influenced the educational landscape, advocating for classrooms that enhance focus and minimize distractions (Rashid, 2023). Research suggests that clutter-free environments contribute to better cognitive processing, improved student engagement, and enhanced academic performance (Rodrigues & Pandeirada, 2018). In the Philippines, where classrooms are among the most crowded in Asia, creating organized and clutter-free learning spaces has become an urgent concern. Public elementary schools in the country have an average class size of 43.9, significantly higher than Malaysia's 31.7, Thailand's 22.9, Japan's 23.6, and India's 40 (Philstar.com, 2006). This overcrowding necessitates measures to optimize classroom space and improve learning conditions.

Recognizing this issue, the Department of Education (DepEd) released DepEd Order No. 21, s. 2023, which mandates that classroom walls remain bare and free of posters, decorations, and other visual materials. The order also prohibits classrooms from being used as

storage areas for unnecessary items (Department of Education, 2023). This directive aligns with findings from a study in Cebu, where teachers reported that the "Oplan-Baklas Operation 2023"—which involved the removal of classroom decorations—reduced preparation time, expenses, and workload, allowing educators to focus more on instruction (Bernales et al., 2024). However, while a minimalist classroom environment offers several benefits, its implementation presents challenges, particularly for elementary teachers accustomed to using bulletin boards and instructional displays as teaching aids. This shift requires strategic approaches to maintain instructional effectiveness while adhering to the decluttering mandate.

Despite the increasing adoption of minimalist classrooms, research on their sustainability and effectiveness in the Philippine context remains limited. Internationally, studies have explored how classroom design affects student behavior and cognitive development (Rodrigues & Pandeirada, 2018), while local research has primarily focused on student perspectives rather than the challenges faced by teachers

(Bonghanoy et al., 2024). Additionally, the issue of classroom congestion exacerbates the difficulty of maintaining clutter-free learning environments. According to the 2023-2028 Philippine Development Plan, 32% of elementary schools, 41% of junior high schools, and 50% of senior high schools are projected to experience overcrowding. DepEd faces a backlog of 159,000 classrooms, requiring PHP 397 billion, yet only PHP 10 billion has been allocated for classroom construction in 2024 (Abasola, 2023). As an alternative solution, the government has considered expanding the voucher system to encourage private school enrollment and reduce congestion. However, ensuring that public schools maintain a conducive learning atmosphere despite these constraints remains a pressing challenge.

Furthermore, the decluttering mandate has sparked debates among educators, with some expressing concerns that removing visual aids may negatively impact instruction, while others support the initiative for its potential to streamline classroom organization and reduce non-essential workloads (Manila Bulletin, n.d.; Peña, 2023). The introduction of the Matatag Curriculum further complicates this transition, as new teaching strategies may require additional instructional materials, making it essential to strike a balance between minimalism and effective pedagogy. Without clear strategies for implementation, teachers may struggle to maintain engaging yet clutter-free learning spaces.

This study aims to explore the challenges faced by elementary teachers in implementing and sustaining minimalist classrooms and to identify effective strategies for overcoming these challenges. It examines interventions such as teacher training, financial and material support, policy development, community involvement, and digital integration as potential solutions. By providing a comprehensive analysis of the experiences of elementary teachers, this research seeks to bridge existing gaps in literature and offer practical, evidence-based recommendations for maintaining clutter-free classrooms without compromising instructional quality.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research design, specifically a phenomenological approach, to explore and analyze the strategic approaches to maintaining bare walls and clutter-free classrooms in elementary schools in the Schools Division Office (SDO) of Balanga City. The phenomenological approach was chosen to gain a

deep understanding of teachers' lived experiences, insights, and challenges in creating and sustaining such an environment.

To gather rich and detailed data, several qualitative methods will be utilized. In-depth, semi-structured interviews will be conducted with 21 teachers from Kindergarten to Grade 6 across 18 elementary schools in SDO Balanga City. Additionally, focus group discussions (FGDs) and classroom observations will be conducted to facilitate in-depth discussions and directly examine how teachers implement and manage clutter-free practices. Furthermore, document analysis will be performed, reviewing relevant materials such as DepEd Order No. 21, s. 2023, school policies, and other guidelines related to classroom management and organization.

