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Levelling the Tutoring Playing Field

The Power of Volunteer Tutors to Tackle Inequality in Education

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Levelling the Tutoring Playing Field: The Power of Volunteer Tutors to Tackle Inequality in Education

Susannah Hardyman

Summary

This article explores the growth and journey of Action Tutoring, an educational charity established in 2012 that seeks to support pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds to achieve at least national standards in the core subjects of English and maths, using a wide range of high-quality volunteer tutors. The charity aims to address the large attainment gap between pupils from disadvantaged families and their wealthier peers by making the benefit of tutoring available to those that wouldn't otherwise afford it. Since its inception in 2012, Action Tutoring has grown rapidly, now working in eight cities across England supporting 3,000 disadvantaged young people a year through partnerships with both primary and secondary schools, with this expected to grow significantly further in the coming year. Action Tutoring has developed a carefully structured, well-managed and tailored programme, which ensures it can drive the best possible impact for its pupils. This article explores the structure of the Action Tutoring programme, designed to make it as impactful and scalable as possible, and the impact that the organisation has had to date.

Keywords

Learning, Tutoring, Disadvantaged pupils, Attainment, Volunteers, High impact entrepreneurship, Charity

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Levelling the Tutoring Playing Field: The Power of Volunteer Tutors to Tackle Inequality in Education

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Problem discovered

Action Tutoring exists to help tackle the significant attainment gap that exists in the UK between pupils eligible for free school meals and their wealthier peers.¹ Achieving five good GCSEs² at age 16, including English and maths, significantly reduces a young person's chance of ending up not in education, employment or training (NEET), by giving them the qualifications that most employers, colleges or training providers look for as a minimum.³ Yet, nearly 800,000 16–24-year-olds are NEET, often because they did not obtain the basic GCSEs which would enable them to progress. The cost to the state of each individual who is NEET has been estimated at £56,000 over a lifetime⁴. Tutoring has been shown to add up to five months of academic progress for a pupil⁵, but it is expensive, often costing at least £30–£40 an hour. Whilst tutoring is a booming industry – with over 25% of pupils receiving private tuition nationally in the UK and over 40% in London⁶ – it is simply not an affordable option for many families. We believe this only exacerbates the attainment gap and by making the many benefits of tuition more widely and fairly available across society, we are helping to level the playing field. The work of Action Tutoring not only benefits the individual, but also wider society as discussed below.

The intervention

Action Tutoring partners with non-selective state primary and secondary schools to deliver its tutoring programmes, in English and maths, using high quality volunteer tutors. Within those schools, we identify pupil premium⁷ pupils at risk of not achieving national standards in English and maths. Before pupils begin their tutoring sessions, they sit a baseline assessment test that helps identify the areas they most need help with. Halfway through the year, pupils then sit a progress check. This serves two purposes: impact reporting to the school and to identify

¹ UK Government:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/676596/SFR01_2018.pdf, January 2018

² GCSE stands for General Certificate of Secondary Education. These are exams that pupils in England and Wales sit at the age of 16.

³ Education Endowment Foundation:

<https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/evidence-summaries/teaching-learning-toolkit/one-to-one-tuition/>, accessed May 2020

⁴ <https://www.york.ac.uk/inst/spru/research/pdf/NEET.pdf>

⁵ Education Endowment Foundation:

<https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/evidence-summaries/teaching-learning-toolkit/one-to-one-tuition/>, accessed May 2020

⁶ The Sutton Trust, <https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/private-tuition-polling-2019/>, September 2019

⁷ Pupil premium pupils are those eligible for free school meals at some point in the last 6 years, the UK's main measure of disadvantage in schools. Currently schools receive additional funding per pupil premium pupil.

which areas the remaining sessions should focus on. Following an induction and baseline assessment with an Action Tutoring coordinator, pupils are matched with a carefully sourced, high-quality volunteer tutor, who by this point will have undergone training and a DBS check. Volunteer tutors work with pupils for at least an hour a week over the course of the academic year. Depending on their needs, pupils may have tutoring in both English and maths. Tutors use resources that have been developed by curriculum specialists and can be tailored to individual needs.

Typically we work with 15–20 pupils in a school bringing in 8–10 volunteer tutors. Sessions are overseen by an Action Tutoring coordinator who helps engage pupils, monitors the quality of sessions, supports schools with logistics and provides important on-going training to volunteer tutors. By providing individual or small-group tuition in this way and with involvement from schools, Action Tutoring can support pupils' learning whilst significantly improving their subject knowledge, confidence, motivation, study and subject skills and ultimately, their grades to unlock doors for their future.

Since its inception in 2011, Action Tutoring had ambitions to operate across the country, recognizing that far too many charities only offer programmes in London, yet some of the areas of greatest need are outside the capital. Delivering in London has often been easier for organisations, due to access to more funding, ease of having a staff team in one location and the ability to engage with large corporate firms. However Action Tutoring is proving it's possible to overcome these barriers. Clear processes, procedures and an excellent data base system has been key to making this possible. Currently Action Tutoring works with over 100 partner schools across 8 cities, from Brighton to Newcastle. Bristol and Birmingham are the biggest areas of operation outside of London. We have significant plans through an online business model recently piloted to expand the geographical reach further, particularly to rural towns and coastal areas, which have some of the highest measures of deprivation in the country.

