

# Vertical tutor groups in the primary years – boys and character education

**Maria Hodges**



***I have noticed a great divide in the relationships between the boys in Year 4 and those in Years 5 and 6***

**A** Year 4 boy once said to me, “I really don’t like playing on the oval, the older boys scare me, they take up all the space and yell at us to get out of the way so I keep away from them.” This comment marked the start of my research project, leading me to question why in one school, with boys just a few years apart in age, some boys would be afraid of and deliberately stay away from others, when our school places so much emphasis on boys displaying virtuous behaviours and we want them to care for each other. I began researching the impact the introduction of a vertical tutor group might have on boys in Years 4 to 6, to assess whether this might improve the way the boys demonstrate how they care for each other, and enhance the relationships between them.

The evidence from my study suggests overwhelmingly that boys in vertical tutor groups, given the right opportunities and assistance, can grow to care for boys outside their immediate cohort. This was clearly demonstrated through the reflection of one of the boys who stated, “It was great being in the vertical tutor group. The older boys showed a lot of responsibility and tolerance to us younger boys. We did fun activities and went on fun outings together. I really got to know boys I would never normally play with and who I used to be scared of. They were nice and they cared about me. It was probably the best thing ever!”

Increasingly important in our rapidly changing world is the need for schools to teach boys values that in our parents’ era were predominantly taught at home. Schools have taken on this societal expectation, and the resulting emphasis on character education has become of key importance. As Johnson (2002) notes, “for schools in general, character education is about finding some way to help students develop good habits or virtues” (p.13).

Having heard from the boys in my classroom about how they sometimes feel fearful of the

older boys in the school, I wanted to see if I could find a way to improve their relationships. I have taught many of the older boys they referred to, and I knew that this fear was more a problem of perception and logistics as opposed to intent. This is why I embarked on this action research project, aiming to bring the boys together in small group situations and develop core links in trust, friendliness, and most importantly, in learning how to care for each other. This led to my research question: *How might the introduction of vertical tutor groups foster caring between boys in Years 4 to 6?*

At the outset it was important for me to unpack exactly what I mean by the term ‘caring.’ To care is to ‘feel concern or interest; attach importance to something’ (Oxford Dictionary, 2010). It was this definition that I sought to explore in my research; to encourage boys to see that other boys in the school, younger or older, are important and need to be treated with concern and interest for how they are feeling. Caring could be as simple as learning their names, or allowing them some play space rather than running straight through their game. Caring could also be demonstrated by simple acknowledgement of each other in the playground or outside of the school grounds, or even just knowing something about someone else – for example, knowing something about what they like to do or eat. Although caring can be demonstrated in many ways, it was this ability to show concern or interest that formed the focus of my project.

I have noticed a great divide in the relationships between the boys in Year 4 and those in Years 5 and 6. This divide is particularly evident during recess and lunchtime. There are frequently complaints from the Year 4s that older boys are bullying them. The lunchtime sporting games on the oval are exclusive of the ‘4s’ and if they ever try to join in, the ball is not passed to them or they aren’t made to feel part of the team. When questioning the Year 4s

about which boy hurt them or which boy made a comment to them, they never can give names, as they do not know the boys by name.

Meetings held with the boys to discuss this issue have not seemed to make any inroads in addressing or improving the care shown by many of the older boys towards the 4s. In fact, it became apparent from conversations I had with the older group that they were oblivious to how the 4s felt.

One factor that appears to contribute to the ‘isolationist’ issue between year groups is the logistical placement of the year groups. Building limitations can physically locate year groups away from each other. Another factor can be that entry year cohorts, (often Years 4 or 5) need help in learning how to socialise and familiarise themselves with their new surroundings. They find it difficult to set common games as they have come from schools where certain games were played, e.g. one school may have been a soccer playing school and another an Aussie Rules school. Coming to a new school, boys try to work out social systems and establish where they fit in. This is compounded if the new school is large. They often require help, but do not know where to find it.

Vertical tutor grouping is not new and there is much research available on the topic. What is new is introducing this system at a much younger age. Most of the literature available on the topic concerns itself with vertical streaming from Year 7 or above. The effect of introducing streaming much earlier was the action, or intervention, that this research project investigated. Action research was my chosen methodology as it allowed me to participate in the research in a hands-on way, rather than being purely an observer (Stringer, 2013). I was able to act and reflect on the process while carrying out the research. It is a process that allowed engagement with the research, and also encouraged reflection on which strategies best suited the research question I was investigating.



Using action research also helped participants acquire important lifetime habits and skills while they were actively involved in the process.

In the view of Milton Mayeroff (1971), caring plays an enormous role in our lives, greater than we might perceive. Mayeroff states: “to care for another person, in the most significant sense, is to help him grow and actualise himself” (p.1). He goes on to establish caring as an essential characteristic to build into the character of boys through education, understanding and, importantly, practice. Caring is about more than a moment of showing ‘care’; it is a long-term process where trust is developed and bonds are formed. Mayeroff explains further that by showing the characteristic of care, “a man lives the meaning of his own life” (p.2). Teaching boys to help others ‘grow and actualise helps prepare them for their future lives and relationships with others, both personal and professional. In light of these claims, would I be foolish to proclaim that caring underpins all the other core virtues to which we aspire?

