



## The Unique Learner: Case Studies of Clients With Complex Learning Profiles

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### On Mentoring Others

I love to remember my mentor, Dina Birnbach, one of the founders of The Churchill School, a special school for dyslexic children in Manhattan; when I remember her interest in my work, my heart fills with gratitude and pride. The terrors of my early practice with very entitled clients, who often had emotional issues to sort out regarding money and my work, faded under Dina's guidance as she taught me how to listen to them. My new full-time private practice centered around helping students with issues of dyslexia, attention, non-verbal learning disabilities, and complicated family dynamics made more fraught by divorce or death. I was often called on to stand up to clients who tended to bully their children, and by extension, me.

Having Dina in my corner meant that I had someone to talk to about cases, and I developed confidence that I could meet the challenges my clients and their parents presented to me because there was no issue I could not speak to Dina about. Dina claimed that I could do what other educational therapists could do, though we all called ourselves learning specialists then, but that I would do it with love, and that this love, well channeled, would make my work stronger.

Rather than crowd me with prescriptions on how I should do my work, she led me into thinking through my strategies and plans with her warm but sharp questioning and by opening her personal library to me. Dina didn't suffer fools at all, and her attention to the *why* of my therapeutic plans made me a better educational therapist.

Three years ago, I began mentoring a young educational therapist, and I like to think that Dina would approve of my attempt to pay forward all that she taught me. When I helped my protégé to read psychoeducational evaluations, when I helped her learn to use her curriculum-design expertise in the realm of one-on-one remediation, I felt satisfied that I was helping someone extraordinarily talented to develop into an educational therapist. I modeled patience and listening skills as I listened to her concerns about her students every week. I knew many of the issues of some cases because I had referred the client to her. My mentee wanted to be successful quickly, but I was sure that teaching her to slow down to listen well would make her a better educational therapist and that staying connected to her client *was* doing the work even if the client rejected the exercise that my protégé had worked so hard to create. I could help her relax while she built relationships

with her families, as each client struggled to pick up new skills or showed resistance to learning new ways of working.

Our time together made us friends, business partners, and admirers of each other. Were there challenges? Yes, of course, but each of us is the kind of person who likes to talk about a problem and do so straight away. We are now on a path to creating an online class for people interested in becoming educational therapists, through which we will soon mentor other teachers and specialists who wish to become educational therapists.

The process of mentorship is different from the contract we sign when we agree to supervise an ET in the attainment of her professional credentials. That relationship has a beginning, middle and end, and it has good boundaries that are set at the beginning of the twelve or so weeks provided for supervision. A mentoring relationship can continue until it comes to a natural end. It may even last a lifetime, as my relationship with Dina did. Dina taught me life-long methods of being empathetic, curious, and generous. My worldview changed for the better and forever because she mentored me, and all that she taught me is mine to keep. Though Dina has now died, she is part of who I am as an educational therapist and as a person.

A mentorship is something you do from the heart so that the soft skills of educational therapy that hinge on building relationships can be passed forward. You may find that mentoring changes your practice in ways you could not have anticipated as you work to teach your mentee strategies for teaching and organizing a successful remediation. I know about those challenges to development that my mentee chose to share with me. In passing knowledge forward, I feel connected to my mentee and to Dina, and through Dina, to all the famous women of our field who once taught her. What we educational therapists know is transmitted through close relationships, great questions, and patient work with those young educational therapists whom we agree to help.

I wish you the pleasure and privilege of mentorship.

**Susan Micari, MSEd, BCET**, is the founder, along with Dr. Annalisa Perfetto, of EdTherapyNYC, a practice that serves adults with NVLD, dyslexia, executive function difficulties, and ADHD. Susan serves clients whose profiles are complicated by trauma, and she has designed courses in LD for parents in the UK, Australia, and the United States. Susan now lives in Richmond, VA, and continues her practice there both online and in person with middle, high school, and college students as well as executives who seek help for executive functions or dyslexia.

### ERRATUM:

*The Unique Learner* column "On Collaboration With Mental Health Professionals With Expertise Treating NVLD" was published in the Fall 2020 issue of *The Educational Therapist*. We regret that the name of one of the authors, Benjamin Meyer, LCSW, was inadvertently omitted. [Please click here for the revised column.](#)