

## **18. Department of Psychology Learning support assistant in a secondary school**

### **What does learning to be professional through the work placement experience mean?**

My professional placement year was in a comprehensive secondary school. There were about 800 pupils in the school from years 7 to 11 with children from all types of backgrounds and abilities. The school was in an Army town, therefore a lot of the children were from army families and lots of the children were Nepalese, from Ghurkha families and as refugees. I found my placement through the psychology placement website and went for an interview after submitting my CV and then was called up that day to say I'd got the job! It was quite daunting to think that I had finally got a placement, but it was really exciting to think that I'd be 'making a difference' during my year.

The Learning Support Department was the department that I worked in and was the largest department in the school with over 20 full time staff. This was because there are a lot of leaning needs at the school, with approximately 1/3 of the children on the Special Educational Needs register and there were also a number of statemented pupils and many pupils had English as a second language. It was quite scary to think that there were all these children who really needed help and I was meant to be giving them that, but the department were so friendly and supportive and throughout the year everyone got on so well and I had a fantastic year as part of the team. The team was really diverse with people from all works of life and although I hadn't experienced that before in the workplace, it was a really good experience. I had to be really open and just be myself in the department which was liberating as then everyone accepts you for who you are and then each person valued each other as part of the team and the different qualities they could contribute.

My role for the year was a Learning Support Assistant working in class, with withdrawal groups, and in the Study Support Unit. I had never done anything like this before and so didn't quite know what to expect, but when I arrived on my first day, I was well briefed on what my job was and the fact that I didn't know exactly what to do already was not a problem at all. In a way, I was put straight in at the deep end when I began and although this was quite scary to begin with and I wasn't sure how I'd manage, I found that it was by far the best way to learn in that situation and hence I got to grips with the different aspects of my role a lot quicker than I would have done had I been eased into the job slowly!

There were many different aspects to my job, and this took a bit of time getting used to since there were so many things to remember and on top of this I never thought I'd learn all of the children's and teachers names! But the children were really helpful in that and I soon came to realise that the children weren't trying to trip me up but were quite willing to tell me their names over and over again until I remembered them! Once I had settled in after a couple of weeks I was confident to move around the classrooms and help different children out as I became aware of which children had needs in different areas. Withdrawal groups were with children in years 7, 8 and 9 who had the lowest abilities in the year group. They didn't do a second language and instead came to have extra literacy lessons to develop their skills in spelling, reading, writing and understanding what they read.

There were different resources available for me to use as I was in charge of up to 4 groups at a time, teaching them and responsible for their development. I found that it was fairly difficult to come to terms with all of the different resources for different year groups all at once at the

beginning of the term, yet through the year I gained more confidence in asking for advice from my colleagues. I also learnt more and so was able to chop and change lessons and adapt lessons to what I wanted to do. By the end of the year I had frequently been developing my own series of lessons on different topics and looking back, I don't think I'd have ever expected me to be doing that when I first started my placement! I realised that without noticing it, during my placement year I had gained so many valuable skills and learnt so much that I was almost a completely different type of LSA than when I started... definitely for the better!

The children were tested continuously throughout the year on their literacy skills and their underlying ability and reading age. This would indicate, by the end of the year, if and how much of an improvement had been made. Although this frightened me a little as their progress reflected on their teacher (i.e. me!). However, we also had a few observations through the year and the feedback was so encouraging and positive to all the Learning Support staff that it made me feel quite good about my contribution to the team. This was a really nice experience as it is always nice to know that you're doing well!

Apart from small groups and in-class support, my timetable consisted of planning sessions for my small groups and marking the work. For two hours a week, I was also in the Study Support Unit (SSU) which is an alternative to suspending a pupil if the pupil hasn't been so bad that it is necessary to exclude them or even expel them from the school. All of these different tasks developed my skills and it was good to be involved in the general day to day workings of the school in order to understand all the different things that go on in schools from the perspective of the staff rather than as a pupil!