“Character development involves caring for and respecting others as well as caring for and respecting oneself” (The Jubilee Centre, 2013, p.1). Therefore, to develop one’s character, knowing how to care for others needs to be taught and practised. Too often care is shown by a momentary question such as, “Are you OK?” or “Would you like help?” Such questions do not demonstrate long-term commitment to another, but are merely passing phrases of little importance that, for many boys, is how they learn to demonstrate caring. The Jubilee centre (2013) notes, “character education is about helping students grasp what is ethically important in situations and to act for the right reasons, such that they become more autonomous and reflective (p.2). So that this can become embedded in the school’s culture, students need to be taught explicitly how to care for each other. This is where I honed my focus for project.

Noddings (2007) argues that “there is much to be gained, both academically and humanly, by including themes of care in our curriculum”

(2007, p.1). Caring for others needs to be taught as we teach literacy and numeracy. Boys finishing school literate and numerate will not achieve their full potential if they cannot build caring relationships with others. “All humans can be helped to lead lives of deep concern for others ...they can be led to develop the skills and knowledge necessary to make positive contributions, regardless of the occupation they may choose” (Noddings, 2007, p.2).

Caring underpins all positive relationships, as outlined by Seligman (2012, p.20.), who explains that very little that is positive is solitary. Teaching boys to interact in a positive manner with each other, building caring and positive relationships is essential for them to go on and have productive, positive lives, in meaningful relationships with others. The Jubilee Centre for Character and Values (2013) states: “schools should aim to develop confident and compassionate students who are effective contributors to society, successful learners and responsible citizens” (p.1).



### Vertical tutor group

The vertical tutor group operated one to two times per week during the initial Form period of the day (20 minutes). The participants came together and undertook activities, some of which were planned and structured, while others were free, ensuring time was spent together. The participants also spent much of the time, with me as the group leader, getting to know each other and being involved in practical, written and social activities to foster bonds between them. Some examples of activities included: finding out about foods boys in the group liked or disliked and then going to a café and ordering for someone else in the group by picking a name out of a hat; teaching a group member to play a sport he did not know how to play or could not play well; helping a younger group member with a homework task or something he had identified as being difficult; and making lists of similarities and differences between group members and themselves.

The activities were primarily focussed on helping the boys grow and

actualise themselves through developing caring relationships (Mayeroff, 1971, p.1). Participants were often paired or grouped to ensure that the three different year group levels were mixed and boys were forced to interact with boys from different year levels to themselves. The boys completed a reflection each week where they could make observations about others who they had come to know, or about themselves, and how they were feeling or what they were experiencing during this time. As the group leader I also had an opportunity to observe and reflect upon the development of relationships between the participants as well as how my own relationship with the group was progressing. The building of these caring relationships between the participants, as Noddings suggests (2007), needs to be taught and nurtured through our curriculum and schools, and it was this exact opportunity that was being extended to the boys in this group.

By reviewing all of the data collected a clear picture of the effect of vertical tutor groups on the participants came to light. The boys who participated in the research group all found it to be an enjoyable experience. They were happy and motivated to attend the sessions and one of the mothers wrote to me to let me know that her son, on the mornings he knew he would be attending the group, was eager to be on time for school. "He wakes up very excited every morning of the day that he knows he has some activity with you and the rest of the group. It is nice to see him act responsibly and independently in order to assure that nothing and nobody delays him for school."

Placing the boys into House groups proved to be a positive way to find a commonality with the other boys in the group. "Membership in a House provides students with a second, and more intimate, identification in the school" (Reichert & Hawley, 2010, p.133). Boys instantly made a connection with other boys, their common purpose being that they belonged to the same House. By having them in a vertical relationship, they were able to build upon that one area of sameness. This was crucial in setting up the vertical tutor group.

Overwhelmingly, my research found that having boys involved in a vertical tutor group encouraged new connections, friendships and a real sense of caring for others that would not normally happen. Reflecting on my definition of 'care', interest in another person can be identified by a simple acknowledgement of their name or having the confidence to greet a peer. This theme resonated throughout the boys' reflections and was evident in my observations, especially at the commencement of the group sessions where the boys would bounce into the room greeting each other and having conversations and cracking jokes, thus creating connections between them that only a few weeks prior would not have been possible.

The boys grew substantially in confidence and this was evident in all of their reflective journal pieces. For example, a Year 4 boy with a history of social problems, and whose teacher, just days prior to the commencement of this research, had described him as lacking in confidence, said, "I am more confident to talk to other boys now thanks to the vertical tutor group." This growth in confidence was also manifest in the changed behaviour of boys who had to be introduced to each other in the first session. By the end of the research period they greeted each other by name and with high fives.

