"I Can Have Success Here": Building Belonging in 16-Year-Old Boys Through Peer Tutoring

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Abstract

Regardless of age, it is likely that we have all experienced the feelings that come with failing at something multiple times. We know that when this happens, our belief in our ability to achieve that task is damaged and it becomes difficult to have the resilience to keep trying. This belief in our ability to achieve a particular “thing” is called “self-efficacy” (Bandura, 1977) and when our self-efficacy is damaged, it becomes hard to achieve or make progress. Unfortunately, the New Zealand education system is currently structured in a way which allows students, beginning at age 14 years, to fail high stakes assessments multiple times over a number of years. This continuous failure has created a landscape where students seem to be disengaging from the classroom altogether, ultimately not seeing this as a place in which they can have success. To address this issue, this action research explored the use of peer tutoring as a means to increase students’ academic self-efficacy and provide them a way to re-engage and find success in the classroom.

The steps of this project included identifying a group of 16-year-old students who had failed an assessment twice and were due to sit their third attempt midyear. This group of students attended six intervention sessions, taught by two peer tutors, across a six week period. The focus of these sessions was twofold: using language to improve the students’ academic self-efficacy, and a focus on literacy (the content of the high-stakes assessment). The action had positive results, with both qualitative and quantitative evidence showing that peer tutoring helped the students to feel safe and take risks in the classroom, and positively shifted the students’ attitude towards their learning.

However, challenges remain around engaging students who declined to participate, pointing to the need for earlier intervention in secondary school. While the outcomes were promising, upscaling the tutoring program will require careful consideration of the demands on peer tutors, staff, and school resources; a challenge that staff at Wellington College plan to explore further in a larger study.

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The 2020 UNICEF report “Worlds of Influence: Understanding What Shapes Child Well-being in Rich Countries” found that 35.4% of 15-year-olds in New Zealand struggle to read and write. This finding triggered a shift in the discussion around literacy within the New Zealand education sector, including the introduction of the “Co-requisite Qualification” into the New Zealand Secondary School qualification’s framework. This qualification consists of three pass or fail tests, one each in reading, writing, and numeracy. If students do not pass these tests, they can re-take them up to twice a year until their final year of secondary school, whilst simultaneously engaging in the other aspects of their secondary school qualifications (NCEA Levels 1-3 and University Entrance). If students do not pass all three co-requisite tests by the time they finish secondary school, they are not awarded any of their qualifications. That is to say, a student may pass chemistry and calculus with the highest grades possible, but if they have not passed the writing co-requisite test, they leave with nothing to their name.

The nationwide roll-out of these tests happened in 2023, with just 56.4% of students nationwide passing the writing test in the first of the two testing opportunities, and 54.7% in the second, with similar nationwide results in the 2024 academic year (NZQA, 2025). Nationwide results from the 2024 academic year also revealed that girls were outperforming boys by 10% in the writing test. While these numbers are troubling, what this looks like on the “front line” in schools is even more concerning, as behind the failure to pass is the damage to a student’s sense of belonging in the classroom. Failing these high stakes tests multiple times can impact the way they perceive themselves as learners; fail them, and the learning across all curriculum areas may end up counting for nothing.

Analysis of our school data at Wellington College shows other impacts as well. Across current Year 10, 11 and 12 students (ages 14-16 years), there seems to be a correlation between

students with lower literacy attainment and higher behavioural incidences in the classroom, regardless of subject areas (see Appendix A). Interestingly, while this group of students appear to not feel a sense of belonging in the classroom (as shown in their attitudes and behaviours), they do appear to feel a sense of belonging on the sideline of important sporting fixtures, where they are seen actively engaging in supporting the school, whilst wearing the uniform with pride.

These factors highlight a problem in our school: students with low literacy attainment do not feel the classroom is a place where they belong and can have success. As Bandura (1977) notes, if students do not believe they can have success, it is highly unlikely that they will. In practical terms, if we, as educators, do nothing, this group of students will end up leaving school with no qualifications. In order to stop this from happening, we need to change the students' belief in themselves as successful learners in the classroom, alongside their literacy capabilities. We need to help this group of students to feel like the academic classroom setting is a place where they belong. The question then becomes: How?

