

## TRANSCRIPT: Reaching our Diamonds in the Rough

Susanna Miller:

So, without further ado, the LD at School team is very pleased to welcome guest speaker, Mariem Farag whose presentation this afternoon is entitled, Reaching Our Diamonds in the Rough, Seeing Beyond Behavior. The Ministry of Education has provided funding for the production of this webinar, please note that the views expressed in this webinar are the views of the presenter and do not necessarily reflect those of the Ministry of Education nor the Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario. We will also be tweeting throughout this entire presentation, so if you want to follow along with us, you can find us on Twitter at @LDatSchool and if you'd like to join the conversation, use the hashtag, #LDwebinar and we'll be able to see what you're saying. So, that takes care of all my housekeeping slides. I would like to welcome Mariem now. Mariem Farag has been involved in special education classrooms for 10 out of the last 14 years of teaching.

Susanna Miller:

She's been assigned to classrooms that were in crisis and turned those rooms into warm and safe places. Mariem has taught in the home school program, in the intensive support programs for learning disabilities and mild intellectual disabilities. She has served as a methods and resource teacher on her school support team for four years. Welcome Mariem. The floor is now yours.

Mariem Farag:

Thank you very much. Hi, everyone. So, let's share our screen here. Okay. All right. So, our topic for today is Reaching Our Diamonds in the Rough and it is a talk on how to teach with students with behavioral needs in our classrooms. So, my hope or my goal for this presentation today is that everyone leaves a little less apprehensive about having students with behavioral challenges in their class. I'm hoping that we change our perspective from ... and I've had this perspective obviously, where it's like the curriculum is so daunting, it's so large, there's so much to take care of. How am I going to meet all of those expectations while having a student with behavioral challenges in my classroom? Changing that perspective into, because the student is my class, I will be able to better meet all of those expectations that are already on me.

Mariem Farag:

So, that is my hope, and I want to start with a story about perception and it's an anecdote that was told to me when I was starting out and it really stood the test of time. It's something that I revisit kind of like my cheerleading story whenever I'm thinking of how am I going to connect or reach this particular student this year. So, it begins with a young teacher who gets a new assignment and she hears that this is a class in crisis with lots of behavioral challenges, in fact, they've lost a few teachers already who called it quits and she goes in the first day and she is definitely met with lots of behavioral challenges to the point where she says, "You know what, not the first gig that I want to start my career with. I'm going to tell the principal, I'm going to check out."

Mariem Farag:

She goes into the principal's office with the intention of quitting, but the principal is not in the office, but when she takes a glance at the principal's desk, she sees her student lists with all of their IQ scores on there. Their IQ scores were off the charts high. So she said, "Oh, wow. Okay, no, I'm not going to quit. This is a class that is very capable and I need to show them how to reach their potential." So she goes



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back into that class with a fresh perspective, and she tells these students that they have to meet their potential, that she's going to help them do that, and lo and behold, by the end of the year, the students were meeting the expectations. They were doing wonderfully. The behaviors were gone and the principal came to her at the end of the year and said, "Well, how did you turn this class around? How did you do it? Tell me your secret."

Mariem Farag:

She said, "Well, I have a confession. I was planning on quitting the first day, but then I saw their IQ scores and I thought no, I have to make them reach their full potential." The principal looked puzzled and said, "Huh, there is no such list. The only list at the beginning of the year that could have been is their locker numbers." So I love the punchline of the story and it does ring true, even in the real world, that really having the right mindset, having that right understanding of who our diamonds in the rough and that they are diamonds in the rough helps us to see past the behavior and allows us to reach them. So that is my little beginning intro here. So let's get started, so obviously, I did pick the diamonds in the rough as an analogy for the students because sometimes it could be rough around the edges.

Mariem Farag:

They can sometimes challenge us. It's not always easy having these students in our classrooms, but I thought it's a two-way analogy because just like we have to sometimes put the right pressure on our students and the right shaping tools for our students to bring out that sparkle. Having these students in our class does the same for us as educators, that by them being there, they're putting us under a little bit of pressure. They're shaping us and because these students are in our classrooms, we can become diamond educators ourselves. So understanding their importance in our careers, as defining moments, I think is a really nice perspective that helps us get through those challenging days. So who are our diamonds in the rough? I have worked in intensive support programs, so this might look different in other settings in other classrooms in the regular stream, in the younger age.

Mariem Farag:

So this is not an exclusive list, an exhaustive list, just a few things that popped into my head. So oftentimes, I feel that their reputation precedes them. So what does that look like? That's where I will start the year and I will get a teacher who has no ill intention at all, they will walk into my class and say, "Oh, you have who next year. Good luck," right? We've probably all said a version of these sentences, without meaning anything by it, but it does have a connotation. It does have an effect on how that student is perceived. The way I try to think about these moments, and trying to remind myself, how I speak about these students is very important, is by looking at them as the iceberg, that the behavior is just the tip of the iceberg. What I'm not seeing is why the behavior is there?

