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## Identifying Classroom Management Strategies Using Observational Notes and Zone of Tracking Framework at the Elementary Level (K-5)

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*Empirical*

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**Identifying Classroom Management Strategies Using Observational Notes and Zone of Tracking Framework at the Elementary Level (K-5)**

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.69670/mje.1.2.5><https://www.williamwoods.edu/academics/mje>**Pallavi Aggarwal****Abstract**

An effective classroom management plan helps to create a positive and safe learning environment that fosters motivation, addresses challenges, and develops critical thinking among students (Jobirovna, 2023). Social-emotional learning plays a crucial role in building self-regulation among students. Research shows that self-regulated and emotionally alert students can achieve higher academic success (CASEL,2021). A case study on an urban Midwest K-5 charter school helped to identify the classroom management strategies used by elementary teachers to enhance the social-emotional state of the students by implementing the “Zone of Regulation” strategy (Kuypers, 2023) and analyzing the observational notes. A framework known as the “Zone of Tracking” framework was developed to connect the emotional alertness of students with the predicted intervention, which included various classroom management strategies used by all core-content teachers. Using the Zone of Tracking framework, 165 students across all grade level teachers were observed (N=66 observations). Each observation was one hour for all subjects. Out of 66, in 33 observations, Following Classroom Expectations was identified as one of the strategies for creating emotional alertness among students. Note-making during all classroom observations (N=66 observations) exhibits patterns grouped into two categories: instructional and classroom routines. Instructional routines included four subcategories: lesson planning, teacher time management, proximity of teacher, and automaticity of students. Classroom routines included four subcategories: Teacher voice level, classroom norms, rewards, and transitions. Listing and recognizing the various classroom management elements, considering the emotional alertness of the students, could assist the teachers in building a strong classroom management plan that can cater to both the student's academic and emotional needs and create a positive classroom environment conducive to learning.

**Keywords**

classroom management strategies, social-emotional learning, elementary, case study, positive classroom environment

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## **Introduction**

### **Background of the Problem**

The study addresses the challenge of managing student behavior and maintaining emotional alertness in the classroom to foster academic success and a positive learning atmosphere. Disruptive behaviors, lack of engagement, and emotional instability among students are common issues teachers face, especially in elementary education. Teachers need effective strategies to address these issues while catering to students' emotional and academic needs. The background highlights evidence-based classroom management strategies like the Caterpillar Game, Good Behavior Game, and others. Zodar-Martell et al. (2023) concluded that evidence-based strategies helped teachers create a positive classroom environment by addressing academic and behavioral needs. Furthermore, Fraser and Treagust (1989) and Moos (1979) emphasize the impact of classroom social-ecological settings, including classroom climate, students' perception of teacher-student interactions, and how students' emotions shape learning. The research connecting classroom strategies to the positive learning environment and its impact on the social and emotional well-being of the students are further explained in the next section.

## **Literature Review**

### **Classroom Management Strategies and Positive Classroom Environment**

Zodar-Martell et. al (2023) discussed classroom management as the teacher's strategy to increase students' attentiveness by keeping them on task. The various strategies used by the teachers to reduce student disruptive behavior are the Caterpillar Game, Classroom Password, Color Wheel, Good Behavior Game, Mystery Motivator, On-Task in a Box, Quiet Classroom Game, and Tootling. The authors concluded that the evidence-based strategies helped teachers cater to the academic and behavioral needs of the students by generating a positive classroom environment (Zodar-Martell et al., 2023).

Prisbell et al. (2009) defined the classroom as one where students participate and develop fellowship with each other by communicating behaviors to create an environment conducive to learning. Moos (1979), as cited in Barr (2016), concluded that social ecology can impact the attitudes and moods, behavior and performance, and the self-concept and general sense of the students.

The classroom's social-ecological setting, often called classroom climate, encompasses its social and emotional aspects (Barr, 2016). Fraser and Treagust (1989) explained the factors that might influence the classroom environment. It might include the students' perception of the rigor of the classroom, their interaction with the instructor, and their participation in the classroom. However, students' perception is greatly influenced by the environment encompassing their community and the collective feeling among students and teachers. Fraser and Treagust developed an instrument that helped to measure the classroom climate in higher education. The College and University Environment Inventory (CUEI) highlights the seven internally consistent metrics of higher education classroom management:

- 1) Personalization: Students were allowed to develop a relationship with the instructor and share concerns.
- 2) Involvement: Students are encouraged to participate in the classroom.
- 3) Student Cohesiveness: Students build interpersonal relationships with each other.
- 4) Satisfaction: Students enjoy the classroom environment.
- 5) Task Orientation: Class activities are structured and clear.
- 6) Innovation: Utilization of unique teaching methods for students.
- 7) Individualized: Students were allowed to make decisions.

