

Needs Assessment

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Introduction

The purpose of this needs assessment is to determine the use of calming areas (sometimes referred to as calming corners, sensory stations, quiet areas or relaxation station) within preschool classrooms. This assessment aims to gather information from stakeholders to determine the teachers perceptions of the use and effectiveness of using calming areas within a classroom. Additionally, this needs assessment aims to identify if the use of these decrease challenging behaviors and support emotional development as well as to identify areas of improvement for our youngest learners.

The data collection methods to provide an in depth awareness of the data will be collected using a mixed method approach. This will be through the use of a survey and a questionnaire to be given to stakeholders, therapists, teachers and/or teaching assistants who work in classrooms on their perceptions of the use of calming spaces.. Interviews will be given to stakeholders and teachers on their beliefs and perceptions using a calming areas as a self regulation tool.

The primary objective of this needs assessment is to determine the gaps in the literature and use of calming corners in classrooms to aid social emotional regulation and development. The researcher along with stakeholders can then formulate a plan to make recommendations and enhancements to users when utilizing a calming area within their classroom setting. This needs assessment will also explore best practices in the use of calming areas within preschool classrooms are developmentally appropriate and supportive to students emotional development.

Description

The mission is to create supportive inclusive learning environments that foster social emotional well-being and self regulatory skills in young children. By integrating calming

corners within preschool classrooms we aim to provide spaces to our youngest learners to assist them in developing emotional competencies and build resilience while decreasing maladaptive behaviors. Goals for the assessment include to support teachers to effectively use calming spaces and to ensure that calming corners are inclusive, supportive, and adaptable to meet the needs of all students.

This project will consist of stakeholders from The West Virginia and Mental Health Technical Assistance Center (WVBMHTAC) which is a collaboration of The West Virginia Department of Education (WVDE) and The Autism Training Center (ATC). Key members from the WVBMHTAC center are Amy Staples, Dr. Anna Shreeve and Dr. Amy Carlson. The community partners involved in the project are WV collaborative preschools and preschools in WV public schools. The consumers for the initiative are teachers, teaching assistants, therapists and administrators. The preschool children in which calming areas are used range in ages from 3-6 in preschool classrooms. Teachers, teaching assistants, therapists and administrators age ranges from 18-99. Socioeconomic status is not a limiting factor in the needs assessment as calming areas in classrooms are designed to be used for all students in the classroom. Currently, all preschool classrooms in WV are required to have a quiet space within the classroom setting. The space is open ended in regards to the demographic of where it is located within the classroom and/or size and space. Items that are placed in the quiet area vary from classroom to classroom. Social emotional development programs such as Positive Behavior Intervention Support and Conscious Discipline are social emotional programs/frameworks used in preschool classrooms.

Multiple frameworks can be used in preschool classrooms to promote social emotional development. Two popular ones that emerged in the research are Conscious Discipline (Wilburn et.al., 2023) and The Pyramid Model. The Pyramid Model is based on underlying principles of

positive behavioral support that have been altered in a way that is developmentally appropriate for early childhood practices (Rothstein & Rivard 2023). The framework is divided into three tiers. In the first tier of the program, universal practices are taught to educators to promote all children's social and emotional development in a highly supportive classroom setting. Nurturing relationships are an integral part of tier one practices. The second tier develops interventions for children at risk of social-emotional delays. The third tier of the model is developing individualized interventions for children who are experiencing severe social or emotional skill deficits that include challenging behavior (Hemmeter. et.al, 2022).

Conscious Discipline is a framework that provides teachers with a way to manage their emotions using structures, rituals, and routines that are most likely to produce certain behaviors in children and in themselves. Adults are taught to consciously manage their own thoughts and emotions so that they can help students to do the same. They are taught to stay calm during misbehavior and use this cue to teach instead of reprimanding. They work towards creating a community of relationships and provide self-regulation strategies because they believe that this where learning can take place (Wilburn, et.al., 2023).

Each of these frameworks can be implemented in preschool classrooms to support social-emotional development and equip teachers with evidence-based strategies for fostering these skills. Both Conscious Discipline (Wilburn, et.al., 2023) and The Pyramid Model (Hemmeter. et.al, 2022) can be used universally and/or with small groups and for individualized instruction. Each offers frameworks on how to structure the classrooms and though they do not specifically mention "calming area, or safe spaces" as part of the models' framework to address challenging behaviors.

Literature Review

Early childhood educators must balance these tasks while addressing the diverse needs of each child in their care. Early education programs have increasingly incorporated calming corners (sometimes referred to as "safe spaces", "calm-down areas" and "relaxation stations") as a strategy to help young children manage emotional, regulation and behavioral challenges (Maich, et.al., 2019). These areas are meant to provide an accessible location for students to practice self-regulatory skills, when they are experiencing emotions i.e. frustrated, sad or scared. (Jiang & Jones 2016). These skills form the foundation for children's ability to interact positively with peers, manage emotions, and engage in learning activities. Children with strong social-emotional skills are more likely to succeed academically, build positive relationships, and handle life's challenges.

