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Improving the Social Emotional Recognition and Regulation for Special Education Adolescents

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Isabella Maria Lopez

A Capstone Project for the Bachelors of Science in Human Development and Family Science

Introduction

The focal topic for this project is emotional learning in high school students in special education programs. Social emotional learning is focused on emotions, recognizing emotions, and expression of emotions in connection to interacting with others. This is important in any stage of development because it creates the foundation of children's future social interactions and how they deal with emotions in adulthood. Students with special needs sometimes lack the ability to recognize their own intense emotions and enact appropriate ways to express them. For these students, it can be difficult to process and express emotions in a social setting, like school, with many other students who do not learn and think the same as they do. Children with special needs may have difficulty maintaining and creating relationships because of this lack of regulation. Given SPED students' emotion skills challenges, it is important to incorporate social emotional skills into their regular academic curriculum. This project provided the students with opportunities to practice recognizing other people's emotions, appropriately expressing their own emotions, and using coping strategies for dealing with difficult emotions. I provided three activities on three separate days that give students a fun way to learn emotion strategies and skills that can help them through adolescence and young adulthood. For my target group, I focused on high school students in the SPED program at Hollister High School. The students' ages ranged from 14-18 years old, and the population in the school is majority Latinx.

Needs Statement

My capstone focuses on social emotional development in special education high school students. Students with special needs, like autism, may have difficulty with recognizing their emotions, regulating their emotions, and reading the emotions of their peers in order to create relationships and communicate. Because of this issue, there is a need for education in the SPED programs for increasing emotional competencies. The students need to be able to recognize emotions to understand and express them in order to form positive relationships. The first lesson discussed the recognition of four common emotions. This skill will be important to practice and repeat to strengthen their emotional recognition. The second lesson will help the SPED students practice showing two common emotions, allowing them to practice reading facial expressions and body language. The last lesson will be to practice coping strategies for intense emotions they may encounter during their daily routines. The importance of emotional regulation proves necessary through the day-to-day life they encounter.

Special education programs in school can receive students who have a wide range and combination of many different disabilities. These can include intellectual, developmental and physical disabilities. Intellectual disabilities is an umbrella term for disabilities that can affect the individual's ability to learn and develop typically, and these disabilities are usually noticeable before the age of five (The Arc, 2022). Down's Syndrome is one of the more common intellectual disabilities seen in special education programs including that of Hollister High School. Ahlers, Gabrielsen, Lewis, and others (2023) explain, "It is a chronic, multifactorial disorder that affects brain development and function, impairing cognition and adaptive behavior." Another common intellectual disorder seen in the Hollister High School Special Education Program is Autism Spectrum Disorder. Samson, Phillips, Parker, and others (2013)

note that ASD presents as difficulties with communication and social interactions, fixations on interests, repetitive behavior, and sensory deficits. With ASD, children and adolescents face the difficulty of emotion dysregulation- the inability to regulate their emotions. Behaviors such as poor anger management, aggression, irritability, and mood dysregulation are all commonly associated with this disorder. These difficulties are due to the brain being underdeveloped and in result, they have delays in cognition and language. Physical disabilities can also play a huge role in the children or adolescent experience in school. A common physical disability is Cerebral Palsy. Cerebral Palsy can be described as a combination of permanent disorders resulting from brain malformation during fetal development or infancy. These disorders can limit movement and activity, affect posture, and the ability to be independent (Silberg, Kapil, Caven, et al., 2023). Because they are not usually able to be independent, this can create some divide between their neurotypical peers and the different communication styles between them. Students with any of these disabilities or disorders can have difficulties with social interactions and emotional expression or regulation, but with some curriculum it can be introduced and practiced to give them exposure to this skill.

