



# Utilizing the AIM Curriculum to Improve Job Performance in an Educational Setting for Children With Autism and Related Disabilities

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## Abstract

The current study evaluated the effect of brief, daily present moment awareness activities on the work performance of paraprofessionals working at a school for children with disabilities. A nonconcurrent multiple-baseline design across three participants evaluated changes in staff-initiated interactions with students and staff's accuracy of data collection on student behavior. Relative to baseline, participants demonstrated an average increase in staff-initiated interactions and an increase in the average percentage accuracy of data collection. Participants averaged 10.02 (range 3.4–16.67) staff-initiated interactions during baseline and 15.38 (range 9.75–24.4) during the intervention phase. Relative to baseline, two of the three participants demonstrated an increase in their average accuracy of data collection on student behavior. Participants' average data collection accuracy was 56.9% (range 40%–86.67%) during baseline and 91.98% (range 86.41%–100%) during intervention. The average percentage of nonoverlapping data was 61.67% (range 25%–100%) for staff-initiated interactions and 33.33% (range 0%–100%) for data collection accuracy. Implications and possibilities for future research related to acceptance and commitment training interventions in workplace environments are discussed.

**Keywords** AIM · ACT · Present moment · Staff · Stress

Human service personnel, including those who work with individuals with disabilities, are at an increased risk of experiencing high levels of occupational stress and burnout (Hatton et al., 1999). Reasons for increased levels of stress might include working with clients who display challenging behaviors or who have significant behavioral deficits (i.e., language and communication). It has also been reported that factors such as minimal influence in decision making, lack of supervisor and colleague support, and lack of resources reduce job satisfaction for staff working within these organizations (Burke, Greenglass, & Schwarzer, 1996; Hatton et al., 1999; Kirkcaldy & Shephard, 2001). Additionally, increased levels of stress can influence job performance. For staff working with individuals with disabilities, high levels of stress are associated with absenteeism, turnover, infrequent staff

interactions, and reduced fidelity in the implementation of behavior intervention plans (Hastings & Remington, 1994; Hatton & Emerson, 1993).

Behavior-analytic interventions implemented in human service agencies can improve the workplace performance of agency staff. Such interventions involve techniques that include providing staff with feedback on their performance (Alavosius & Sulzer-Azaroff, 1986; Brown, Willis, & Reid, 1981), delivering monetary incentives for performing tasks correctly (Pommer & Streedbeck, 1974), and implementing self-monitoring procedures (Richman, Riordan, Reiss, Pyles, & Bailey, 1988). Typically, interventions focus on altering contingencies within the organization. For example, Mrachko, Kostewicz, and Martin (2017) taught teachers methods for improving their interactions with students and provided the teachers with daily feedback regarding their performance. After beginning intervention, three of the four teachers demonstrated an increase in positive daily interactions and a reduction in negative interactions. In a study conducted by Miller, Carlson, and Sigurdsson (2014), a multiple-baseline across-participants design was utilized to demonstrate the effectiveness of daily feedback and a lottery-based incentive on treatment integrity. Although these interventions

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have been shown to be effective at improving job performance, human service agencies may not have the resources available to implement them within their organizations in a meaningful or effective manner, potentially rendering traditional approaches inapplicable in these environments (Hayes, Bunting, Herbst, Bond, & Barnes-Holmes, 2006).