The data collected will be systematically coded and analyzed using thematic analysis, identifying key themes and patterns related to the challenges and strategies for maintaining clutter-free classrooms

## RESULTS, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSIONS

This chapter presents the findings of the study, analyzing and interpreting the lived experiences of elementary school teachers in implementing and maintaining bare walls and clutter-free classrooms in the City of Balanga during SY 2024-2025. The qualitative data gathered from in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and classroom observations were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify key themes related to teachers' experiences, coping mechanisms, and proposed strategies for long-term sustainability.

The findings are presented thematically according to the research questions, accompanied by narrative accounts from the participants. The discussion also integrates relevant theories and previous research to explain the significance of the findings.

### *Lived Experiences of Elementary School Teachers in Implementing and Maintaining Bare Walls and Clutter-Free Classrooms*

The first research question investigates the firsthand experiences of elementary school teachers as they implement and maintain the bare walls and clutter-free classroom policy. It aims to understand both the positive impacts and challenges of sustaining a minimalist classroom environment, including its effects on student learning, teacher workload, and classroom management.

**1.1 Positive Impacts of the Bare Walls and Clutter-Free Classroom Policy**

*Subtheme from Interviews and Focus Group Discussions*

Subtheme	Significant Statements from Participants
<b>Increased student focus</b>	"Adopting a minimalistic classroom design creates a calm, organized, and purposeful space that enhances student engagement. Without excessive visual distractions, students tend to stay on task longer." (P10)
<b>Better classroom management</b>	"A conducive, tidy, and simple classroom made learning easeful and spacious."(P14)
<b>Calm and clean environments</b>	"Implementing and maintaining the bare walls and clutter-free classroom minimized distractions among learners. It creates a calm learning environment where students give more focus to the lesson. Also, cleaning and organizing became more manageable." (P5)
<b>Reduced teacher workload.</b>	"Positively, implementing and maintaining the bare walls and clutter-free classroom policy became more convenient and advantageous, especially at my age; less work, stress, and expense, with no need to prepare quarterly designs and other colorful materials on boards." (P9)

Many teachers reported that maintaining a bare walls and clutter-free classroom environment positively influenced student behavior, focus, and engagement. The following subthemes emerged:

1. **Increased Student Focus-** Teachers observed that removing excessive decorations and visual clutter helped students stay more focused during lessons. This aligns with Bonghanoy et al. (2024), who found that a minimalist classroom setup improved students' concentration and participation in learning activities. These findings reinforce the idea that a simplified, clutter-free environment promotes better attention and learning outcomes.
2. **Better Classroom Management -** The findings align with Jacob Kounin's (1970) Classroom Management Theory, which emphasizes that a well-structured classroom prevents disruptive behavior and fosters an organized learning environment. Many teachers reported that removing unnecessary materials reduced distractions, leading

to a more disciplined and productive classroom setting.

3. **Calm and Clean Environments –** The aesthetic simplicity of clutter-free classrooms creates a peaceful atmosphere conducive to learning. This aligns with Musiowsky-Borneman and Arnold (2021), who advocate for classroom minimalism, arguing that reducing physical and digital clutter decreases stress for students and teachers, leading to a more focused and productive learning experience.
4. **Reduced Teacher Workload –** The policy of maintaining bare walls and clutter-free classrooms has lessened the burden on teachers, as they no longer have to spend significant time and resources updating bulletin boards and decorating classrooms. This aligns with Bernales et al. (2024), who found that the 'Oplan-Baklas' operation reduced the effort, time, and financial costs associated with classroom decorations, allowing teachers to focus more on instruction rather than aesthetic preparations.

