



Westlake Boys High School  
Te Kura Tuarua o Ngā Taitamaāne o Ururoto

# *A Year in the Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning*



# Reflections on a year in the Centre for Excellence

I am immensely proud to have been part of what the Centre team have achieved in 2025

## Jude Arbuthnot

### Renewed focus on Research

Every year, the creativity, intelligence, and strong work ethic of the team combines to create meaningful and supportive professional development opportunities for Westlake staff and beyond. This year was no different, in fact, I think our impact has grown at an exponential rate.

For me, my work with trainee teachers has been particularly rewarding. Working with a range of Initial Teacher Training providers, Westlake has hosted nearly 30 pre-service teachers this year. And beside every trainee are one or two mentors from our staff, ready to share their time, experience and expertise. This combination of experience and novice practitioners is essential to the development and sustainability of the teaching profession, and I can confidently say that Westlake is a great place to do your teaching practicum.

For the past few years we have been attempting to relaunch our Action Research programmes; 2025 was the year we succeeded. Later in this publication you will have the opportunity to read summaries of Action Research carried out by staff and students. I wanted to personally acknowledge the hard work, effort and time that all the Action Researchers put into the year's work. It is not an easy feat in such a busy school but their commitment to the projects and understanding of the importance of inquiring into teaching and learning drove their successes. I look forward to growing the programme further next year.

In August, I had the privilege of attending the Research Invested Schools National Gathering in Melbourne. While there I presented on how to establish Student Action Research and the response was very positive. It was also a wonderful opportunity to network with teachers from likeminded schools in Australia and New Zealand.

Meanwhile, the Research Invested Schools network in New Zealand continues to grow. I am now on the committee of the group as the Auckland representative with plans to continue to meet regularly online to share ideas and collaborate in the research space, and to organise a mini-conference for 2026. It is professionally fulfilling to know that education is a rich research space in New Zealand. These sentiments are also true in the IBSC Special



Interest Group (SIG) on research that I am part of. These regular online SIG meetings allow me to connect with teachers around the world to discuss what works best for boys, and how we can use research to know this to be the case.

This will be the last year that I edit this publication. I will be handing over the reins to Rachel Smith, our new Leader of Learning in the Centre. I know that she will bring her wit, flair and creativity not only to the publication, but the Centre team next year. Welcome Rachel.

I would also like to take the opportunity to wish Becky O'Gram the very best for her future role at The Teachers' Institute. Her guidance and direction for teaching and learning has been profoundly impactful for our staff and our students. She will be sorely missed and we thank her for all she has done. Goodbye Becky.

With continued drive and initiative, the Centre for Excellence will continue to grow, but at its heart will always be a team that has the best interests of the students as its focus. Bring on 2026.

## Casey de Wit

### Excellence in Professional Development

This year has been an incredibly rewarding one, marked by collaboration, innovation, and a focus on growing both staff and student capability. My involvement across several Centre for Excellence initiatives, from professional development to student leadership has provided opportunities to combine two things I care deeply about: people and progress.



A real highlight has been the introduction of the Emerging Student Leaders programme, designed to develop foundational leadership skills among our Year 12 students. This initiative has focused on self-awareness, communication, empathy, and service, helping students recognise that leadership begins with character. It has been inspiring to see these students grow in confidence and purpose.

Working with our Prefect team has continued to be a privilege. They have proven to be an empathetic, focused, and supportive group of young men who model authentic leadership and care for their peers. Our Prefect Professional Development sessions have encouraged reflective leadership, teamwork, and the importance of leaving with honour and legacy.

Our Staff Book Club has also gone from strength to strength. This year, our readings combined research-based educational practice with broader reflections on wellbeing. From evidence around cognitive load to "Life Hacks from the Buddha." The group continues to provide a meaningful space for collegial discussion and professional curiosity.

In my role on the AI Integration Committee and through my in-school Action Research project, I have explored how teachers can use artificial intelligence ethically and effectively to support student learning. The project has informed our school-wide AI framework and supported staff in building confidence with classroom applications. This has been an exciting area of growth, as staff across the school begin to experiment with new tools and share their experiences.

I have also really enjoyed taking on the Professional Growth Cycle. It has been a genuine pleasure engaging in Teaching and Learning conversations with staff and hearing about the innovative practice happening across our classrooms. Alongside this, the Professional Development planned for our teaching staff this year has included sessions on cognitive load theory, Mātauranga Māori, behaviour management, and a review of the new curriculum changes. These have sparked rich discussion and practical reflection within departments.

It has been a privilege to work in The Centre for Excellence and contribute to a culture where learning, leadership, and innovation continue to thrive.

## Kelly Easton

### Leading Growth and Excellence Across Our Teaching Community

This year has been both professionally rewarding and deeply fulfilling as I have had the privilege of leading initiatives that strengthen teaching, learning, and leadership within our school. Through my involvement in the Aspiring Middle Leaders Programme, I have worked with colleagues to nurture emerging leadership potential and build capacity for sustained excellence here at Westlake. Facilitating professional development to explore leadership identity, develop strategic thinking, and lead with integrity has continued to affirm my belief that effective leadership is embedded in collaboration, reflection, and a shared sense of purpose.



An especially meaningful aspect of my role has been mentoring beginning teachers. Supporting colleagues as they embark on their teaching journey has reminded me of the importance of encouragement, constructive feedback, and professional dialogue in shaping confident, reflective practitioners. It is immensely rewarding to see new teachers grow in assurance and skill, and to know that this guidance contributes directly to the strength and consistency of teaching at Westlake. I actually find the mentoring process to be mutually enriching — as I mentor others, I continue to refine my own practice and deepen my understanding of what impactful teaching looks like in our ever-evolving classrooms.

Alongside this, I have led professional development for the whole staff, as well as more targeted sessions for smaller groups of experienced teachers. Whether facilitating workshops on effective pedagogy, sharing evidence-based strategies, or promoting collaborative reflection, I have aimed to create spaces where colleagues feel inspired to innovate, take risks, and refine their craft. It is a privilege to witness the professionalism, curiosity, and commitment that teachers in our community bring to these sessions, all united by the shared goal of ensuring the very best outcomes for their students.

As I reflect on the year, what continues to drive me is the opportunity to contribute to the high standards of teaching and learning that define Westlake Boys. Continuing to work in the Centre for Excellence with like-minded peers deepens my appreciation of how collective professional growth enhances the culture of excellence that benefits our entire community.



# Teacher Training Going from Strength to Strength

Reflections from a selection of this year's trainees

## Jessica Zhao

Maths – The Teachers' Institute

This year in my school-based teacher training, one of the biggest lessons I learned is that teaching is all about building relationships. In a boys' school, I saw first-hand how much learning depends on trust, respect, and connection between teacher and students. Boys respond strongly when they know their teacher genuinely cares about them—not just their grades, but also who they are as people. When those relationships are established, classroom management becomes easier, and students are more motivated to engage with learning because they feel valued and understood.

I also learned that boys often look for leadership in their teachers. They need a figure who sets clear boundaries, models consistency, and guides them with confidence.



Being that leader doesn't mean being authoritarian—it means being firm, fair, and reliable, while also showing empathy. By stepping into that educational leadership role, I was able to create a classroom culture where students felt secure, respected, and ready to learn. This balance of strong relationships and leadership is something I will continue to carry into my teaching practice.

## Kathy Wilson

English – The Teachers' Institute

Enthusiastic, excited, and apprehensive - that was how I felt at the start of 2025. I had made the bold decision to retrain and become a teacher. Crazy? Perhaps – but easily the best decision that I have ever made about my career, well so far anyway.

Choosing to complete my teacher training through The Teachers' Institute, in a school-based programme, was also a wise decision. The school-based programme has proven to be a good fit for me. I have had the most rewarding experience at Westlake Boys High School. From the very first day, I was immersed in the realities of classroom life. I have been fortunate to learn under the guidance of two supportive and knowledgeable mentor teachers, Sidah Russell and James Cammell. I also had a patient and encouraging Virtute teacher, Rachel Smith, and an exceptional coordinator, Jude, all of whom ensured I felt encouraged and supported every step of the way. Their mentorship not only supported my growth but also challenged me and pushed me beyond my comfort zone.

The experience often left me exhausted by the steep learning curve, but also energised by the boys' spirit, enthusiasm, and willingness to take risks in their thinking. Two of the most valuable lessons I've learned are to relax and be myself and to talk less and listen more (the second one still needs some practice).

I have really enjoyed watching the students come alive in their extracurricular activities, whether it be on the debating floor, the running track or the sports field. Their energy and commitment are inspiring. I am excited to be joining the English Department next year, and on Saturday mornings you might spot me on the sidelines, cheering the boys on.



## Tāwera Akehurst

### Science/Te Puna – Auckland Schools Teacher Training Programme

Kia ora e te whānau whānui, ko Tāwera Akehurst tāku ingoa.

He uri nō te Tai Tokerau, ko Ngāpuhi me Ngāti Kahu ki Whangaroa ōku iwi.

Last year, I had the privilege to take part in the Auckland Schools Teacher Training Programme through Westlake Boys.

The Centre for Excellence became a mainstay in my journey towards teaching certification; I chose the ASTTP Pathway because I wanted to learn in a hands-on environment where I could immediately apply theory to practice. Working alongside experienced kaiako allowed me to see the real complexities and rewards of teaching, far beyond what can be learned from university lectures alone.

Throughout the course, I was able to spend time in the Centre taking part in various Professional Development seminars, having meaningful conversations about teaching pedagogy, and sharing my experiences through the programme. The mentoring I received through the Centre helped me refine my classroom management skills, build



prosperous relationships with students, and reflect critically on my teaching practices.

I plan to carry these skills forward into my teaching by creating engaging, student-centred lessons that reflect the diverse identities of ākonga and uphold the principles of Te Tiriti o Waitangi. One of the most enjoyable aspects of this process was seeing my students light up with curiosity during lessons. The biggest challenges were balancing study, teaching practice, and my personal life with my wife and three children. I was able to overcome these through perseverance, open communication with mentors, and a genuine passion for supporting learners to thrive

## Sunny (Xiaoji) Sun

### Digital Technology, The Teachers' Institute

When I began my journey as a school-based trainee teacher, I wanted to bridge my past with my future. Having worked as a software engineer for over a decade and later as a fully registered early childhood teacher, I chose school-based training because it offered authentic, day-to-day immersion in teaching. I believed that learning through doing, by being in the classroom with real students and experienced mentors, would help me grow faster and more meaningfully than theory alone could.

This year at Westlake Boys has been a remarkable experience. I have taught Year 9 to Year 12 students in Digital Technology, guiding them through coding, web design, and Python programming. Each lesson has been a new opportunity to learn, not only about teaching strategies but also about communication, adaptability, and the importance of understanding how teenage learners think and respond.