Emotional social behavior is how we are able to send signals and receive signals from our peers in order to communicate, for children and adolescents with special needs this may not work as smoothly. In middle childhood and adolescence the individual will have the ability to use internal strategies to manage their emotions and conflicts with others. In addition, they will practice emotional self-efficacy, which is taking control of their emotional experiences (Berk, 2009). In order to reach this level, the child needs to build up certain skills that give them the ability to be emotionally competent. The basic emotions we develop from early childhood are happiness, anger, sadness, and fear (Berk, 2009). Classifying overall positive and negative

emotions into those more specific emotions allow the child to express themselves thoroughly. In addition, having developed more emotions to express can allow children and adolescents to create relationships and communicate with others. Self conscious emotions include shame, embarrassment, guilt, envy, and pride (Berk, 2009). These emotions can cause harm to our sense of self, but they're necessary for development. These feelings can create negative thoughts when we are interacting with others or when we hurt others. However, it can help children build empathy for others. Emotional self regulation is another key component of emotional competence. This refers to the way we can handle our intense emotions in order to be able to accomplish tasks and reach goals (Berk, 2009). This requires many skills we learn as we develop through childhood that help build our ability to control and respond appropriately to the intensity of our emotions.

The ability to recognize common emotions is an important part of communication with others. Chamberlain, Kasari, and Rotheram-Fuller (2006) conducted a study about the effects of having students with special needs integrated into regular classrooms. They determined that in any age group, children diagnosed with autism regardless of gender tend to bond and make friendships with their girl peers over their male peers. From parent statements, they were made aware that male friendships were often based on competition and taunting. For example, it was mentioned that in one group where children with autism were mixed into the classroom with their neurotypical peers, one boy was convinced to lick a toilet seat for a nickel (Chamberlain, Kasari, and Rotheram-Fuller, 2006). This kind of experience for students with autism can create an unhealthy way to recognize and read the emotions of their peers. In this case of taunting, the child with autism would not be able to understand the negative intentions of his peers through their emotions of happiness when he complied with the dare, or anger if he refused. In another

study where children with autism were observed of their reactions to different emotions, it was shown that compared to their neurotypical peers they were unresponsive to the adult who was displaying sadness or fear (Capps, Kasari, Yirmiya, and Sigman, 1993). To elaborate, the neurotypical children attempted to soothe or relieve the adult from their negative emotions, and the children with autism did not seem to sympathize or feel affected by this. This shows that children with autism lack understanding of the negative emotions that can be encountered daily. The ability to recognize key emotions like these can give children with autism the ability to form healthier relationships with their peers in school settings and when they become young adults.

Children and adolescents with special needs do not always have the ability to properly and appropriately express their emotions. Understanding the severity of the child's disability is important to understand how well they're able to develop this skill. When in a school setting, there are many opportunities for students to express themselves given situations that bring out their emotions. Children and adolescents with emotional dysregulation don't have these abilities, so managing emotions and their intensity can be difficult when trying to perform day to day activities in school and making friends (Berkovits, Eisenhower, & Blacher, 2017). This study examines the reality of what can happen when students are faced with changes or failures. This can be something as common as cutting a paper off the indicated line or calculating a math equation incorrectly, but can also be as big as not being able to communicate with their peers. In addition, many students with special needs rely on the consistency of a schedule or routine. When that routine is not followed or is changed without warning, this can cause a sense of loss of control. This will trigger the student to feel frustrated or unwilling to follow the new change, and in turn may result in behaviors that are difficult to navigate through, like tantrums or self inflicting harm (Berkovits, Eisenhower, & Blacher, 2017). These behaviors are the more

recognizable and noticeable, but are not the only behaviors that may occur. Changes in schedules are not as frequent in a school setting, but are still possible. A small shift in the routine can cause stress on the student, thus producing the only behaviors they know to express that discomfort. With gradually increasing exposure to situations like these and giving the students safe spaces to practice expressing their emotions, their skills can improve.

