What does a great form tutor look like?

It is a long-held perception that a great form tutor can play an enormously significant role in the life of a young person as they go through school. The quality and consistency of tutoring for all pupils is a hugely worthwhile focus. All pupils have the right to receive the care and attention they need and deserve in order to succeed in secondary education. When a child enters our school they enter a world entirely different from the primary school which has been their introduction to schooling. After 7 years of consistent adult attention they could find themselves in an environment in which they can potentially not come across the same degree of personal attention unless they are fortunate in having a tutor who is able to give them the kind of care and attention that they have been used to from their primary class teacher.

This development falls within Pillars 4 and 7 of The Pillars of Greatness.

Why did we focus on this?

In the Autumn of 2011 a similar need was identified by a number of secondary schools. This was a desire to improve the quality and consistency of tutoring in our schools. We were part of a collaborative group known as the Leadership Improvement Group. This is a group of schools from Redbridge who worked together in a series of subject, pastoral and leadership networks for over 8 years. Staff from Loxford together with Beal, Oaks Park, Seven Kings, Wanstead High Schools met termly to share good practice, identify future needs and support the achievement of over 13000 students. The research was resourced with additional funding from the Redbridge Learning Community. The aims of our work were to:

- Identify the crucial aspects of high quality tutorial support at KS3, 4 and 5 in the perception of students.
- Describe and document the actions and determining features of tutors who care particularly successful in the eyes of students
- Disseminate the findings of this study in a way that empowers schools to manage the quality of tutoring for all students and thus raise achievement and well-being of students through their school career.
- Create a core group of highly trained staff who are able to carry this work forward in a sustainable manner in year 2 and beyond.

Four of the five schools were outstanding in their last Ofsted. All schools had a large ethnic mix and medium/high degrees of deprivation within their communities.

In analysing what was really valuable to students in schools we became aware that the role of tutor seemed to be underestimated by school leadership teams and by staff and that the really significant part it played in helping students achieve needed to be celebrated and recognised more widely. To prove or disprove this hypothesis we polled a large number of students in five schools to determine who had tutors that could be described as outstanding in pupils’ eyes. We asked students from several year groups in each school to complete an online questionnaire in which they were asked to rate their tutor on a 1-5 scale on various qualities and analysed the results. From this we found one or two outstanding tutors in each school in the eyes of their tutor group. Our next step was to carry out focus groups with randomly selected pupils from the tutor groups of the tutors who scored highly. The aim was to identify what it was that these tutors delivered in the eyes of students.

Our story

An online questionnaire was created using Google Docs, as it is a platform which is freely accessible and it gave the opportunity for unlimited participants. Our first network meeting focussed on creating, refining and sharing the questionnaire which students could use to evaluate and reflect on the quality of support they receive from
their tutor. Initially two focus groups were run in order to test questions, check the direction of the project with students and test the online model. It was agreed to use the following questions:

1. My form tutor is helpful in giving me advice on progression through school and beyond. GCSE Options/A-levels/6th form etc
2. How does your tutor respond to difficult situations?
3. How useful do you find tutor time at the moment?
4. How much support/advice do you get from your tutor if you are not making good progress in your subjects?
5. How effective is your tutor at team building in your tutor group?
6. Do you think you have a good relationship with your tutor?
7. How approachable is your tutor?
8. Does your tutor give you what you need to have a successful day? (check you have planner, equipment, good mood!)
9. How important is it to you that you have a good relationship with your tutor?
10. How would you rate your tutor?
11. Do you feel free from emotional/physical harm in school?
12. If you didn’t feel safe, how happy would you feel in speaking to your tutor about this?
13. How often does your tutor allow you to lead on activities?
14. How important is the above to you?
15. How effectively is bad behaviour dealt with when it occurs in your tutor group?
16. How often does your tutor engage in extra-curricular activities with your tutor group?
17. What would you like to spend more time on during Tutor time?
18. List the most important characteristics that you feel are needed to be a good tutor.

We agreed to use gather a cross section of ages. Within Loxford we initially reviewed the 215 results from year 7. It was clear that the year 7 tutors made a significant impact on the pupils who value them and the role they play. Tutor time useful/very useful (78%); effective in developing team building (73%); helpful/very helpful in giving advice on progressing through school and beyond (79%); important/very important to have good relationship with their tutor (87%); established a good/very good relationship (78%); while 76% also felt that their tutor was approachable/very approachable.

Pupils showed the desire to lead more on form time activities, while some commented that they would like to see their tutor involved with them in extra-curricular activities outside the form room. Some pupils requested more words of encouragement from the tutor. Form time was used to focus on activities that students suggested as most beneficial.

