

GETTING STUDENTS WRITING

HOW TO SUPPORT TWICE EXCEPTIONAL STUDENTS AND OTHER RELUCTANT WRITERS

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Slides: tinyurl.com/2ereluctantwriters2025

Agenda

- ◆ Twice exceptional & neurodiversity
- ◆ Strengths & spiky profiles
- ◆ Do they have to write?
- ◆ Root cause informs supports
- ◆ 5 + 1 causes of writing challenges
 - ◆ Root cause
 - ◆ Clues
 - ◆ Interventions
 - ◆ Accommodations
 - ◆ Supports & strategies
- ◆ BONUS: Crash Course in 2e for Educators & Parents



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Who are twice-exceptional (2e) students?

Highly capable AND a disability, learning difference, mental health issue, or other challenge

“...a unique population of students who may fail to demonstrate either high academic performance or specific disabilities. Their gifts may mask their disabilities and their disabilities may mask their gifts.”

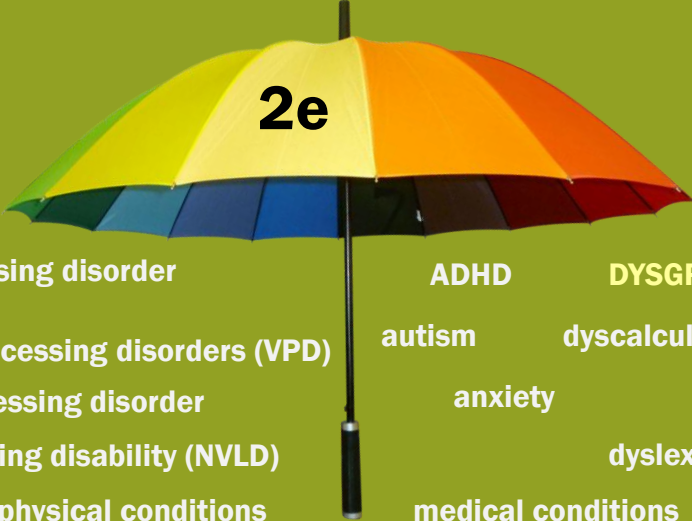
(Reis et al., 2014, p. 222)

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Neurodiversity, another lens on 2e

- ◆ Neurodiversity is not just about autism
- ◆ Every brain is unique, like a fingerprint (Valizadeh et al., 2018)
- ◆ 2e students' brains are neurodiverse
- ◆ Patterns of strengths and challenges
- ◆ Respect individual differences

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2e

auditory processing disorder (APD/CAPD)	ADHD	DYSGRAPHIA
vision processing disorders (VPD)	autism	dyscalculia
sensory processing disorder	anxiety	depression
nonverbal learning disability (NVLD)		dyslexia
physical conditions	medical conditions	

Writing is challenging for MANY 2e students

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Writing is hard for many students, not just 2e

- ◆ Reluctant writers are the canary in the coal mine
- ◆ Some kids will **NEED** supports, but other students with hidden needs will benefit from supports too
- ◆ Writing is a complex, multi-layered skill



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First, do they have to write?

“Don’t turn everything into a secret language arts lesson.”

– Dr. Susan Baum
Bridges Academy
The 2e Center

What is the learning objective?

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Demonstrating mastery via strengths

- ◆ Draw a diagram
- ◆ Make a poster
- ◆ Create a slide presentation
- ◆ Draw a comic strip
- ◆ Record a podcast
- ◆ Make a video
- ◆ Build a model
- ◆ Give choices...

There are **LOTS** of ways to demonstrate mastery of a common core objective...

