Gifted and Overlooked:

The Hidden Challenges of Neurodivergent High-Ability Students

May 2026

XR Health

An Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we gather today.

We also pay our respects to the Elders both past and present and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples here today.

Today’s Speakers

Preeti Ronil

Clinical Director

XRHealth

Julie Kohl

Psychologist

XRHealth

Think of a student who…

- Blurts out answers, articulate, and challenges fairness
- Seems capable but underperforms
- Quiet, withdrawn, average performer
- Is bright but disengaged
- Is anxious, rigid, or ‘difficult’
- Very bright, but struggles to start the task

… That student may be twice-exceptional (2e).

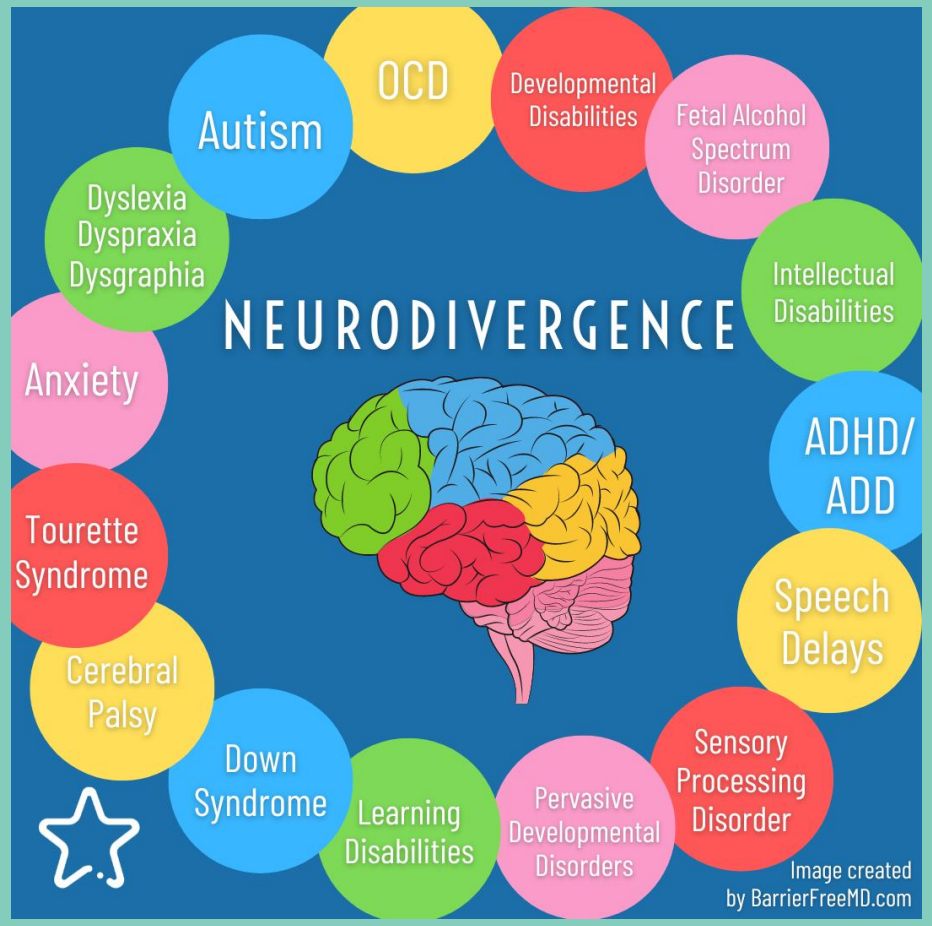
Agenda

01 Understanding Twice-Exceptionality (2e)
02 Why These Students Are Overlooked
03 The Student Experience – a parents perspective
04 What Actually Helps
05 Collaboration is Key
06 Future opportunity in technology

01:
Understanding Twice-Exceptionality (2e)

Giftedness + neurodivergence coexist:

- Neurodiversity as important as biodiversity
  “Who can say what form of wiring will prove best at any given moment?”- (Blume, H., 1998)
- Neurodivergence, differences in the wiring of the brain- (ADHD, Autism, SLD and more...)
- ADHD 1 in 20 children, ASD 1 in 32 young people under 25 in Australia (ABS, 2024)
- Challenges hide strengths- Often falls between systems



