

## The Open School

### Developing productive relationships for students

Most who work in schools, including students, would want an environment where relationships are productive and secure. Parents and carers would want and expect the school to enable good relationships for their children within the school setting. Describing how those relationships should work is complex, coloured by the history of schooling and images of the teacher and student relationship as one of tension, exacerbated by images from films, books and comics which describe the extremes. From *Gradgrind* in Dickens, to *Kes*, *The History Boys* and *Miss Jean Brodie*, the roles of students and teachers are depicted as oppositional, conspiratorial or idiosyncratic.

For many decades, the notion of teaching as an intensely vocational professional took precedence over technical effectiveness. In more recent times, the role of the teacher has been increasingly defined in terms of pedagogic effectiveness (though pedagogy is a term some of the proponents dislike). Much of the training and development of the teacher is focused on the teachers' role in managing interactions on their terms, ensuring engagement and compliance in learning tasks devised by the teacher.

Social time in schools has reduced as schools have sought to 'maximise learning'. With the reduction in inter-school competition, there are fewer opportunities for students to represent their school and build esteem. Youth clubs and recreational options for teenagers outside school have reduced.

Yet, at the same time, celebrities or renown specialists, when asked how their skill or talent was fostered, mention a particular teacher who 'noticed them', 'showed belief', 'pointed them in a helpful direction', 'made a connection' or 'opened a door'. An interviewer will often say something to the effect of, 'It is so often a teacher...'

### Relationships in schools

The Open School is rooted in the belief that the relationship between each student and at least one concerned and supportive adult is at the heart of the learning process. This is the

adult who they relate to easily and who relates to them without resorting to familiarity. It is the adult who can initiate conversation as well as respond to the student's instigation when necessary. It is the adult who is at ease with a gentle and listening formal conversation, while at the same time being able to offer the welcomed quiet word or the gentle nudge.

For every student to experience naturally a reliable and supportive relationship is a vital aspect of learning, of gaining best value from school and navigating the uncertainty of adolescence. This cannot be left to chance, hoping that the 'one teacher' will cross paths with the student at the right moment. Students need to know that there is someone to whom they can turn who is trusted and has their best interests at heart.

We know that the internet is a forum with influencers using technology to make young people feel special. We know that the risk of grooming grows for teenagers who feel the need for security of relationships. We know that anxiety about so many of life's challenges leads too many young people to avoid, miss or absent themselves from opportunity. We know how many students with bright prospects of success in school suffer self-doubt and distraction. We know that a vast proportion of young people will succeed in school. What they all deserve is unconditional support from their school. We cannot leave this important agenda to serendipity and hope the right teacher and the right student will somehow find each other.

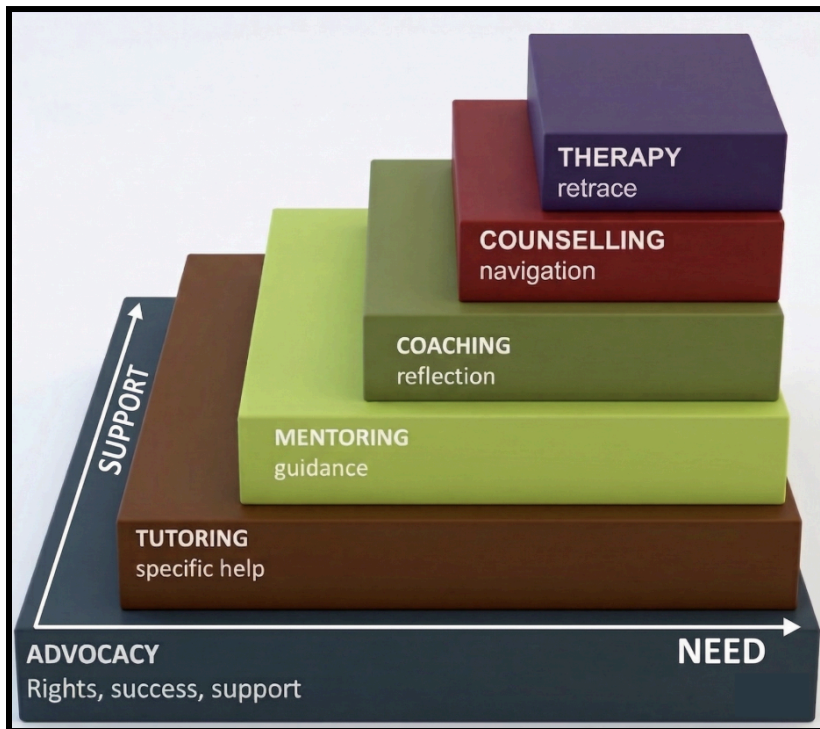
## Building trust and securing engagement through the Open School

