

THE EDUCATIONAL THERAPIST

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MESSAGES

- Sherry L. Cramer, MS, ET/P, FAET, Editor** 2
Lori K. Dver, MA, BCET, President 3

PSYCHOEDUCATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

- Boundary Setting for Educational Therapists** 4
Drew Lau-Regent, MA, Associate ET
Pamm Scribner, MEd, BCET
- The Power of Self-Awareness for Twice-Exceptional Students: An Educational Therapy Perspective** 9
Cynthia Z. Hansen, EdD, ET/P

DEPARTMENTS

- Notes From the Trenches—**
- Parent Involvement in the Therapeutic Process** 16
Karen Lerner, MA, ET/P
Brett Patterson, PhD
- Assistive Technology in Practice—**
- The Myths and Realities of Speech Recognition** 18
Shelley Haven, BSME, ATP, RET
- Ed Tech for Teachers—**
- Mathematical Language Development** 22
Nancy Bley, MA, ET/P
- The Unique Learner—**
- A Memoir of a Meaningful Year** 25
Susan Micari, MEd, BCET
- Book Review—**
- Virtual Educational Therapy:
A Case Study of Clinical Supports and Advocacy** 27
Kaye Ragland, EdD, LMFT, BCET, FAET
- Book Review—**
- Flooded: A Brain-Based Guide to Help Children Regulate Emotions** 29
Laurie Fox, EdD, ET/P
- Book Review—**
- 12 Principles for Raising a Child With ADHD** 30
Mary Beth Burns, EdD, ET/P
- In Memoriam—**
- Karen Anne Kass** 32
Fondly remembered by:
Jone Bycel, Marcy Dann, and Maxine Ficksman
- AET Board Organization Chart** 33

The Power of Self-Awareness for Twice-Exceptional Students: An Educational Therapy Perspective

Cynthia Z. Hansen, EdD, ET/P

This case study, from an educational therapy perspective, follows the journey of an at-risk, twice-exceptional youth who was unidentified for her giftedness or disabilities until eighth grade. Along with a majority of her elementary classmates, her parents did not speak English at home, and her elementary school offered targeted language support to all students regardless of their English Language Learner (ELL) status. The elementary teachers' generous support in her general education class masked her processing and memory difficulties. In turn, those undiagnosed disabilities concealed her gifted potential. Her increasing failure during middle school, due to misunderstood abilities, masked talents, and obstacles, began a spiral that put her at risk academically, socially, and emotionally. Through the educational therapy process, she learned to view her disabilities as part-time obstacles but not barriers, invest in talent development opportunities, and visualize her future as a creative, gifted young adult able to advocate for her complex learning style at school and work.

The text was from Kerria, Mayala's¹ mother. It had been over seven months since we last spoke. Knowing Mayala's previous struggles, I was a little apprehensive, though it was by a mutual, joyous agreement that Mayala had been ready to part from our educational therapy sessions. Instead of words, it was a phone camera's eye view of a Zoom recording. The split-screen showed Mayala's beautiful graduation portrait next to her counselor, who was introducing her as the recipient of the high school's senior award for growth and leadership. "Finally," I thought, "she has been seen."

When I first met Mayala, she had just completed hours and hours of neurological assessment in the middle of her eighth-grade year. I learned during the intake process that she was a star pupil throughout elementary school, getting 'A's and praise' through the fifth grade. She was known as a hard worker, respectful of adults, and had a group of like-minded friends. At home, Mayala enjoyed creating exquisite cupcake designs for family and friends, accompanied by hand-drawn cards. Transitioning to middle school in sixth grade, she began to falter but still kept a positive attitude. Her grades continued to fall in seventh grade, along with Mayala's self-identity as an 'A' student. As Mayala watched her old friends continue to do well in school, her effort dissipated,

¹The names have been changed and some identifying features were altered to afford anonymity.

and her frustration grew. As her self-esteem plummeted, Mayala began to doubt her academic acumen, seeking out age peers who were embracing an anti-intellectual identity, began confronting students from different peer groups, and became less respectful to her teachers. These behaviors and poor grades prompted her mother to seek intervention from a non-profit educational advocate recommended by their family physician.

