

Abstract

Inclusive classrooms with complex, diverse students have many challenges, including that of effective design. One included element should be a relaxation station, designed to teach and promote everyday self-regulation skills within a calmer and more private space. A relaxation station is an essential component in every classroom to support sensory needs, self-regulation, and so on, in an everyday and easily accessible manner appropriate for students with and without disabilities. This article presents a rationale as well as practical guidelines on how to develop such a space effectively, including recommendations for its design (e.g., boundaries), procedures (e.g., entry / exit), and elements (e.g., items, tools, and visuals).

Keywords: classroom design, cozy corner, self-regulation

A Relaxation Station for Self-Regulation

Classroom design is not only an art but a science that examines how classroom spaces can be best configured to enhance learning (Roskos & Neuman, 2011, p. 110). Formulating an effective classroom plan requires an understanding of both classroom aesthetics and child development. Through such approaches, student learning can be maximized (Roskos & Neuman, 2011) so that all students can benefit from a built environment that is inclusive (McAllister & Maguire, 2012). Classroom design has a history of careful consideration for educators and researchers reflecting societal, political, professional, and technological trends and innovations (Baker, 2012). Some design elements, however, such as a proactive safe space for relaxation, calming, and/or quiet reflection, are only just emerging, as awareness of the diverse needs of inclusive classrooms grows. Regardless of age or grade, all students—with or without disabilities or histories of harm (Casey, Purvis, Parris, & Cross, 2014)—have moments of anxiety, stress, and upset that may be better supported and resolved with a break space within the classroom as

part of everyday classroom practice (Baker, 2012). Students may be learning emotional self-regulation skills, experiencing ongoing sensory needs, engaging in mildly problematic avoidance or escape-based problem behaviors, or experiencing transitory stressors that are part of everyday life in the classroom community (Ouzts, 1991; Thompson & Gauntlett-Gilbert, 2008). The development of a student-led, teacher-scaffolded *relaxation station* can be an essential component to support such emotional needs in an everyday, inclusive, and easily accessible manner. Rather than being a space for seclusion, punishment, or control, the relaxation station is a space to overtly learn, practice, and implement self-regulation strategies (Casey et al., 2014; Harrell, 1996). It is important to note that its purpose is not for addressing extreme anger, aggression, or out-of-control problem behaviour but rather for the self-regulation of everyday emotion.

Fundamental Components

The inclusion of a relaxation station in classroom communities is part of an accessible classroom design that is inclusive of all learners. It is a proactive approach to prevent challenges before they develop in the classroom environment. By including relaxation stations in their classrooms, educators can provide students with a safe space right in their own classroom for retreat when students are feeling overwhelmed. This approach also allows students to re-enter the rest of the classroom unobtrusively upon reaching a more self-regulated state. A range of elements can be used in a relaxation station so that it appeals to—and works for—a broad range of learners with and without disabilities, as part of the wider fields of environmental design, classroom design, and classroom ecology (Burke & Burke-Samide, 2004; McEvoy & Reichle, 2003). Relaxation stations are occasionally recognized as essential design elements for all classrooms, but encouragement is needed to extend their use beyond early childhood settings.

Secondary school educators often struggle with how to formulate inclusive environments within their complex and interconnected classroom communities; their endeavors are complicated by a lack of research, large classroom sizes, and little pedagogical guidance when it comes to accommodations to student needs (Scanlon & Baker, 2012).

Although spaces comprised of a small group of chairs near the classroom or a quiet space outside the classroom, such as the library, are sometimes suggested for self-regulation (Kluth, 2003), classroom-integrated relaxation stations are encouraged. Such spaces can be simple or complex, but careful consideration should be given to their design while differentiating by age and developmental stage, and classroom environment. Fundamentally, relaxation stations provide a physical area inside the classroom where children can calm or soothe themselves—or learn to do so—while they are preparing to re-join their wider classroom community. Relaxation stations are most successful when educators are available as needed to scaffold students in learning coping and relaxation techniques while helping to build skills for life (Casey et al., 2014; Coleman et al., 2013; McAllister & Maguire, 2012; Renshaw, Cooke, Eklund, O'Malley, & Meyer, 2017; Thompson & Gauntlett-Gilbert, 2008). Through simple exercises, even early learners can learn from educators how to self-regulate when facing stressful situations (Bayat, 2015). The rules and procedures of the relaxation station and its strategies must be explicitly taught to the whole class so that students can use them successfully with little teacher prompting.

