23. What had learning to be a professional meant to you?
Department of Psychology
Research evaluator at a local educational Excellence Cluster

A description of the company or organisation

Excellence Clusters were developed out of the Department for Education and Skills (DfES, now Department for Children, Schools and Families) Excellence in Cities programme which aimed to raise standards and promote inclusion in inner cities and other urban areas. Excellence Clusters, however, focused on smaller geographical areas and looked towards tackling underachievement in schools through specific strands, including access to a learning mentor for each school, the development of Learning Support Units and provision for Gifted and Talented pupils.

My local Excellence Cluster aimed to increase life chances of children and young people through the support of targeted schools to raise levels of attainment, raise standards of behaviour, extend opportunities, increase attendance and provide focused support for 'at risk' pupils.

> Vision Statement
> "To increase life chances for the children of the local Excellence Cluster by helping them: achieve their potential, both academically and for their future employment; feel safe; understand and lead healthy lifestyles; make a positive contribution to their community" (MECP and BIP Service Plan 2007)

Within the local Excellence Cluster Partnership are 20 schools (21 before an amalgamation), 16 of which were formerly receiving support under the Education Action Zone. These twenty schools located within a geographical area serve a comparatively deprived community where educational qualifications and skills have traditionally been low. The wards within the Cluster have high levels of poverty and in terms of education; some fall within the 10% most deprived wards in the country. This is also reflected in the high numbers of pupils with Special Educational Needs and those receiving Free School Meals, which are both above national average in many of the schools.

All of the schools and partners were involved in the planning for the local Excellence Cluster and signed a letter of commitment to the MECP Strategic and Action Plans. The following priorities were agreed by the partnership:
- Raising expectations and attainment at Key Stages 1-4
- Narrowing attainment gaps and tackling underachievement
- Raising expectations and attainment post 16
- Promoting inclusive education and reducing exclusion.

An account of the range of tasks you performed

Within my role as Project Evaluator I was asked to conduct an eleven-month research project to evaluate the impact and success of the local Excellence Cluster Partnership. This project offered twenty local schools Mentoring and Counselling support, Language Enrichment programmes, Behaviour Improvement Programmes and extended opportunities for Gifted and

Talented pupils. The main activities conducted whilst on placement include a literature review, production of a research proposal with suggested methodologies, data collection and analysis and report writing. The findings from the study were presented in the form of an evaluation report and various presentations.

An evaluation of the placement in utilising or extending skills and knowledge

Whilst on my placement with the local Excellence Cluster I was able to use my knowledge and skills developed in the first two years of the psychology course in many ways. Research skills developed whilst preparing for assignments and reports completed at university enabled me to accept the initial task of conducting a literature review with little hesitation. In this way I was also able to transfer writing skills when preparing documents or handouts, with the ability to draw conclusions with all evidence in mind. Using knowledge and skills developed within our Research Methods and Statistics modules I was able to evaluate the effectiveness of various methodologies and analyse the findings once data had been collected. (For example the use of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) for qualitative data and T-Tests for quantitative.) My knowledge of developmental psychology put me in good stead when I attended the Children's Workforce Induction training, as many of the other trainees had more practical experience; I was able to bring theory into our discussions. This meant that were able to work well as a group to produce a well-rounded argument, with my team nominating me to be the group speaker. Most of all I found it interesting to see how theories and topics studied translated into real life, in the form of interventions and strategies within the education system.

I feel that whilst on my placement year I was given a wealth of opportunities to develop my knowledge and skills and clarify my future plans. When starting work for the MECP I had to learn very quickly to manage my time and plan effectively, right from the start I was aware of the timescale of the evaluation project and so devised a timetable for action within my research proposal. There were stages within my placement where many tasks needed completing simultaneously and so it was vital that I could prioritise. At one stage when working under pressure I felt it was appropriate that I refused a further request from my line manager, although I could have easily accepted the task I knew I would have taken on too much, and I think she later respected me more for being honest with her.

My biggest area of development whilst on placement year, I feel, would be in my communication skills, when I began in the role I was nervous of taking phone calls or making calls to figures of authority. But as communication was a large part of the role I soon became accustomed to using the telephone and email system on a daily basis. These skills were also important when preparing questionnaires and interview schedules, I had to think about how they would be perceived and tailor them appropriately to the audience. Initially I was nervous about conducting the interviews, so I began with members of staff I was more familiar with, when these went well and I felt I could build up a rapport with the participant I felt more confident in interviewing the twenty Headteachers. By the end of the data collection phase I felt much more confident in my communication abilities, feeling I was more able to read verbal and non-verbal messages and respond accordingly.