One of my greatest takeaways has been the value of scaffolding learning carefully, breaking complex coding tasks into achievable steps while maintaining students' confidence and curiosity. I have also learned the importance of relationships; building trust with students, has made classroom management more natural and learning more collaborative.

I have most enjoyed watching students light up when their code finally runs successfully or when they realise they can

design something entirely their own. Those moments remind me why I love teaching: it is about guiding discovery rather than simply delivering content.

Of course, there have been challenges. Stepping into a new environment as a trainee, teaching large groups of energetic boys, and managing off-task behaviour were initially intimidating. However, with the consistent support of my mentors and the reflective culture of TTI, I learned to stay calm, plan with intention, and focus on solutions. Over time, my classroom presence grew stronger, and my confidence followed.

The mentoring I received was invaluable. My mentor teacher not only modelled good practice but also invited me into genuine professional dialogue. Observing her lessons, receiving constructive feedback, and then applying new strategies in my own classes taught me the rhythm of responsive teaching.

Looking ahead, I plan to apply everything I have learned to build inclusive, hands-on learning environments that integrate technology, creativity, and critical thinking. The school based experience at Westlake Boys has not only prepared me for the classroom but has also reaffirmed my belief that teaching is a profession of both heart and craft.



## Romina Villamonte

Maths, The Teachers' Institute

I chose a school-based teacher training pathway because I wanted to gain hands-on experience directly with teachers and students. Being immersed in the classroom environment allowed me to see the realities of teaching beyond theory, and to learn by observing experienced practitioners while actively engaging with learners.

One of the most important lessons I discovered is that not all students learn in the same way. Each learner has unique strengths, challenges, and preferences. I learnt that students have enormous potential, but it is our responsibility as teachers to help them find the approach that works best for them. This reinforced my belief that teaching is about flexibility, patience, and creativity.

In my own teaching, I will apply these insights by staying true to my philosophy that every student can learn. My role is to help them find their way, even if it means trying multiple strategies. I believe that learning from failure is part of growth, and students deserve every opportunity to succeed. I will continue to differentiate my teaching, provide varied learning experiences, and encourage resilience in my classroom.



The aspect I enjoyed most was being involved with students; building relationships, learning about their interests, and seeing their progress. These interactions reminded me why I chose teaching: to make a positive impact on young people's lives.

Like any new teacher, I faced challenges such as managing behaviour, adapting lessons on the spot, and balancing expectations. I overcame these by developing resilience, reflecting on what worked and what didn't, and seeking guidance from mentors. The mentoring component of the course was invaluable, as it provided constructive feedback and encouragement that helped me grow in confidence and skill.

## Hayden Patching

Commerce and Music, Auckland Schools Teacher Training Programme

For 2025, I have been based at Westlake Boys High School, undertaking a Graduate Diploma in Teaching (Secondary) and getting invaluable experience onsite at the school. The experience I've gained far exceeds the standard two 7-week placements through traditional university pathways. The integration in the school was seamless, and being trained in a school with incredibly supportive teachers and staff has been one of the most rewarding things I've done in my career.

Like many trainee teachers, I am a career changer. I have spent 12 years as a practising accountant, and even longer than that as a performing musician. After many conversations with family and friends I felt now was the time to pursue teacher training. I felt like I had a wealth of experience to impart into the next generation, and I really wanted to be in a career that valued and utilised both of my skill sets. I chose school-based teacher training because I felt that being in a school would be the best way to learn. Being paired with two contrasting mentor teachers provided very different approaches to teaching and gave me permission to develop my own style and approach to teaching as well. Being based in a school for training is the only way trainee teachers can glean off experienced professionals without a time limit. This is an invaluable strength of the programme and will serve me well as I embark on my professional teaching career.

This year I have learnt several things that can't be taught through university papers: Classroom management, building professional relationships with teaching colleagues, building positive relationships with students, working to tight curriculum deadlines and inspiring students to come on the journey with you. Going forward at the heart of my teaching I will put relationships first before academic achievement and the skills I developed this year will be further enhanced and honed for the benefit of the students.



Whilst the course was an incredible year, it wasn't without its challenges. It is a much bigger workload than doing it through a university alone, and that has required personal sacrifices. I did find having dual interests (University deadlines vs school requirements) challenging. Having a supportive school co-ordinator who was separate from my mentor teachers really helped, as well as professional communication with my mentor teachers about the conflicts of interest and what I needed to achieve.

Overall, I would absolutely recommend school-based training as a valuable course that truly prepares you for the reality of teaching. It's challenging and rewarding at the same time, and I firmly believe it has set a firm foundation for my career going forward.



# IBSC Conference Boston

Better Together

## *Boys and Belonging: A Completed Action Research Journey*

In June 2025, I had the privilege of presenting my completed action research project at the International Boys' Schools Coalition (IBSC) conference at Belmont Hill School in Boston. This marked the culmination of an 18-month journey that began with a question: How can we foster belonging, inclusivity, and engagement among Pasifika boys in our classrooms?

The idea first sparked at the 2023 IBSC conference hosted by Westlake, where I was inspired by the calibre of educators and the collaborative spirit of the Action Research programme. I applied to join the 2024–2025 cohort, motivated by my experience with my Pasifika Virtute class. While I loved working with these boys, I noticed that unless prompted, they were hesitant to connect with me and one another. I wondered whether this reflected a deeper issue of belonging.

Accepted into a global cohort of 44 researchers, I was supported by Bryan Dunn as my advisor and worked alongside educators from Australia, South Africa, the United States, the UK, and New Zealand. The initial phase involved reading Mills' *Action Research: A Guide for the Teacher Researcher*, engaging in online modules, and attending training days at the IBSC Conference at Harrow on the Hill in London. These experiences laid the foundation for what would become a deeply rewarding and eye-opening inquiry.

My research focused on a student-led, culturally grounded project designed to enhance connectedness and engagement. Over 5–6 weeks in Term 3 2024, my Pasifika Virtute class worked in small groups to create lessons or presentations based on Pacific identities—exploring language, music, food, and history. The process was collaborative, creative, and at times vulnerable. It became clear that some boys felt hesitant to express their cultural identity, especially if they didn't speak the language fluently. This insight was powerful and underscored the importance of creating safe spaces for cultural exploration and expression.

As the project unfolded, I observed a shift. Conversations became more natural, relationships deepened, and the classroom atmosphere grew warmer and more inclusive. The final phase involved collecting data through observations, interviews, and surveys, culminating in presentations to younger students and reflective feedback.



My findings were three-fold:

- Conversations strengthen relationships – informal dialogue built trust and connection.
- Collaborative learning fosters inclusivity – working together on culturally relevant projects encouraged participation and mutual respect.
- Pasifika boys value process over product – the journey of learning, sharing, and connecting held more meaning than the final output.

Although the project didn't directly improve attendance, it revealed significant insights into student engagement. The boys responded positively to the cultural relevance of the project, noting that it gave them "something to talk about with [their] mates." Sharing food, stories, and songs created a sense of community, and the boys began to open up—asking questions, sharing experiences, and supporting one another. One moment that stood out was walking into our classroom during lunch to find my boys leading a Fijian song practice with juniors—unsupervised, unprompted, and completely engaged. It was a true "teacher moment."

Completing the final write-up and preparing the presentation and introduction video was hard work, but also a highlight. Seeing everything come together—data,



reflections, student voices—was incredibly fulfilling. Presenting in Boston was a major career milestone. The conference itself was energising, and the bond formed within our research team was something truly special. We supported each other through the process, and I've made lifelong friends through this experience.

I'm grateful to Bryan, Carla, Jude, Conor, and Paul for their support throughout this journey. To anyone considering action research, I wholeheartedly recommend it. It's challenging, yes—but also transformative. I've grown as an educator, and my students have grown as young men proud of who they are and where they come from.

Looking ahead, I plan to repeat this project with future cohorts, using it as a framework to build class culture and relationships early in the year. I'll also explore ways to integrate cultural relevance more deeply into the curriculum, ensuring that our classrooms remain inclusive, respectful, and engaging spaces for all learners.

**Helen Jorgensen**



## *Headmaster's Reflection*

This year, I had the privilege of accompanying four outstanding Westlake Boys High School staff members to the IBSC Conference in Boston, USA. The global network of boys schools is deeply connected and collaborative, and this is the annual opportunity for us to come together and share our practice and experiences.

During the conference, I attended several workshops and my selection of these were mostly aligned with governance, school leadership and strategic planning. The most thought provoking and informative was a workshop led by William Doherty, Principal of Xavier College, Melbourne. Xavier, have just been through a multi-year strategic planning and action phase which saw them sell off a significant chunk of school and diocese owned land to free up capital and build new buildings, and move their Year 7 and 8 students to their main campus to centralise the learning experience for their boys. The action/outcome was significant and impactful, but most interesting to me was the strategic process, the underpinning philosophy behind the outcome and the pragmatic way that William packaged up his strategic thinking. With Westlake Boys entering a strategic planning phase toward the end of 2025, there were some worthwhile take aways.

Recently, I travelled to Melbourne, Brisbane and Sydney with some colleagues and whilst in these cities, I visited some IBSC member schools. Visiting other schools is an important professional development practice for educators and through the IBSC network we can achieve this globally. The schools I visited this year, were the result of relationships established at the conference in Boston.

A fantastic conference, which was hosted with precision and excellence by Belmont Hill School. Westlake Boys aspires to be a beacon of excellence for boys' education and contributing positively to this global community is an important part of this endeavour.

**Paul Fordham, Headmaster**



## Becky O'Gram

### Associate Principal

I thoroughly enjoyed the opportunity to attend the IBSC Conference in Belmont, Massachusetts. It is always an occasion that provides high quality opportunities for professional learning, network building and horizon-broadening experiences that we can bring back to improve our practice at Westlake. A particularly memorable highlight for me was the chance to row on the Charles River with the five of us Westlake Boys staff in our Westlake Rowing Candy Stripes.

I presented a workshop on the mahi we have done to drive for Excellence in Teaching & Learning, consistently across the school. I covered what we did to produce and introduce our teaching and learning guidelines and what

we're doing as our next steps. It was reaffirming and invigorating to speak with many educators around the world who recognised the importance of that work and want to take the ideas back to do something similar in their own schools.

I attended other workshops and inspiring key note talks that have sparked ideas, such as the research program developed by an Australian school and the internship connections made at a North American school.

I was also very proud to support three other Westlake staff in their presentations, sharing some of the great work they have been doing recently. The trip was immensely enjoyable and educational, but it also served as a great reminder of the high-quality work we do, and amazing student outcomes achieved at Westlake Boys that stands up on a worldwide (and usually generously privately funded!) stage.

