How did teachers use The Zones of Regulation with Autistic students?

This study looked at teachers' experiences using a program called The Zones of Regulation, including how they adapted lessons for Autistic students, how suitable they found it, and what made it easier or harder to use.

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Location: Australia

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At a glance

Who may find this information useful and why?

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This snapshot may help teachers and schools understand how The Zones of Regulation is used with Autistic students. The Zones of Regulation is a program with 18 lessons. The lessons aim to help children understand emotions and learn ways to respond to them. It may also help Autistic students and families ask questions about how the program is used, discuss whether it meets their needs, and request changes or different approaches where needed.

What is this study about?

The Zones of Regulation is used in schools, but there has been little research about using it with Autistic students. This Australian study looked at teachers' experiences using the full program in classrooms set up to teach and support Autistic students. They taught it over two school terms. The researchers wanted to know how practical and suitable teachers found it, what changes they made, and what helped or made it harder to use the program.

Why did we choose to create a snapshot of this study?

The Zones of Regulation is a program that uses colours to help children recognise and manage their emotions. Teachers and families may already be familiar with The Zones of Regulation program. We felt this study was important to share because it looks at how teachers use the program with Autistic students in real classrooms. It highlights the importance of understanding how the program is used and whether it meets the different needs of Autistic students, rather than assuming one approach will work for everyone.

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In the AAKH survey, 'Autistic students' experiences and support needs are understood, and their wellbeing is supported at school' was identified as a priority by Autistic people and the autism community. The need for better understanding and support for Autistic students has also been raised in community consultations and Australian priority-setting studies.

What are the key takeaways from this research?

1 Teachers noticed changes in how some students understood and communicated their emotions

- Teachers said some students started using words from The Zones of Regulation to explain how they felt. Some students did this outside the classroom, too.
- Teachers also noticed some students becoming more aware of other people's emotions.

2 Teachers changed lessons to make them easier to use

- Teachers broke up longer lessons. For example, one lesson was divided into four shorter lessons, with each focusing on one colour zone.
- They used more pictures, hands-on activities, and movement to help students take part.
- Teachers found that some tasks involved a lot of writing, and this did not suit their students. So, they changed these tasks. For example, they changed worksheets that involved too much writing or were difficult for students to understand.

3 The program did not suit every student

- Teachers said some students were bored or disengaged. Other students became anxious or upset during parts of the program.

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- One teacher described using another program with a student who found The Zones of Regulation upsetting. The student's psychologist had recommended the other program.
- Some teachers said different students needed different ways of learning the material.

4 Support from other staff helped teachers use the program

- Teachers said co-teachers, researchers, and colleagues with experience using The Zones of Regulation helped them change lessons if they needed to.
- The teachers said that support from other staff also helped them keep using the program.

What can I do with this information?

These are some ways you could use what the researchers learned. The researchers did not test whether these suggestions work.

For teachers and school staff using The Zones of Regulation

- Break longer lessons into shorter activities, and change activities that involve lots of writing.
- Use pictures, games, movement, or hands-on activities instead of relying only on writing tasks.
- Ask students how they prefer to share their feelings. This could include speaking, writing, pictures, or communication devices.
- If The Zones of Regulation does not suit a student, talk with them, their family, and the other professionals who work with the student about other suitable supports.

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For school leaders and staff supporting teachers

- Give teachers time to prepare lessons and change activities to meet students' different needs.
- Arrange regular times for teachers to share ideas, discuss challenges, and learn from colleagues who have experience using The Zones of Regulation.
- Do not assume The Zones of Regulation will suit every student or classroom. Support teachers to try different approaches when needed.

Questions to think about based on this study

If you are a teacher or school staff member

Which parts of The Zones of Regulation need to be shorter or more visual for your Autistic students?

If you support teachers to use school programs

Who has the right knowledge and experience to help teachers when they need to adapt The Zones of Regulation?

One thing to remember

The Zones of Regulation may not work in the same way for every student. Teachers may need to adapt the lessons and use different approaches to suit Autistic students in their classes.

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Looking more closely at the study

Why and how was the study done?

The Zones of Regulation is used in many schools, but there is little research about how well it is suited to Autistic students. The researchers wanted to understand teachers' experiences of using the program in classrooms set up to teach and support Autistic students. They wanted to find out whether lessons needed to be changed and what support teachers needed.

Teachers used The Zones of Regulation series of lessons taught over two school terms, or about 20 weeks. Researchers collected teachers' views through:

- a survey, where they asked people the same set of questions
- online focus groups, where they brought a small group of people together to discuss their experiences
- interviews, where researchers spoke to people to learn about their experiences in detail.

Who was involved?

- Teachers were working at five Autism Spectrum Australia (Aspect) schools in Australia.
- Twelve teachers took part. They were aged 25 to 69 years. Eleven were women and one was a man.
- The teachers taught classes with 96 Autistic students in total. The students were aged 5 to 12. About 23% of the students were girls.
- Five students used Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) and 26 students had a co-occurring intellectual disability.

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- The classes were in satellite programs, main campuses, and distance education.

Who helped shape the research?

- Education staff from an autism school helped set the project goals and design the research. This included school leaders, therapists, psychologists, teachers, and other staff.
- Autistic researchers who were part of an Autistic advisory group provided feedback on the design and other key stages.

What are some questions that are still unanswered?

This study offers useful information, but there is still limited evidence about how well the program works.

- The teachers talked about their experiences. What do Autistic students think about the program?
- Teachers made changes to the program. Which changes to The Zones of Regulation are helpful for different students?
- The teachers talked about changes they saw in the children after using The Zones of Regulation, but this was not tested. How could we find out, in more detail, if The Zones of Regulation program makes changes for children?
- This study was done in schools designed specifically for Autistic students. Would teachers and Autistic students have similar experiences in other schools?

One study rarely changes practice.

When making decisions, it is important to consider this study alongside:

- People's values, needs, and lived experience

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- Findings from other research studies
- Professional knowledge and expertise

All of these are important parts of an evidence-based approach.

Citation

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