What we observe in boys' schools is that the "brotherhood" created appears to be crucial to boys' sense of belonging; therefore, leveraging this brotherhood can support students in developing their belief of their place in the classroom, as well as on the sport fields and sidelines. This led to my research questions: *How do peer tutoring workshops affect the academic self-efficacy of 16-year-old boys with low literacy attainment?*

Literature Review

The framework of self-efficacy, developed by Bandura (1977), asserts that if a person understands and believes a particular course of action will lead to an outcome, but doubt their own ability to achieve that course of action, their ability will be impacted. This can be in regard to both their initial attempts at mastery of the task as well as achieving it. More recently, Withy (2019), defines the concept of self-efficacy as "a set of beliefs that influence the decisions individuals make and the subsequent actions they choose to carry out" (para. 1).

The concept of self-efficacy has particular importance within the classroom setting. Pajares (2002) notes that “teachers would be well served by paying as much attention to students’ perceptions of competence as to actual competence” (p. 29). Hargreaves and Withy (2019) echo this, contending that self-efficacy is “an enabler of success at school” (para. 3). Therefore, understanding a learner’s self-efficacy in relation to a task, then intervening to improve this, should positively impact student outcomes.

Not only does a person’s self-efficacy affect the activities a person chooses to engage with, but it also impacts the effort they put in and their resilience and persistence when the task becomes challenging (Withy, 2019). Therefore, when faced with a student who is not attaining grades on an assessment which their ability suggests they should, a teacher can look to understand a student’s self-efficacy in order to help guide the next steps. However, Pajares (1996) suggests that self-efficacy judgements should be used with caution, arguing that in order to gain an accurate assessment of self-efficacy, the assessments of self-efficacies must be in response to domain specific statements, meaning that the capability that a student is self-assessing and the one being tested match exactly. This is due to self-efficacy not being in relation to a person’s self-esteem (how they feel about themselves and their overall self-worth), but rather a judgement of capability in relation to particular domains (Bandura, 2006).

Teachers must be able to use a range of strategies in order to appropriately intervene with underachieving students. Providing students with multiple opportunities for individual successes in a specific domain is one of these strategies. Evidence suggests that providing these opportunities can not only improve a student’s self-efficacy within a domain area, but can also transfer to similar situations, even ones that are substantially different. Once self-efficacy is developed, it is then easier to achieve in other areas (Bandura, 1977). The language used with students has also been shown to have an impact on self-efficacy, with it being far easier to weaken self-efficacy through negative feedback than to strengthen with positive. However,

genuinely positive feedback from peers and teachers can have a significant impact on the self-efficacy of a learner (Withy, 2019).

John Hattie (2012), in his study into the effect pedagogical strategies on learning outcomes, found that peer tutoring has an effect size of 0.54, greater than that of the typical classroom teacher's effect of 0.4. He went on to show that peer tutoring has the ability to support students in increasing their self-regulation in regard to their learning. Similarly, Hargreaves and Withy (2019) note that "peers are the second most important influence on self-efficacy beliefs" (para. 7), and that peer modelling, especially when the peer models themselves show fallibility, can be more effective than teacher modelling.

The impacts of peer tutoring on students' self-efficacy can be further reinforced through understanding that students place greater value on the support they get from other students and find greater enjoyment in the learning process when undertaken with peers (Brown & Thomson, 2000). This notion of "value" is particularly pertinent for boys, who place a high value on being able to accomplish tasks, such as preparing for exams, with their peers, which they find far more meaningful when completed together (Cox, 2011).

Peer tutoring and peer learning are models of collaborative learning, where students work in groups to teach each other and address misunderstandings. This form of collaborative learning has been found to increase retention, self-esteem, and academic self-efficacy in the students involved (Child & Shaw, 2016; Collaborative Learning, n.d.). The impacts of peer tutoring are of particular importance in the New Zealand setting, where it is a traditional part of Te Ao Māori (the Māori world). Through the concept of *tuakana-teina*, an older or more expert *tuakana*supports and guides the younger *teina* through a reciprocal learning relationship and both students are valued for what they bring to the relationship (Te Reo Māori Online, n.d.).

The feeling of being valued is especially relevant with boys, as it has been shown that when they do not feel valued in a classroom, it leads to increased cortisol production, which

does not happen for girls. This increase in cortisol production forces the brain into survival mode and away from the mode of thinking and learning (Gurian et al., 2001). Further reinforcing this point, Cox (2011), established that boys who understand their place in a group hierarchy feel more freedom to test themselves, growing in both confidence and courage. The New Zealand Education Review Office (2018) has found that the use of reciprocal learning models results in gains in learning and improvement in attitudes towards learning for the tutees. Beyond individual moments of peer tutoring, establishing school wide *tuakana-teina* programmes of peer tutoring and mentoring have shown both an increase in student engagement and academic achievement (Education Gazette editors, 2022).