Flexible assignments

Encourage creativity

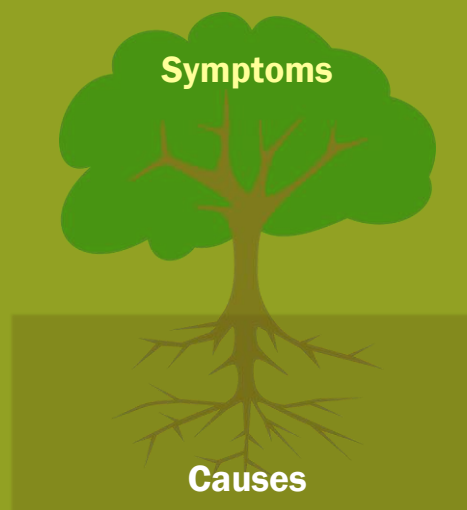
Build on student strengths

The point is communication of ideas

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Look for the Root Cause

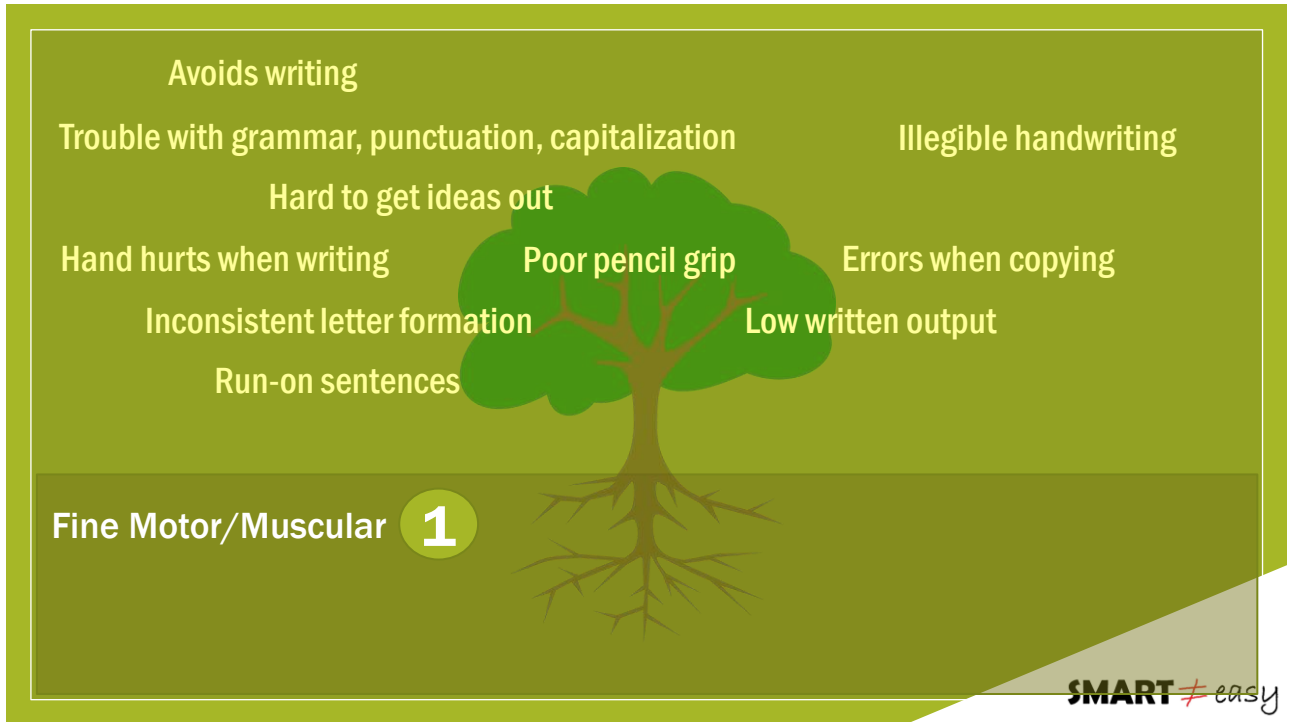
- ◆ Several possible causes of writing challenges
- ◆ Supports and strategies are **DIFFERENT** depending on the cause
- ◆ Applying an ineffective support causes frustration
 - ◆ OT only helps with **ONE** of the 5 main causes of writing trouble



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1 Fine Motor/Muscular – Root Cause

- ◆ Small muscles
- ◆ Big muscles
- ◆ Core/trunk muscles
- ◆ Stamina
- ◆ Coordination

Clues

“My hand hurts”

Unusual pencil grip

Posture/wriggling

ALSO trouble with drawing and crafts

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1 Fine Motor/Muscular – How to Help

- ◆ Occupational therapy
- ◆ Tiny crayons/chalk
- ◆ Playdoh/clay
- ◆ Pencil grip devices
- ◆ Perler beads

After middle elementary,
switch to keyboarding or
dictation



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Avoids writing Poor spelling Slow (but very neat) handwriting
 Trouble with grammar, punctuation, capitalization Illegible handwriting

