Improving Classroom Climate and Engagement at the Secondary Special Education Level through the Implementation of Classroom Management Strategies

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INTRODUCTION

Accountability for student achievement has been the broad focus of educational policy since the start of this millennium. States are required to submit accountability plans and measure school performance under ESSA (Adler-Greene, 2019). According to the Pennsylvania Department of Education (2020), Pennsylvania high school students must achieve proficiency on Keystone Exams in algebra I, biology, and literature in order to fulfill graduation requirements.

Research has suggested a relationship between academic achievement and effective classroom management. While behavior problems affect all classrooms, they are more prevalent in classrooms of students with disabilities. Students in these classrooms consistently underperform their regular education peers. Special education teachers must possess the tools to effectively extinguish problem behavior and promote desired learning and behavioral outcomes in the classroom setting.

OBJECTIVES

This study sought to answer the following two research questions:
1. What is the extent to which high school learning support teachers implement classroom management strategies?
2. What effect do classroom management strategies have on high school special education students in terms of classroom climate and engagement?

RATIONALE

Most classroom management studies use students in the elementary or middle school level and regular education or inclusive classrooms. There is a gap between high school students and students who are in the learning support classroom.

It is proposed that improvements in behavior will help contribute to a better classroom climate and minimize distractions leading to disengagement.

- Equipping teachers with the proper tools and knowledge of effective classroom management strategies can only be beneficial in improving outcomes within the classroom.

Less time spent addressing problem behavior = more time for academic instruction!

METHODS

This study followed a mixed-methods research design using qualitative and quantitative data.

- Qualitative data was collected in the form of a questionnaire to gather teacher perspectives on effective classroom management strategies.
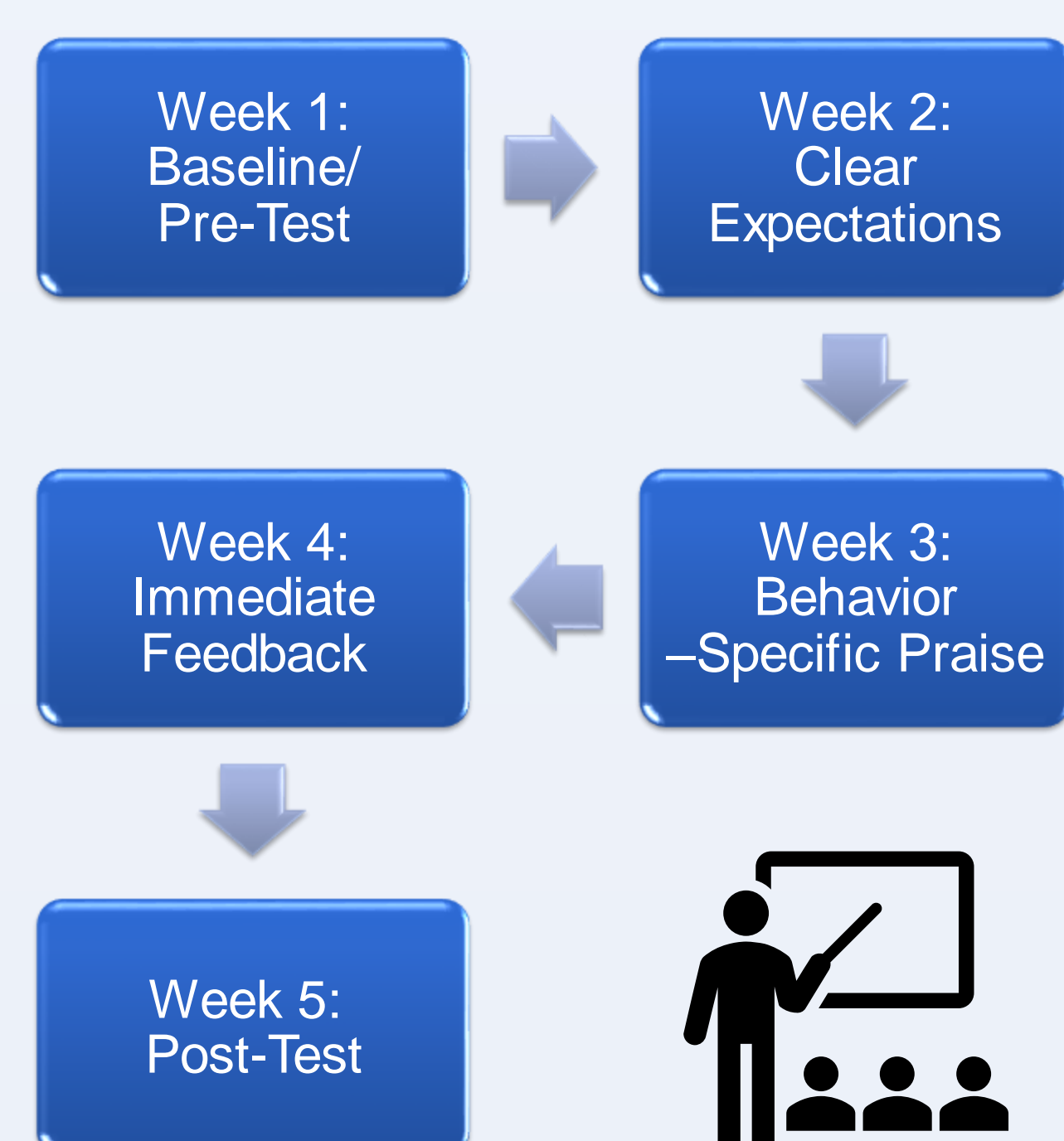- Quantitative data was gathered using a pre-experimental one-group pretest-posttest design.