Recently, there have been more attempts to improve staff performance and morale using language-based interventions like acceptance and commitment training (ACT). ACT aims to improve psychological flexibility, or one's ability to adapt to changes and challenges, by targeting six processes (Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 2012). These six contextual and interrelated processes include acceptance, defusion, present moment awareness, self-as-context, values, and committed action. The totality of the ACT model typically is discussed as six separate processes that are designed to address improvements in psychological flexibility (i.e., adaptive responding). Acceptance is designed to enhance one's tolerance of aversive stimuli (often covert verbal behavior) that may arise in various settings and contexts, because if too much time and effort are spent in trying to eradicate such stimuli, potential reinforcers are often not successfully contacted. Defusion is a process that attempts to weaken dominant stimulus functions that tend to result in the person selecting nonadaptive behaviors, as the person fails to attend to other concurrently available stimulus functions of the same event. Present moment awareness aids in improving the person's stimulus control of current environmental factors and in reducing substituted stimulus functions that may transcend time and place as controllers of behavior. Self-as-context is a means of contacting a transcendental sense of self, such that the person becomes more aware of the "them" that remains constant across time and place and that is not simply a collection of the roles they may play in their day-to-day life. Values are life directions or ideals that are distant in time and necessitate a pattern of behavior to converge in an attempt to bring such delayed consequences, literally or psychologically, closer in time and attainability. Committed action is both a description of and an engagement in a series of behavioral performances that align with preidentified reinforcers and said values. Recent research examining the effectiveness of implementing ACT with human service personnel at improving job performance is promising and proving to have immense practical value (Bond, Hayes, & Barnes-Holmes, 2006). For example, Pingo, Dixon, and Paliliunas (2019) demonstrated the effectiveness of feedback plus ACT for treatment implementation of direct support professionals (DSPs). In a study conducted by Castro, Rehfeldt, and Root (2016), DSPs who attended two values and committed action workshops improved their engagement with clients. Finally, Little, Tarbox,

and Alzaabi (2020) demonstrated the added effectiveness of using ACT in conjunction with behavioral skills training (BST) compared to BST alone.

Although research has analyzed ACT interventions employing all six processes, it is often unclear which process is responsible for behavior change. To better understand the effects of a single process, the current study sought to evaluate the efficacy of an intervention that focused on just one of the six processes. Brief, daily present moment awareness activities on staff-initiated interactions and data collection accuracy of three paraprofessionals working with students with disabilities. Present moment awareness, similar to mindfulness practices, is the ongoing and nonjudgmental contact with psychological and environmental events as they occur (Hayes et al., 2012). Whereas research examining the utility of mindfulness-based techniques has shown them to be effective, past research has often utilized group designs, lengthy intervention sessions, and self-report assessments to evaluate interventions (i.e., Biglan, Layton, Jones, Hankins, & Rusby, 2011). The current study aimed to extend upon previous research by utilizing a single-subject design to evaluate the effect of brief (i.e., 10 min), daily present moment awareness activities on observable staff behaviors.

## Method

### Participants and Setting

Three paraprofessionals who worked full time at a school for students with disabilities participated in the study. The participants—who will be referred to by their pseudonyms, Wanda, Peggy, and Barbara—each worked directly with students for about 25 hr a week. Participants had worked at the school for an average of 13 months (range 8–18). Daily job duties included aiding the special education classroom teacher, providing toileting and eating assistance, collecting data, implementing behavior intervention protocols, and working on adaptive skills with students. Prior to beginning the study, participants completed the Maslach Burnout Inventory–Human Service Survey (MBI-HSS; Maslach & Jackson, 1981), which consists of three subtests to assess emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment, to evaluate whether they have experienced burnout in relation to their jobs. As seen in Table 1, Barbara and Peggy reported moderate levels of burnout, whereas Wanda reported lower levels of burnout.

The current study took place at a midwestern therapeutic day school. Most students attending the school had a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder, developmental delay, or social-emotional disorder and the students' ages ranged from 5 to 21 years. Students were typically referred by the local public school system due to unique learning needs, frequent or

**Table 1** Participant Scores on the Maslach Burnout Inventory–Human Service Survey Prior to and Following Intervention

Participant	Emotional exhaustion		Depersonalization		Personal accomplishment	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Wanda	17	15	5	10	38	41
Peggy	25	25	11	14	31	28
Barbara	25	26	5	7	43	36

severe challenging behaviors, or high levels of individualized support. Throughout the day, classrooms were staffed with a special education teacher, a behavior technician, 2–4 paraprofessionals, and 9–10 students.

