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Trauma-Informed Teaching Practices Post-COVID: A Classroom Action Project

Jillian F. Weemaes

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts in TESOL degree at SIT Graduate Institute, Brattleboro, Vermont.

April 1st, 2022

IPP Advisor: Dr. Leslie Turpin

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Jillian Weemaes 4/30/2022

Acknowledgements

This project would not have been possible without the support of my professors, workplace, family, roommates, and Evergreen cohort. Working full-time though a pandemic while going to school was not how I imaged my master's journey to go, but I'm thankful for the experiences and lessons it has left me with. I began my journey at SIT by writing an essay about my interest in trauma-informed teaching practices and I think it's only fitting that that I'm ending my journey with the same theme.

First, I want to thank my professors at SIT for their flexibility and patience as we all adapted to pandemic life. Second, I want to thank Briya Public Charter School and my Basic 1 and Basic 2 teams who supported me through my schoolwork and allowed me to conduct my action research with my students this January. Third, I want to thank my family and roommates from the past two years who picked up my slack when I was busy with work or school and couldn't contribute as much as I would have liked to the house or family. And finally, a big thank you to Evergreen. I couldn't have asked for a better cohort to learn with and learn on over the past two years. I appreciated the support, care, patience, and kindness you all exhibited through the program and would not have made it through without you all.

Trauma-Informed Teaching Practices Post-COVID: A Classroom Action Project

Abstract

Out of recognition of experienced trauma, trauma-informed practices have existed in schools and classrooms long before the start of the pandemic and will continue to exist and evolve after. Programs need to evolve due to the changing nature of the pandemic such as the possibility of teachers experiencing trauma alongside their students, and distance learning complicating the ability of students to make connections with peers, teachers, and administrators. Limited literature currently exists in the field showcasing how teachers have changed and updated their practices since the start of the pandemic. The objective of this action research is to add to that literature by implementing a daily check-in routine which acknowledges the possibility of shared trauma in the classroom. Students will have the opportunity to check-in about their well-being and have a dedicated time to share information with me, their teacher, that they find relevant to their learning. The themes of safety, connection, and emotional regulation are common in trauma-informed practices and another goal of this action research is to evaluate whether this practice can provide them. Finally, as the trauma of the pandemic is not isolated to students only, I would also like to identify whether this routine can be used to better inform my own teaching and ability to connect my students with additional support.

Keywords: trauma, trauma-informed teaching, ESOL, adult ESOL, classroom action research, safety, emotional regulation, connection, COVID-19

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Introduction

School is generally challenging for most, and logically more so for those experiencing outside stress. Stress can manifest in different ways such as housing or food insecurity, illness, or past or present trauma. As stated by Harper and Neubauer (2021), "traumas are naturally occurring events that shatter an individual or collective actor's sense of well-being" (p. 18). Trauma is what is felt or experienced due to the event which, "can lead to challenges with memory, concentration, attention, planning, decision making, creativity, and learning (Harper & Neubauer, 2021, p. 18). Stress responses can also manifest in ways unknown to an individual, such as the unconscious perception of safety and danger from one's body (Porges, 2011). Schools support students who have or are experiencing trauma through the implementation of trauma informed practices. Although a single definition of trauma informed practices doesn't exist, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (2014) writes:

> A program, organization, or system that is trauma-informed realizes the widespread impact of trauma and understands potential paths for recovery; recognizes the signs and symptoms of trauma in clients, families, staff, and others involved with the system; and responds by fully integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices, and seeks to actively resist re-traumatization. (p. 9)

During the Spring of 2020, schools, business, and life as usual came to a halt with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic itself has been a source of stress due to changes in all aspects of life according to Javakhishivili et al (2020) including:

> Abrupt changes in life circumstances; uncertainty about the future; deterioration of livelihood; restriction of social contacts; imposed quarantine; stigmatization, discrimination, and fragmentation of communities; loss of loved ones; deprivation of culturally appropriate morning rituals; and finally, the threat of contracting COVID-19. (p. 2)

Now, two years later, schools around the world have opened their doors to in-person learning again. Although many would like to believe the shift back to face-to-face learning would result in a return to normal, it is important that we ask ourselves an important question. What are schools doing to address the possible trauma students, their families, teachers, and administrators are living with due to the pandemic including the occasional return to virtual learning?

Trauma informed practices are not new and have been around since the mid 1990's. (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014). This review of the literature focuses on trauma-informed practices since the onset of the pandemic, as this era of trauma-informed care poses unique challenges. The findings are then used as the context for a classroom action project which aims to add to the existing literature and address identified challenges.

I will first look at the research done by two programs and one classroom in a university setting in the United States that began using trauma informed practices after the pandemic began. The first practice comes from a health promotion program and the second from a social work program that teaches trauma content. The third is an action study done during the first 5 weeks of a preservice teaching class that was moved online due to the pandemic. I will then explore a trauma informed practice based on the work of Stephan Porges' Polyvagal Theory. After the literature review, I will introduce and explore the findings of the classroom action research followed by implications for the future.

Literature Review

The first two university practices outlined by Harper & Neubauer and Javakhishvili et al used the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA) six-principle approach to trauma-informed practice (Harper & Neubauer, 2021, p. 14). The six principles include Safety; Transparency and Trustworthiness; Peer Support; Collaboration and Mutuality; Empowerment, Voice, and Choice; and Cultural, Historical, and Gender Issues (Harper & Neubauer, 2021, pp. 20-21). Safety

ensures that students, teachers, and administrators feel physically and mentally safe. As noted by Harper & Neubauer (2021), the definition of safety should be created by those with the least amount of power and enforced by those with the most power (p. 20). Transparency and Trustworthiness, "should build trust with students, educators, and administrators" by keeping all parties in the loop about decision-making processes and all decisions themselves including informing students as soon as possible about any changes happening (Harper & Neubauer, 2021, p. 20). Peer Support speaks to the idea of building connections. Through those connections, students, teachers, and administrators can support and help each other through shared experiences. The aim of Collaboration and Mutuality is to reduce power differences by including those affected by decisions into the decision-making process. Similarly, the goal of Empowerment, Voice, and Choice is to ensure that those who have been historically left without a voice or choice are given both of those things especially in decision making. Finally, Cultural, Historical, and Gender Issues recognizes the biases that can cloud judgement and works to educate those in power about those biases. Javakhishvili et al (2020) also expanded on this principle by changing "issues" to responsiveness by deliberately adding more diverse content into the classroom.

The classroom action research outlined by Roman (2020) specifically addressed and recognized the mental health needs of her students by providing the opportunity to share their feelings as recommended by Carello and Butler (2015, p. 270). Roman (2020) used a free online formative assessment tool called Spiral using a specific feature called Quickfire lite to conduct daily check-ins with her students including questions about their stress levels, how they were positively coping with stress, and how they were generally feeling. Students just had to click a link and type their name to join the discussion board. Students' answers were anonymous to each other but allowed the instructor to follow-up with respondents who could benefit from support. Roman (2020) noted that students expressed appreciation for the follow up and support that was given from participating in the check-ins.

In addition to classroom activities, teachers can use their voice, facial expressions, and background noise as a trauma-informed practice according to Stephan Porges (2011). Based on his Polyvagal Theory, a sing-song voice (prosody), facial expressions (toothy smiles and showing crow's feet), eye contact, and the elimination of low frequency background noise all contribute to helping individuals return to a state of balance after being triggered or help keep them balanced during potentially stressful and triggering situations (Porges, 2011). This is due to the brain connecting these actions to a sense of safety and community.

The programs and classroom outlined by Harper & Neubauer, Javakhishvili et al, and Roman were created for adults in higher education after the pandemic began. The first two used the same framework, although the second program added to the last principle by reframing an issue into a response and adding an action point to actively incorporate more diversity.

SAMHSA outlines 10 levels of implementing trauma-informed practices (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014). The first two programs kept to the policy level and didn't explain what those policies looked like in the classroom. Alternatively, Roman and Porges outlined specific classroom activities (a check-in and intentional use of sound and facial expression) and not specific organizational practices. Additionally, among all four examples are the themes of connection and safety.

Missing from the survey are examples from K-12 schools as well as programs and schools that fall in between K-12 and higher education such as regular adult programs and adult programs for English learners. With that data, a more comprehensive overview of post-pandemic practices as well as challenges for implementing those practices would be achieved.

One complication due to the pandemic that was identified by Harper & Neubauer (2021) was the role of trauma on the teacher (p. 17). A key part of the pre-pandemic practices was the role of the teacher as a grounding and calming force in the classroom due to the assumption that the teacher

would not be experiencing their own trauma (Miles & Bailey-McKenna, 2016). Porges' theory also relies on the role of the teacher to smile and use a sing-song voice in the classroom (2011). If a teacher is experiencing their own trauma, remaining calm and grounding, or even positive all the time seems like an impossible task. After the pandemic started, many teachers experienced their own trauma with some teachers also experiencing second-hand trauma through their students (Resilient Educator, 2021). Complicating things further, were the closure of schools and the transition to virtual teaching which many teachers had only a day or two to figure out. This for many was an additional stress which would add to the difficulty of keeping a calm and centered demeanor. Finally, the move from in person to virtual class has many implications for the principle of connection. Technology and internet access affect the ability to see and interact with teachers and classmates, and the format in general would drastically reduce the number of people the students would encounter compared to studying in person, even resulting in none if the teacher opted for an asynchronous format or if students chose not to engage with their peers (Roman, 2020, p. 479).

Trauma-informed practices have existed out of recognition of experienced trauma before the pandemic and will continue to exist and evolve after. Programs will need to evolve due to several complications from the pandemic such as teachers experiencing trauma alongside their students, and distance learning complicating the ability of students to make connections with peers, teachers, and administrators. More data needs to be collected to identify additional areas of complication due to the pandemic and to see concrete examples of policies in practice in classrooms.

Methods

Context

Due to the general lack of post-pandemic trauma-informed literature, I decided to add to it by adapting Roman's check-ins for my own adult ESOL (English for Speakers of other Languages) context. In addition to taking inspiration from Roman's check-ins, I also recognized that teaching during the

pandemic has left me with little time to intentionally think through trauma-informed practices in my hybrid teaching context which has left me feeling inadequate to meeting the needs of my students.