Understanding how to regulate or cope with emotions appropriately can be difficult for children with special needs. In a study done with parents and children with autism spectrum disorder, parents found it difficult to read their children's emotions- their children's lack of ability to control their tempers can affect their emotional regulation (Jahromi, Meek, & Ober, 2012). Parents of children with ASD observed how their children react to changes in routine or failures. From this study, it was seen that children on the autism spectrum do have some coping strategies when it comes to dealing with frustration or anger, but they are not always effective. In this study, it was more common for the children with autism to use venting strategies and avoidance strategies to deal with their frustration (Jahromi, Meek, & Ober, 2012). In other words, instead of expressing their emotions through typical forms they were more inclined to avoid the issue and communicate their feelings through narratives. These strategies can be effective in some cases, but in situations they cannot avoid can lead to escalations. Goodman and Southam-Gerow (2010) revealed through their study in peer rejection with children with ASD, that girls reported more instances of feeling sad or worried about rejection in social situations. In addition, when being put in through the exclusion or teasing scenarios, both sexes were higher in having reactions of anger or aggression. This coping skill is not effective and ultimately does not help the individual or their peers, however does pose as a direct communication strategy of how they are feeling. In seeing their anger and aggression, this is where it's important to see the

occurrences that led to that aggression and understand what can be improved or changed to avoid that behavior in the future. In changing the experience, practicing and introducing healthy coping mechanisms for these students to use in these moments that can lead to escalations.

Emotional competence is seen as a skill that is not able to be improved easily. Therefore the curriculum needed to be altered to fit the child's needs and abilities case by case. Children with special needs can have different behavioral issues that are correlated with having low social competence (Brown & Conroy, 2011). When special needs children are in a group setting, like a classroom setting, it can be difficult to manage their behaviors when escalated or sitting quietly for too long. From my observations of working at Hollister High School, many of the interventions they have don't actually focus on correcting behavioral issues or creating socially acceptable behaviors, however instead provide these students with alternatives to avoid problematic behaviors. Brown and Conroy (2011) explain that the form of these interventions are dependent on what works best for the student and their behaviors. Three forms of initiation of these interventions are environmental arrangements,peer-mediated social interaction interventions,and teacher-mediated interventions- which can be done individually or combined. The types of interventions can also be administered individually or combined as follows-reinforcers, instructions, prompts, models, rehearsals, feedback mechanisms, and discussions (Brown & Conroy, 2011). The right combination of how and which interventions are used is solely dependent on the level of competency of the adolescent. In another study conducted by Davies, Elliot, Frey, and Cooper (2021) it was also found that social emotional competence was needed in order to perform academically. This is because they need problem solving skills, meeting academic challenges, avoiding risky choices, preparing for the demands of the workplace, and their overall well being (Davies, Elliott, Frey, & Cooper, 2021). Having social

emotional skills is an indicator of the quality of life the child will have in the future. This is in correlation to the way they are able to not only communicate with others, but being able to advocate for themselves as well. In a study performed by Chamberlain, Kasari, and Rotheram-Fuller, (2007), they revealed that when students with intellectual or physical disabilities are mixed into classrooms with neurotypical students, there are some positive results on social skills. When included in these classrooms, SPED students found friendships with many different groups of children including popular students, girls, and smaller groups (Chamberlain, Kasari, & Rotheram-Fuller, 2007). These students do tend to rate themselves higher in socialization than their peers would suggest, but this means their confidence has increased and they may be more likely to attempt to make friends.

This project serves to increase the support for SPED students' ability to effectively communicate their emotions with others. When the students practice identifying, expressing, and coping with emotions in the activities provided, they can feel more comfortable practicing these methods in the future. In attempting to understand how these skills are important to build through childhood and adolescence, theorists like Lev Vygotsky and Barbara Fredrickson can elaborate further. The learning outcomes of recognizing, expressing, and coping with emotions will bring the students stronger skills in communicating and making relationships with others. In the one day, three-part lesson the eleven moderate to severe special education students will practice and test their skills.