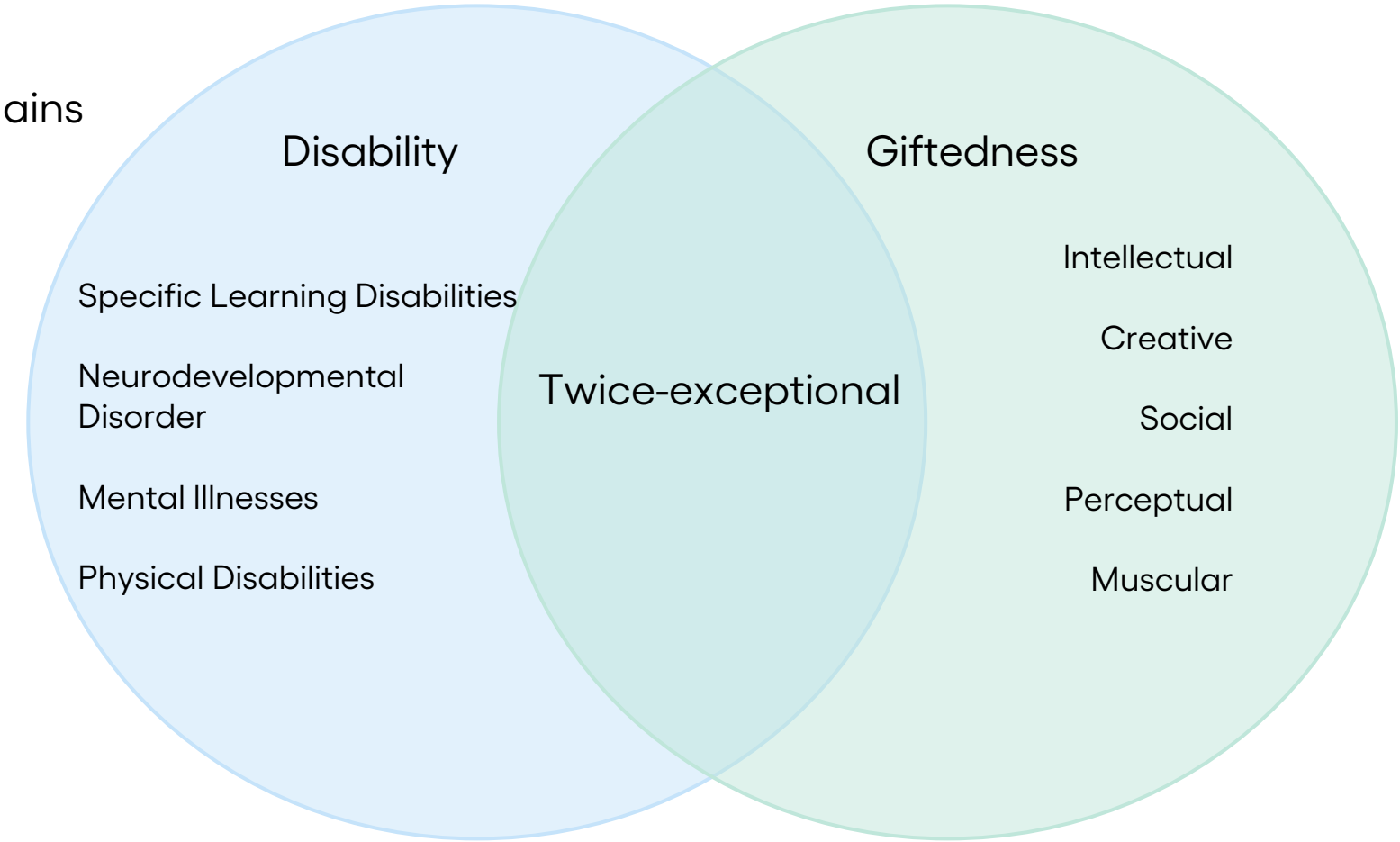
What is twice exceptionality?

2E = Giftedness + disability / neurodivergence

- A learner may show:

- Exceptional ability in one or more domains AND
- Coexisting disability or support needs
- Examples:
  ADHD | Autism | Dyslexia | Dysgraphia | Anxiety | Trauma | Sensory / physical differences

- **2E is not a DSM5 Diagnosis**
- **No standard Australian identification pathway**



Understanding Twice-Exceptionality (2e)

Asynchronous development:

- Advanced cognition - reason like an adult
- Delayed emotional/social skills- regulate emotions like a much younger child
- Adaptive functioning challenges - speak brilliantly but struggle with daily functioning
- Executive functioning challenges , particularly for ADHD (working memory, self-control, focus, planning, prioritising information, emotional regulation).