**Challenges in Implementing and Maintaining Clutter-Free Classrooms**

*Subtheme from Interviews and Focus Group Discussions*

Subtheme	Significant Statements from Participants
<b>Student Adjustment</b>	"The hardest part has been helping the students get used to having fewer decorations since they are used to a more colorful classroom." (P1)
<b>Lack of Visual Engagement</b>	"The most difficult part is maintaining the balance between minimalism and keeping the classroom visually engaging. I've addressed this by rotating student work and selectively displaying functional materials that support learning." (P16)
<b>Storage</b>	"The most difficult part of maintaining bare walls and a clutter-free environment in my classroom has been managing storage." (P3)
<b>Finding Balance Between</b>	"The most difficult part of maintaining this policy has been finding the right balance between creating an inspiring and stimulating space and maintaining a clutter-free,



<b>Minimalism and Functionality</b>	organized environment. It requires constant adjustment, flexibility, and a deep understanding of what will best support the learning and well-being of my students." (P13)
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Despite the benefits, teachers faced several difficulties, which were categorized into the following subthemes:

1. Student Adjustment & Lack of Visual Engagement – Some teachers expressed concern that students, particularly younger ones, struggled with the transition to a more bare-walls and clutter-free classroom. This aligns with Bonghanoy et al. (2024), who found that some students initially felt less connected to their learning environment due to the lack of colorful decorations and visual aids. However, their study also suggested that students eventually adjusted and recognized the benefits of a clutter-free classroom, including enhanced focus and fewer distractions.
2. Storage Problems – Teachers highlighted the difficulty of organizing teaching materials without visible storage options, a challenge also noted in Hauck’s (2022) study, which emphasized the need for efficient storage solutions in minimalist classrooms. The lack of designated storage spaces often led to disorganization behind the scenes, making it difficult for teachers to access materials quickly.

3. Finding a Balance Between Minimalism and Functionality – Many teachers struggled to maintain a balance between keeping the classroom clutter-free and ensuring that essential learning aids were still accessible. This concern aligns with Salar et al. (2024), who found that while minimalist classrooms reduce distractions, completely removing educational decorations can hinder student engagement and comprehension. Their study suggests that a carefully designed bare-walls and clutter-free classroom should still incorporate essential instructional aids to support learning.

***Coping and Strategic Mechanisms for Overcoming Challenges***

The second research question aims to identify the coping strategies and solutions teachers have developed to address the difficulties of implementing and maintaining bare walls and clutter-free classrooms. It examines how teachers manage classroom organization, engage students and parents, and integrate alternative teaching aids while ensuring a functional and engaging learning environment.

***Subtheme from Interviews and Focus Group Discussions***

<b>Subtheme</b>	<b>Significant Statements from Participants</b>
<b>Using Alternative Visual and Interactive Teaching Aids</b>	"Use of learners' portfolio, reminder notebooks, group chats (GC), detachable IMs that are easy to keep, and PowerPoint presentations." (P14)
<b>Strategic Storage Solutions</b>	"For better organization, I use storage boxes and shelves to keep materials accessible but out of sight." (P5)
<b>Rotating Student Work and Essential Visuals</b>	"To address the challenge of limiting decorations, I focus on displaying only essential visuals, such as student work and key learning aids, which I rotate regularly to keep the classroom engaging yet clutter-free."(P12)
<b>Establishing Routine Decluttering and Organization Strategies</b>	“One In, One Out” Rule – If I add a new visual or material, I remove something to prevent accumulation. Hidden but Accessible Storage – I use: Labeled bins for quick access to supplies. Hanging organizers for small items ( flashcards, manipulatives).End-of-Day Reset Routine – I allocate 5 minutes at the end of each day to tidy up and organize”(P21)
<b>Addressing Student and Parent Expectations</b>	“Addressing Student & Parent Expectations Strategy: Educate & Communicate Early. At the beginning of the school year, I explain the benefits of a minimalist classroom to students and parents. I emphasize how fewer distractions lead to better focus, organization, and learning. During open house or parent-teacher meetings, I share research or examples of how an intentional environment supports student success.”(P10)
<b>Encouraging Student and Community Involvement</b>	“Encouraging student involvement in maintaining the clutter-free environment is essential for its long-term success.”(P17)