Mariem Farag:

What happens to the student when they leave my class and come back? What kind of challenges are they going through from that moment until the next moment if they're on the spectrum? How are they perceiving the world? How overstimulated must they be? How would I feel if I was overstimulated and what kind of behaviors would I be showing? So kind of keeping that at the front of my mind so that way, I don't also contribute to this reputation. They often have an identification like autism, behavioral learning disability, a combination of some. Sometimes they don't have an identification at all, but



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knowing if there is an identification is important and we're going to talk about how to tackle that. They have a safety plan, they have an IEP. Most of the times, the IEP has an alternative page or pages.

Mariem Farag:

Sometimes it could be a large OSR depending on where they are on their career timeline, right? The older they get, sometimes the bigger those get, and not to see that as a daunting thing, but as a helpful resource and we're going to unpack that as well. They often have an EA or SNA attached to them, if we're lucky. So getting those human resources in there is important, but also making sure that the human resources are working for the student, right? I've seen it where if the EA and SNA is not buying into the program, is not buying into the positivity of the room. They can actually turn into the triggers of the student very quickly. So understand ... and we're going to talk about that, understanding how to bring our EA and SNA and draw them in, and get them on the same side so that they are beneficial.

Mariem Farag:

In my experience, all of my EAs and SNAs have been very, very helpful and very, very understanding of these students, and often gave me a different perspective because they've worked with these students for so much longer than I have. Their peers are often apprehensive around them. So there was a class that I took and I came the second year, that this cohort was together. The first year was very intense and they had a lot of interpersonal issues with each other. So I came in the next year, all fresh eyed and bushy tailed and I didn't take into account what the previous year had done, and I remember we were sitting down and one of the students who was flagged as having high outbursts in the class, just made a sound in the room. He got frustrated and he made a one note sound and it didn't sound anything special to me, but I noticed that the room changed when the sound happened.

Mariem Farag:

The adults froze. The kids got really quiet and one student in the class said, "Here we go again." I was like, "Oh my goodness. Here we go again, such big sentence." It was okay. It was just a small behavior, but it reminded me in that moment that sometimes when these students come or when these groups come together, there is trauma, there's patterns and I need to be aware of them, and I need to help re-establish new patterns and new perceptions amongst the peers as well. That's very important, because there's history there, right? Then they have untapped potential and often high emotional walls, big walls. Oftentimes those walls are towards their teacher. Sometimes we feel like we are ... without even meeting the student, we're labeled as the enemy in the room. That makes sense, because sometimes these students with behavioral challenges, their behaviors are very much tied to their lack of success in the education system.

Mariem Farag:

That we as teachers, as educators, represent the person who's going to be in the room, making them do things they don't want to do, they feel that they can't do and we're always going to be there, causing them struggle. So the walls are often, yes, up, right away, day one and it's figuring out how to get those walls down so we can reach them. That is very, very important, especially in the early days. So where do I begin? So we're going to begin ... and I love to begin before I even meet them, okay? I need as much data and information before I even lay eyes on the student. So I identified four key areas that I like to use before the school year even begins. It's not too late. It's only a few days into the school year. So the



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four areas are their documentation, their past human resources like their teachers, their EAs, their SNAs, whoever has worked with them previous.

Mariem Farag:

The puzzle piece is their interests. I like to know that early on, and their strengths. So we'll look at each one of those. The first one is their OSRs. So what's in the OSRs? If those are the big OSRs, the really thick ones ... I remember my first OSR that looked like that, I didn't know where to begin. How do you even tackle this? So these are my tricks of the trade, where I like to go in those big OSRs. Number one is the IEP. I like to pull out the IEP and it can be thick as well but I know what I'm looking for. So I'm looking yes for the strategies, but I'm looking for the page three, to go to page three and I see what are the academic areas of need. Very good. More importantly, I like to go to the alternative pages, so I keep flipping and the alternative pages are things like transitions, emotional regulation, so many things.

Mariem Farag:

It could be many things and in my eyes for a student with behavioral challenges, that's the curriculum. So if I can tackle the alternative pages, and get those skills in play, then I can reach the page three stuff. If the student can't emotionally regulate in the class. There is no reaching those page threes. Okay? So that's how I perceive that IEP. Are there assessments or identifications in there? So have they been seen by psychologists? Do they have an identification? Have they been seen by speech and language? I'm not a psychologist, I'm an educator, so if I take out that psychology report, I'm not reading the whole thing. I'm just flipping through, I like to see the background information from the point of view of the parents, from the point of view of the teacher who was dealing with them when this was being done.