Methodology

Action research is an inquiry process aimed to bring about meaningful change and is used by educators to investigate "how their particular school operates, how they teach, and how their students learn" (Mills, 2011, p. 5). Rooted in constructivist theory, action research recognizes knowledge as co-constructed and context bound. This process allowed me to investigate a problem which was born of the New Zealand educational context, but where the solution is unique to the needs of the boys of Wellington College. This influenced my qualitative approach, where understanding was shaped through interaction with participants, observation and reflection on experience. I used both quantitative and qualitative methods: Quantitative Likert scale questionnaires before and after the intervention measured shifts in perception or behaviour, alongside qualitative observations, group discussion, and analysis to explore deeper insights.

Research Context

Wellington College is a state funded secondary boys' school in Wellington, New Zealand. Wellington College is one of the oldest schools in New Zealand, founded in 1867. The school sits within the "fewest" barriers category in the New Zealand School's Equity Index. The New Zealand

Ministry of Education describes the Equity Index as a classification system which estimates "the extent to which young people face socio-economic barriers to achieving in education" (Ministry of Education, 2024); meaning, therefore, that most students at Wellington College face some of the fewest barriers to education when compared to other secondary schools around the country. Wellington College enrols some 1950 students across Years 9 to 13 (12- to 18-years-old), coming from a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds. The school's vision for its students is captured by its motto *Lumen accipe et imperti*—Receive the light and pass it on.

The fifteen participants in this study were Year 12 students (16-years-old), selected because they had previously failed the writing co-requisite test twice, requiring them to take it a third time in May 2025. The students in this group knew me due to my position as Assistant Principal. Excluding one student who I taught for the first time in 2025, and another who had participated in intervention workshops I have led, I did not have regular contact with any of the students in this group.

Ethics

Both students and the families were informed of the action, with the opportunity not to be involved clearly outlined. Throughout this process, it was explained that students would have access to the support and guidance needed to prepare for the Co-requisite tests whether or not they participated. Students' identities were kept anonymous using through a coding system which identified each participant as 'Student A', and so on. All students and families were happy to be included in this research.

The Action

The action took place across a six-week period, during Period 1 on a Friday, a time when Year 12 and 13 students would normally have a late start. This was an important consideration as it meant these students, who were already struggling with belonging, needed to choose to come into school early for an optional lesson. While fifteen students were invited to participate

and attend sessions, only nine regularly attended and were ultimately included in the results. The two Year 13 students who acted as peer tutors (named 'Peer Tutor A' and 'Peer Tutor B' in this report) were student leaders and therefore known to the group of Year 12s.

The focus of each peer-tutored session was twofold: to improve the students' skills required to meet the written literacy requirements of the exam and to bolster the students' academic self-efficacy and sense of belonging in the classroom.

Timeline

Week Prior to Sessions Commencing

I began by meeting with the two peer tutors to plan the first few sessions. Since the focus of the action was the impact of peer tutoring on the students being tutored and not on the tutors themselves, I pre-planned the portions of the session that were specifically related to the requirements of the qualification. My time with the Year 13 peer tutors was used to focus on developing the tutees' academic self-efficacy to help increase their mastery of the material.

Peer Tutoring Workshops (Six-Week Period)

Each week I met with the peer tutors to run through the session for the following morning. Following the session, I used feedback to plan the subsequent session. Each session took a similar structure, including a "Do Now" activity that asked the tutees to complete a grammar task, followed by the main body of learning, which focused on planning and writing persuasive emails or articles in the structure required for their co-requisite test.

Data Collection

I used a mixed-method approach to data collection, using both quantitative and qualitative sources of data. The data collection took place before, during and after the conclusion of action itself.

At the beginning of the first session, the participants completed a Likert scale questionnaire that focused on how the students see themselves in academic settings (see Appendix B). This pre-action questionnaire was written using the guidance of Pajares (1996), who notes that in order to gain an accurate assessment, statements need to be written as domain specific.

During the action, I recorded observation notes making sure to include both changes in behaviours as well as conversations had by the students.

Post-action, participants were given the same Likert scale questionnaire that they completed in the first session. Following this, I completed a focus group interview with six of the Year 12 participants.