Design and Implementation

Educators can formulate inclusive classroom environments that are supportive and accessible to all students by including elements of relaxation, meditation, and cognitive-behavioral techniques (Renshaw et al., 2017; Thompson & Gauntlett-Gilbert, 2008). A relaxation station or cozy corner can provide an accessible location for students to soothe themselves,

practice self-regulation skills, and seek emotional safety as required (Coleman et al., 2013; McAllister & Maguire, 2012). Such an approach contrasts with classroom spaces focusing on academic growth, such as reading nooks. While a relaxation station or cozy corner can appear somewhat similar to a reading nook, its focus on emotional regulation makes its purpose very different in praxis. Its usage can provide frequency data for students with individual education plans or applied behavioral analysis-related goals who have individualized programming related to self-regulation. It is important for the relaxation station to be located in an accessible zone within the classroom where students can retreat from classroom activities and programming—temporarily—while being in view of the educator at all times (Roskos & Neuman, 2011). Relaxation stations should be used for a specific and set amount of time in order to provide the required break for students. These specific expectations that students will self-regulate, self-manage and return to classroom programming should be maintained consistently as part of its integral structure and functioning (Alberto & Troutman, 2012).

Recommended Components of a Classroom Relaxation Station

It is best for a relaxation station to provide multiple elements that allow for fluidity, variability, and choice for individual need while allowing for a calm respite within the classroom environment (McAllister & Maguire, 2012, p. 202) (see Figure 1 for a sample space). A relaxation station can be utilized from early child care to high school environments (Casey et al., 2014). Its appearance will shift significantly but its purpose remains. The following 10 steps outline the recommended components to developing such a space.

Step 1—Choosing location carefully. Relaxation stations should be located in safe and easily accessible spaces of classroom communities or in their in-built infrastructure (e.g., nooks in classroom walls in the periphery of the classroom space) in order to ensure likely usage.

However, it is important that some privacy is maintained. Educators need to balance the overall need for safety, students' privacy, and the ability to supervise distressed students-- reflecting elements of library design (Burke & Burke-Samide, 2004; McEvoy & Reichle, 2003; Engel & Antell, 2004; Roskos & Neuman, 2011). For our younger grades, this can be done easily and inexpensively—even temporarily—with a large cardboard box, tent, or the lower level of a reading loft. Figure 2 is an example with a large circular entrance to a cozy 'nest' space, appealing and colorful pillows inside, and assistive posters on its cardboard walls. For older intermediate grades, cushions can provide comfortable seating in a corner of a classroom if the space does not allow for in-built nooks and utilize creative ways to build a sense of privacy (see Step 2). Individual spaces for intermediate grades or high school can quickly be constructed with the use of portable desktop dividers providing a space that is predictable, consistent, and semi-private (Phillips, 2015).

Step 2—Setting physical boundaries. Boundaries for privacy (such as curtains, furniture, or other pseudo-barriers) that allow students some privacy while still allowing safe supervision, are essential aspects of relaxation stations and have the additional benefit of absorbing extraneous noise (Roskos & Neuman, 2011). Teachers can construct such a space using pre-existing elements in their classroom (e.g., low bookshelves), or translucent curtains as depicted in Figure 1 (Maich & Hill, In Press). Additional elements such as portable tri-fold cardboard panels can also be added to any table or desktop (Rissmiller, 2015) thereby providing an easy way to create a relaxation space in any classroom at any grade level (also depicted in Figures 1 and 3). For secondary students, an additional desk with a desktop cardboard cubby (see Figure 4) can suffice without being off-putting to students (Phillips, 2015; Stange & Ponder, 1999). Such boundaries are not only comforting for students utilizing the relaxation station but

also reinforce a message to others that privacy—at least momentarily—is required. McAllister and Maguire (2012) refer to such designs as “structured identifiable areas—in effect, ‘rooms within a room’ where individual activities could take place” (p. 204). Providing effective physical arrangement provides students with a message of the type of behaviour that is allowable and decreases the likelihood of distractions from the task at hand (Alberto & Troutman, 2012).