1. Using Alternative Visual and Interactive Teaching Aids – Instead of traditional wall decorations, teachers relied on digital presentations, interactive whiteboards, and projection-based learning tools to keep students engaged. This is in line with Kelley (2022), who emphasizes that technology integration in minimalist classrooms helps maintain student engagement while reducing visual clutter.
2. Strategic Storage Solutions—Many teachers use labeled bins, vertical shelves, and hidden storage areas to maintain a clutter-free appearance while ensuring the accessibility of materials. This approach is consistent with Hauck (2022), who highlights that efficient storage solutions are essential for organizing teaching materials in minimalist classrooms without compromising functionality.
3. Rotating Student Work and Essential Visuals – Instead of permanent wall decorations, some teachers adopted a rotating display system that periodically updates student work and key learning materials. This strategy is consistent with Bonghanoy et al. (2024), who found that students in minimalist classrooms reported improved concentration and participation due to reduced visual distractions. While their study focused on the impact of reducing decorations, a balanced approach—such as rotating essential visuals—may help maintain engagement without overwhelming the classroom.
4. Establishing Routine Decluttering and Organization Strategies – Teachers developed routines for maintaining a clutter-free space, such as weekly decluttering, five-minute cleanups, and assigning

students classroom organization tasks. This supports Kounin’s (1970) Classroom Management Theory, which stresses that consistent and structured routines are key to effective classroom management and minimizing disruptions.

5. Addressing Student and Parent Expectations – To gain support from parents and students, some teachers held orientation sessions to explain the benefits of bare walls and clutter-free classrooms. This aligns with Kotter’s (1996) Leadership and Change Management Theory, which emphasizes that clear communication and stakeholder engagement are crucial when implementing organizational change.
6. Encouraging Student and Community Involvement – Teachers found that engaging students in maintaining the classroom helped instill responsibility and ownership of the space. This is supported by Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) Ecological Systems Theory, which highlights the role of the surrounding environment and stakeholders in shaping student behavior.

***Proposed Strategic Plan for Sustaining Bare Walls and Clutter-Free Classrooms***

The third research question seeks to determine the necessary support systems, resources, and best practices that would help sustain bare walls and clutter-free classroom environments over time. It focuses on identifying administrative support, storage solutions, digital teaching tools, and long-term strategies that can facilitate the effective implementation of the bare walls and clutter-free classroom policy in elementary schools.

***3.1 Resources or Support from the School or Administration to Ensure Long-Term Success of Maintaining Bare Walls and Clutter-Free Classrooms***

***Subtheme from Interviews and Focus Group Discussions***

<b>Subtheme</b>	<b>Significant Statements from Participants</b>
<b>Adequate Storage Solutions</b>	"Adequate storage like cabinets and shelves for teaching materials so we can reuse them."(P4)
<b>Administrative and Policy Support</b>	"Wide dissemination of the program about the long-term success of maintaining bare walls and clutter-free classrooms."(P6)
<b>Budget and Funding for Organizational Supplies</b>	"Budget for organizational supplies—funding for clear plastic bins, file organizers, and label makers to keep materials sorted."(P3)
<b>Digital Tools and Technological Support</b>	"Ensuring that the technology used in the classroom (interactive boards, digital projectors, etc.) is maintained and updated regularly. If tech fails, it could lead to the teacher reverting to physical materials to cover lessons." (P17)

<b>Professional Development and Teacher Training</b>	"Professional development on minimalist teaching practices and classroom organization."(P16)
<b>Student and Community Involvement</b>	"Collaboration with parents for managing materials and supporting classroom organization." (P13) "Support in creating a student-led cleaning routine." (P15)
<b>Time Allocation for Organization and Maintenance</b>	"Time & support for maintenance."(P7)

**Adequate Storage Solutions-** One of the major concerns of teachers is the lack of proper storage for teaching materials, making it difficult to maintain a clutter-free classroom. Participants suggested the need for lockable cabinets, labeled bins, and vertical shelves to keep resources organized while ensuring accessibility. This aligns with Bernales et al. (2024), who found that while DepEd's Oplan-Baklas initiative helped declutter classrooms, it also left teachers struggling with storage solutions. The study reinforces the need for school support in providing proper storage facilities.

