

Rachel Noble's Development Work

An exploration of the role of the form tutor and the value of form time

at Bushey Meads School, Bushey

Rachel was a member of her school's Learning Working Group during 2006-7. She was concerned about the role of the form tutor, and in particular the quality of students' experience of 'form time'. These sessions provided the opportunity for regular contact between pupils and teachers but for many they seemed to be unproductive.

In order to help her clarify her thinking on this, she consulted a number of books, articles and websites as well as the school's own guidance to form tutors. What she found was that there many expectations placed on the form tutor, ranging from 'secretarial' tasks such as taking the register and distributing notices and letters, to more substantial responsibilities such as monitoring the academic progress of pupils and liaising with other colleagues and parents about issues relating to pupils in the form. Some advise that the form tutor is also an 'uber-counsellor' who guides the students through a wide range of social challenges (Watson-Davis, 2005).

Rachel took up the challenge of improving the effectiveness of form time in her school. She wanted to devise strategies that could help fellow tutors carry out this complex and demanding role. She decided that her first task would be to gather views of staff and pupils about form time to inform her planning. She asked all tutors and pupils in Key Stage 3 (pupils aged 11-14) to complete a questionnaire during a form period. In addition, she secured colleagues' agreement for her to observe a tutor period in each of Years 7-9.

She found that teachers wanted greater structure and direction in the work they carried out with pupils in form time. They identified problems such as a lack of resources and insufficient opportunity to discuss approaches with each other. Pupils, particularly those in Year 9, felt that tutor time was often boring and lacking focus; they too expressed a desire for a more structured programme of activities.

Rachel's observations supported this view; in some of the Year 9 classes pupils did not appear to engage in formal group or individual activities and the questionnaire responses indicated that, in contrast with their younger counterparts, they were more inclined to dislike form time.

Having gathered evidence Rachel met with the Head of Key Stage 3 to have a conversation about this evidence and possible ways forward. They agreed with the need for more structure and direction in form time, particularly with the older pupils, so Rachel offered to pilot some activities and share them more widely with colleagues. She would identify two 15 minute 'slots' per week in which she could trial activities and obtain feedback from pupils.

The questionnaire responses were an excellent source of ideas for these activities. The pupils had suggested some simple yet engaging and worthwhile activities. She worked on these and developed a programme of games and competitions with simple prizes for winning teams and individuals. These activities would aim to promote group cohesion through team work and competition. The first of these was a competitive personal and social education activity that was based on the format of a popular television game show. This was initially successful, but Rachel soon found that clearer ground rules were required as pupils became over-excited and began shouting out answers. She developed a scoring framework that included the deduction of points for such behaviour. She also noticed that while some pupils were highly motivated by this game, others appeared to withdraw and 'switch off'. She realised the importance of developing a range of activities that would appeal to all personality types.

Once she had tried out and improved a range of activities Rachel was able to offer them to colleagues to use in their 'form time' periods. In the following academic year she continued to build a bank of electronically available resources to support Year 9 tutors during form time, and these have been welcomed and have helped to transform the quality of tutor time particularly for Year 9 students.

The support of colleagues with middle and senior leadership roles played a vital role in this development project. They had given specific support and had recognised the need to encourage teachers to take on the challenge of whole school issues such as this one. Another key factor in the success of the project was 'student voice'

(Rudduck and McIntyre, 2007). Rachel had listened attentively to what students had to say and they had helped her to identify ideas for the activities that are now being used in form time throughout the school. In her final reflections at the conclusion of her project portfolio, Rachel made a simple but powerful statement:

The best advice I would give to anyone trying to improve the quality of their form time is to ask the students what they want and need.

Sound advice indeed.

References

- Rudduck, J. & McIntyre, D. (2007) *Improving Learning through Consulting Pupils*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Watson-Davis, R. (2005) *Form Tutor's Pocketbook*. Hampshire: Teachers' Pocketbooks.