This image above shows a summary of the most important characteristics across 660 students from years 7-13. From this our initial conclusions were as follows.
1. There is no real difference between the year groups in terms of what they want and need.
2. The major theme/need is ‘being set up for the day ahead’. This might be ‘today’, issues from the previous day, long term information etc.
3. The students place a high value to this role and question whether the teachers place a similar value to it. Do tutors underestimate the impact they might have?
4. The person must not be a ‘stranger’ and must have a relationship with them.
5. The person must develop the relationship within the group and across individuals. A common ethos needs to evolve.
6. There is definitely more than one way to be a good tutor.
7. Students need to see their tutor as a real person, talking about their experiences, life and modelling good relationships.
8. The relationship with parents is key. Students want this and value the ‘comfort blanket’.
9. Some schools with rotating tutors were now questioning the lack of accountability of tutors over time.

Next we identified tutors who scored highly and drew out what behaviour, attitudes and practices gave rise to such good results. To secure impartial results focus groups were led by teachers from other schools.

**Findings from Years 7-9** - The tutor was seen as someone they could go to talk to who would listen and understand. An ordinary person with feelings and emotions, while the subject teachers can be withdrawn and almost robotic, helping to push and motivate the students to do well. The tutor had created a two way relationship where issues were shared, supporting extra-curricular activities further adhered them to the class and the togetherness, additionally students were not allowed to put others down and a collective approach was created. Their role was seen as more important than subject teachers as the tutor sees the big picture, helping the pupils to continually move forward and progress. The fact the tutor always gives out daily information made them reliable and trustworthy. Students felt the tutor allowed them to be themselves and this helped them get to know the form. This was important as you have a lot of lessons with them and so harmonious relationships needed to be developed. Form time was seen as a second home where they felt welcomed and cared for creating a real identity. A consistent approach enabled students to know what to expect. The tutor was seen as their first school friend and guide them through school, ‘You can always fall back on your tutor who will help’.

**Findings from Years 10-11** - A tutor should be relaxed, approachable, trustworthy, warm and a person who wants to get to know them, willing to go the extra mile for the students – very important in building the relationship. Students need to be able to talk openly to them and feel listened to. A consistent tutor was highly valued as it really helps to make a bond with the tutor’s personality coming out effectively whether it be very quiet, laid back or very competitive. Form time is the start and end of the day so it reinforces the bond within the form. The students could not put their finger on how their tutor had created the bond on what exactly they did that make them an effective tutor except - A consistent approach, clear boundaries, listening and trusting us. A very important role was helping the students with both academic and personal issues at school. Universally students felt that they had a connection with their tutor and they valued their view more and so acted on this immediately. The shared termly targets worked well to ensure that the tutor knows the whole picture of the student.

**Findings from Years 12-13** - Similar key themes emerged effective tutors were flexible not too authoritative, not trying to control, to guide not to lead; a critical friend. A more relaxed informal tutor time was valued ‘If students don’t get to know each other in tutor time they will do it in lessons causing disruptive behaviour’. A good tutor can bring a tutor group together, like a family where the tutor is the ‘head of the family’ taking a guiding, supportive role. The tutor must understand them personally and they need to feel comfortable talking to them ‘they give us confidence and through their support and help guide us on how to improve. It is important that I always have the same tutor as I develop trust and understanding, respect, personal friendship and it makes me feel valued and liked’. The rewards that a tutor offers makes it even more important to impress ‘At times we did not always see where the tutor was taking us and the bigger picture however reflecting now it is clear what their aim was and they understood the reason why sir acted as he did’. Trust is developed through a stable a
familiar routine, clear consistent boundaries and implications of breaking them. The tutor creates a whole group ethos without sub groups. This prevents peer pressure, tension, fallings out and cleeks. Students said that they knew and could identify who would be a good tutor through their behaviour and actions around the school.

Our Results - Six key factors in determining a great tutor

1. The tutor’s attitude:
   a. Welcoming – great tutors are successful in making their tutees feel welcome and feel they want to be with them. The effect of this is underestimated by tutors, but it was remarkable the consistency with which students reported how genuine they felt the tutors desire to be with them was and how important this was.
   b. Caring – great tutors care about their tutees doing well. Their tutees become convinced that the tutor really wants the best for them and really cares that they do well. This grows as the tutor’s consistency of intention is portrayed through their actions and their attitude to tutees.
   c. Conscientious – tutees report with visible pleasure how conscientiously their tutor looks out for them and shows attention to their needs in detail, giving pertinent information and grasping opportunities; noticing their individual needs and keeping an eye on them.
   d. Friendly – expressed in different ways depending on the tutor’s personality. If keen on sport it may be competitively based; if keen on nature it may be based on sharing this. The common factor is enthusiasm.
   e. Personal – great tutors are able to share personal information in a way that was significantly different to normal teacher behaviour – a sense of connection/intimacy was established that marks out the tutor as someone special in the tutee’s life. The key was a degree of interesting, appropriate disclosure, not generally associated with a pupil/teacher creating a mix of parent/teacher/friend – the relationship is multidimensional; a combination of a teacher, friend and parent at the right time! A tough challenge!!

