

Evaluating Engagement: A Case Study of Circle Time Routines in a K-1 Special Day Class

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Abstract: Circle time is a staple teaching strategy in many schools, helping develop speaking, reading, and numeracy skills of students, as well as equipping them with necessary life and social skills during the foundational years of their lives. These are especially important for special needs students who may need additional support in order to mainstream or integrate with the rest of society. With the rising number of students in special education, it is more important than ever to create robust practices, strategies, and curricula in order to support their needs. Although there is abundant literature examining the strengths, weaknesses, and best practices of circle time routines, scholarly papers focusing on special education are limited. This study aims to provide more insight on the use of circle time routines, specifically in the context of a special day class. The study examined how 15 students with autism, speech-language impairment, and intellectual disability engaged with each of the activities in their circle time routine. Through observation it was noted that activities such as the welcome song, the calendar activity, the rules recap, the emotion song, the question of the day, and the closing song resulted in high engagement, while the calming exercises, attendance activity, and schedule of the day only had moderate engagement. The results highlighted the importance of integrating songs into the activities to engage students, ensuring activities can maintain a sense of novelty for the students, and being mindful of the length of each activity.

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Circle time is a routinely used teaching strategy, ideally involving the entire class, in which the teacher and students gather in a circle to accomplish a set of activities. The actual activities carried out in classrooms can vary according to the students' social and cultural backgrounds, local contexts, specific needs, learning goals, and skills to be attained. In a study of Montessori circle time routines by Koczela & Carver (2023), the frequently included circle time activities are calendar work, show and tell, grace and courtesy lessons, vocabulary lessons/discussions, dancing or movement, read aloud discussions and stories, general conversation, snack time, and birthday celebrations. Another study, which instead focused on preschool students, listed down children sharing, calendar time, review of schedule or rules, literacy and numeracy skills, morning message, singing and dancing, and transitional or noninstructional time as activities commonly done during circle time (Bustamante et al., 2018).

Circle time, being a structured and largely teacher-driven activity, leads to a tendency for challenging behaviors, negative interactions, and disengagement, especially when the activities exceed 30 minutes (Koczela & Carver, 2023). This raised the question of whether the issue was a result of the widespread practices, or due to the method of implementation. The same study by Koczela & Carver (2023) showed that in the Montessori schools included within the scope of the study, teacher training, as well as ample circle time preparation, can decrease these undesired behaviors and disengagement. The study by Bustamante et al. (2018) found similar results, citing low quality of instruction and low student engagement. The same study highlighted that less teacher talking time and more focus on child talk and engagement as a potential avenue to make circle time sessions much more productive. In a study by Zhang & Quinn (2018), routine activities such as

calendar time, weather report, taking attendance, discussing events or classroom themes, and singing songs were observed to be commonly conducted during circle time. While the activities remained the same across classrooms, it was observed that the methods of implementation vary heavily from teacher to teacher, affecting the effectiveness of the activities, as well as the students' engagement. Another study by Collins & Kavanagh (2015) examined the school experiences of student teachers with regards to circle time as an inclusive learning space. The participants in the study reported more negative experiences compared to positive, specifically mentioning self-consciousness, pressure to speak, and other issues surrounding confidentiality and fear of ridicule. Nonetheless, the study still found benefits such as improving interpersonal relationships and promoting social skills. Overall, the existing literature reveals many existing weaknesses in the teaching strategy, emphasizing the need for thorough planning, and a purposeful, student-centered approach to the curation of circle time activities.

Although there are questions raised regarding the effectivity of circle time as a teaching strategy, circle time routines remain a staple in early childhood education for good reason, serving as the foundation of the children's interactions with community and society at large, and equipping the children with the behaviors, habits, skills, and values that would allow them to thrive in life. In a study by Bonfim et al. (2025), it was noted down some of these benefits, including stimulating speech development, expanding children's vocabulary, developing physical skills, while also having the potential to promote confidence, self-esteem, social skills, as well as the acquisition of concepts. These benefits are essential for any student, but are especially necessary for students in special education.