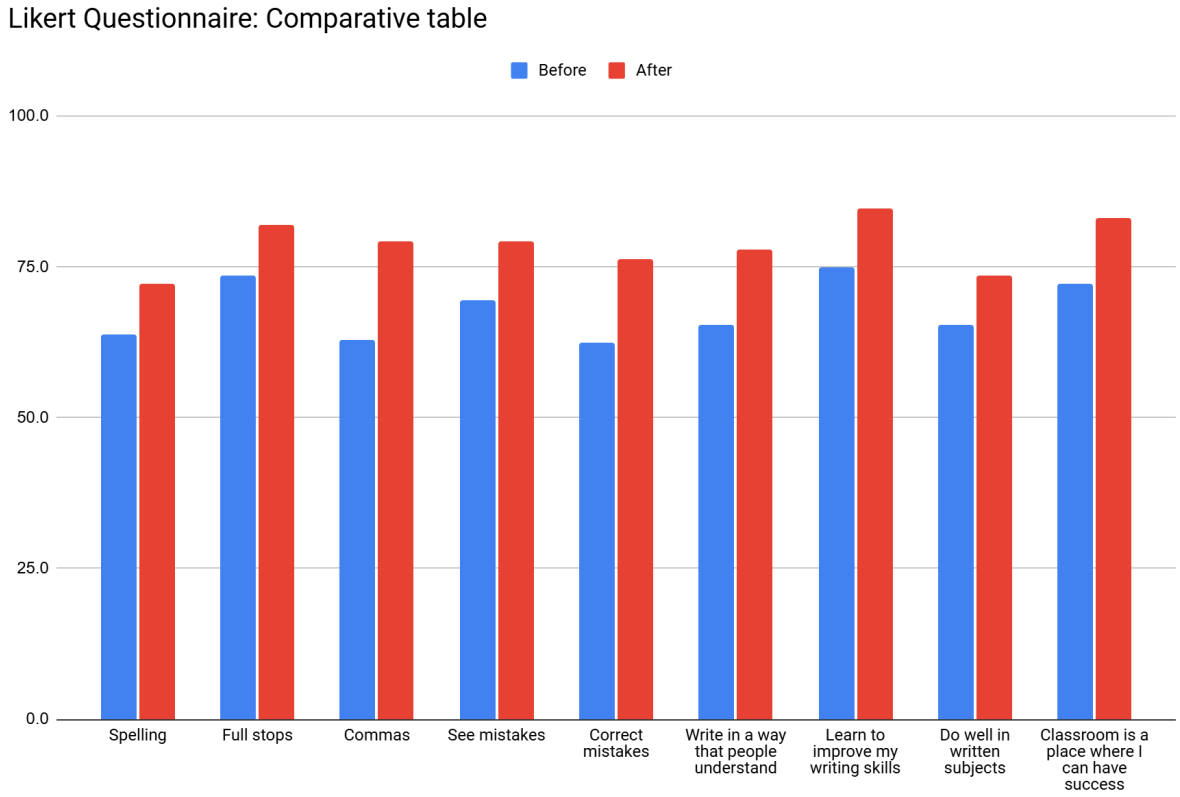
Data Analysis

To analyse the data, I used inductive reasoning, whereby meaning was generated from the observations made after the action had taken place. Initially, I grouped responses using the highlighting method. During my first attempt, I grouped things chronologically and as a whole to identify patterns for the entire cohort. Secondly, I grouped responses by student to see how individuals shifted throughout the course of the action. This varied grouping of the data allowed for two central themes to be identified from the qualitative responses: safety and risk taking; and attitudes as the key to unlocking learning.

Quantitative data, via Likert scale questionnaire responses (see Figure 1), were used at the beginning and end of the action to support the qualitative data. In this questionnaire, students were asked to rate themselves as a percentage of their perceived ability based on nine “I can” statements.

Figure 1

Average Responses Across All Students, Pre- and Post-Action



Findings and Discussion

The findings of this research suggest that peer tutoring in a classroom setting helped to increase the academic self-efficacy of boys with low literacy attainment due to the student-to-student shared experience. This happens through two avenues: the peer tutoring helps students to feel safe to take risks in the classroom; and the peer tutoring helps to shift students' attitudes towards learning in the classroom in a positive direction, which in turn unlocks learning.

Peer Tutoring Helps Boys to Feel Safe and Take Risks in the Classroom

Traditional research tells us that when boys feel valued and understand their place in a group's hierarchy, they feel freer to test themselves (Cox, 2011). Qualitative findings from this

action support this notion. Participants, within only two sessions, began to take greater risks and test themselves in the learning environment. The boys' willingness to take risks appears to have been in response to feeling that the peer tutors understood, and therefore valued, their struggle.

Observations from session one highlighted the initial negative attitudes of students towards being in the classroom setting and engaging in learning. When asked to participate in questioning and discussion, students did not offer answers with any enthusiasm and needed a lot of prompting to engage. The two peer tutors noted after the session that it was "harder than [they] thought" to teach and motivate students. During the session itself, Student D, after being particularly slow to start a task, whispered to Student H next to him, "What's the point, I'm never going to be able to do this," to which Student H responded with, "Na, I definitely can't do this."