Best practice classroom management strategies identified by current literature were embedded into the researcher's high school learning support biology classroom to conduct the study.

Classroom Management Best Practices
Clear Expectations	Behavior –Specific Praise	Immediate Feedback

Behavior tracking was completed daily on each student to monitor the intervention. The researcher recorded how many reminders were needed to meet classroom expectations.

The effects of the implemented classroom management strategies on students' behavior and engagement levels were measured through the **Student Classroom Climate and Engagement Survey** adapted from Harvard's Panorama Student Survey (2014).

Five -week intervention schedule:

Week 1: Baseline/ Pre-Test → Week 2: Clear Expectations → Week 3: Behavior –Specific Praise → Week 4: Immediate Feedback → Week 5: Post-Test
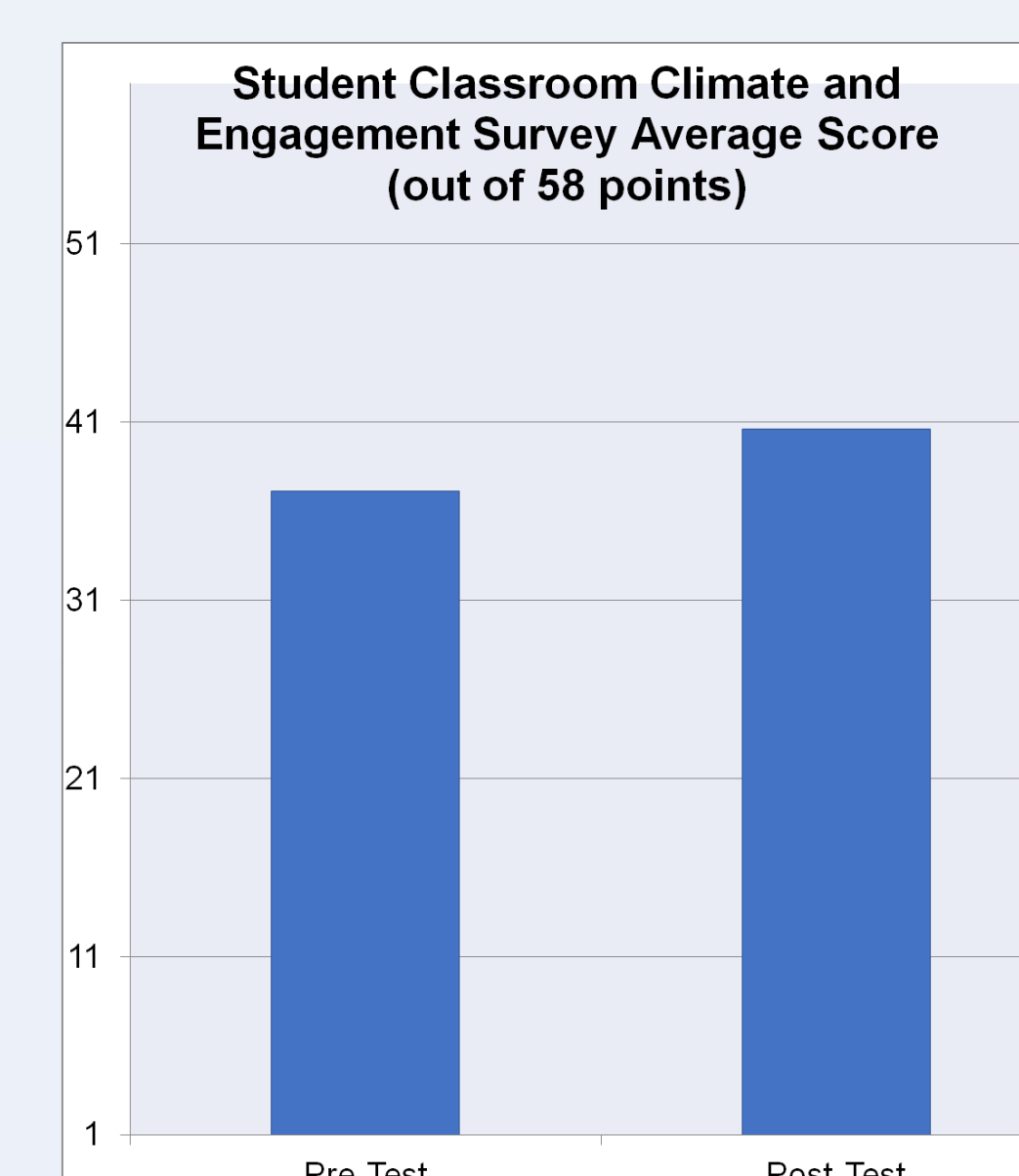
RESULTS