The demand for quality education, services, and support for special education students is rising, alongside the number of students eligible for services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). In an article by Arundel (2025), it is noted that there are almost 8 million students with disabilities, from ages 3 to 21, and could increase by another 1 million following current trends. This number is made up of a diverse group of students, with diverse needs as well. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, students under this classification may have a specific learning disability, speech or language impairment, autism, developmental delay, intellectual disability, emotional disturbance, multiple disabilities, hearing impairment, or impairments limiting strength, vitality, or alertness ("Students With Disabilities," 2024). Romero (2022) also noted that students with learning or developmental disabilities may have difficulty in terms of forming relationships, confidence, and behavior, due to the lack of developed emotional regulation skills. There is a wide range of disabilities, impairments, and special needs that teachers must account for in order to effectively do their work as educators.

While some students with special needs are able to integrate into general education classrooms, other students may require more attention. Students in special day class (SDC) still follow the general education curriculum, but require more individualized attention, accommodations, and support, as a result of their disability, impairments, or special needs (Markley, 2024). Done right, circle time has the potential to equip students in SDC with necessary life skills, and potentially integrate into inclusive or even general education classrooms.

Although there are many studies on the effectiveness of circle time as a teaching strategy, and many instances of its implementation for special education students, there are a limited number of studies which look into the implementation of circle time routines into SDCs. As stated in most literature regarding circle time routines, there is a risk of negative outcomes or experiences when activities are not given thorough planning and consideration. The study by Koczela & Carver (2023) specifically cited student engagement as playing a significant role in creating an environment conducive to learning and conducting circle time activities.

This study aims to observe how likely students in SDC are to engage with activities in circle time. Specifically, the study aims to answer the following questions.

1. Which circle time activities did students engage with the most?

2. Which circle time activities did students engage with the least?
3. What are the commonalities among the circle time activities with high engagement?
4. What are the commonalities among the circle time activities with the least engagement?

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative case study research design in order to best answer the research question, which required a focus on the experiences, habits, and behaviors developed and formed by K1 SDC students during circle time. This study placed its focus on first-hand observations acquired by conducting and facilitating circle time activities, allowing for a more contextualized and practical perspective on the implementation of circle time.

Population and Sample of the Study

The study was based on observations from a K1 SDC class in Daniel Webster Elementary School, Daly City, California, from August 2025 to December 2025. The class consisted of 15 special education students, with 11 kinder level students, and 4 grade 1 level students. All of the students had Autism as their primary disability. 13 of the students had speech language impairment as their secondary disability, while 2 had intellectual disability as their secondary disability. Only 1 student was formally recognized as requiring 1:1 support in their individualized education plans (IEP). In practice, 5 students in total required individualized attention. Observations were conducted twice per week over the course of 5 months, with a total of 34 observation sessions.

Procedures

Every day, the teacher conducted two sessions of circle time, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. Each day, the following circle time activities were carried out with the class.

Welcome Song. A song from YouTube, such as “Circle Time Song” (The Kiboomers - Kids Music Channel, 2022) is played to signify the start of circle time. The students may sing along as they form a circle to start the circle time routine. This exercise aims to grab the attention of the students, increasing engagement, as well as the song’s association with circle time.

Calming Exercises. Students are given calming exercises, with specific exercises varying per day. These variations include pretending to blow out a candle, pretending to blow an imaginary balloon, blowing bubbles, petting a toy dog or cat, and blowing a windmill or fan. This aims to promote emotional regulation in the students, and enable them to have an easier time calming down in future situations.

Attendance Activity. The teacher plays a song called “What’s Your Name?” (Super Simple Songs - Kids Songs, 2020) which the students sing along to. The teacher then shows the class a chart with icons for “At Home” and “In School”, as well as icons that represent each student. When their names are called, the students may move their icon under “In School”, or simply inform the teacher that they are present. Aside from simply taking attendance, this activity also aims to give students more psychomotor stimulation by encouraging them to move their respective icons.