Winston et al.(1994) also created similar dimensions to measure the classroom climate in higher education. Although Fraser and Treagust (1989) and Winston et al. (1994) created different dimensions for classroom climate, they are similar in the way they group the dimensions as factors controlled by the instructor and the participation of the students in classroom activities. Frisby et al. (2010) examined the relationship between the instructor and students and among the students in building a positive classroom environment. The study further stated that to build a positive environment in the classroom, the relationship between the instructor and students and the interaction among the students plays an important role.

Dwyer et al. (2004) stated that the student relationship with the instructor should not be the only focus area for building a positive classroom environment; the interpersonal relationship between the students plays a key role in enhancing classroom connectedness.

Considering the impact of evidence-based strategies (Caterpillar Game, Classroom Password, Color Wheel, Good Behavior Game, Mystery Motivator, On-Task in a Box, Quiet Classroom Game, and Tootling) helped the teachers to increase the attentiveness of the students in the current case study of a K-5 charter school, the teachers used different strategies in their classroom to manage disruptive behavior. The strategies vary as per the needs of the students in the classroom.

### **Impact of Social-Emotional Learning**

Many case studies focus on charter schools and SEL implementation in the building. Sampson (2021) suggests that to improve the school's social culture, it is important to implement the SEL strategies infused into the academic curriculum. Filderman et al. (2023) focused on providing instructional decisions to the teachers after monitoring and implementing SEL. A seven-year-long study was conducted to understand the impact of SEL in classrooms, schools, and districts. A Collaborating Districts Initiative (CDI) was started with three districts in 2011 and went up to 10 districts, serving nearly 1 million students in 2017.

CASEL (2021) published a report mentioning the impact of SEL on students and schools while implementing CDI for seven years. The following are some positive impacts:

- 1) Academic Achievement Improved: Three districts that used the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) improved their reading and math scores during the experiment. In particular, the Chicago School District showed a great increase in test scores from 2.19 before CDI to 2.65 in 2015, which is approximately an increase of nearly 21%. Their graduation rate also increased to 15% during the experiment. Nashville school district used the standardized test scores during the experiment and had seen improvement in

scores in math and ELA. All districts improved their ELA and Math scores for at least one grade level.

- 2) **Student Engagement and Behavior Improved:** Attendance improved in the districts that collected this data. Chicago improved its attendance by 8%, and Anchorage (elementary and middle levels) and Nashville (middle and high levels) gained points at two of three levels. Suspensions decreased by 65% in two years, which accounted for 44,000 fewer students suspended in only one year. In Sacramento, the district-wide suspension rate declined by 23%, and for high school, it declined by 43%.
- 3) **Student Social and Emotional Competence Improved:** Students' social and emotional competence improved based on student and teacher surveys. All the grade levels in all districts showed growth in all five categories of social-emotional learning. Washoe County results showed that students with high social-emotional competence performed better on many competencies: increased GPA, fewer suspensions, and higher academic achievement.
- 4) **School Climate Improved:** Overall, the school climate improved in all the districts that collected data. Chicago school district data was collected and made available for analysis, which specifically mentioned creating a “supportive environment” for the students. Another study by Durlak et. al (2011) showed the meta-analysis of 213 schools with 270,034 students from kindergarten to high school. The study showed the positive impact of social and emotional learning on students. Compared to the control group, the students who participated in the SEL programs showed improved attitudes, behavior, and academic performance. The academic performance increased by 11 percent.

A meta-analysis of SEL programs was conducted by Mahoney et. al, 2018. The research observed many positive long-term and short-term impacts on students participating in the study. SEL has been defined in many ways, but Mahoney et. al, 2018 have cited the definition of SEL, which includes all the significant aspects of it. As cited in Weissberg & Cascarino (2013) by Mahoney et. al (2018), SEL is defined as the process through which all individuals acquire knowledge and effectively execute the knowledge and skills to establish their emotions and maintain positive relationships by making responsible decisions. Roger Weissberg and colleagues (2015) mentioned the five core clusters of social and emotional competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.

The results of the meta-analysis for four studies are as follows:

- SEL skills- Identifying emotions, goal setting, self-management, problem-solving, conflict resolution
- Attitudes- Positive attitude towards self and others (school, peers).
- Positive Social Behavior - Helping others, getting along with others, peacebuilding, cooperation
- Solve Problems - Students have developed better skills in managing fights, bullying, and verbal aggression. Implementing SEL programs in the school building has decreased disruptive classroom behavior, discipline referrals, and delinquent acts.

- Emotional Distress - Students who got SEL intervention were able to manage depression, stress, anxiety, and social withdrawal better than the control group.
- Academic Performance—According to the teacher, the student's academic performance increased overall, specifically in math and reading, standardized tests, grades, and academic competence.

Understanding the positive impact of the students' social-emotional well-being on their academic success and behavior self-regulation, one of the social-emotional learning strategies used by the K-5 charter school to regulate their students' emotions and build a positive learning environment in school was the zone of regulation strategy. The zone of regulation strategy categorizes the students' alertness and emotions based on the color (red, yellow, blue, green). Each color represents the emotions linked to the person's body language (Kuypers, 2023). Table 1 explains the different colors associated with the various body gestures displayed by the students.