## Penny Weakley

### Head of Mathematics

My trip to Boston for the IBSC Conference was both inspiring and affirming. A highlight was presenting with Shereen Le Fleming on the work our Mathematics department has done to foster a positive environment, building a culture of friendship, collaboration, and professional growth. Sharing our journey with an international audience was humbling and energizing.

Connecting with educators from boys' schools around the world was a real privilege. It was affirming to see how Westlake stands out globally, not just for academic excellence, but for the strong sense of brotherhood and commitment our boys show every day. These connections highlighted the shared values that underpin boys' education worldwide.

The workshops explored themes such as leadership, positive masculinity, and intentionally teaching boys to become good men. General Mark Milley, former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, spoke powerfully about leadership requiring both competence and character. While competence can be taught, character must be built through commitment, courage, compassion, and humility. He reminded us to avoid hubris; true leadership is grounded in service not ego.

A particularly moving keynote came from Gus Worland, who spoke about the importance of having a village around you, one that builds emotional muscle, resilience, and strong social connections for mental fitness.

Belmont Hill School, the host venue, was stunning and reflected a deep commitment to excellence. I'm excited to bring back ideas to strengthen our team culture and lead with authenticity.

I'm deeply grateful to the Board and to Headmaster Paul Fordham for supporting and enabling this incredible opportunity.

## Shereen Le Fleming

### 2IC Mathematics

I had the absolute pleasure of attending and presenting a workshop at the IBSC Annual Conference in Boston this year. It

was four days filled with professional learning and experiences I won't soon forget.

We were hosted by Belmont Hill School, a private day school for boys with small classes and exceptional facilities. We had the opportunity to meet some of their students and found them to be well-rounded, dedicated young men who genuinely appreciated the opportunities afforded to them at their school and through their alumni network.

With over 100 workshops on offer, choosing just seven to attend was a challenge. One that stood out explored the bystander culture among teenage boys and how we can shift mindsets to promote more positive environments.

A personal highlight was presenting a workshop with Penny Weakley and rowing on the Charles River!



# Our First Year of Student Action Research

Since the inception of The Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, student action research has been one of our goals.

This year we finally had the opportunity to put this plan into action with a group of year 12 volunteers.

The group was a co-curricular activity that ran out of The Centre every Friday lunchtime from term 1 to term 3. Throughout the year, the students learnt the key principles of action research and worked through the phases with Jude Arbuthnot as their Action Research mentor.

In term 1, they identified the areas they wanted to inquire into and split into two smaller research groups. Top of their list of areas they wanted to research in, and hopefully improve in school, were brotherhood, peer-to-peer learning and revision strategies. Through robust discussion and guidance, they were able to finesse their action research questions and embarked on literature reviews, actions, and writing full reports before presenting their findings to a range of staff at the start of term 4.

A summary of both action research projects can be found here. To witness our students engaging in research was so rewarding; seeing them develop their skills in leadership, collaboration, and teamwork alongside completion of the projects showed the true value in such a programme.

Next year, the programme will once again be offered to keen year 12 students, with our current cohort mentoring, guiding and supporting.

## Building Brotherhood Through Collaboration: An Action Research Project

**Authors: Isaac Ryu, Borynt Em Ream, Yeonoh Noh, Tasman Hu, Danny Yoon (Year 12)**

### Purpose and Rationale

Our project explored how collaboration between Year 12/13 and Year 9 students could strengthen the school's core value of Brotherhood. We identified a social gap between seniors and juniors, often limited to sports or music groups, which undermines unity and belonging. Research highlighted that shared experiences and teamwork foster stronger connections than mere proximity.

### Literature Insights

Studies by Aldana (2012), Hickey (2008), and Davis & Allen (2020) informed our approach. Key themes included the role of social capital, the risks of hypermasculinity in sport, and the benefits of culturally responsive mentoring. We concluded that collaboration—not just common interests—drives meaningful relationships.

### Action Plan

We designed three weekly sessions during extended Virtute:

- Icebreakers – to reduce hesitancy and build familiarity.
- Practice Puzzles – cryptograms, riddles, and anagrams requiring teamwork.
- Puzzle Competition – with rewards for the most puzzles solved.

Tasks were split so seniors handled core puzzles while juniors provided hints, ensuring interdependence and reducing stress for younger students.

### Data and Findings

Surveys before and after the sessions revealed:

- Importance of Brotherhood: 73% of Year 9 students rated it 8–10/10 even before the action.
- Interest in Collaboration: 81% of juniors and 83% of seniors scored 6 or higher for wanting joint activities.
- Enjoyment: 72.7% rated sessions 7 or higher.
- Impact on Brotherhood: 85% felt the sessions positively influenced their sense of connection.
- Preferred Activities: Collaborative tasks (47%) and competitions (26%) were most effective.

Qualitative feedback was equally encouraging. One senior remarked, "I love how we had to work together instead of one person doing everything." Another referred to his juniors as "three musketeers," reflecting genuine bonds formed.

### Challenges and Recommendations

Recruiting seniors was difficult, especially Year 13 students with busy schedules. Attendance inconsistencies limited our ability to measure long-term impact. Some frustration arose from puzzle difficulty, suggesting future activities should balance challenge with accessibility.



To enhance effectiveness, we recommend extending sessions beyond three weeks, prioritising Year 12 involvement for better availability, and embedding collaborative activities into Virtute periods to sustain connections.

## Conclusion

Our research confirms that structured, collaborative experiences can bridge the gap between year groups, fostering a stronger sense of brotherhood and school culture. These findings have implications for teaching and learning, as students who feel connected are more engaged and attentive. We hope school leadership considers these insights when planning future initiatives.

# Learning Together: How Peer Tutoring Boosted Confidence and Performance

**Authors: Preston Wang, Somatha Yin, Evan Li, Achilles Yeong (Year 12)**

When streaming was removed at Westlake Boys High School, a question emerged: How do we keep students motivated without the pressure of comparison? For a team of Year 12 researchers, the answer wasn't competition—it was collaboration.

## The Big Idea

The group noticed that while removing ranking reduced stress, it also left a gap in motivation. Their solution? Peer-to-peer learning. Could students teaching students, both juniors helping classmates and seniors guiding younger learners, improve confidence and academic performance in Mathematics?

## The Action Plan

The project involved 29 Year 10 students and several Year 12 tutors. Over the course of the action research, the team implemented three phases:

### Phase 1: Baseline Check

Students completed a survey and a short test on trigonometry and Pythagoras' theorem. Most rated their confidence as "average," and study habits were limited (35% relied on simply reading notes, while few used active strategies like flashcards or practice exams.)

### Phase 2: Peer Learning in Action

Sessions focused on two forms of collaboration:

- Junior-to-Junior: Students who mastered certain questions helped peers who struggled.

- Senior-to-Junior: Year 12 tutors guided small groups through problem-solving and shared effective revision techniques.

The emphasis was on discussion, explanation, and active engagement, not passive instruction. Seniors acted as mentors, showing juniors how to study smarter, not just harder.

## Phase 3: Measuring Impact

Students sat a second test and completed a follow-up survey to gauge changes in confidence, habits, and performance.

## What We Found

The results were encouraging:

- Confidence climbed: Before tutoring, most students rated their study effectiveness as 3/5. Afterward, 44% rated themselves a 4, and 11% a 5.
- Study habits improved: Students reported learning new strategies beyond "just reading."
- Academic gains: Over half (56%) noticed improvement in their performance, and written responses showed the biggest leap—suggesting that discussion sharpened thinking.

One student wrote: "I learnt how to do questions I didn't know before and now feel confident studying." Another added: "I'd love more sessions like this."

## Challenges and Insights

Not every student found the sessions transformative; 22% said they were unhelpful, often because they already knew the material. This highlights the need to tailor future sessions to different ability levels. Logistics were also tricky: coordinating senior tutors during busy schedules was a challenge.

Still, the overall trend was clear: collaboration works. Students not only improved academically but also felt more confident and connected.

## Why It Matters

Peer-to-peer learning didn't just boost grades; it built community. As the report notes: "Students need to be explicitly taught a range of ways to study and revise." Embedding these strategies, and creating more opportunities for peer support, could transform learning across the curriculum. When students learn together, everyone wins.

*Both Student Action Research reports can be found in full at our webpage: <https://www.westlake.school.nz/curriculum-learning/centre-excellence-teaching-learning/about>*



# Transitioning from the Primary sector to High School

Journeys from intermediate to secondary teaching at WBHS

## Rhea Anglesey

After decades of teaching both at the primary and intermediate sectors, I finally made the move to secondary English teaching at WBHS in 2025. Teaching English is something I have always enjoyed the most and it was high time in my professional life for a change.

Was I thrilled to be a part of WBHS? Undoubtedly!

Was I scared? Absolutely!

Am I happy with the change? It's been the best decision ever for me!

Now, with the end of 2025 fast approaching, it's time to reflect on my transition journey and what made it so successful.

Changing sectors can make even the most experienced teacher feel like a Beginning Teacher. I found myself in a world of systems, processes and, above all, acronyms that threatened to swamp me. And, I would have been completely overwhelmed had it not been for the excellent wrap around support that I received from my English department colleagues, members of the SLT, and above all from Jude, my mentor.

With a weekly dedicated time set aside for myself and my other two transitioning colleagues, at the Centre for Excellence, Jude provided us with a haven where we could ask, learn, share and feel very valued and seen. Those weekly meetings became my mooring, though Jude and other staff rallied around whenever I needed any help.

Never once did I feel that I was asking too many questions (I'm sure I was) or was in anyone's way. In this positive and supportive climate, I learnt fast and my confidence grew. Before I knew it, Term 3 had come and I had stopped calling myself a 'noob'.



I won't pretend that it wasn't hard at times. Bonding with and motivating adolescent boys is a very special skill set that needs a lot of patience and practice. I am still learning every day, but I am learning from a group of dedicated and passionate educators who are truly invested in our boys. I am learning from the best. For that opportunity, I am truly grateful.

I would like to end with a heartfelt thank you to WBHS, the English department colleagues, Karl, my HOD and above all Jude, my mentor. This school was prepared to invest time and effort in me and help me transition into secondary teaching while still valuing me for my years of teaching experience. That to me is the recipe for my successful transition, sprinkled with my love for teaching English and dogged determination to do it well.

I can't wait for 2026!

## Roseanne Dassler

The beginning term 3, 2025 marked my first full year at Westlake, and what a rewarding journey it has been transitioning from primary to secondary teaching. After many years specialising in Year 7 and 8, I was ready for a new challenge — one that would stretch me professionally and reignite my passion for teaching and learning. Stepping into the world of secondary English, teaching Years 9 to 11, has been exactly that.