The boys' reticence to try continued into session two, where students were reluctant to try corrections on a task and the peer tutors ultimately had to step in. At this point, Peer Tutor A talked about his own experience with, and the importance of, struggle. In the task that followed, Peer Tutor B made an error when modelling a task at the board, in response to which Peer Tutor A worked with the students to help correct the mistake. After this, when asking for volunteers to complete a task at the board, three students volunteered. This moment signalled a shift in the willingness of the students to take risks. By session three, students A, B and F were all quick to share responses after the starter activity. Later in the session, students were tasked with reading out loud to each other, which is traditionally a task that struggling students would avoid. Peer Tutor A approached students G and H, who were off task, and gave encouragement and explained the importance of the task. Upon walking away, Student G began to read out loud to student H. The two students then remained focused for the remainder of the session.

By session four, students were taking greater risks in front of the group, including openly asking questions such as, "Which one is an apostrophe again?" Peer Tutor B followed this up with positive reinforcement for asking the question, which resulted in two further questions from

students; thus, demonstrating an increase in feelings of safety and belonging within the learning environment. These feelings continued through sessions five and six, with students consistently asking the peer tutors for help, calling them over for support, and contributing to discussion.

This shift in feelings of safety and increased risk taking was also reflected in the group discussion feedback, which took place after the sixth session. When asked what it was like being taught by someone a bit older than them, Student I responded that it was the same, except that "[The peer tutors] were a bit less confident [than a classroom teacher]," and Student F noted that, "[Peer Tutor A and B] were nervous at the beginning, but so was I."

This apparent nervousness seemed to endear the tutors to the students. When asked if there were things that the Peer tutors did that teachers didn't, Student E responded that, "They know the experience that we are having, so they were able to talk from their personal experience." This was reinforced by Student D who said they were "more relatable," with Student A saying he felt respected and listened to because "[The Peer tutors] understood that we were struggling, and some teachers don't understand that." When asked if they would want to learn from someone older than them again, the students unanimously agreed that they would because it was "fun.. These findings align with the research, which states that in order for peer tutoring to be effective, the peer tutors themselves must show fallibility (Hattie, 2012), and that students find greater enjoyment in learning from their peers, which in turn helps to support increased self-efficacy (Brown & Thomson, 2000).

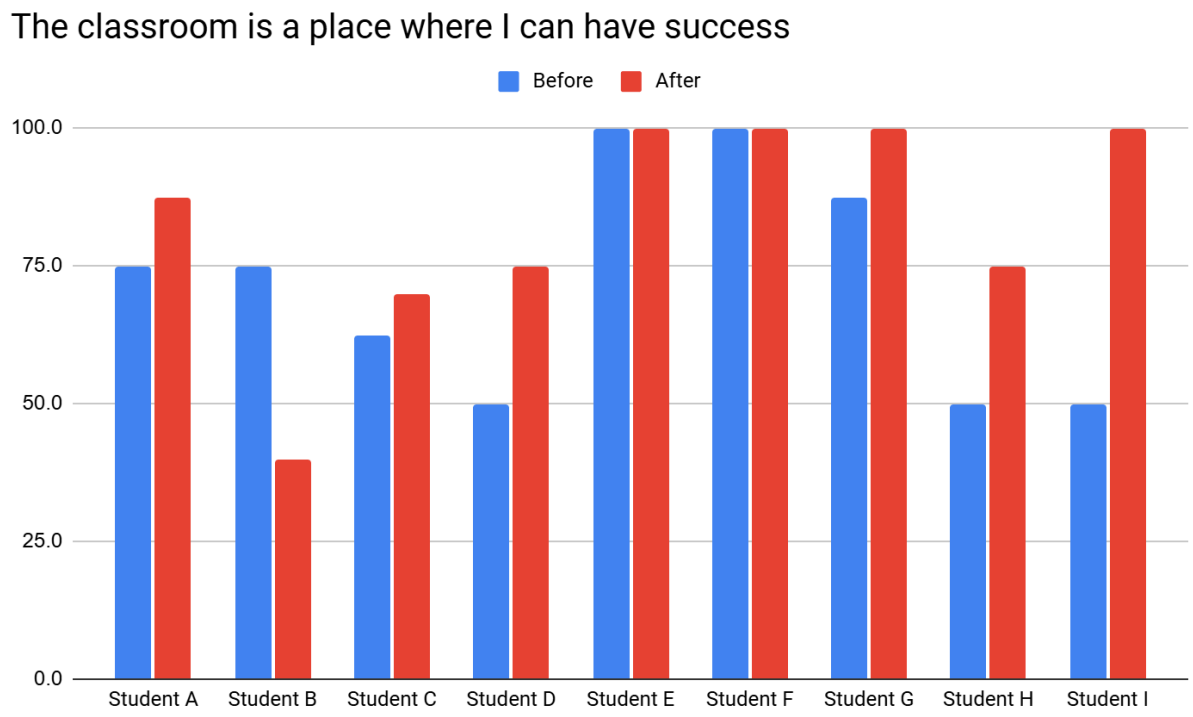
Peer Tutoring Positively Shifts Students' Attitudes Towards Learning