Unfortunately, Mayala's story is not unique. Twice-exceptional students, having both gifted qualities and learning impairments, often exhibit academic failures or emotional distress caused by undiagnosed learning disabilities—especially as their cognitive load increases (Webb et al., 2016). Alternatively, twice-exceptional learners' superior abilities may be unrecognized because of the educational system's focus on their learning deficits. To actualize potential interests and talents, all students benefit from explicit opportunities to nurture their talent areas (Baum et al., 2017; Renzulli, 1978; Renzulli & Reis, 2018).

Mayala's disabilities were ironically masked by her elementary teachers' supportive, collaborative learning environment. Mayala was a fluent, native English speaker; her parents spoke limited English at home. Like her peers, she was reluctant to acknowledge her bilingual abilities because of the stigma she felt in her community. Yet teachers in her elementary school assumed her difficulties with written language were due to her home language and put extra emphasis on basic English skills. Because Mayala's elementary school environment enhanced her collaborative learning strengths and encouraged her leadership potential, she thrived as a friend and community member. Her strengths and talents were recognized collectively, not individually. Yet, her unexamined giftedness intensified her emotional and social awareness. When her subject-specific classes in middle school increasingly focused on individual achievement and academic progress, her creativity and task commitment floundered and eventually disappeared. With her growing anger, her leadership potential twisted into verbal and physical combativeness mirroring the behaviors of her new friends. When interviewing the referring advocate and Kerria before our initial meeting, it became clear that this family honored the educational system, trusting that teachers would provide optimal conditions for all children to thrive.

Kerria knew her daughter was more than the grades she was receiving. She instinctively believed that Mayala's behavioral changes, combined with her dissipating interests in illustration, poetry, and design, were more than adolescent angst. After two years of falling grades and motivation, Kerria sought support from her family physician, who recommended a non-profit advocacy group that offered neuropsychological assessments at little to no cost. This same non-profit sought and employed me, an educational therapist and credentialed teacher, to assist Kerria and work with Mayala to ease her challenges. I entered their lives during the IEP review meeting at the middle school.

When Kerria presented the assessment results during the IEP review process, Mayala's school counselor, Ms. Higgins, noted her surprise that the evaluation report did not identify oppositional defiant disorder (ODD) to explain Mayala's

increasingly combative behavior. The assessments revealed Mayala's processing difficulties, dyslexia, and dyscalculia. Ms. Higgins connected Mayala's "deficits" to her declining grades and recommended a change of classes to remediate and support her language arts and math. This deficit-focused action did not consider the social and emotional upheaval that Mayala was experiencing, nor Kerria's awareness of her child's strengths, interests, and potential talent areas (Baum et al., 2017; Olenchak, 2009; Olenchak et al., 2016; Renzulli & Reis, 2018).

As an educational therapist trained in strength-based, talent-focused interventions, I was disappointed when the counselor gave her an additional study support period, so I suggested an interest-based elective that could help anchor her to the school experience and might nurture her creativity. However, Kerria vetoed my suggestion because she was desperate and grateful for the added support finally being offered to her daughter. Kerria hoped Mayala's defiant behaviors would lessen with the extra resource opportunities. Ms. Higgins encouragingly discussed the course changes with Mayala, who agreed to try them. During that meeting, Ms. Higgins introduced me to Mayala as a private "tutor" who would meet with her on campus twice a week. When we met privately later that week, I sensed a fierce adolescent who had lost faith in herself and the educational system.

AN EDUCATIONAL THERAPIST'S ROLE

Because of their high abilities and paradoxical difficulties, gifted students may feel isolated or misunderstood by their peers and teachers when they cannot explain their struggles in school (Beckman & Minnaert, 2018; Webb et al., 2016). Without input from allied professionals, including non-profit advocacy groups, family physicians, school personnel, and private educational assessment professionals, many families, including Mayala's, would be unaware of the support offered by educational therapy. These professionals know that educational therapy offers more than quick-fix-tutoring; instead, the process instills the learner with self-awareness, curiosity in the learning process, metacognition, increasing confidence, and enthusiasm to become a life-long learner.