Mariem Farag:

Then I flip, flip, flip, flip to the summary page. So I read the summary page and I'm seeing more importantly, what are the strategies that are recommended for this identification? It's usually at the bottom, a few sentences and I want to see and reflect on, are these being done? How can they be changed? If I have any questions, I can talk to my principal and whoever, to understand this document. Okay? Then if my student has behavioral challenges that are physical, there should be something called a safety plan in there. That safety plan is gold. That safety plan will show me what are the triggers and what are the preventions? So, a great story, we had a student who was nonverbal and he was on the spectrum. He's a big teddy bear, a lovely guy, big heart, such a sweetheart.

Mariem Farag:

His number one trigger was hearing, "Oh, Canada." So if we hadn't heard ... if we hadn't read this trigger early on, imagine first day of school and the reaction is big. That would have been a very big misstep. So thank goodness, we read it, talked it over with my staff. We figured out what we're going to do and then I told my admin, do you mind just holding off, "Oh, Canada" for a little bit until we get the students positioned in the right places? It would opened up a lovely dialogue, the first day of school about our different needs and how we have to be there for each other because everyone is going to need everyone's support this year. So that was the tone that we set because the student was in our class. Lo and behold, you hear "Oh, Canada," he stands up, he jolts and he makes a very quick run for the door, bulldozing whoever is in his way.



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Mariem Farag:

So what we taught the students was that this is his flight lane and if you're standing in that flight lane, you're just going to shift one, one over and let him through. Two weeks then, it was clockwork. He would hear "Oh, Canada," get up and scream, he would charge down that flight lane and our EA would be standing in front of the door, she closed the door behind her, she would show him our stop signal. He would see it, he would stop, he would ask for a hug, we'd give him a hug. He would calm down and he'd listened to the rest of "Oh Canada." So these are nuggets, these are gems that we really need to look and flip through so we have a right ... that we can start the year on the right foot. Human Resources, people who have dealt with our students in the past, very important, but we can hear the stories, but we're listening with what I call a positive ear.

Mariem Farag:

We want to look for things like what are their interests? What are their hobbies? Who are their advocates in their family? Who are their friends? What do they like to do? We're trying to pull as much of the positive things about the student and what works with the students, what strategies have worked? We're kind of setting the tone and that if there are negative stories, also for our own well being and our own mental health, we're limiting how much time we invest in these negative stories and if this is an SNA or EA that has worked with the student ... and they didn't have the best year with the student previous. This is the time to start investing in them and putting ideas in them that this year will be different. Things like the student has grown over the summer. They've had a bit of a break.

Mariem Farag:

They could have grown up a little bit. There's a new cohort in the class. Some students are coming in, some students are leaving. This might change the dynamic of the room, and we're really trying to get our SNAs and EAs to buy into the fresh start, the fresh eye with the students. I have seen it where sometimes there is some apprehension with working with the same student more than once, but really giving that positivity and that encouragement really goes a long way, and my EAs and my SNAs have always had that extra eye in the class and have helped me, if we are lucky to have them in the class, absolutely. So, what do I do with the negative stories? So here, I had a teacher who I had just entered the building, I had just set up and she said, "Come on over, I want to tell you something about this particular student that you're going to teach." She had never taught him, but she had an interaction.

Mariem Farag:

She said, "I was standing in the hallway, lining up with my students and your student came down the stairs charging because he was angry. He kicked the door. The door hit me in the leg. He walked off, nothing was done and he never apologized, and that was that." I heard the story. It's important to hear these stories and to acknowledge the feelings and to understand that this was traumatic. This is your place of work that is not meant to be brought down. Absolutely. At the same time, what I'm listening for is some inquisitive things, some positive things as well. One, I heard that my student runs when ... he's physical when he's angry. I heard that. So I need to figure out in my class, what am I going to place in there so that my student has a place to physically take out his frustration?

Mariem Farag:



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I have to meet the student where they are and then yes, I'm going to gradually teach better ways to express ourselves, but I have to meet them there. The other thing I heard was that the student leaves the class when he's angry. So I need to work on my connection with the student. I need to show him that, "No, stay in the class. Let's talk this through. Let's figure this out together." So making that connection was going to be important and the last and most challenging thing I heard there was that my student had developed some negative interactions with other staff members outside my class. That's the hardest thing to change, but it starts with us. It starts with us when we are in a staff meeting, or we're in the staff room, and we have the urge to just complain. To understand that that maybe is not the right place, that the staff room and the staff meetings, that's the time to show off the growth of that student.

Mariem Farag:

The leadership that they're taking on in the class, and really trying to change the perceptions that have been formed. I've had lovely librarians in my past or gym teachers in my past who have helped me in that mission and slowly but surely the impression of the staff changes, because it's so important, because when our students leave our class, and they go to unstructured times, that's when they will have these negative interactions and then, we're going to get pulled in them, whether we like it or not and that could affect our relationship with our students. So it is really important that we try to change the culture as much as we can, if it has turned negative. Hobbies. So I picked the puzzles, because it has a special place in my heart. I had a student whose previous teacher told me, he has a lot of issues with self-regulation, but for some reason, you give him a puzzle, he's going to calm down.