Literacy and Numeracy Activities. The teacher chooses between a set of activities which would either focus on the literacy or numeracy of the students. The first option makes use of the News 2 You platform, which provides articles which are timely and appropriate for the learners, practicing the literacy of students while simultaneously giving awareness to timely events. The second option is story reading, in which the students read a book, led by the teacher. In this activity, emphasis is placed on sight words or high frequency words, in order to familiarize learners with these. Another option is an alphabet activity, in which the learners sing along to the “ABC Phonics Song” from The Kiboomers - Kids Music Channel (2022), and are afterwards asked to identify letters. This activity also addresses literacy, ensuring students are able to recognize the letters of the alphabet. For the final option, students practice basic math, specifically counting numbers from 1 to 20. This activity familiarizes students with numbers as a stepping stone for when they move on to basic operations.

Calendar Activity. The students sing the “Days of the Week Song” (Super Simple Songs - Kids Songs, 2016) to be led by the teacher. The lyrics help familiarize the students with the days of the week, the months, the weather, and the birthdays of their classmates. After singing, the teacher makes use of either a Starfall calendar, or an interactive classroom calendar. With the guidance of the teacher, the students highlight special holidays and future events to take note of.

Rules Recap. The teacher plays a song called “I Can Follow the Rules” (HeidiSongs, 2015). The song incorporates lyrics and dance steps that incorporate classroom rules, such as quiet voice, safe hands, walking feet, and share toys. The students sing and dance along to the song, and then have a recap of the rules afterward. The teacher also utilizes visual icons and gestures as further reinforcement of the rules.

Schedule of the Day. The teacher, utilizing a chart with detachable icons representing the activities of the day, goes over the daily schedule with the students. The teacher reads out the schedule to the students, who then repeat what was read out loud.

Emotion Song. The teacher plays “Breathe In & Out - The Kiboomers Feelings & Emotions Song” (The Kiboomers - Kids Music Channel, 2022), a song with lyrics that talk about the different emotions. Students sing along to the song, led by the teacher. Once the song is over, students are shown images depicting the emotions that were included in the song. The students will then be asked to choose what emotion they are currently feeling, to which they can respond by either picking out the emotion image or by saying the emotion out loud. This activity aims to familiarize students with simple emotions, and enable them to express these.

Question of the Day. The teacher gives the students a simple “Would you rather” question, such as “Would you rather see a butterfly or a rainbow?”, or “Would you rather ride a bus or a taxi?”. The students are each given a picture of themselves, and place it under their chosen answer once it is their turn. They are also asked to share their answer with the class, and explain it if they feel comfortable doing so. This activity aims to provide students an opportunity to practice their speaking and reasoning skills.

Closing Song. The teacher allows the students to pick a song for the final circle time activity. The students sing and dance along to their chosen song. Before returning to regular seating arrangements and closing circle time, the students are also given a preview of the next scheduled activity, as well as instructions on where to go once circle time ends.

The flow of activities is generally as described, with adjustments made in order to accommodate the needs of the students. In some situations, the order of activities may be changed to avoid a monotonous flow. In situations where the environment or the behavior of students is not conducive to learning, adjustments to the circle time routine may be done in order to properly contextualize the activities.

The implementation of these activities places heavy emphasis on creating an engaging experience for the learners. Song and dance, as well as the use of visual and interactive materials, such as charts and calendars are often integrated to engage learners. Student participation is also heavily encouraged to allow speaking and communication practice, as well as reduce teacher talking time as much as reasonably possible.

Data Analysis

The data collected consisted of a tally of student participation for each activity in the circle time routine, as well as the teacher’s qualitative observations on the participation and engagement of the students. The observations will be codified in order to analyze the teacher’s observations, as well as to observe commonalities across all the activities conducted during circle time.