The transition itself hasn't felt like too big a leap for me, largely because I love being challenged intellectually and thrive when learning something new. I have thoroughly enjoyed the opportunity to focus more deeply on the teaching of reading, writing, and critical analysis. Being able to specialise in English and to learn from such skilled, passionate colleagues has been an incredible experience. The collegial nature of the English department — the

generosity in sharing ideas, resources, and expertise — is unlike anything I have experienced before in my career. It has been both inspiring and affirming to be part of such a supportive, knowledgeable team.

There have certainly been challenges along the way. Managing five separate classes — nearly 150 students that I see each day — has required careful time management and organisation. Balancing the workload of marking (which in English is no small task!), meetings, extra-curricular commitments, ensuring continuity across lessons, and incorporating new technologies has been a significant but rewarding learning curve. Whilst I don't claim to be an expert in anything, my ability to form strong relationships, to truly know my learners, and to work positively with colleagues has definitely helped my transition. Having Jude Arbutnot as my mentor has also been a tremendous support; her guidance, encouragement, and practical wisdom have been invaluable throughout this journey.

I also feel extremely grateful to be part of a school culture that truly lives its values. The spirit of courage and excellence is woven into everything here — from the professionalism and warmth of the staff and leadership,

the high expectations, and the character of the students. The support afforded by the Primary to Secondary transition programme and the Centre for Excellence has been exemplary, facilitating a smooth, well-supported, and genuinely enjoyable transition.

Of course, there has been a great deal to learn this year, but as a lifelong learner, I have embraced every challenge with enthusiasm. Each new experience has reaffirmed my belief that I made the right decision in taking this step. I love coming to work each day, and I feel proud to contribute to a community that values growth, integrity, and excellence.

The school motto, *Virtute Experiamur* — Let Courage Be Thy Test — resonates deeply with me. It reminds me that by taking the brave step into secondary teaching, I have lived out the very value we encourage our students to embody. I truly feel I have found my place here at Westlake.



## *To Otto*

Reflecting on my journey from primary to secondary teaching, I can confidently say that this past year has been both a challenge and a joy. After many years of teaching at the primary level, I was ready for a new professional challenge—one that would allow me to specialise in my passion for reading, writing, and critical thinking. Transitioning to high school English has given me that opportunity and more.

This first year at Westlake Boys High School has been an incredibly positive experience. The staff have been nothing short of amazing—friendly, professional, and genuinely supportive. From the Heads of Faculty to the Deans and Senior Management, I have consistently felt guided and encouraged. The New to Westlake programme and the Centre for Excellence have provided me with the tools and mentorship to grow in confidence and skill. The culture of courage and excellence that defines Westlake is one I feel honoured to be a part of.

Teaching boys has been one of the most enjoyable aspects of this transition. I love their straightforward, good-humoured, and non-complex approach to life. They make me laugh every day, and I have come to truly appreciate the unique energy and honesty they bring to the classroom. One of the greatest discoveries for me this year has been finding my true passion and place in teaching literacy support. I've developed a deep love for working with our Year 9 and Year 10 students, as these year levels feel like a natural bridge between my primary background and the secondary environment. Supporting these boys to

grow in confidence with their reading and writing has been incredibly rewarding, and it feels like meaningful work where I can make a real difference.

Of course, the journey hasn't been without its challenges. Learning new curricula, assessment structures, and teaching approaches at the secondary level has taken time. I've had to work long hours to create resources that align with my teaching style. There have been moments of uncertainty as I found my footing in a new environment and subject area. However, these challenges have been valuable—they've pushed me to reflect deeply on my practice and grow both as an educator and as a person.

Overall, this transition has reaffirmed my love for teaching and learning. I feel incredibly fortunate to be part of such a supportive, high-performing, and nurturing environment. Westlake Boys High School truly is a special place, and I look forward to continuing to contribute to its culture of excellence while refining my craft as a secondary English teacher.





# Leading the Learning

## A Programme Supporting Tomorrow's Middle Leaders

The Aspiring Middle Leadership Programme continues to be a touchstone of the Centre for Excellence's professional development programmes. This year Jude and Kelly were joined by Rachel Smith and Helen Jorgensen to present the workshop programmes.

Below, this year's participants reflect on their experience and the lessons learnt.

### Sidah Russell

#### English

After being locked together in an Escape Room for an hour, I knew I was going to enjoy learning from these people. As we worked our way through the clues and puzzles, it was clear there were lateral thinkers and pattern identifiers. There were those with an eye for detail, and those who stepped back and considered the bigger picture. Some of us, more easily bored, wandered off to search for new clues, while others showed persistence, going over and over a puzzle until it was cracked.

But what we had in common was a desire to work as part of a team, to seek competence in others, and be reflective about our own contribution. The Escape Room was the Middle Leadership Programme's ice breaker, but you could already see signs of each person's strengths and leadership styles.

For me, the programme was a chance to crystallise some half-formed ideas and answer half-formed questions. What sort of teacher did I want to be? What sort of teaching career did I want to have? What skills did I want to develop? What opportunities might be out there for me?

As a second-career teacher, the course was about clearing the space to reflect on a totally new work identity. I had

spent 25 years developing a communications career for myself; now, suddenly, I was an early-stage teacher. Teaching – and all the planning, marking and admin that goes with it – can be all consuming. It's a challenge to keep on top of the day-to-day, let alone find time to reflect, explore and imagine what you might want to do differently.

So, that's what MLP gives you. Ring-fenced time to consider what might be next. Or to discover you are exactly where you're meant to be. During the course you encounter new perspectives, develop leadership and communication skills, and meet others going through their own process of self-reflection. By the end, you will know a lot more about yourself and your colleagues and have built lasting connections with people from across the school.

I could tell from that early Escape Room challenge that I was going to enjoy hearing from such a varied group of colleagues. MLP gets you outside your department silo and exposes you to ideas and options you might not otherwise consider. While those in the humanities will always be 'my people', trust me, you want a mathematician with you when you're locked in a room with only one escape route.





## Natasha le Brocq

ESOL

I decided to apply for the programme as it seemed like the right time to start extending myself and my skillset a bit. As it happens, at the end of 2024 I secured an HOD role, so I knew this was going to be even more important to get involved with.



The organisation of the course and materials put together meant we covered and learned a lot in our time together. The course helped me learn more about myself as a leader, situations I would likely face as a leader and how to navigate these, as well as giving me the chance to see what happens in the wider school. Being able to shadow and receive mentoring from experienced leaders was incredibly valuable. Really looking at what I am capable of and understanding processes through which to investigate issues within a team was important for progressing throughout this year.

The course has helped me to step into my role with more courage. Being new to middle management has presented some challenges, but we have such a supportive environment here, and plenty of people willing to offer a listening ear and sound advice. Getting a better idea of how our processes work overall and who I can see when I have questions about things has, and continues to be, beneficial. My inquiry was based around this and has given me a greater appreciation for how myself and my department fit into the school as a whole and how we can work and grow within that.

I really enjoyed being able to work together with everyone on the course. We were supported and challenged throughout. Doing an escape room together and practising open-to-learning conversations really stuck with me. They were fun and challenging, and got us practicing our skills in action! It was a cool experience being open and honest about our experiences and perspectives, what we learned, and seeing everyone's growth across the year.

## Suretha Steyn

Mathematics

I joined the Aspiring Middle Leadership Programme because I wanted to keep growing in my role within the Mathematics faculty and learn how to lead people, not just manage tasks. I was especially keen to get better at those "tricky conversations" that every middle leader knows are part of the job.



The programme turned out to be both practical and enjoyable. I learned how to move a task forward while keeping relationships intact, which is sometimes easier said than done. I also realised that empathy, body language, and clear evidence make feedback much more effective. It was a relief to hear that feeling defensive is normal, and that it just takes practice (and sometimes a deep breath!) to handle it well. Observing lessons outside of Maths was another highlight. It reminded me that every subject connects to the same goal of helping students learn and grow.

In my own context, I plan to keep being "10% braver." That might mean saying yes to new challenges, having the tough chats rather than avoiding them, and mentoring others in a way that builds their confidence. I've also learned that middle leaders are the glue between teachers and senior leadership, quietly making sure everything runs smoothly - even when it doesn't feel like it!

I really enjoyed meeting colleagues from other faculties; swapping stories, laughing about shared struggles, and realising we all face similar hurdles was refreshing. The escape room and afternoon drinks didn't hurt either! They turned professional development into something genuinely fun. Jude and Kelly were outstanding. Their passion for leadership was obvious, and their mix of wisdom and humour kept every session engaging.

Overall, the programme gave me practical tools, a stronger sense of purpose, and a few good laughs along the way. I'd recommend it to anyone sitting on the fence. Growth doesn't have to be scary, just start small, stay curious, and maybe schedule a celebratory drink at the end.

## Isabella Sinnema

### Social Sciences

I tēnei tau, I joined the Middle Leadership Programme to discover and develop the direction of my leadership journey. Despite not holding a formal leadership position, I wanted to take the opportunity to develop my confidence in the classroom through understanding the educational literature and putting it into practice.

I learnt from MLP that, as educators, leadership does not just occur in a position where you officially lead others. It can be in the classroom, in a co-curricular activity, or with colleagues in the office. Leadership does not always translate to power over others, but how you empower others to succeed and improve while working towards a common goal. Values and virtues shape who we are as people and how we connect with others, no matter who they are.

I have already begun implementing my learnings from MLP into my context. Allowing the rangatahi in my classrooms to consider their positionalities in the world

while studying historical contexts. Additionally, placing a greater emphasis on relationships with those I teach and those I work with to help enhance the final outcome; whatever that may be.

The most enjoyable moments from MLP were the camaraderie between the staff from different departments and experiences of leadership. Shared laughter, tears, and journeys of leadership and growth made the programme so much more valuable. There was an abundance of resources available so we can continually reflect on leadership, what it means to us as individuals, and how we can use it to contribute to our kura.



## Zachary Easthope

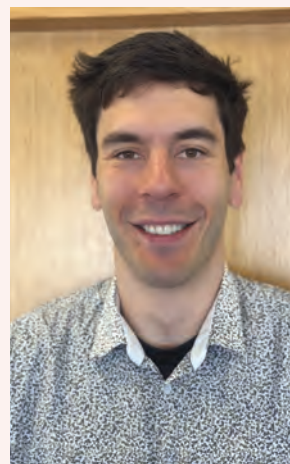
### Social Sciences

This year, I joined the Middle Leadership Programme because I wanted to grow my capacity to lead from the classroom. While I don't currently hold a formal leadership title, we all lead in the classroom every day, any opportunity where I can develop my skills to help influence and support others around me seemed like a great idea. MLP felt like the right space to build the foundations for future leadership roles while strengthening the impact I can have right now.