I teach at Briya Public Charter School in Washington, DC. The school follows a two-generational learning model where adult students, and their children attend class at the same school. In addition to adult ESOL and our early childhood programs, Briya also offers classes for becoming a medical assistant (MA) and National External Diploma Program (NEDP).

My students are adult English learners who take time away from work and their families to study with me for 5.5 hours a week. I teach two classes a day at the basic level covering English and digital literacy content. We began the school year with a hybrid learning model but switched back to fully virtual in January 2022 after returning from winter break due to the increase in COVID-19 cases in the area. After three weeks of fully virtual learning, we returned to our original hybrid model.

Research Focus

I identified safety, routine, and connection as three important aspects of a trauma-informed practice that I felt were lacking in my classroom and a good place to start. I planned to do this through the implementation of a daily check-in adapted for my classroom from Roman (2020). My goal was to evaluate whether the check-in was an effective means to create safety, routine, and connection for my students and myself. First, I hoped to create safety by providing students with the opportunity to share how they were feeling in an anonymous format. Second, I planned to provide dedicated time each day for students to respond to the survey, creating a routine they could depend on, even on days they were absent. Finally, by being able to follow up with students and their needs, I hoped to be better informed and create more personal connections.

I recognize that asking for help or talking about uncomfortable feelings can be hard for people and even go against cultural norms. I wanted to provide an opportunity for students to share the full spectrum of their feelings in a safe place and be able to follow up with those who needed it. Two of the

drawbacks identified by Roman where struggles with technology and absent students (who Roman identified as needing the support the most) not being able to participate (2020). To address these challenges, I used a platform my students were familiar with and sent the survey to all students who opted in regardless of whether they were planning to attend class that day or not. I conceded that some students would see this as taking away from class time, so, to get student buy-in, I kept the questions in English.

Methodology

The first part of this project was a survey of literature, as shown above. From the literature review, I developed my surveys and check-in questions. Due to the unplanned move from hybrid learning to fully virtual in January 2022, my original plan had to be modified. What I had originally planned to do over the course of four days, I condensed into two. Our first day back, I taught a modified version of my feelings lesson, had student fill out the pre-survey, introduced my project, had students read and sign the consent form, and complete their first check-in. The second day back, I did a review of everything from the day before and met with students who were absent to answer any of their questions while the students who were present the day before completed their second check-in.

I created digital versions of the pre-survey and consent forms using Google Forms, which deviated from my original plan to provide those as physical copies. To maintain confidentiality, I had students fill out the forms on their phones and set the forms to not collect any data about the user apart from a timestamp. Although the screen on a phone is smaller and potentially harder to read from, I opted for that instead of assigning the survey and consent form on Google Classroom to provide privacy and confidentiality since the school has access to their Chromebook screens. Cell phones also allowed for the use of a student's preferred keyboard/alphabet which their student Chromebooks did not.

I had also originally planned to use Kahoot as the check-in medium but decided to use Google Forms for that as well. I initially planned to use Kahoot because my students were more familiar with

Kahoot Homework than with using Google Forms on their phone. Since I had to use Google Forms for the surveys and consent forms that became a non-issue. While discussing my methods with a co-worker, I also realized that if I used the same Kahoot link every day, Kahoot would notify students that their number was already taken after they completed the survey for the first time, requiring me to create a new link each day. To avoid that and have more control over the presentation of all the questions, I used Google Forms.

After I received consent from each student, I assigned them a unique number and sent them a text over WhatsApp (WA) with their number and the link to the check-in. I sent the initial texts during our 10-minute break the first day students completed the check-in. For the first three days of class I shared my screen and instructed students to click their number once they opened the check-in. I re-sent each student's text every class day before the start of class for the four weeks of action research. During class, I made at least one announcement every day about completing the check-in and provided a couple of minutes at the beginning of class for students to complete the check-in if they wanted. For those who opted out or who had already completed it, I invited them to join me with stretching.

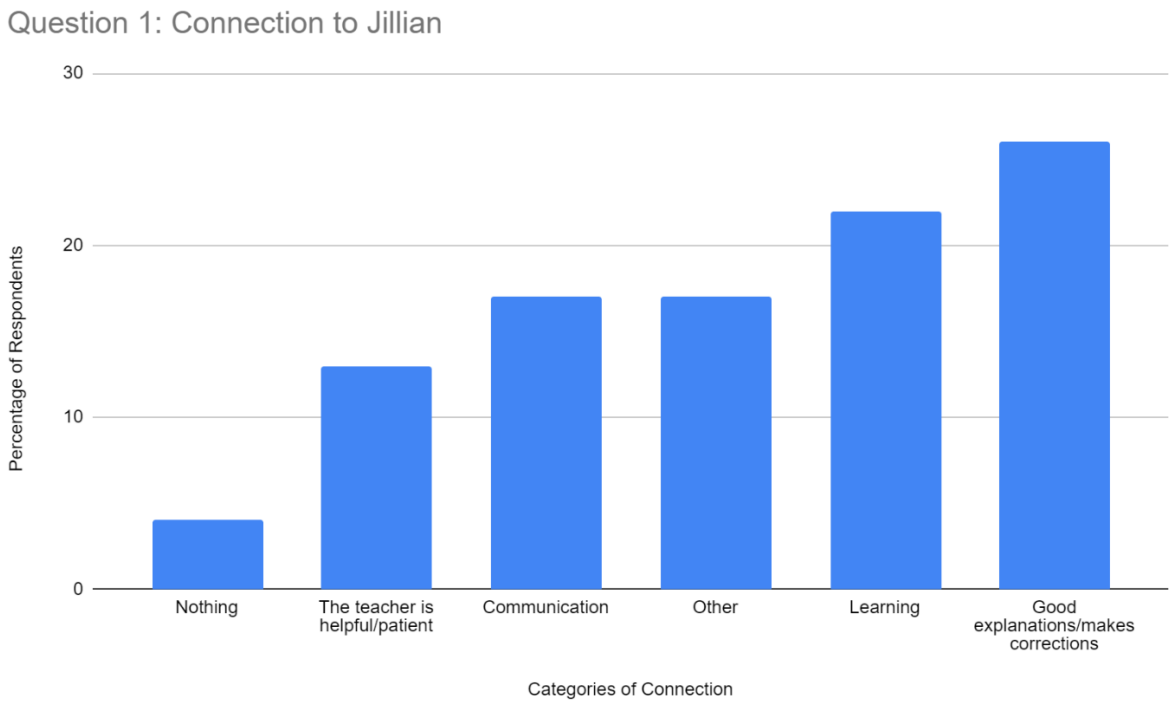
I checked the responses daily after class and followed up with students who asked to speak with our student services coordinator. I used Thursday afternoons to review the collected data and look for trends. I used our first 30-minute Friday homeroom class to share the results of the food questions from the survey and how many students didn't eat before class that week. We shared and brainstormed ideas together. I used the time during the following three weeks for students to share and brainstorm about Zoom fatigue, noise distractions on Zoom, and the future use of our homeroom time due to our unexpected move to fully virtual class.

At the end of the four weeks, I sent all my students a link to the post-survey to complete in their language on their phones. Once I had all the data, I translated and organized the responses into different categories. From there I looked for trends and wrote up my findings.