Step 3—Labeling clearly and purposefully. A positive and polite label and visual should be included that indicates the use of this element of the classroom (e.g., relaxation station, cozy corner, calm-down corner, the nest, or the office, depending on location, design, age, and grade level) in close proximity to the target area itself (Sussman & Gifford, 2012). Reminiscent of *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*, teachers can also choose creative labels for the area or Australia (Bonnett & Maich, 2014). Alternatively, teachers and students can co-construct a creative name that reflects its purpose.

Step 4—Providing well-defined, concrete expectations. Be sure to co-create, teach, post, and reinforce a few positively stated, simple rules and procedures collaboratively for the relaxation station (Casey et al., 2014; Coleman et al., 2013). The rules can focus on reasons for its use, when it can be used, length of time for its use, and activities that can take place in the relaxation station. The field of behavior suggests using brief and explicit rules which are limited in number (e.g., five or six) (Madsen, Becker, & Thomas, 1968); Marzano, Marzano, and Pickering (2003) suggest using co-created rules to provide general standards and procedures to provide specific expectations for behavior, with an upper limit of seven or eight for any one classroom in total. A sample rule could be to use the relaxation station only when needed. Procedures could include setting the timer for five minutes when entering the relaxation station or using at least one relaxation exercise. Overall, it needs to be evident that academic tasks may

be briefly postponed when entering the relaxation station but their completion is still expected (Cooper, Heron, & Heward, 2007).

Step 5—Creating entry procedures. Any new initiative will garner much excitement and attention from students, but it is important to remember that any initial excitement and attention will diminish with time and use. Consistent restatement of the rules and expectations is indicated. Initial use can be initiated—and managed—by the teacher or the students or both with modelling, regular review, and contingent praise (Coleman et al., 2013). Educators could prompt its use by using gestural prompts or brief reminders (Dhaem, 2012), such as, *"Perhaps you would feel better if..."* or *"Do you think it would be a good time to...?"* Students can verbally ask teachers for permission to use either the relaxation station or utilize a self-management tool to do so (e.g., a break card). A break card is a visual representation of time away from a setting, task, or situation; it is a strategy to self-monitor the need for a break with the understanding that a return to the classroom activity is necessary after a pre-set amount of time (Geiger, Carr, & LeBlanc, 2010). The break card can be placed on a desk, in a pocket on the boundaries around the relaxation station, or a sign-in can be used for the classroom's office space as a visual signal for the teacher.

Step 6—Providing relaxation tools. Within the relaxation station, sensory regulation and other tools can be a useful addition: "Sensory interventions help students register and modulate responses to sensory stimuli allowing them to overcome some of their over-reactive or under-reactive responses to sensory stimulation" (Mays, Beal-Alvarez, & Jolivette, 2011, p. 49). Visuals and/or manipulatives such as scales, stories, cards, and posters can be used to prompt students about sensory-related, relaxation, and self-regulation strategies (e.g., deep breathing) that have been taught to the whole class—comparable to those used for academic skills (Casey et

al., 2014; Cheng, & Boggett-Carsjens, 2005; Ernsbarger, 2002; Sussman & Gifford, 2012). Cognitive-behaviour tools have a history of successful implementation (Banks & Zionts, 2009; Ghafoori & Tracz, 2001). For example, *Zones of Regulation* (Kuypers, 2011) a system of four emotional states expressed by color and accompanied by a range of built-in self-regulation strategy and tools is a cognitive-behaviour tool that could be incorporated. Similarly, the *Incredible Five Point Scale* (Dunn Buron & Curtis, 2013) in which emotional states are translated into levels—more concrete numbers, colors, words, and faces paired with self-regulation strategies—is another widely utilized cognitive-behavioral strategy program for the needs of individual students; either can be implemented on a class-wide basis.