## Dependent Measures

### Staff-Initiated Interactions

The primary dependent variable was frequency of staff-initiated interactions with students. The first author, Theodore Issen, worked at the school and was regularly in the classrooms working with students or collecting data, observed participants working in their assigned classroom. Staff-initiated interactions were defined as any instance in which the participant initiated a vocal interaction with a student (e.g., providing praise, asking if the student needs help, delivering prompts) without being prompted to do so by another classroom staff-person. Staff-initiated interactions did not include instances in which the participant interacted with the student reactively (e.g., responding to the student asking for help) or in response to a behavior being emitted by the student (e.g., providing verbal prompts for a student to lower their voice, asking a student to sit in their chair). A second observer who also worked at the school was present during 33.3% of all classroom observation sessions (9 of 27 total sessions). Interobserver agreement (IOA) was calculated using the total-count method. IOA was determined to be 92.3% for staff-initiated interactions.

### Accuracy of Data Collection

The second dependent variable was the accuracy of participants' data collection of student behavior. For the current study, participants collected data for one behavior of a single student during the 30-min observation (e.g., frequency of Tyler's property destruction, frequency of Katie's screaming). At the beginning of each session, the primary classroom teacher informed the participant of which student they would be observing and the target behavior. The participants collected data for students who engaged in a target behavior frequently throughout the day. Additionally, each participant had previously been trained on the operational definition of

the target behavior as part of their job training. Frequency was used to measure all student behavior.

Once the observation session began, both the participant and the first author, Theodore Issen, began collecting data for the student and target behavior identified. With Theodore's data serving as the "true value," the accuracy of the data collected by the participant was calculated by dividing the smaller value by the larger value and multiplying this quotient by 100%. For instance, if the participant recorded 8 occurrences of the target behavior during a 30-min interval, and Theodore recorded 10 occurrences, the accuracy of the participant's data collection would be 80%. If the participant and experimenter recorded the same value for the session, the accuracy of the participant's data collection would be 100%.

A second observer who also worked at the school was present during 33.3% of all classroom observation sessions (9 of 27 total sessions). The second observer collected data on student behavior, which was compared to the first author's data. This was done to ensure that the first author's data collection was representative of the "true value." IOA was calculated using the total-count method. For accuracy of data collection, mean IOA was 88.9%.

## Experimental Design and Procedure

A nonconcurrent multiple-baseline across-participants design was used to evaluate the efficacy of daily present moment awareness activities on staff's job performance. Participants were observed twice a week for 30-min throughout the entirety of the study. The intervention began after participants demonstrated steady-state responding in baseline for staff-initiated interactions. Subsequent participants began intervention after demonstrating steady-state responding in baseline and once the previous participant had demonstrated an increasing trend during intervention. Prior to and during baseline and intervention sessions, participants received no additional training or instruction on data collection procedures or interactions with students.

### Baseline

During baseline, participants entered the classroom, began collecting data for one student's target behavior, and