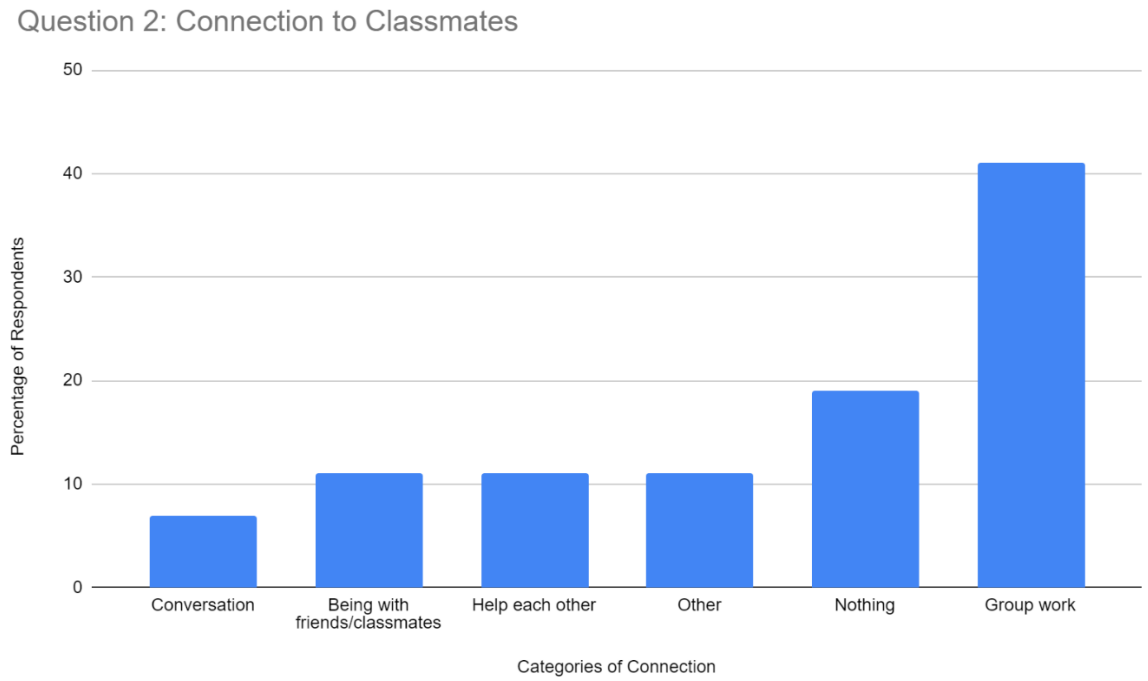
Results

Pre-survey

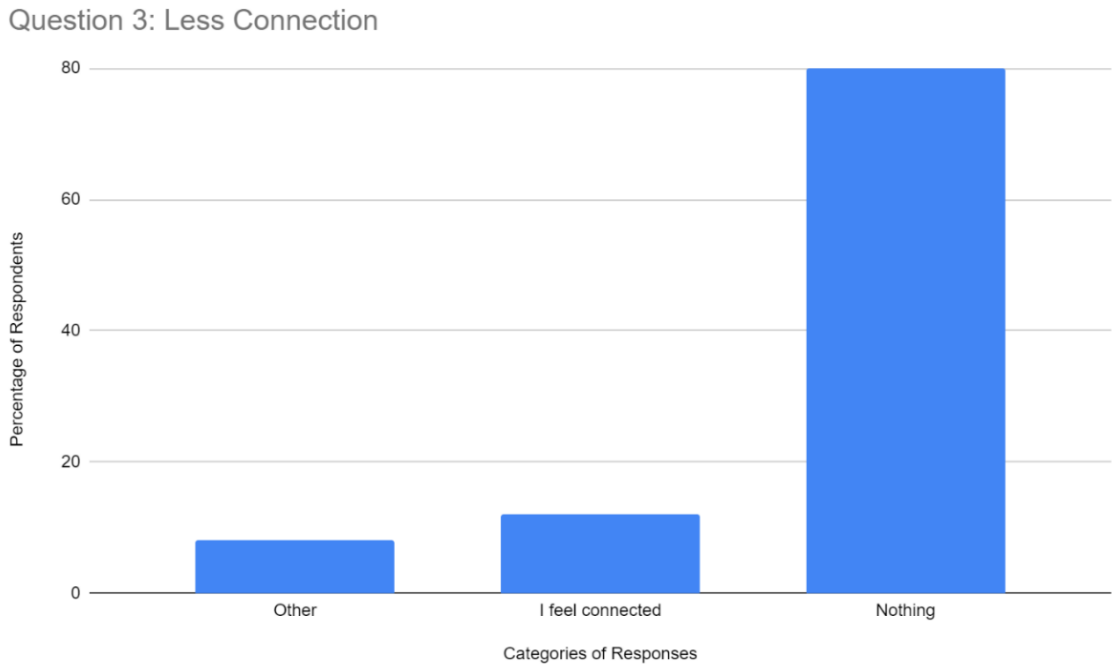
Question 1: What do we do in class that makes you feel connected to your teacher Jillian? Select nothing or write a short answer.



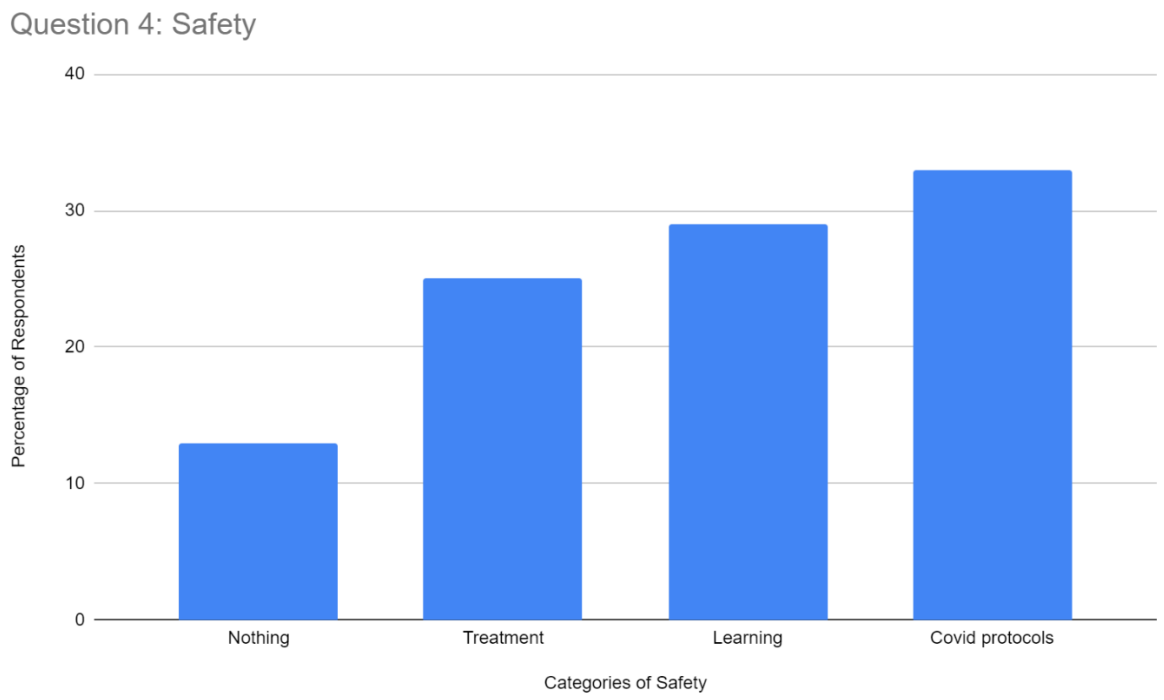
Question 2: What do we do in class that makes you feel connected to your classmates? Select nothing or write a short answer.



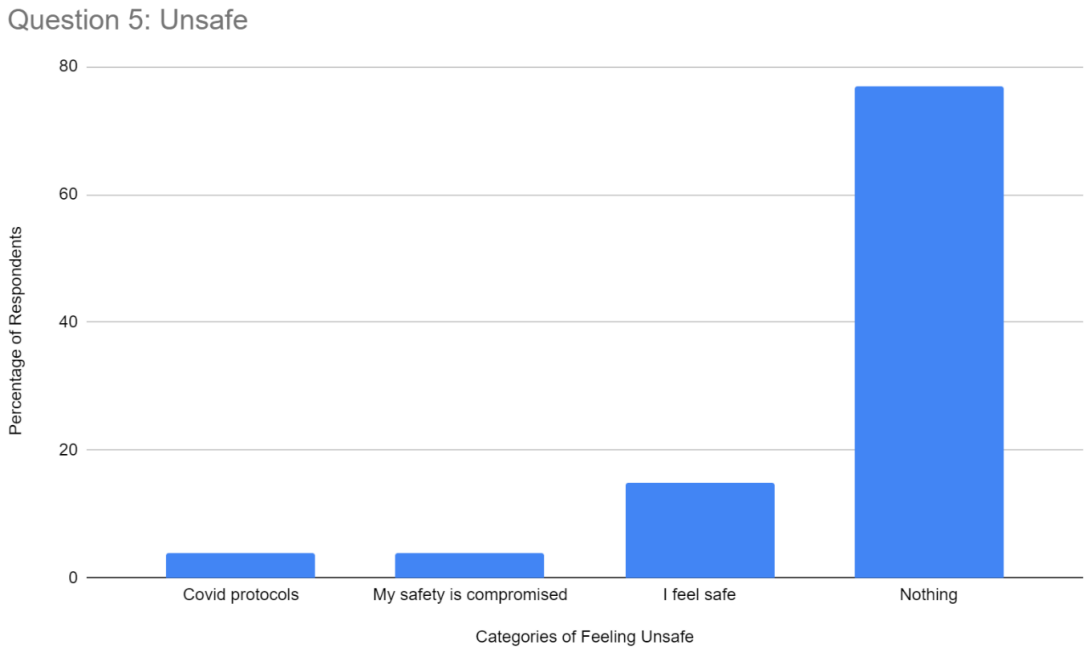
Question 3: What do we do in class that makes you feel less connected to your classmates or Jillian? Select nothing or write a short answer.



Question 4: What do we do in class that makes you feel safe? Select nothing or write a short answer.

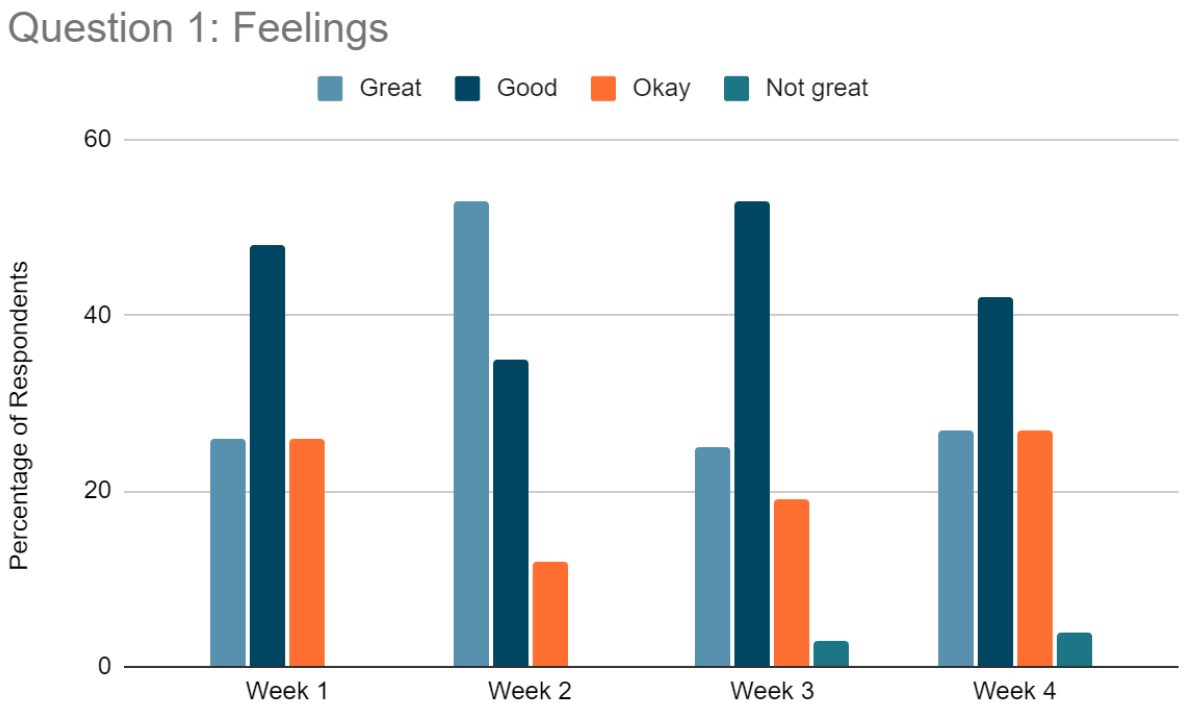


Question 5: What do we do in class that makes you feel unsafe? Select nothing or write a short answer.

