

The Role of an Education Assistant: Supporting Inclusion

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Book Review/Recension d'ouvrage

The Role of an Education Assistant: Supporting Inclusion

edited by Mary Harber and Asha Rao

Canadian Scholars, 2019, 306 pages

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The release of Harber and Rao's (2019) edited collection in *The Role of an Education Assistant: Supporting Inclusion* is both timely and important. Although the book has a uniquely Canadian focus, there are clear applications for international contexts.

Sixteen chapters are arranged in four main sections, which are: The Education Assistant, Mental Health and Wellness, Cultural Diversity, and Supporting All Students. Each chapter begins with three key ideas, ends with a section called Voices from the Field, then poses three questions to support critical thinking. The book is designed as a resource for use in post-secondary courses that prepare practitioners in inclusionary practices.

Harber and Rao's "comprehensive and practical collection provides an overview of the complex role of education assistants as both advocates for inclusion and key members of the educational team" (back cover). The book explores a diverse range of topics that describe or encourage the further development of the education assistants' evolving scope of practice. The collection details how EAs provide academic, social, and behavioral supports to students with disabilities. In addition, the book includes chapters describing how EAs collaborate with teachers to plan and evaluate student progress. Another feature of the book is found in the descriptions of effective EA utilization, drawn from the field, and showcased in Chapters 13, 14, and 15.

In Chapter 13, Education Assistants as Inclusive Leaders in Classrooms, Linda Hill explores three themes. The first is how inclusive education assistants help create relaxed learning environments intended to bring out the best in everyone's differences. This

strategy is for EAs to help students feel relaxed about and accepting of diversity. For example, by introducing students to various relaxation techniques and activities involving aspects of inclusion, students may learn to counter their fight/flight/freeze survival instincts when encountering differences in themselves or others. The second theme is how EAs are role models and mentors for communicating with compassion. EAs spend a good portion of each day listening to students, parents, and teachers. By supporting teachers and classmates to understand students who communicate differently, EAs often act to interpret communications between these groups. Central to developing compassionate understanding is opening one's senses, mind, and heart to diverse ways of communicating. The third theme is EAs as allies and advocates who are prepared to stand up for inclusion and to effectively respond when exclusion occurs in schools. For example, Hill discusses the value of EAs taking anti-discrimination first aid training and acting accordingly when events of exclusion occur.

In Chapter 14, Heather Wik and Barbara Eckersley describe how teachers and EAs are a unified team in the classroom to support students academically. The authors emphasize that the starting point for implementing a program of academic supports is for the EA to know and understand students by drawing from the extant historical information at the school, as well as through conversations with teachers, parents, and students. Typically, academic supports are comprised of diverse strategies created to bolster students' reading, writing, and numeracy abilities across the curriculum. Some of the most common strategies include stating expectations, ensuring readiness to learn, giving choices, using technology, connecting to prior knowledge, chunking, and celebrating success. Supporting students academically also involves assisting them to make transitions within the layered structures of the school day. Offering academic support requires working and communicating as a team, which includes contributing updated documentation to students' files. The authors end the chapter addressing challenges that teams of teachers and EAs may experience when supporting academic learning.

In Chapter 15, Kyla Cleator focuses on EAs and teachers working together to develop collaborative strategies and resources for the classroom. Like students, teachers and EAs hold a range of knowledge, skills, and abilities, along with stressors that accompany dealing with the unknown. By planning collaboratively and defining roles and responsibilities, the EA/teacher team can more effectively guide students to achieve learning success. Cleator outlines strategies to collaboratively plan for the whole class and for individual students.

Chapters 13, 14, and 15 present practical illustrations of how effectively utilizing EAs as part of a classroom team may enhance the teacher's role. These examples drawn from practice are important features of the text, as it makes an important and timely contribution to informing what EAs can do to support students and school teams. The overriding goal for Harber and Rao's *The Role of an Education Assistant: Supporting Inclusion* is to inspire further conversation to influence change and growth in both individual and systemic practice. This is a worthwhile pursuit "in light of the growing international use of [EAs] and evolving research surrounding their use in inclusive classrooms" (Sharma

& Salend, 2016, p. 117). Harber and Rao's book serves as a contribution to the body of research literature available on EAs.

Harber and Rao's book is positioned as a significant catalyst to inform research efforts designed to explore the complex roles and applications that define EA practice. The authors acknowledge "... that the field is ever changing, and [their] hope is that this book will inspire further conversation to influence change and growth in both individual and systemic practice" (p. xv)., This collection has the potential to be offered in future editions that could additionally feature recently published research studies to inform practice.

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