Hand hurts when writing Poor pencil grip Errors when copying
 Inconsistent letter formation Low written output
 “Drawing” letters one stroke at a time

Automaticity **2**

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2 Automaticity – Root Cause

- ◆ Brain-based automaticity of letter formation
- ◆ “Muscle memory” for letters and numbers
- ◆ Should be automatic by 2nd or 3rd grade

Clues

Unusual letter strokes

Letters on the same page look different

Messy handwriting

OR Very neat (but very slow)

“Drawing” each letter

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2 Automaticity – How to Help

- ◆ Lazy 8 Exercise [Video](#)

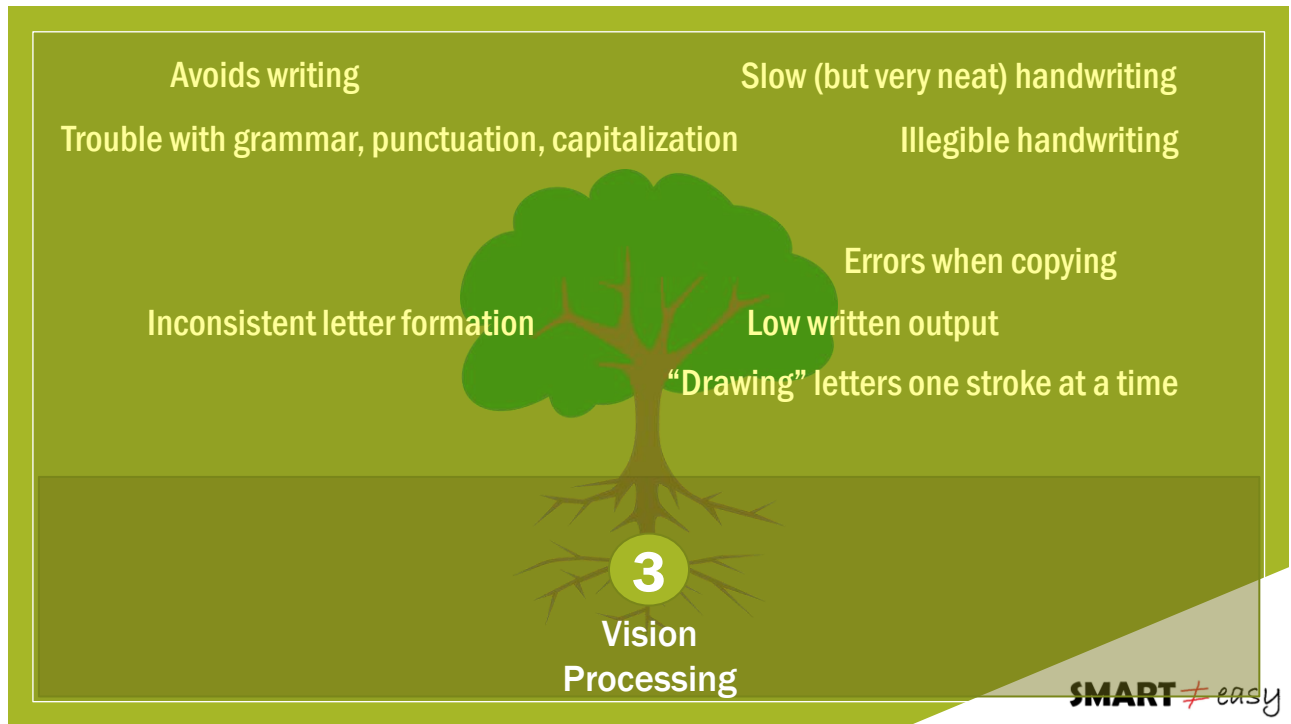


- ◆ Arrowsmith Program “Word & Tracing”

Need a LOT of repetition

After middle elementary, switch to keyboarding or dictation

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3 Vision Processing Disorders – Root Cause

- ◆ Brain-based
- ◆ Eyes working together
- ◆ Focusing and refocusing
- ◆ Trouble with 3D perception
- ◆ Intermittent blurriness
- ◆ Letters/words can move/flip/double
 - ◆ b, d, p, q