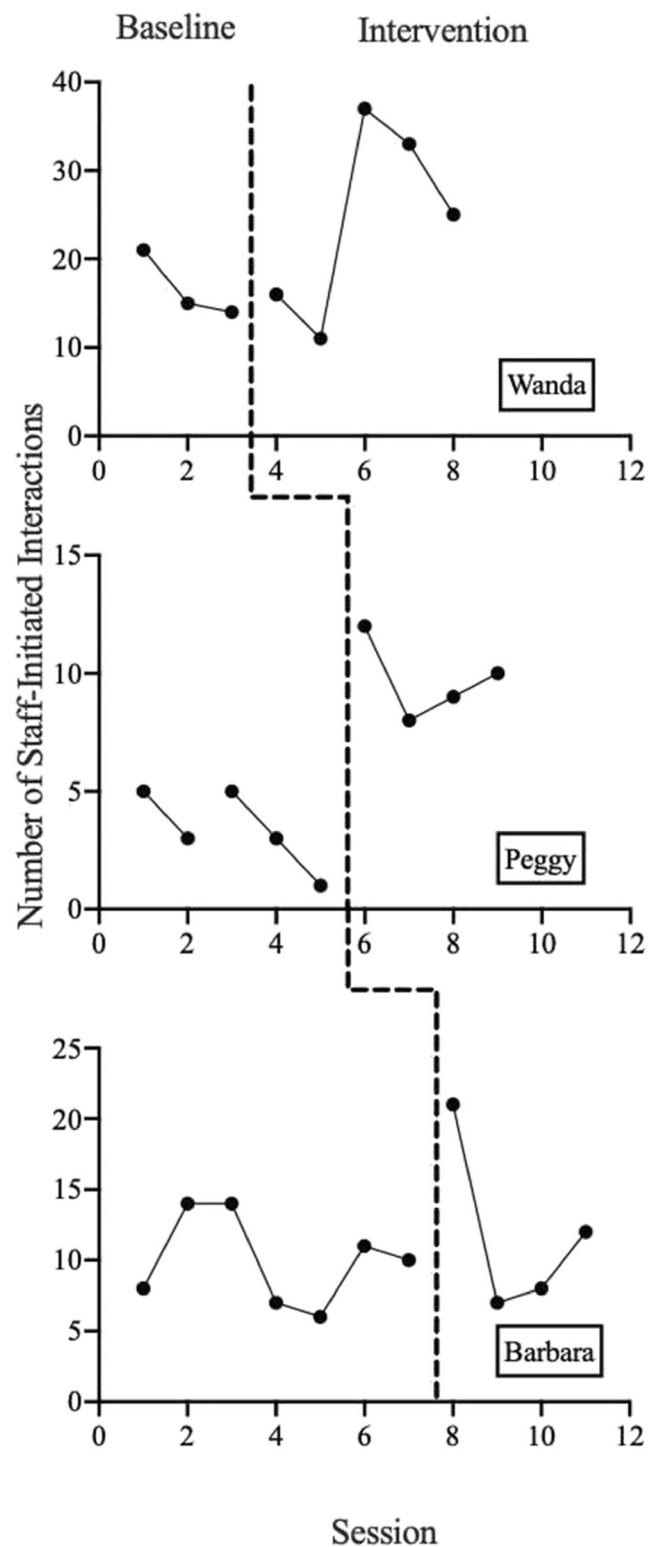
completed their daily duties as they normally would. During each observation session, Theodore collected data on staff-initiated interactions with students. At the end of each observation, Theodore evaluated the participants' data to determine accuracy and did not provide any feedback to the participant regarding their performance. No intervention sessions occurred prior to the beginning of the observation session, nor were there any changes to the classroom environment.

### ACT Intervention

During the intervention phase, participants completed a brief (e.g., 10 min), one-on-one guided present moment awareness activity with Theodore prior to the observation session. Intervention sessions took place in an empty room in the school before the participant entered their assigned classroom for the day. The present moment awareness activities were adapted from *Accept. Identify. Move. A Behavior Analytic Curriculum for Social-Emotional Development in Children* (AIM; Dixon & Paliliunas, 2018). While it was initially developed to implement with children, we chose to utilize the AIM curriculum to determine if the exercises being implemented with students would also benefit the staff. Although the activities completed by participants emphasized present moment awareness, the activities also incorporated the other five psychological flexibility processes. Five activities were used during intervention in sequential order. The activities included "Day 1: Welcome to Your Mind," "Day 10: My Mantra," "Day 12: Centered Chaos," "Day 20: Eyes Closed, Feelings Open," and "Day 23: Mind in Balance." The activities focused on mindful awareness during busy situations, observation of thoughts and emotions, and mindful breathing techniques. After completing the activity, participants entered the classroom and began collecting data for one student's target behavior and completed their daily duties as they normally would. Similar to baseline, at the end of each observation, Theodore evaluated the participant's data to determine accuracy and did not provide the participant with any feedback on their performance.