Theory

Social emotional competence is an important developmental area to have well formed in order to be successful in society and adulthood. Two theories support this claim- Lev Vygotsky's

Sociocultural Theory and Fredrickson's Broaden-and-Build Theory of Positive Emotions. Lev Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory states that adults help children develop their social emotional competence through their cultural norms and interactions with adults. Essentially, adults need to help foster children's experiences in life in order for them to practice the skills they will need to be successful in social situations (Cong-Lem, 2022). In Vygotsky's theory, it is specified that the more social experience a child has the higher their social competency will be. Vygotsky focused on the quality of the skills developed and how the more cognitively advanced children earned these skills through other peers and adults who had higher skills. Cong-Lem (2022) explains that the skills that are improved and developed can include memory, perception, decision making, speech, and language. In Fredrickson's Broaden-and-Build Theory of Positive Emotions it states that with experiences with positive emotions, there is more opportunities to broaden their "...momentary thought- action repertoires…" which makes the individual build their emotions and expand their resources in understanding those emotions (Fredrickson, 2001). In the broaden-and-build theory, it's explored that the more you practice a skill the better it will be. All of these skills contribute to the ability to express and regulate emotions.

These theories identify the importance of socialization and the development of social emotional skills. For students with special needs, they may not have the same opportunities and milestones as their neurotypical peers to connect and may be inclined to experience more negative social interactions. In childhood, there is a stage of crisis according to Vygotsky's theory where the child does not understand their emotions (Cong-Lem, 2022). As the child reaches adolescence, their ability to understand their emotions and how they come about is more refined, but not mastered. In the Broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions, when the child has repeated experiences with positive experiences they can process these emotions better and

understand how to communicate those (Fredrickson, 2001). For students with special needs, these milestones may be more difficult to achieve with or without added intervention and repetition because of their cognitive disabilities. In this case, it is the educators' and parents' responsibility to help support this development by providing opportunities to practice these skills and form healthy patterns of emotional regulation. With more curriculum centered around social emotional development implemented in their routines, special education students could have more practice with these skills. In addition, it is important to role model these strategies and communications to produce healthier cultural norms when it comes to emotional regulation and expression. In the lessons, positive emotions are also included to remind students that there are many different emotions. The lessons provide opportunities for the students to practice with their peers along with presenting in front of the class in groups. From both theories, it is imperative to recognize the social norms and age range already set in place around the students in order to appropriately teach these skills.

Consideration of Diversity

Diversity is defined as the adolescents in the Hollister High School special education program. In San Benito County, 13.3% of children had disabilities and needed services to support them through school in 2022 (cite new website). Further, in California for every 1,000 students in 2019, about 49 have a learning disability and about 7 have an intellectual ability (Kids Data, 2020). This means that many of these students have difficulty understanding and developing the social skills the same as their neurotypical peers. There is some diversity when it comes to race and ethnicity as well- 6.1% are African American, 48.9% are Hispanic/Latino, 28% were white, and other consisted of 15.3% (Kids Data, 2020). This means any curriculum presented should be inclusive to all students and their backgrounds in order to make it relatable

and easier to digest and practice outside of the classroom. This project is formatted to be inclusive and allow both verbal and nonverbal students to be able to participate because of the open response they are able to input by using their communication boards or devices. It also gives opportunities to special education students who may not excel in group participation or non-written assignments to attempt the skills.

Learning Outcomes

This project focused on social emotional learning of adolescent students with special needs. I taught them this concept through three consecutive thirty minute sessions. The learning outcomes were categorized as follows:

1.　High school special needs students will be able to recognize and identify four different emotions based on facial expressions.

2.　The students will demonstrate how to appropriately express one of the four emotions of happiness, anger, sadness, and excitement through facial expressions and body language when prompted.