Clues

- Mistakes when copying
- Capital letters in wrong place
- Missing punctuation
- Silly mistakes in math (+ – x)
- Inconsistent scores on tests
- Resists smaller fonts
- Clumsy/sports

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3 Vision Processing Disorders – How to Help

- ◆ Vision Therapy, www.covd.org (look for FCOVD)
- ◆ Large fonts
 - ◆ eReaders
 - ◆ Photocopy onto 11x17
- ◆ Preferential seating
- ◆ Slant board
- ◆ Reading guide strips
- ◆ Math: $\frac{1}{2}$ " graph paper, turn notebook sideways



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Avoids writing Poor spelling Slow (but very neat) handwriting
 Trouble with grammar, punctuation, capitalization Illegible handwriting
 Hard to get ideas out
 Errors when copying
 Low written output
 Run-on sentences



4 (Stealth) Dyslexia

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4 Stealth Dyslexia – Root Cause

- ◆ Phonological awareness
- ◆ Reads everything as a sight word
- ◆ Word -> sounds -> spelling
- ◆ Orthographic rules don't stick
- ◆ Despite this, excellent comprehension with elementary texts

Clues

SPELLING

Rhyming/Wordplay

Can't sound out words

Skips or substitutes words

Inconsistent scores on standardized tests

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SPELLING

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How to screen?

www.thepasttest.com

Oral manipulation of sounds

Reading nonsense words

Trouble rhyming "harder" words

(School screenings may not catch it)

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4 Stealth Dyslexia– How to Help

- ◆ Structured literacy in schools
 - ◆ Phonics & phonological awareness
 - ◆ Wilson, Heggerty, Sonday, 95 Group, etc.
- ◆ Dyslexia tutoring
 - ◆ Orton-Gillingham, Barton, All about Reading/Spelling
 - ◆ Wired for Reading
 - ◆ Lindamood-Bell
- ◆ Online reinforcement
 - ◆ treasurehunt.prenda.co, nesy.com
- ◆ Audiobooks - LearningAlly, Bookshare, Speechify
- ◆ Typing with spellcheck, or dictation

Tutor Referral Lists

wabida.org
 or.dyslexiaida.org
 socal.dyslexiaida.org
 norcal.dyslexiaida.org

Don't Wait

Intervention in 1st or 2nd grade is twice as effective as intervention in 3rd grade (Lovett et al., 2017)

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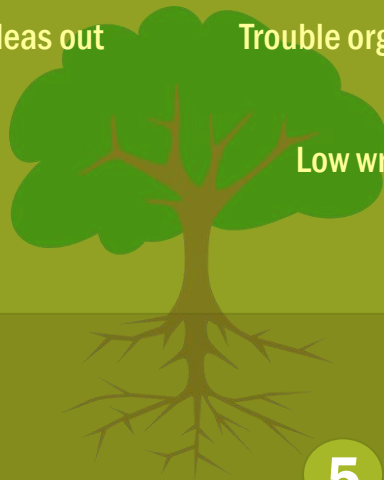
Avoids writing

Trouble with grammar, punctuation, capitalization

Hard to get ideas out

Trouble organizing ideas

Low written output



5 ADHD/Executive Function

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5 ADHD/Exec. Function – Root Cause

- ◆ Not a lack of attention, but trouble regulating attention
- ◆ Can focus when INCUP:
 - ◆ Interesting
 - ◆ Novel
 - ◆ Challenging
 - ◆ Urgent/Pressure
 (Dodson, 2018)
- ◆ NOT: rote, boring, easy, even if very important

Clues

Trouble getting started

Trouble staying on task

Time management

Breaking down big projects

Can produce when interested in the topic

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5 ADHD/Exec. Function – How to Help

INCUP: Interesting – Novel – Challenging – Urgent – Pressure

- ◆ Align with interests
- ◆ Give choice in topics, formats
- ◆ Something unusual to spark excitement
- ◆ Authentic projects for real audiences
- ◆ Make it more complex or more challenging
- ◆ Create time pressure (sometimes)
 - ◆ “Extra time” accommodation for ADHD?
- ◆ Social pressure & teacher relationships matter

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This is a tough transition



Lots of interconnected ideas in brain



First, ●. Then ●, ●, and ●.
●. ●. ● because ●.