One of the biggest learnings for me was recognising that leadership isn't just about having authority, it's about creating an environment where everyone can succeed. The programme helped me reflect on how my own values and relationships shape the way I lead. I became more intentional about how I communicate, build relationships, and support both students and colleagues. It also challenged me to think about my organisation and time management.

I've already begun applying these lessons to my classroom, I've been more deliberate about setting a clear tone, using specific language and fostering a collaborative, team culture. These are quiet forms of leadership, but they've helped me see that influence doesn't always come with a title.

What I've enjoyed most has been the discussions shared with the group, all of us coming from different departments and backgrounds allowed us to share different perspectives. But hearing how much similarities we have had in our leaderships journeys and ways we can apply these daily gives you space to think and grow as a leader. Be encouraged and supported by those around you. Leaving me feeling excited about the leadership opportunities that lie ahead.



## Forrest Roos

### Commerce

I participated in the Middle Leadership Programme to enhance my leadership skills and gain a deeper understanding of how to effectively support both my colleagues and students within the school. I wanted to

gain valuable knowledge and tools to enhance my practice as a leader/future leadership to ensure success when leading a department. As a Business Studies teacher, I wanted to develop my capacity to contribute to the school's strategic goals, improve team collaboration, and drive positive changes in the learning environment.

Throughout the programme, I learnt valuable skills in communication, team management, and strategic

planning. I gained insights into effective leadership styles, conflict resolution, and how to motivate and inspire others. I have also learnt how to combine my own practices and principles to align with the school. It was important for me to learn how to develop my interpersonal skills with both staff members and colleagues as a leader.



I plan to apply what I've learnt by taking a more proactive role in curriculum planning and mentoring junior staff in the Business Studies department. I will also use data to track student progress and tailor interventions more effectively. Moreover, I aim to foster a collaborative team culture where ideas and feedback are openly shared, thereby improving both teaching quality and student outcomes.

What I enjoyed most was the opportunity to engage with colleagues from different departments, sharing experiences and learning from diverse perspectives. The practical workshops and real-world scenarios made the programme highly relevant and engaging, helping me to see immediate ways to implement new strategies in my classroom and leadership role.

## Nikki Masaga

Te Puna

I really enjoyed being part of the Middle Leadership Programme this year. It honestly helped me grow a lot, especially around having those uncomfortable conversations that most people avoid. I've always naturally been someone who will call out inappropriate behaviour when I see it, but sometimes I've held back here because I still feel "new" to the school and to secondary, even though I'm not new to teaching.

The programme really helped me understand more about how our school operates and just gave me that extra confidence to step into those 'learning conversations' when needed and only see these as opportunities to understand, grow and support as a leader.

I also really appreciated how safe and supportive the space felt. Everyone was on their own learning journey, and it was nice to see kaiako being open about their vulnerabilities in leadership. It made it easy to understand each other and genuinely support one another.

Thank you, Jude and Kelly, for all the time and effort you put into running MLP. I really enjoyed being part of it.



## Natalie Stettler

Physical Education/Health/Languages

Shadowing, mentoring, and coaching all play an important role in developing effective teaching and leadership practice. The Middle Leadership Programme at Westlake Boys offers all of these. Having someone witness our practice, whether in the classroom, in a professional conversation or across our various departments, it is an important part of our growth and development, not only as teachers but as humans. It helps us to recognise both our strengths and areas for development, while also ensuring safety, transparency, and consistency across classrooms. When conducted well, these observations, conversations and shared learnings build trust among staff and contribute to improved student outcomes through collaboration. This is a small part of what is taught in the MLP course, along with readings, discussions and presentations about different aspects of teaching practice.

Mentoring and coaching complement this process of observation. A good coach does not provide the answers but guides reflection and self-discovery, empowering

teachers to find their own solutions. This aligns with effective leadership qualities—being collaborative, empathetic, and focused on continuous improvement. Overall, these processes strengthen professional trust and collective responsibility, leading to more reflective, confident, and capable teachers. Again, this was on offer through the Middle Leadership Programme.

I thoroughly enjoyed and benefitted from MLP, not just for the connections with other teachers and staff, but also for the opportunity to look inward, reflect on where I want to go and how I will get there, and make sure I enjoy the journey along the way. Ngā mihi Jude, Kelly, Rachel and Helen





# Looking Back to Move Forward

## Beginning Teachers Reflect on a Year of Growth

### Emily Copland

PCT 1, Commerce

This year, I've learnt a great deal about who I am as a teacher. Through classroom observations, mentoring, Tuesday morning PCT sessions, and discussions with my PCT buddy, I've been able to trial different approaches and discover what feels most genuine for both me and my students. I now feel far more confident in my teaching and deeply supported. There's such a strong network within the PCT programme to lean on for guidance or to bounce ideas off. These regular opportunities to talk and reflect with others has also prompted me to consider perspectives I might not have reached on my own.

One of my main goals this year was to improve my questioning techniques, particularly with my Year 13 class, to better check for understanding across all students. I've learned not just about the variety of ways to ask questions, but also about the types of questions that stimulate higher-level thinking. This has become a natural part of my classroom culture, especially within my senior classes, and I'm proud of the growth I've made in this area.

I'm looking forward to heading into next year with a much stronger sense of who I am as a teacher. I'll be building on what worked really well this year while refining the areas I know can be strengthened. The work I've done around

questioning will carry through to all my classes from the very start of the year.

As somewhat of a perfectionist, one of my biggest challenges has been accepting that teaching is rarely perfect, and that's okay. I've learned to embrace the idea that growth comes from those imperfect moments. It offers a chance to refine, adjust, and keep improving.

Above all, I've most enjoyed being part of this school community and all the incredible things that happen here. I loved being involved in the costuming for production, attending the quiz night, market day, and the Westlake Oscars night. It's been such a joy to see my students succeed beyond the classroom and to celebrate those achievements with them.



### Karisma Padharia

PCT 1, English

My first year as a provisionally-certified teacher at Westlake has taught me as much about myself as it has developed my teaching practice. The programme has taught me resilience, adaptability, and strengthened my confidence in the classroom. The reflective nature of the weekly meetings, mentor sessions, and the portfolio, provide invaluable opportunities for continuous growth as a beginning teacher.

Throughout the year, I have learnt to be comfortable with not having all the answers. At the beginning, I felt like I had to know everything and have a solution for every scenario. However, I have learnt that teaching is as much about learning alongside students as it is about guiding them. Adaptability has become a key part of my practice. I've realised that lessons run best when I move at the students'

pace rather than rigidly sticking to mine. This shift has allowed me to build confidence in responding to the moment, trusting my instincts, and adjusting my teaching to support their learning.

This adaptability has been particularly important in my English classes. I entered the year aware that students would be at different levels, but I was surprised by the extent of the disparities between some students. In some classes, students could complete an essay within a single period; in others, some students struggled to fully understand the question. Initially, I felt I had to precisely follow my lesson plans, but I soon realised that students guide the learning journey. I have learnt you have to meet them halfway; pushing them forward but not so far that they disengage.

This year the most enjoyable and rewarding part has been building relationships with my students. It is never a dull day teaching boys, and I've loved witnessing moments

when they recognise their own achievements. I've noticed that boys can sometimes be reluctant to speak highly of themselves, so I've worked to build a classroom culture where positive self-recognition feels natural. Through small, consistent affirmations and encouragement, I have enjoyed helping them feel confident celebrating their own growth. The boys' humour and endless quips make each lesson unpredictable in the best way. Beyond the classroom, I'm constantly in awe of their talents, whether it's listening to music performances in assembly, watching student-made films, or seeing the pride they wear on their badge-covered blazers. These moments make me proud to be part of the Westlake community.

While the year has had its challenges, I have always felt supported. A strength of the programme is the reassurance that you are never facing problems alone. I have been able to approach anyone in my department or the programme mentors for guidance. They have consistently offered constructive feedback, shared practical solutions, and stepped in when needed. In my department especially, collaboration and communication have made a huge difference. The willingness of colleagues

who offer their support whenever needed has made my first year not only manageable but also strengthened my confidence.

The programme has helped shape me into a more reflective, resilient, and confident teacher. It has reinforced the importance of adaptability, relationship-building, and collaboration, and it has shown me how much growth can happen in just one year. I feel grateful to be part of a school community where learning, for both students and teachers, is truly valued.



## Sadie Fourie

### PCT 2, English

The WBHS PCT programme is an extensive initiative that helps shape teachers who are new to the profession and those new to the country. As a teacher who falls under both categories, the programme has been an invaluable part of my teaching journey. Through the weekly Tuesday morning PCT meetings and ongoing mentoring, I have developed professionally and strengthened my practical skills within the classroom.

I have learned to reflect more critically on my teaching practice, adapt lessons to meet a diverse range of learning needs, and manage my classroom environment with greater confidence. The opportunity to meet weekly to discuss challenges, share strategies, and learn from one another has been invaluable. After every meeting, I leave feeling reassured and motivated to keep improving.

One of the biggest lessons I have learned this year is the importance of building relationships with students, parents, colleagues, and the wider school community. This focus has shaped my approach to teaching and learning, as well as my daily interactions with others, ensuring that connection and care remain at the heart of everything I do. I have found that fostering strong relationships with students lead to better engagement and participation in their learning and contribution to the classroom environment.

I have particularly enjoyed connecting with other PCTs during mentor meetings. Talking through challenges, sharing strategies, experimenting with new ideas in class, and offering feedback and advice have all helped me see

real growth and improvement in my practice. At WBHS, collaboration is everything, and you are never alone. No challenge feels unique, because there is always someone who has experienced something similar and is willing to advise and guide you.

I have overcome challenges mainly through trial and error, trying out different suggestions until I find what works best for my students and me. It can be exhausting at times, but it is always worthwhile when I see positive changes in my classroom. Continuously trying has made me an expert in learning from mistakes, staying open to feedback, and celebrating small improvements along the way.

Looking back, this year has gone by so quickly, largely because of the immense support from my mentor, colleagues, and the wider WBHS community. The encouragement, shared wisdom, and sense of belonging have made this year not only manageable but deeply rewarding. I feel proud of how much I have grown and excited for the opportunities ahead as I continue developing my pedagogy.



## Paul Strang

### PCT 2, Commerce/PE/ Future Sport

"Gradually. Then suddenly." Hemingway's words from *The Sun Also Rises* perfectly capture how my journey as a Provisionally Certified Teacher has unfolded. Embarking on teaching three years ago as a career changer was both exciting and daunting, so it's hard to believe this chapter is now complete.

Throughout this time, the Centre of Excellence has been a constant support providing guidance, and professional growth, along with the encouragement, perspective, and space to develop. It's no exaggeration to say they have been integral to my progress.

