an award-winning film
by thomas ropelewski

twice exceptional

A VIEWER'S GUIDE

Why This Documentary Matters...

The 2e Center for Research and Professional Development welcomes your interest in the film **2e: Twice Exceptional**. The documentary was filmed over several years at **Bridges Academy**, a private school for grades 5-12 in Los Angeles, and provides a look at the school during those formative years.

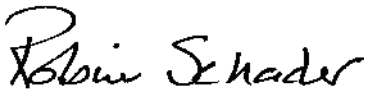
We were delighted when **Director/Producer Tom Ropelewski** offered proceeds from the film to support the Center in its ongoing work. What a wonderful opportunity to spread awareness of the challenges facing 2e students, their families, and their schools!

Many people are unaware that 2e students exist. Often they are dismissed as behavior problems, lazy underachievers, or troublemakers in conventional classrooms. In fact, 2e students struggle with a mix of high intellectual abilities and talents along with special needs such as learning disabilities, attention deficits, and behavioral difficulties. And, as this film demonstrates, **no single "label" can begin to describe the great variety and individuality of these young people.** Indeed, the 2e label is problematic. The term 2e came from the field of gifted educational research, and has traditionally referred to students with above average IQ scores and learning differences. Today the 2e educational movement has broadened beyond IQ limitations to emphasize the discovery and development of strengths and talents latent in all learning-disabled students who are being educated in programs that focus only on their deficits.

The power of the documentary is that it highlights individual stories and commentary from students, family, educators, and therapists, providing insights into the world of 2e learners. The film can be enjoyed from many perspectives.

This guide provides starting points for further exploration. We hope you will join us in the "national dialogue" about the issues of growing up 2e that Tom Ropelewski calls for in his director's statement on the next page.

Susan Baum, Ph.D.
Director, 2e Center



Robin Schader, Ph.D.
Trustee, Bridges Academy

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illustrations by Sydney Frank

A Personal Note from

Tom Ropelewski

Producer/Director

I am the parent of a "twice-exceptional" teenager (he's intellectually gifted – that's the first exception – but with a learning difference – ADHD – that's the second). I've lived through many frustrations trying to understand and nurture my son who at one moment could seem wise beyond his years and yet, in the next, could throw a tantrum like a much younger child. I know the heartache of speaking with school officials who acknowledged that my son was brilliant but unmanageable. But I also know the thrill of being in the presence a unique and lively mind, one that has little patience for a three-minute pop song but can sit through the entirety of Wagner's Ring cycle and discuss it excitedly afterward. I admit my son's a challenge, but why can't everyone see the same brilliant kid I see? Why do they always focus on the problems instead of the gifts? And why can't my son just go with the flow once in a while? Why does he always have to make everything so hard on himself by insisting on doing things his own way?

The simple answer is that that his brain is "wired" differently. Basic executive skills (like remembering to turn in his homework on time) that come so easily to other students are truly difficult for him. But studying graduate-level molecular genetics in the tenth grade was a piece of cake!

Although the concept of twice-exceptionality has evolved over the past half-century, I hadn't heard of it until I discovered **Bridges Academy**. I had no idea that there was a small but passionate network of educators around the country who were developing curricula that focused on the strengths of these unique students while also helping them address their deficits. Most importantly, these teachers were helping students identify and develop their talents and passions. They were defining these kids by their strengths – what they can do, often brilliantly – instead of by their weaknesses, which is the predominant approach of the American public school system. Navigating adolescence is demanding enough for anyone, no matter what path to adulthood you find yourself on. That challenge is compounded greatly for the young person who finds himself on a path which few, if any, have forged before, as well as for the parents and teachers who are trying their best to nurture and guide him.

It is my hope that **2e: Twice Exceptional** will expand the national dialogue about twice-exceptional education and recognize the educators, researchers, and professionals who are developing insightful, effective programs to engage these idiosyncratic kids who may indeed grow up to change the world.

Tom Ropelewski

Viewing Activities

Optimally this film should be watched with others to allow for questions and discussion. The documentary itself is 54 minutes long; however, we encourage you to allow two hours for the entire viewing experience.

We recommend the following activities:

1. Before viewing

Look through the materials provided, especially the sections "Background Information" and "Noticing 2e." The background section provides information referred to in the film that may be new to viewers. Familiarizing yourself ahead of time can be helpful.

2. While viewing

From the intriguing introduction of the film through the revelations embedded in the credits, you will find a number of interesting themes that reveal the richness and complexity inherent in the world of twice-exceptional learners. Because there is so much information covered in this film, we include a description of several themes that are woven throughout on pages 6 & 7. We strongly recommend that viewers look for evidence of the themes as they watch the movie. There is a chart on page 8 for this purpose. The chart can be copied so all viewers may tally evidence and take notes to think about and discuss later.