The only significant problems I encountered during the year were with the behaviour of children. One instance was with a girl in one of my withdrawal groups where she was with some of her friends and she was desperate to make herself look cool in front of them. She was very disruptive and I had to send her out of the class a couple of times. This was hard as was in my first couple of weeks on placement and so had not yet developed how I wanted to discipline the children and how to deal with them most appropriately. However, one of the other teachers was having problems with one of the boys in her equivalent withdrawal group and so via the correct protocol, we swapped the two pupils and the situation was much better for everyone. This was just one experience that led to me gaining confidence and experience and various skills during my year.

The other problem I had was when, after the first half term when I had been sharing a group with one of the heads of the department, the other teacher had to leave for medical reasons for the second half term. This was planned but when I took over all the lessons for a particular group one of the children in particular was very badly behaved and very rude. This had a knock on effect to the rest of the group but the problem was that she did not care about punishment and was stubborn and resistant. I found this really difficult with such little experience handling this type of situation and although I tried many different tactics and punishment she would continually misbehave and be very rude in the lesson. The other staff were very supportive and gave me advice and one of the other LSA's who was often in the lesson with a different pupil used to aid me with the discipline, unfortunately to no effect. In the end, I often had to resort to sending her out of the classroom and sending her to the head of department to work alone for the rest of the term. This was discouraging at the time and I would often dread those lessons. Now though, I realise that, should I become a teacher in the future even if I have a role managing other colleagues, this was good experience. I know that I did things that weren't helpful in disciplining and I had to find out how to discipline effectively and this was a really difficult challenge. Nevertheless, it taught me so much in the way of dealing with others in all

types of situations, and how to handle situations to get the best possible outcome. Especially if I become a teacher, I know that these experiences will be invaluable to when I get into the classroom. There were other lesser issues that I encountered on my placement, such as fights between children, potentially very aggressive children in different situations, a teaching strike, and a difficulty in the department with a previous member of staff. All of these developed my skills in dealing with others and communicating effectively.

During my placement, I developed and acquired many new skills in different aspects of work and my life. Going into a job and having to go straight in at the deep end with taking my own groups of children and having to learn everyone's names as well as disciplining children and everything else that came with the job, had a big impact upon my confidence levels. I also developed my time management and organisational skills, and my communication skills definitely improved!

Although my placement was not directly an application of psychology, I definitely found my first two years of the psychology degree useful. In the year I came across many different learning and behavioural difficulties that all had a psychological aspect. Some of these were learning problems such as dyslexia and dyspraxia that have been directly studied to an extent at university. Other difficulties such as Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder, Autistic spectrum disorders and attachment disorder also provided an opportunity to use knowledge of psychology to gain an understanding to some extent of that 'disorder'. On top of using knowledge from the degree programme it was also interesting to learn more from in service training specific to the learning support department where we learnt more about different issues in detail and how these would affect the children in different environments. This was very interesting and enabled me to also combine the new knowledge with previous knowledge about i.e. Theory of Mind.

This placement year was very helpful to me in aiding me with my career decisions. Before starting my placement, I had no idea as to what to do as a career and in the future. Now however, I am inclined towards teaching as a path for when I finish my degree. I had always known it was an option, though now, having spent a year experiencing working in a school, I definitely consider it a possibility for the future. Also, now knowing how much I enjoyed spending a year working in education, I am also aware of the other routes that I could follow that involve education and psychology. Even if I do not decide to do teaching, I know really enjoyed my placement and know that it was one of the most valuable experiences I have had. Through my professional year I learnt so much about myself and about working in a professional field. Looking back, I don't think I'd really change much about what I did as I know that through all my experiences, they all helped me to grow in myself and develop confidence and abilities.

Should someone who is about to embark on their professional placement year ask me for advice, I would say not to have too high expectations but go in with an open mind. Be optimistic, be positive about all experiences and embrace the opportunity to learn as much as you can. I know that although the year does not have a direct 'knowledge' impact on my final year, it has encouraged me to work really hard to achieve the best I can, and it has refreshed me to apply myself completely to what I want to achieve so that in the future and once I have graduated I can be the best employee that it is possible for me to be. I suppose it is really important just to approach the year with a positive attitude and a desire to do the job to the best of your ability and make the most out of each and every situation, then you will find the experience really rewarding.