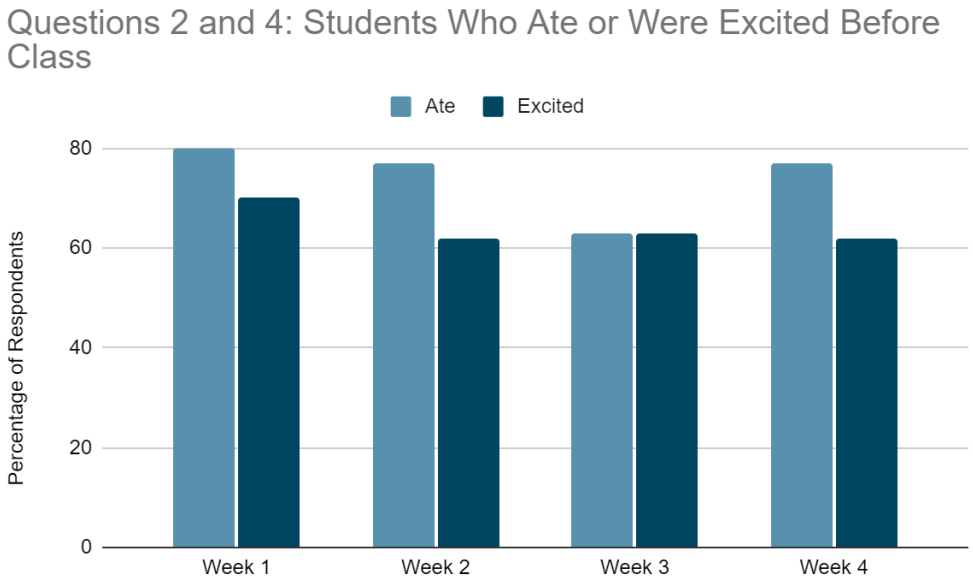


Check-in

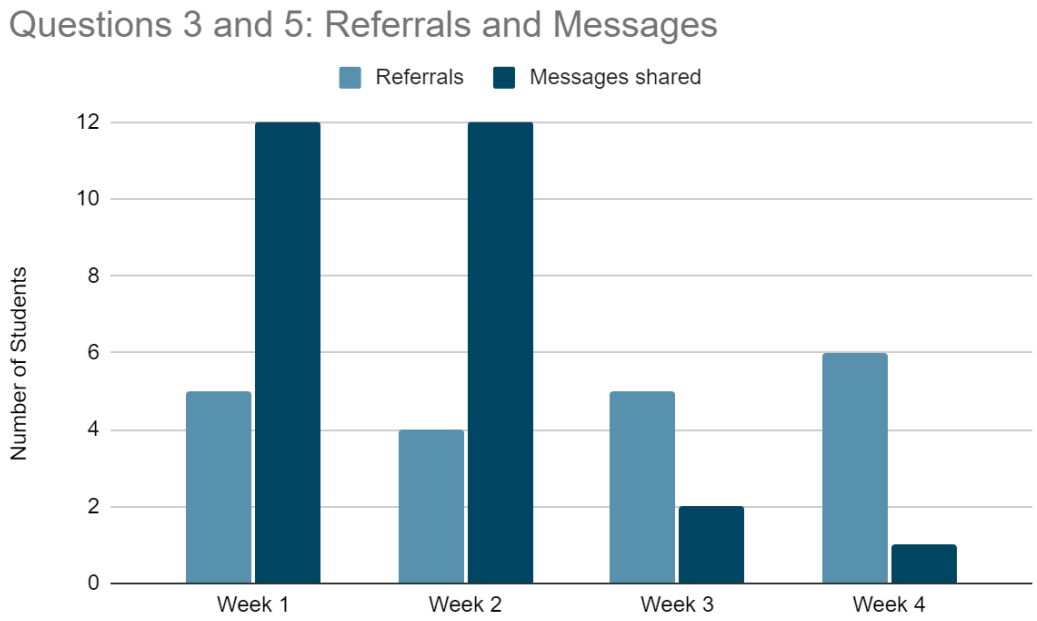
Question 1: How are you?



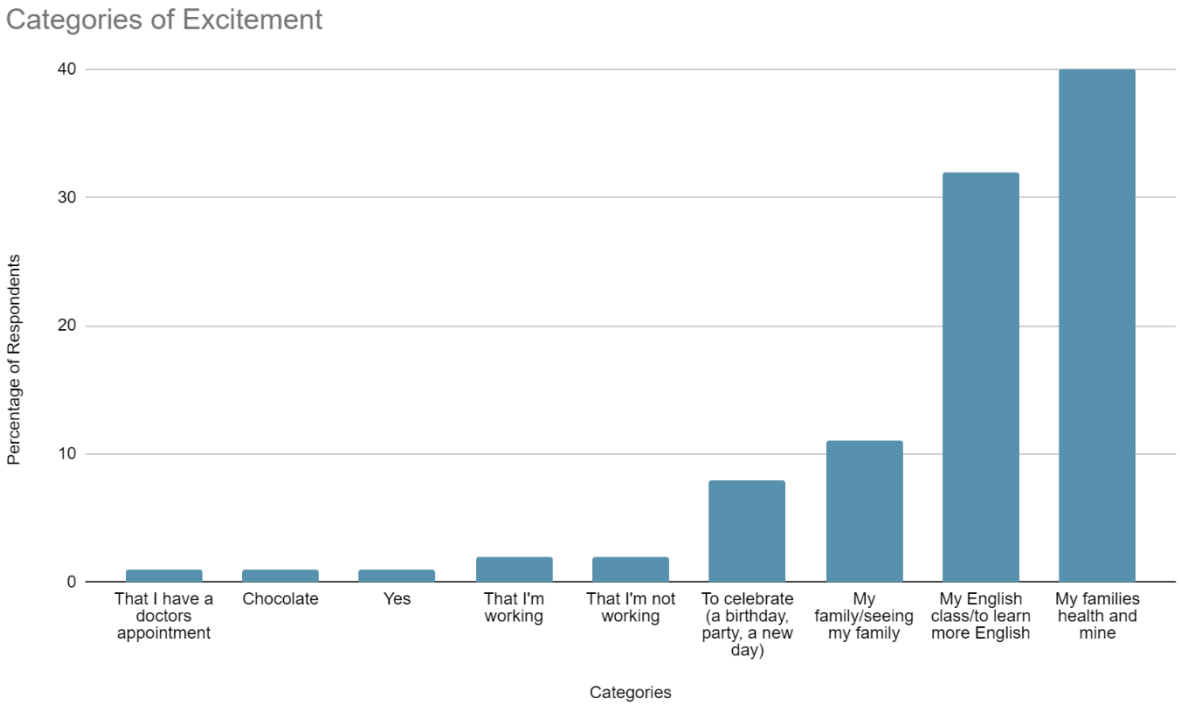
Question 2: What did you eat for breakfast this morning? / What did you eat for lunch this afternoon?



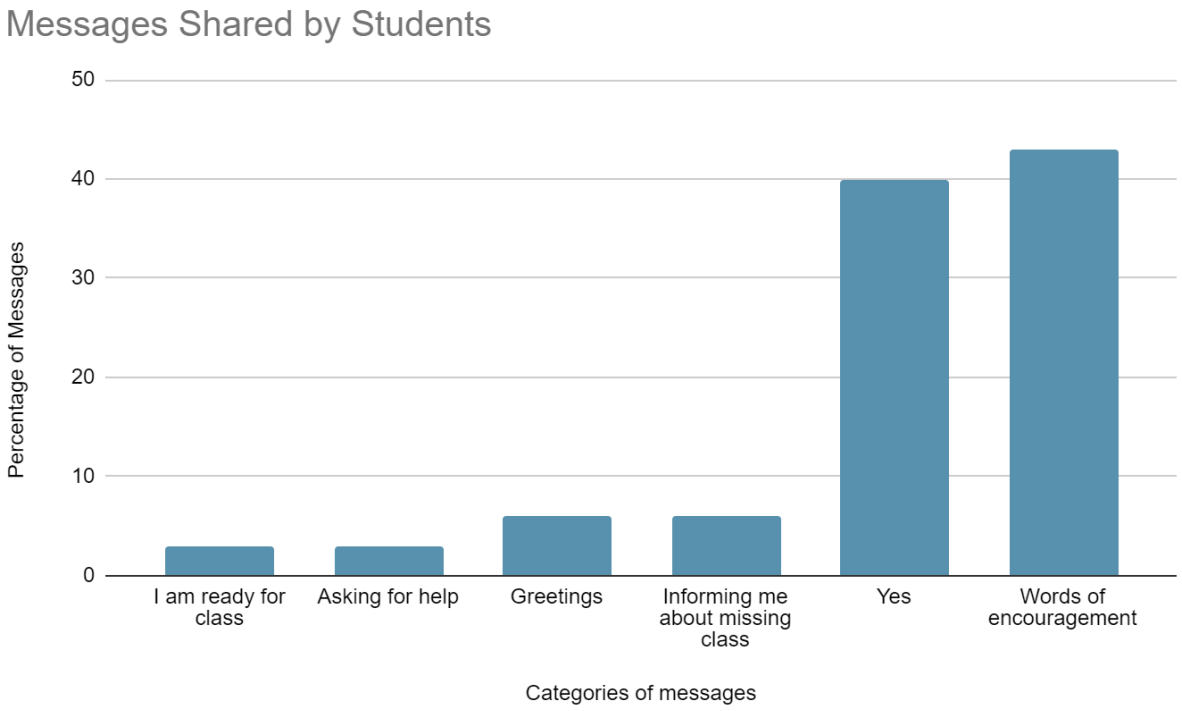
Question 3: Do you want to talk to Claudia this week?