3. After viewing

Share what you noticed and recorded on the viewing chart. Discuss implications as you see them. Finally, consider the open-ended discussion questions, as well as topics and questions for targeted audiences: parents, educators, and counselors/therapists. Choose any combination to plan your follow-up experience.

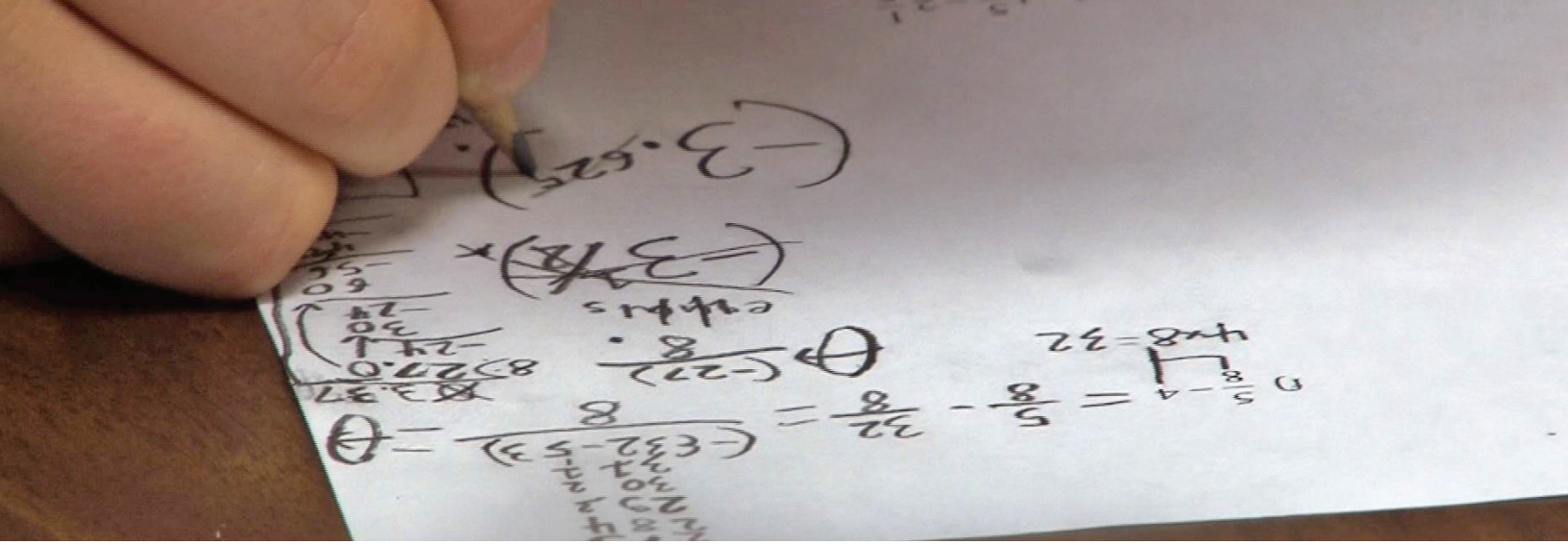
Background Information

1 **Educating a 2e student.** The students in this film demonstrate many advanced intellectual and artistic skills. Their strengths are quite varied. The challenges that brought them to a 2e school are equally diverse. Because there is such a mix of diagnoses for each student (plus the disparity between what that student can and can not do), it is essential to design and align student profiles with personalized programs.

2 **Misdiagnosis, missed diagnosis, and misunderstood behaviors** are common problems. 2e students can be confusing to parents, teachers, and other support professionals. Behaviors shown by 2e students can look like advanced abilities, yet they can also resemble the behaviors of students with special needs.
For instance, think of a child who reads only non-fiction, is obsessed with certain topics, and is a stickler for justice. Are these behaviors indicative of an individual on the Autism Spectrum or are they representative of the passions, intensities, and empathy seen in intellectually advanced students? As another example, a child may appear hyperactive, blurt out answers, and act impulsively in the classroom. Is he ADHD and/or is this child demonstrating traits found in highly creative people? When working with 2e students, it is important to have a team familiar with both advanced abilities and disabling conditions to identify accurately the actual issues a child is facing.

3 In the documentary, **Asynchrony** is a term frequently mentioned. It refers to uneven developmental rates of a child's intellectual, emotional, social, and motor skills. For example, a student demonstrating highly advanced intellectual abilities may have social or motor skills that lag substantially behind. Asynchrony is confusing for the child, parents, and teachers, as seen in the film.