Most of my clients are considered *twice-exceptional* (2e), having the potential for high cognitive and creative abilities coexisting with one or more disabilities as defined by federal or state criteria (Reis et al., 2014). Many are *Alphabet Kids* (Woliver, 2009), having multiple diagnoses, with unique combinations of giftedness, blossoming talents, executive dysfunction, and/or learning disabilities. These students grapple with the dissonance of their incongruous learning profile. Some students, like Mayala, also contend with intrinsic biases based on culture, peer affiliation, race, gender, and language (Steele, 1997, 2011).

Students are particularly vulnerable during their adolescent years, especially when previous success begins to unravel, as with Mayala (Baum et al., 2014; Hansen & Mahendra, 2022). Beyond the need to conform to peer expectations, Baum et al. (2014) discuss the difficulties present during middle school by emerging adolescent students who successfully compensated for

their learning obstacles in elementary school. These students, unable to compensate for the new challenges, encounter unexpected failure and endeavor to hide their perceived deficits and experience feelings of being a poser, an outsider, or less able than their friends. The authors further describe the developmental conundrum experienced by students of this age:

Their acute sensitivity and painful awareness of the lack of congruence between academic potential, school achievement, and social competence can cause many of these students to become extremely depressed and require counseling and/or medication to deal with their frustration over discrepancies between what they can and cannot do. (Baum et al., 2014, p. 165)

In sixth grade when Mayala transitioned to middle school, her success in elementary school dissipated when the school demographics shifted and previous supports were no longer available. Her initial middle school slump was attributed to moving from a smaller school to a larger campus, adjusting to multiple classrooms and teachers, and being mainstreamed into the predominantly English-speaking student body.

My role in Mayala's life was to help her understand how her strengths and learning obstacles interact and to discover strategies to leverage her interests and talents in school. I was an ally, providing a safe space to connect her learning frustrations to her emotions and adolescent social expectations. First, she had to become authentically self-aware, self-accepting, and open to recognizing the environments where she already thrives so she might authentically share her best self (Baum et al., 2014). She needed to understand how her weaker memory and language skills became an unintended mask of her talents and learning potential. After self-understanding, discovering creative solutions to her learning obstacles could begin, and she could learn to advocate for those solutions in school.

A REACTIVE, CATAclysmic BEGINNING

Collaboratively with Kerria and the school counselor, we set goals for my work with Mayala: to help her understand her new awareness of her learning profile and to accept and embrace the complexities of her learning disabilities as she re-discovered her ableness, interests, and talents. Establishing an authentic, trusting relationship is a critical task that usually takes only one or two sessions with my clients. Not so with Mayala. Our first meeting was in January of her eighth-grade year. We met during her history class in the teachers' lounge of her middle school, a room with a large square table big enough to fit ten adults. I sat at a corner by the entryway, expecting to sit catty-corner to her as I started my usual introductory process. She entered with her hands in her sweatshirt pockets, wearing her backpack and her soon-to-be familiar, confrontational scowl. She moved straight to the table's opposite corner, to a chair that had been left askew, and sat down sideways, never taking off her backpack, and never taking her hands out of her pockets for the entire 40 minutes of that first session.

Getting Through Barriers

During initial conversations and to establish trust with new students, I use several reliable interview tools that encourage them to discuss their self-perceptions, and I anticipated nothing less than this optimistic experience before Mayala entered that first day. Her body language clearly showed that I would have to consider alternative strategies. Though she was in the room, she was not a willing participant and was slow to reveal her frustration and anger about her schedule change that placed her “with dummies” (her words). Mayala did not trust easily. Before we met, she had two years of negative learning experiences. When we met, Mayala shared her disrespect toward most educators and her strong biases about new classmates, so different from those she knew. She later expressed her disdain when mentioning the *honors* and *rich kids* who attended the gifted magnet on her middle school campus and the *school-of-choice* high school that she attended. I was just another manifestation of the educational system that had failed her. She expected me to show her respect and trust before she was willing to reciprocate.