2. The tutor as motivator
   A tutors had a significant impact on the motivation of pupils both in the short term to deal with each day, and long term as they helped sustain their tutees’ belief in their ability to succeed. Declaring a consistent belief in pupils’ ability, helping students see the point of working and learning and linking this with their aspirations and visions of their future lives. Building competence in the small but important skills they need to succeed and connecting with parents with an approachable manner. Noticing and communicating if a student’s motivation was enhanced or flagging; being ready to help even when students didn’t need help.
   Structured PSHE lessons in tutor time received a less than enthusiastic response, regular structured target setting with pupils by their tutor was appreciated but not as strongly as might be hoped. Tutees appreciate the 1:1 attention but found the targets less than inspiring. Tutoring continuity was really important.

3. Giving accurate and timely information
   Conveying timely information about what’s going on in school reliably is highly valued; it shows a tutors’ commitment. Tutors briefing on immediate issues – what’s happening today or this week (procedures, exams, assemblies etc) and encouraging students to make use of opportunities by giving them specific information that fits their interests e.g. extra-curricular activities. Making tutees feel cared about because they know more than others; they have a tutor who really looks after them and their needs. Students love to be secure that they know what’s going on and conversely hate not knowing.

4. The quality of pupil/tutor relationship
   More on a personal level than being teacher, sometimes described as ‘like having an older brother or sister, uncle or aunt’. Two-way communication (telling, listening and consulting) many tutors left quite a lot of space for conversations with individuals. Reciprocity of openness (personal information as well as work) was remarked on continually, it marked out the difference in role that the tutor played. Great tutors somehow knew that their students needed to know more about them to be able to be open with their tutor; approachability was paramount. Great tutors knew that it mattered how they used information that was disclosed to them – they gained a reputation for being “trustable” through word-of-mouth between students. Most importantly tutees knew that their tutor was reliable when they got in trouble, even with another member of staff. Not that they would side with them but that they would be their supportive advocate and help make amends. This was valued by all students – even those who never got in trouble.
5. Facilitating relationships with other pupils in group
This was perhaps the most surprising result. Great tutors don’t simply provide support – they enable the group to become mutually supportive. What was surprising was that the value of this far surpassed other factors because it created a supportive environment throughout the students’ life at school. One student who remembered fearing secondary school and could see that she could have become isolated said she ‘couldn’t believe how lucky she had been to be placed in her tutor group’, knowing there was always someone who would be welcoming whenever she walked into the dining hall. This kind of story was repeated again and again – one group said they were ‘like a family with the tutor as a kind of Dad who made sure everyone supported each other to succeed’. A striking feature of this result is the disproportionate effect that a good tutor can make in this way on the lives of vulnerable students who lack support at home. Great tutors actively create good relationships and clear norms and values; giving space to share information about themselves and their interests early on in the life of the group. Creating a team spirit almost like a family and a climate of helping each other; giving space to individuals so they can interact freely. Each tutor acts in a way which they are comfortable – there is no universal recipe! This was very highly valued by students.

6. Detecting and solving problems
Great tutors spot when students get into trouble or need help. They do this by observing and keeping an eye on what people are doing in a holistic way. They keep an eye on each student in their group and know what’s going on. If they are not sure – they find out. They notice little things and because they are trusted they get to know if things are not going right for somebody. Having a firm but supportive approach – doesn’t avoid a problem and is committed to being helpful rather than ‘taking over’ or instructing.

These factors have been used to challenge the perceptions of our tutor teams. They have reflected on what the results and have evolved. The value of direct information was a great motivator, tutors were able to compare their own ‘modus operandi’. The results obtained give us a clear way of developing and training good tutors. We have seen the motivation of tutors increase as they value their work alongside being a subject teacher. The findings were used as discussion points in year team meetings with actions evolving from this ‘best practice’.

Our Reflections

Even in an outstanding school there can be large variation in the quality of tutoring offered to students. Having a great tutor is regarded as a gift of great value by all students. The tutor group, when well run, delivers significant elements of social and personal education in a non-formal way that seems far more effective than formal teaching methods. It acts as a family with significant impact where the tutee’s family is less supportive. Measuring the quality of tutoring by employing online questionnaires for students was an effective way of demonstrating interest in the topic by the school leadership team. It's use could be extended to other aspects of our school including the effectiveness of subjects, teachers or whole school initiatives.

Being a good tutor should be seen less as a quality of personality and more as a disciplined professional task which uses the personality of the teacher to best advantage. Where people have genuine difficulty with the tutoring role the best support is coaching on relationships, and the switch to a more personal connection with students.

Thanks go to all the pupils and staff who took part in this initiative.

Next Steps

As a school we are reviewing our communication systems so information can be shared in a more effective manner. This will support the tutor in being the ‘team manager’. We are interested in exploring the link between an effective tutor and achievement in their group. The significance of a motivator is seen in sporting situations which can be read in another case study from Lampton School. I believe this ‘X factor’ does play a part in a student’s overall achievement. This will further underline the value of the form tutor. Finally we are looking at the time a tutor group spends together; how can this be highly productive and what activities should be part of this quality time.