Linear writing, one word at a time

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How to Help

1. Get ideas out of brain in a messy way
2. THEN organize where you can see it

How?

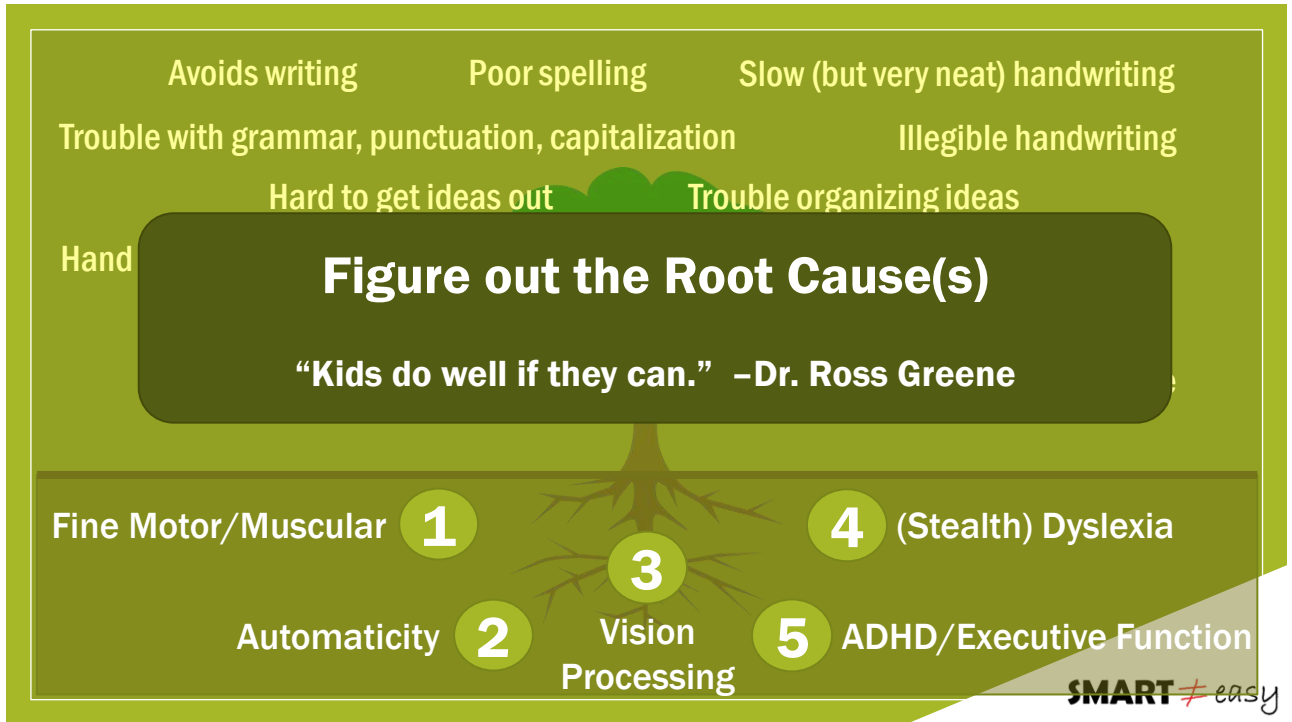
- ◆ Sticky notes
- ◆ Mind map
- ◆ Drawing
- ◆ Dictation to a computer
- ◆ Human scribe
- ◆ Walk & talk

Topic/paragraph
graphic organizers
WON'T HELP

Why? They impose
order too soon

Help each student find what works for them

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Anxiety

- ◆ Prior writing experiences that didn't go well
 - ◆ Unclear expectations, not enough guidance
 - ◆ Correcting every mistake
 - ◆ "I'm not good at this."
- ◆ Fear of criticism
- ◆ Time pressure

First, need to undo prior writing trauma...

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Perfectionism

- ◆ What is perfectionism, actually?
 - ◆ Erase a hole in the paper
 - ◆ Hate criticism
 - ◆ Dwell on mistakes
 - ◆ Reach for impossible goals
 - ◆ Want the first draft to be the final draft
 - ◆ Hard to start
 - ◆ Afraid to risk failure

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Writing is being vulnerable

- ◆What if I make a mistake? (spelling, grammar, etc.)
- ◆What if people don't like my ideas?
- ◆What if people disagree with my viewpoint?
- ◆What if I forget to say something important?
- ◆What if they laugh at me?