The role of emotion in learning has been empirically studied. Emotions guide the cognitive integration of new knowledge, and this process also informs future learning behaviors (Beckman & Minnaert, 2018; Immordino-Yang & Faeth, 2010). As far back as 1954, Carl Rogers discussed the detrimental effects of psychologically unsafe environments on the learning process (Rogers, 1954). Negative emotional states may impair working memory and processing speed, causing additional concentration issues and irritability (Coward, 2018; Immordino-Yang & Faeth, 2010; Rogers, 1954; Webb et al., 2016). Introduce an undiagnosed learning disability into the mix, and Mayala’s anxiety over her “sudden” difficulties with academics sent her spiraling—the more she tried, the more anxious she became and the worse her memory. Her progress was also hindered by her lower working memory capacity, slower processing speed, and coexisting traits of dyslexia and dyscalculia. The complexities of her learning profile increased her anxiety, and she felt out of sync with her classmates. Mayala no longer felt safe to learn, which further interfered with her ability to process information (Baum et al., 2017).

Unconditional Assurance

Before we could build a trusting relationship, we endured a defining incident at school when she tried to demonstrate her loyalty to her new peers. One day, about five weeks into our school sessions, I seemed to be waiting longer than usual for Mayala to arrive at the teacher’s lounge. The school secretary had to call her teacher three times before she finally arrived. She seemed mellow and almost happy to see me when she arrived, which seemed to be a positive change! We started to do an activity, and she was relatively willing; I was hopeful! Then I noticed that she was having trouble staying focused and started looking pale. I asked if she was okay, and she said she was just a little tired but good. And then she wasn’t. She got sick all over the table, the floor, and the activity materials. That is when I smelled the tequila. I went to get help, grateful to be at school

with the nurse present, but extremely worried when we returned only two minutes later, and she had passed out. We later learned that her friends had “graciously” shared water bottles filled with tequila and orange juice so they could enjoy the thrill of drinking during class and as a challenge to her loyalty to them. Mayala had not dared to let them know of her inexperience with alcohol. I stayed with her until the ambulance took her to the hospital. She recovered physically, though with a bruised ego. All of the drinkers, including Mayala, were suspended for several days.

Educational therapy relies on the establishment of a trusting and open relationship. Carl Rogers coined the phrase “unconditional positive regard” to describe the need to respect each client’s humanity and recognize that at any given time, she is doing the best that she can (Akerman, 2021). Revealing educational trauma, such as the unexpected difficulties Mayala experienced, means digging into the psychoeducational underpinnings of her self-identity as a student.

Kerria had been in touch after Mayala returned home, and the school let me know when our sessions could resume. I arrived, ready to move on, and discovered that Mayala had stayed home. I called her house, and Kerria told me she had refused to go to school, though she had the previous two days and felt fine. I intuited that Mayala did not want to face me due to embarrassment or fear that I would be yet another adult chastising her decision to drink. She still did not view my role in her life to be nonjudgemental; she did not believe that I could advocate for her potential and help her reach it. With Kerria’s help, Mayala put the phone to her ear. My only request was that she listen. I told her that as her educational therapist, I needed to understand her authentic pain, strengths, and weaknesses and that I had the luxury of standing beside her without criticism. I said she could choose to talk about what happened or never talk about it, but I was ready to move on and help her to understand her learning strengths. I invited her to move on with me.

She showed up the following day, and for the first time, Mayala took her backpack off as she entered and sat in the chair next to mine. That is when our work really began.

THE HEALING PROCESS

One of my most reliable interview tools when meeting students is *My Learning Print™* (MLP) (Schader & Baum 2016/2021) which helps me assess students’ self-awareness, different interests, opinions about school subjects, and if the basis of those impressions are due to their educational experience or to their relational history with teachers. Though I could not use this instrument effectively in our early meetings, as our relationship and trust grew, MLP was instrumental in helping Mayala express her confusion and feelings of failure about the assessment process she had endured, her class changes, and her peer concerns. When she finally revealed that she resented being pulled out for a *special* class (meeting me) in front of her peers and felt like she was “being punished for being stupid,” we worked with her mother to end my school visits in favor of the family coming to my office after school.