3.　The students will be able to demonstrate one strategy for coping with intense emotions.

Method

Location and Participants

This project was conducted at Hollister High School in a classroom of eleven moderate to severe special education students, with individual student support from student leader aides,

instructional aides, and a teacher. I picked this group after discussing my project with one of the teachers I have worked with since June of this year. I work closely with many students from this program two to three times a week. This group was picked because they have the most responsiveness and this class block is one of the bigger groups in the program. The students were nine male and two female moderate to severe special education students. The majority of the students were Hispanic or Latinx, while the others were Caucasian or Pacific Islander. Two students' primary language was Spanish, however all students understood and communicated in English. The students had different kinds of disabilities ranging from physical, intellectual, and/or cognitive. Some students were non-verbal, primarily using one to two primary verbal sounds, but also used their communication tablets or a sheet that had the same key vocabulary terms. All the special education students who participated were between fourteen to sixteen years old.

Procedures and Materials

This workshop was done in three parts, all in one day. Prior to beginning the lessons, the special education students went through their normal daily opening routine. This included a daily question where the students have to pick between two to three options on the board, a joke of the day which allows the students to discuss with their peers and aids, and watching a bulletin created by their study body about recent events in the school. After this, the students were reminded that they were going to be participating in a presentation about emotions. I reintroduced myself to the class, to remind them who I am and what we were going to do during my allotted time.

The first lesson was provided through a Google Slides presentation (see Appendix A) focused on identifying the four emotions of anger, sadness, happiness, and excitement. The first few slides were a brief discussion about the four emotions mentioned previously. This opened discussion with the students about their experiences with each emotion and whether they enjoy or dislike these emotions. After this, it was time to play the identification game I created. The students were already seated in four groups along with their instructional aides and/or peer mentors. Three groups had three SPED students and the last group had two. Each slide was a picture of individuals who illustrated one of the four previously stated emotions. I showed each picture for about thirty seconds, then changed to a clean slide that asked, "What emotion are they showing?" The students were then able to answer out loud or through their communication device when their group was called on. After each group went, I recorded my assessment- 'were the students able to respond?' and considered the accuracy of their responses. The accuracy depended on if they were at least close to the correct response or if they were way off. For example, if the picture was meant to depict excitement but they answered with happiness, I would consider that a correct response.

The second lesson was provided about five minutes after the previous one. This game was to help the students practice demonstrating one of the four emotions- happiness, sadness, anger, or excitement. The Google Slideshow (see Appendix B) for this lesson had brief instructions on what the game was and how to play. As a whole class, there was a discussion about what different ways there are to express them. Next, I gave each group a card that said one of the four core emotions. They were given one minute to practice showing that emotion with their group. Then, I called each group one by one to demonstrate the emotion in front of the class. Each student took their turn in practicing the emotion. This made it easier for me to

recognize how much the students were able to perform on their own with minimal prompting. I

assessed the results of the activity by pass or no pass standards- the student was either able to

accurately portray the emotion or not. The class applauded after each group and was able to

practice along with the group presenting, which allowed the students to practice all four

emotions.

The third lesson was provided about eight minutes after the second one, as we needed a

bigger transition period in order to refocus. This Google Slides presentation (see Appendix C)

was centered around the coping skills we can practice when it comes to intense emotions. Some

examples of the coping skills were taking a walk, breathing techniques, and an exercise called

'safe hands' where you interlock your fingers together and show your peers. The students were

asked to practice doing the coping skills provided and inclined to give any suggestions on others

that were not named. With some prompting, I demonstrated along with most students how to

perform these coping strategies. The images on the slides allowed the students to follow along

and understand what emotion they were using the coping skills for in addition to keeping their

focus. The assessment was after our class discussion- going around the room, one by one the

students were asked to show one coping skill they use already or they would like to use in the

future. This activity concluded my lessons and I exited the classroom.