Following on from communication skills are those of presentation. From the start of the placement I was expected to produce progress reports for members of the steering groups and strand meetings, something which, depending on the audience, I did not find too daunting. However, each term the MECP held a 'full board meeting', at which I was asked to present my findings so far. These meetings were attended by representatives from each school involved, the MECP and local council. Initially the thought of speaking to around twenty-five people, who

would not hesitate to criticise, filled me with fear. At my first full-board meeting my voice was shaking and I could not wait for it to end. However, attending these meetings, over time allowed me to overcome my nerves and produce a presentation for the celebratory event. I was nervous about the event, but this was my chance to shine. There were around sixty people in the audience, but I was determined to appear confident and professional and delivered my speech well. After my presentation, many people congratulated me, including the Director of Children's Services, which left me feeling a great sense of achievement.

Production of the evaluation report lead me to improve my computer skills and my knowledge of programmes such as Microsoft Word, Access, Excel and Power Point. Each of these were used to a large extent during my day-to-day tasks such as database management, data extraction, presentation production and report writing.

Being given the opportunity to work with the local Excellence Cluster, local Council Children's Services and twenty schools in the area allowed me to greatly extend my knowledge of education and educational psychology. I learnt of the many roles that exist in the field and the part they play within the school setting or within the local authority. During the data collection and analysis stages of the evaluation I learnt of the measures used within education for attendance and attainment, as well as those for attitudes and emotions. I was given the opportunity to work with vulnerable children during a summer school held at one of the Cluster schools, which I found very rewarding. In the second half of the placement I worked for one day a week in a primary school, helping me extend my knowledge of teaching practices, such as the use of phonics and high frequency words. Whilst working with the Cluster and with the Educational Psychologists I was able to learn more about special educational needs and interventions put in place to help these children, as well as those with socio-emotional difficulties.

My placement with the local Excellence Cluster Partnership has only strengthened my desire to pursue a career in educational psychology. At this stage I plan to complete my undergraduate degree and look to applying for the educational psychology doctorate course and for funding from a local authority.

An evaluation of any personal change and development

I feel that the largest area of personal change arising from my placement year would be that in my confidence and independence. The evaluation project that I took on was largely self-managed and so I was required to be organised, use initiative and manage my time effectively. The expectations of my line manager and other staff in the team were apparent from the start, and I feel this boosted my confidence, as I was aware of what they felt I could achieve. When I first started in the role I was given support and advice from a supervisor, but when he left the team a few months later I felt even more pressure to be independent as the member of staff who replaced him was less experienced and had less understanding of the MECP than myself. There were many occasions when I would be alone in the office; the feelings of trust installed in me and the responsibility given to me increased my confidence further.

When I was given the opportunity to work with the Educational Psychologists, at meetings or in-school reviews I was often asked my opinion on a certain child or situation. This encouraged me to think like a psychologist and installed a belief in me that other professionals thought my opinions were of value. I hope that from this experience I have also gained maturity.

Any other notable feature of the placement

One notable feature of my placement I would like to mention was my line manager. As a Senior Educational Psychologist she was able to see my potential and push me to achieve it. I feel that I learnt a lot from being able to work with someone with such a wealth of skills, knowledge and expertise. Throughout my placement she was keen to offer me new opportunities, hence allowing me to get the most out of the year possible. Not only did I conduct my daily role as Project Evaluator, I was able to help her with her BPS work, shadow various education professionals, attend training and gain experience of working within a school setting.

Another thing I noted whilst on my placement was just how young I felt in the professional world. Whilst sitting in a room of education professionals with qualifications and experience under their belt I realised that I am really only just beginning my life in the real world and at this stage there are many opportunities open to me. However, it also felt good to be accepted into this world and asked for my opinion on things, with people commenting how I brought a fresh approach to problem solving.

My last comment on this report is how difficult it is to summarize a year of growth and experience in this way when changes take place that can't easily be put into words. Employers are often reluctant to give someone a job with no experience, but following this year I can understand why, I think experience is not something that can be measured, but is of huge benefit when starting out in the professional world.