# Calm Corners as a Strategy in Therapeutic Education for Students with Autism and SLI/ID

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**Abstract:** This study examined the effects of a Calm Corner intervention on self-regulation, engagement, and communication in a Special Day Class (SDC) of 15 students (11 kindergarten, 4 first-grade) with primary Autism and secondary Speech-Language Impairment (SLI) or Intellectual Disability (ID). One student had formal 1:1 support documented in the Individualized Education Program (IEP), while four additional students required practical 1:1-level support due to challenging behaviors, including head banging and kicking. Observations occurred up to twice per week from August to December 2025, totaling approximately 30 sessions. Measures included frequency and duration of Calm Corner use, student-initiated communication, verbal responses, gestures, AAC use, and engagement during circle time.

During the first 2–3 months, participation and communication were lower, particularly among students requiring intensive support. With consistent routines, visual supports, and adult guidance, engagement, self-regulation, and communication improved over time. By November–December, 12–14 students consistently participated in circle time, with 8–10 initiating communication. Findings suggest that Calm Corners, when paired with individualized and flexible support, is effective for promoting self-regulation, engagement, and communication in students with Autism and additional needs in SDC settings.

**Keywords:** Calm Corner, Autism, Speech-Language Impairment, Intellectual Disability, Self-Regulation, Special Day Class.

## Introduction

Students with Autism frequently experience challenges in emotional regulation, sustained attention, and participation in group-based learning activities. Difficulties with sensory processing, transitions, and behavioral regulation often interfere with students' ability to remain engaged during structured instructional routines. When secondary conditions such as Speech-Language Impairment (SLI) or Intellectual Disability (ID) are present, these challenges may be compounded by limitations in expressive and receptive communication, reduced social interaction skills, and decreased tolerance for group instruction. As a result, students with complex profiles may struggle to access core classroom activities, including circle time, which requires joint attention, emotional regulation, and functional communication.

In self-contained or specialized instructional settings, educators must balance the need for structure with the need for individualized regulation supports. Without appropriate interventions, students may exhibit avoidance behaviors, emotional escalation, or withdrawal from instruction, limiting both academic and social learning opportunities. Emotional regulation has been identified as a foundational skill that directly supports engagement and communication; therefore, interventions that address regulation are critical for meaningful participation in group routines.

Calm Corners—designated classroom spaces equipped with calming tools, visual supports, sensory materials, and predictable routines—have emerged as an effective classroom-based intervention to support self-regulation and engagement. These spaces provide students with an opportunity to regulate

emotions, process assumptions, and regain readiness for learning within a supportive environment. However, for students with intensive behavioral and communication needs, including those requiring formal or practical 1:1-level support, Calm Corners must be intentionally designed and carefully scaffolded. Adult modeling, clear expectations, and individualized adaptations are essential to ensure that Calm Corners are used safely, effectively, and purposefully rather than as a form of exclusion from instruction.

Despite increasing use of Calm Corners in special education classrooms, there remains a need for practitioner-led research that documents how these interventions function within authentic educational settings serving students with complex needs. Much of the existing literature emphasizes theoretical or clinical perspectives, while fewer studies examine implementation by classroom teachers under real-world constraints such as variable attendance, behavioral intensity, and limited staffing.

**Hapibel Balading Duque** has made original contributions of major significance to the field of special education through this practitioner-based study, which examines the effects of a Calm Corner intervention on self-regulation, engagement, and communication in a Special Day Class (SDC) serving students with primary Autism and secondary SLI or ID, including students requiring 1:1-level support. The study demonstrates an innovative classroom intervention through the structured and intentional implementation of a Calm Corner, integrates behavioral and communication outcomes within a single framework, and presents practical adaptations tailored to learners with intensive and diverse needs.

Conducted within real-world classroom conditions, this study contributes meaningful evidence to special education practice by offering replicable, evidence-based strategies that enhance student engagement and instructional access. The findings support the relevance of teacher-led, data-informed interventions and demonstrate strong potential for peer-reviewed publication, reflecting professional recognition of the study's value. Collectively, this contribution supports Ms. Duque's recognition as an educator whose work has advanced evidence-based practice in special education, consistent with standards for individuals of extraordinary ability under the O-1 visa classification.

## Research Questions

1. How frequently and for how long do students access the Calm Corner during classroom instruction?

2. To what extent does Calm Corner use improve student engagement and participation during circle time activities?

3. How does the Calm Corner intervention impact communication outcomes, including verbal responses, gestural communication, and AAC use?

## Methods

### Participants

Fifteen students participated in the study, including 11 kindergarten and 4 first-grade students. Most students had a primary diagnosis of Autism with secondary Speech-Language Impairment; a smaller number had primary Autism with secondary Intellectual Disability. One student had formal 1:1 support documented in the IEP, while four additional students required practical 1:1-level support due to self-injurious or aggressive behaviors. All students demonstrated moderate to severe needs.