- ◆Writing is a window into the soul
- ◆Writing can be a very emotional experience

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TAKE OFF THE PRESSURE

- ◆Stop criticizing
- ◆Don't try to make it perfect
- ◆Focus on the IDEAS, not the mechanics
 - ◆Don't correct spelling, grammar, unless it's REALLY important
 - ◆Let kids have kid ideas (not adult ideas)
- ◆Strengths focus! Praise the progress, not the outcome
 - ◆Celebrate small successes
- ◆Small successes -> bigger successes -> self-confidence

- ◆Developing confidence in writing >> Perfecting mechanics

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Strategies That Can Help - Generating

- ◆ Don't push writing until ~5th grade
- ◆ Start with inspiration
 - ◆ Pick a high-interest topic
 - ◆ Do an authentic project for a real audience
 - ◆ e.g. Write a persuasive letter and send it
- ◆ Offer sentence starters
- ◆ Get them talking
- ◆ The first draft will not be perfect
 - ◆ "It's faster to write a quick draft and edit"
- ◆ When in doubt, provide more SUPPORT
 - ◆ Not pressure

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Strategies That Can Help - Editing

- ◆ Have student read it out loud
 - ◆ Or have the computer read it
- ◆ Learn how to use tools
 - ◆ Spellcheck, grammar check, thesaurus, e.g. Grammarly
 - ◆ Text-to-speech, speech-to-text/dictation
- ◆ Offer feedback, don't insist
 - ◆ "You're the author." "Listen first, decide later."
- ◆ It doesn't have to be perfect – let some things go!
 - ◆ Don't feed the perfectionism monster

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Writing programs to try

- ◆ Druidawn.org – collaborative fantasy writing (middle)
- ◆ Writtenoutloud.org (grade 3-8)
- ◆ Nightzookeeper.com (elementary, middle)
- ◆ 1:1 tutoring



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2E CRASH COURSE

for educators, home educators, and parents

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Adults don't have to be great at everything



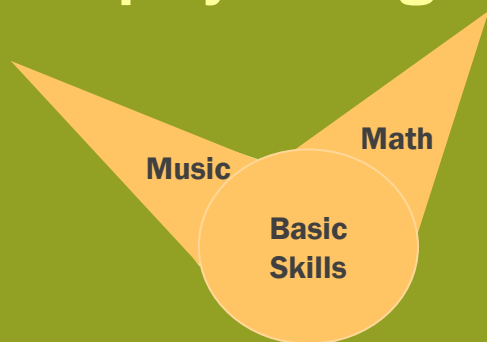
Adult careers will focus on **STRENGTHS**

Adults find “niche” environments that support or eliminate weaknesses

(Armstrong, 2012)

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Spiky Strengths



Well-Rounded



Colleges are looking for “spiky” applicants!

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2e is a Form of Neurodiversity

- ◆ Neurodiversity is not just about autism
- ◆ Brain with a different “operating system”
- ◆ **Careful:** neurodiverse brains are not “worse” (or “better”)
 - ◆ They are **DIFFERENT**
- ◆ Pattern of strengths and challenges
- ◆ Many common diagnoses are better understood as neurodiversity
 - ◆ **ADHD** – strengths in quick response time, acting under pressure
 - ◆ **Dyslexia** – strengths in visual/spatial, creativity, big picture, entrepreneurial
 - ◆ **Autism** – strengths in spotting patterns, details, logic
- ◆ Every brain is unique - just like a fingerprint

(Valizadeh et al., 2018)

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High IQ is also a form of Neurodiversity

- ◆ Regional brain volume is **BIGGER** in some areas (left hemisphere, bilateral frontal cortex, phonological loop, working memory, sensory, anxiety, amygdala)
 - ◆ and **SMALLER** in others (lateral-parietal junction)
- ◆ **DENSER** connectivity between some areas (arcuate fasciculus, corpus callosum - “information highways”)
 - ◆ and **SPARSER** connectivity in others
- ◆ Brain maturation happens on a different timeline (4 year difference!)
- ◆ High IQ brains are physically different than neurotypical brains

Source: gro-gifted.org

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What Does 2e Look Like in the Classroom?