As we built our relationship, Mayala revealed years of lost knowledge “she knew she knew,” but that seemed lost because she could not retrieve them. We talked about the strengths revealed, yet left unspoken during her psychological assessments and why she had felt the obstacles slowly drowning her drive to learn. She became curious about ideas she missed during the two years she had checked out of school, and I became increasingly aware of her giftedness and perfectionism, which often hindered her desire to begin tasks. Why start if you can’t finish it to your vision? As we continued our work together, I watched her use up all of my correction tape and expertly apply Liquid Paper. Ironically, one of the most complex obstacles we worked to acknowledge and embrace was how much she cared about education and doing well in school. Once her desire to learn returned, it was easier to investigate ways to build her memory and improve her academic writing. As she shared her artistry and poetry, it became clear that her high self-expectations extended beyond academics.

Establishing a Safe Community at School

Kerria wanted Mayala to have a fresh start after the trauma of eighth grade and enrolled her in a public charter high school away from her “tequila friends.” Before she left middle school, Kerria, Mayala, her counselor, resource teacher, and I met as a team to reflect on Mayala’s semester progress and to prepare recommendations to the high school that would encourage specific electives aligned with her interests and supports to fill in gaps suffered during middle school. Unfortunately, because of concerns to ensure a “least restrictive environment,” Mayala was placed in a regular math class instead of a resource class that could have helped her cope with her dyscalculia.

In the new high school setting, Mayala felt socially and academically out of place, with few of her classmates sharing the same culture or family background. Though trying to be open, Mayala quickly became frustrated with conflicting expectations of ability and increased cognitive load. By the fifth week, she had returned to her challenging behaviors, had borderline fails in all of her classes, and audaciously refused to comply with teacher requests, especially in math. Believing that the difficulties were a misunderstanding of Mayala’s academic needs, I helped Kerria to set up an expedited meeting to review her IEP and coached Mayala to self-advocate to change her mathematics class. Though I forwarded the English translation of Mayala’s detailed assessment reports to the new school in preparation for the meeting, they were not read before or during the conference, nor, we discovered, was a summary shared with her teachers. Instead, the school personnel who were supposed to advocate for her special learning needs were all too quiet, while those who did speak up used it to blame Mayala for not trying hard enough and being disrespectful. A district special education leader even blamed Kerria for being a poor mother. The school authorities’ assessment of Mayala’s difficulties revealed implicit biases based on her history the previous year, her home neighborhood, and assumptions that her behaviors stemmed from the wrong friends, alcohol, and drug use. For example, in the meeting, we discovered Mayala had lashed out in frustration at her math teacher because she could not do the homework, which the teacher adamantly told the meeting attendees was

a choice. As a student at that school, Mayala was expected to be proactive in asking for help, yet when she asked for help during the first week, the teacher verbally repeated a truncated version of the class lesson, though Mayala needed hands-on interventions and more foundational instruction. The math teacher had no knowledge of Mayala’s dyscalculia, though listed in her IEP, and was not coached in pedagogical methods to support a student like her. Frustrated by the process, Mayala did stop trying. Mayala’s independent and proud nature was emerging as defiance because the teacher assumed that she was being oppositional—which by then, she was. Misunderstandings escalated into a series of unfortunate confrontations and anger on both sides. Because of the math teacher’s reports and her suspension record, the school psychologist added the diagnosis of ODD to her student profile without further assessment or even scanning the extensive neuropsychological evaluation report. The lack of training for these school officials was grossly evident, as was the gross misinterpretation of Mayala’s frustration with the work (Assouline et al., 2006; Baum et al., 2014; Foley-Nicpon & Assouline, 2020; Webb et al., 2016). That year was fraught with mistrust resulting in truancies and confrontation. Fortunately, her case manager, Ms. Martin, worked behind the scenes to move her into a more appropriate math course.

Though initially mocked by Mayala, Ms. Martin and the resource teachers increasingly became allies at school and thereafter assigned Mayala to classes where the teachers could support her developing skills and help her grow as a learner during her sophomore year. Mayala was still distrustful of some of her teachers. Fortunately, Ms. Martin was able to prove her trustworthiness through unconditional regard, and as the year progressed, was able to calm Mayala when she became upset.