This research highlighted the positive influence peer tutoring can have on tutees' self-efficacy. The Likert scale questionnaire results show that all students, excluding one, maintained or increased their belief that the classroom is a place where they can have success (see Figure 2). The one student who indicated a far worse self-efficacy score expressed that this was as a result of a wider context around school that had happened that week, highlighting the

limitations of using Likert scale questionnaires as a single source of data when used to draw conclusions in action research.

Figure 2

Individual Participants' Scoring of Themselves as Being Successful Learners in the Classroo.

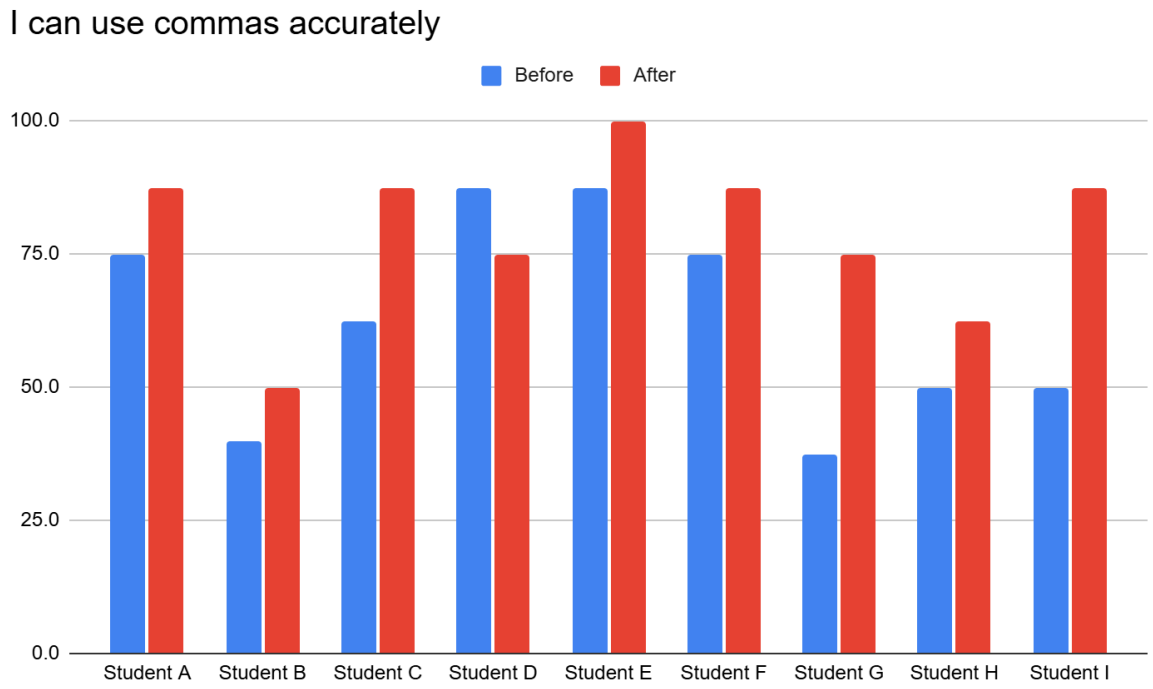


This shift in attitude towards learning in the classroom is reflected in the qualitative findings as well. In the early sessions, students were either not engaging or using negative self-talk; however, by session three, this had shifted to distinctly more positive talk. During a peer task, Student G said to Student H, “You’ve got this mate,” to which Student H responded, “we’re going to nail it.” This is in direct contrast to the first session where the same students were heard saying they “can’t” and would “never” be able to “do this.” Additionally in session three, Student F, who had barely said a word across the first two sessions, openly asked for support from Peer Tutor A, showing a desire to engage more fully in his learning and progress by actively seeking support.

