Reinventing ADHD in Out-of-School Time

Devan Blackwell

Attention issues made it difficult for Matthew, a fifth grader, to sit down and focus for long periods of time. He was easily distracted and often got into trouble during the school day for being disruptive.

I nicknamed him Matty Go-Go when he was in my school classroom because he was always on the go. If you spent any time observing Matthew, you would likely find yourself exhausted. His internal motor kept him in a constant state of motion. His chair was often empty because he was busy making frequent trips to the pencil sharpener (because somehow the point just kept breaking), to the hook on the wall where his backpack hung (because something he desperately needed was in there amidst the clutter), and to my desk to share the rapid flow of thoughts, ideas, and questions that came into his mind (because he just *had* to). If you are an out-of-school time (OST) practitioner, I'm sure you know a kid, or possibly many kids, like Matty Go-Go.

Well, I was that kid.

Unlike Matthew, I was not diagnosed with attention-deficit / hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) until I was an adult. But as far back as my memories go, I always felt that there was something *different* about the way my brain worked. I felt driven by an internal motor that sometimes accelerated beyond my control. Though I did not receive a formal diagnosis until I was in my 40s, I could present a list of struggles that began in elementary school and persisted through my adult life and career. These struggles, I would learn, were connected to my brain's ADHD wiring.

ADHD is typically diagnosed among children in grade school. Children like Matthew who have ADHD typically present with restlessness and with difficulty

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in paying attention and controlling their impulses. Because I had been that kid, I knew why Matthew struggled during the school day. I also knew that children like him need an environment that is designed to accommodate all that go-go energy.

When I introduced an urban landscape photography project to students during afterschool time, I encouraged Matthew to participate. This project offered opportunities for physical movement through outdoor discovery walks. While working with him and other students who I suspected had similar wiring, I emphasized the importance of looking and observing as we travelled an urban landscape capturing photographs of all that we saw. "Don't move so fast that you miss something amazing," I would remind the student photographers.

Over time, I added mindfulness components to this learning experience. Through activities that encouraged participants to slow down and stop for breath work, I demonstrated how they could learn to manage their internal motors. In the end, Matty Go-Go slowed down enough to skillfully observe his surroundings. He mastered the art of photography, capturing still images that were good enough to become part of an installation at a local museum.

Outdoor photography and the freedom to meander provided a space that fit. Finding such a space was essential for Matthew.

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Journey into Technicolor

In those days, when I was a novice teacher, I found myself in a space that did not fit.

I taught fifth grade in an inner-city school. Even though I enjoyed working with the kids, I struggled every day to keep up with the ever-growing administrative demands of the classroom. Who knew there would be so many? Long after the school day ended—and often into the weekend—I was buried under piles of student IEPs, SGOs, and other mentally exhausting acronyms that were supposed to guide every single aspect of what I did in the classroom.

Adding to that struggle, the curricula I was trained to deliver felt like clothing I could never tailor to comfort. The English language arts curriculum, for example, came not only with required readings and writing assignments, but even with prescribed questions for class discussion. It all felt very scripted. How well I followed that script was part of the measure of how tenure-worthy I was, a supervisor told me.

Further, the intense focus on teaching to a state test left me full of angst. I felt pressured to see my students mostly as data points on the growth charts district overseers used to assess both them and me. That perspective was so one-dimensional, I thought, in comparison to the multidimensional students I was working with every day. They were more than data points to me. I thought there had to be other ways—more meaningful ways—to assess their strengths and aptitudes.

One afternoon, after we had finished reading *The Wizard of Oz* by L. Frank Baum, I introduced my fifth graders to the 1939 film version. I had seen this movie dozens of times, starting when I was around the age of my students. As an adult, I understood that the movie was an example of "the hero's journey," a concept popularized by Joseph Campbell. The hero's journey is the common template of a broad category of tales and lore that includes, for example, the *Star Wars* and *Harry Potter* series. A hero goes on an adventure and suffers setbacks. In a decisive crisis, the hero wins a victory and then returns home changed or transformed in some way.