Five high school learning support teachers completed the **Classroom Management Questionnaire**. Their responses revealed the following about classroom management strategies at the secondary special education level:

- *No participant had received formal training on classroom management from their employer.*
  - *Two teachers had no classroom management training at all. Three had some training from college.*
- *All participants had experienced problem behavior in their classrooms at varying degrees.*
- *Task avoidance, refusal, inappropriate language, calling out, elopement, and mild physical contact were cited as examples of behaviors seen in high school learning support classrooms.*
- *Best practice classroom management strategies- behavior –specific praise and immediate feedback- were not identified by participants.*
  - *Two teachers referenced clear expectations.*

Participants' Reported Amount of Formal Classroom Management Training

- 40%
- 60%

■ No Formal Training At All ■ Some Training From College, Not From Employer
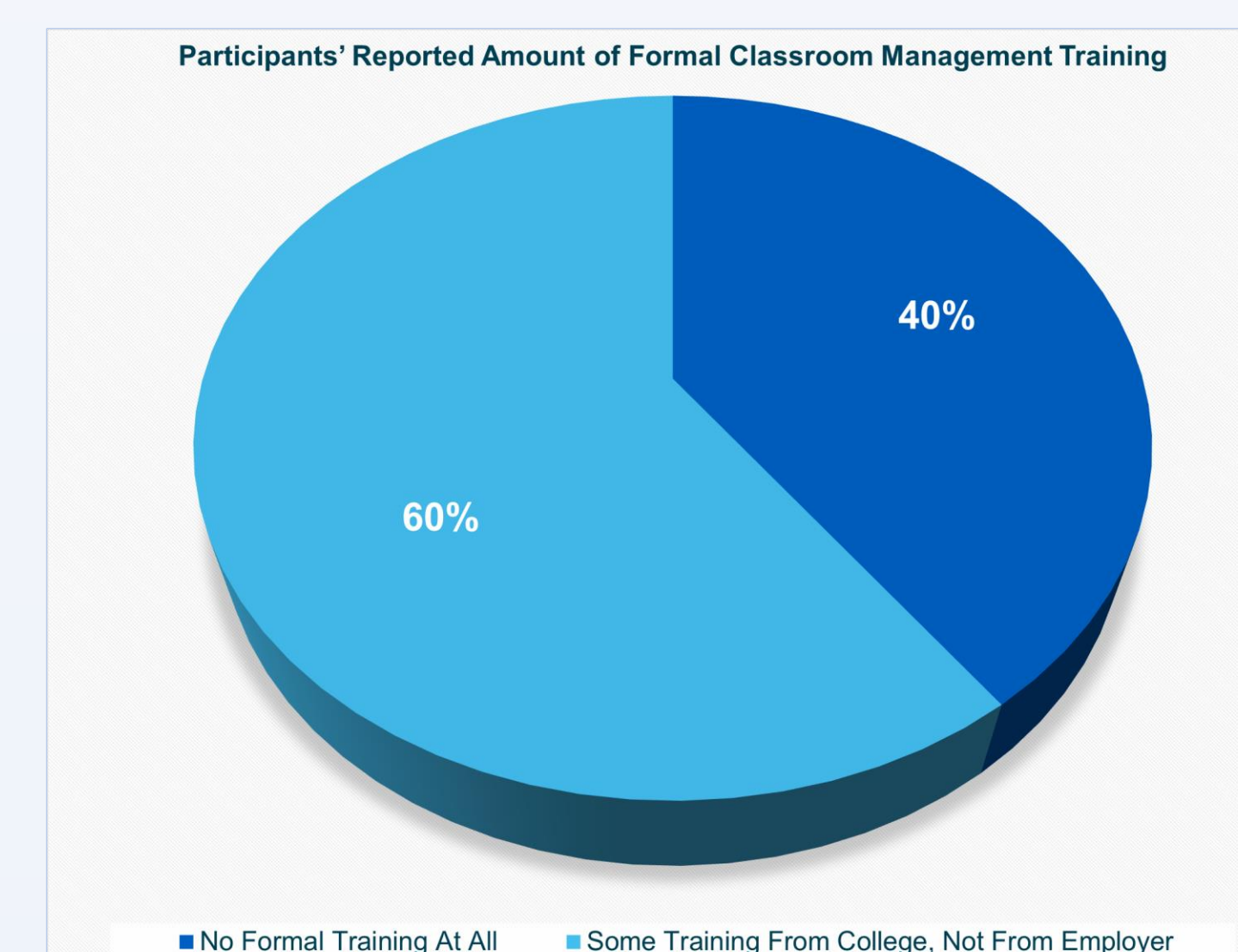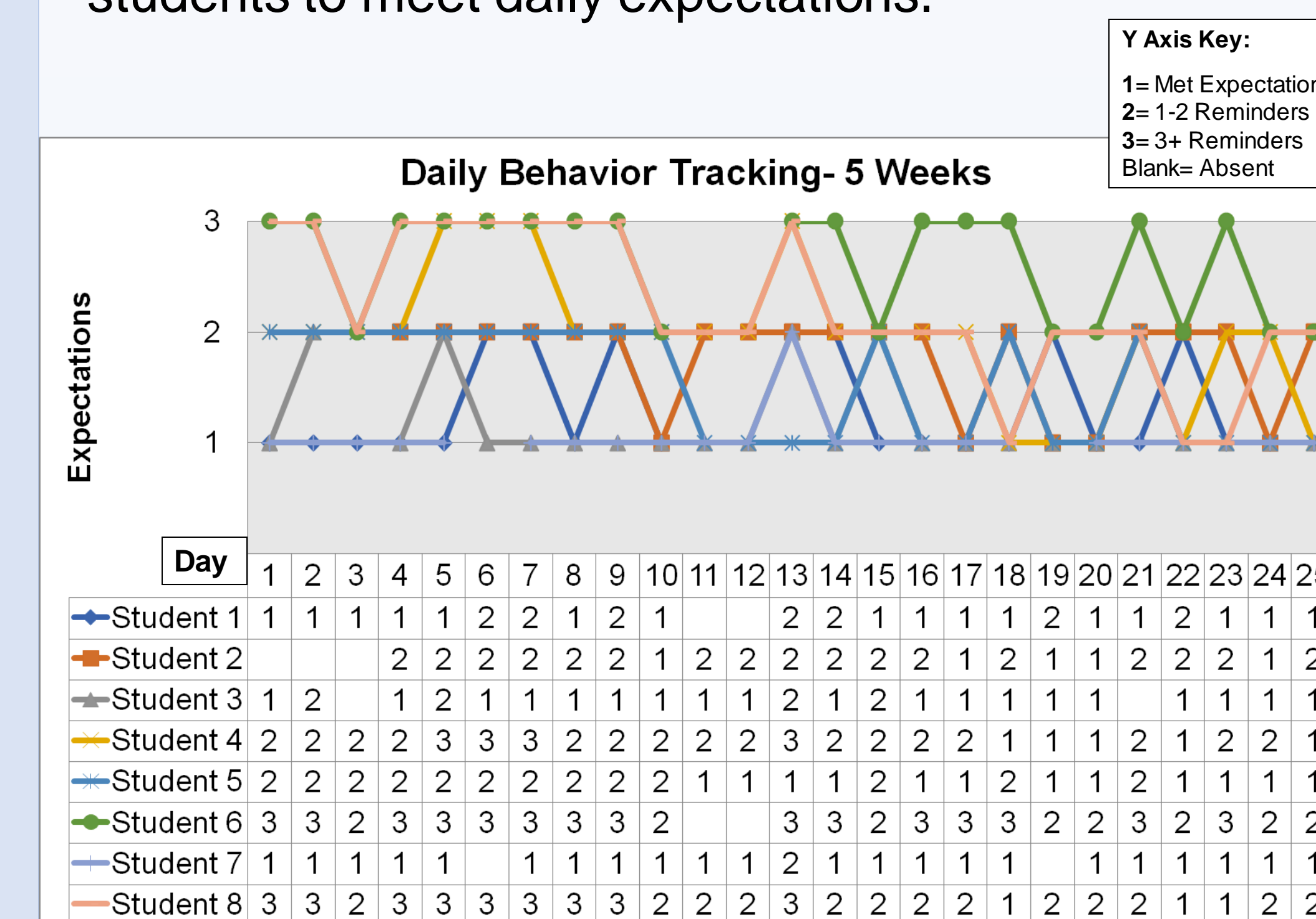
A paired-samples t-test was used to determine whether there was a statistically significant mean difference between the score on pretest evaluations and post-test evaluations following the intervention.

