The Calming Corner and Student Behavior

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In education today there are various strategies and interventions teachers can use to support in managing classrooms. Classroom management can be hard to define solely because there are various ways a classroom can be managed. However, a broad definition of classroom management are actions teachers utilize to promote an environment that supports learning (Oliver, 2011). It can take teachers months and even years of practice to truly learn and understand what works best in a diverse learning environment. Furthermore, given the diverse backgrounds of all students and learning how to meet their needs, there are times when students demonstrate behaviors that can disrupt the learning process as well. Oftentimes teachers at one point in their teaching career will come across a student that may demonstrate inappropriate and challenging behaviors. Some of these behaviors can even escalate to a point of verbal and physical aggression if specific protocols or strategies are not put in place. When teachers utilize proactive interventions such as acknowledging and praising appropriate behaviors it can lead to a decrease in behaviors from escalating (Colvin et al., 1993).

However, due to underlying circumstances and other factors not all problematic student behaviors can be easily managed by just praising that student for when they demonstrate positive behaviors. Therefore, in some situations students may benefit from utilizing strategies to help them self-regulate. According to Shanker (2010), self- regulation is the skill of remaining calm, focused and alert in order to have self-control. Being able to cope with frustration is a much needed skill in life and can be a crucial part of a child’s everyday life. Furthermore, teaching appropriate ways to cope can be an essential part of every classroom. In many classrooms today, teachers may also even provide a physical space in the room for a student to apply these self- regulating skills. These spaces can be identified as several different names such as the calming corner, the peace corner, the zen zone, the me zone, the cozy corner and many more that fit the needs of the student (Shanker, 2010)

With this space, that will be further referred to as the calming corner, it can be used to support the needs of students who need a break or space to reset their mind and prevent further decisions that could lead to consequences. A space for them to simply just remain calm or calm down. With the calming corner put in place as a part of classroom management there needs to be teacher instruction on appropriate ways of using the calming corner. Specifically in elementary age students, they may require more time spent in teaching not only appropriate use of this space but also a curriculum that focuses on self-regulation and social emotional learning. Although there are many ways to examine the use of a calming corner and teaching skills needed to cope with feelings that can be problematic, the purpose of this study is to examine and analyze the question: *What is the effect of the calming corner on student behavior?*

Taking a Look Challenging Behaviors

Amongst classrooms today we see a variety of behaviors both positive and problematic in a learning environment. Teachers often find that these problematic behaviors are stressful to the environment and are unacceptable. It is also mentioned that teachers spend a great deal of time and effort in managing the classroom due to intolerable behaviors (Sun 2012). According to Sun (2012), research has shown that misbehavior can eventually escalate with time and can even lower academic achievement.

In terms of what challenging behaviors look like and what behaviors may require more support are those that can be disruptive and can be more severe in regards to affecting others. Examples of these behaviors include and are not limited to talking out during teaching activities, screaming/ yelling, physical aggression, property destruction, eloping area or classroom, and noncompliance or not following directions (Sun 2012). All of these disruptive behaviors can often lead to teachers putting their classroom learning on pause and to take immediate action to these behaviors due to potential escalation and safety concerns (Arbuckle, 2004).

When looking at challenging behaviors, the impact of a student’s environment must be taken into consideration. According to Dunlap (2011), one main reason challenging behaviors occur are because they are a way for students to communicate their needs and wants or is a way to escape or avoid something. Challenging behavior can continue to happen if the student ends up getting what they want out of it, especially if it is something that is effective for them in other environments such as at home. These behaviors can better be understood through three principles: challenging behavior is functional, communicative, and a lack of appropriate skills (Lee 2021).

Social Skills and Social Emotional Learning

Over the years there has been an increasing need and demand to incorporate a social skills curriculum into every classroom (Steed 2021). Also over time there has also been an abundance of programs and curriculum for educators and schools to utilize. Unlike academic areas, a social emotional learning program can be applied in a student's functional skills throughout their day such as at lunch, recess, and in the hallways and can even be addressed school-wide (Greenberg, 2003). An organization that facilitates the need for Social Emotional Learning is known as the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) (Greenberg, 2003). This Social Emotional Learning program, CASEL, entails facilitation in the areas of self-awareness, self- management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2003). Other well known programs are Second Steps, Responsive Classroom, Zones of Regulation, Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports, Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies, and Interplay Solutions (Mindess et al., 2008). It has been reported by many educators and schools that they have seen a difference and a positive impact when teachers take the time to teach social emotional learning programs. As a matter of fact, while incorporating social skills programs, there has been a decrease in inappropriate behavior and an increase of academic achievement (Duginske, 2017).