Teaching, I've discovered, is like flying a plane while building it — fun, exhilarating, turbulent, unpredictable, and always challenging. In many ways, the Centre of Excellence crew has been my flight instructor, air traffic control and ground staff all rolled into one and without them, I doubt I would have kept the plane aloft. They helped me to navigate daily teaching experiences and through their mentoring, lesson observations, and workshops my practice has lifted.

When reflecting on this past year as a PCT2 teacher it has been a real turning point. My skills have grown exponentially — not just in expertise but in confidence. I

feel I've shifted from a mindset of 'doing' and 'surviving' to one of 'design' and 'balance'. This growth stems largely from the strong foundation provided by their evidence-based approach which gave me the confidence to respond more thoughtfully to students' needs.

Finally, I'm especially grateful for the collegiality and strong sense of community fostered by the Centre of Excellence. Being surrounded by like-minded, passionate educators is transformative, and the energy is contagious. I'm incredibly thankful to my PCT cohort and the Centre Team of Jude, Kelly and Casey for cultivating such a powerful learning culture — thank you.



## Zhongyu Li

### PCT 1, Mathematics

This has been a rich year of professional growth for me. I have participated in a range of valuable professional development sessions focused on pedagogy, behaviour management, student engagement, and supporting Pacific and Māori learners. I have also received insightful advice and guidance from my mentor and fellow PCT teachers. The most significant learning for me has been the importance of involving parents in their children's learning. Building strong connections with whānau has provided a supportive network that positively influences classroom behaviour and engagement.

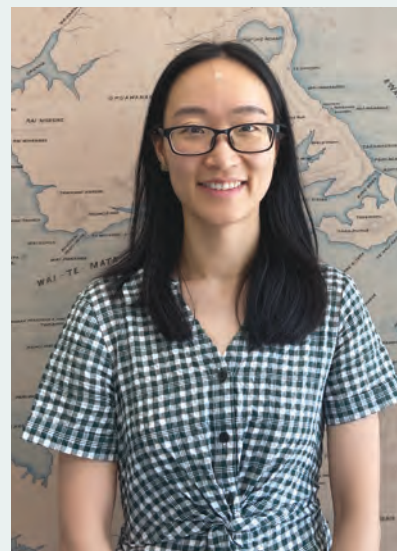
From the beginning of the school year, I have been sending regular update emails to parents and caregivers. This has helped me build stronger relationships so that I'm not just a name to them. As a result, when any issues or requests arise, whether from parents or myself, we already have a foundation of trust and open communication to work together effectively.

Whenever challenges arose, I sought advice and support from my mentor and experienced colleagues. Their guidance often provided practical strategies and encouragement, helping me to reflect on my practice and

develop more effective approaches.

Although this year has been challenging, I have found genuine joy in the moments of connection with my students— seeing their growth, celebrating their achievements, and knowing that my efforts have made a

difference. I also valued the professional relationships I've built with colleagues, whose support and collaboration have helped me navigate the ups and downs of teaching. These moments have reminded me why I chose this profession and have helped me to regain a sense of purpose and motivation.





# Staff Action Research Projects

Staff Action Research got off the ground this year in the Centre for Excellence, with two staff completing their Action Research cycles: Casey de Wit and Kelly Easton. Helen Jorgensen also completed her IBSC Action Research.

Summaries of their projects are below but their full reports can be found on our Centre webpage: <https://www.westlake.school.nz/curriculum-learning/centre-excellence-teaching-learning/about>

I would like to acknowledge the amount of their own time that has gone into this work throughout the year. Their vision for how action research can improve learning outcomes and teaching practices has driven their determination to complete their research cycles.

Natalie Marriott, Gareth O'Brien, Sara Caplain and Che Muller have also been part of the staff Action Research group this year, and their work and inquiries are ongoing. I look forward to sharing their progress in next year's publication.

Casey will now go on to represent Westlake Boys High School in the 2026 IBSC Action Research cohort at the annual international conference at St. Stithians College in South Africa.

## Casey de Wit

### Research Question

**How can a language learning model (LLM) assist essay planning in the topic of 'Coming of Age' Genre in a Year 12 Media Studies class to increase engagement and learning outcomes?**

**Author: Casey de Wit, Director of Professional Development, Westlake Boys High School, November 2025.**

### Introduction

At Westlake Boys High School, we are actively embracing the opportunities that artificial intelligence can offer in education. As part of our strategic direction, we have developed AI policy, appointed staff to lead integration efforts, and established systems to guide ethical and purposeful use of AI in the classroom. However, much of the enthusiasm around AI is still driven by instinct, optimism, or concern. We simply don't yet have the classroom-based evidence to back up many of our assumptions.

This Action Research was designed to address that gap. It aims to generate data that can move us beyond "hunches" and help inform future decisions about how AI is used in teaching and learning, not just at Westlake, but across the wider sector.

The Level 2 Media Studies class involved in this research was a small, cohesive group of 22 students with a strong classroom culture. Students were engaged with the content and consistently demonstrated a willingness to participate in open discussions. The cohort included a mix of students, some had been studying Media since Year 10,

while for others this was their first experience in the subject. As a result, academic ability varied widely across the group, with students spanning the full range of the achievement scale. This diversity of experience and confidence made the class an ideal environment for trialling AI integration, as it provided an opportunity to observe how different learners interacted with the tools and the extent to which AI could support personalised learning pathways.

Nationally, the approach to AI in education is currently more hands-off. While the Ministry of Education has released broad guidelines, the responsibility for interpreting and applying them sits largely with schools. In this context, research-led inquiry at the classroom level becomes essential. This project contributes to that need by offering a grounded example of how AI can support student learning and where its limits lie.

### Literature Review

Engaging in this literature review process has significantly deepened my understanding of both the possibilities and the complexities of integrating large language models (LLMs) into classroom practice. Initially, I was optimistic about the potential for tools like ChatGPT to enhance essay planning, particularly in the context of the Coming-of-Age genre in Media Studies. However, through critical reading and annotation, I came to recognise that meaningful use of AI depends less on the tool itself and more on the pedagogy that surrounds it.

Research by Volante et al. (2023) affirmed that LLMs can scaffold higher-order thinking when students are guided to critique and revise AI-generated text. Their findings

aligned closely with my own observations during the Action Research process, particularly when students were prompted to interact with AI outputs rather than passively consume them. Conversely, literature from Gillani et al. (2023) and Scott (2021) challenged me to think more critically about the ethical and philosophical risks of AI, including the potential for bias, the erosion of teacher agency, and the “black box” nature of algorithmic decision-making. These works introduced the concept of “AI literacy” not just as technical fluency, but as an awareness of the systems, limitations, and social implications of generative AI.

My annotations across the literature reflected an increasing awareness of the need for human-centred, blended learning approaches that preserve student voice, agency, and creativity. Rather than seeing AI as a replacement for teacher instruction or student effort, the most effective frameworks positioned it as a thinking partner- one that still requires teacher mediation and ethical guardrails. I also found support for the view that AI use should be paired with explicit reflective practice, prompting students to evaluate, question, and adapt the outputs in ways that deepen their understanding.

Ultimately, this review has not only refined my understanding of effective AI integration but also reshaped my thinking about what constitutes authentic engagement and deep learning in a digital age. While AI can enhance access to content and boost confidence, it does not eliminate the need for critical thinking, synthesis, and effort. These findings directly informed the design of my intervention, reinforcing that tools don't teach, teachers do, and pedagogy must lead the technology.

## Findings

While the data from the post-action questionnaire suggests that students felt more confident with essay planning through the use of AI, my personal reflection reveals a more complex reality. Students may feel empowered by having access to structured ideas or completed models, but this does not always equate to engagement with learning in the deeper sense.

In practice, I observed that students were still drawn to the path of least resistance. Whether the information was coming from a textbook, Google, or ChatGPT, many students wanted the answer, not the process. Despite building in clear prompting scaffolds, including our prompt diaries and the use of the ICE Model (ideas, connection and extension, as a way to evaluate how students moved beyond passive use of AI and into meaningful engagement), many students found the volume of AI-generated content overwhelming. The task of refining, integrating class notes, or synthesising new ideas often felt like “extra work” rather than core learning. This highlights a significant tension: AI can accelerate access to information, but it doesn't automatically build agency, curiosity, or critical thinking.

The hardest part for students was not generating content through AI but engaging meaningfully with it. Specifically, asking students to go beyond the AI response, to add their

own class knowledge, interpretations, or insights, proved to be the most challenging. Had I not embedded the explicit question, “How could I use my class notes to supplement these ideas?”, I believe many students would have disengaged from the content entirely and defaulted to copy-paste behaviours.

Yet, ironically, even with these surface-level engagements, students still reported feeling more confident. This leads me to a key insight: confidence may stem not from deeper understanding, but from the comfort of having access to answers. In this sense, AI might act similarly to a comprehensive revision guide, it removes the cognitive load of “where do I start?” and offers a starting point that feels safe and structured. Yes, this may also reflect a broader literacy issue. It stems back to the age-old challenge of teaching students to “skim and scan” effectively, something we have been battling long before the arrival of AI. The question then becomes: Do we continue to teach the same comprehension strategies, or do we need to evolve our literacy instruction alongside the tools we're using? Regardless, what remains unchanged is the need for students to actively process and make meaning from content, not just consume it.

This raises a pedagogical question: Is providing highly scaffolded, answer-rich tools inherently bad? Perhaps not. But it does signal a need to explicitly teach students how to move from passive consumption to active processing, especially in the AI age. The next step may not be to abandon AI scaffolds but to evolve how we train students to use them.

## Conclusions

The impact of this Action Research was significant in shaping both student engagement and teacher reflection around the integration of AI tools in the classroom. While students overwhelmingly reported increased confidence in essay planning, deeper analysis revealed that this confidence often stemmed from having content “provided” rather than from engaging critically with it. This signals a need for more intentional teaching practices if AI is to truly enhance learning. At Westlake Boys High School, where the adoption of AI is being actively supported through policy and staff development, this research offers timely and relevant insight. It confirms that the presence of AI in education is not inherently transformative, its value lies in how we, as educators, design learning around it.



Moving forward, there are several practical implications for teaching and learning at WBHS. First, explicit instruction in synthesis (and not just with AI) must become a core component of our pedagogy, not an optional add-on. It is clear that students struggled most with the task of integrating their own ideas with AI-generated content. To address this, prompt diaries should include mandatory student commentary or reflection before they are allowed to proceed with further AI-assisted tasks. Without this pause for contribution, students risk bypassing critical thinking altogether. Moreover, teachers must model what it looks like to merge AI output with class-based knowledge. This needs to happen repeatedly and across multiple contexts so that students develop a mental model of how AI can be a thinking partner, not a shortcut.

This project has also reinforced the idea that AI will be treated as a shortcut unless we explicitly teach otherwise. The technology is fast, responsive, and can produce vast amounts of data but students need help navigating that abundance meaningfully. Teachers must intervene with intentional scaffolding and structure, ensuring AI is used to promote depth rather than speed. If this mindset becomes part of school-wide teaching practice, AI can support not just content knowledge but also the development of higher-order thinking and learner agency.

