

Case Study: Educational Psychologist - Jayne

What do you do?

I am an educational psychologist and that covers quite a wide range of activities. Basically the main thrust of the job is working with schools and with children who have special educational needs (SEN).

But the remit of the job is wider than just that and I act as a consultant to teachers, talking primarily with head teachers and the SEN co-ordinators, helping them to plan their programme for meeting the needs of children with special educational needs.

I also have a lot to do with parents. My particular emphasis at the moment is working with children under five. I do a lot of specialist work in that area.

The age range for educational psychology is from birth up to nineteen years - so it's quite a wide range.

What is your background?

When I was at school I was always interested in people. I was the sort of person who people would talk to. People used to seek me out as a listener. So I always knew I was interested in that area.

When I was about sixteen we had a careers lesson at school and a psychologist came along. I'd never heard of an educational psychologist before, but I listened to what he had to say and I found it quite interesting.

Then I was thinking about what degree to take, and again I was interested in psychology. I was fascinated with how people behaved and why they did various things. I was also fascinated about children and what they might be thinking.

The only degree course that seemed to fit those interests was psychology, but I actually combined it with philosophy.

While I was at university I became convinced that I would like to pursue the psychology side of things. I was also interested in education - so the two went together.

So I went on to do a PGCE in Primary Education, then taught for about four years. Then I went on to do the professional training in educational psychology.

While I was teaching, I taught for a couple of years in a mainstream school, then the rest of the time I was a special needs teacher. So I had become interested in pursuing that side of things.

What characteristics do you need to be successful in your job?

You need to be a good listener, because a lot of the time we are used as 'sounding boards' for people's worries and concerns, so you need to be able to manage that situation. And you need to be able to relate to all different sorts of people, including children.

You've got to be able to relate to a whole range of people. And also to relate to their particular circumstances. You get parents who might be going through stressful times, with their children. And you work with teachers - helping them to manage very difficult situations.

And you have to work at a strategic policy level as well, with officers of the local authority. That includes planning intervention programmes, etc.

Problem solving is one of the main skills you need as well. Very often you are on your own, having to deal with everyone else's perceptions of problems. So you very quickly have to decide what the main issue is and helpfully guide people through that situation.

You have to be organised as well, because you work on your own really. Although you will be part of a team, you are an individual and you have a lot of autonomy. Managing the workload is always a bigger task than you think it should



be. So you've really got to be able to organise and prioritise.

Very often, schools that are under great stress themselves will try and offload onto the next layer, which is often the educational psychology service. The individual psychologist for the school is the 'front line' of that. So you have to be able to deflect concern and anxiety.

So, all those skills I've mentioned, as well as knowledge and understanding of psychology and all the underpinning theories.

What other jobs could you do using the skills from this job?

They probably would be related to people, because I feel that the skills that I have and that I've developed are all about working with people and managing situations. But it could expand into counselling, managing, back into education (because at the moment you need to be a qualified teacher to do this job).

With a psychology background you could go into consultancy, where you can use an overview of a situation to help devise ways to help schools and authorities that are having problems.

It's only when you sit down and list the skills that are required for this job that you realise that they can be used in a wide variety of other jobs.

What changes will there be in the future?

At the moment the highest qualification you need to be an educational psychologist is an MA, but there are moves towards making it a doctorate level profession. This would bring it in line with clinical psychologists.

I believe that in a couple of years, the vast majority of training will be a taught doctorate course. Therefore, maybe the teaching qualification will no longer be a necessity.

Whether this would have an effect on how we deliver our service, I don't know. It would probably add a bigger research element into it.

With the changes in how children with Special Educational Needs are educated, in mainstream schools, I think our work is going to be much more on the preventative side - early interventions and working with parents and schools to understand what inclusive education means.

At the moment I work largely from home, using a computer, email, laptop and mobile. Different local authorities have a different emphasis - some provide laptops, etc, but others aren't so geared up to the technology that's available.

This has changed in the last couple of years, and I think that things will continue along those lines.

What are the biggest challenges in your job?

A positive challenge is that every day is different. Even though the general work might be following a pattern, because you're working with people - that's what makes it different.

Also, because you're working with different sets of families and teachers, you can't really sit back and relax because you don't know what those particular people might be bringing to the situation. That's a challenge, but again, a positive one.

Report writing can be tedious, but it depends how you go about it. I've agreed with some of my schools to provide them with a brief summary about what we've decided that I email to them, rather than lengthy reports. They'd rather my time was spent face-to-face with children and families.