Calming areas in a classroom are individually designed and items in the area vary from space to space. The process of designing a classroom is both an art and a science to ensure that every area of the classroom encompasses learning. Calming corners are designed to be a proactive space for students for relaxation, calming and decreasing challenging behaviors. All students with and without disability have moments of anxiety, stress, dysregulation. A calming area in the classroom where the student's nervous system is made to feel safe may assist students in learning emotional self-regulation skills. It can provide sensory rich experiences to encourage calmer nervous systems. This proactive strategy prevents emotional challenges before they emerge. (Maich, et.al 2019). The hope of a calming corner is that students will learn to manage difficult emotions first through co-regulation and then independently to build resilience.

While calming areas serve as a valuable tool for supporting social-emotional development, their effectiveness must be reinforced through teaching practices daily embedded into daily preschool routines. As the occupation of children, play (Kuhaneck, et. al. 2024) are

embedded throughout preschool curriculum. Strategies during play such as modeling, prompting, and reinforcing appropriate social behaviors can effectively support children's development of social skills (Case-Smith, 2013).

In addition to calming corners supporting social-emotional development, another important component is the importance of self-regulation skills and the emergence of self-control in preschool children. These skills are precursors to academic and school readiness (Silkenbeumer, et. al. 2018). These are two vastly different concepts that are imperative for preschoolers to begin to develop and learn to support academic learning. (Knopp, 1982). Co-regulatory practices are the precursor to self-regulatory skills.

Co-regulation requires educators to address the cues children are sending to them and provide the right amount of support to learn through a neurological lens, to assist them in calming their nervous systems. Frameworks such as Conscious Discipline and The Pyramid Model provide knowledge to educators on how to assist students with the overall teaching of social emotional development.

The study by (Rademacher, et.al., 2022) revealed the importance of promoting early self-regulation skills to support children during the preschool to elementary school transition. The data determined that there were behavior problems that occurred when self-regulation skills were lower despite moderate social emotional competencies. Low levels of self-regulation skills in preschool predicted difficulties in behavioral adaptation in areas such as hyperactivity. Research by (Steed et.al. 2023) reveals that teachers' perceptions of handling complex issues with students depend on how comfortable they are with the situation and parent perceptions.

Methods

The data collection methods that were used were interviews and a survey. These methods involve quantitative and qualitative methods. The survey (chart one) given consisted of twenty questions with multiple choice, selecting all that apply and short answer questions. The (chart two) interviews were given to stakeholders and preschool teachers. The survey questions were sent via email and returned in an anonymous format.

Chart one
1. What is your role?
2. What is the grades of the students that you work with?
3. Have you ever used a calming corner before?
4. Have you ever used a calming corner in your classroom for students?
5. How often do you believe that children use calming corners?
6. What are the mian reasons that you (for students) use the calming corner (check all that apply)?
7. If you answered other to number 6 please specify?
8. How effective do you find a calming corner?
9. How long do users typically spend in a calming corner?
10. If you chose other to question 9 please specify
11. What are some elements do you have in a calming corner?
12. If you chose other to question 11 please specify
13. Do you feel comfortable using a calming corner with your students?
14. What additional feature do you think could improve a calming corner?
15. Do you feel safe using a calming corner?
16. What do you think prevents students from using a calming corner?
17. What could be done to encourage the use of a calming corner?
18. How would you rate the effectiveness of a calming corner?
19. What changes would make the calming corner more effective?
20. Any additional comments?

The interview questions that the interviewer asked of the stakeholders and preschool teachers.

The interview was conducted via face to face, virtual platforms and/or telephone interviews.

Chart two
1. What items do you use/seen in a calming area within a preschool classroom?
2. What items do you find most effective?
3. What do you think needs to be provided to improve the use of calming areas within preschool classrooms?
4. Do you feel comfortable using a calming corner?

5. Do you have a social emotional curriculum if, so what is it?

The advantages of using a survey were the simplicity of the creation and distribution to the participants. Surveys also provide an anonymous format that participants can share, allowing participants to openly share their thoughts on the subject. In contrast, the advantages of using the interview format included the opportunity for direct person to person interaction whether that happened via telephone, in person or virtual platforms. Being able to discuss the questions with stakeholders and participants provided a valuable way to gain deeper knowledge, clarify responses, and a more meaningful dialogue about the effectiveness and potential improvements of calming areas Scaffa and Reitz, (2020).