Mariem Farag:

So what I heard was that puzzles now need to be my favorite thing in the all time world, and that's how I was going to connect with that student. Thank goodness, I love puzzles but if I didn't love puzzles, I was going to love whatever it is that he or she loved. You just have to love it because it's an entry point. So this is where now I'm ready to set up my class. Before this, I haven't even entered my class and I'm trying to set up my class with the student in mind. So the puzzle center is going to be in there, a common zone is going to be in there. Setting up my class in calmer colors to lower anxiety is going to be in there. So lots and lots of different things are in there and I'm setting it up yes, for that student but because this student needs it, my other students will also benefit from it, is the idea that I'm trying to work with, is that this is not, "Oh, look at all this work that I have to do for this one."

Mariem Farag:

That by investing in this, I'm going to help everybody, including myself. So that is very, very important. Actually, with the puzzle station, I actually found that that year, I was visiting the puzzle station to calm myself down some time, so it benefits everybody. What are their strengths? Very important to figure those out quickly and especially in the first little while, maybe the first week or two, we are highlighting their strengths. We are finding activities that they connect with their peers with, that highlight their strengths. Now, I should know what their needs are and I'm trying to avoid it in the first week or two, because the anxiety and the walls are going to be high the first two weeks, and I need to slowly bring those down so that way, there's a new idea that is entering the students' mind, that this year is going to be different.

Mariem Farag:



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That I'm going to learn a little differently this year, that there's a little bit of hope that is given to them by the end of those two years, and we're really good at giving assessments so we can figure out where we're going and I'm challenging us that, I know the pressures are high on us but if we do have a student with behavioral challenges that are specially tied to the lack of success in the classroom, to hold off on those assessments as hard as we can, so that they can feel their strengths, that they're not reminded of their areas of need in the first two weeks of school. So that by the end of the week, we see it in their body language, that they're relaxed. They're thinking that, "You know what, this year, I will be different," right? So that's what we're hoping by highlighting those very important strengths, the first few weeks.

Mariam Farag:

Then once they're calm, we can go with the assessments but not really. So those are the four areas I like to start with before I meet the student. Now, the student is in my class and these are some effective strategies that I think probably everyone here is already doing them. So you're going to be tapping yourself a lot on the shoulder in the next little bit or maybe you're thinking of a different way of seeing something, so these are things that are generally in almost all the classrooms but I think the importance of realizing how important and crucially are in the classroom is just a good mantra, a good reminder. So number one of course, is connection and I really like this picture when I found it because it wasn't just about the connection of the teacher to that one student, it was about the connection to everybody.

Mariam Farag:

I think everybody in the class needs to be connected, and sometimes ... and I like this quote, is that my perception of the behavior as attention seeking becoming connection seeking, is very true, that changing that idea, not just for me but for the whole class is very important. One thing that I do in the class to kind of work on this connection piece between the peers, it's hard but we have something in our room called the moderator room or the moderator corner. That's because a lot of the times, my students with behavioral challenges, they get triggered the most, when it is unstructured time, during recess, during gym time, during lunchtime. These are the times where they get into those conflicts. So I have this reconciliation time or this moderator time embedded in my schedule.

Mariam Farag:

So right after every transition, I'm not going into a lesson. I'm going into something that doesn't require my full attention. Something like quiet reading or journaling or coloring. Something that doesn't need my full attention because chances are, I'm going to be dealing with some issues that have happened during recess, that also lowers my stress level. I have the capacity. I have the time embedded in there to deal with this. I'm not frustrated, "Oh, why can't we figure this out, guys," right? So I'm ready for it and I remember this moderator room, I knew it was working. It was a few months in the school year with that group that just had too many mismatches and they couldn't really get along. I knew it was working really well when ... there was one particular recess, the student raised his hand and said, "Miss Farag, I need so and so to join me in the moderator room."

Mariam Farag:

I joined them, I went and he right away started. I didn't start anything. He started and he said, "So and so you did this and that really upset me." Then so and so took his turn, because we've modeled it. We practiced it many times and he said, "Oh, I didn't ... That's not my intention. I was trying to do this. I'm sorry, you misunderstood," and then they did this really nice back and forth conversation. They shook



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hands and then they left and went back to the class, and I just was left standing there, like I didn't even matter in the room and that's when I'm like, "Oh, hey, it's working," and they were starting to connect with each other and they wanted to get along. That was really, really rewarding. Technology. Many horrible things have happened because of COVID but the one thing that I have loved because of COVID is technology.

Mariam Farag:

It has really increased accessibility of technology. We know that technology is great but we were always struggling with, only the special education students get the classroom story, they get all of the students a one to one technology situation, where now with our admins, they're really investing in technology and almost every class has it. So that's wonderful to see, because now it's not about, it not being in our hands. It's now in our hands and it doesn't matter how old the teacher is or what their background is, they know how to use it. It doesn't matter the student's age or their background. They know how to use it, so it's wonderful and it's a wonderful equalizer. For me, it's helped me make sure that I'm assessing the right thing. So if I'm trying to see, did the student understand the text? I'm not getting them to write it down because now I'm testing their writing, I'm not testing their reading comprehension.