When teaching asynchronous students, it is necessary to meet them at their various developmental levels. For example, while a student may be ready for content higher than grade level, parent and teacher expectations for writing (homework, testing, reports, etc.) might need to be minimized because of slower fine motor skill development. In addition, just because a child demonstrates advanced cognitive skills, one cannot assume that social and emotional decision-making is at an equally advanced level. In fact, it is likely not as mature. It can take years (and much patience) for the uneven developmental trajectories to align.



4 The documentary begins with students participating in a Pi Day celebration. **Pi Day** is celebrated around the world on March 14th (3.14) with various games and events. A particularly favorite event is the competition to memorize Pi (π), the Greek letter used in mathematics to represent the ratio of the circumference of a circle to its diameter (3.14∞). Because Pi is infinite, it is a challenge to memorize more and more digits. The Guinness-recognized record is 67,890! Certain kinds of minds like to tackle this type of challenge.

Memorization is a useful skill heavily relied upon in most schools settings, and students find unique methods to help in the task. In the film you will see students memorizing Pi using colors and song.

5 **Synesthesia?** During an interview, one of the students mentions that he sees numbers in different colors. He can't remember that it is called "synesthesia." The word comes from two Greek words, syn (together) and aisthesis (perception). Synesthesia literally means "joined perception." The most common form is when someone always sees a particular color in response to a certain letter of the alphabet or a number, but it can involve any of the senses. For example, some people taste colors, others smell sounds, while some have tactile responses to what they see. Duke Ellington saw sounds as colors. Physics Nobel Prize winner Richard Feynman noted, "When I see equations, I see the letters in colors. As I'm talking, I see...light-tan j's, slightly violet-bluish n's, and dark brown x's flying around."

6 **What might 2e students grow up to do?** Scenes in the film show how interests and talents need to be valued in schools — even the teachers talk about early interests. All students need focused attention on what they can do, what they love to do, and what they find most fulfilling.

Many successful people have learning differences that made traditional schooling a nightmare for them. Dr. Jack Horner, the world-renowned paleontologist, who was the major consultant on the film Jurassic Park, barely passed high school, flunked out of college, and had great difficulty reading or writing because of dyslexia. Jim Carey, actor and comedian, has dealt with ADHD and depression since childhood. He was always in trouble at school. Picasso could not read or write and stubbornly refused to do anything but paint. Dr. Temple Grandin, an engineer whose expertise with animals has made her the most famous designer of cattle yards in the world, is autistic.

Noticing 2e: Themes in the Film

1 **2e?** Notice the traits, characteristics, and behaviors of the students in the film that would be associated with being 2e.

a. There is no typical representation of a 2e person; there is a richness of diversity.
b. Because of the combination of both strengths and disabilities, and the resulting discrepancy between what 2e students can and cannot do, they easily feel anxious, conflicted, and overwhelmed.
c. Students' behaviors can be confusing to teachers and parents and might be interpreted inaccurately.
d. More boys than girls are identified as 2e. There are gender differences in how 2e students present themselves in the classroom and at home.

2 **Change and Growth:** Given time and a psychologically safe environment, the 2e students in the film experience positive growth (academically, socially, and emotionally).

a. Social change – Beginning as loners, without social networks, students develop self-awareness and meaningful relationships.
b. Emotional change – Anxiety transforms into a sense of comfort and satisfaction, along with pride and healthy anticipation.
c. Academic change – Initially unable to complete many classroom tasks (reading, getting ideas onto paper, scheduling and planning, turning in homework, participating in discussions, etc.), the students gradually evolve into productive learners.

3 **Misunderstood behaviors — Dualities, Dichotomies, and Asynchrony:** The development of 2e students is often erratic and out of "sync," resulting in behaviors that seem to be contradictory.

a. Confusingly, while these students may be intellectually quite advanced, they can be socially and emotionally immature.
b. Often their physical development doesn't keep pace with their cognitive development.
c. Classrooms that work for 2e learners offer sophisticated intellectual challenge while accommodating their learning deficits.

4 **Environment Counts:** The students flourish in a supportive environment that respects and values their differences.

a. Teachers share their own excitement for learning and look for students' interests, abilities, and experiences.
b. Entry points for learning are based on interests, abilities, and talents. Teachers "teach to the gift."
c. Teachers take time to know their students holistically. They are not boring. They enjoy working with these types of minds.
d. School is physically accommodating. Schedules are flexible, there's room to move around, and students are offered choices in active learning.
e. Working and learning together, students and teachers create an enriched, safe, and collaborative community.

f. Parents who understand and accept that their child is on a non-traditional developmental path are generally more supportive. Positive, constructive, and consistent parental involvement is critical to the long-term success of 2e students.

