Private tuition for ‘Looked-after’ Children in the UK

Problem identification

According to government statistics for 2019, relative to non-looked-after children, a significantly lower proportion of looked-after children in England achieved the expected standards for reading, writing and mathematics by the conclusion of Key Stage 2 (primary school) (Department for Education, 2020). ‘Attainment 8’ is a metric for assessing academic progress between the end of primary school and conclusion of Key Stage 4 (years 10 and 11). From 2017 – 2019 (the most recent data published), the Attainment 8 scores of looked-after children were less than half those of non-looked-after children: 19.1 and 44.6 respectively (ibid). Furthermore, by the end of Key Stage 4, looked-after children are almost four times more likely to have Special Educational Needs: 53% compared to 14% of non-looked-after children (ibid).

In 2001, on behalf of the Department for Education and Skills, the British Market Research Bureau surveyed parents of children aged 5-16 and enrolled at English state schools. They found that whilst parents want to help their children with homework, parents reported declining confidence in their ability to do so as their children age through adolescence (Williams, Williams and Ullman, 2002). 71% of parents of year 1 children helped with homework, whereas only 5% of year 11 parents helped (ibid). However, the authors proceeded to state they found no correlation between confidence and willingness to help, speculating that declining assistance may be attributed to “the independent nature of the homework” (ibid). This raises the question of whether – to develop autonomous learning habits beneficial throughout adult life – children need to struggle alone with homework.

Liabo, Gray and Mulcahy (2013) reviewed studies into the effects of various interventions – including tutoring – on educational outcomes for looked-after children. They concluded they did not know the effectiveness of the interventions. Independent fostering agency Compass and charity Catch Up experimented with training carers of looked-after children to help children catch up with their peers in reading ability, at home. They found that discipline and concentration were obstacles to the children learning at home but overall, both the children’s and carers’ self-esteem was improved by the exercise (Fraser *et al.*, 2008).

Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) found that parental influence on a child’s educational achievement is exerted through inspiring self-identification as learners and inspiring high aspirations. The government recognises the importance of children’s aspirations: their guidance on educating looked-after children states local authorities must prioritise “creating a culture of high educational aspirations” (Department for Education, 2018). Besides providing tuition, the tutors using my application could serve as role models to instil children with the sense that they can achieve whatever they aim to and that failure is an inevitable step in the learning process.

Hirsch-Pasek et al (2015) examined mobile applications marketed as ‘educational’, attempting to contextualise these amongst different styles of learning. They focussed on applications which directly deliver supposedly educational content, whereas my interest is applications serving as a conduit for third parties to deliver education. However, they did cite social interaction as an effective means of learning.

Which regulators and governing bodies are involved in education of looked-after children?

Interestingly, in England the regulatory body for children’s care and foster services is Ofsted, who also regulate state education (*About us - Ofsted*, no date). Under the Children Act 1989 and the Children and Families Act 2014, local authorities are legally required “to promote the educational achievement of looked-after children” and to appoint an officer – either employed by the authority or another local authority – to ensure this legal duty is properly discharged (Department for Education, 2018). The officer appointed to administer this legal duty is known as a Virtual School Head (VSH) and one of their duties is to “promote high aspirations” (ibid). Perhaps, rather than a legal guardian as I originally intended, the relevant VSH should be required to verify children who register for my application.

Government guidance states that educational arrangements for looked-after children “should be based on what any good parent would want for their child” and “the child’s wishes and feelings should be taken into account” (ibid). Therefore, if a looked-after child wishes to use my application – and their guardian supports this – then a VSH may be legally obliged to allow it.

Pupil Premium Grants and National Tutoring Programme

Pupil Premium Grants (PPG) are paid by central government to local authorities and schools for the purpose of “raising the attainment of disadvantaged pupils of all abilities to reach their potential” (Education and Skills Funding Agency, 2021). The Education and Skills Funding Agency pays a grant of £2345 to local authority VSHs for each child aged 4-15 looked-after for at least one day (ibid). Department for Education guidance states VSHs have flexibility in how PP grants are spent and can seek to maximise its impact for an individual child, but the grant is not a personal budget for an individual child, though they may allocate an amount of it to support an individual child’s needs (Department for Education, 2018). Such incoherent guidance is typical of a British government. Perhaps local authority VSHs may be persuaded to allocate some PPG funding to paying undergraduates to tutor children through my application.

The National Tutoring Programme is part of the UK government’s Education Recovery programme, designed to help children whose education suffered as a result of Covid-19 to catch up. Through NTP, schools can arrange fifteen-hour programmes of extra tuition for pupils who most need help catching up and 70% of the cost is subsidised by central government (National Tutoring Programme, 2021). Tuition must be provided by an official partner of the NTP and the selection process is currently closed.