Question 4: What are you excited about this week? (a celebration, English class, my family is healthy, nothing)

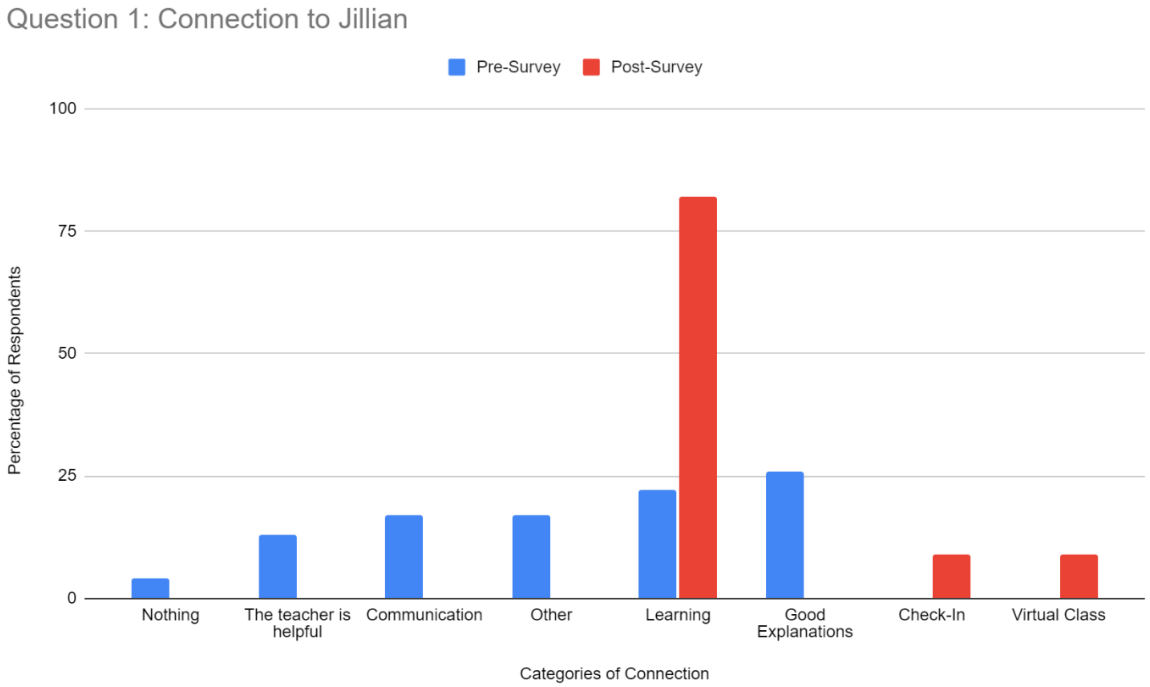


Question 5: Do you want to share anything with Jillian?

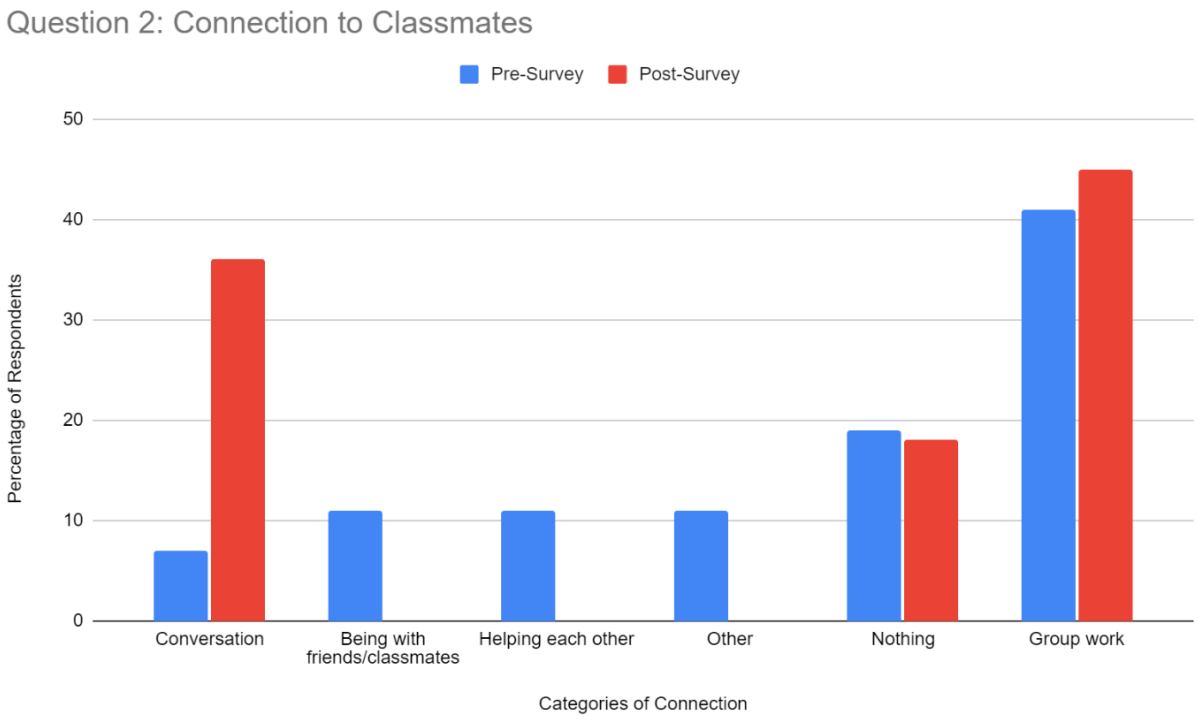


Post-survey

Question 1: What did we do in January that made you feel connected to your teacher Jillian? Select nothing or write a short answer.

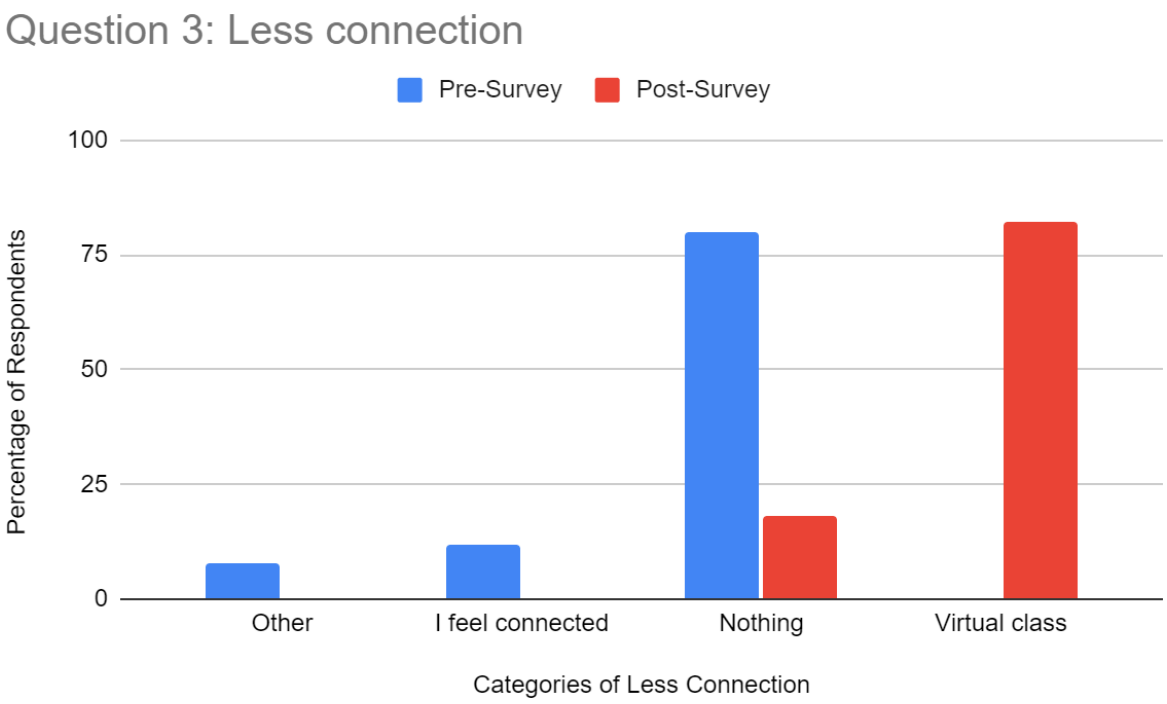


Question 2: What did we do in January that made you feel connected to your classmates? Select nothing or write a short answer.

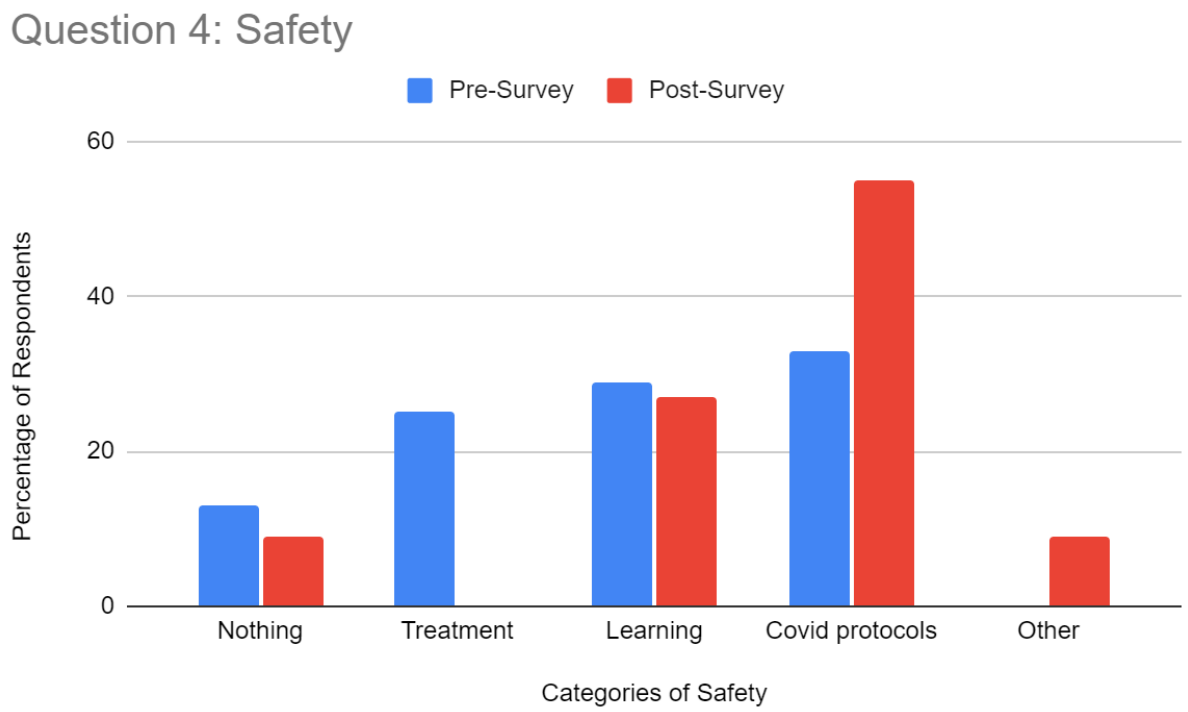


Question 3: What did we do in January that made you feel less connected to your classmates or Jillian?

