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On Being an Educational Assistant

By: Liz McLennan

I am an Educational Assistant within a large school board in Eastern Ontario. I have been supporting students as a supply/fill-in for five years now, whilst offering occasional respite to families. This year, I have been hired full-time by my Board and am delighted to have settled into one school, having predictable and steady routines with the children I support.

As such, I feel there are unique challenges for children [with disabilities] within the formal education system. I see part of my job as being the liaison between a system that insists it wants to include all students (but doesn't really), and the children whose best lessons (both learned and taught) may have very little to do with academics. There are very few articles specifically geared toward supporting children as opposed to adults, and even fewer about support in school. My goal here, then, is to be a positive microphone (not the voice) for the children I support, and all those who come after. On that note, I offer that our job as Educational Assistants is to help students succeed at school – period. As many of the students I've supported have autism, my experience is laden with the rich lessons they've taught me and I'd like to share some of them here:

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1. Assume Competence

Because a student doesn't speak, doesn't mean that they can't. It doesn't mean that they don't hear and understand either. Just because the child you're supporting needs help with sounding out words, or scribing, or navigating the bathroom, doesn't mean they can't read, won't write, and will always need your help. Assume that they can, they will, and that they won't.

Assume that, with your help, they won't need you past this academic year, and let your support be guided by that belief, rather than anything less. At the end of the year, if you've done your job well, you will no longer be needed in the same ways next year, if at all. Simply put, your job is to work yourself out of a job.



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2. Avoid Name-Calling

I support a little boy whose diagnosis of autism includes the phrase “non-verbal.” I have always struggled with other folks who toss “non-verbal” around as an identifier, particularly around the kids I support. As in, “He’s non-verbal,” or “She’s a runner,” or “He’s an autistic, non-verbal runner.”

He is a little BOY! Period. Full-stop.

Stop using labels to define ANY part of the children you’re supporting. Meet them as they are: students who need support to succeed at school. (This, frankly, is all of them. Some just need more help than others.) It’s my firm belief that we need to see the children we support as students FIRST, and then have a closer look at what their needs are second. The role of student is valued and valuable and students with disabilities often lose out on both because “we” see their differences and disabilities, first. Changing our mindsets about WHO we’re supporting is crucial to their success.

For example, the little boy I support may not speak often, nor does he always speak in full sentences, but by GOLLY, he communicates clearly and WELL with his eyes, actions, body language and sounds. And recently, prompted in part by a program that reads out short sentences he creates using pictures and symbols on his iPad, he has begun speaking. In his real voice.

TO me.

WITH me.

WITHOUT ME, TO OTHER PEOPLE.

I firmly believe that he has been waiting and watching and listening and has now decided to trust me and my fellow educators enough to let us in, just a little bit. I also believe that the computer/iPad program was the final push he needed, to see that when he used it, he always got a response.

When he uses his voice – computerized or physical – he will always be heard. I must always listen.

It has been a powerful lesson for him, and for me.

3. Remember Your Place

This one is harder than it seems, especially if, like me, you are a parent. These children, – much as you care about them and want them to succeed – are not yours. I have been guilty of calling students “my boys,” and treating them as I do my own sons. I must remind myself often that I am but a helping hand along their journey – no one knows them the way I do, but no one knows them BETTER than their own families. I need to repeat that as much for my own self as for readers who are supporting students in schools: you know who they are in school, but you do NOT know them BEST. Remember your place and work alongside families, whenever possible, to help your student thrive. It’s a ridiculously hard lesson – at least for me. It’s one I re-learn at several points throughout the school year when I find myself sliding into old habits – new relationships with new students, and the comfort of familiarity and routine. I have taken to asking a handful of trusted, like-minded colleagues and, sometimes, students themselves to gently remind me of my place when I start to overstep. Kids love this reversal of roles of course, and yes, it’s a bit stingy when they say, “Mrs. M, remember who I belong toooooo...” or whichever phrase we’ve come up with, but I’d rather that sting than to damage the relationship we’re growing.

