

7. Department of Psychology

Educational Psychology intern at a special autism school

Setting up the placement

Choosing an area for my placement was a simple decision for me. I have always known I want to work with children in an academic setting. In addition, as a result of a careers meeting in secondary school I had intended to go on to be an educational psychologist. Further I had decided I would like to live back at home, which would mean creating a whole new placement since none seemed to have been established in the local area. So I set about tracking down 'ed psychs' as they are known. I soon discovered that this would not be easy since ed psychs that are part of the council do not generally take placement students before they have graduated from their psychology degree. This was becoming more of a challenge than I had at first anticipated but I had to persevere despite many closed doors.

The placement co-ordinator then contacted me as a potential placement had come up within a half an hour drive of my house. However, after a few days of consideration I decided to decline the placement since I did not fit the person specification and neither did it fit my expectations. So the search continued. My mum works in a school for disabled children and so I was exercising her contacts to identify any possible ed psychs I could contact. Two potential options came up as a result. The first actually turned out to be a non-starter but still worth considering. Through the other contact I then got in touch with the ed psych of a school for children with autism. I was a little daunted by the prospect of working with children with autism as I had limited experience but I could not turn down the potential of a fantastic experience.

After many emails, telephone calls and an interview the placement was set up. I would be working alongside the ed psych and his two assistant psychologists at a special school for autism. The ed psych, who had interviewed me, would be my supervisor for the placement. Now I just had to get ready for the work that lay ahead. I knew I had a lot to learn so I did some reading about autism over the summer as a basic understanding. Although the placement was unpaid the experience would be fantastic so I was keen to make the most of every opportunity.

The School

My placement location was an independent special school for autism. It caters for boys and girls aged between five and 19 years with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD). There are 70 students at the school, which runs across two sites. The primary and secondary departments are in one site, and the post-16 and residential provisions are in a second site. The majority of students are male with only 5 girls in the school. Most students attend the school on a daily basis but there are about 20 weekly boarders between Monday and Friday.

Within the school there are support services to ensure the children are content and progressing optimally. The school has a Speech and Language Team (SaLT) and Psychology department. One of the key aspects within the school is sharing information within and between departments.

The Classroom Setup

Each class consists of between four and ten students. In the primary department students have most lessons in their classroom with the exception of Science, Art and P.E. Secondary students have a base room but then travel between classrooms for lessons.

Psychology Department

The Psychology Department consists of one Educational Psychologist (EP) and two Assistant Psychologists. During my placement I became part of the Psychology team as a Student Psychologist. My time on placement was split between the office, which was shared by the two assistant psychologists, and being out around the school. The psychology department aims to identify the psychological profile of the students, and in connection with class teachers and assistants, to identify the most effective method of working for that pupil to maintain optimum learning. Through monitoring and assessment strengths and emerging skills are identified along with those areas where additional support may be needed. Upon admission of a new pupil a baseline assessment is made. Standardised assessments are used to establish each pupil's strengths and to highlight any problem areas. Pupil's progress is assessed annually and monitored throughout the year. Furthermore, the Psychology department also look into changes in behaviour and try to develop strategies to improve challenging behaviour. The psychology department is also responsible for constructing Behaviour Support Plans and Individual Education Programmes.

The first few weeks

During my first few weeks at the school I attended several training sessions for new staff at the school. Some of these were general autism related sessions, which built on my understanding from the developmental lectures in first and second years of my degree. The remainder of the sessions contained information specific to the school and the students within it. This was a very intense period, during which my understanding grew immensely but the real learning experience would begin in the school.

Tasks on placement

Behaviour Bulletin

It is a requirement of the school that an up-to-date record of behaviours is held and distributed regularly to inform staff of any new or recurring behaviours and strategies implemented to address these. The Behaviour Bulletin is the document that holds this information. Throughout my placement I was responsible for the maintenance and distribution of the bulletin.

Inter-Departmental Review

Each week an Inter-Departmental Review (IDR) was held after school. This is a meeting where all departments involved in a class have a meeting to maintain progress and consistency. Each child in the class was discussed in turn and any problems were highlighted and possible solutions and strategies were discussed. I attended several of the IDR meetings during my placement and was able to give my input and offer additional support for children who were displaying challenging behaviour.

Annual Review

On behalf of every child at the school it is necessary to hold an annual review. This is a meeting which is held to ensure the student is making optimal progress, to review the previous year's achievements and to prepare for the year ahead. On several occasions during the year I have attended the annual review of a student that I worked closely with for a period of time. I often helped with the preparatory work for the review including making observations and helping with assessments which form part of the report.

