

## A vital education

Juliet Whitehead on life as a trainee educational psychologist

British Psychological Society (BPS) accredited professional training for educational psychologists (EPs) in England and Wales changed in 2006. The one-year master's programme was replaced by a three-year full-time programme leading to the doctorate qualification. As a second-year trainee EP studying at Cardiff University, I welcome the opportunity to share my experiences in light of the revised professional training route.

The extended training offers greater breadth and depth, in terms of developing understanding and experience, and a corresponding responsibility for trainees to reflect this knowledge in their practice. Cardiff University has ensured the acquisition, consolidation and demonstration of this level of competency by delivering a comprehensive curriculum that includes: assignments, group tasks

(including collaborative research projects), presentations, written reflections, small-scale research projects, taught sessions, educational psychology service (EPS) placements and writing-up of fieldwork. A key element of the programme is the submission of a thesis in the final year of training, undertaken with the support of a designated supervisor.

Trainees are placed in a different local authority (LA) each year for blocks of time, with periods set aside for university sessions or studying. The work I have undertaken during my placements has illustrated the considerable difference that the application of psychology can make to children and young people. This work has included assessing learning and emotional needs; developing, delivering and evaluating therapeutic and behaviour management programmes; reviewing policies; and conducting research. From my own experience, the opportunity to work as a trainee EP within a variety of LAs has provided invaluable insights into different models of practice and service delivery. It has enabled me to consider the merits of various EPS structures, the roles that they play within LAs, and the diverse populations that they serve.

It is especially evident during EPS placements that the EP's role is dynamic and evolving, and it is a privilege to be a trainee at a time when much emphasis is being placed on collaborative working using a multi-agency team approach to deliver a comprehensive, quality service.

It is my experience that the role has moved away from working with children and young people on an individual basis and towards a consultation approach. This has provided opportunities for me to seek to support children and young people through working with their families, and colleagues from various disciplines, including teaching staff, health professionals and social workers. I have found this multidisciplinary and multi-agency collaborative working particularly surprising; the professionals working with a child or young person can be numerous and diverse. This has highlighted the importance of appreciating and understanding the roles of organisations and agencies early on within the placement, the necessity for effective communication in a language common to all, and the need to consider multiple perspectives to ensure the best outcomes for the children and young people with whom we work.

University-based sessions have developed my theoretical knowledge and maximised its practical application during EPS placements, not only within schools, but also in the wider community. These sessions facilitate a safe environment to explore, debate and challenge extensive and diverse issues and practices. From my experience the increasingly eclectic mix of trainee EPs' backgrounds (a teaching qualification no longer being required for training) has provided a fresh and diverse range of perspectives and skills applicable to the EP's role.

One component of the training programme that has recently had a considerable impact upon my thinking is fellow trainees' process account presentations, detailing a piece of work undertaken on the current placement. The extensive range of professional work at the individual, group and systemic level; the different approaches to service

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delivery; and their increasing responsibilities carried out within EPSs have highlighted the collective progress made since the same activity was undertaken the previous year. It was also reassuring to know that the same initial feelings of conscious incompetence at the beginning of more complex and challenging pieces of fieldwork are not unique to me!

At the initial stages of the training programme, I remember feeling somewhat overwhelmed by the curriculum requirement to conduct multiple research projects. I thought that research studies, especially those involving quantitative analyses, were somewhat daunting, having not opened my SPSS textbooks (the ones for beginners) for several years. I would no longer say this is true.

Lectures on quantitative and qualitative research skills early on in the programme introduced and built upon pre-existing knowledge. A collaborative research study allowed these skills to be applied with the support of fellow trainees and a subsequent small-scale research study carried out independently ensured the consolidation of these skills before the thesis research study was begun. The studies have been genuinely fascinating, and have included an exploration of the attainment and resilience of looked after children with emotional and behavioural difficulties; the promotion of emotional health and well-being in one Welsh authority's primary and secondary schools; and factors affecting anxiety in more able adolescent students.

Research studies will often have their challenges, and those concerned with educational psychology are no exceptions to this. Collecting data from students with additional learning needs; coordinating the return of written consent forms from parents, students and schools; participants' absences on the day of data collection; and the equipment, that has been tested and retested prior to data collection, nevertheless breaking down at the crucial moment; these are just some of the challenges encountered so far. My thesis study is in its infancy...

The experiences and opportunities created by trainee EPs themselves, as independent learners, also expand their knowledge and understanding of the profession. I was privileged to represent trainee EPs at the BPS's Division of Educational and Child Psychology Annual Professional Development Conference held in Manchester earlier this year. The experience inspired my involvement in hosting, along with other

## FEATURED JOB

**Job Title:** Service Development Strategist  
**Employer:** CORE Information Management Systems Ltd

**C**ORE Information Management Systems Ltd (CORE IMS) was founded by John Mellor-Clark in 2001. 'Many psychologists and other talking therapy professionals were beginning to introduce routine outcome measurement into their clinical work,' he tells us. 'However, it was not uncommon to see the paper yield of such laudable endeavour piled high on administrators' desks. CORE IMS supported such services through bespoke software dedicated to the task of outcomes data management, analysis and reporting.'