- Students scored higher after the intervention (M= 40.625 points, SD= 6.277795) as opposed to the pretest (M= 37.125 points, SD= 2.531939).

Student Classroom Climate and Engagement Survey Average Score (out of 58 points)

| Pre-Test | Post-Test |

Results revealed that there was not a significant difference from the intervention – the null hypothesis failed to be rejected. Overall, however, there was an improvement in behavior and a decrease in the level of prompting required for students to meet daily expectations.

Y Axis Key:
1= Met Expectations
2= 1-2 Reminders
3= 3+ Reminders
Blank= Absent

Daily Behavior Tracking- 5 Weeks

Day	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25
Student 1	1	1	1	1	1	2	2	1	2	1		2	1	1	1	1	2	1	1	2	1	1	1	2	1
Student 2		2	2	2	2	2	2	2	1	1	2	2	2	1	2	1	1	2	2	2	1	1	1	1	
Student 3	1	2		1	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	1	1	1	1		1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Student 4	2	2	2	2	3	3	3	2	2	2	2	2	2	1	1	1	2	2	1	1	1	1	2	2	1
Student 5	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	1	1	1	1	2	2	1	1	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Student 6	3	3	2	3	3	3	3	3	3			3	3	3	3	3	2	2	2	2	3	2	2	3	3
Student 7	1	1	1	1	1		1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Student 8	3	3	2	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	2	2	3	2	2	2	1	2	2	1	1	2	2

CONCLUSIONS

1. High school special education teachers do not explicitly utilize classroom management best practices. Effective classroom management strategies are needed as problem behavior does occur at this level. There is a need for increased professional development to help improve the behavioral climate of secondary special education classrooms.
2. Implementing research-based classroom management strategies was beneficial to the overall classroom behavioral climate and level of student engagement.
   - *Due to the known correlation between student engagement and achievement, it is the researcher's hope that academic achievement would be favorably impacted because of the intervention.*
   - The researcher will utilize clear expectations, behavior -specific praise, and immediate feedback to increase engagement and promote a positive classroom climate throughout the school year

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