Observations

Observations are carried out at the school for several reasons. They form an integral part of the review process; they may be used to monitor progress; they may be required to monitor an emerging behaviour; and they may also be used to monitor the effects of an intervention or the use of a new strategy. As part of my role in the school I undertook the task of conducting

observations. During the observation I made notes of key points that occurred relating to the area of focus, for example, this could be student interactions or class participation.

1:1 Tutorial Sessions

As the year progressed I was given the opportunity to support one student to address two objectives that had been identified. The student I was chosen to work with was a 15 year old boy with Asperger Syndrome. I held a support session for him each week which lasted between 30 and 40 minutes. Each week I devised a series of tasks and activities that built upon our previous sessions to explore the different ways of working towards a goal or target. The sessions became a matter of trial and error and constantly refining strategies in order to develop an individualised way he could work best.

Assessments

During my placement I became familiar with assessment tools used to assess numeracy and literacy. Since I had not graduated from my psychology degree I was unable to conduct the tests independently but I was able to assist. Towards the end of my placement I was able to score the assessments with supervision from the psychology team. Often I would be involved in the discussion and interpretation of the scores in comparison to previous years, even if I was not present while the assessment was administered.

Incident recording

Many of the children at the school display challenging behaviour as a result of their autism or another disability. Each of these incidents of challenging behaviour must be recorded. The frequency and intensity of incidents can vary widely but they must all be recorded in the same format. Part of my role was to check the forms had been completed correctly, follow up any omissions on the forms, and to enter the data onto the computer recording system.

Additional support

Since my placement was unpaid I only needed to work for four days a week to fulfill the University requirements of my placement year. On the 5th day I took up the opportunity to become employed by the school as a member of additional support working in classes to support the students' learning. In addition, I was frequently called into class to work as additional support on my four placement days to cover absences and to help with challenging situations.

Evaluation of my progress on placement

Throughout the year I have embraced many opportunities that have arisen through my placement and as a result I have made considerable personal development over my time in the school. During my placement I have developed my independence and maturity in the working environment. Although I have had part-time work before my placement this has been my first experience of full-time job. I have had many experiences as a result, that have allowed me to refine and enhance my skills.

I have had the opportunity over the year to improve my interpersonal and communication skills in a variety of settings. My confidence has grown with experience, particularly when addressing groups and in a formal manner. My placement required that I interact with many different types of people, including children across the full spectrum of age, adults, professionals and other departments within the school. I learnt the essentiality of appearing calm even when nervous and this has improved over the year. I was required to write several reports throughout my placement which has improved my written communication skills. My writing has become clearer and more concise and I realise the importance of being completely informed in the area in order

to plan a report of a high standard.

My timekeeping and reliability have been useful throughout the year, particularly in relation to meeting deadlines or achieving goals. Due to the nature of the tasks I would at times be very busy whereas at others, be searching for tasks to undertake. This required a lot of self motivation and the clear use of time guidelines. Over the year I realised the importance of not accepting too much work at any one time and keeping track of the work in hand. I also learnt that I should ask for help when needed and to clarify a task if I was unsure. The importance of knowing the precise requirements of a task was demonstrated to complete it to the full capacity.

Over the year there have been some difficulties, including being unsure of what I can and cannot do, learning procedures and defining my role within the psychology department. Since I am a determined and motivated person I was keen to get as much out of the placement but this sometimes meant I overstepped the boundary of what it was planned I could do. Since this was a pilot year for this placement there were many discussions redefining my role and ensure the level of work was appropriate.

My understanding of autism has grown considerably over the year. This has been the result of the training opportunities through the school, hands-on experience and independent reading and research I have undertaken throughout the year. This has informed my future plans for my career such that at some point in the future I would like to work with children with special educational needs. I have decided as a result of the varied experiences of my placement that I will train for a PGCE in primary education after graduating from my Psychology degree. The experience has allowed me to clarify my preference to work in the education setting with children but I am now more open to the options of special needs education and to work with older students. However, I would like to train in mainstream school before progressing further into an area of disability. The placement has benefited me in terms of personal development of skills and informing my future decisions regarding my career.

Recommendations for future placement students

- Don't be afraid to turn down an unsuitable placement
- Chose a representative placement of something you might like to do in the future
- If your placement is unpaid, seriously consider living at home
- Explore a range of possibilities and make an informed decision
- Clearly define your role within the workplace at the start of the placement