

Identifying and catering for 2e students



Twice Exceptional (2e) children are often an enigma to teachers and sometimes even their own parents. They can see the great potential but puzzle over why it is not reflected in academic achievement. SPELD NZ Assessor Chris Herbert looks at how to diagnose and cater to gifted students who also struggle with learning difficulties.

Formal identification of 2e

Identifying 2e students isn't always easy as their uneven development and weaknesses depress their IQ scores. These are the students who have a 'spiky profile' on comprehensive standardised testing, the high points representing their areas of strength and the low points revealing areas of difficulty. Without an awareness of 2e, when assessed, these students are often not identified for either giftedness or learning disabilities.

Identifying students for gifted programmes and identifying students for remedial programmes tends to be mutually exclusive or separate activities. This means the assessment tools may not be appropriate and the educators making the selection decisions may not be well informed about 2e or have the necessarily skills to identify it. As a result, 2e students can be overlooked for both extension and remedial assistance. These students are also sometimes excluded from extension classes on the basis of behaviours (which are symptomatic of their challenges), or because of untidy or incomplete work (due to their difficulties).

The Woodcock Johnson Test Battery, as administered in SPELD NZ assessments, is a superb and comprehensive assessment tool for identifying 2e students. Not only is it suitable for specific diagnosis of learning difficulties such as dyslexia, but it also has very high test ceilings, allowing gifted students to achieve to their potential without being capped at ceiling limits, so their areas of giftedness/strength can also be clearly identified.

One of the characteristics of twice-exceptionality is inconsistency in performance. Because 2e students are inconsistent performers with uneven skills and asynchronous development, it's critical to look carefully at all of their test scores on IQ tests. Their overall test score is not as insightful as exploring the pattern and range of their test scores. While there is no single defining pattern of characteristics or test scores, these students will demonstrate evidence of:

- a discrepancy between expected and actual achievement
- an outstanding ability or talent
- a co-existing deficit.

Formal testing can identify a 2e student's need for extra help, such as assistive technology and/or voice-recognition programmes for writing, and computer programmes to assist reading. However, the student must be helped to develop the skills to use these tools effectively.

Formal testing prior to NCEA examinations can support applications for Special Examination Conditions for 2e students, such as reader/writers and extra time.

How we can cater for 2e students

Acknowledging the intellect of 2e students is vital, as is adopting a strength-based approach. Their learning must be rich in context; they need to be able to see a purpose in learning tasks, and their areas of often intense interest can be used to motivate them when working on areas of weakness/remediation. Strength-based interventions are often more successful because they engage the student's interests and abilities, enhancing motivation and increasing their tolerance for frustration. The challenge level must be high enough so they extend themselves, but not so high that they will fail. While using a strength-based approach, their areas of weakness also need to be supported.

They need to be encouraged to take pride in their strengths and helped to understand why they find some learning tasks more challenging than others.

Their learning needs to be individualised (an IEP set-up) to cater for their intellectual strengths while also providing support and compensatory methods to work around their disability/difficulties. The IEP should be tailored to the student and their unique pattern of strengths and weakness.

When catering for these students in the classroom, teachers need to:

- Nurture the student's strengths and interests
- Foster their social/emotional development
- Enhance their capacity to cope with mixed abilities
- Identify learning gaps and provide explicit remediation
- Support the development of compensatory strategies.

2e students often need help to hone their organisational, time-management, and study skills especially when working on larger tasks such as projects. Helping them to develop mind-mapping skills and to break larger tasks into prioritised chunks can make them to feel less overwhelmed.

Processing speed is often an area of weakness as the 2e student struggles to apply themselves to their potential, especially within strict time constraints. It can be helpful to remove the time constraint or begin the testing at a level that suits their ability so they don't waste time on questions that are too easy and don't fully stimulate their intellect.

Most importantly, anyone who works with these students needs to develop an understanding of 2e and to help the student understand better their own pattern of strengths and weaknesses.

These students have unique needs. If well catered for, they can achieve to their potential at school, feel good about themselves and become adults who lead fulfilling lives where they can tap into their strengths, benefitting both themselves and society as a whole.