Mariam Farag:

So it helps us to be more precise with what we're looking for and it helps us to avoid testing one thing versus another, and maybe discouraging our student who really understood the book but can't write it down, right? So making us more mindful of how to get that information and giving us different avenues to get that information, and I have ... Well, we'll focus on a girl student. I know I always talk about my male students, unfortunately, but I have a one story where this student, she was a selective youth and she was on the spectrum. She was lovely, but her worlds were so high when it came to me. She didn't want to take anything from me. My feedback was ignored. She would even like scratch out my feedback with her pen, when I would give it. Her walls towards me were very high. I remember one day I brought the Dash and Dot robots into the class, and within five minutes, she found a way to connect a marker to the Lego.

Mariam Farag:

Then she had a piece of paper in front of the Dash and Dot robot. The Dash and Dot robot started drawing a circle, after she programmed it, and it was amazing. The whole class was floored within five minutes. She knew how to do this and she was just introduced to the dash and dot robots. Everybody wanted to know how she did it. She went around to every single group on their iPad and showed them how to program their Dash and Dot robot, to program how to write and it was magical, because her wall started to come down, because I think in that moment, it was a realization that it wasn't just that, "I could be in this class." It was, I think, she realized that she can also contribute to this class, that she didn't need to be speaking in order to be heard by her peers, by her teacher. That was lovely to see and slowly, with more technology being put into the class and shining her leadership in there, she started to feel part of the room.

Mariam Farag:

Her walls started to go down towards me, and it was lovely. So technology really gives those students opportunities who ... students who are often overlooked to be the leaders in the room, and to show their friends another way to connect the students to each other. Technology, I love it. Engagement. This



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is highly researched. We know this that if engagement is high, behavior issues are low. The issue becomes how do I engage the students? So I love this quote. It says, "Tell me and I forget. Teach me and I remember. Involve me and I learn." Very important that they are involved in their learning. How they show their learning is very, very important. If we give them many options, if we give them many topics that they can learn, like giving them that choice, giving them that differentiation in their learning is very important.

Mariem Farag:

Integrating is very important using cooperative learning is very important. Finding as many ways to connect them to the topics. So we had one group that was mostly boys, very kinesthetic learners and we had to teach them government and city structures. I remember we took out the Makedo kits, that have saws and screws and all of these lovely gadgets in there, and we said, "Okay, guys, as a class, we're going to build a city," and it was all about connecting all of the different strands. Sending a proposal with your partner. Why is your building important to make this city work? We brought in math, what is the perimeter in the area and how are we going to build this? Science, how do we make it stable? Art, what is the design and just trying to get as many of those strands in so that we have these rich, interesting, engaging tasks.

Mariem Farag:

Yes, the work to get these ideas is a lot, but I find it's less work eventually because you end up getting so much content and so many marks from these rich tasks than a bunch of other small tasks that only give you one skill set. So making it engaging and connecting it to the real world is so crucial to lowering those behavioral issues. Consistency. Consistency, not to be confused with being rigid. So it's not about like not changing, not adapting. No. Consistency in key areas, so being consistent in rules and routines, and praise and affection, and expectations. In expectations, they have to be high. Our students actually, I find, are triggered by low expectations, when we give them something that is very babyish. We have to give them high reachable expectations, and then giving them the skill set to build towards them. That really lowers a lot of behavioral issues.

Mariem Farag:

Praise and affection, has to be consistent. They're so sensitive. They're so hypersensitive to how we feel towards them, what we think of them, what their peers think of them. So making sure that that's consistent. If I'm having a rough day, if my ... I'll tell them, I'll say, "You know so and so everybody? Miss Farag is having a bit of a down day. My child is sick at home, so I might be a little off today." So that way they know that I'm different today, not because of them but because of what I have going on and it's good modeling. Rules and routines are consistent. So if I'm going to change the routines, I'm giving them a lot of time ahead to tell them that rules always have to have the same ... The rule can't matter one day and then not matter the other day. We have to be consistent, because I find when those areas are clear, the students' trust increases in us. Then, once the trust is there, then there's some leeway to be more on the fly but that has to be established. They have to believe in us.

Mariem Farag:

Positive reinforcement, lots of philosophies about positive reinforcement. My philosophy changes year in and year out on what I'm going to use in the class for positive reinforcement. There's a myriad of stuff and teachers are so clever, and so engaging in how they use positive reinforcement strategies in their



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classroom. My two that I love to go to are verbal positive reinforcement gestures, high fives, COVID aside. So, just making it about ... showing them that I've noticed your hard work and I'm proud of you and just getting that in there constantly. If we have to give a piece of negative reinforcement ... I read an article by Meyer and Soldier Askroft. It was on preventing antisocial behavior in the schools. They said for every negative feedback that you have to give a student with behavioral challenges, give three positives before.