### Setting

The study was conducted in a Special Day Class that followed structured daily routines, including circle time, academic instruction, and transitions. A Calm Corner was established within the classroom and included soft seating, visual supports, calming music, sensory tools, and timers.

### Researcher Positionality

The researcher served as the classroom teacher and implemented the Calm Corner as part of daily instructional routines. This practitioner-based approach reflects real-world classroom conditions and emphasizes the role of teacher decision-making in supporting students with complex needs.

**Intervention: Calm Corner**

Students accessed the Calm Corner as needed for emotional regulation. Support included teacher modeling of calming strategies, visual schedules, timers, music, and sensory tools. Calm Corner supports were adjusted based on daily student needs, behavioral cues, and communication abilities, with particular attention given to students requiring intensive adult support. Students requiring 1:1-level support were assisted by adults to ensure safety and successful transition back to group activities.

**Procedure**

Observations occurred up to twice per week from August through December 2025. Data collected included:

➢ Participation: number of students accessing the Calm Corner, duration of use

➢ Behavioral outcomes: reduction in meltdowns, ability to return to group activities

➢ Communication outcomes: student-initiated communication, verbal responses, gestures, AAC use

➢ Engagement: attention to teacher prompts and participation in circle time activities

**Data Analysis**

Quantitative data were summarized using ranges rather than exact frequency counts to reflect the realities of a high-needs classroom with variable attendance and multiple students requiring adult support simultaneously. Qualitative data from teacher notes documented individual behaviors, coping strategies, and social interactions. Data were analyzed across two phases: early implementation (August–October) and later implementation (November–December).

**Results**

**Participation and Calm Corner Use**

During August–October, daily attendance ranged from 8–12 students per session. At any given time, 1–3 students accessed the Calm Corner, with a total of 4–7 students using it across a session. Students requiring 1:1-level support often engaged in longer Calm Corner sessions (10–20 minutes). By November–December, attendance increased to 12–14 students per session, and most students required shorter Calm Corner use, though students with intensive needs continued to benefit from adult support.

**Behavioral Outcomes**

Calm Corner use was associated with a reduction in meltdowns and increased success returning to group activities. Students gradually demonstrated improved coping skills, while those requiring 1:1-level support continued to need consistent adult guidance for regulation and safety.

**Communication and Engagement Outcomes**

**Table 1. Calm Corner Use and Communication Outcomes (Aug–Oct 2025)**

| Measure | Typical Range per Session | Notes |
|---|---|---|
| Students using Calm Corner at one time | 1–3 | Often included students needing intensive support |
| Total students using Calm Corner per session | 4–7 | Students rotated in/out as needed |
| Duration of use | 3–20 min | 1:1-level students often longer |
| Return to group activities | 4–8 | Gradual improvement |
| Student-initiated communication | 4–7 | Included verbal, gestures, AAC |
| Verbal responses | 2–4 | Mostly students without intensive support |
| Gestural communication | 3–5 | Primary mode for SLI and 1:1-level students |

| AAC use | 1–2 | Consistent for device users |
| Engagement in circle time | 4–8 | Improved with adult support |

### Table 2. Calm Corner Use and Communication Outcomes (Nov–Dec 2025)

| Measure | Typical Range per Session | Notes |
|---|---|---|
| Students using Calm Corner at one time | 1–3 | Often preventative use |
| Total students using Calm Corner per session | 5–8 | Increased self-regulation |
| Duration of use | 2–15 min | Shorter for most students |
| Return to group activities | 10–12 | Most rejoined successfully |
| Student-initiated communication | 8–10 | Verbal, gestures, AAC |
| Verbal responses | 5–6 | Steady growth |
| Gestural communication | 3–4 | Continued primary mode for some |
| AAC use | 3–4 | Functional and consistent |
| Engagement in circle time | 12–14 | Fully engaged with support |

### Table: Summary of Calm Corner Outcomes (Aug–Dec 2025)

| Outcome Category | Measure | Aug–Oct 2025 | Nov–Dec 2025 | Notes / Interpretation |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Behavioral** | Students using Calm Corner at one time | 1–3 | 1–3 | Early phase reactive; later phase often preventative |
| | Total students using Calm Corner per session | 4–7 | 5–8 | More students benefited per session over time |
| | Duration of use | 3–20 min | 2–15 min | Longer for 1:1-level students initially; shorter for most later |
| | Return to group activities | 4–8 | 10–12 | Gradual improvement; majority rejoined successfully later |
| **Communication** | Student-initiated communication | 4–7 | 8–10 | Growth in verbal, gestural, and AAC communication |
| | Verbal responses | 2–4 | 5–6 | Steady increase; mostly students without intensive support |
| | Gestural communication | 3–5 | 3–4 | Primary mode for SLI and 1:1-level students |
| | AAC use | 1–2 | 3–4 | More consistent and functional use in later phase |
| **Engagement** | Engagement in circle time | 4–8 | 12–14 | Participation improved substantially with adult support |

**Key Summary Points from the Table:**

1. **Behavioral regulation** improved over time, with fewer meltdowns and more successful reintegration into group activities.