Current offerings in the private tuition sector

At least two organisations offer tuition services specifically targeting looked-after children: a charity named The Tutor Trust (The Tutor Trust, no date a) and Worcester Learning Zone (Worcester Learning Zone, no date). The Tutor Trust only delivers tuition face-to-face and only operates in Leeds, Liverpool and Manchester (The Tutor Trust, no date b). Their tutors are predominantly students recruited from local universities (ibid), which is what I intend to do too. Worcester Learning Zone also operates face-to-face only and its operations are geographically confined. Besides tuition, they also offering mentoring, a service which I feel is frequently overlooked and which may benefit children as much as tuition.

You need only type the phrase “private tuition” or “private tutoring” into a search engine to observe an abundance of online agencies and matching services for connecting potential clients with tutors in the UK. Some function primarily as advertising boards (e.g. Tutor Hunt) offering some peripheral services and learning resources, others (e.g. Tutorful) also provide their own virtual classroom platform through which they insist all tuition must happen. Web based services appear to be substantially more common than native applications.

Peer Tutor

During the 2020-21 academic year, before developing another homework assistance web application, I found a company called Peer Tutor. They had received attention from some British education industry websites (NCFE, 2019, 2020), although these articles were sponsored and written by the charity which owned (Companies House, no date) Peer Tutor. Months later, Peer Tutor was closed “due to the ongoing impact of Covid-19 on exams” (*Peer Tutor*, 2021). Peer Tutor was similar to my proposed application – because its tutors were undergraduates and clients were children in British compulsory education – and may have been my closest competitor, had it not closed. Confusingly there is now another UK based private tutoring company called The Peer Tutor, ostensibly separate from Peer Tutor.

One of the interesting features of Peer Tutor was that it moderated questions, answers and messages for inappropriate content using artificial intelligence. Another was that users could upload photographs of the problem they wanted help with, which is something I would like to implement. Something I disliked was that when posting a question, the categories you could assign the question to were limited to ten or twelve subjects and it was unclear which to choose if none of those options were directly relevant. This might have deterred users from asking questions which did not easily fit into those categories.

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Tutorful

Tutorful is the most popular UK based tutoring mobile (with native Android and iOS versions) application I could find. Searching Google for “private tutoring”, Tutorful was the seventh result (or third if you exclude sponsored advertisements). It has an average – from 267 ratings – of 4.2 stars on Google Play store, 4.6 stars – from 973 ratings – on Apple’s App Store and 4.7 stars – from 2900 reviews – on TrustPilot. On both Google Play store and Apple App Store, its description claims it has more than 150,000 users, with 12,000 of those being tutors.

Most of the poor reviews (3 stars or less) on Google Play are about bugs, specific to the Android application and so they offer little to inform features of my proposed JavaScript web application. Some reviews on Google Play complain tutor ratings on Tutorful are partly automated based on response times for messages, the grievance being that people message tutors outside of usual working hours and do not receive responses for hours, negatively impacting the tutor’s rating (Jack Barr Johnston, 2020; O Ben, 2020). Therefore, my tutor rating feature will be entirely based on client feedback.

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(Michael O, Google Play Store, 2020)

Several poor reviews (M1raPratit, 2019; voodoo we hate u, 2019; zetimmie, 2021) from tutors on Apple App Store cite problems with push notifications; clearly real-time notifications are an important feature for tutors. One reviewer on the App Store suggested a feature for tutors to give clients progress reports (Dunk\_Man\_G, 2019). This will be beyond the scope of features I can develop within the available time but is a feature I would otherwise implement. Another tutor suggests that once a tutor has a client base, “the platform isn’t necessary. Parents prefer to text or call directly” (v283, 2019). This reinforces my intention to facilitate initial contact between tutors and clients through messaging, with the lessons subsequently delivered through Zoom.

Having registered on Tutorful as a student, I find the user interface to be clear, uncluttered and intuitive to use: for example, the core menu is across the bottom of the screen and is visible on all screens, similar to other applications I regularly use such as Santander, My BT and the Southeastern railway app. A particularly shrewd feature is the ‘refer a friend’ button on the main menu; if time allows, I would like to implement a similar feature. Searching for tutors, the colourful, symbolic subject buttons are appealing but inclusion of a search field is valuable: when I tried Peer Tutor six months ago, it limited users to ten subjects, potentially deterring users seeking help with subjects other than those.

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Searching for tutors sometimes yields questionable results, for example: I searched for GCSE Design & Technology tutors and the results include many whose profiles do not read as if they would be able to answer questions about using AutoCAD, whereas somebody who has recently completed that GCSE would have some familiarity with it.

See third screenshot on the line below; relevance of some search results is very dubious.

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I also appreciate that profiles include an average rating and reviews. The messaging feature looks clean and simple and there is an integrated lesson calendar.

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Tutor Hunt

Tutor Hunt is a UK based private tutoring agency and web application (exclusively – no Android or iOS applications), with an average 4.9 star rating from 3135 reviews on TrustPilot. It is the sixth result (or second if you exclude sponsored advertisements) for a Google search for “private tutoring”. Several of the negative reviews from tutors on Tutorful stated that they would switch to Tutor Hunt and recommended students did too (Roger, 2018; Stefano, 2018; Thorpe, 2021). Reading Tutor Hunt’s negative reviews on TrustPilot, most are from tutors who are displeased about either being charged an excessive amount of commission or about delays receiving payment for lessons they taught.