Details of the impact

Action Tutoring have invested strongly in evaluating the impact of programmes both internally and externally. In our most recent impact report⁸ (academic year 2018–19), 74% of primary school pupils achieved the expected standard in reading and 81% in maths after support from Action Tutoring – 12% and 14% higher respectively than the national average for disadvantaged pupils. This was despite all pupils supported being at risk of not achieving expected standards when they joined the programme and something we are incredibly proud of. At GCSE, an external control group study conducted by the National Institute for Economic and Social Research (NIESR) in 2014–15 has shown pupils typically achieve half a grade more than similar peers after taking part in our intervention with just 7-8 sessions.⁹ Schools typically expect pupils to make one grade of progress in a whole academic year. This study enabled us to achieve level three on NESTA – The Innovation Foundation's Standards of Evidence. We were one of only two organisations to reach this standard out of 50 that underwent similar evaluations at the same time. Level 3 standard of evidence meant that we could demonstrate our intervention was causing the impact and had used a robust control group. In 2018–19,

⁸ https://actiontutoring.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Action-Tutoring-Impact-Report-2018_2019-v5.pdf

⁹ https://actiontutoring.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/action_tutoring_impact_evaluation.pdf

61% of Action Tutoring pupils achieved grade 4 or above in their English GCSE and 58% achieved this benchmark in maths – both exceeding the pass rate for disadvantaged pupils nationally, despite our group being considered at risk of not achieving a grade 4 or above when entering the programme.

In addition to these headline figures, we report to schools halfway through the year on the progress pupils have made against our baseline assessment. This year, pupils made an average of 10% progress in English and just over 14% in maths before sessions had to end prematurely due to national school closures.

An external evaluation carried out by data consultant Chris Percy of CSP resources¹⁰ shows a strong correlation between number of sessions attended and the grade achieved. Given that, we track attendance closely to ensure pupils are getting enough sessions to make the progress we would hope to see. The benefit to pupils isn't about exam grades in and of themselves, but about what they open up for the future: doors to further education, employment or training, which in turn benefits society as well as the individual.

Our work has attracted significant interest from well-known funders, including NESTA and the education and young people funder Impetus¹¹, who have supported us for several years to continue expanding our reach. Recently, we have played a key role in campaigning for the newly announced National Tutoring Programme, working closely with the Chair of the Education Select Committee, who saw our model as an example of what could be rolled out, and giving evidence to the wider education select committee.¹²

Whilst the majority of our work focuses on the impact on the pupils, we strongly believe it brings significant benefit to the volunteer tutors too. People volunteer with us who would not normally consider tutoring and we are attracting a different kind of person to the usual profile for private tutors. People volunteer because they want to give back and make a difference to make society fairer; they are not interested in doing it for money. Action Tutoring attracts students, corporates and retired volunteers and last year they ranged in age from 18-82! Some have decided as a result to go into teaching as a career and many report how it increases their confidence and communication skills. Finally our programme brings people together who might not normally mix. This builds tolerance, respect and breaks down stereotypes people might have about young people or disadvantage, whilst exposing pupils to people from a wide range of backgrounds.

About the organization

Action Tutoring is an educational charity supporting pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds to achieve at least national standards in the core subjects of English and maths, using high-quality volunteer tutors. Since our inception in 2012, we have grown rapidly, now working in eight cities across England supporting 3,000 disadvantaged young people a year through partnerships with both primary and secondary schools, with this expected to grow significantly further in the coming year. We have developed a carefully structured, well-managed and tailored programme, which ensures we can drive the best possible impact for our pupils.

¹⁰ <https://www.linkedin.com/in/chris-percy-strategy-advisor/?originalSubdomain=uk>

¹¹ <https://impetus.org.uk/>

¹² <https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/441/pdf/>

About the leaders



Susannah Hardyman is the founder and CEO of Action Tutoring. Susannah was inspired to start Action Tutoring following experiences working in the charity sector and as a private tutor, recognising the potential to make the benefits of tutoring available to those that might not otherwise afford it, using volunteers. Susannah is a fellow of the RSA and a Leaders Plus alumni. Susannah graduated from the University of Cambridge, where she studied Theology at St John's College. She holds a Masters from Kings College London in Politics, Theology and NGOs, where she wrote her dissertation on the interplay between state and third sector welfare provision. She has worked in the charity sector since she graduated in roles including research and project management, before beginning work on Action Tutoring. Until recently, Susannah was the chair of the teaching & learning committee and a school governor at a secondary school in south London.

Susannah is supported by a strong senior management team of four members including a Director of Transformation & Impact, Head of Finance & Operations, Head of Delivery and Head of Marketing and Communications. The Director of Transformation is an ex senior teacher and there are a number of qualified teachers within the wider staff team.¹³

A committed board of seven members have oversight of the organisation and include a Headteacher. Other skills include business management and development, finance, education policy and strategy.¹⁴ Through the partnership with Impetus, Action Tutoring are also able to access regular high quality pro bono support.

Sources to corroborate the impact

Action Tutoring 2018-19 Impact Report:

https://actiontutoring.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Action-Tutoring-Impact-Report-2018_2019-v5.pdf

Action Tutoring's Small Group Tuition Programme Evaluation, NIESR:

https://actiontutoring.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/action_tutoring_impact_evaluation.pdf

Action Tutoring Standard's of Evidence Certificate:

https://actiontutoring.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/nesta_l3_certificate_action_tutoring.pdf

Action Tutoring 2018-19 Annual Report and Accounts:

<https://actiontutoring.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Action-Tutoring-Annual-Report-and-Financial-Accounts-year-end-Aug-2019-FINAL.pdf>

¹³ <https://actiontutoring.org.uk/team/>

¹⁴ <https://actiontutoring.org.uk/trustees/>