**Table 1**

*Zone Color and the Meaning of the Body Language*

Zone Color	Meaning
Red	Extremely Heightened states of alertness or very intense feelings. Anger, Rage, Explosive behavior
Yellow	Heightened State of Alertness. Stress, Frustration, Silliness, Nervousness, Anxiety, Wiggly, Squirmy, or Sensory-seeking
Blue	Low states of Alertness. Sad, Tired, Sick or Bored
Green	Regulated State of Alertness. Calm, Happy, Focused

### **Purpose of the study**

Even with the existing research-based effective classroom management strategies, the teachers in the K-5 charter school employed unstructured classroom management strategies to manage student behaviors and enhance their emotional alertness. Thereby creating disruptive behavior and low emotional stability among students. The current study aims to identify strategies that might help teachers build successful classroom management plans and highlight strategies that can enhance the students' emotional stability. A list of the identified strategies can help the charter school focus on those strategies and build strong classroom management skills among their teachers by providing structured and purposeful training and professional development. This leads to the development of the research question.

## **Research Question**

How do the classroom observation notes and predicted intervention help identify the classroom management strategies that would enhance the emotional alertness of the students using the Zone of Tracking Framework at the elementary level?

## **Significance of the Study**

This research is significant because it aims to fill the gap in understanding the specific interventions that help teachers improve students' emotional alertness using a structured observational framework. The Zone of Tracking Framework developed in this study helps measure the effectiveness of interventions by tracking changes in students' emotional states, indicated by color zones (green, yellow, blue, red). By identifying successful interventions, the study contributes to better classroom management strategies teachers can apply to build a positive classroom environment. The study also ties into broader research on Social-Emotional Learning (SEL), noting its long-term positive impacts on student academic achievement and emotional well-being, as shown in studies such as those conducted by CASEL (2021) and Mahoney et al. (2018). The findings are also important for educational leaders, who can leverage these strategies in professional development and training to help teachers foster self-regulation and emotional awareness among students, ultimately leading to higher academic success and reduced classroom disruptions.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The Theory of Action developed by Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning is a blueprint for implementing and monitoring various Social Emotional Learning strategies within the school site (CASEL, 2021a). The four focus areas for the Theory of Action are building foundational support and plan for SEL, strengthening adult SEL competencies and capacity, promoting SEL for students, and reflecting on data for continuous improvement

Educational psychology and classroom management theories help to establish the importance of classroom management strategies and provide a framework to monitor and implement those strategies at the school site (Evertson & Weinstein, 2006; Emmer & Sabornie, 2015).

## **Material and Methods**

### **Description of Framework**

According to Kuypers (2023), self-regulation may be defined as the person's ability to adjust their emotions, actions, and energy levels as per the need of the demand and situation and attain the personal goal by maintaining their well-being. The Zone Tracking framework was developed to track the change in student alertness and engagement in the classroom when the teacher implemented the predicted intervention. This framework combined the "zones of regulations" strategy with the predicted intervention. The framework consists of various elements: Teacher name, Grade level, Student name, Zone color, Level of discipline, predicted intervention, and Zone color change. The main idea of developing this framework was to help the teachers recognize the

interventions working for a particular student and help the teacher develop a classroom management plan by catering to the student's emotional needs while bridging the academic gap. Identifying the interventions that effectively manage the students' behavior can also help the beginning teachers have a better-structured classroom.

After conducting various informal observations, a list of predicted interventions linking the emotional alertness of the students and the level of discipline was created with the help of a team of researchers. Predicted Intervention defines the possible classroom strategies that the teacher can use to increase the alertness and readiness of the student to perform the task appropriately. The predicted intervention included five categories: norms/daily routine, lesson planning, following classroom expectations, setting change/sitting arrangements, and engagement strategies. To measure the framework's credibility, the framework was reviewed by the team of researchers and the school's leadership team. The researcher addressed potential biases by researcher flexibility. The researcher acknowledges that her previous experience of K-12 teacher training, which involves implementing classroom management strategies and how they impact student engagement, might influence the data analysis. To address these potential biases, the researcher met regularly with her research team to question her interpretation of the results.

This framework consists of various data sources that can help understand the change in student behavior in the classroom. Zone color change and predicted intervention are the two data sources that link the change in student behavior once the teacher executes the appropriate intervention.

In the framework, zone color defines the student's alertness and readiness to learn and participate in class.

- Green represents that the student is ready to learn, described as calm, happy, and focused. It also shows students' regulated state of alertness.
- Yellow represents a heightened state of alertness in the student, which can be noticed as stress, frustration, nervousness, silliness, wiggleness, squirminess, etc.
- Blue represents a low alert state, meaning students might be bored, sad, tired, or sick.
- Red represents that highly heightened level of alertness, which means very intense feelings such as anger, rage, and explosive behavior.