The disadvantages of using a survey and interviews for the purposes of a needs assessment can be time consuming. These methods may have a low response rate if participants chose not to answer the questions. Furthermore, these methods could provide a misinterpretation of the questions causing the participants to answer the questions incorrectly. The way questions could be interpreted by the interviewer could create bias with representation of the answers. Scaffa and Reitz, (2020).

Results

The results of the needs assessment found several significant findings. The themes that emerged were that all the respondents felt safe using a calming area within preschool classrooms. A significant percentage of respondents, fifty-seven percent, reported that they did not believe that children knew how to properly execute and utilize a calming area. Barriers to implementation was another theme that resulted from the assessment. Lack of funding for materials and inconsistencies in the use of the safe space was identified as obstacles for implementing calm areas. Additionally, respondents reported that they believed that teachers and

teaching assistants should introduce, maintain, and maximize how to use these spaces when needs arise before (in times when the student is regulated) rather than waiting until the child (in a dysregulated state) would benefit from the use of a safe space. The items that were found most effective during use of the calming corner were fidgets and seating, i.e. bean bags and soft chairs.

Discussion

The results from fourteen respondents indicated that the use of a calming area in a classroom is beneficial to students with ninety-three percent of the respondents reporting the benefit. However, discrepancies of how the areas is used from ninety-two percent of the respondents suggest the need for educator support and professional development on the use of the area for social emotional development. Respondents reported that they did see benefits of the utilization of safe spaces. More structured training and resources could prove beneficial to maximize the effectiveness. Furthermore, differences in the implementation and the resources used in the calming area suggest that more research is required to determine best practice.

The gaps noted in the literature concluded that lack of funding and resources may contribute to the development of a calming space. Professional development opportunities are warranted to assist teachers and teaching assistants' best practices on how and what to use in a calming space and the use of self-regulation and emotional literacy practices to build resilience skills. Additionally, the lack of guidelines on the usage of calming areas has led to discrepancies in implementation and effectiveness.

Stakeholder involvement for the program involved in the capstone project provided verbal feedback regarding the needs assessment survey and suggested adding the following questions to improve the accuracy of the survey. 1. Do you use a social emotional program/framework in your classroom? 2. If you do not find a calming corner effective, why? 3.

What information do you provide parents for social emotional and self-regulation? No additional suggestions were made for the interview questions. An observation checklist was also suggested as a means to collect data if the opportunity arose to observe classrooms.

According to Scaffa and Reitz, (2020) needs assessments should include input from all stakeholders to ensure interventions proposed are valid and sustainable. The involvement of my stakeholders assisted in shaping the findings and identifying areas that require intervention including the need for continuing education and streamlined resources in calming areas. At the WVBHMTAC our center works in conjunction with the WVDE to address challenging behaviors through tiered systems of support and we are committed to teaching best practices strategies to educators.

Conclusion

Challenges within the classroom are part of the teaching trajectory. Many teacher preparation programs do not include sufficient training in social-emotional learning strategies or behavioral interventions. Limited resources such as such as calming areas or SEL-focused curricula—needed to support emotional and behavioral development appear to be common in preschool classrooms. Teachers are tasked with classrooms being more diverse, with children coming from varied cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds, each with individual needs.

Limitations of how to use calming areas within preschool classrooms existed in the literature and in the methodology from the needs assessment. The research discussed items that can be used in the area, the best locations in the classroom such as using areas that were free from room traffic and a quieter area would be best utilized. Current studies on calming corners are sparse, making it difficult to establish a convincing evidence base for their effectiveness. Few

studies detail how calming corners implemented in practice, leading to variability in their design, purpose, and use across classrooms. There was little evidence assessing whether calming corners achieve their intended goals of promoting self-regulation and reducing challenging behaviors.

Further research conducted could be developed using standardized guidelines for implementing calming corners and assessing their impact. There is a lack of evidence-based tools and research on practical, scalable strategies for teachers to implement in classrooms. Inadequate integration of social emotional learning (SEL) happens frequently. Instead of treating SEL as an integral part of early education programs, it can be treated as an afterthought. Opportunities for innovation such as providing teachers with targeted training in SEL could empower them to address these challenges effectively. Environmental supports such as designing classrooms with calming areas and emotional regulation tools could foster self-regulation in children. Targeted collaboration with families in SEL initiatives could reinforce these skills both at school and home environments.

The proposed action plan is to develop a qualitative and quantitative measure to determine teachers' perceptions of the use of calming spaces within classrooms. Creating the best practice guideline for the use of calming spaces in a classroom setting can benefit the field of occupational therapy by providing an evidence-based way to teach using the space. Occupational therapists can support teachers through the use of these spaces with their expertise on sensory integrative interventions that could be used in the calming area. Occupational therapists could also create meaningful individualized support for use with specific children in the classroom. Additionally, this plan can promote occupational therapy by creating diverse and inclusive environments for children with and without diverse needs.

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