I remember that, on this day in particular, *The Wizard of Oz* resonated with me in a deep, personal way. Though I was not stuck on a dusty farm in Kansas, I was living an existence similar to that of the story's protagonist. As a classroom teacher, I felt trapped in an uninspiring black-and-white setting, confined by dusty chalkboards and classroom walls. I longed to escape. At that time, one of my students was known as a "runner": She attempted to break free from the school a few times a week. One day I found myself wanting to run out of the building ahead of her and not come back. That's how badly I wanted out. I felt stifled, teaching from a script that I did not create, speaking words that were not my own. I was chronically disengaged, miserable, and on the verge of leaving the profession.

I turned to an artist friend and mentor named Shozo. He was Mr. Miyagi to my Karate Kid, Yoda the Jedi master to my Luke Skywalker. When I vented about how stuck and uninspired I felt, he told me to find a way to bring my authentic self to the work. Shozo encouraged me to create, to make art of the situation. *Easier said than done,* I thought.

Little did I know that signing up to be an instructor in the district's newly implemented OST program would be a transformative experience.

There had to have been a plan on paper for this district-wide afterschool initiative. But when I walked into the cafeteria on the first day, that plan, whatever it was, was not translating into engagement, as far as I could see. I saw only disengaged students and bored adults. There were baskets of books on the windowsills. There were science kits and art supplies stacked on the lunch tables. But there was no engagement.

That is when I saw opportunity for myself: the freedom to create, to experiment with ideas. I would use this space as a blank canvas. My hero's journey took me from black-and-white Kansas—the school classroom—to a place far beyond the imagination where everything changes. My Oz was the vast landscape of OST. There, I was able to create and teach in technicolor. Student engagement came to life. The most incredible projects came to life. I came to life!

Bringing my authentic self to the work allowed me to make art of it, as my friend Shozo had encouraged me to do. By making art of the OST programming, I created the afterschool enrichment that had been promised to participants. Being in a space that *fit* was as transformative for me as it was for Matty Go-Go. For the first time in my career as an educator, I saw myself from a positive perspective.

Finding Jamie Everywhere

Inflexible classroom structures and rigid environments can induce or exacerbate symptoms of ADHD as students struggle to sit still for long periods and to follow auditory-sequential instruction. The analogy of square pegs trying to fit into round holes comes to mind. Understanding myself as one of those square pegs, I know the importance of finding—or carving out—a space that fits.

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As a student, I had Matty Go-Go's hyperactive energy. I was also inattentive, with a mind that constantly wandered. Surely you've worked with a student whose mind seemed to travel here, there, and everywhere when you wanted it to pay attention to you and the lesson you put so much time and energy into planning?

That is, maybe you know a student like Jamie Everywhere?

This middle schooler was often overlooked among her peers because she did not stand out as a top scholar. Mostly, Jamie seemed to want to be invisible in class. She never raised her hand, and she rarely spoke. She was so anxious that she would tremble when called on to answer questions.

Jamie also was a daydreamer—something she and I had in common. Her trademark was a steady intent gaze that would fixate on the lights above her desk or the clouds moving through the sky outside the window. Whenever I noticed Jamie staring off during class, or *wandering* as her mother described it during a parent conference, I simply moved toward her desk and restated the instructions for everyone. My proximity would usually bring her back from her travels and get her on task.

I once observed an interaction between her and an increasingly frustrated instructional coach. "Jamie, where do you go?" the instructor scoffed.

Everywhere, I thought. *Jamie goes everywhere.* I knew. I remembered how I had struggled to follow auditory-sequential instruction as a student. Like Jamie, I had a mind that took me here, there, and everywhere. My wandering was a regular escape from my own classroom anxiety.

Many inattentive students long for some connection, a way to anchor their minds to activities that engage them in the here and now. Partly because I had been one of those students, I wanted to make a connection with Jamie. One day, I asked about her inner world. I discovered that she had a profound depth of emotion, something most teachers had not been able to unearth. I told Jamie that I had always been a daydreamer just like her. I shared that I had found ways to use daydreaming to enhance the fiction manuscripts and mixed-media art projects I created in my spare time.