The school discipline coordinator developed the Level of Discipline protocol to classify teacher-managed student behavior and administrative-managed student behavior. Teachers manage Level 1 while administration manages Level 2 and Level 3 student behaviors.

### **Setting and Demographics**

An urban K-5 charter school in the Midwest, serving 165 students, participated in this case study. In 2021-2022, the student population comprised 82.50% black, 6.60 % multiracial and 9% white, with 49.40% female and 50.60% male. 54.4 % of the students received free reduced lunch, 3.61% were homeless, and 10.84% received special education services in 2021-2022. The school has 11 full-time classroom teachers consisting of 2 teachers per grade level (K-4) and one for 5th-grade teaching all subjects (ELA, Math, Social Studies, and Science). Students also take extracurricular classes (Music, Adaptive thinking, and Mind and Movement).



## Data Collection

After developing the framework, the researcher conducted observations across the school for all general education classroom teachers and extracurricular teachers. In cycle 1, 11 general ed classroom teachers were observed for 1 hour, and three extracurricular teachers were observed for 30 minutes. Cycle 1 comprises observing all 11 general ed teachers for one class and three extracurricular teachers for all of their 11 classes. Six cycles of general-ed classroom observations (66 observations) and one cycle of three extracurricular teacher observations (33 observations) were conducted over three and a half months. Six observations were conducted for every teacher. The current study analyzed all six cycles (N= 66) for all core-content teachers. Students were color-coded based on their alertness and emotional state. If the student is squirmy or wiggly, then the student is coded yellow. Based on the emotional state of the students, the teacher used the predicted intervention to change their emotional and alert state to green. The level of discipline is selected as coded by the school discipline committee. While recording the data in the Zone of Tracking framework, the researcher also utilized a short note-taking method to record various classroom teacher actions to address the students' behaviors shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**

### Sample of Data Collection

A		B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
1	Grade Level	Zone Color	Student	Level of Classroom Discipline	Predict Intervention	Zone color change			
2	3	Green	Student 1						
3		Green	Student 2						
4		Green	Student 3						
5		Green	Student 4						
6		Yellow	Student 5	1	Following classroom expectati...	Green			
7		Green	Student 6					Things Working	Needs Attention
8		Green	Student 7					Change in the seating arrangements	Pace of instruction
9	Absent		Student 8					Consequences	Firm voice
10	Sleepy	Blue	Student 9	1	Following classroom expectati...	Green		Tally Marks	Urgency
11									For reading the text, ask the students to read. Do Tag team/Cold call so that they all the engaged and working.
12		Green	Student 10						
13		Green	Student 11					She started well but in reading she lost control	
14		Green	Student 12						
15		Green	Student 13						

## Findings

### Data Sources

In this study, the frequency of the predicted intervention used by the teacher and the observational notes were used as the data sources. N= 66 observations were observed to identify the most used predicted intervention used by all core-content teachers with the observational notes helping to identify the elements of the classroom management plan. Out of 66 observations, following classroom expectation intervention was used in 33 observations (50%) by all core content teachers.

To understand the process of change in emotional alertness of the students using the predicted interventions, an excerpt from 66 observations of the Grade 1 teachers is listed below that depicts