- ◆ explosive behavior
- ◆ distractible
- ◆ trouble finishing work
- ◆ trouble getting started
- ◆ anxiety
- ◆ perfectionism
- ◆ low frustration tolerance

Easy to Misunderstand

“lazy”

“unmotivated”

“doesn’t care”

“mis-identified as HiCap”

A lot more HiCap kids are 2e than we think. Maybe even the majority, especially among highly gifted.

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Behavior is communication

- ◆ When a 2e student is having a hard time,
you will see it in their behavior
- ◆ “Not won’t, can’t” “Kids do well when they can”
– Ross Greene
- ◆ “Shifting from addressing behaviors to trying to
understand their origins and triggers means
making a shift from managing our children to
understanding them deeply.” – Mona Delahooke
- ◆ “It’s never about lazy.” – Austina De Bonte

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Polyvagal safety is essential

- ◆ Porges polyvagal theory
 - ◆ Autonomic nervous system is constantly evaluating the environment for safety
 - ◆ Co-regulation is essential
- ◆ Create a neurodiversity-affirming classroom (& home)
 - ◆ Relationship with teacher (& parents)
 - ◆ Environmental safety in classroom (& home)
 - ◆ Relational safety with classmates (& family)

Ventral Vagal
safe, connected,
calm, social

Sympathetic
fight/flight/freeze
"take action"

Dorsal Vagal
shutdown,
overwhelm



Adapted from Deb Dana 2022; Porges 2011



Rewarding neurotypical learning styles teaches ALL kids that neurotypical brains are superior.

This is harmful to neurodivergent kids.



Creating a neurodiversity affirming classroom & home environment

Infographic by #neurowild
on Instagram & Facebook

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Best Practices for 2e Students CHALLENGE

- ◆ See the strengths first
 - ◆ Be a talent scout, not a deficit detective
- ◆ 2e students need CHALLENGE
 - ◆ Acceleration, depth, complexity, problem solving
- ◆ Provide work at their COGNITIVE level
- ◆ Provide accommodations to ensure ACCESS
- ◆ Dyslexic HiCap students with high verbal skills need access to high level material in accessible formats

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Best Practices for 2e Students INDIVIDUALIZE

- ◆ Individualize for special needs
 - ◆ Allow student to use different tools than other students
i.e. Dictate, scribe, audiobooks
- ◆ Individualize for strengths
 - ◆ Allow student to show mastery using a strength area
i.e. Draw a comic or poster, make a video, 3d model...
- ◆ Individualize for interest areas
 - ◆ Allow student to customize a project to match an interest
i.e. Final project in chemistry about bladesmithing

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Best Practices for 2e Students ACCOMMODATIONS

- ◆ Provide accommodations universally
- ◆ Universal Design for Learning (UDL)
- ◆ Most 2e kids are never diagnosed & will never have a 504
- ◆ Especially:
 - ◆ Typing
 - ◆ Dictation
 - ◆ Spellcheck/Grammarly
 - ◆ Audiobooks (learningally.com, speechify)
 - ◆ Snaptyping!

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Best Practices for 2e Students GRADING

- ◆ What are you measuring with course grades?
 - ◆ Transactions of school – assignments, points, on time, “effort”
 - OR
 - ◆ Mastery of subject area
- ◆ What are you trying to communicate with grades?
- ◆ Mastery-based learning is coming to WA
- ◆ Mastery-based grading can be applied to any class at any grade level

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Best Practices for 2e Students FLEXIBILITY

- ◆ Flexibility in classroom seating/locations
i.e. Standing desks, pacing lanes, movement breaks
- ◆ Flexibility to show mastery in many ways
i.e. Comics, poster, videos, 3D models...
- ◆ Flexibility to let different students do things differently
Every student doesn't have to do the same thing

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Best Practices for 2e

- ◆ Challenge...acceleration, depth, complexity
- ◆ Individualized...for special needs, strengths, interests
- ◆ Accommodations...provided universally
- ◆ Grading...by learning objectives, not executive function
- ◆ Flexibility...to accomplish goals in different ways
- ◆ Create a neurodiversity-affirming classroom
- ◆ Use a strength-based approach, build a “niche”
- ◆ Help kids develop a Spiky Strength

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Slides:

tinyurl.com/zereluctantwriters2025



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