02:
Why These Students Are Overlooked

Why These Students Are Overlooked

Average performance masks high ability

Behaviour misinterpretation

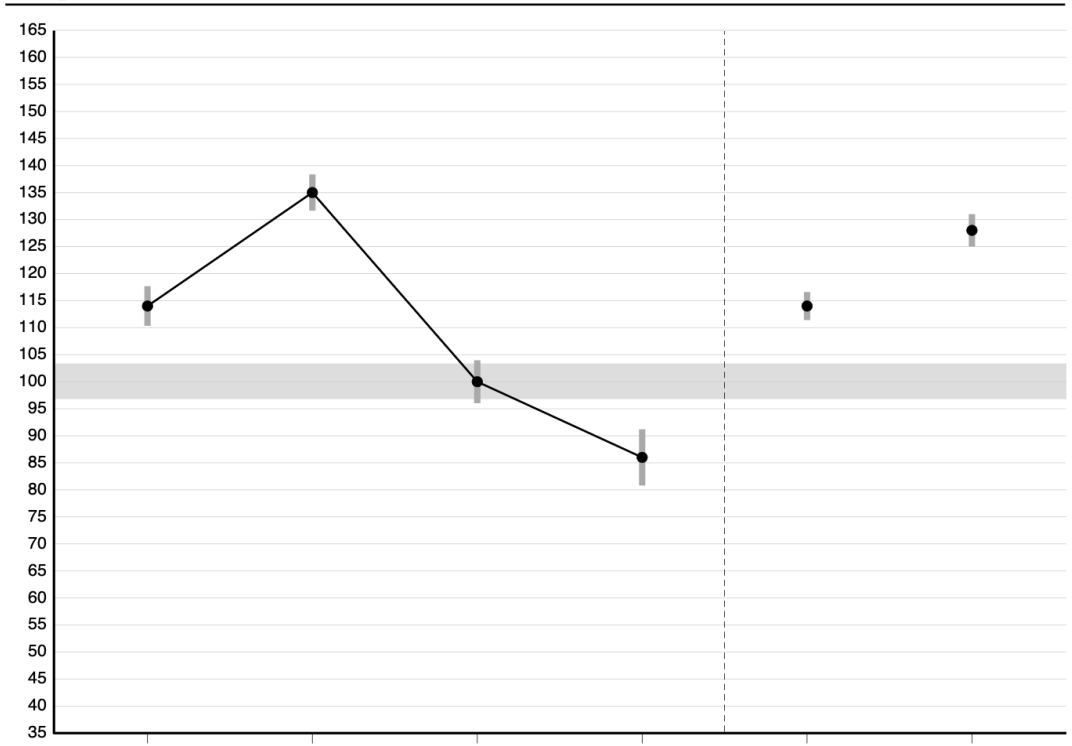
Compensation hides struggle

Lack of challenge or support + System barriers & bias

Average Performance = ‘Fine’?

- Average achievement **does not** equal average ability.
- Masking Effect- Giftedness hides disability / Disability hides giftedness
- Student masking identity to fit in socially
- High standards- fear of failure/ perfectionism = avoidance
- Uneven cognitive profiles are common
- Standardised testing can miss 2E (academic achievement tests/IQ tests NAPLAN, WISC/WAIS, WIAT)
- Average-above average visual-spatial/verbal comprehension. Below average working memory/processing speed

Composite Score Profile



Composite	VCI	PRI	WMI	PSI	FSIQ	GAI
Score	114	135	100	86	114	128
SEM	3.67	3.35	3.97	5.2	2.6	3.0

Note. The vertical bars represent the standard error of measurement (*SEM*). *SEM* values are based on the examinee's age.

Behaviour Misinterpretation

Instead of seeing:
- Defiance
- Disengagement
- Laziness
- Overreaction

Consider:
- Cognitive overload
- Under-stimulation
- Anxiety
- Sensory overwhelm
- Emotional distress
- Strong sense of justice/fairness

Compensation Strategies

- Using strong verbal reasoning or memory to mask learning difficulties or executive functioning challenges.
- Copying (social scripting) or relying on peers to navigate social or academic expectations.
- Working excessively hard – to exhaustion to compensate/overcompensate- no more energy left for brilliance.
- Sometimes what looks like competence is compensatory.