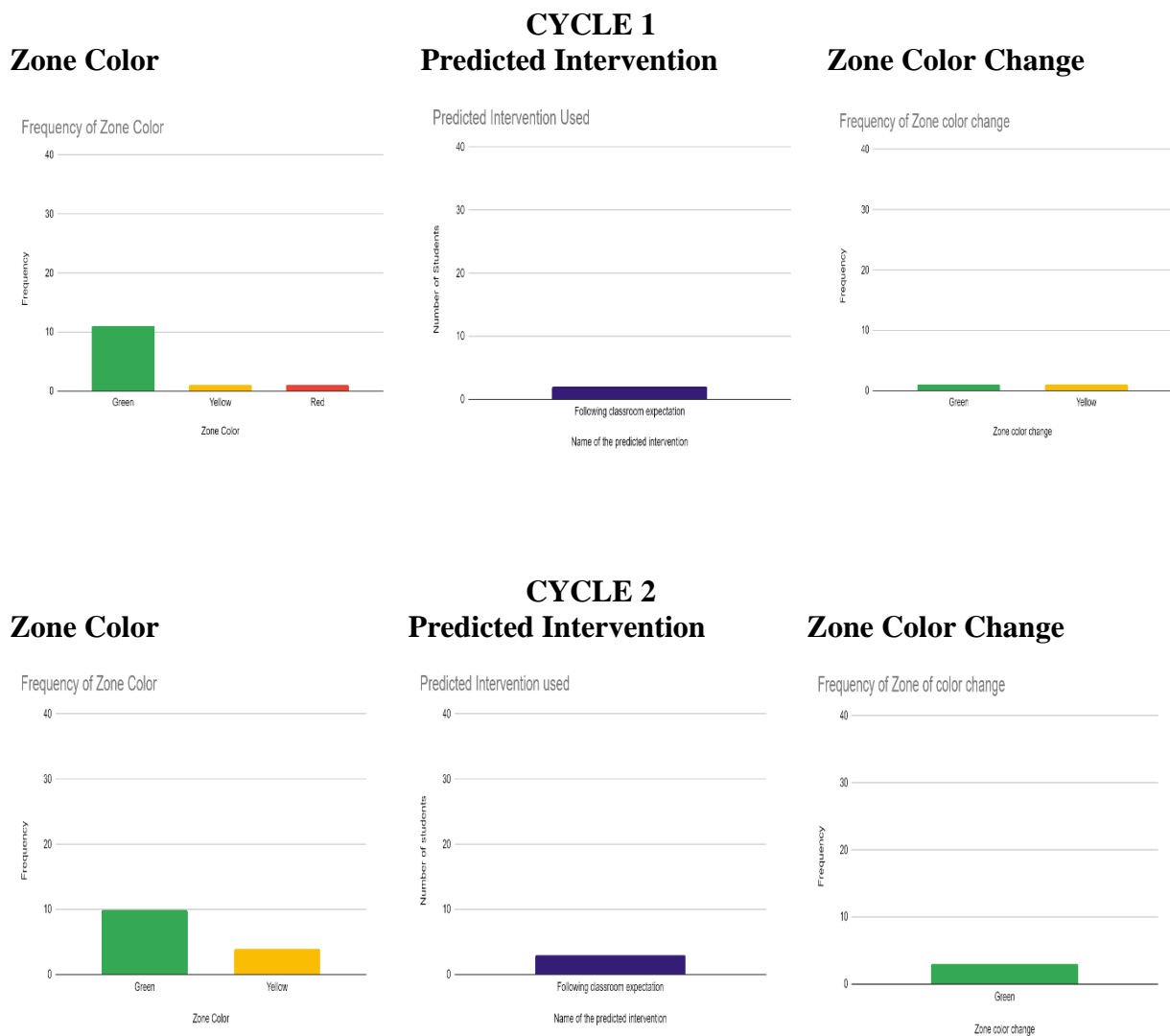
the change in the zone color of the students implying the change in their emotional alertness in the class.

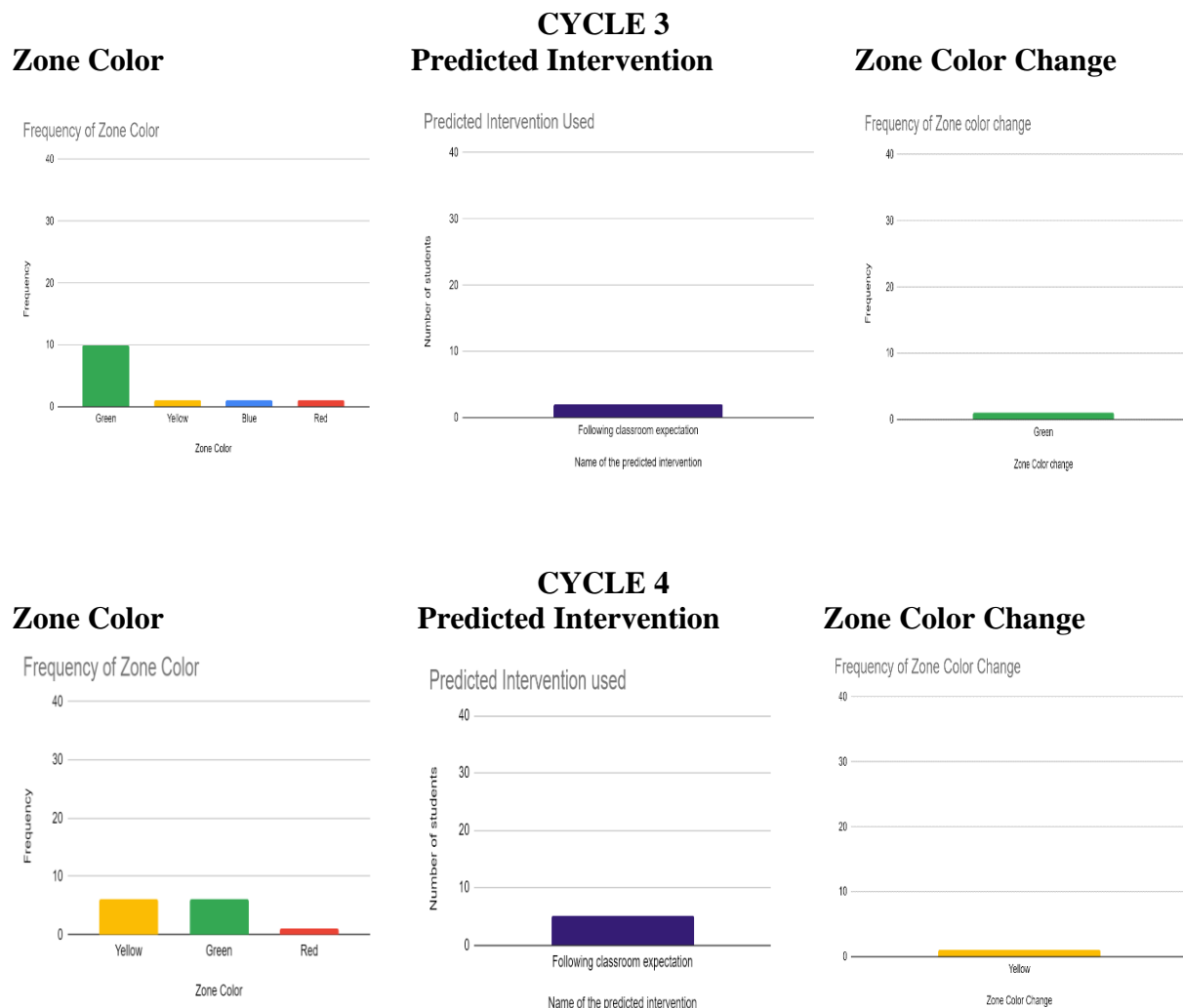
***Predicted Intervention used by Grade 1 teachers.***