Last year the company were delighted to celebrate the provision of annual licenses to just over 300 UK services. 'But just being able to supply software for outcomes data management is not enough,' Mellor-Clark says. 'The introduction of outcome measurement is all too typically experienced as something of a journey rather than an event, throwing up an increasingly complex sequence of challenges, involving strategic development, training, problem solving, client management, research, analysis and report writing.'

The role involves working closely with NHS, third sector and private psychological therapy providers to prepare them for the practical, clinical, logistical and empirical challenges of collating practice-based evidence. According to Mellor-Clark: 'Sagacity, diplomacy, empathy, and numeracy will be daily skills likely to be exercised to peak potential. We're after someone skilled in organisational development and/or proven in delivering demonstrably excellent service provision. Ideally, someone who experiences challenge as an opportunity for growth and antagonism as a positive indicator of misplaced conviction. In short, we are looking for someone who believes, like us, that psychological therapy services that do no more than average help keep the average down!'

It's clear that Mellor-Clark, an organisational psychologist by training, is a managing director with great ambition for his company. 'Joining CORE IMS at this stage of its evolution presents a very exciting opportunity to make a significant impact, building on an excellent history of innovation, brand development and market leadership,' he says. 'Working as part of an established team of like-minded practitioners and researchers, who believe in the potential of all psychological therapy professionals, should be an empowering and rewarding experience.'

CORE will offer the successful applicant a 'challenging daily environment', but one with 'significant potential for learning first-hand what constitutes safe, efficient and effective practice in psychological therapy provision – and then replicating it with others. We are confident that the right applicant will find CORE IMS a great place to develop, growing valuable and unique expertise with a young visionary company dedicated to putting quality at the heart of therapy.'

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"We're after someone skilled in organisational development"

Cardiff trainees, our own conference, 'Psych-Odyssey'; a conference for fellow trainees to be held on 4 September 2009 at Cardiff University (for information e-mail [teconference@googlemail.com](mailto:teconference@googlemail.com)). With many EPs, including Brahm Norwich and Tommy MacKay, agreeing to present a wide range of thought-provoking topics focusing on the theme of the future of educational psychology, it is hoped that the conference will provide a vehicle for stimulating discussion and inspiration.

The knowledge that we acquire during our training provides the foundations on which new ideas and concepts are developed. Ultimately, this will make a significant difference to the education and well-being of the children and young people with whom we work. The profession possesses enormous potential. At a time of increased emphasis on multi-agency working, and with greater opportunity to construct our distinctive professional role, the future is one that I look forward to with optimism.

# Life as an educational psychologist

## Miles Thomas

I am employed by a London Borough to deliver psychological services to schools and the wider community. I am also seconded for three days a week to a university to help run the professional training Doctorate in Child and Educational psychology. In the former role I work with children and families to promote inclusion and problem-solve around a diverse range of issues, including learning difficulties and behavioural issues. I deliver training to colleagues across the authority and am involved in strategic developments related to developing provision. In my university role I am head of Years 2 and 3 of the doctorate programme. I lecture, supervise, and coordinate the timetabling and delivery of the curriculum. I meet with trainees and supervisors in their work setting, do lots of marking and am an examiner in doctoral vivas. I am also involved in

teaching and supervision of projects across other programmes in the university.

### What's your main current professional challenge?

The main professional challenges in recent years have related to the move to Children's Services. This change agenda has dismantled existing systems and relationships in pursuit of a rather idealistic (and at times simplistic) notion of 'joined-up' working. In my authority we have been relatively successful in reducing the burdens of statutory assessment by delegating funding to schools. The well-being and achievement of children 'looked-after' by the authority is increasingly a focus of our



work. We try to work at a systemic level to increase the capacity of schools to meet the needs of all children using approaches such as training for staff and organisational change programmes. In terms of my university role, the change to three-year doctoral training has had huge impact and I know from colleagues across training courses that we have all been stretched by the challenges inherent in such radical development. Employers have generally worked constructively to support the change programme and are giving us great feedback about trainees. Our first cohort recently sat their vivas and are going to have a huge and, I believe, positive impact on our profession over the coming decades. We are now in the position of being able to reflect on the last three years and to plan for future cohorts from a position of knowledge and experience.

### What advice would you give to someone set to enter your profession in the next few years?

It can be an incredibly varied and

## Caryl Carr

I work part-time – three days a week now. I have a senior role which is more strategically based, so that I have responsibility for few 'patch' schools, only one secondary and two feeder primaries. This year in conjunction with two County Senior EPs I have worked on projects that have included:

- | writing research articles on gifted and talented children and on young offenders for internal publication and reference;
- | a behaviour project in a secondary school that involved interviewing staff, students and colleagues from outside agencies working in the school and presenting a

summary of recommendations to senior management;

- | introducing a way of increasing reading comprehension (Reciprocal Teaching of Reading) in two secondary schools with the aim of raising the attainment of the lowest 20 per cent of students.
- | working in a special school to identify systemic or individual factors which could be preventing four of their students from making expected progress.