A key element of the work of the Open School is focused upon acting upon the voice of the student, building trust and securing engagement.

That support can come in part from their Open School tutor. Someone who knows them well and knows them for good things. Someone who knows what makes them tick and what winds them up. Someone who gives a little of themselves and meets them where they are. Someone who opens a door and ushers them through to an experience that they might otherwise be too anxious to enjoy. Someone who checks in with them and oils wheels. Someone who helps them to make decisions for themselves.

In the effort to structure purposeful relationships, the Open School has identified a range of roles that should be available to connect the student we know with the provision map which could open in front of them. One role of an Open School tutor would be to determine the extent to which the student needs support and whether that support is intensive, periodic, routine or urgent.

## Types of purposeful and supportive relationships



Every student has a right to expect their school to be an advocate for their well-being and development. As well as teaching lessons well and offering wider opportunities, some students need to be supported to make the right choices or the choices they would avoid without appropriate support.

Schools are increasingly recognising that the supportive and productive bond between teacher and students can be built through dedicated allocation of time to reflect on relationships, application and aspiration as well as challenges and problems. Well-managed, by well-supported teachers, such consistent sessions bring PHSE expectations to a reality beyond the perfunctory and statutory lesson arrangements. For most students, such good quality provision, coupled with secure family circumstances, will sustain them through most of their school experience. For some, temporarily or more extensively, there will be a need for 'support beyond the group'.

All students need access to high quality individual 'tutoring'. The tutor focuses upon a group of individuals rather than on the collective called a class. Traditionally, schools have placed students in 'tutor groups', spending part of their day with someone who deals with a more pastoral agenda. In recent times, less attention has been paid to this role as adolescence and society have become more complex and confusing and the need greater

than ever. In many schools, 'tutor' or 'form' time has been squeezed and has become either perfunctory or non-existence as schools seek to maximise 'learning time'.

Some students will need a 'coach' to guide them through specific learning challenges, whether to hone and develop a skill or talent or to overcome a barrier in an area of development. This might be academic, sporting, creative or relationship focused. Engaging with the coach can be short or long term, targeted towards an end point or driven by interest of capability.

Some students will require a 'mentor'; someone with whom they can associate and believe in, guiding them through challenges that they identify and accept, and where they are prepared to act upon advice, having recognised the need to do so.

There are some roles which rightly belong with specialists beyond the school. If the Open School tutor role is working well, the proportion of students needing specialist support will be minimal, recognising that student problems are often a consequence of circumstances beyond the school setting.

Fewer students will require 'counselling'. Where the individual student is experiencing a crisis or has made errors of judgment, then the opportunity to reflect with a trained adult and determine a way forward that can be supported can help to turn a corner.

A very small minority of students will require and deserve 'therapy'. Having experienced trauma, the student needs an adult who can take them through reflection on the past and enable a future.

## The Open School commitment

The Open School is committed to helping schools to develop productive relationships that enable engagement. Those schools affiliated to the Open School have guidance to access and quality assurance for high quality training providers of in-school tutors, whether that be teachers or other staff, including administration, site and catering.

The Open School provides advice on the commissioning of specific support from private companies for counselling support for individual students or access to CAMHS.

The Open School community commits to sharing information and experience across the spectrum of productive relationship management in order to develop and extend expertise and effectiveness.

The Open School community commits to sharing resources and techniques for whole school management arrangements and deployment to ensure efficiency as well as high quality.