Figures 2 and 3 demonstrate descriptive analyses of Grade 1 teachers. The illustrations display the different predicted interventions used by the teachers to increase the students' emotional alertness and build a positive learning environment.

**Figure 2**

*Predicted Interventions Used by Teacher 1 Of Grade 1 in four cycles of Observations.*





### Explanation for Figure 2

In cycle one, out of 15 students, one was in the red zone, and one was in the yellow zone. Two students were absent and pulled out for intervention, respectively. To increase the emotional alertness of those two students, the teacher used the following classroom expectation intervention, which helped increase the students' emotional alertness to green and yellow, respectively.

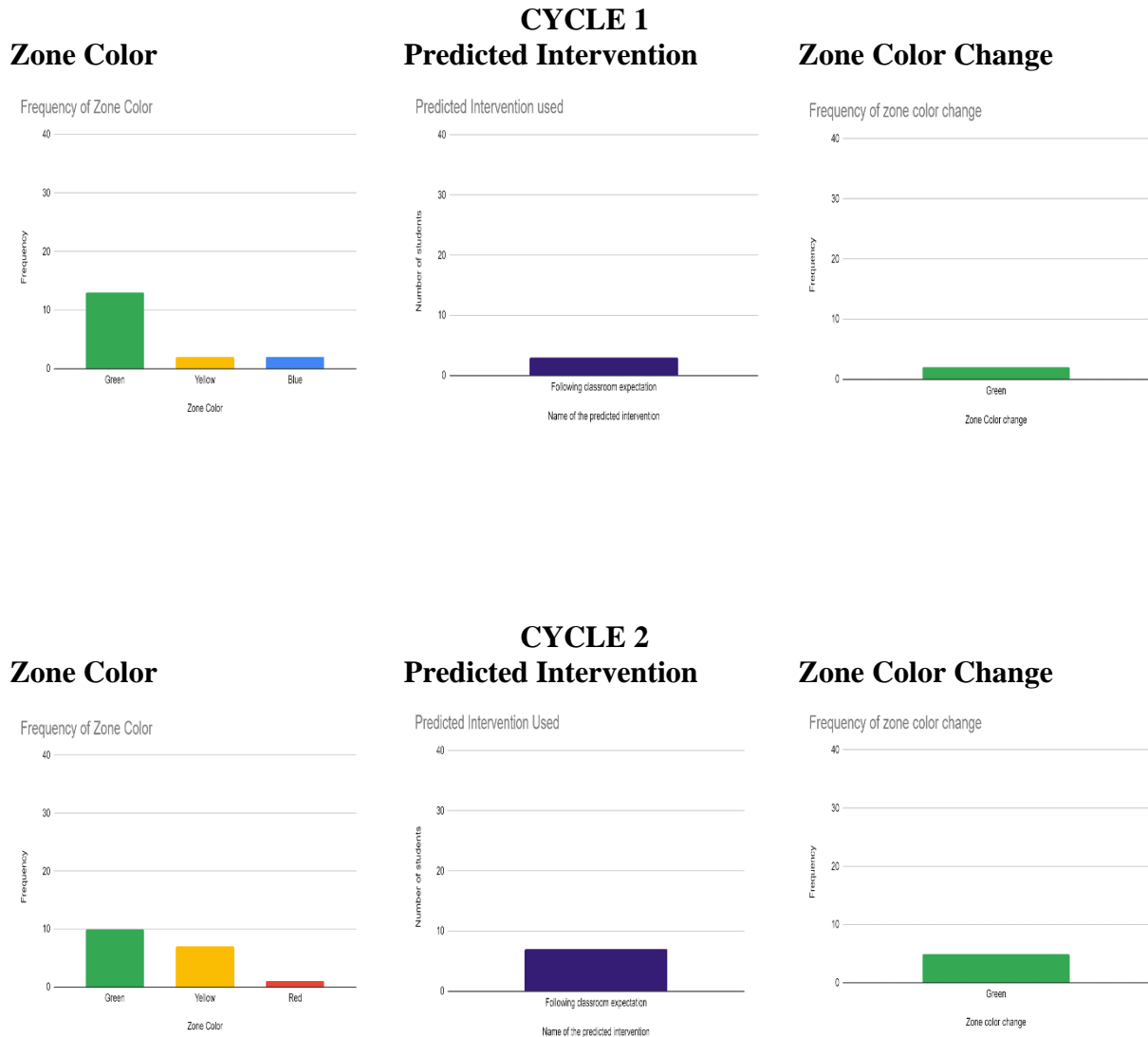
In cycle two, four of the 15 students were in the yellow zone, while one was pulled out for intervention. Following classroom expectations, intervention was used for three students, which resulted in three students being moved to the green zone.