Step 7—Ensuring comfort objects and other preferred items. It is vital to ensure that the relaxation station is built around physically comfortable, soft, and malleable furnishings, such as the alternative seating depicted in Figure 1 (Critz, Blake, & Nogueira, 2015). Recommended items include those that are connected to positive emotions and happy memories such as family photos, comfort objects, cuddly toys—or drawings or photographs of these tangible items if space is limited. For our younger students this might include an *All About Me* book (Friedman, 2005). For secondary students this can include photos of favorite people, preferred items, or hobbies. Any of a student's passions, fascinations, strengths, and areas of expertise can be utilized for a comforting and calming distraction from otherwise stressful moments at school (Kluth & Schwarz, 2008).

Step 8—Providing sensory items. A range of tactile sensory items (e.g., fidgets, weighted items) can be placed in a relaxation station not only to provide for a range of sensory processing needs but to provide individual, student-directed choice for self-regulation (Casey et al., 2014; Critz et al., 2015). Targeting other sensory systems is possible and can include auditory

accommodations such as noise-canceling headphones, music, or white noise for students who need quiet calming-down time with decreased stimuli (Casey et al., 2014; Cheng, & Boggett-Carsjens, 2005; Critz et al., 2015).

Step 9—Using reflective and teaching tools. Provision of opportunities and resources can be recommended for students to reflect in an open-ended manner (e.g., journaling) or more structured cognitive-behavioral reflection tools can be completed by the student, independently or with an adult (National Autism Center, 2015). Students can be taught both awareness and strategies to label emotions, for example, while listing and practicing related strategies on an individual or class-wide basis (Casey et al., 2014; Cheng, & Boggett-Carsjens, 2005) (see Figure 3 for an example). Commercial kits are available a range of items, from a fully prepared set of suggestions on setting up a relaxation station, to ready-to-print signs, activities, and posters; however, resources used need to be adapted for the needs of the classroom and its students. Older and more independent students may need a quiet space to reflect on the complex processes in academic self-regulation (Zimmerman, 2002). Children’s or adolescent’s literature that addresses relevant social-emotional-behavioral topics can also be included (Maich & Kean, 2004).

Step 10—Creating exit procedures. The maximum number and length of such potential breaks (e.g., two per day, five minutes each) in the relaxation station should be predetermined, incorporated into the rules, and displayed. An auditory and/or visual timer should be used to provide timing boundaries (Alberto & Troutman, 2012). A further option is to provide students with a self-monitoring form to complete on each use of the station (Alberto & Troutman, 2012). These tools can help students in complying with the expectation of a return to the task at hand.

Conclusion

While the incorporation of quiet areas or cozy corners for very early learners in child care is familiar, this article provides recommendations for the incorporation of relaxation stations within classroom settings for all ages and grades to facilitate self-regulation and thereby reduce student stress (Burke & Burke-Samide, 2004; McEvoy & Reichle, 2003). Many examples and components of relaxation stations and related resources can be easily accessed by searching websites such as Google Images, Pinterest, or Teachers Pay Teachers, using search terms such as *cozy corner classroom*, *calm down corner*, *calm down kit*, or *self-regulation*. The provision of relaxation stations can further the goal of creating accessible and inclusive classroom environments that meet the needs of the diverse learners within the classroom community, including those with disabilities impacting behavioral and/or emotional self-regulation (Burke & Burke-Samide, 2004; McEvoy & Reichle, 2003). With the usage of relaxation stations, educators can work towards formulating classroom communities that support all learners and provide all students with safe and accessible learning environments where self-regulatory needs are supported (McAllister & Maguire, 2012). Notably, educators incorporate a multiplicity of means to assist students with self-regulatory difficulties in engaging successfully with their learning within school (Renshaw et al., 2017; Thompson & Gauntlett-Gilbert, 2008). All students, with and without disabilities, can benefit from the provision of self-regulatory spaces and related tools and exercises in the classroom in an accepting, inclusive, and skill-building space that is quite different from the purpose, practice and outcome of a time-out (Baker, 2012).