RESULTS

The data gathered over 34 observation sessions from August to December was organized into a table, rating the overall engagement or enthusiasm of the students, as well as the statement from the

observation notes synthesizing the teacher’s observations on student behavior for each activity across the observation sessions.

Table 1. Level of Engagement of K1 SDC Students for Each Circle Time Activity

Activity	Level of Engagement	Exact Words from Observation Notes
Welcome Song	High Engagement	All students were very participative. 1:1 level students were fully engaged, with required guidance
Calming Exercises	Moderate Engagement	Some students followed teacher-led breathing and movement exercises. Some focused on individual body awareness and self-regulation. 1:1 level students required brief modeling and additional support in order to follow.
Attendance Activity	Moderate Engagement	Students participated by identifying names and pictures, however some did not feel inclined to place pictures under the “In School” category. 1:1 level students participated consistently with minimal need for prompts.
Literacy and Numeracy Activities	Highly Varied Engagement	Some students are very active in engaging with the activities, by listening attentively, repeating sounds and words, or actively participating in phonics or vocabulary activities. Other students participate depending on familiarity with activity. 1:1 level students require more support.
Calendar Activity	High Engagement	Students are very engaged with the calendar song used. They actively respond to questions and contribute ideas for events. 1:1 level students were also able to participate with the use of scaffolding, such as visual aids and augmentative and alternative communication (AAC).
Rules Recap	High Engagement	Students engaged with the song used, mimicking gestures and actions demonstrated by the teacher.

		1:1 level students actively followed the lead of the teacher.
Schedule of the Day	Moderate Engagement	All students listened to the rules of the day, but only some repeated the schedule as it was read aloud by the teacher. 1:1 level students participated in the activity, only needing occasional guidance.
Emotion Song	High Engagement	Students actively engaged with the song, and most students were able to express their feelings, either using the provided visual aids, sentence frames, and gestures, or through the use of AAC.
Question of the Day	High Engagement	All students participated actively, in the activity by sharing their preferences with partners or the rest of the group. 1:1 level students engaged successfully with the prompts.
Closing Song	High Engagement	Most students fully participated in the songs and chants chosen for the activity. 1:1 level students also participated with minimal support required.

Table 1 presents the different levels of engagement the class had for each of the circle time activities. Most of the activities had high engagement from the learners, specifically the welcome song, the calendar activity, the rules recap, the emotion song, the question of the day, and the closing song. The 1:1 level students were also able to follow along with these activities, albeit given the support and scaffolding indicated in their IEPs. Activities that included songs generally resulted in high engagement with students, with the exception of the attendance activity. Although the question of the day activity did not have singing or dancing included, all students, including those at a 1:1 level, engaged with it and participated actively.

The high engagement activities, with the exception of the question of the day, primarily utilized music, accompanied by the students' own singing and dancing, as a way to make activities more exciting and engaging. Another common factor that could be found in the high engagement activities was the presence of some novelty. The calendar activity varied, not only with the change of the date, but with the daily weather as well. The activity carried out after the emotion song also depended on the current feelings of the student sharing. The question of the day would always change with each session, giving the students a new topic to consider each day. These novel experiences allowed the students to become more invested in the activities each day, lessening the boredom that may come from the daily repetition of activities. Although some of the high engagement activities did not provide much opportunity for novelty in the circle time routine, these activities still managed to capture and retain student engagement due to the length of the activity. The welcome song, the rules recap, and the closing song do not take too much time to accomplish, with these activities only extending for a few minutes after their respective songs have finished.