**Budget and Funding for Organizational Supplies-** Many teachers reported that a lack of financial support for storage solutions and organization tools made it challenging to sustain a clutter-free classroom. This aligns with Salar et al. (2024), who found that schools with financial backing for classroom organization see better implementation of minimalist learning

environments. The study highlights that budget allocations play a vital role in sustaining these efforts.

**Digital Tools and Technological Support-** To address the lack of traditional visual aids, teachers relied on digital resources such as interactive whiteboards, projectors, and online learning platforms. This shift is supported by Marantika et al. (2024) and Zulyetti (2023), who found that digital learning tools enhance student engagement without the need for excessive classroom displays.

**Time Allocation for Organization and Maintenance-** Teachers reported that finding time for regular decluttering and organization was a challenge, especially with their already heavy workloads. This aligns with Kelley (2022), who found that teachers who establish consistent organization routines experience reduced stress and better classroom management.

**3.2 Most Effective Strategies for Maintaining Bare Walls and Clutter-Free Classrooms in the Long Term**  
*Subtheme from Interviews and Focus Group Discussions*

<b>Subtheme</b>	<b>Significant Statements from Participants</b>
<b>Establishing Clear Guidelines and Classroom Expectations</b>	"From my experience, setting clear rules for decorations, like limiting what can be displayed and where, helps maintain a clutter-free space."(P1)
<b>Smart Storage and Organization Systems</b>	"Designated Storage Areas: Use labeled bins, shelves, and cabinets for organized storage."(P3)
<b>Regular Decluttering and Maintenance Routines</b>	"Creating routines for maintaining the clutter-free environment, such as daily tidy-ups, weekly deep cleans, and regular organization checks."(P17)
<b>Using Minimalist and Purposeful Displays</b>	"Rotating student work, using minimal displays, and promoting organization and tidiness are key to maintaining a clutter-free classroom long-term."(P8)
<b>Digital and Multimedia Teaching Strategies</b>	"Always have my slideshow presentation and downloaded videos and pictures that are related to my lessons/topics."(P2)
<b>Student Involvement and Responsibility</b>	"Designation of tasks among the pupils, strongly established classroom management, collaborative learning."(P9)
<b>Multi-Functional and Sustainable Teaching Materials</b>	"When making instructional materials or charts, make them in a way that they can be used in other subjects to minimize clutter in the future."(P20)

**Establishing Clear Guidelines and Classroom Expectations-** Teachers emphasized the importance

of having clear and consistent policies regarding the bare walls and clutter-free classroom initiative.



Establishing classroom expectations ensures that students, teachers, and parents understand and follow the guidelines effectively. This aligns with Kotter's Change Management Theory (1996), which suggests that establishing a clear vision and reinforcing policies are critical for sustaining change.

**Smart Storage and Organization Systems-** The lack of adequate storage was identified as a major barrier to maintaining a clutter-free classroom. Teachers recommended using labeled bins, vertical shelves, and designated storage spaces to keep materials accessible but out of sight. This strategy aligns with Bernales et al. (2024), who found that effective storage systems help teachers maintain minimalism while ensuring access to essential resources.

**Regular Decluttering and Maintenance Routines-** Many teachers shared that clutter builds up quickly if not consistently managed. Implementing weekly or monthly decluttering schedules helps maintain a clutter-free learning space. This finding is consistent with Kelley (2022), who found that teachers who follow structured organization routines experience less stress and have more time for instruction. Her research highlights that regular maintenance is key to sustainability.