My role during these years was to support specific skill development, including planning, organization, and memory retention and recall, and to help Mayala navigate the pragmatics of this new environment. Even as her academic skills improved, it took time before she was willing to share her talents and interests. Finally, mid-year, after two more meetings with assistant principal Ms. Latham, Ms. Martin, Mayala’s counselor, and a new psychologist, I was able to amplify Mayala and Kerria’s voices in advocating for change. They discussed several electives with Mayala, and she chose a photography class, which aligned with her gifted visual and artistic sensibilities so she might thrive. Growth for a struggling student is more than just putting in academic effort. Students who have suffered school trauma need opportunities to nurture their skills within high-interest areas so they may build stamina and resilience (Baum et al., 2017).

Mayala abhorred getting help at school for many reasons, including her pride, high self-expectations, perfectionism, nascent inquiry skills, and general lack of trust in non-familial authority figures. Few teachers in this high school offered help, instead, expecting students to ask for clarifications outside of class. Mayala and I discussed why she deserved to receive help, when and why she felt lost, and how to approach different teachers with their diverse temperaments. We began with her photography

teacher, exploring different strategies so she might confidently practice her new communication skills in a desired subject.

She grew tremendously throughout that year and the next—socially, emotionally, and academically. I collaborated with Ms. Martin, who took the time to talk *with* Mayala rather than *at* her. Together we helped her navigate the school culture and revise Mayala’s “rules of respect.” With the case manager as an intermediary and many trips to Ms. Latham’s office, other adults stopped reacting and started listening to the frustrations beneath her reactivity. Mayala slowly, mistrustingly, discovered an unexpected ally at school—Ms. Latham, the assistant principal. Ms. Latham coached her to find safer alternatives to the feelings of disrespect that instigated her aggressive confrontations with staff. Mayala felt increasingly safe leaving an escalating situation to visit Ms. Latham. At her end-of-the-year IEP meeting, Ms. Latham acted as another advocate, praising Mayala’s artistic talents and growing positive leadership, and recommended her for a job training program, provided she continued her efforts to study. Mayala had a new incentive and a growing hope in her future. She was excited at the promise of becoming a nurse’s assistant, her first paid job.

Finding Hope

During our sessions in her junior year, we continued to expand her inquiry skills, expand her vocabulary, and develop the life skills that she needed to thrive as a successful learner and hospital employee. I watched as she tossed away easy fixes and wishful thinking and risked embracing hard work. She was growing and maturing, transforming her anger into drive, using her fierce loyalty to develop leadership skills, and using her deep emotions to care for strangers in need. In November of her junior year, she was officially offered a paid internship at a local hospital. Like many others when offered talent development opportunities, Mayala realized that when she was involved with an exciting task based on her interests, she could more easily accept learning support to remember protocols and systems with more facility (Baum et al., 2017; Olenchak, 2009; Olenchak et al., 2016). We discussed her growing ease of adapting to the hospital environment, her supervisor’s training style, and ways to remember and cognitively retrieve essential protocols. Her diligence and kindness toward patients were reciprocated, and her supervisor noticed. I asked about the patients who could be demanding, and she said helping them was satisfying because they were stuck in their beds, and she could make them more comfortable.

Her compassion and desire to defend those in need shined brightly in her service to others.

A MATURING SELF-IDENTITY

The paid internship at the hospital allowed Mayala to explore her interests in medical and social services while enjoying the ongoing mentorship of the hospital supervisor. Mayala had tremendous respect for her hospital supervisor, who saw her potential as a budding healthcare professional in real-time and with actual patients.

During her second month, Mayala described her day at work with a rare smile and animated voice. I commented, “You seem to really love this work.” She paused and thought before replying, “Work isn’t something you should *love*. You love people. But I think I enjoy it.” After another pause, she added, “Maybe I could love it.” She saw a future—one that was realistic and attainable. She understood now why effort and grades were important. We practiced drawing sketches and models of her notes to increase her retention and have a visual pathway to retrieve the data when needed. Given these opportunities to nurture her talents, she decided to go to college—the first of her family.