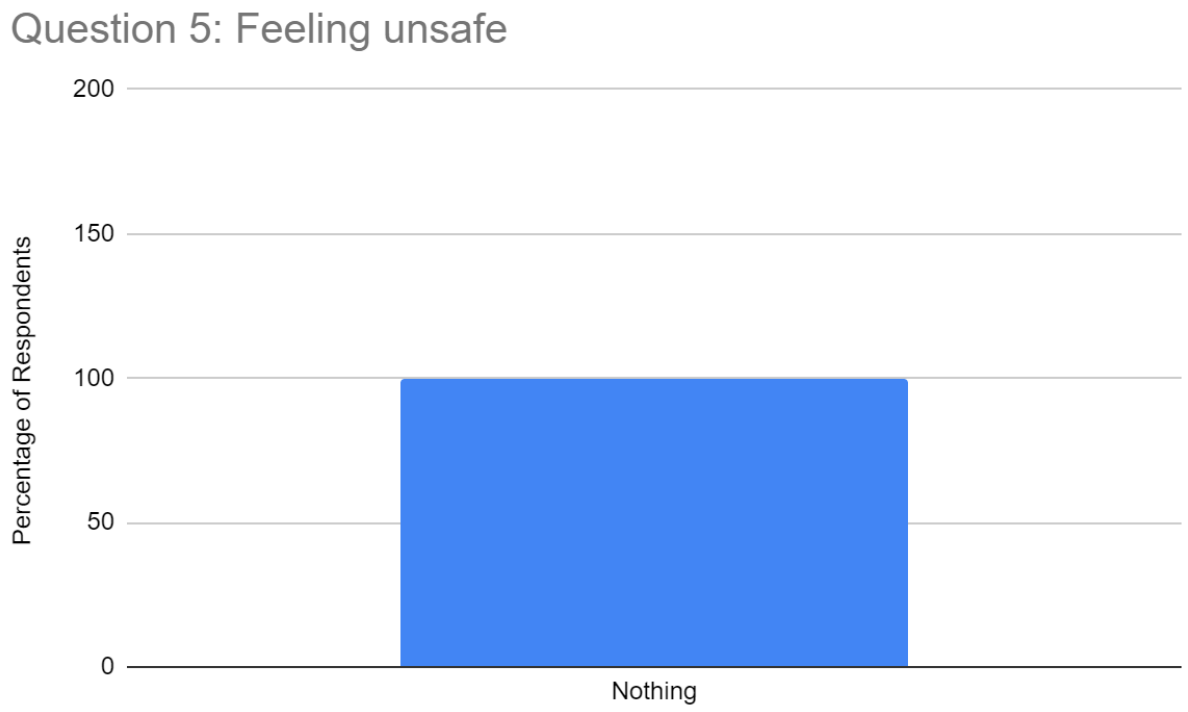
Select nothing or write a short answer.



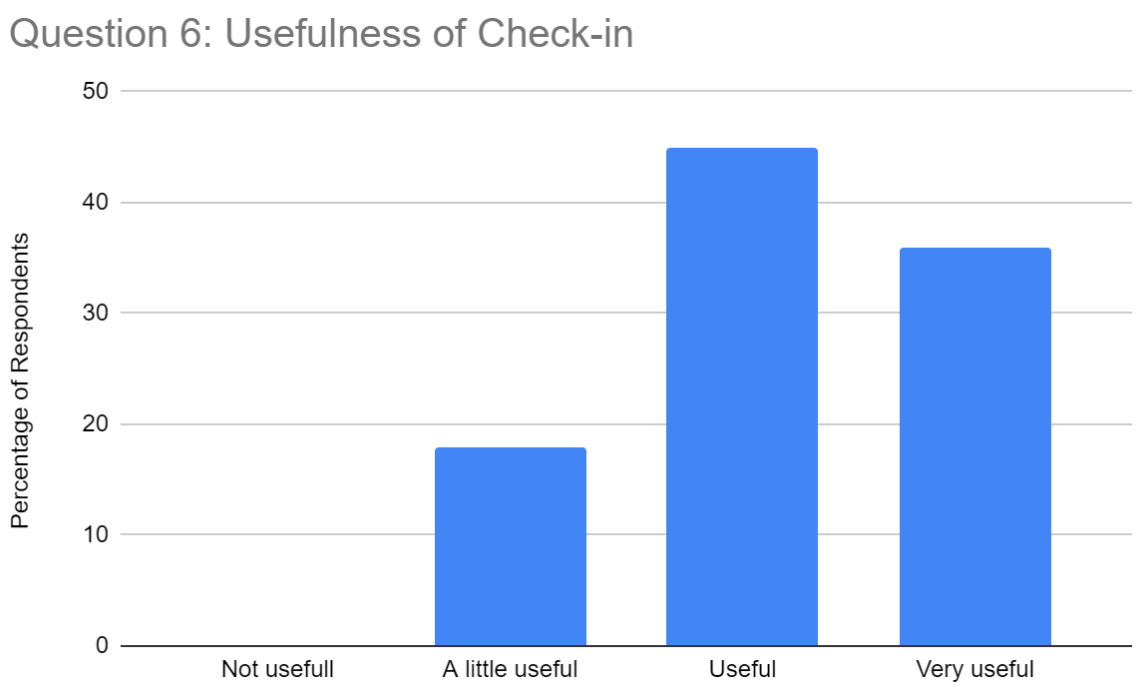
Question 4: What did we do in January that made you feel safe? Select nothing or write a short answer.



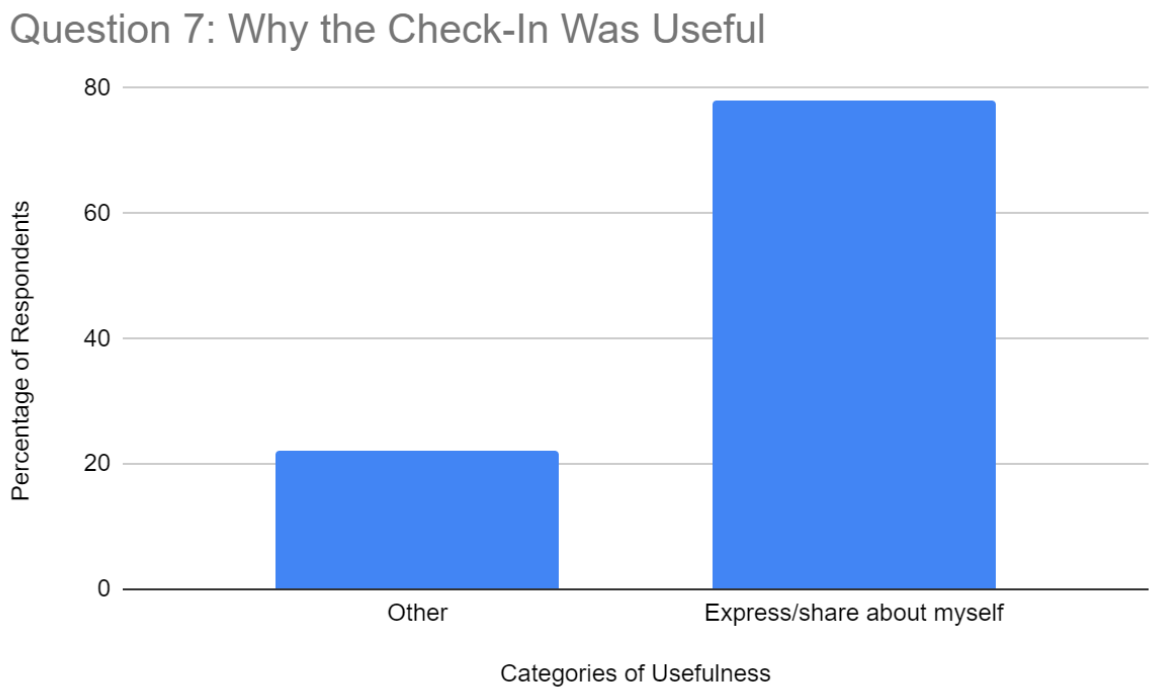
Question 5: What did we do in January that made you feel unsafe?



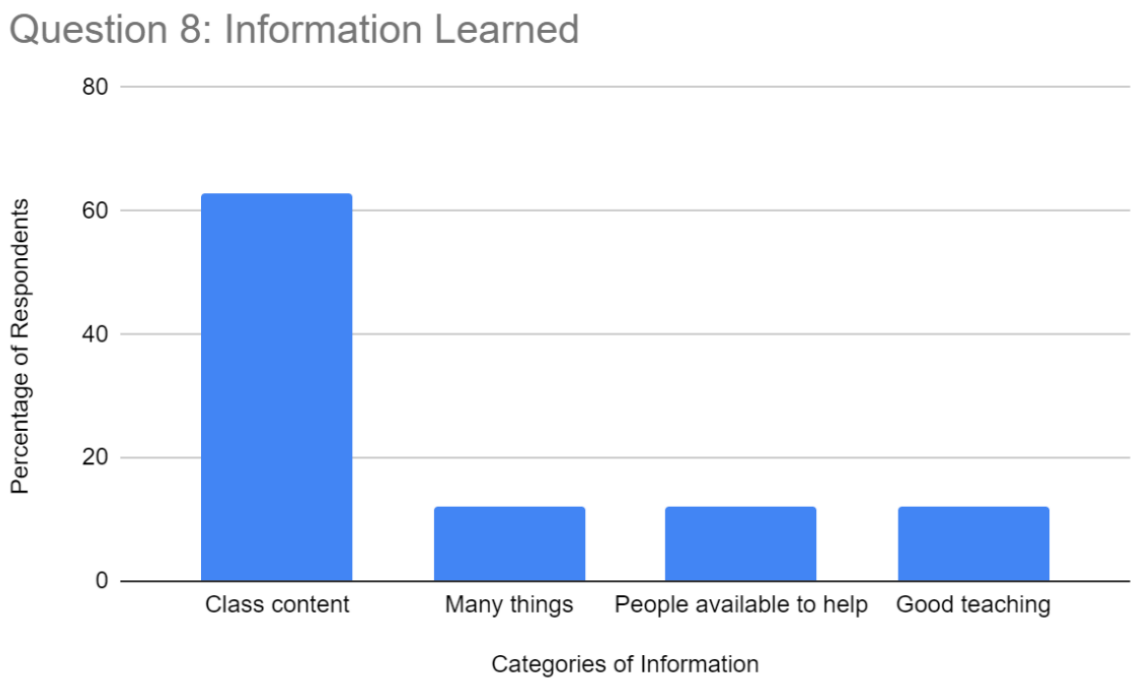
Question 6: Did you think the check-in was useful?