In terms of what I would do differently; I would front-load the project with more scaffolding around synthesis and more modelling of the merge between AI and student knowledge. I would also embed reflection prompts more frequently within the task and not just at the end, so that students are constantly nudged to think critically and add their own ideas. Ultimately, the success of AI in education at WBHS will depend not on the tool itself, but on how well we support students to use it with purpose, discipline, and voice.

Where to now? I will be working closely with my colleague who leads the AI curriculum to develop a guiding framework that centres on core literacy competencies, particularly 'skimming and scanning' critical engagement with information, and synthesising ideas (as noted in the reflections). As noted in my literature review, authors such as Volante et al. (2023) and Gillani et al. (2023) emphasise the need for human-centred pedagogy that leverages AI not as a shortcut, but as a scaffold for deeper learning. Without deliberate instructional design, the risk is that AI simply reinforces surface-level behaviours, something I saw in my trial. I believe that building this framework will help ensure AI tools are used in a way that supports and does not replace, authentic student thinking.

## Kelly Easton

### Research Question

**How can targeted strategies for developing a growth mindset, best support the personal and academic growth of Year 12 Economics extension students at Westlake Boys High School?**

**Author: Kelly Easton, Specialist Classroom Teacher, Head of Economics, Westlake Boys High School, November 2025**

### Introduction

It was comments from my students that triggered my desire to delve into action research this year. I was teaching a wonderful class of extension Economics students at Year 12, who I overheard putting themselves down in comparison to their peers. Comments such as "but I am not as smart as ..." "I don't even know if I should be in this class" "oh, I am so dumb", made me question why these thoughts were occurring in students who have proved their academic ability to be in an extension class. Sometimes these comments were expressed to me directly, sometimes they were said to themselves, and I was privy to overhearing them. I knew I couldn't change my students' thoughts, but I knew I could have some influence to at least make them reframe their beliefs. To support this shift, I identified the need to embed explicit growth-mindset strategies into my practice, encouraging students to view their abilities as developable rather than fixed.

### Literature Review

Researchers classify mindset as a spectrum between a fixed mindset and a growth mindset. Learners with a fixed mindset believe individuals have innate abilities that are unchangeable. They tend to avoid failure because it shows a lack of ability (Dweck, 2006). On the other end of the spectrum, learners with a growth mindset believe ability is malleable and can be developed with effort. As with most concepts that exist on a spectrum, people typically have a mixture of both fixed and growth mindsets, and their tendency towards one side or the other can change depending on the day or the activity.

Related to the framing of failure, based on neural activity studies, those with a stronger growth mindset focus more on the corrective information from mistakes, compared to those with a stronger fixed mindset, who focus on the failure (Mangels et al., 2006; Moser et al., 2011). Thus, those experiencing failure with a growth mindset see themselves as on the 'right path' while those experiencing failure with a fixed mindset see themselves as failing to achieve a goal, which may suppress dopamine (Lembke, 2021). For this reason, our mindset may affect our dopamine system and, thus, our motivation towards long-term goals.

In an article by Maggie Dent, she noted that dopamine is a key neurochemical that helps with feeling good and being engaged, and it is essential in our classrooms for learning.





Also, that the plasticity of the adolescent brain shows that when students did something hard in school and stuck to it, their brains formed new or stronger connections, thus they continue to receive dopamine cues from these actions.

While failure can beneficially trigger neuroplasticity, humans have also evolved to avoid it. Thus, failure can also reduce motivation. How failure affects motivation partly depends on how we psychologically frame it (Edmondson, 2011). When we frame our failures as being on the right track, we tend to persist; when we frame them as setbacks, we tend to quit (Deichmann & Ende, 2014; Eskreis-Winkler & Fishbach, 2019; Tawfik et al., 2015).

Framing difficult things, like hard projects or challenging puzzles, as valuable to you allows you to receive dopamine from them (Lieberman & Long, 2018; Looby et al., 2022; Sapolsky, 2004). Connecting dopamine to difficult things takes time, which helps explain why habits take at least 18 days to form (Lally et al., 2009).

Dopamine tends to be more activate-able in the morning after being suppressed overnight (Mendoza & Challet, 2014). This final point was of note, as it meant that I planned my action to occur in the first two periods of the school day, as opposed to the last.

## Research Methodology

The research on mindset spectrum and dopamine led me to share information with my students about how to leverage their dopamine system more holistically for motivation. This was intended to be useful to support my students in realising that feedback while learning, can reinforce the idea that failure is an expected part of learning and does not detract from ultimate success in the long term. I did this over two lessons, firstly through some direct instruction illustrating mindset theory from my literature review and the theory of neuroplasticity and how the brain works, particularly the teenage brain. The second lesson incorporated narratives from past and present Westlake students on learning from failure and how they have used positive mindsets to overcome failures. It would be useful to identify at this stage that the definition of failure for many of these students was coming second or third place or gaining Merit grades as opposed to Excellence grades. It was not (in the most part) a spectacular failure at a high stakes assessment or sporting event, hence I reflected on my decision to leave the interpretation of 'failure' intentionally open when inviting student contributions, and I am pleased with this approach, as it elicited narratives spanning personal, sporting, and academic experiences, thereby enriching the breadth of the data.

## Conclusions

This action research project demonstrated that while high-achieving teenage boys often experience discomfort when they encounter mistakes or fall short of personal expectations, these moments also act as powerful catalysts for future effort and motivation. My students' reflections revealed a cohort that is deeply invested in academic success, sensitive to personal performance, and responsive to the emotional and relational cues embedded in the classroom environment. Their reactions to setback, most frequently described as 'disappointment', were consistently linked to a desire to improve, signalling a strong internal drive that can be further built upon through intentional mindset practice.

Importantly, the findings from my questionnaires highlighted that mindsets among these learners are adaptable rather than fixed. Students overwhelmingly believed in their capacity to improve, and their motivation was shaped not only by subject difficulty or assessment outcomes, but also by perceived relevance, enjoyment, and their relationship with teachers. These insights underscore the value of explicitly teaching mindset theory as well as the science of neuroplasticity, as doing so empowers students to reframe mistakes as productive rather than threatening. Additionally, the students' receptiveness to peer and alumni narratives suggests that relatable role models play a meaningful role in normalising setbacks and modelling a growth mindset.

For Teachers working with teenage boys, several recommendations emerge from this action. First, embed explicit instruction on how the brain learns, particularly the role of challenge, dopamine, and incremental growth, to demystify difficulty and reduce the stigma of error. Second, cultivate relational trust: boys are more willing to invest effort when they feel their Teachers are equally invested in them. Third, normalise mistakes by incorporating low-stakes opportunities for productive failure and reflective thinking, reinforcing the message that setbacks are data, not verdicts. Fourth, provide narratives of perseverance from peers and near-peers to make growth mindset principles feel authentic and attainable. Finally, strengthen perceived relevance by helping students draw connections between their subjects, personal interests, and future pathways, enhancing their intrinsic motivation to persist. These represent a series of ongoing interactions rather than an isolated action, occurring continuously throughout the school year.

# Helen Jorgensen

## Pride of the Pacific: Creating Connectedness in Year 12 Pasifika Boys Through a Student-Led Project

### Abstract

Pasifika boys in New Zealand high schools often face unique challenges that impact their academic performance and social engagement. At Westlake Boys High School, a Pasifika Virtute class community had been established to address these challenges and promote Pasifika culture. Despite this, disengagement and a lack of enthusiasm were often observed in my Year 12 Pasifika Virtute class. This action research project examined the efficacy of a student-led project focused on Pasifika culture to create connectedness in the classroom. By encouraging boys to create and present a project on their culture, with the freedom to choose the content and method of delivery, my research aimed to increase engagement and, hence, belonging. Over a six-week period, 15 boys, aged between 16 and 17 years old, participated in group planning and collaboration during their daily Virtute class. The boys valued the collaborative process, felt more connected to their peers and culture, and appreciated the opportunity to share and learn from each other's cultural knowledge, which led to increased openness and communication.

At Westlake Boys High School, boys can opt into a Pasifika Virtute class designed to foster and promote the Pasifika cultures found within our school, such as Samoan, Tongan, Fijian, and Cook Islander. The boys are encouraged to share experiences about their culture and their interests and to participate in regular Pasifika events.

However, as a Pasifika Virtute teacher of the same group of 24 boys for four years, I had noticed that participation was not happening with enthusiasm or much interest at all. Unfortunately, this trend was not only in my class, but all over New Zealand as many Pasifika learners reported feeling disconnected from their educational environment (Hargraves, 2021). As a result, I sought to investigate how Virtute time could serve as a meaningful intervention to strengthen the boys' sense of belonging and connectedness.

The initial goal of my research was to deconstruct what was preventing boys from engaging in Virtute class. I wanted to explore ways to promote an authentic sense of connectedness among the Pasifika learners. Therefore, in Pasifika Virtute I wanted to ensure that I had the boys "buy-in" when the content was not an assessment worth credits. For my action, I focused on creating a task and space where the boys could connect as a team, share their own ideas, and demonstrate pride for their culture. According to Pasifika learners, a "good teacher" understands that identity, language, and culture are important (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2018); therefore, a student-led project about culture was going to be key. To that end, my Virtute class engaged in a project that was designed to encourage belonging and improve engagement in the classroom. My intent was to answer

the research question: How can a student-led project by 16–17-year-old Pasifika boys build connectedness within their Virtute class?

### Literature Review

Connectedness, or the feelings of belonging, acceptance, and the ability to create bonding relationships (Rovai, 2002), allows students to develop social skills, increase their confidence, and have a greater sense of belonging (Jorgenson et al., 2018). Connectedness, Rovai (2002) elucidates, is "feelings of friendship, cohesion and satisfaction that develop among the learners" (p.322). Xin Ma (2003) denotes that a sense of belonging, a term that has been used to define connectedness, is the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported in the school and social environment. Building on this idea of connectedness from the students' perspective provides academics the ability to cultivate healthy and successful students (Jorgenson et al., 2018).

Stereotypically, Pasifika boys are often perceived as disinterested and unmotivated in the classroom (Hargraves, 2019), but perhaps these boys are just frustrated with a lack of care about them as individuals or little interest in their cultural identity. Participation, collaboration, positive teacher relationships, and cultural integration are all key concepts that could be employed to combat disengagement and promote inclusivity, diversity, and connectedness (Rowe et al., 2007). Reynolds (2017) argues Pasifika boys express a strong desire to try their best in educational activities. Positive relationships with teachers, characterised by respect and understanding, play a crucial role in fostering engagement as highlighted by Evans (2011), stating, "male Pacific students' engagement and learning is likely to be enhanced when the teacher takes the opportunity to use Pacific literature, culture and experiences as part of their teaching processes" (p. 73). Additionally, achieving connectedness among men involves creating safe spaces for open conversations and promoting positive social relationships (McKenzie et al., 2018).