Results

Learning Outcome 1 is high school special needs students will be able to recognize and

identify four different emotions based on facial expressions. When the images were put on the

screen, the eleven students were able to either tell me their answers out loud or through their

devices whenever they were ready. This free- answer method allowed the students to feel

comfortable in their classroom and talking amongst their peers. This method also made it easier to record how many students were able to answer correctly. This was measured by visually observing and recording how many students were able to engage and answer the questions. In addition, I observed if they answered correctly or near the correct emotion. For example, if the picture showed excitement, but the student answered 'having fun,' they were given a pass and another chance to answer another picture correctly or incorrectly. This LO was fully met as 90% of the students passed, (see Appendix E). One student was able to answer when prompted by his aide and I considered this a pass- he was guided by giving two choices to pick from that helped him answer. The student who did not pass refused to participate and was being soothed by his aide. This refusal was ultimately caused by my lesson not being a part of their normal routine.

Learning Outcome 2 is the students will demonstrate how to appropriately express one of the four emotions of happiness, anger, sadness, and excitement through facial expressions and body language when prompted. When starting this activity, we reviewed the four emotions we previously discussed so it was fresh in their mind. I then went to each group and handed them the emotion card they would be practicing and then presenting to the class. During the two minutes they were given to practice they were guided by myself, their teacher, and the aids in the classroom. When each group took their turn in front of the classroom presenting the emotion, I assessed the ability for each student to be able to understand and represent the emotion accurately. As shown on table two, nine out of the eleven students passed this LO and it was fully met (see Appendix F). The same student who refused to participate during the first lesson was still refusing. The second student who did not pass refused even after prompting and guidance from his aid, but was able to communicate that he did not want to participate.

The third Learning Outcome is the students will be able to demonstrate two strategies for coping with intense emotions. The goal of this lesson is to help the students avoid behaviors that lead to escalations when confronted with anger or sadness. All eleven students participated in practicing these coping strategies. This LO was passed by 100% of the students, so it was fully met. To pass this LO, the students needed to be able to show one coping strategy on their own for when they feel angry or sad. With little to no prompting, every student was able to demonstrate at least one strategy for communicating and alleviating intense emotions. The two most popular coping strategies the students used were safe hands and deep breaths.

Discussion

This project was an overall success. The students were able to recognize and demonstrate emotions with little to no prompting from adults. All three of my learning outcomes were fully met with minimal failure or refusal. Based on my observations for the last six months with this group, the teachers and instructional aids provide a safe space that supports learning and opportunities for the SPED students to express their emotions. Considering the theories mentioned previously, the students are able to observe the adults around them show emotional regulation and it helps support their development and experiences as explained in Lev Vygostsky's Sociocultural Theory (Cong-Lem, 2022). In reference to Fredrickson's Broaden-and-Build Theory of Positive Emotions (Fredrickson, 2001), having strong connections with their teachers and aids provides more positive experiences, which makes the students more comfortable to try to express their emotions and communicate coping strategies that work for them. This also helps the SPED students have better communication skills between themselves and their peers and improve their relationships. The lessons worked well for most of the students,

as they all had different modes of communication that allowed them to answer and participate. Despite having a rough morning as a class, the students were engaged during all three lessons.

Although all my LO's were fully met with above 75% passing, there were some limitations in the lessons. Upon arrival, the teacher warned me that the students were having a rough morning. This meant that the students were not able to focus as much as they would other days, and it took longer during transition periods to refocus. For the students who did not meet the LO's, one student was minimally verbal and communicated that he did not want to act out the emotion in front of the class. The other student was having difficulty adjusting to having the lesson during their first block instead of their normal routine. This was expected since there are minimal changes in their daily routine unless there are school events. If I could improve these lessons I would include worksheets in order to implement more practice and curriculum and have more assessments.