All participants knew each other by name at the end of the project and could identify other boys' personal details, such as their favourite activity or drink. One participant reflected, "I learnt that Joe doesn't like Diet Coke and Peter likes playing sport such as footy. I feel great that I know this about them."

I observed a Year 6 boy, who was known by staff to be 'too cool' to go out of his way to help others or demonstrate care within his own year group environment, take the time to show an awkward, socially lacking, younger boy how to hold a tennis racquet. The feeling of success that both boys gained from that small interaction gave them a common link in each future session they had together and removed barriers that would, in a normal setting, have never allowed these two boys the time or place to interact.

In their journals, the boys documented many happenings outside of the vertical tutor group. One participant wrote that he learnt one of the younger members of the group lived close to him, and spoke about seeing him walk to school and how they had made plans to meet up and walk together on a regular basis. "It felt really good to care about someone else,"

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he wrote in his journal, “I could chat to him about what he was going to do that day and he could tell me if he was having problems.” The participant went on to describe the confidence that he gained by helping someone else. Linking back to Mayeroff’s (1971) point made earlier, this connection helped both participants to grow and actualise themselves, building their character by practising care for each other.

The impact of this new-found confidence in the younger boys became clearly evident to their class teachers early on in the research. Teachers commented to me formally and informally about how the students who had demonstrated social inadequacies and lacked appropriate interaction skills with their class peers seemed to have found a new level of comfort with themselves, and this became evident during classroom cooperative experiences. One teacher formally wrote to me about the immense change she found in her research participant: “I have noticed a huge change in class. He is not as worried when things are not going well and bounces back a lot quicker, rather than staying upset for a whole lesson when something/someone has upset him.”

The participants developed new connections and placed importance on relationships with boys they had previously not known. The boys repeatedly noted in their reflections that they had never felt that talking to a boy from a different year group was something that they would do, especially talking to boys in younger years. They found that these interactions were enjoyable and that the younger boys had a lot to contribute and were able to engage appropriately with them. They exited the research feeling that, by having these connections with younger boys, they were better off and felt more a part of the whole school. One participant stated, “I have learned things about other people in other years that I wouldn’t have learned without this group. One thing I learned is that the younger boys are a very humorous bunch of kids.” Another boy noted, “I talked to people I would never normally talk to,” while another commented that he learnt “to care for people in younger years, meaning [he could] make relationships with other people.”

At the commencement of the research, all of the participants in this project from Year 4 played with boys from their same year group

during break times. By the end of the research, all the boys had improved their ability to identify boys from the other year groups. What was really interesting was that the greatest improvement in being able to do this came from the boys in Year 6. They named boys from both the years below them and included many names of boys who were not part of the research group, but were from Year 4 or 5. They had taken it upon themselves to get to know many more boys, not just the research group. It seemed to become more acceptable that they could associate with the younger boys and they were doing this outside of the tutor group sessions.

At the conclusion of the research, the Year 4 boys were very confident in naming boys from both the older year groups. The questionnaire indicated that during break times, they still preferred to play with boys from their own year level, however, they now viewed the older boys in a ‘happy’ way and they were no longer as worried about them. One participant stated, “I enjoy playing on the oval now as I know a lot of the older boys. If our ball gets kicked into their game, I’m not scared to get it back, the boys even pass it back to me and smile.” They had experienced successful interactions with boys from older year groups and were comfortable in dealing with them socially.

The research clearly indicated that incorporating a vertical tutor group system into a primary school setting encouraged boys to develop and maintain relationships with boys they would otherwise not have known. The boys grew in confidence and felt that they had a new group of peers who cared for them. Incorporating into the school curriculum the theme of care and implementing a programme which teaches boys ways to form caring relationships with others they would not normally interact with, proved rewarding for all participants involved in this project. Confidence was the key outcome reported for the majority of participants, and acting with care and interest towards other boys was self-rewarding for the group members.

The younger boys felt increasingly secure and able to interact in a safe environment with, or in close proximity to, the older boys.

The surprise was that the older participants felt that they were the group of boys who gained

the most out of the experience. This ‘cool’ group of boys was there to help the younger boys and act as mentors to them, yet the boys finished the research by overwhelmingly talking about how much they enjoyed getting to know and relate to the younger group.

What happened next is what really excites me. Colleagues were really interested in what I had discovered. Once I presented the research and the findings, teachers were passionate about becoming involved and working with their own vertical tutor groups. There was an astounding demand to begin a whole school trial of these groups, which is what we did, and we are seeing positive outcomes. These positive outcomes are reason enough to implement vertical tutor groups into a primary school setting. As the future project develops and expands to include even younger boys, the challenge will be to adopt activities that relate to the age of the boys as well as targeting the specific outcomes being pursued.

This has been a journey I would recommend to any educator who wants to try to make a change, big or small. How thankful I am to work in a school that supports and encourages these projects, has a progressive and open-minded leadership team, and is part of an organisation such as the International Boys’ Schools Coalition, which supports, scaffolds and encourages such research to happen. An everyday teacher can make a difference!

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