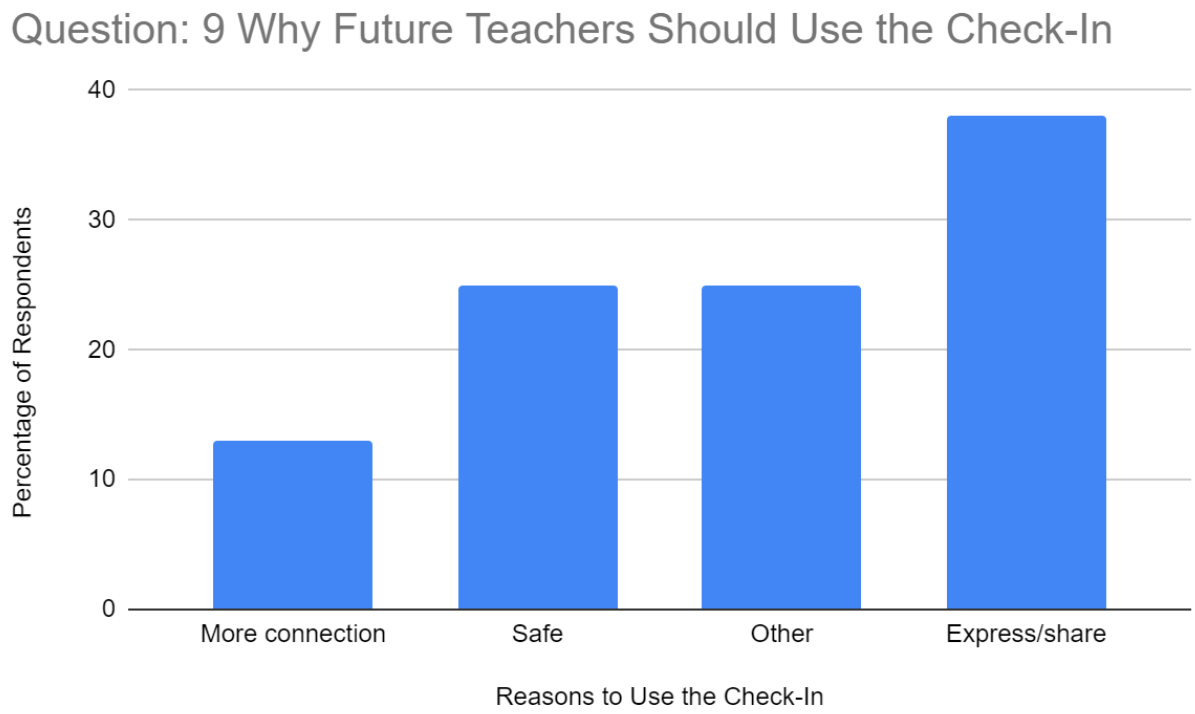
Question 7: Why was the check-in useful/not useful?



Question 8: Did you learn anything about yourself, classmates, or Jillian? Yes: write a short answer.



Question 9: Do you want your future teachers to use a check-in? Why?



Discussion

Pre-survey

I sent the pre-survey as a phone link over WhatsApp (WA) to both my morning and afternoon classes on Monday, January 10th. The pre-survey was translated into French, Amharic, and Spanish to cover the languages used by students in my morning and afternoon classes. To make sure students opened the correct survey, I sent the links individually to students who were present in class. At that time, I had a total of 25 students on my class list between my morning and afternoon. I sent the survey after class to those who had been absent. I received a total of 27 responses over the course of four days, which means that at least two of the responses were duplicates.

Early on, I noticed a few themes such a group work being connected to students feeling connected to their classmates, the role of COVID protocols making students feel safe, and the role that self-identifying that learning was taking place had in both making students feel connected to me as a teacher and making them feel safe. After the classroom research concluded, I translated then organized the student responses into various categories before I analyzed the data. The graphs above show the responses organized by category. I chose to use percentages as the unit of measure instead of number of responses for better correlation to the post-survey.

Question 1: What do we do in class that makes you feel connected to your teacher Jillian? Select nothing or write a short answer.

For this question and the next, I really wanted to see one, if students felt connected to me and their classmates, and two, in what ways. I realized too late that I would have liked to separate this question into two. One that specifically asked about face-to-face class, and another that asked about virtual class. 96% of respondents wrote they felt connected to me while 4% wrote they did not. Of that 96%, the largest percentage came from the “good explanations/corrections” category. It was interesting

to see such a specific focus on my teaching and their feelings about learning being connected to their connection with me.

Question 2: What do we do in class that makes you feel connected to your classmates? Select nothing or write a short answer.

The percentage of students who did not feel connected was higher for this question with 19% of students writing they did not feel connected to their classmates and 81% who said they did. Of the students who felt connected, the largest category at 41% wrote that group work made them feel connected to their classmates with "helping each other", "being with classmates", and "conversation" coming after. I would be interested to see how these answers compared for students with minority languages who only have one language to communicate with their classmates with.

Question 3: What do we do in class that makes you feel less connected to your classmates or Jillian? Select nothing or write a short answer.

For this questions, an overwhelming 80% of students responded with nothing. Another 12% responded specifically that they felt connected in class. Apart from the remaining 8% of responses, (a comment for me not to be late and naming an online independent reading program we use each week), the results indicate that most students did not identify anything specific that made them feel less connected to their classmates or me. To be fair, I think I would have a hard time pinpointing a specific thing that makes me feel less connected to my classmates as well. I'm sure that there are things that students could identify as making them feel less connected, I just need to work on finding a better way to get students to be more critical.

Question 4: What do we do in class that makes you feel safe? Select nothing or write a short answer

For this question, 87% of students responded that they felt safe with 13% responding that they did not. The largest group at 33% wrote they felt safe due to Briya's in person COVID protocols which included required masking, 3-foot social distancing, and special air purifiers in each room. The two other

categories included self-identification that they were learning and the way they were treated (positively) made them feel safe. I also realized too late with this question that I would have liked to separate this question into two. One that specifically asked about face-to-face class, and another that asked about virtual class.

Question 5: What do we do in class that makes you feel unsafe? Select nothing or write a short answer.

For this question, 77% wrote nothing. Of the remaining 33%, 15% wrote they felt safe. The remaining 8% consisted of two responses one that stated their safety was compromised, and the other that the COVID protocols made them feel unsafe. For this question, I really wish I could follow-up with the student who said their safety was compromised. I also wonder if this is due to something that we did in class virtually, face-to-face, or if this was due to something happening at home while studying virtually. As for the COVID protocols, there is nothing we can change about those rules as they are mandated. I recognize that the masks are uncomfortable, and that distancing can be a pain, but it is the reality we are living with.

Check-in

After students completed the pre-survey, read, and agreed to the consent form, I sent the initial check-in through WA as a private message with their individually assigned number. I then copied and resent the check-in link individually to each student before class started each day which was time consuming. Of the 25 students I had on my class list when we started the project, 17 decided to participate in the check-in. Over the course of the 4 weeks, ten students either dropped the class or moved up to the next level, which left a total of 11 students still participating in the check-ins.

At the end of the four weeks, I translated and then organized the data into themes/categories to better analyze the results. As the number of participants changed from the start to the end of the project, I used percentages as the unit of measure.

Question 1: How are you?

I wrote this question with two goals. First, I wanted to provide an opportunity for self-regulation. Second, to provide students with an anonymous way to express their feelings. When I ask this question informally in class, my students usually respond with great or good, sometimes with okay, and very rarely with not great or something similarly negative. The responses from the check-in show that the frequency of feeling great, good, and okay fluctuated similarly. In week three, the first not great was recorded and increased by a percent in week four. There is no way to know if that had to do with students feeling more comfortable to share or if there was something different happening at the same time. I would like to hope that it was a sign that students were beginning to feel more comfortable though. With more time, I think it would be easier to make that conclusion.

Question 2: What did you eat for breakfast this morning? / What did you eat for lunch this afternoon?

I wrote this question with the intention of gathering data on how many of my students eat before class. I knew of a few students who rarely ate before class due to work or getting their children fed first, but I wanted a bigger picture of my entire class since it is much harder to learn and retain information on an empty stomach. The results show that at most, 80% of my respondents were eating before class and just over 60% were eating before at the least.

I used our Friday debrief time during the first week to discuss this and provide a time for students to share and brainstorm ideas together. My students with school aged children talked about the frustrations of getting their children to eat who do not want to eat and the lack of time they themselves have to eat before getting their children to school or while preparing future meals. Advice that was shared was to try to eat something, even if it was a piece of fruit or a glass of water, since that would be better than nothing. We returned to hybrid learning during the fourth week of the study and the percentage of students who ate went up from week three but stayed the same as week two indicating that there was not a significant change from when they had class virtually versus face-to-face.

Significant to me was the fact that around 20-40% of my students are not eating before class even when they are learning from home and what that means for their learning and retention.

Question 3: Do you want to talk to Claudia this week?

Claudia was the Student Services Coordinator in charge of helping my classes. I created this question to help myself as a teacher and to provide my students with an additional way to reach out if they needed help with anything. With our hybrid and then fully virtual schedule, I recognized that I was receiving fewer requests for student services referrals than in the past. By adding it to the check-in, students had an additional opportunity to reach out if they needed help and I had a better understanding of what was happening in their lives. The results show that referrals increased by one each week after week two for a total of 20 referrals in four weeks, more than double the number of referrals I had made in the previous four months combined. I am hopeful that meant my students felt more comfortable to reach out and receive help. As a teacher, I felt like I had a better idea about what was happening in their lives and that I had better tools to help students get the help they needed through the check-in.

