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| Introducing vertical tutoring into a special school |

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| **BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT:**As part of the schools ongoing self-evaluation we came to the realisation that the pastoral structure of horizontal grouping failed to maximise the potential for developing emotional well-being in our learners. As a staff team we engaged with the argument that the school environment has the potential to either enhance or damage the mental well-being of both staff and pupils. We recognised our significant responsibility that we needed to create an environment that promoted good mental health; that actively supported those experiencing difficulties and acted to prevent developmental problems in vulnerable groups. As early as 1996, Warnock warned of the extent to which the current teaching climate has been reducing teachers’ opportunities to attend to those emotional and social factors that are recognised as affecting all children’s learning. Mc Loughlin (2008) identifies teachers as powerful agents in children’s lives who can help to foster emotional well-being and resilience. The new teaching standards (2012) again fail to recognise the importance of this role for teachers but as a school this did not deter us from our duty of care. C:\Users\HEAD\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\INetCache\Content.Outlook\6K2JL5X2\WP_20160525_029 (2).jpgThere was also strong evidence within our school that the behaviour of troubled adolescents, both at home and in school, was greatly influenced by their peers. Peer loyalty can inhibit openness to experiences and, as Barnard (2010) argues, hinders access to learning which in turn severely impacts on children’s ability to develop deeper understanding of moral values such as fairness and empathy. As a school we wanted to investigate whether there were more effective structures for supporting young people socially and emotionally within a special school context.So we asked the question; ‘Can a tutor system that replicates a family structure support the development of relationships essential for the promotion of emotional well-being in learners’? We decided to introduce a vertical tutor system to explore whether the vertical tutor group can act like a ‘secure base’ (Bowlby, 1979) or ‘home base’ (Perry and Szalavitz, 2006) if established effectively within the context of a predictable, respectful relationship. We wanted to investigate whether from such a base, children can begin to create learning relationships and build esteem through empathetic relationships.C:\Users\HEAD\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\INetCache\Content.Outlook\6K2JL5X2\IMG_6612.JPGWe therefore wanted to ascertain whether replicating the notion of a family structure, in the form of vertical tutoring - a family group made up of children from across the school of mixed age, ability, gender and race who meet twice daily with a tutor and co-tutor - would enhance children’s awareness of their emotions and thus impact positively on their behaviour and readiness to learn. |

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| **THE GOOD PRACTICE IN DETAIL (how it improved outcomes for pupils)**The school established 18 vertical tutor groups to provide a secure base for learners within a family-type group established within the context of predictable, respectful relationships. Staff were provided with training on attachment theory to support them understand the importance of developing secure and empathetic relationships. The older pupils were provided with training from youth workers on coaching and mentoring to develop their skills in supporting the younger pupils in their group. The role of the vertical tutor identified the importance of working closely with parents and they were therefore responsible for conducting the ‘learning conversation’ and chairing the annual review.C:\Users\HEAD\Pictures\DSCN1116.jpgThe vertical tutor groups meet twice a day to undertake a range of activities according to the needs of the pupils in the group Activities undertaken include:* daily opportunities to reflect and be quiet.
* sharing advice on day-to-day problems
* talk about and reflect on internet safety
* build a scrap book of memorabilia from VT activities
* model emotional skills – ‘today I feel’ ‘I feel sad when I see that happen’
* discuss issues such as sexual health and relationships, when they arise.
* talk about their learning
* older pupils supporting younger learners e.g. reading, numeracy work
* opportunities to review behaviour
* monitor weekly merits for behaviour and progress
* have fun together – playing circle time games, parachute etc.
* put together a presentation for assembly
* work together on the School Show
* learning a new skill together
* learning makaton signing
* identify a charity and fundraise
* update transitional reviews together
* preparation and planning for ‘Foodie Friday’
* planning an outing together

There were a number of positive outcomes from establishing vertical tutor groups including reducing bullying and incidents of challenging behaviour. Staff reported that attuned, creative and mindful relationships acted out within a supportive and positive environment -that vertical tutoring provided - had a significant impact on young people’s well-being. Staff quickly became aware that emotional and social skills are not taught but, ultimately, ‘caught’ from adults within positive caring relationships and to maximise the potential of such relationships, staff needed time and space away from the demands of teaching to create a safe space to develop such relationships. Vertical tutoring provided that quality time and space. |

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| **Impact on pupil outcomes:**The mixed aged groups enhance the opportunities for young people to practice being emotionally literate through mentoring and taking leadership responsibility. It also extends their friendships network an important outcome for young people with limited social opportunities compared to their mainstream peers.The benefits for young people of having quality time away from their peer group is widely recognised as having a major impact on young people’s ability to be open to new experiences, empathise and practice skills to enhance their emotional literacy. image4.JPGStaff acknowledge the impact on emotional well-being of having dedicated time to work emotionally with young people without being constrained by a curriculum. They valued the opportunity to interact instinctively with young people freed from the constraints of curriculum, targets and assessment checklists; staff report being able to develop relationships with young people that are organic and unique. Having two tutors in each group also maximises the opportunities for modelling emotional literacy,Vertical tutoring involves the whole community working in school and therefore instils a belief that pastoral care is the responsibility of everyone. The focus on developing close working relationships with parents was deemed both beneficial to the well-being of the child and the parent and is considered a major gain from the vertical tutor system.  |