Jamie had not considered herself to be a creative or artistic person. I encouraged her to channel the imagination and curiosity that fueled her daydream wanderings into some form of creative expression. Jamie decided to give writing a try. We made a deal. She could daydream in my class, but, whenever her mind wandered back to her desk, Jamie was to jot down some vivid description of where she had gone. These writings were intended to be just for her. Eventually, the shy student began to share some of her daydream travels with me. On the pages of Jamie's notebook, I saw her talent as a writer.

At the time, I was overseeing the afterschool production of a student-made film that told the stories of fictional teens who struggled with feelings of isolation because they believed that they did not have a voice. Knowing Jamie's emotional depth as a writer, I believed that connecting her with this project could be transformative. I was right. Jamie connected to the creative writing and even to the performative aspects of the project in ways that surprised everyone. No one was more surprised than Jamie herself.

Although she had steadily grown in confidence as a writer, Jamie's anxiety almost prevented her from sharing her voice by performing a monologue in the film. I had an idea. I told Jamie to take the words that she had written and create a character to give them to. The film's audience would see and hear not Jamie, but someone different: the character Jamie created. I told her many creative people used this tactic, especially those who were naturally introverted like her. This approach worked for Jamie. The character she created, described as an *emo daydreamer*, become the emotional center of the production.

With her *everywhere* mind focused on the artistic process, Jamie demonstrated a newfound confidence when operating in her "zone" as an artist. The OST space gave her the technicolor world she needed.

A Space of Possibilities

As an adult practitioner with ADHD, I experienced the OST environment as a space where I could thrive. I finally actualized possibilities for myself that felt like a lifeline to unlimited potential.

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I wanted to share that feeling with others, especially students like Matthew and Jamie who struggled as I had. I wanted to create a space for them to thrive and offer them "possibility projects" to keep them inspired. Introducing the idea of *possibility* to the youth I worked with felt imperative. These young people had been labeled "at risk," based on their socioeconomic status and other statistics, but I saw them as being "at potential." I would use OST—and particularly project-based learning—as a vehicle to introduce participants to possibilities for what they could be, do, and achieve in their lives.

Whether I was leading a visual and performing arts or STEM-based activity, facilitating a service-learning project or a civic engagement initiative, or guiding a lesson in career exploration, I understood that my most important role always was that of a constant enthusiast for the possibilities of the youth in my program.

I had always struggled with paperwork, as a student and as a teacher. However, I had a natural affinity for what I call *people work*. Becoming an OST practitioner gave me opportunities to demonstrate and cultivate those skills on a daily basis. I measured the success of my people work in the number of youth who were so engaged in our activities that they stayed late at school and even met up on weekends at the library to work on our projects. I also saw the results of this people work when the students I worked with grew in self-confidence and took creative and artistic risks. More evidence came when students spoke in terms of possibilities, including their aspirations to attend college, create inventions, or become entrepreneurs.

After being seen as a source of weakness in countless areas of my life, ADHD revealed itself to be a strength and distinguishing factor. In my OST work, my ADHD wiring showed up as boundless energy and enthusiasm. It also brought a sense of play to the learning environment. These attributes set me apart from teachers who taught with tightly structured lesson plans and followed routines to the letter.

My style of teaching connected with participants in a way that kept them engaged and invested during OST hours. All of us were thriving together in a less structured environment where we rarely sat down,

used outside voices indoors when excitedly brainstorming ideas for our projects, listened to music while we worked, and felt safe and supported enough to be expressive and performative when demonstrating the outcomes of our learning.

This is how I wanted learning to look and feel everywhere. Although I could not create such a space during the school day, afterschool programming was where I could experience and facilitate learning the way I felt it ought to be. Both I and the students I worked with needed to experience learning this way.

Abdal the Impossible / the Influencer

While students like Matty Go-Go and Jamie Everywhere can frustrate teachers with their disruptive behavior and inattentiveness, some students with ADHD can create more serious disciplinary problems. Often these challenging students are the ones who require the most empathy.

Perhaps you've encountered a student like Abdal the Impossible?

Abdal, a high school student, came with labels like "oppositional," "defiant," and "combative" and with a paper trail of documented incidents in his file. Abdal had issues with most adult authority figures. His name was well known in the school—and not because of his good behavior or outstanding achievements.