The shift to a more positive attitude towards learning continued across the remainder of the sessions. Students began agreeing to try things they acknowledged having ignored in the past, even when their teachers encouraged them to do so. In session four Student I stated, “I thought planning was a waste of time before, but maybe I will do it this time.” Similarly, Student H said, “Oh, that might be why I failed last time, OK I'll do it this time.” This was followed in session five by Student F exclaiming, “This is WAY easier” and Student H “high fiving” Student G for offering both partially correct and correct answers to problems. By session six Student A stated, “I'm passing stuff now, so I can definitely do this.”

The boys’ increased self-efficacy, as supported by both the qualitative observations and quantitative data, was further reinforced through the group discussion. All students, when asked if they had changed the way they think about their own abilities, commented that they were more positive using statements such as, “I feel like I'm more ready this time,” and “I’m more confident in my writing.” Interestingly, they also said that they have “learnt more skills,” when, in fact, no skills were “new” during the sessions. For example, all but one student indicated that they felt more confident in their ability to use the comma accurately following the sessions, when in fact commas were not covered at all! (see Figure 3). The sessions appear to have unlocked the students’ ability to use skills and knowledge they already had. This finding supports the research by Bandura (1977), which asserts that when we support a student in improving their self-efficacy within a domain area, that this can then transfer into other areas more easily.

Figure 3



Conclusion

The findings of this research suggest that the use of peer tutoring successfully helped to build belonging and grow academic self-efficacy in boys with low literacy attainment. This was shown through both the quantitative and qualitative data gathered across the course of the research. In particular, the results suggest that peer tutoring leads to students feeling safe to take risks and positively shifts their attitudes towards learning in an academic classroom setting.

However, this research also raised the issue of how to engage the group of students who were invited to participate in the intervention but chose not to engage. Students also had the option to participate in interventions not part of the action research, and, therefore, this was not a factor for their "opting out." This challenge opens the door for exploring ways of engaging students in the peer tutoring model to help build their self-efficacy earlier in the secondary

school career, in order to prevent them reaching a place of being hard to engage by the time they get to Year 12 (16-years-old).

Another factor which needs to be considered when thinking about applying this peer tutoring model more widely across schools, is the demand on the peer tutors themselves and the resources required to train and then supervise them in the classrooms. A part of the success of the programme relied on having the lessons written by a teacher with the expertise in both curriculum and pedagogy, who prepared the tutors to deliver a high quality "lesson," including training around the use of the language to support the promotion of self-efficacy. Schools would need to balance the opportunity cost of a programme like this, weighing factors such as the time and energy of staff and peer tutors, as well as the monetary cost of staffing, against the opportunity presented in fostering the success and belonging in the students with low academic self-efficacy.

On the whole, the outcomes of this research were positive and align with the wider literature on peer tutoring as a tool for improving self-efficacy. The positive nature of the findings provides the impetus to undergo a wider study. Following the conclusion of this action research project, at Wellington College, we plan to embark on a larger scale study. We plan to use the principles of this peer tutoring model and apply it to all students who need interventions before the next round of the Co-requisite Qualification testing.

Reflection

This action research project has proven to be an invaluable learning experience for myself as an educator. Whilst the navigation between the "usual business" of my role within school and the demands of the action research, at times, felt overwhelming, the ultimate results made every moment worthwhile. For me, one of the biggest standout moments was the literature review, where I was able to immerse myself in the readings. This supported me in bedding what had previously been conclusions I had drawn from experience, in theory, providing

me with lots of 'Yes! That's so true!' moments. Then, once the action was under way and I started to see the positive change in the students "in real time," it gave me a joy that was priceless. An added bonus of this project was seeing the joy that the two peer tutors gained from working with this group of students, and how invested they became in their progress. This also enabled the peer tutors to develop skills that will support them in later life, such as clarity of communication and leading with empathy.

This wouldn't have been possible without the support of my school, including Glen Denham, the Headmaster of Wellington College, and my fellow Strategic Leadership Team colleagues. In particular Luci Lendrum and Jenna Vreeburg, who listened to me endlessly talking about my research and picked up my slack when I had to turn my focus to the analysis and writing of my report, and to Aaron Columbus, who, as my research mentor, allowed me to show up at his door unannounced to talk through any niggly thoughts I was working through.

At the conclusion of this action research journey, I feel excited to embark on the next stage of this, moving into a wider trial; my ideal being that we are able to find a way to support all students in sustaining positive academic self-efficacy, therefore enabling them to progress in their learning and achieve their goals.