Mariem Farag:

So I can't count that much. I'm more of an organic teacher, but what that tells me is, I need to give a ton of positive reinforcement if I'm planning on giving a little bit of constructive feedback, because they are sensitive, and they are building their confidence. So keeping that in mind is very important. I had a student who has behavioral challenges were very much tied to his lack of success in the class, and I remember it was two months in, and I wasn't able to get the student to read with me. Whenever I would ask him to come and sit and read with me, he'd say something rude, he'd be passive aggressive about something and he would avoid it altogether. I remember, "You know, what, two months in, I got to read with him." So I said, "Come on over. We're going to read together. I know you can do this. Come." He approached, but he didn't sit down and he looked down in the book, and he saw how easy it was.

Mariem Farag:

That triggered him, because he knew he couldn't read it. He looked at me straight in the eye and he said, "I thought you were smart. I thought you were smarter than this. You still haven't figured out that I can't read?" That hurt that this student had now believed, he had a fixed mindset that he could not read and that wasn't going to change, and I had to change that. I had to throw my belief in him, get him to try. I remember there was a moment where he did eventually sit down with me and he was reading the easier books, and I remember we were in the library. He looked up at a topic of, I think it was parrots, he loved parrots and saw a novel. He pointed towards it and he said, "I'll be able to read that soon." That's a moment and it's these moments where you see them believe in themselves, and what a difference that makes, that he now could believe that he could eventually read and beyond.

Mariem Farag:

Those are the moments that go right in a teacher's heart, right? So teaching from crisis. I've done everything. I've read all the OSRs. I've developed the connections and still, I make a misstep or I misjudged a situation and crisis happens in the classroom with the students. It was a student that year that had made the most gains. It was the student who could not have emotional regulation, and he was doing wonderfully, we were in April and he was becoming the leader in the class. He had so many strategies. I remember that day, he was off, he was just popping and something was different. I remember it was at the end of the day, he just got up, he got frustrated and said, "I'm out of here," and I took a ... I misjudged the situation and I stood in front of the door and I tried to block him from leaving the class. Right away, I saw his shoulders go up, he was a hockey player, and he body-checked me into our class garbage can.

Mariem Farag:

The height of my career. I could have focused on how embarrassed I was. I could have focused on the students who had all seen this, but I decided in that moment that I was going to focus on what we had



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successfully done that year. Protocol kicked in. My EA had already walkie-talkied the office and told them we had a runner. She was pulling the students aside to do another activity that didn't require me so I can go find my student. I had a lovely student who got up and pulled me out of the garbage can and said, "Ms. Farag are you okay?" That was very nice. No one laughed. That was also nice. Then the connection, it had worked. I walked maybe 10 steps out of the class, opened the stairwell and there he was sitting on the ground, not a runner waiting for me. I approached with caution, and I said, "Hey, can I sit beside you?" He scooched over and made room for me. I could tell he was so upset with himself.

Mariem Farag:

I said, "I'm okay," and that mattered to him, I could see his shoulders drop. I'm not hurt. He cared about me. He cared about my well-being. I sat there, and I waited and when I saw that he was ready, I said, "Okay, what happened?" He said, "I thought I could do it." I said, "You thought you could do what?" He said, "I thought I could go a full day without medication. I've been doing so well." He believed in himself. That's what I heard. I said, "But you are doing so well. Last year, you couldn't get through one period with medication and now, you're getting through months and months, with wonderful successes with medication." I did hear though, that he maybe wanted to lower the medication. I remember I had a conversation with his mom to debrief shortly after. She had the same thought and they actually went to the doctor and he lowered the dose, and he did well still.

Mariem Farag:

So he knew something and we just needed to direct it in the right direction. So also, Christ is important to show us that we have done our job, that we've laid down the patient, that things are working and learning from these moments is very, very important and not being harsh on ourselves and saying, "Oh, we have failed." No growth mindset. This is learning. This is success. What can I learn from this? That takes me to my next one, which is constantly reassessing and reflecting on what is going on in our classroom. Our world in teaching is so fast paced. We don't get a breath sometimes, but I challenge us to just give five minutes and I know prep time is so golden, but five minutes at the beginning of prep, one prep, to sit down and reflect on how things are going and to see ... ask questions. So never stop asking questions, right?

Mariem Farag:

How can I do better? What more can I do? What's going really well that I can keep doing? Just having that moment to reassess and reflect is so good for us. Mental health. The mental health of the students is very important, so is ours. This is a wonderful story. Monitor ... Sorry, this is a wonderful story called The Giving Tree by Shel Silverstein and it's a wonderful story. It's about a tree that keeps giving and giving and giving to this boy who keeps taking and taking and taking until she is a stump and has nothing left to give, but still the boy ... she says you can use me as a chair at the end of his life and he sits and enjoys himself with the tree. Lovely. Terrible mindset for teachers. Terrible. We cannot keep giving and giving and giving until we are stumped, until we have nothing left to give because if we do that, we will become the triggers in the class.