If this project were to be repeated in the future, there are different variations that could be implemented. If it was a smaller group, it would be easier to record the individual responses and maybe further the variety of emotions to test the students' range of emotional competencies. In addition, the lessons could be taught across multiple days in order to avoid major shifts in the students' routine. To make this lesson inclusive for parents as well, the students could be paired off with their parents to practice the emotions and reinforce repetition of these skills not only in school with their peers, but also at home with their parents. The students' and their parents could play against each other displaying different emotions in an attempt to broaden the students' understanding and recognition. To be more inclusive of students with severe disabilities who may have trouble communicating and showing facial expressions could be given a paper curriculum. This could include a similar game of matching the emotions to their labels with

guided assistance from their aids. Another possible route would be introducing discussion about

having romantic feelings for peers, as the special education students do not have typical

interactions with others or any discussion about the appropriate ways to go about these feelings.

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Appendix

A. Lesson 1:

https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1mpvgflPG1l9Re3OIZ-Su2tdjjmYqzDkVu6Be3c7cFCY/edit?usp=sharing

B. Lesson 2:

https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1AunOXEy1SnHaG_VW9IOjdPSnWTwYH-Ik6SRAKYhhDd4/edit?usp=sharing
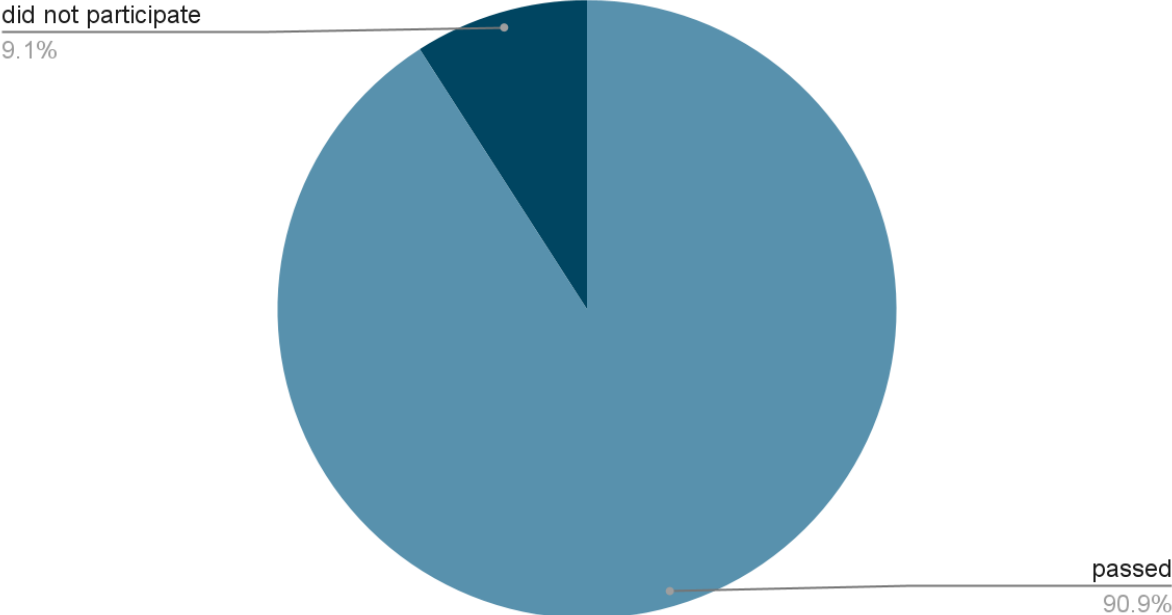
C. Lesson 3:

https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1OfQtpm-06tmbCWrCD9GFMIluDobKcLu26_gTkvPTv9Y/edit?usp=sharing

D. Capstone Festival Presentation:

https://www.canva.com/design/DAFzusX1YD0/IQN5fCE-vGcgbMjuUYAaxw/edit?utm_content=DAFzusX1YD0&utm_campaign=designshare&utm_medium=link2&utm_source=sharebutton

E.

Learning Outcome 1 (Table 1)

did not participate
9.1%

passed
90.9%

F.

Learning Outcome 2 (Table 2)

did not participate
18.2%

passed
81.8%