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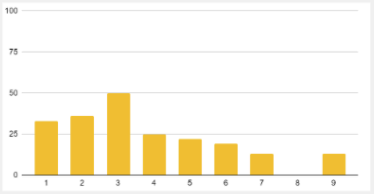
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Appendix A

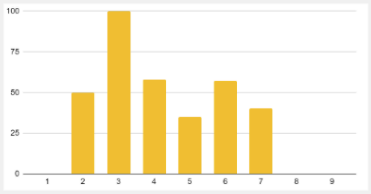
The link between literacy and behaviour

These graphs show the percentage of students within a stanine who have one or more 'discipline' or 'classroom' pastoral entries

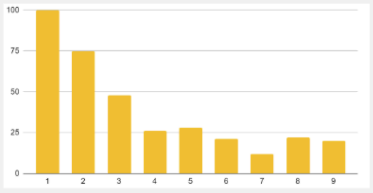
Class of '27 *Year 10 Term 1*



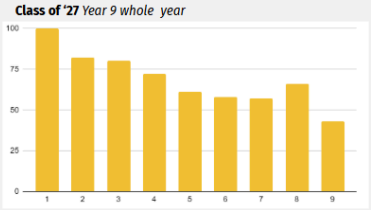
Class of '26 *Year 11* Term 1*



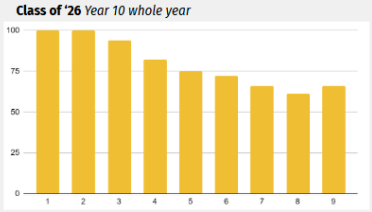
Class of '28 *Year 9 Term 1*



Class of '27 *Year 9 whole year*



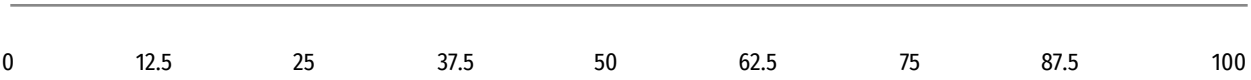
Class of '26 *Year 10 whole year*



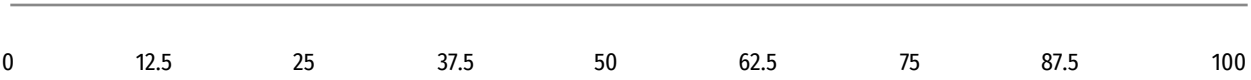


Appendix B

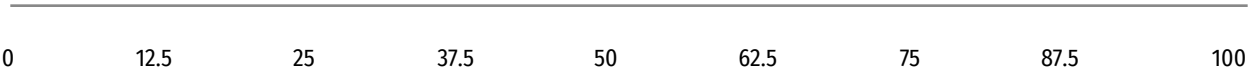
I can spell accurately



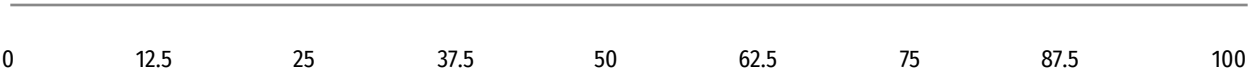
I can use full stops accurately



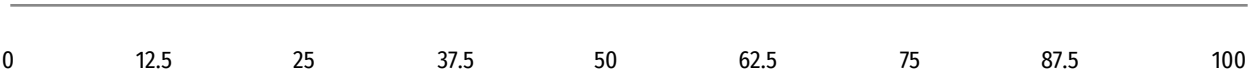
I can use commas accurately



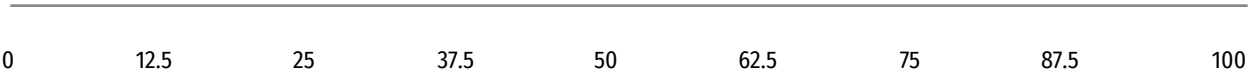
I can see mistakes in my own work



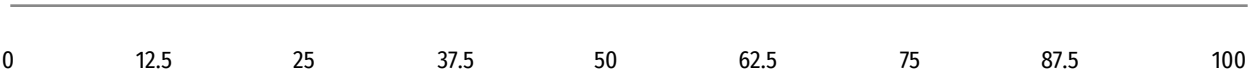
I can correct mistakes in my own work



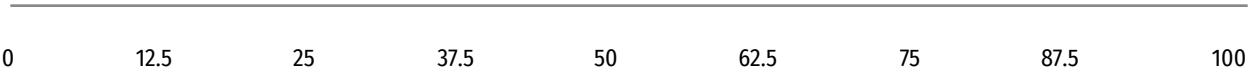
I can write in a way that people understand



I can learn to improve my writing skills



I can do well in written subjects



The classroom is a place where I can have success