Lack of Challenge or Support

When the Environment Misses the Child

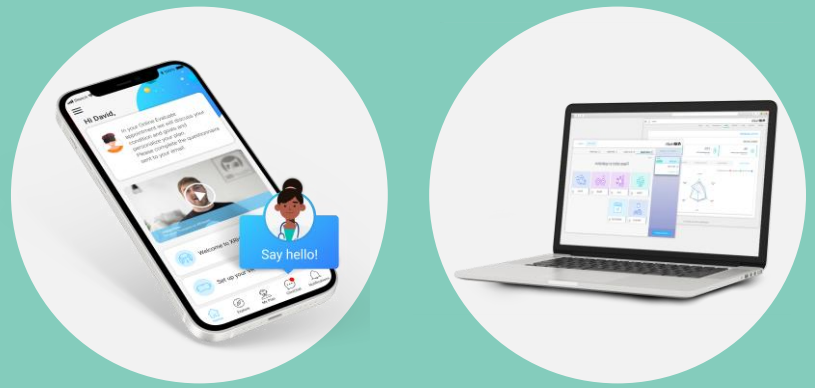
- Simplistic curriculum
- Under-stimulation
- Deficit-only support – e.g., focusing on speech delay/mutism over nonverbal abilities
- Emotional/cognitive needs missed
- Existential depth ignored/pathologised
- Bullying/belonging challenges
- Limited resources for teachers – large class numbers, limited funding, limited by teaching curriculum.
- Excessive psych assessment costs

03:
The Student Experience

What does this actually feel like?
Cognitive
Behavioural
Social
Emotional

Parent Perspective

A parent's lived experience- Preeti Ronil

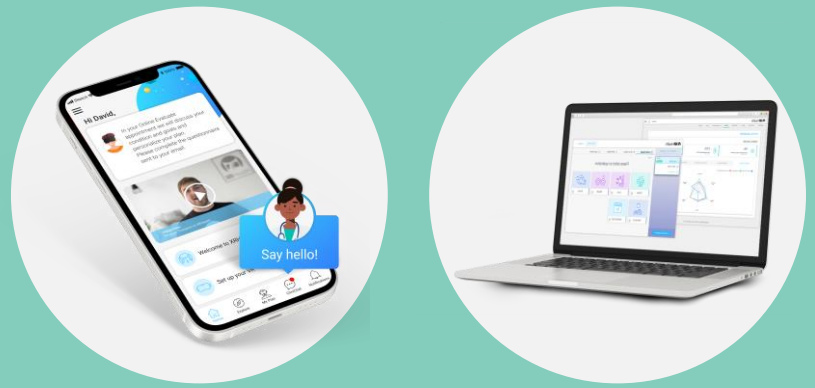


The Student Experience

Cognitive/Social + Emotional impacts, Behaviour as communication

- Chronic boredom and under-stimulation
- Executive functioning challenges (Organisation, Task initiation and completion, Sustained attention)
- Task initiation paralysis
- Inconsistent output leads to low self-esteem, lack of motivation
- Perfectionism = anxiety, negative self-beliefs
- Negative association to school/students leads to school refusal
- Identity confusion ('too much' or 'not enough’)
- Bullying/social isolation leads to depression, suicidal ideation- poor mental health becomes sole focus

04:
What Actually Helps



What Actually Helps

Duel Lens Support: challenge AND support instead of EITHER/Or thinking

- Support the barriers AND
- Develop the strengths to **increase confidence & self-esteem** to ^ learning outcomes
- Flexible learning pathways
- Access to talent and development inside and outside of school environment
- Many existing programs are for already high-achieving students-

  Change entry criteria?

What Actually Helps

Practical Classroom Supports

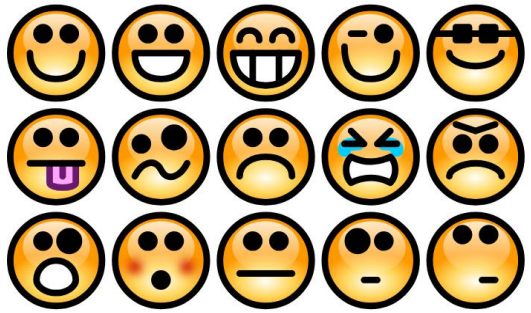
- Structured, predictable, visual, scaffolded learning
- Reduce cognitive load- visual timers, music sounds for transition warning
- Executive functioning supports- don't assume natural development- needs to be taught
- Offer flexible ways to demonstrate learning e.g., verbally, visually, through technology
- Sensory-informed supports and classroom (e.g., weighted stuffed toy, recharge time, noise-cancelling headphones)

What Actually Helps

Emotional, Social & Relational Support

- Emotional regulation support to manage chronic nervous system stress
- Social belonging & psychological safety e.g., buddy systems
- Bullying prevention/intervention
- Safe adults and connection e.g., provide tools rather than reprimand
- Growth mindset- praise the journey + support seeking efforts over outcome
- Curiosity about the child's inner world- "what are they feeling? What story are they telling themselves?"