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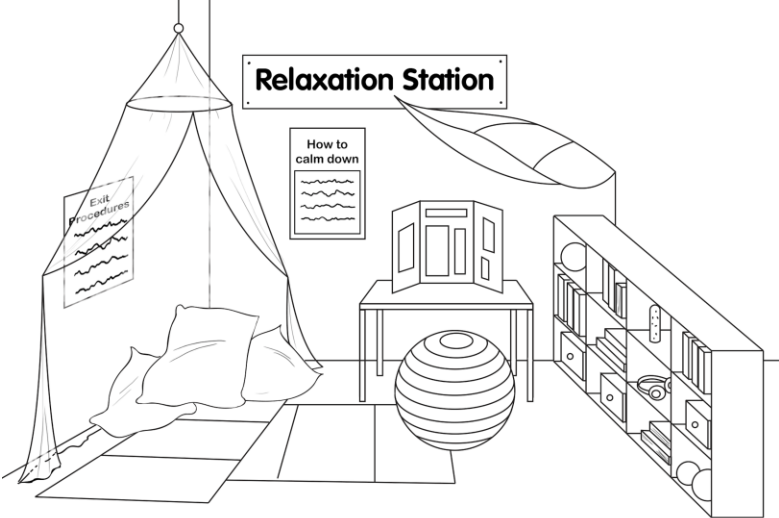


Figure 1. One example of a relaxation station.

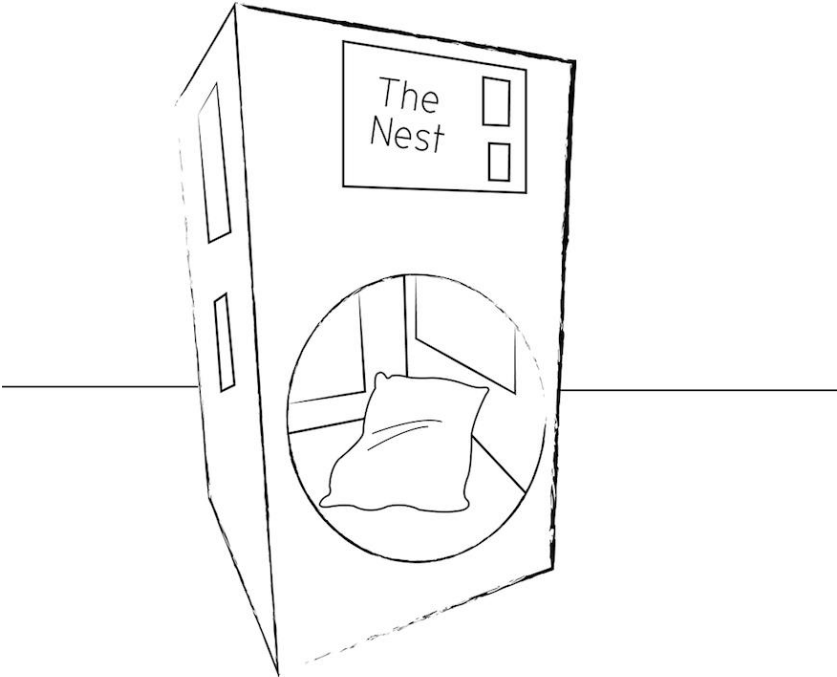


Figure 2. One example of an easy-to-create cozy space.