### Results and Discussion

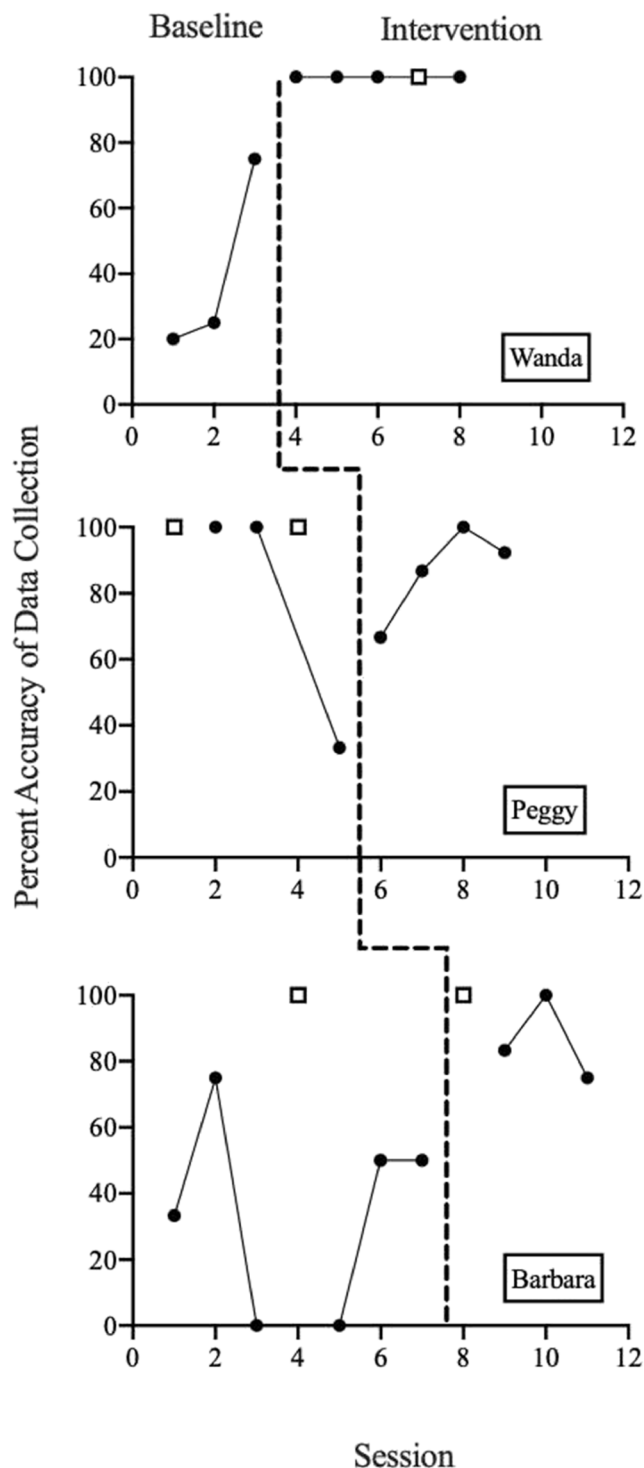
As seen in Fig. 1, all three participants demonstrated an average increase in total staff-initiated interactions. The average staff-initiated interactions of the participants was 10.02 (range 3.4–16.67) during baseline and 15.38 (range 9.75–24.4) during intervention. Additionally, prior to beginning intervention, all participants demonstrated a decreasing trend in responding. Wanda initiated an average of 16.67 (range 14–21) interactions in baseline and an average of 24.4 (range 11–37) interactions during intervention. Although Wanda demonstrated an increase in overall level of responding, she demonstrated



