

11+: The End of Tuition?

In a recent article (16 September), The Telegraph ran a story titled 'Independent schools change admissions tactics to spot tutoring.' The major change appears to be a six hour interview at certain schools, rather than an hour-long slot. It is hoped, those interviewed say, that this will weed out tutored children, leaving only the natural talents behind.

The gist seems to be that children who parrot prepared answers to 'What is your favourite subject?', 'What would you like to do when you grow up?', 'Which is your favourite foreign trade deal?' and so on, will be caught and exposed for the over-worked frauds that such schools, apparently, believe that they are. Unable to discuss anything other than astrophysicists and opera singers, stating a preference for violin practice over video games, gloomily expressing their predictions on the policies of Dr Liam Fox, they will struggle to join in with the 'collaborative, problem-solving activities' that have been assigned and, marooned from the spoon-fed questions and answers that their tutors have prepared for them, will be summarily rejected from every school they try for.

That's one type of tutored child. I think it is a caricature and certainly not a type that I have ever encouraged.

To pick a more realistic type: what if the candidate in question is a shy child, who finds it a little difficult, in a classroom environment, to lead discussion, or to fully understand everything that their confreres seem to digest so quickly? They may have worked with a fantastic, diligent tutor for the last six months, who has helped them to improve their speaking ability and grow their confidence; someone who has shown them that it is not so hard to understand the difference between metaphors and similes given a little extra help and practice. They arrive at their 11+ assessment, are perhaps a little quieter than some of the others, but they are involved with the activities, willing to speak on a variety of subjects, and easy to get along with. This child – and there are many of them – will still succeed, and rightly so. Yet both these children will have been 'tutored'. Are the 'tutor-proofing' brigade equally as keen to stop the latter as the former?

Let us be clear. No-one wants, and no child should be turned into, a robotic candidate, capable of speaking at great length on their favourite book but unable to look the interviewer in the eye. And good tuition is not about that. It never has been.

A Brighton College spokesman is quoted as saying, 'It is not enough for the child to pass tests, we are also looking for kindness, the ability to work well with their peers and the understanding that coming to Brighton involves a lot of community work...'. Fantastic. This is very good news, and exactly the sort of qualities that should be promoted in all schools. It is also entirely unrelated to tutoring, which cannot make a child kind or selfish. Tutoring is about furthering and deepening a pupil's understanding of a subject. It is about encouragement and diligence and confidence.

Another headmaster aims to 'see between the capable but heavily tutored candidate and the more authentically engaged learner.' But no child will benefit from tutoring unless they are committed to learning and being engaged. It is the responsibility of a tutor to make lessons exciting and engaging. If a pupil doesn't respond well, I usually suggest that the family tries another tutor. If that doesn't work either, then there is rarely much that anyone can do. If a child is not inclined to work, and cannot be inspired to do so, whether in the classroom or at home, then their chances of exam success are not going to be improved by private lessons.

So how do these new changes protect schools against tuition? I find it hard to see how tutor-proofing could really function. The interviews might become longer, but we can assume that no-one is currently planning to do away with the Maths, English and Reasoning test elements. And from my experience, interview preparation forms a very small percentage of 11+ and 13+ tuition. Tutors are more usually employed to give a child the time to understand how to do a comprehension, say, or deepen their grasp of geometry, with a focus and individual care that only 1-to-1 or 1-to-2 tuition can provide.

Yes, there are tutors who will try to cram a child with prepared thoughts and opinions. They are, quite simply, bad tutors. And if this leads to those students being 'sussed out', and penalised as a result, then we should feel sorry for them, because they have been manipulated by unethical people.

The Tutors' Association is dedicated to removing this kind of tuition from the industry, which is no good for anybody. We are constantly working on creating the highest ethical and professional standards for our industry, and we strive to give our members a professional framework within which to develop and grow their careers.

'Tutor-proofing' is a silly idea, impractical and focussed on exposing practices that only a tiny minority of the profession espouses. And in truth, while there has undeniably been an explosion in tutoring in recent years, it is wrong to imagine that children haven't always received help after school, on Saturday mornings, and so on. To win scholarships to the most academically-demanding schools, to turn a predicted GCSE Maths grade from a D to a B, to practise expressing your ideas before an interview....well, there are very few students who will have succeeded in such endeavours by only going to school.

Link to Telegraph article:

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/2016/09/16/independent-schools-change-admissions-tactics--to-spot-tutoring/>