Question 4: What are you excited about this week? (a celebration, English class, my family is healthy, nothing)

I created this question because I wanted students to find something to be happy about. I also wanted to hear more about what was happening in their lives. As seen in the results from question two, the highest percentage of excited respondents happened in the first week at 70%, which was our first week back from winter break. After that, the percentage was between 62-63% for the next three weeks.

Looking at the reasons, the biggest category of excitement belongs to “my family’s health and mine”, followed by “my English class”. As we were fully virtual during this time due to increased COVID cases, it makes sense that this would be the biggest theme. Seeing that students were so excited to be in

class and learning was also great to see, especially since it is much harder to gage student interest when we are on Zoom.

Question 5: Do you want to share anything with Jillian?

I also created this question to provide students with an additional opportunity to share anything with me. As seen in the results from question three, I received twelve comments each during weeks one and two, then the numbers dropped dramatically during week three to just two and then one during the final week. The largest category of responses was "words of encouragement" which consisted of an assortment of messages telling me I was a good teacher, that class was good, or thank you notes. I was surprised by the responses, but it was heartwarming. The second biggest category was, "yes" with no further elaboration. I wish I had had the time to individually follow up with those students to see what they wanted to share, but I did not. The most helpful messages, and the themes I hoped to see most, were those about missing class, asking for help, and informing me that that they were ready for class. It would have been nice to receive feedback in this space about class as well, but I think a more targeted question about class feedback would be better in the future.

Post-survey

On the morning of our final day of the project, I sent the check-in to the remaining participants and then I sent the post-survey to all the students who began the project with me. I received 11 responses in total, the same number of participants who ended the project with me. After a week, I translated, organized, then analyzed the data from the post-survey while also comparing the answer from the shared questions from the two surveys.

Question 1: What did we do in January that made you feel connected to your teacher Jillian? Select nothing or write a short answer.

I included this question again as a follow-up to the pre-survey. "Learning" is the only category that is repeated between the two surveys and includes a good percentage of responses from each. New

to the post-survey were the “check-in” and “virtual class” categories. It was surprising that no one answered nothing with the second survey, especially since we spent three out of four weeks learning fully online. I am guessing that given the choice between virtual class and missing class, virtual class becomes more desirable. It is also still striking to me that students drew such a strong connection between their sense of connection and learning. It makes me wonder if those students who feel less connected then have a harder time learning due to not wanting to speak up, practice, or ask questions.

Question 2: What did we do in January that made you feel connected to your classmates? Select nothing or write a short answer.

Question two was also a follow-up from the pre-survey. “Conversation”, “nothing”, and “group work” are the only categories that repeated from the first survey. “Group work” remained the biggest category for connection, with “conversation” being the second here in the post-survey. The “nothing” category decreased while “conversation” and “group work” received a higher percentage of responses than the pre-survey. As we were fully virtual for most of January, this is a good indication that “group work” and “conversation/speaking practice” in particular play a vital role in students feeling connected to each other while being virtual.

Question 3: What did we do in January that made you feel less connected to your classmates or Jillian? Select nothing or write a short answer.

For this question, I wanted to collect additional data from students about our class in general and see if any responses were connected to the check-in project. As seen in the results, the largest category became “virtual class”, a big change from the initial survey. Although impossible to know with certainty, I suspect our return to face-to-face class during the final week of the project may have affected the way students answered this question after studying fully online for the first three weeks. It is interesting how students’ perception of virtual class changes depending on what options are available to them in the moment.

Question 4: What did we do in January that made you feel safe? Select nothing or write a short answer.

Also a follow-up from the first survey, the two largest categories, “learning” and “COVID protocols” remained unchanged. The percentage of respondents who selected “nothing” decreased slightly. I believe timing also impacted the response to this question, as we returned to in person learning during the last week, which would have been the only week where COVID protocols would have been relevant in January.

Question 5: What did we do in January that made you feel unsafe?

For this question 100 percent of respondents wrote nothing. As with previous surveys, it is always hard to get my students to answer negatively. If I had given choices, it is possible that students would have selected one or thought of something else to add.

Question 6: Did you think the check-in was useful?

I created this question to see to see how useful students really thought the check-in was. As seen in the results, all respondents found the check-in to be at least a little useful as the majority selected useful or very useful. This is exciting and encourages me to continue the check-in in the future after some changes. I also found it to be very useful in regard to feeling more connected to students and giving more referrals to student services.

Question 7: Why was the check-in useful/not useful?

Almost 80% of students wrote that the check-in was useful so that they could either express themselves or share something with me or the school. The responses that made up the remaining other category consisted of students writing that the check-in was useful and one student who wrote that it “gave them a personal responsibility”. This was very exciting to see as two of the goals of the check-in were to provide students with the opportunity to self-regulate their feelings and for me to feel more connected to them.

Question 8: Did you learn anything about yourself, classmates, or Jillian? Yes: write a short answer.

I wrote this question primarily to see if our Friday discussions made any kind of impact. 91% of students indicated that they learned something with 9% indicating that they did not. I was interested to see that most students focused on what they learned from class content. Of the three remaining categories, "people available to help" stood out as it indicated that a student recognized that either a classmate, the school, or myself were available to help if needed which may have been new information for that student. From this question and others, it looks like students are starting to think and reflect on class content and providing them with a designated space in the next iteration of the check-in makes sense.

Question 9: Do you want your future teachers to use a check-in? Why?

I created this question to see if students thought the check-in was worth continuing or not. 91% of respondents said they wanted to continue the check-in. Students had multiple reasons for wanting to continue the check-in with future teachers, the biggest being so that they could express/share about themselves. Students also listed safety and more connection for reasons to continue the check-in. As I wrote above, expression, safety, and connection were all goals of the check-in so students stating them as reasons to continue was thrilling. I suspect the expression theme is so big since my students have limited English at their level and I only speak one of the many languages my students speak so this provides an additional space to share with me in their chosen language.

Question 10: Do you want to add or change anything to the check-in?

I created this question to gather feedback about the content of the check-in. One student said they wanted to make a change to the check-in by adding a question about what they liked about class the previous day. I think this makes a lot of sense and tracks with previous class related answers I received throughout the surveys and check-in.

Returning to the research focus, my goal was to see whether the check-in would be an effective means to create safety, connection, and routine in my classroom, both for my students and

myself. First, I had hoped to create safety by providing students with the opportunity to share how they were feeling in an anonymous format. As seen above in question nine of the post-survey, sharing/expressing was the biggest reason why students wanted their future teachers to use the check-in while also mentioning feeling safe as another reason for continuing the check-in. Sharing/expressing was also the biggest reason why students said the check-in was useful in question seven of the post-survey. Second, by being able to follow up with students and their needs, I hoped to be better informed and create more personal connections between my students and myself. The number of referrals I sent to our student services coordinator in the four weeks of the project was more than double what I had sent in the previous four months. That space became a great way for students to reach out and it was much easier for me to follow up with students that way and be aware of what was happening in their lives. Finally, I had planned to provide dedicated time each day for students to respond to the survey, creating a routine they could depend on, even on days they were absent. The survey was sent to students every morning at the same time, and I provided time each day in class for those present to complete it. It became a part of my routine and by the end of the four weeks, most participants would have it filled out before class even started.

In addition to my research goal findings, I also learned a lot about my students and myself. First, I learned that a significant percentage of my students were making a connection between their learning and feeling connected to others. Students identified that they felt connected to their classmates through group work and discussion (modes of learning), and that they felt connected to me when they could identify they were learning. Students also reflected that the primary reason they wanted to continue the check-in was for the opportunity to share about and express themselves. This is striking to me because I text with most of my students, and they have that same opportunity to share/express themselves through that medium, but they do not. Further proof of that is reflected in the 20 student

services referrals I made in the four weeks of the study. This illustrates to me that students saw the check-in as a medium for asking for help in a way that texting does not.

The most important thing I learned about myself was that a significant part of my stress was coming from feeling disconnected from my students and that I was not meeting their needs. The check-in provided a simple way for me to collect information about my students' well-being and follow up with them in my own time which helped me maintain work boundaries. Not only did students share a lot of information about themselves, but many took it upon themselves to send me supportive messages, and reflections about class which created another level of connection and communication that I didn't anticipate. The supportive messages brightened my days and made me feel more confident that I was at least meeting students learning needs. For any teacher that wants to feel more connected to their students while maintaining a work-life balance, I recommend trying some version of a formal check-in.

There are several changes I want to make to the check-in before I start the check-ins again in my classes. First, I want to remove the number system as it created a lot of extra work on my part and was generally confusing for students. I will also make the check-in completely anonymous unless a student says they want to speak with student services or if they respond that they want to share something with me, but do not add a message. I am making this change to see if students will be more critical with their answers if they know their answers are anonymous, and so I can still follow-up with students who need it. I will add conditional formatting to ask for a student's name if those questions are answered. I also want to add a class reflection section to the check-in by asking students if they liked class that day or not and add more conditional formatting to ask why or why not depending on their first answer. To accommodate students who were absent, I will start the section by asking if they attended class that day or not. I also want to end the check-in with the question about what they are excited about instead of the share question, to create a better change to end on something positive.

I thought the Friday reflections were helpful and a good way for students to share ideas with each other. I'm not sure that the 15-20 minutes we had each week was enough time to have an impactful conversation though. Ideally, I would like to have at least 30 minutes for everyone to have the opportunity to share their ideas and then have a discussion with translation. I would love to continue the conversation about eating before class and include other themes as they come up in class or from the check-in results.

Conclusion

Most of my students chose to participate in the daily check-ins to share about their well-being. Those that participated indicated that the check-in was useful, and as a teacher I also found the check-in to be informative and helpful. Through the surveys, students self-identified the themes of safety, connection, and emotional regulation (sharing/expressing) which where the major areas of trauma-informed teaching practice I was hoping to incorporate, which shows that the check-in is a viable way to incorporate those themes. The survey and check-in questions helped inform my teaching and I have made several adjustments since the project began such as increased group work, adding more exercise, and providing more opportunities for students to talk and share with each other. I feel closer to my students and more confident that I am providing them with the support they need. Whether incorporated face-to-face, fully virtual, or in a hybrid setting, I am confident that a formal daily-check-in can be useful to both students and staff to acknowledge and address trauma that may be present in the classroom.

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