**Fig. 1** Number of Staff-Initiated Interactions During Baseline and Intervention Phases Across the Three Participants. *Note.* As displayed in the second data set, Peggy was required to attend jury duty after completing two baseline sessions. Peggy resumed baseline sessions when she resumed work after missing 5 days

a decreasing trend following Session 6; however, her overall level remained higher compared to baseline levels of responding. Peggy initiated an average of 3.4 (range 1–5) interactions in baseline and an average of 9.75 (range 8–12) interactions during intervention. During intervention, Peggy demonstrated both an increased level and trend of responding. Barbara initiated an average of 10.0 (range 6–14) interactions in baseline and an average of 12 (range 8–21) interactions during intervention. Although Barbara demonstrated an initial increase in responding during intervention, her responding decreased during Session 9; however, following this decrease, Barbara demonstrated a steadily increasing trend in responding. During intervention, both Wanda and Peggy demonstrated an increase in their levels of responding, and Peggy and Barbara demonstrated an increasing trend in responding. The percentage of nonoverlapping data (PND) was calculated for each participant. For staff-initiated interactions, PND was calculated to be 60% for Wanda, 100% for Peggy, and 25% for Barbara.

As seen in Fig. 2, two of the three participants demonstrated an increase in data collection accuracy. The average data collection accuracy of participants was 56.9% (range 40%–86.67%) during baseline and 91.98% (range 86.41%–100%) during intervention. As seen in Fig. 2, students engaged in zero instances of the target behavior during several observation sessions, which was correctly scored by the participant resulting in 100% accuracy. These instances were recorded and included in the calculation of the current data analysis. Wanda's average data collection accuracy was 40% (range 20%–75%) during baseline and 100% during intervention. During baseline, there were no sessions in which the student engaged in less than one instance of the target behavior; however, on Session 7 during intervention, the student engaged in zero instances of the target behavior, which was scored correctly by Wanda. Additionally, during Session 3, Wanda demonstrated an increase in responding. However, because staff-initiated interactions was the primary dependent variable, intervention was implemented despite this increasing trend. Overall, Wanda demonstrated an increase in level during the intervention phase. Peggy's average data collection accuracy was 86.67% (range 33%–100%) during baseline and 86.41% (range 66%–100%) during intervention. During Sessions 1 and 4 of baseline, the student engaged in zero instances of the target behavior, which Peggy accurately scored, and there were no sessions in which the student engaged in less than one instance of the target behavior during intervention. Although there was a decreasing trend at the end of the baseline phase, Peggy's average responding did not improve during intervention. Barbara's average data collection accuracy was 44.05% (range 0%–75%) during baseline and 89.53% (range 75%–100%) during intervention. During Session 4 of baseline and Session 8 of intervention, the student engaged in zero instances of the target behavior, which Barbara accurately scored. Although Barbara's responding was somewhat



**Fig. 2** Percentage Accuracy of Data Collection During Baseline and Intervention Phases Across the Three Participants. *Note.* Open squares represent days on which zero target behaviors were emitted by the student; thus, accuracy was 100%. As displayed in the second data set, Peggy was required to attend jury duty after completing two baseline sessions. Peggy resumed baseline sessions when she resumed work after missing 5 days.

variable during the baseline and intervention phases, she demonstrated an overall increase in level. For accuracy of data

collection, PND was calculated to be 100% for Wanda, 0% for Peggy, and 0% for Barbara.

Following intervention, each participant once again completed the MBI-HSS to evaluate changes in burnout. As seen in Table 1, participants demonstrated little to no changes in burnout scores. Although Wanda demonstrated improvements in emotional exhaustion and personal accomplishment, there was a decline in her depersonalization score. Additionally, all of Peggy's and Barbara's scores remained the same or declined following intervention. However, while there were minimal changes in burnout, the results of the current study support the utility of ACT for improving job-related performance despite feelings of burnout. The data clearly show improvements in Wanda's and Peggy's staff-initiated interactions and improvements in Wanda's and Barbara's data collection accuracy.

Eliminating factors that contribute to daily stress or impact job performance within human service agencies may be difficult and implementing traditional behavior-analytic interventions can require time and resources. In line with the findings of Pingo et al. (2019), Castro et al. (2016), and Little et al. (2020), staff demonstrated an improvement in job performance following implementation of the ACT intervention. Additionally, similar to the methods employed by Castro et al., behavior change was observed following an intervention that consisted solely of ACT and no other performance feedback. The current findings also support the practical utility of the intervention. Like Little et al., the current study utilized a brief ACT intervention to demonstrate meaningful behavior change. However, where Little et al. delivered a 1-hr ACT workshop that focused on present moment awareness, values, and committed action, the current study utilized 10-min present moment awareness activities completed by participants before they began their work duties. Altogether, the current findings contribute to the existing body of literature indicating that the use of ACT interventions produces meaningful changes in the job performance of human service personnel.