WHEN SOMEONE IS **BUGGING** ME, I CAN SAY TO THEM:

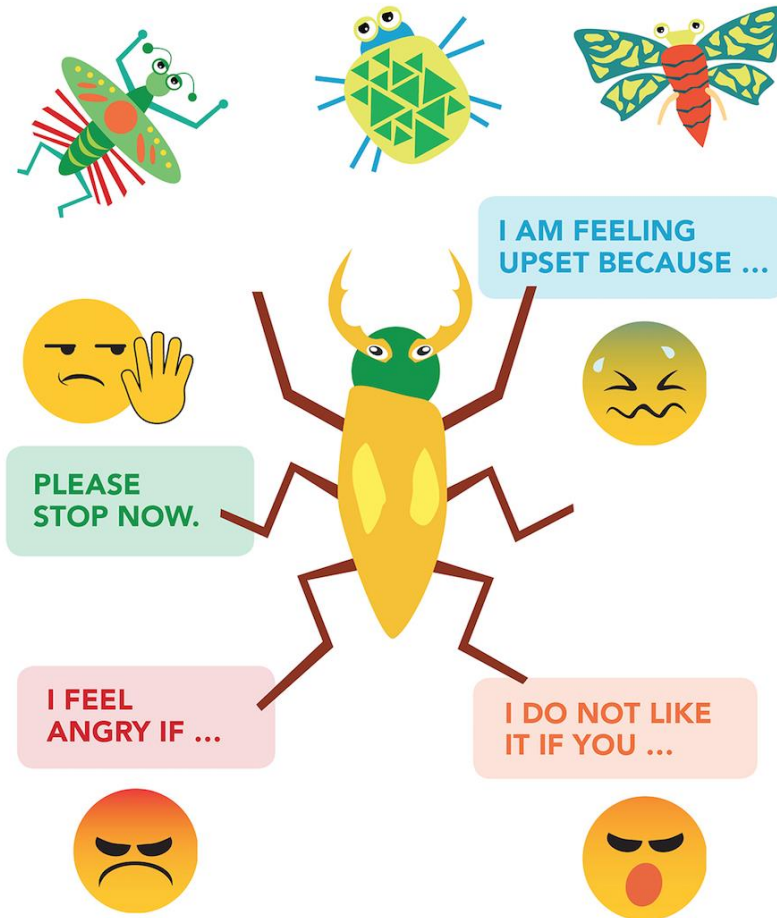


Figure 3. One possibility for prompting peer-to-peer self-regulation.

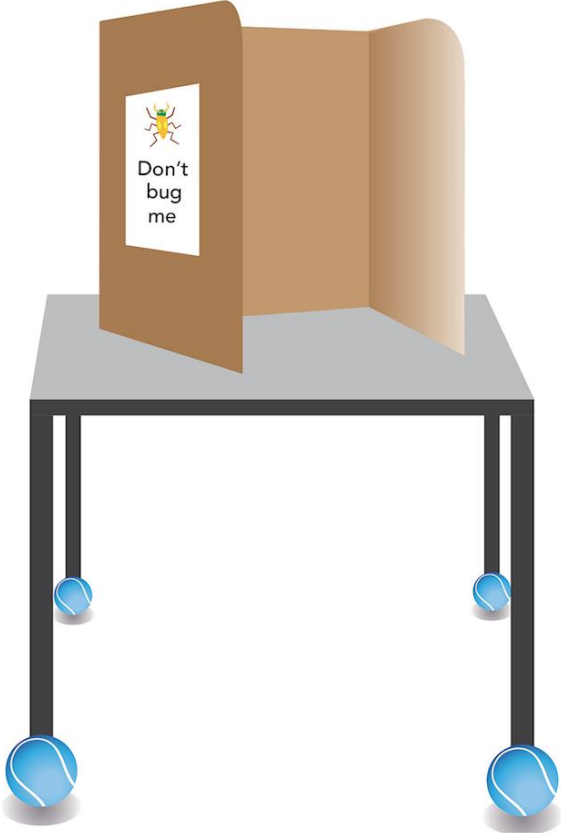


Figure 4. A tri-fold privacy panel easily creates a semi-private space.