Helping others in the hospital cultivated her willingness to help classmates, beyond her friends at school. Mayala was experiencing the joy of harnessing her strengths of compassion, empathy, loyalty, and intense emotions to help others. And with that success, her grades improved, returning to A’s and B’s. When the pandemic hit, her internship was interrupted, sending her into a slump. Though initially discouraged that COVID spring without the nurses’ aide position and the face-to-face school interactions that helped her thrive, the following school year, she became determined to learn the online platforms and keep up her grades. The online platform was not always straightforward, but she had learned the power of resilience and surprised herself by becoming fluent in the complex technology, returning to her academic success of the previous winter, and earning a reputation during her senior year for supporting both her teachers and peers as they navigated the new learning platform.

Embracing Self

As an educational therapist, part of my job is to help students move toward independence as they are ready. My students and I always note their progress at the end of each school year, but as Mayala’s junior year ended, I noticed she needed something more tangible. She was ready to own her growth. One of the self-awareness tools that I use in my practice is the card game called, *The Hand You Were Dealt Game: Exploring Diverse Minds* (THYWD) (Hansen & Hansen, 2022). The words on the deck of cards have a mix of positive and negative connotations about learning attributes and attitudes, allowing students to discuss their non-conscious thinking. I use the cards along with a reflection sheet that helps to organize thinking into different categories, such as “attributes that best describe me,” “sometimes this is like me,” “interests and potential talents,” and “obstacles I want to work to change.”

The process of self-reflection was powerful, and her list of ‘positive’ attributes grew. We discussed her list of “sometimes” characteristics and how she had learned to acknowledge and regulate her powerful emotional traits. She added a list of the attributes that had held her down over the years but were no longer an active part of her profile. And we realized that the column called “interests and potential talents” was a wish list of her life goals. She was realistic about the attributes of both obstacles and strengths (strong-willed, perfectionistic), and we noted the language for self-advocacy she developed during our earlier sessions.

Most importantly, each card was part of her united, complex identity. To make the point tactile, and using her artistic sensibilities, I offered her some ribbon and yarn with different textures and colors to weave into a bracelet to remember her growth and wholeness. She carefully attached a swatch of the colored fabrics to their corresponding attributes before weaving the fibers together. After completing the woven strand, she twisted it around her wrist several times and let me tie it for her. As she left, Mayala was serene and hopeful; she wore a bright smile as she said, “Goodbye.” She was so different from that first meeting so long ago—lighter in the way she held herself and in her spirit.

Growing Forward

When we met in eighth grade, Mayala was angry, confused, distrustful, and unsure she wanted help. We explicitly explored her progress and revealed, layer by layer, her strengths and talents, acknowledged her obstacles, and built a positive self-identity. Throughout the time we worked together, Mayala grew to understand that the strong emotions of frustration and anger about her learning obstacles worsened her cognition and that accepting support did not mean she had failed but that she was empowering herself to thrive. She found teachers whom she could trust and who cared about her well-being. Mayala’s counselor helped her grow her leadership skills by assigning her to be an assistant in both academic and elective courses. In one resource class, she embraced her visual and tactile learning strengths by illustrating representations of math and biology lessons as memory assists. She was rewarded when her peers and staff appreciated her efforts. The assistant principal became a trusted mentor and allied professional through graduation, coaching Mayala to advocate for herself and others peacefully and encouraging her to use her voice and creativity to influence positive change in her community.

Working with her mother, Kerria, we jumped over hurdles, including adjusting IEPs to ensure Mayala had talent and interest opportunities through electives such as photography, graphic design, dance, and music that emphasized interests linked to her emotional, visual, and creative strengths. Together we taught the school the importance of strength-based, talent-focused programming to support Mayala’s resilience and desire to learn (Baum et al., 2017; Olenchak, 2009; Olenchak et al., 2016). Given safety and opportunity, Mayala lowered her defenses, developed an enduring sense of hope in her future, and thrived.

Mayala’s senior award for leadership and growth was well earned.

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