Besides information conventionally displayed – such as hourly rate, average response times, total hours taught through the platform and how long the tutor has been a member – in search results of online tutoring services, I find it interesting that Tutor Hunt also tells users how many repeat students the tutor has. That is a useful metric for potential clients to gauge a tutor’s performance and is something I may want to emulate in my application.

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Tutor profiles on Tutor Hunt tell users whether the tutor has been DBS (Disclosure and Barring Service, the criminal record check) checked, shows their availability over different times of day for each day of the week and client reviews. This is similar to how I intend to design the profiles in my application.

Graphical user interface

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A feature I particularly like about Tutor Hunt is the option to post an academic question and receive replies from tutors. This is how I intend my application to function: I suspect that for the children, posting a question and choosing a tutor based on the replies will be preferable to repeating the same chat with several tutors to establish which is most appropriate.

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Students can (optionally) create a ‘profile’, though this consists entirely of 2 text fields, presumably so tutors can save themselves a couple of messages establishing what a student is looking for help with and when they are available for lessons. The usefulness of such a profile is wholly dependent on the student providing concise but meaningful information and on tutors reading it before responding to enquiries.

I would like my application to have a profile feature where, with a time picker for each day of the week, they can specify any time periods when they are regularly available for lessons. Tutors will also specify their available time slots and perhaps only tutors with appropriate availability will see the child’s question or appear in their search results. Likewise, if both parties specify on their profiles which subjects they need/offer help with, that can be used for matching.

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Students using Tutor Hunt can add subjects to their profile, supposedly making them appear in a tutor’s search results. However, some options in the ‘subject’ dropdown menu are too vague, whereas topics in the subsequent dropdown are perhaps too specific, considering that there are obvious gaps and there is no option to type in a missing subject/topic. For example, under IT there are no options for Node (though perhaps that is assumed to be covered under the JavaScript umbrella) or NoSQL. The list of languages and technologies should either be exhaustive and up-to-date or otherwise should be replaced with more generalised categories, for example: frontend web development, backend web development, desktop software development, Android development, iOS development etc.

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Despite having completed the profile and added some subjects to my account, the ‘suggested tutors’ feature has nothing to show me, rendering it pointless having completed these sections. Perhaps this may be because despite asking the distance a user is prepared to travel, nowhere has it actually asked for my present location.

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Tutors can upload their legal identification and academic certificates for verification by Tutor Hunt. Though students cannot view the documents themselves, this is interesting for various reasons. First, presumably it is difficult for a tutor whose qualifications have been verified to misrepresent their skills and experience (though this depends on the efficacy of the verification process). Furthermore, although it will not prevent any misbehaviour or breach of standards, a tutor whose identity has been verified can be held to account. If I were an anxious or vulnerable student, seeing that a tutor has been verified in these ways may encourage me to engage them. Perhaps this is a feature I should implement myself.

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Another interesting feature of Tutor Hunt is its ‘Tutor Bot’, comprised of a series of games for practicing aspects of mathematics. I will not have the time to build features like this but would if I could.

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My proposal

Current offerings focus on commercial tuition and most tutors working through these platforms are career professionals. A looked-after child who needs two hours per week of extra tuition on the GCSE maths syllabus probably cannot pay a tutor who charges anything upwards of £15 per hour and probably does not care whether their tutor has bachelors and postgraduate degrees and years of experience working in educational establishments. All they need is regular lessons with somebody who recently scored well in their own maths GCSE and for that person to be supportive and encouraging.

If local authorities’ Virtual School Heads are persuaded to spend some Pupil Premium Grant funding on private tuition, then it can pay undergraduates for providing tuition through my application. Otherwise, my application needs some other incentive to encourage undergraduates to register as tutors.

I propose to build a web application for looked-after children who want help with their homework to connect with undergraduates who can assist them. The advantage of a web application is that it runs on all devices and operating systems capable of running a browser. If I were to develop a native application, I would have to decide whether to develop it for Windows or MacOS, or Android or iOS and doing so would exclude many potential users. One disadvantage of a web application is that it requires more effort to open a browser and then navigate to an address than it does to tap on the icon for native application.

My application will differ from current offerings by specifically targeting looked-after children and by engaging undergraduates as tutors, rather than career professional teachers. Children will connect with tutors by posting questions and receiving replies from eligible tutors, as opposed to the model used by most applications and agencies whereby students search for and must browse tutors’ profiles to decide which to engage. Users will be asked to allow notifications from the application, since many reviews of current offerings cite the necessity of real-time notifications. There will be an integrated calendar used to schedule and manage lesson bookings and tutors will be able to provide progress reports for clients. Finally, besides tuition, I want children to have access to role models and mentors.

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