4. Connection Matters

Above all the things you might do as an Educational Assistant in a formal education setting, the MOST IMPORTANT one is to make a connection with the student(s) you support. Give yourself, and her, time to meet one another. To truly connect with her, you must create the safest, most welcoming space within your sphere. You must be open to an entirely new person, whose personality and quirks and strengths are not yet known to you. She does not know you, your voice, your expectations, or your gifts either so be patient. This takes time and a concentrated effort. Make the time to simply BE alongside her as the school year (or day) unfolds. Focus on her, and let her body language and actions guide yours. On an everyday, practical level, I recommend beginning with a cheerful “Good Morning, Lisa!” and then sit quietly as the school day begins and routines unfold. Allow Lisa to show you who SHE is, and what she’s feeling today. Is she anxious or calm? How was morning recess? Is there a test today? Observe students as they transition from hallway to classroom – is the noise too much? Does she need a minute or five to get her boots and coat stowed away? Is the pathway to her desk or table clear? Is everything ready for her to start succeeding, or do you need to help her organize her space in order for her to relax within it? As a supply EA, this is especially challenging as there is often very little time in which to build a rapport, so assume that Lisa knows the classroom routines well enough, and trust that she can guide your support. Assume that she knows, assume that you will be able to “read” her tells and, above all, focus on HER.

In so many subtle ways, by allowing students to take the lead for the support you’ll need to give them, you are building a rapport and easing into a relationship with them. You are showing respect and patience and compassion when you give them room to breathe, to adjust, to BE and, of course, to learn.

This...unfurling...for the student you support and for the relationship you share can be fraught with tension or a tender dance – your job is to hold the space for students to move into, when

they are ready. This is where trust lives. This is where exploration and learning happen. Create and hold the space for connection to spark and everything else will follow.

5. Positive Regard

The thread weaving through all interactions with children is positive regard. Or at least it should be, if you're doing this work well, with heart. Do not confuse this with positive reinforcement, however. Positive reinforcement is naturally used within the formal education system: grades, stickers, check marks, positive comments. As educators, it's right to encourage the children we teach and support with praise for a job well done, an attempt made, a goal met.

For a long while, I mimicked other EAs and praised kids with the phrase, "Good job!" And then one day, I heard the patronizing tone and the falseness of my words. Since then, I try to focus on the tasks and efforts: "I like how you took the time to correct that letter," or "I can tell you're trying hard to tell me something. I'll wait. Take your time."

I like to think that this realization and attempt to rectify past mistakes demonstrates my own positive regard for the students I support. A phrase coined by psychologist Carl Rogers – positive regard – is essentially accepting and assuming the best about the PERSON you're supporting. Positive regard is about the children – seeing them as they are, perhaps seeing their potential future selves – and not about their behaviour.

I imagine positive regard much the way I see my closest friendships: as a soft place for my heart to land. The children we support deserve to know that we can be that for them – that they are safe to falter, safe to feel big feelings AND to express them, safe to make mistakes, safe to LEARN, because we've got them, and we believe in them, and we accept them as they are.

In Summary

To sum it all up? I have one of the greatest jobs ever, and that is to help kids grow and learn.

That's it.

I get paid to help kids grow into themselves; discover language, numbers, technology, friends...all of the things. There is no greater privilege than this expect perhaps being a mum to my own sons, and watching all of the above unfold for them, too.

However, in my role as an Educational Assistant, I think that one of the most uncomfortable truths about my work is that I sometimes forget and make it all about me. Sometimes, I take credit for Mr. O's hard work at his letters because the forming of the letter "N" took him ages, and all of my good-natured patience. The pride and excitement he might have felt was overshadowed by MY need to crow about it, MY desire for someone else to see how hard it was to sit patiently while he worked it out. I wish I could say that this has only happened once, but that would be a lie. When Young Seb finally settled into a routine of my creation, and we had a morning during which he did NOT destroy our workspace in a rage, I mentally patted myself on the back, instead of thanking him for it as I should have. Instead of acknowledging how difficult it must have been for him to contain his big feelings for so long, I pretended as though it was not any big deal, that it was our normal. I was wrong.

I must constantly poke and prod at my own mind and heart to do this work so that I can do better tomorrow. I must always remind myself that all victories – academic and social ones – do not, in fact, belong to me. I am here to bear witness to successes executed by those I support, not to bask in their light or steal it for myself. I am here to bear witness to greatness in the making.

About the Author

Liz McLennan is an Educational Assistant from Belleville, Ontario. When not loving on other people's kids, she runs herd on her sons, called "the Reds," and urges them to do as she says, not as she does. She likes books, bread and laughing, though not necessarily in that order. Writing is her escape and solace, and her most favourite thing ever is when people find themselves or their truth in her words, because she knows that she chose the right ones.

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