When a teacher at the high school suggested that I include Adbal in a service-learning initiative I was starting, another pulled me aside later to say that it wasn't a good idea. "You don't want anything to do with him," the teacher told me. "He's not worth the trouble."

I took a chance on Abdal. At the outset, I found that he lived up to his reputation. He challenged me in lots of ways. But mostly, I felt challenged to find a way to reach him.

Over time, I would learn that Abdal had built a wall around himself as a survival tool. It took a lot of effort for me to reach him. But I didn't give up. When Adbal finally felt safe enough to lower that wall for me, I discovered that his outward behavior masked concerns and fears about what was happening in his

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neighborhood, including gang-related violence and pressure to participate in illegal activities. Students like Abdal can struggle to pay attention to schoolwork because of the toxic stress with which they live every day.

While working on that initial service project, Abdal and I had many discussions. Mostly, we talked about ways that he could have an impact in his community, feel significant without gang affiliation, and rewrite the narrative created by his past behavior. These conversations had such an impact on me that I was inspired to establish strategic partnerships with community organizations in order to design meaningful service learning projects for the youth with whom I worked. Our projects included collecting canned goods to address food insecurity in the community, taking to the streets to raise awareness and collect coins in support of a homeless youth shelter in the city, and creating the content for a public service announcement that promoted alternatives to violence.

Through his participation in structured OST service learning initiatives, Abdal cultivated his dominant personality traits into leadership skills. He was always an influencer among his peers, but he was known for the negative aspects of that influence. However, as he grew into a more positive leadership role, Abdal the Impossible became Abdal the Influencer. Teachers soon noticed the change. Abdal's mother told me that she had started to receive compliments, for the first time, about the young man her son was showing himself to be.

One example of the change was Abdal's participation in a literacy initiative in which older students read to kindergarteners. The towering young man with whom few teachers had wanted to work was reading a picture book to a five-year-old. Later, he tied that child's shoe and protectively took him by the hand to walk him to the dismissal area.

Other boys who joined the OST service projects also came, like Abdal, with warnings. Despite those warnings, I welcomed these young men, connected them with other youth development professionals for additional mentoring and support, and watched with great pride as they worked to make a positive impact

on the world around them. Lives can be turned around by meaningful connections created during purposeful service-oriented learning experiences. These OST experiences were a lifeline for Abdal and young people like him. The young people on the roster with whom teachers want to work the least are often the ones who need us the most.

Reinventing ADHD

For young people who exhibit ADHD traits, OST programming can provide the atmosphere and learning experiences that, by design, sustain attention, engagement, and focus.

After guiding multiple possibility projects over the years with students like Matty Go-Go, Jamie Everywhere, and Abdal the Influencer, I reinvented the meaning of ADHD, changing it from a deficit label to an instructional technique. Rather than attention-deficit / hyperactivity disorder, this use of ADHD means *attention-driven / hyperfocus-designed.* This construction of ADHD is the approach I applied to the planning and delivery of possibility projects that engaged participants across all learning levels and abilities.

Some of the most successful attention-driven, hyperfocus-designed projects I led were either inquiry-based or project-based. To design projects that appeal to young people with ADHD (the diagnosis, not the instructional technique), you don't need to recreate my urban landscape photography project or exact service-learning initiatives. However, there are critical elements you should apply to design of your own attention-driven hyperfocus-designed activities:

- Opportunities for movement and spatial exploration
- Outlets for artistic expression and creativity
- A strong adult-youth mentoring component
- Meaningful real-life connections through purposeful learning experiences
- Opportunities for youth voice

With this focus, you can find out and then deliver what your students need most. Matty Go-Go needed

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activities that offered movement and exploration. Jamie Everywhere needed artistic expression and creativity. Abdal the Influencer and his compatriots needed mentoring, meaningful real-life connections, and purposeful learning experiences that enabled them to be of service.

Students with ADHD often are enormously talented and incredibly gifted. They are full of creativity, curiosity, and spontaneity. ADHD-wired brains offer a "special something" that can enhance any setting. Anchor yourself to the belief that you will be the educator who guides ADHD-wired program participants to discover that "special something" in themselves. In doing so, you will create opportunities for them to actualize their potential. This work will be challenging and at times frustrating. But the future of a young person's self-image and life trajectory may depend on it.