Mariem Farag:

We will be short tempered in the class. We will become the problem in the class. Our mental health is very important to our students, checking in and saying, "I was really short today. Do I need a mental health day? Do I need to take the class outside with fair warning? Do I need to sit at the puzzle table for



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15, 20 minutes and just check out? What do I need to do to get my mental health back up because that is important to my students, to myself, to my family and no one else is going to do it for us." A principal is not going to walk in and say, "Hey, how's your mental health?" We have to do that for ourselves and it's our responsibility. Last but not the least, celebrating all wins. With our students with behavioral challenges, I don't believe in small wins. I feel big wins, small wins, they are equal value.

Mariam Farag:

They're all to be celebrated. It gives the students a wonderful way to reflect. I like to tell students whenever I can, "Look where you were, look where you are now," and I celebrate everything, everything because that's how they can keep going forward. That's how they reach new goals, when they realize they've come a long way, they can push themselves more. So making sure that I'm celebrating these moments throughout the year throughout the day is so important. So I'll end with one more story. That student that had all of those emotional regulation issues. At the end of the year, there was a lot of success and I remember the mom called me the last week of school, and she said a sentence that I think just every teacher wants to hear and every teacher I'm sure in this room will hear some version of it. It is, "You saved my boy." Nice sentence but why did she say it?

Mariam Farag:

She said that ... and I asked her why. I said, "What do you mean, I saved your boy?" She said, "Because this year for the first time, I can take my little guy to the grocery store, without having a panic attack myself about what is going to happen when we get to the grocery store, that we're going to have to leave because there's some kind of emotional crisis with this little guy." She's like, "This year, I could proudly take him to the grocery store." Is that a small win? It's a huge win, and it showed me that what we were doing in the classroom was bleeding into his day to day life, and these big wins were why we are doing what we are doing with these students, because our involvement with students with behavioral challenges is where it really counts. Yes, we are there for all of our students but where it really matters, where it's really going to place the biggest impact is with our students with behavioral challenges.

Mariam Farag:

We have the unique opportunity to change their path from someone who doesn't see their potential, someone who is acting out because they don't believe in who they are as a learner, and changing that course to, "I can learn, I can be a functional member of society of this classroom," is a huge, huge responsibility and a huge gratifying experience to be a part of. So I hope now, we are less apprehensive. We are looking at these students as an opportunity to better ourselves as educators, that by involving ourselves with them and celebrating their wins with them, we're impacting them, we're impacting ... positively impacting their family and their home life and ultimately, we're helping society as a whole because these students will be able to be functional members of it.

Mariam Farag:

How amazing that is for us at the end of our careers to have these diamonds in the rough who tell a story that involves us as that teacher who saw something in me, that teacher who saw me the way that I hadn't learned to see myself yet. That's lovely. I guess my final statement here is I hope that everyone here gets to have the opportunity and the privilege of having diamonds in the rough in their class so that



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we can benefit from them and us as educators, we can become diamonds as well, because these students are in our lives. Thank you.

Susanna Miller:

Thank you so much, Mariem. That was a lovely presentation. I do just want to bring your attention to the chat, because we had some lovely messages from people. We've got ... Someone was clapping with happiness, as you told your stories. We got a lot of wonderful presentations, beautiful stories and I think that's exactly what I was going to say. I think your anecdotes perfectly highlight the great responsibility that lies on the shoulders of educators but also the huge amount of possibility that's there, and I thank you for that. So without any more talking, I think we should just dive straight into the question period. So for anyone in the audience, if you do have a question, just pop it in the question box and I will hopefully get to all of them. So, first thing, I'm going to start with a question that's very top of my mind. I know if I ended up in a garbage can at work, I would have burst into tears.

Susanna Miller:

How have you gotten this thick skin and how have you gotten this attitude where these moments just kind of roll off your back?

Mariem Farag:

With a lot of moments that didn't roll off my back. I think experience with our students over time, does give us that perspective, but challenging ourselves that when it happens the first time to not take it personally, to remind myself that this is not about me, this is about the student, this is about what their personal challenges are, that I may not be aware of and really taking myself a little bit on the backburner dealing with that on my own time. In that moment, when it's happening, I'm trying as best as I can to not take it personally towards myself and then later, I can question to see, did I do something to trigger this person and being honest, as well because there were times early on in my career where I was the trigger. I push the wrong button and if I really was honest with myself, I probably did it knowingly because I was angry.

Mariem Farag:

So having those real conversations with myself and maybe with the colleagues in the room and holding myself accountable and saying, "I can do better. This is not about my feelings, this is about them, and how I can get them to do better as well, and how I can help them."