Managing the workload is a challenge, and I don't think that's unusual to this job. It's like any job - you can always do more. And working with people in particular, the job never ends. You've got to be able to be happy in your own mind about what you want to achieve.

It can be quite a lonely job, you're very often in the middle. You have to be quite strong to be able to recognise that and not feel victimised. You have to find colleagues who you can offload those feelings to. As long as you can acknowledge that this is a product of the system and not anything to do with you as an individual, then that can be managed.

Are there many opportunities to enter this career?

At the moment there is a national shortage, although it varies from area to area. So it would depend on whether you were prepared to move.

Every week we're sent details of vacancies from the Association of Educational Psychologists, and there's between four and ten jobs advertised each week.

You've got to be prepared, if you want promotion, to move to another authority.

There's a lot more women in the profession at the moment, although, with many other professions, the senior management positions are mainly men. Although many more women are taking up senior roles in the last few years.

What do you like about your job?

I like the freedom and the flexibility of the work. That may be more pertinent to my particular job at the moment, but I think it's the way that the job will change - to be more flexible.

I can work from home. And as long as I am available for the hours that I need to be available, the rest of the time it's up to me really, how I manage that.

I really like meeting people. I suppose I'm quite a nosy person. I'm interested in people and I'm interested in hearing about their situations and trying to help.

It's relatively well paid, so that's got to count for something. I don't think I'd do it if it wasn't as well paid. I've got to be honest there.

What do you dislike about your job?

One thing is battling against the fact that there aren't enough resources. There never will be in any situation, but it's that perception that people feel that if there was only more money, or more teachers, or more specialist help, then everything would be alright.

I don't like all the reports that have to be written. If someone said tomorrow 'You don't have to write all these reports', then that would be great.

But I don't always dislike writing reports. When, as quite often happens, parents and schools thank you for a report and say how helpful it was, which does happen. Then I think 'It was worth it then'.

It's the many reports you write that you never hear anything about, that are not acted upon, that are not read, that are filed away, that I don't like about the job.

And sometimes I don't like the fact that I have to work on my own most of the time. Sometimes I wish that I could be part of the staff in a school, where you go into a staff room and you sit down with your cup of coffee and you talk about how you are feeling. That rarely happens, even in a large local authority.

So it's important to seek out your own support network, which comes with experience and time.

What are your ambitions?

Well, I realised one of them recently by getting a promotion to become a specialist senior psychologist with early years and autistic children. So that was one thing I had set myself to do.

I'd still like to develop more effective interventions within my local authority. I'm involved with various initiatives to set up programmes, working with children and their parents in their homes to better manage what is often a very difficult situation.

I've got quite a lot of involvement in different initiatives. And I also do a lot of training, which is quite a big part of many psychologists' jobs, and I would like to develop that further as well.

What advice would you give to someone interested in your career?

I think you need to talk to someone who is doing the job, so maybe reading something like this could help.

Or contact your local educational psychology service and see if there is someone you could talk to. Maybe you could see if it's possible to shadow a psychologist for a day or half a day - just to get an idea.

Prior to that it's getting experience of working with people and working with children. In a way, you can get that anywhere. When I first thought about this job, I thought I'd have to have lots of experience of working with children with special educational needs. So in my holidays I arranged to do voluntary work with various special schools and that sort of thing.

But actually, at interview, what they are more interested in is your experience of a wider view of child development, rather than the very small proportion of children who have got difficulties.

Really it's about having a wide range of knowledge and experience, to give you a rounded view.

A day in the life

At around 9 o'clock I arrive at a school to meet with the special educational needs co-ordinator to discuss the issues and the concerns of particular children in that school. These visits occur on a regular pattern. Typically I visit each primary school for a morning twice a term.

During the morning, I maybe see a child for some one-to-one assessment, or do some observation in a class. Then there would be opportunities to talk through the findings with parents and relevant teachers. Then some actions would be planned.

Around lunchtime I would call into the office to pick up mail and messages. There are always messages. And there's quite a lot of admin involved in that.

Then I might do some home visits to families with pre-school children and discuss issues, on delayed speech and language issues, for example. I'd make an assessment in the home and address the concerns of the parents. I'd also plan strategies for the family to try out and think about who else might need to get involved.

The working day finishes at about five. At the end of the day I check messages and emails again.