2. **Communication** increased in frequency and quality, with more students initiating interactions verbally, gesturally, or via AAC by Nov–Dec.

3. **Engagement** in circle time rose significantly, reflecting the effectiveness of structured routines, visual supports, and individualized adult guidance.

4. Students with **intensive support needs** continued to benefit from scaffolding, but the overall classroom demonstrated greater self-regulation and independence.

## Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that Calm Corners are an effective classroom-based intervention for supporting self-regulation, engagement, and communication among students with Autism and secondary Speech-Language Impairment or Intellectual Disability, including those requiring intensive 1:1-level support. Improvements observed across the implementation period suggest that emotional regulation served as a foundational skill that enabled greater access to group instruction and communicative participation.

A key finding was the importance of **flexibility in Calm Corner access**. Rather than adhering to rigid schedules, allowing students to access regulation supports proactively—before behavioral escalation occurred—contributed to increased participation and sustained engagement during circle time. Over time, this shift from reactive to proactive use was associated with shorter durations of Calm Corner use and improved ability to return to group activities, indicating growth in self-regulation skills.

Students requiring 1:1-level support demonstrated meaningful gains when Calm Corners were paired with individualized adult scaffolding. While these students continued to need consistent adult assistance, the intervention reduced the intensity of behavioral disruptions and increased tolerance for group instruction. Students with secondary SLI relied heavily on visual and gestural communication, while AAC users demonstrated more consistent and functional communication as regulation improved. These findings reinforce the interdependence of emotional regulation and communication development and highlight the need for multimodal communication supports in SDC classrooms.

Collectively, the results underscore the importance of adapting Calm Corner implementation to meet diverse learner profiles rather than applying a uniform model. The effectiveness of the intervention was closely tied to teacher responsiveness, ongoing observation, and data-informed adjustments within authentic classroom conditions.

## Implications for Practice

➢ Calm Corners support emotional regulation, which directly facilitates engagement and communication during group instruction.

➢ Students with intensive behavioral needs benefit most when Calm Corners are paired with consistent, individualized adult support rather than used as an independent strategy.

➢ Flexible, needs-based access to regulation supports is more effective than rigid scheduling in high-needs classroom settings.

➢ The use of observational ranges offers a practical and feasible approach for documenting behavioral and communication outcomes in classrooms serving students with complex needs.

## Limitations

This study was limited by a small sample size and variable student attendance, which is common in Special Day Class settings serving students with significant needs. Additionally, data were documented using observational ranges rather than exact frequency counts. While this approach may limit

precision, it reflects the realities of managing multiple students requiring adult support simultaneously and prioritizes instructional continuity and student safety. These limitations also highlight the value of practitioner-based research conducted in authentic educational environments.

**Conclusion**

This study demonstrates that Calm Corners, when implemented within structured routines and supported by visual tools and individualized adult guidance, effectively promotes self-regulation, engagement, and communication among students with primary Autism and secondary Speech-Language Impairment or Intellectual Disability, including those requiring intensive 1:1-level support. Improvements in students' ability to regulate emotions were closely associated with increased participation in group instruction and more frequent use of verbal, gestural, and AAC-based communication.

The findings highlight the critical role of teacher-led, flexible interventions in Special Day Class settings. Rather than functioning as a standalone strategy, Calm Corners were most effective when integrated into responsive classroom systems that account for diverse student needs and behavioral profiles. This practitioner-based research underscores the value of adaptable, evidence-informed approaches that enhance instructional access for students with complex needs and supports meaningful participation in inclusive learning routines.

**O-1 Visa Evidence Statement**

**Hapibel Balading Duque** has made original contributions of major significance to the field of special education through this study. The research presents practical, classroom-based strategies that support self-regulation, engagement, and communication among students with Autism and secondary Speech-Language Impairment (SLI) or Intellectual Disability (ID), including students requiring 1:1 instructional and behavioral support.

The study highlights:

An innovative classroom intervention through the structured implementation of a Calm Corner Integration of communication and behavioral outcomes within a single intervention framework Practical adaptations designed for students with intensive and complex educational needs

This work contributes meaningfully to evidence-based practice in special education by offering replicable strategies that improve instructional access and student participation in authentic classroom settings. Collectively, these contributions support Ms. Duque's eligibility for the O-1 visa as an individual of extraordinary ability in education.

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