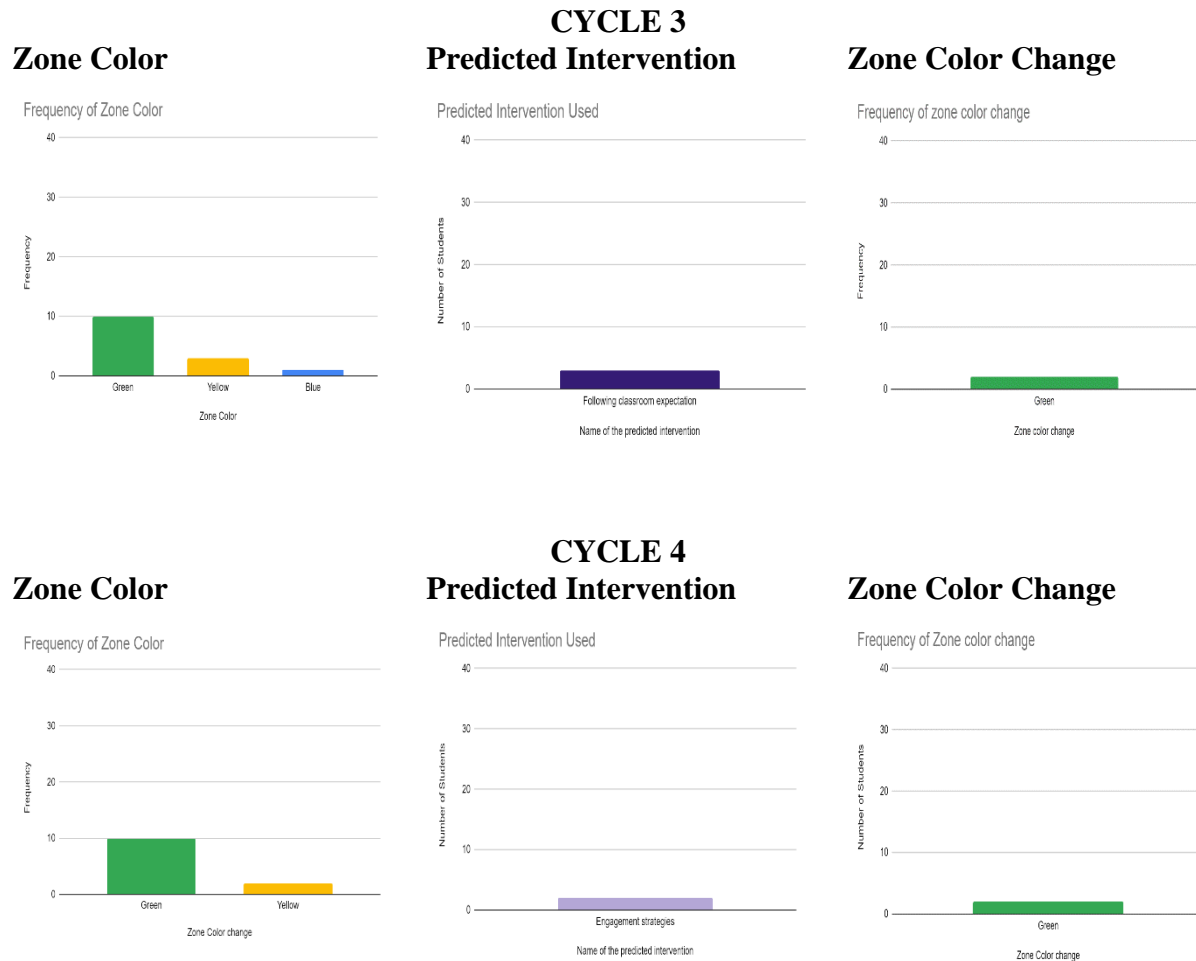
In cycle three, one student was in the yellow zone, one in the blue zone, and one in the red zone. One student was pulled out for intervention, and one student was absent. The teacher used the following classroom expectation intervention to support two students, but only one student moved to the green zone.