- Classroom Tools
  - Zones of Regulation posters
  - Emoji and Coping Tool Kit poster
  - Calm Box
  - Fidget Box
  - Break Cards



05:
Collaboration is Key

Collaboration is Key

- Shared understanding
- Strengths-based lens
- Curiosity over compliance
- Focus on belonging and wellbeing

Collaboration is Key

Shared understanding:

- Parent, Teachers, Allied Health, Student Voice, Department of Education-

  work together to see the whole picture.

Strength Based Lens: Look beyond achievement and see the whole child
Look for:

- unusual questioning
- abstract thinking
- moral sensitivity (strong sense of justice/fairness)
- divergent problem-solving
- rapid pattern recognition
- Passion/ Dabrowski's 'Overexcitabilities' – (i.e. an intensified way of experiencing the world) can occur in five areas: psychomotor, sensual, imaginational, intellectual, and emotional- (Ackerman, C.M., 1995).

Collaboration is Key

Curiosity over compliance:

Instead of:

"How do we make them comply?"

Ask:

- "What is the behaviour communicating?"
- "What's happening underneath?"
- Connection before correction (Dan Siegal- ‘The Whole Brain Child’)

Collaboration is Key

Focus on belonging and wellbeing:

- Safety
- Connection
- Emotional well-being
- School policies and programs to prevent bullying and foster acceptance of diversity

Future of technology

Emerging supports for 2E learners

AI powered personalised learning:

- Khanmigo
- DreamBox
- Microsoft Reading Coach

Assistive AI & accessibility tools :

- Read&Write
- Speechify

Executive functioning support apps

- Goblin Tools
- Todolist
- Visual scheduling / planning tools

Virtual Reality (VR):

- emotional regulation
- social skills development
- strengths exploration
- immersive learning + communication

Technology should support—not replace—human understanding

Final Reflection

Think of one of your students.....

Could there be more beneath the surface?

References

Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). (2024, October 11). *Autism in Australia, 2022: Key findings in plain language*. https://www.abs.gov.au/articles/autism-australia-2022/autism-australia-2022-key-findings-plain-language

Australasian ADHD Professionals Association. (2022). *Australian evidence-based clinical practice guideline for ADHD*. https://adhdguideline.aadpa.com.au

Assouline, S. G., Foley-Nicpon, M., & Huber, D. H. (2006). The Impact of vulnerabilities and strengths on the academic experiences of twice-exceptional students: A Message to school counselors. *Professional School Counseling, 10(1)*, 14-24. https://.doi.org/10.5330/prsc.10.1.y0677616t5j15511

Blume, H., Neurodiversity On the neurological underpinnings of geekdom, The Atlantic, 1998 Issue, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1998/09/neurodiversity/305909/.\

Casad, B.J., Luebering, J. (2026, March 30). confirmation bias. Encyclopedia Britannica. https://www.britannica.com/science/confirmation-bias

Ackerman, C. M. (1997). Identifying gifted adolescents using personality characteristics: Dabrowski's overexcitabilities. *Roeper Review*, *19*(4), 229-236.

Delahooke, M. (2022). *Brain-body parenting: How to stop managing behaviour and start raising joyful, resilient kids*. Harper Wave

Ronksley-Pavia, M. (2015). A model of twice-exceptionality: Explaining and defining the apparent paradoxical combination of disability and giftedness in childhood. *Journal for the Education of the Gifted, 38*(3), 318–340. https://.doi.org/10.1177/0162353215592499

Ronksley-Pavia, M. (2023). The Fallacy of Using the National Assessment Program–Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) Data to Identify Australian High-Potential Gifted Students. *Education Sciences*, *13*(4), 421. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci13040421

Silverman, C. (2020). Neurodiversity: What it is and what it isn't. Scientific American. Retrieved from https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/neurodiversity-what-it-is-and-what-it-isnt/

References

Other helpful/interesting sites and resources:

- https://sethperler.com/child-2e-twice-exceptional-ultimate-guide/
- https://www.davidsongifted.org/gifted-blog/a-strengths-based-approach-for-children-who-are-twice-exceptional/
- https://www.aaegt.net.au/making-twice-exceptional-students-visible-in-policy-and-practice
- Book- 'The Power of Different' The link between disorder and genius, Saltz, G, 2017
- Dąbrowski, Kazimierz (1996). *Multilevelness of emotional and instinctive functions. Part 1: Theory and description of levels of behavior*. Towarzystwo Naukowe Katolickiego Uniwersytetu Lubelskiego. p. 7.