

A New Documentary by Tom Ropelewski

## **2e2: Teaching the Twice Exceptional**

Reviewed by Julie Skolnick, M.A., J.D.

Tom Ropelewski's latest documentary, *2e2: Teaching the Twice Exceptional*, is a sequel to his earlier film, *2e: Twice Exceptional*, released in 2015. In the first film, he interviewed 2e students at Bridges Academy in Studio City, California, to understand their experiences as students. This time around, the filmmaker focuses on teaching strategies implemented at Bridges Academy, from both the teachers' and students' perspectives.

So often we hear from students and teachers alike that a 2e student is not "accessing the curriculum." In *2e2* we see example after example of teachers taking the time to identify where students shine and developing creative solutions to address their challenges as well as utilize their strengths and talents. The result is a community of learners sparked along by their own interests and passions.

As many parents of 2e students know, success often happens for these kids on a teacher-by-teacher basis. When students know that the teacher believes in and understands them, the sky is the limit. Unfortunately, in mainstream schooling it seems the sky is limited. They grow accustomed to receiving negative feedback, being misunderstood, and encountering low expectations. As one teacher in *2e2* recognizes, "Everything is secondary to giving the kids an environment where they can be themselves and not worry about being different."



Image from 2emovie.com

Highlighted in the film are several clever approaches to teaching twice-exceptional students. One is using a drama program to teach social skills. For those who struggle socially, drama enables them to don another persona to practice communication, expression, responses to emotions, and working in a group. Another strategy, painting with water on a sidewalk on a hot Los Angeles day, lets perfectionists practice artistic techniques without negative judgment as they watch

their paintings evaporate. Yet another instructional approach, the "99 Day Challenge," is a way to teach perseverance. Students pick something they love — creating a presentation of quotes from favorite movies, building drones, etc. — and commit to doing it for 99 days.

In another example, a humanities teacher at the school encourages writing production, often an area of challenge for 2e students. The teacher starts an



## 2e2: Teaching the Twice Exceptional, concluded

assignment by saying, “Okay, let’s go for really bad writing now. The worse you can be with the writing, the better.” The purpose of the assignment, the teacher explains, is to free students from their fears.

Another teacher talks about how this population of students “needs a lot of variety, motivation, and help to cope with stress.” Bridges teachers, often dealing with their students’ anxiety and asynchronous development — the uneven development that results when mental and physical growth proceed at different rates — spend a lot of time focusing on the fact that “it’s ok to make mistakes.” They help students understand that “without making mistakes, it’s impossible to learn.”

Along with highlighting many of the tools in the Bridges teachers’ toolboxes, Ropelewski weaves in parents’ accounts of their children’s school experiences, including negative teacher-student exchanges from the past. Parents tell of teachers belittling students for their inabilities or expressing their bewilderment with comments such as, “I don’t understand. If he’s so bright, why can’t he just behave?”

The juxtaposition of these confrontations with the Bridges Academy instructional approach is stark. Rather than attempting to “fix” or “mold” students in a particular way, we see teachers starting the school

year assessing what students do well and how they prefer to learn.<sup>1</sup> Teachers intentionally and strategically discover kids’ interests and strengths in order to design curriculum for them in a “student-centered way.”

This system-wide approach stands on a foundation of respect and appreciation for 2e learners. In the film we hear one teacher say that these kids are “very unusual in the best way.” Another teacher refers to his students as “refreshing” because of the unabashed, direct way they interact with him, providing an opportunity to form “real relationships very quickly.” There’s also the teacher who passionately describes how 2e students are the ones “you think about 20 years later and wonder what they’re doing and bet they’re doing something amazing.”

One of the parents who appears in the documentary talks about the challenge that many parents of twice-exceptional children face: “We’re not worried that he’ll succeed. It’s how do we get him there?” The film shows that the strength-based, talent-focused teaching approach with a foundation of respect and understanding outlined in 2e2 is a great way.

1. In the film we see Bridges Academy teachers sitting with students using the “Learning Print®” Tool created by Robin Schader and Wenying Zhou to discover and record unique combinations of interests, abilities, learning preferences, and experiences. For more information about the “My Learning Print®” Tool, go to <https://www.bridges.edu/resources.html>.

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*Subscribe to Julie’s monthly newsletter, “Gifted & Distractible” on her [website](#), follow @WithUnderstandingComesCalm, and watch regular “Let’s Talk 2e!” Live broadcasts on Facebook, on Instagram @letstalk2e, Twitter @JulieSkolnick, and Julie Skolnick on YouTube.*

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