The calming exercises, attendance activity, and schedule of the day only had moderate engagement, with some students choosing to exert less effort in the activity. During calming exercises, some students preferred to perform the exercises individually rather than following the lead of the teacher. Students got bored more easily, and were also less inclined to follow along with the rest of the class. During the attendance activity, although students enjoyed the song, some students preferred not to place their pictures under the appropriate categories themselves. The students preferred to rely on the teacher to mark their attendance on the interactive chart, rather than actively take part in the attendance checking process. During the schedule of the day, although the students listened attentively to the teacher, some of the students did not repeat the schedule aloud after the teacher. The students once again preferred to take a more passive role, rather than following along with the teacher's example.

Although the moderate engagement activities still had students participating, their participation was less enthusiastic, and more passive. These activities were much more repetitive in nature, compared to the high engagement activities. The schedule of the day and the rules recap particularly did not offer much in the way of novelty, other than reshuffling the order of activities in the schedule and the rules. Although the calming exercises also had different variations for the students to try for themselves, the activity itself was generally slow paced and low energy, leading some of the students to get bored instead. It should also be noted that although the rules recap had a song to engage the students like the high engagement activities, this activity lasted longer than some of the high engagement activities, without offering novel situations or experiences to maintain the engagement of the students. The same can be said for the other moderate engagement activities, as these activities may take longer to finish, while also providing less stimulation for the students.

The literacy and numeracy activities, namely News2You, story reading, alphabet, and simple math, had highly mixed reactions from the students. Some students engaged with the activities and were highly participative. Other students did not find the activities very engaging, with some students not feeling confident enough in their abilities to be able to read along or answer the questions provided by the teacher as part of the activities. The range for the exercises done during literacy and numeracy activities was also wide, as the teacher could choose to do the most basic exercises such as reciting the alphabet and counting to 20. These activities might be more engaging for students at a lower level than the rest of the class, but for more advanced students these may seem somewhat repetitive and may not provide enough stimulation. The teacher may also choose more advanced activities that are still appropriate for the students, such as reading stories and doing simple math problems. The activities would then be more mentally stimulating for the higher level students, while possibly lowering the motivation of the lower level students.

DISCUSSION

Implications for Practice

This case study on the circle time routine of K1 SDC students, mainly made up of learners with autism, speech-language impairments, or intellectual disabilities, revealed their attitudes towards the different activities held during circle time, and provided insights on which factors may increase their engagement during circle time. These findings may be put to use by parents, teachers, and educational institutions, especially those taking care of and working with special needs children, in order to curate a smooth and engaging circle time experience, for the benefit of both students and teachers.

The results gathered from the observations point towards three main factors in the implementation of circle time activities that influence student engagement during each of these. These factors include the novelty of the activity, the length of the activity, and the use of music or similar strategies to engage the students. The most common denominator across the high engagement activities was the presence of music, and the integration of singing and dancing as part of the activity. The integration of music into circle time activities should be heavily considered when planning an engaging activity for circle time.

Although music was the most common factor, novelty and length of activities also proved to be important in determining whether students would be able to remain engaged with the activities. The question of the day and rules recap revealed that whether music was present in the activity or not, providing students with new avenues for thought and expression can still prove to be very engaging; the opposite also being implied, with the presence of a song not being enough to compensate for lack of novelty in an activity. Activity length also acted similarly, showing how short activities that did not offer much in terms of novelty were still able to engage students, while activities that lasted longer would result in less active participation.

Aside from the integration of music in an effort to make activities more engaging for students in SDC, teachers, and other parties responsible for planning and conducting circle time routines, must keep conscious of the length of the activity that they are conducting, and whether students are able to get something new out of the experience, or if they are simply repeating the same exercises day after day. Although these factors aren't rules set in stone for educators to follow, they must still be very intentional in their approach in the case that they do decide to forego one of these factors in the considerations for circle time activity plans.

Recommendations

Due to the study's qualitative case study design, only a small sample was observed. Future researchers are recommended to work with a larger sample size and employ a quantitative approach in order to verify the observations made. Doing further studies into student engagement with numeracy and literacy activities is also recommended, as grouping them under one category resulted in high variance in terms of student engagement.

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