Another major commitment is providing clinical supervision for my colleagues in my area base (I share this with another

Senior), and for a trainee EP in her second year.

The main current professional challenge personally is that partly because of the introduction of the new training arrangements for EPs, we are currently understaffed, which leads to cover arrangements for vacant patches and to problems in meeting deadlines. On a wider basis, the



challenges arise from the reorganisation of local authorities in the wake of the

Lord Laming Inquiry, the organisation of multi-agency teams with the disruption of established networking arrangements and the creation of new ones, and also the emphasis not so much on our work within schools but within the wider community. These developments bring with them

rewarding job. There are lots of different ways of being an EP, so try and be aware of what kind of EP you want to be. Generic EPs are less common than has previously been the case and many now specialise in areas such as autistic spectrum disorders. This is especially true of EPs qualified to doctoral level and is in part an artefact of undertaking research and writing at a doctoral level. Be prepared to struggle to retain what is psychological (our unique contribution) in the face of bureaucratic burdens.

#### What are the highs and lows of your job?

**Highs:** Making a difference for children and families. My colleagues. Variety – not knowing what each day holds keeps me excited. Supervising new cohorts of trainees. Enjoyable CPD activities. Not being office-bound but getting out and about.

**Lows:** Exclusion. Impoverished thinking. Budgetary concerns. Huge amounts of admin. Change programmes that are rooted in political spin rather than considered evidence-based policy development. Having to turn down opportunities because I am too busy to do everything.

#### Dr Miles Thomas

*Academic and Professional Tutor  
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many opportunities welcomed by EPs. For instance, we have long been associated with special educational needs partly through our statutory obligations in the statementing process, but we are well qualified to do much more, for example strategic and development work within schools, work with the youth offending teams and with health professionals, such as health visitors, in talking to ante- and postnatal groups. We are qualified to work with children and young people from 0 to 19 years. The challenge is to create the opportunities where we can be most effective within the framework created by government legislation and by decisions regarding local authority organisation.

Those who are thinking about entering the profession should be prepared to work hard and to be flexible. You need an interest and a liking for people and an ability to get on with them without being judgemental or threatening. You also need to be able to reflect on your practice and take constructive criticism. A sense of humour helps. Do whatever you can before applying to increase your experience and knowledge of children and young people. The competition to get on courses is intense. The training courses are demanding, and you need to be able to reconcile these with the demands of the local authority. Once qualified, you can work part-time if you have young children, but the hurdles within the training course if you

have a family are difficult to overcome. There are no facilities to follow the course part-time, and because there are comparatively few centres you may have to travel long distances to study.

Finally, it is never too late to change career if you are determined enough. It's one of those careers where life experience counts. Training courses are not ageist.

The highs for me far outweigh the lows and I have never regretted a change of career comparatively late in life. After 14 years of teaching it is a joy to be able to arrange my own diary and not to have to jump to a bell rung by someone else. Obviously there are deadlines and parameters imposed by workload but the freedom is a

big bonus. Each day is different. We are in a privileged position in that children, parents and staff confide in us on subjects that are often painful and difficult for them to talk about. We can and do make a difference. I learn on a daily basis. I have colleagues whom I like, respect and trust.

The lows are that there is a lot of paperwork, in a county like Essex there are distances to drive and the hours can be long. It is not always possible to fit reports into the working day. Sometimes in a large and complex organisation it can be difficult to understand the politics and to manage the flow of top-down directives.

#### Caryl Carr

*Senior Educational Psychologist  
North-East SENCAN SCF*

## Victoria Lewis

An educational psychologist's view of the work depends on which Service you work for. In the context of Nottinghamshire, I apply a range of psychological paradigms and models to assess needs and help develop the best approaches and provisions to support children's learning and development. Consultation is a core task, involving collaborative working with a range of partners including early years, schools and the community.

A main challenge at the moment is to continue to raise the profile of EPs working at different levels and with key partners to facilitate organisational problem-solving. Being able to work preventatively to avoid negative outcomes is an important part of increasing the potential to enhance inclusion and reduce exclusions within case work as well as to help develop more effective systems to support learning and development.



As an EP it is vital to help maintain strong links between professional practice and a rigorous psychological evidence base. Those wishing to join the profession may therefore like to reflect upon the theoretical and psychological links in their work. In addition, EPs are trained to critically analyse data, so some reflection on the methodology of some published designs could also be helpful.

I find delivering a wide range of interventions to make a positive difference for children to be immensely rewarding. No two days are the same, and thus the work is never boring! However, because we work through co-construction, applying core problem-solving within consultative frameworks, people may not always realise all of the broad and detailed skills and knowledge that EPs are bringing.

#### Dr Victoria Lewis

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