In a study done by Lee (2021), research was conducted to test the correlation between implementing higher levels of social and emotional practices and the impact those practices made in terms of social skills on children in a preschool classroom. The study consisted of randomized participants including teachers and preschools across various school settings such as public, private, and Head Start. To qualify for the study preschoolers must have demonstrated significant challenging behaviors and of those students in the study most were on an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). To assess and identify students with significant social skill deficits/delay, the Social Skills Improvement System (SSIS) is utilized in this study. The study also uses the Teaching Pyramid Observation Tool to teach 5 of the 14 key teaching practices. Of the 5 key teaching practices used, only 2 showed significant correlation. These two consisted of Teaching Problem Solving and Teaching Behavior Expectations. The other 3 key teaching practices showed no correlation (Lee, 2021)

Another study that was conducted by Kramer (2010) researched social- emotional learning through the Strong Start curriculum which is widely used in schools today. The research included 67 kindergartners and their parents or caregiver and 4 kindergartner teachers. The School Social Behavior Scale was utilized to collect data through the teachers and the parents used the Home and Community Social Behavior Scales. The study also used the Social Skills Rating System to give to teachers and parents. Overall, the results of this study indicated an increase of appropropriate social and emotional behaviors among the kindergartner students. Both parents and teachers reported that they felt the curriculum made a positive impact on their learning (Kramer, 2010).

The Calming Corner

A calming corner can be known and identified as several different names including the zen zone, peace corner, calm down corner, etc. According to Lantieri (2008), this area is referred to as the “peace corner”. The peace corner is a place in the classroom for students to go when they need to remain calm (Lantieri, 2008). At one point or another we experience strong emotions such as being stressed, frustrated, angry, or feeling overwhelmed. Young students especially may experience these feelings and may need further support in coping with those emotions. This space is available for those that just need that break and want to be left alone (Lantieri, 2008).

This space for students to access should provide students with a sense of calm, relaxation, and self-reflection (Maich 2018). It can also be beneficial specifically for those with Autism or those who receive special education. According to Maich (2018), there is a 10 step process that can help set up such a space. The first step of the process is to choose a location which is followed by the next step of setting physical boundaries. The third step is to create labels and names, such as the calming corner or relaxation station. The fourth step is to provide those expectations which can also tie into step five of setting up an entry procedure. The sixth step is to provide relaxation tools which can include visuals or manipulatives. Step seven is to make sure there are those comfort or preferred items to help students remain calm. Sensory items are also beneficial for some students such as noise canceling headphones or calming music which is the eighth step. The next step, step nine, insists on using a reflective teaching tool such as a journal. With an entry procedure, there then must be an exit procedure which is included in step ten (Maich, 2018). It is important to take into consideration these ten steps: a student's age, grade level, and level of cognitive function. (Maich, 2018)

In a study conducted by Thompson (2021), the effects of a calm down corner were administered. The participants included 23 students of which 3 were on Individualized Education Plans (IEP). The results of this study indicated that the calming corner did have a positive impact on student behaviors. Although behaviors were not eliminated completely, the teaching of self-regulating strategies and the use of the calming corner benefited the students and even decreased some of those unwanted behaviors (Thompson, 2021).

Conclusion

There is much research that shows the effectiveness a calming corner can have on student behavior. The abundance of resources and tools that teachers can use to manage classroom behaviors is unlimited but it can be overwhelming to also know what is going to be the most effective for a classroom. In terms of utilizing and accessing a calming corner there are also several ways to implement such procedures. When researching calming corner or similar names that relate to the calming corner, there were limited scholarly articles and data to support evidence of their effectiveness or even how to set up such a space in the classroom. Based on research there have been several studies on how teaching social-emotional learning curriculums and self-regulating strategies can make a positive impact on students. Therefore since there are very few studies that specifically look into the effect of a calming corner on student behavior this research will focus on just that and the impact it can have more specifically in a special education setting.

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