In cycle four, out of 14 students, six were in the yellow zone, and one was in the red zone, with one student pulled out for intervention. The teacher used the following classroom expectation intervention for five students to increase the students' focus. A student in the red zone improved his emotional state by moving to the yellow zone. There was no change in the emotional alertness of the other yellow zone students.

**Figure 3**

*Predicted Interventions used by Teacher 2 of Grade 1 in four cycles of Observations.*





### Explanation for Figure 3

In cycle one, out of 18 students, two were in the yellow zone, and two were identified in the blue zone. one student was absent. The teacher used the following classroom expectation intervention for three students. Only two students' alertness improved and changed to the green zone.

In cycle two, one student was in the red zone, and seven were in the yellow zone. The following classroom expectation intervention was used for seven students, but only five students' emotional alertness changed to green.

In cycle three, three of the 18 students were in the yellow zone, and one was in the blue zone. The teacher chose the following classroom expectation intervention for three students, resulting in two in the green zone.

In cycle four, two students were in the yellow zone, and two were pulled out for intervention. Four students were absent. The teacher opted for the engagement strategy intervention for two students, which resulted in two students in the green zone.

### *Observational Notes Analysis*

During classroom observations, short notes were recorded for all six cycles (N=66) of core-content teachers. Note-taking usually comprises the elements working for the teacher and/or the aspects needing attention. A pattern was observed in all the cycles, which resulted in grouping the examples and non-examples in one category. Further, those patterns were clubbed together to form the instructional and classroom routines, which were the strategies used by the teachers to improve their classroom management skills. Table 1 elaborates on the patterns identified in the notes and routines performed by the teachers. Table 2 summarizes the classroom management strategies into two routines, instructional routine and classroom routine, which are further classified into four patterns in each routine.

**Table 2**

#### *Description of the Patterns with the Routine Classified*

Routines	Patterns	Description
Instructional Routine	Lesson Planning	It describes the preparation of the lesson in the class. Example- "Clear instruction" "Pace of the instruction."
	Time Management	This strategy encompasses the utilization of time by the teacher in the classroom. Example- "Long one-on-one conversation with kids" "Timed Lesson"
	Proximity	It is the strategy used by the teacher to manage the student's behavior and check their understanding of the content. Example: "Moving Around" "Using Proximity to check in with the student."
	Automaticity of Students	It includes various strategies the teacher uses to develop effortless and critical thinking in students. Example: "Student writing was a great engagement strategy." "Repeating the sounds" "Stretching the learning"
Classroom Routine	Voice/Tone	It includes the voice level and the response given by the teacher to students to motivate them and stay on task. Example: "Strong Voice" "Positive Praise"
	Classroom Norms	The daily procedures used by the teacher to run the class effectively and efficiently. Examples: "Use of Tally Marks," "Use of Attention Getters," "Constant reminders of classroom expectations," and "Communication with the parent."
	Rewards	Teachers used an incentive-based strategy to motivate the students to stay on task. Examples: "Giving DOJO Points." "During brain break, students remained in their seats and engaged."
	Transitions	It describes the movement of the students in the classroom. Examples: "Students were moving around the classroom with no permission" and "No seating start for students to know where to sit."

*Note.* Reprinted From P. Aggarwal (2024). *Translational Research: Collaboration of Post-Doctoral Fellow With K-5 Charter School*. Unpublished manuscript.

### **Connection of Results with Research Question**

How do the classroom observation notes and predicted intervention help identify the classroom management strategies that would enhance the emotional alertness of the students using the Zone of Tracking Framework at the elementary level?

The predicted intervention results highlight the importance of following classroom expectations to enhance students' emotional alertness and focus. In 50% of the total observations, the teachers used this strategy to increase students' emotional alertness and focus.

On the other hand, the observational notes showcased the common patterns/routines employed by the teachers to manage their classrooms and improve the students' alertness. These routines, when used consistently and effectively, could help the teachers create a positive learning environment with better-managed classrooms.

### **Discussions and Future Implications**

The descriptive analysis resulted in identifying following classroom expectations as the most used intervention by the teacher to gain emotional alertness in the students, which eventually leads to academic success. The observational notes helped deepen the understanding of the actions conducted by the teacher, which further provided insight into the various types of classroom management strategies executed to build a positive classroom environment. As the current study strived to link the classroom management strategy with every student's social-emotional needs, future research can focus on curating a specific intervention plan for each student, increasing one's focus and leading to high academic achievement and low disruption in class.

The instructional coaches can use the Professional Learning Communities platform to discuss the strategies that might assist in building an effective classroom management plan and also educate students about self-regulating their emotions and making independent and responsible decisions that lead to fabricating high self-esteem and self-worth.

Further research can be conducted to understand the effectiveness of each strategy and its magnitude of impact in building engaging classrooms that foster positive relationships among students and with the teachers.

### **Limitations**

The study's various limitations include the demographics of school X being specific, so the results obtained cannot be generalized to other populations. The zone of regulation strategy is based on the student's emotional alertness regarding their physical gestures, which can vary according to the observer's understanding. This may impact the observation results.

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