Although these results are promising, several limitations should be discussed. First, during baseline Peggy was required to report to jury duty for 5 consecutive workdays. Her absence resulted in limited observation sessions and may have affected internal validity. Additionally, prior to the third intervention session, Peggy notified the school that she would be leaving her job, which may have influenced her motivation to interact with students. Second, on several occasions during baseline and intervention sessions, another staff member in the classroom (i.e., the teacher, behavior technician, or paraprofessional) announced the occurrence of the target behavior in some way (i.e., "Katie is ripping up her papers again!"). It is possible that data collection accuracy may have increased due to this occurrence. Third, low IOA presents a limitation to the current study. A second observer was present for nine

observation sessions across participants and phases. The first author briefly reviewed the operational definition of staff-initiated interactions with the observer, and the observer was familiar with the students' target behaviors. However, based on the low IOA for both variables, future studies should implement improved IOA training, consider using different IOA methods, or ask the observer to only measure one variable at a time rather than two. In addition to improving IOA, future studies should consider utilizing social validity measures to determine the acceptability of the intervention by staff. Finally, there are several limitations related to data collection and measurement. First, phase changes were dependent on staff-initiated interactions, which resulted in the variability of the other dependent variable across phases. Second, on days when zero instances of the target behavior occurred, and the participant correctly recorded zero instances, it was recorded that they had performed with 100% accuracy. In future studies, researchers may consider only assessing the accuracy of data collection and focusing on accuracy when at least one instance of the behavior occurs per observation session. Third, it should also be noted that within the classroom setting, there may be a variable number of opportunities for staff to initiate interactions with students on a day to day basis. For example, staff may avoid interactions with students while students are focusing on school work or completing a test. To address this, future studies might examine the percentage of interactions per the number of opportunities.

The current study presents several avenues for future research to investigate. For the present study, we chose to isolate present moment awareness and facilitate activities that focused on the process. However, given that AIM (Dixon & Paliliunas, 2018) is an ACT curriculum which incorporates the entire psychological flexibility model, it is likely that even though a single process had been isolated, participants also were exposed to the other five processes. Although this is an obvious shortcoming of the current study, it also presents an empirical question as to whether these contextual processes can truly be isolated from one another and examined individually or must be examined interdependently. Based on the existing body of research, studies like this one have demonstrated the effectiveness of focusing on a single process, whereas others have demonstrated the effectiveness of focusing on a fraction of the processes and others have utilized all six.

Future research might continue to investigate the relationship between the various processes and observable behavior change to better understand how they are interrelated. Additionally, to date, this is the first study to use modified AIM (Dixon & Paliliunas, 2018) activities with adults. Research should continue to evaluate the utility of using the same curriculum with both students and teachers or staff. These findings suggest that the activities, which were designed to improve the social-emotional skills of students,

can also be used to improve the behavior of the staff working with those students. By implementing brief activities with staff, not only will staff benefit but client services will also be enhanced. Finally, future research should continue to investigate the effects of ACT interventions on socially significant overt behaviors using single-subject designs. To date, there is only one other empirical study to use the AIM curriculum to evaluate overt behaviors (i.e., Howard, Barron, Hinman, & Dixon, 2020) using a single-subject design. The current study presents promising findings supporting the utility of ACT as a means for improving the work performance of staff working with students with disabilities.

## Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Conflict of interest** Mark R. Dixon receives small royalties from the sales of the AIM curriculum.

Ethical approval

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. The study was approved by the Human Subject Committee of Southern Illinois University, Carbondale.

**Informed consent** Written consent was obtained from all participants.

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