Susanna Miller:

Wonderful. It sounds like you also have very high expectations for yourself as well as your students.

Mariem Farag:

And that's something I have to keep in check as all educators. Yes.

Susanna Miller:

All right. Have you ever had a classroom where the students are kind of feeding off of each other's bad behaviors and what do you do to sort of break that cycle?



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Mariam Farag:

Yes, absolutely. I've had those. So identifying, first of all, when is it happening? That could also be a big part of the solution is, are we starting our day wonderfully? Then right after recess, that's when they start revving each other up. Is it in a certain subject area? So I'm really trying to be reflective of when is it happening and why is it happening? Is it that, right when these two students we start reading tasks, is it because now they know that they're not going to be the readers in the room and they're going to struggle and other students are going to notice? Is this a defense mechanism? Should I maybe not highlight that and move them to a smaller group, work with them only in a smaller group or maybe split them up when I'm working on a reading task, so I can put the student in Group A put the student in Group B?

Mariam Farag:

There's lots and lots of different strategies, but I think trying to find the triggers, and when is this happening and trying to find the pattern is very important. Teachers are creative. I think we find lots of different strategies that work for students. I've seen some teachers, they use positive reinforcement using like a token society because they found that these students really benefit when they're working towards a goal, so that could be something. Yeah.

Susanna Miller:

Wonderful. All right. What would you suggest for educators that don't have the same support that you do in the classroom, like with an EA or a special needs assistant and a lot of people are flaunting that desperately but just don't have the resources?

Mariam Farag:

Absolutely. I think it starts with first, seeing do we actually like need these supports? Have I done tier one strategies that work for the whole class and tier two strategies that work for some of the students? Then these are ... SNAs and EAs I think are considered like tier three, that would just benefit this one particular student or few members of the class. So have I introduced enough differentiation in the class? Have I used small groups to my benefit? Making sure that the class, as many strategies are already in play before seeing, "You know what, there are some extra needs with this student, especially if there's physical things going on that I need to be taking notes. I need to be taking logs, so that I can take it to my team and say, okay, you know what, we've done all of this, we need an extra body in the class for the safety of the students." I think that's important, to identify when I need these supports.

Mariam Farag:

If we don't have those supports, then I think just relying on good teaching good practice positive encouragement in the classes is also going to go a long way.

Susanna Miller:

Awesome. Have you ever had students where positive reinforcement actually triggers them, and what strategies do you use in place?

Mariam Farag:



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Yeah. Absolutely. Early on, the positive reinforcement strategy that I was using was not enticing to the students. Yes, if it's used punitively ... So I know some people have noticed that tokens, sometimes can be triggering because some teachers often use it as, "Okay, I'm going to give everybody a sticker for something, but I'm not going to give you." So is that positive reinforcement? So that would be a negative reinforcement. So we have to also question whether the strategy that we're using is actually bringing on the behavior that we want, right? I also found that for me, personally, when it was a group thing, taking away from that personal student's onus, that you're not getting this sticker because you didn't earn it, just ... where the class is going to work collaboratively together towards a goal, I found that was very effective. I had one year where our EA was an excellent chef.

Mariem Farag:

So the class was always trying to earn incentives to go and cook with our EA at the end of the month. So I think it just requires some creativity but yes, being mindful of whether the positive reinforcement is actually not doing what it's supposed to, it's doing the opposite, make sure that it's not turning into something negative and if it is, remove it. You don't need to be married to anything.

Susanna Miller:

Wonderful. Okay, I think we have time to squeeze in one last question. Now, I know we purposely planned this webinar for the start of the school year, so you could start off fresh, but that's not always the case. Sometimes you get jostled around mid year, sometimes you're covering for someone, people will be watching this recording at any time. What do you do ... Is it ever too late to put in place these strategies? What do you do if you walk in halfway through the year?

Mariem Farag:

Yeah, no, I think these strategies are good, even throughout the year, especially if you're going into a new assignment. You can still go and check out those OSRs, talk to people. I love when I go in, my technology ... technology has saved me many, many, many times in the class, especially, if I teach them something new, you gain so much respect quickly on the students who are struggling, really start to feel more confident because oftentimes, they are good at using technology. So that one really, I have to highlight that that has saved me many, many, many times when I'm going into a situation that I don't know very well just yet.

Susanna Miller:

Wonderful. Well, that is unfortunately all the time we have for today. If you do have any more questions for LD at School in general, for Mariem, please get in touch with us. You can email us at any time, [info@ldatschool.ca](mailto:info@ldatschool.ca). We're always available on Twitter and if you look up the hashtag #LDwebinar, you'll see lots of images from today and you'll be able to see when the recording is available as well. So on behalf of the LD at School team, I would once again really like to thank Mariem. It was a wonderful presentation. I'd like to thank everyone in the audience who took time out of their day to be here.