When Pasifika boys are participating in something of interest, or of cultural value, they are more likely to engage. Implementing choice, interactive activities and shared meals is an important aspect of Pacific culture and can be used to enrich a sense of community (Thompson et al., 2009). McMillan (2012), when talking about classroom



pedagogy, says that “through an embracing of a collaborative learning strategy, Pasifika boys can be engaged behaviourally, cognitively and emotionally” (p. 46). Similarly, student-led discussion groups promote connectedness and engagement, and a small group approach is “intended to encourage enjoyable and meaningful interaction among a seemingly alienated group of students” (Diamond, 1972, p. 978). On a wider scope, teachers who are responsive, readily accessible, and reasonable are the key to unlocking educational success for Pasifika students (Siope, 2011). Perhaps, if Pasifika boys are encouraged to participate in a group task, allowing breadth for their own choice and cultural implementation, it will result in an improved sense of connectedness to the school and community.

## Findings and Discussion

The aim of my action was to encourage boys of Pacific Island cultures to engage more in their Virtute class. My hope was that a student-led project would lead to better attendance, improved communication, and a clear sense of inclusivity or belonging; all indicators of increased engagement (Reynolds, 2017). When checking at the end of my action, it was clear there was no improvement in attendance, and, despite my anticipation, this project would not be the solution to that issue in my class. However, keeping an open mind, what I found was far more reassuring in that the boys did show signs of improved engagement. The three main themes that I identified in the data were: the journey to purposeful learning is through process over product; fostering inclusivity and encouragement builds a connected classroom culture; and how conversations, particularly around culture, can strengthen relationships.

### Pasifika Boys Value Process Over Product in Their Learning

An unexpected finding was that the boys engaged in this project despite attendance issues, reluctance to present their final project, and a lack of organisation. Boys acknowledged the project provided a purpose, or as one student said, “it was something to do.” The idea of having this specific task was interesting because typically, the boys showed reluctance to completing the prescribed Virtute class tasks on a weekly basis. However, Student E confirmed “[the task] has to be something the boys can relate to.” By focusing on Pasifika culture, boys seemed to buy in and value the process, if not the product. The same student went on to justify this when he said: “most of it was just us having fun. Making this podcast idea, getting the plans together and drawing up sketches of what it was going to look like (see Appendix E). That was more fun than presenting the action.”

Of the 15 boys who participated, all agreed in their interviews that the project brought the class closer together despite the fact that they already knew one another. Student J in particular said “I knew them but wouldn’t really talk to them, and I feel like after this project we just came together a bit more.” It seemed like some boys already felt connected to the school because as

Student C puts it “they belong to the 1st XV or the premier choir.” However, boys on the quieter side admitted to feeling more connected and confident due to the being involved in the project. Student R said this is “because completing tasks and working towards a goal with different people will help anyone get closer.”

### Collaborative Learning Fosters Inclusivity and Encouragement in Pasifika Boys

Throughout the student-led project I noted that, “there is a change to the classroom atmosphere; the boys were now speaking to one another, and to me.” This observation was supported in the post-action survey, where a recurring response to the open-ended question about what the project helped with was that one third of the boys “felt more connected to their culture and more open about discussing it.” By encouraging the boys to create a project about their own culture, it gave them a platform to show off their knowledge and learn from each other. In other words the boys felt encouraged to open up.

By embracing a collaborative learning strategy, Pasifika boys seemed engaged (McMillan, 2012) and the process of working in groups that they chose themselves contributed to the inclusive dynamic. When asked about working in groups specifically for Pasifika boys, their response was about being a community, as Student M said “it encourages us to stick together and stay connected”.

When asked in their final survey if they felt included in Pasifika class, all boys agreed, an increase from the 12 out of 15 who agreed before the action. Asked if Pasifika class is a good environment, the response in pre- and post- action surveys remained at total agreement.

### Conversation Strengthens Relationships Between Pasifika Boys

One surprising theme that became apparent, and something that all boys mentioned, was how working on this project allowed them to talk and open up. Student J said, “everyone is talking to each other now,” “it has brought us together.” Of the formal interviews that were conducted, “talking” as an outcome was mentioned thirty-three times.

At the start of the group project, the boys chose their own groups and started to brainstorm before progressing to a lesson plan using a basic template. The boys reflected that they enjoyed this process because it was strengthening connections that were already there and everyone came together and brought ideas, including boys who were usually quiet. I agreed, noting that the “quiet boys are becoming more talkative,” and that “boys who wouldn’t normally speak to me have started speaking about their results and subject selection.” I observed groups discussing other things such as sport, Tik Tok videos, and even engaging me in conversation; for example, “Miss, where is a good place to take a girl on a date?” Data pointed to the fact that boys were starting to engage, and the quieter boys were coming out of their shell and conversing with the more confident leaders in the class.



When asked about the project topic, the boys all agreed that engaging in Pasifika culture was a good idea and that it even encouraged them to talk more at home. Student E said, "I was going around to my mum and family and asked for Fijian words," and the majority of boys agreed in their interviews when asked if "the project made me feel more engaged with my culture." There was a change in how I was interacting with the boys too. I was more aware of using cultural greetings and making sure we had a prayer before eating our food; important values of Pacific Island culture. The boys also started talking to me more about their culture. I could see their enthusiasm as they told me about family back in the islands and what it means to be a "plastic," slang they used themselves.

While these social labels predominantly reinforce derogatory stereotypes and racial discourses, some Pasifika peoples have been able to find empowerment through labels that "can be 'owned' to become badges of pride" (Radclyffe et al., 2023, p. 14). I was surprised when some boys shared that they weren't as knowledgeable with cultural practices, and some stating they were ashamed they couldn't speak their culture's language. This was an interesting reminder that some boys don't feel as confident about their Pacific Island identity as others and, therefore, could be affecting their feelings of belonging in the class.

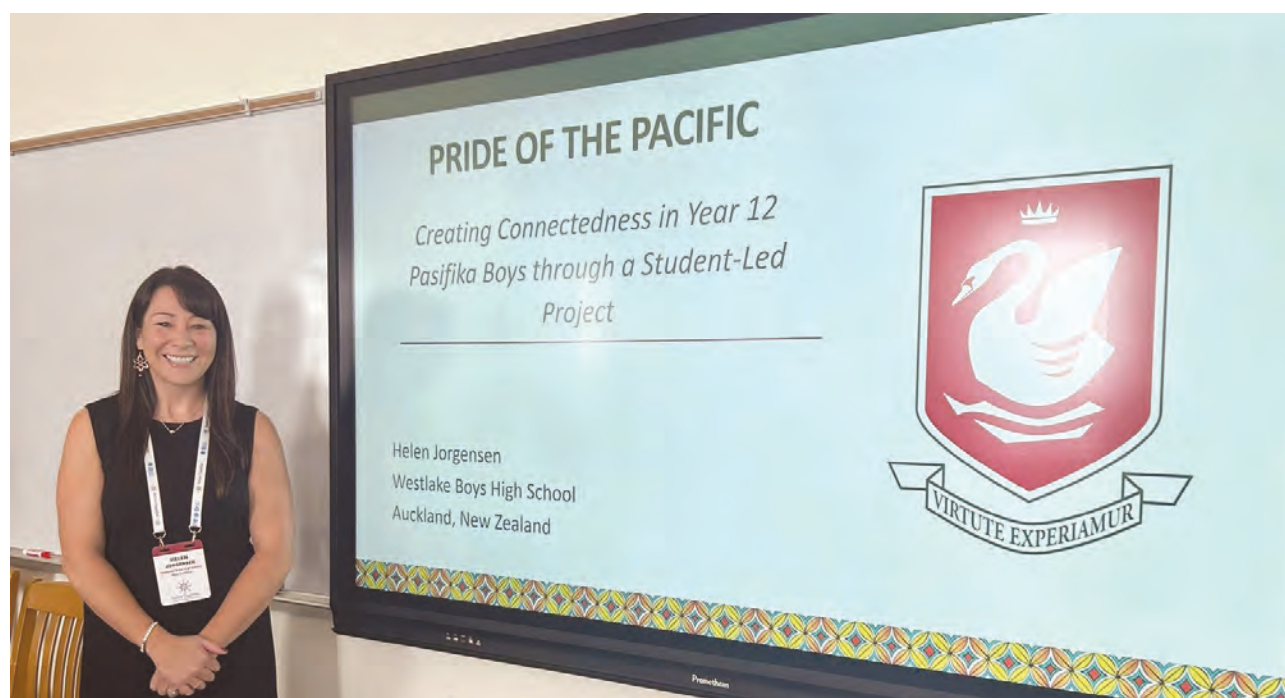
The evidence suggests that the student-led project did engage the boys more. It seemed to strengthen relationships between the boys and with their culture. When I started the action research, I wanted the boys to be engaging with one another, rather than being on their phones. I was delighted at the end when two boys said, "I noticed a lot more people talking to each other rather than looking at their phones," and "I think there has been a lot of growth, from a lot of people in terms of a social dynamic, I think the project has enhanced that."

## Conclusions

It is evident that the boys in my Virtute class responded positively to the student-led project focused on their Pacific Island cultures. Although the project did not lead to improved attendance, it revealed significant insights into student engagement. This research demonstrated that the relevance of the project to their cultural background played a key role in this engagement, as the project fostered inclusivity and encouragement, creating a more connected classroom culture. All boys indicated that as long as the task was interesting, they would get involved because it provided "something to talk about with [their] mates." Pasifika culture was an excellent topic because it allowed the boys to share their cultural knowledge and learn from each other, leading to increased openness and communication. The change in classroom dynamics was supported by observations and feedback, indicating that when students feel respected and valued, they are more likely to engage with their peers.

During this research, the boys' sense of belonging and confidence grew as they worked together on a project that celebrated their cultural heritage. I learnt that some boys in the class had been too "scared" to ask questions of each other because "they were embarrassed they did not know the language" compared to the other boys. By discussing their cultural backgrounds and sharing personal experiences, the boys developed a deeper understanding and appreciation of each other. I was delighted to see that this sense of connectedness extended beyond the classroom project, as evidenced by the boys' comments about feeling more included and getting involved in Pasifika events.

Moving forward, this project could be used as a guide to establish a safe and engaged classroom and build relationships. By fostering a sense of community and encouraging open conversations, educators can create a more inclusive and supportive learning environment.





Westlake Boys High School  
Te Kura Tuarua o Ngā Taitamatāne o Ururoto