**Using Minimalist and Purposeful Displays-** Rather than eliminating classroom visuals, teachers recommended displaying only essential materials, such as student work, key learning aids, and interactive boards. Swain (2024) argues that classrooms should be a "canvas for thought" rather than an overwhelming display of decorations. He emphasizes that purposeful displays enhance learning without causing distractions, reinforcing the idea that moderation is key in classroom visual setups.

**Digital and Multimedia Teaching Strategies-** To compensate for the removal of traditional visual aids, teachers suggested incorporating digital teaching tools such as projectors, PowerPoint presentations, and interactive learning apps. Studies by Marantika et al. (2024) and Zulyetti (2023) found that flipped classroom models and digital resources improve student engagement and reduce reliance on printed materials, making them effective tools for minimalist classroom setups. Hauck (2022) also supports the idea that technology allows teachers to create dynamic, engaging lessons while keeping the physical classroom clutter-free.

**Student Involvement and Responsibility-** Encouraging students to take responsibility for maintaining a clutter-free environment fosters accountability and long-term success. Teachers highlighted that assigning classroom organization tasks and creating a culture of responsibility among students lead to better classroom upkeep. This aligns with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979), which suggests that student behavior is influenced by their immediate environment, including the classroom setting.

**Multi-Functional and Sustainable Teaching Materials-** To reduce clutter, teachers emphasized the importance of using versatile teaching materials that can be reused across different subjects and lessons. Instead of single-use posters or printed charts, they suggested laminated resources, detachable learning aids, and multi-purpose instructional tools. This aligns with Musiowsky-Borneman and Arnold's (2021) "Triple P" Process, which encourages teachers to identify the purpose, prioritize what's essential, and pare down unnecessary materials.

## CONCLUSIONS

Based on the findings, the following conclusions were drawn:

The implementation of a bare walls and clutter-free classroom policy has led to both advantages and challenges. While teachers acknowledged enhanced student focus, improved classroom management, and reduced workload, they also faced issues related to storage, student engagement, and balancing aesthetics with functionality. Teachers have adopted various strategies to cope with the changes, such as leveraging digital resources, implementing strategic storage solutions, rotating visual displays, and engaging stakeholders in maintaining a minimalist environment. These methods have helped in mitigating some of the initial difficulties faced in the transition to a clutter-free classroom. A sustainable approach to maintaining bare walls and clutter-free classrooms requires a combination of school support, proper resources, and strategic implementation. Providing adequate storage, budgetary support, digital tools, professional training, and dedicated time for organization will ensure the long-term effectiveness of this policy.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and conclusions, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. For Schools and Administrators:

- Develop school-wide policies that provide clear guidelines on maintaining minimalist classrooms while allowing essential learning materials.
  - Provide adequate storage spaces and financial support for organization tools and digital teaching resources.
  - Organize teacher training workshops focused on effective classroom management, minimalist teaching strategies, and digital integration.
2. For Teachers:
- Utilize alternative teaching aids such as digital presentations, interactive media, and rotating student displays to compensate for the absence of wall decorations.
  - Maintain a decluttering routine by implementing weekly or monthly clean-up schedules with student participation.
  - Collaborate with parents and community members to ensure sustainability and support for the minimalist classroom initiative.
3. For Policymakers (DepEd and Local Education Units):
- Consider formulating a policy that balances minimalism and instructional effectiveness by ensuring organized, functional, and engaging classrooms while sustaining a bare-walls and clutter-free initiative.
  - Allocate funding and grants for storage solutions, technology, and maintenance supplies to assist teachers in maintaining clutter-free classrooms.
  - Establish monitoring mechanisms to assess the impact of minimalist classrooms on student learning outcomes and teacher workload.
4. For Future Researchers:
- Conduct longitudinal studies to examine the long-term impact of minimalist classroom environments on student performance, behavior, and overall engagement.
  - Explore the psychological and cognitive effects of reduced visual stimuli in learning spaces.
  - Investigate alternative classroom organization models that blend minimalist principles with interactive, student-centered learning environments.

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