5 Key to Success — Spotting and developing talent: Authentic enrichment opportunities are not extra-curricular. They are essential!

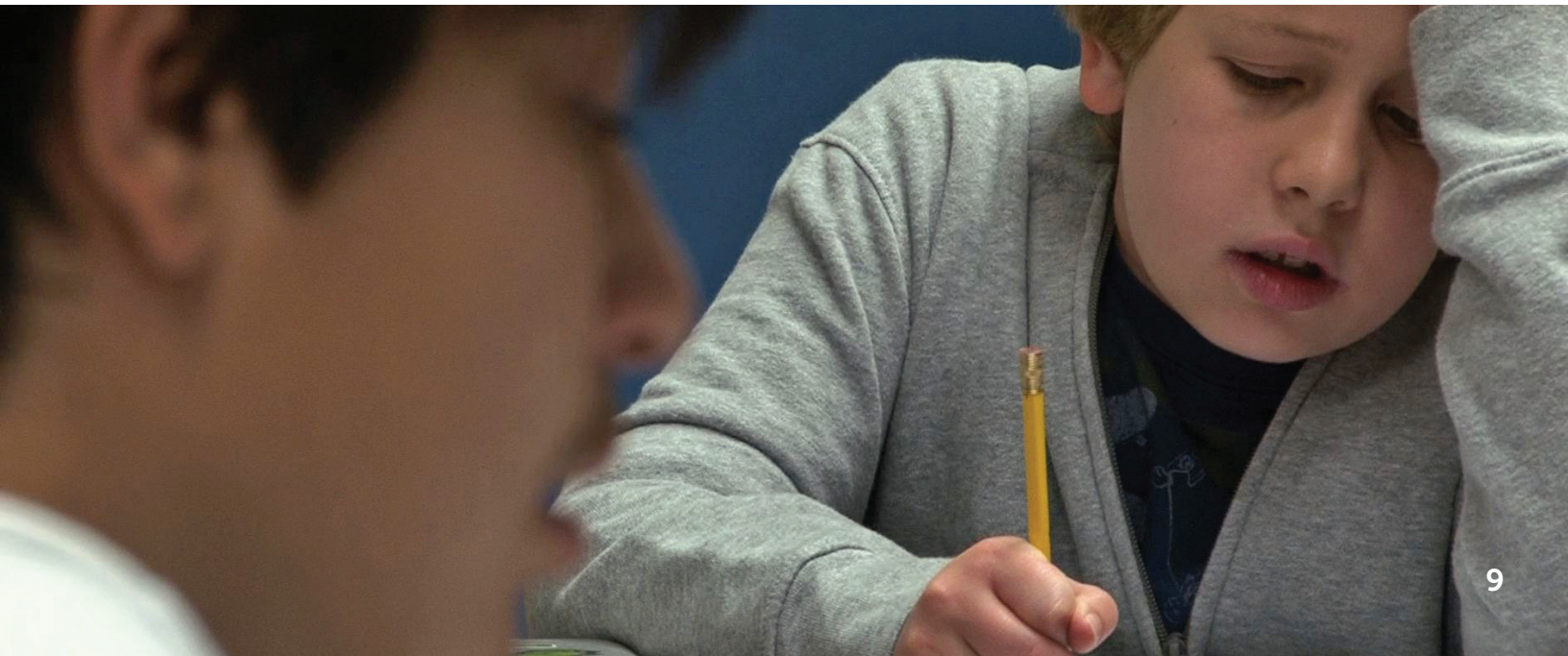
a. When talents are discovered and developed, student interests and strengths can lead to on-going learning and possible career paths.
b. Talent development allows students to become goal-focused and self-regulated.
c. When working from novice to expert in interest areas, students experience success because they have the desire and focus to stay in the struggle.
d. Success in an interest/talent area can serve as a springboard for exploration in other areas.
e. Students are encouraged to use their strengths and interests whenever possible in approaching their class assignments.
f. Students gain mutual respect through recognition of each individual's talents, gifts, and interests, often through tackling complex, team-based projects.

Charting Your Observations

Evidence of Themes

1. Who are the 2e? What are the traits, characteristics, and behaviors associated with being "2e"?
2. Change & Growth: 2e students can experience positive growth (academically, socially, and emotionally).
Social
Emotional
Academic
3. Misunderstood behaviors — Dualities, Dichotomies, and Asynchrony: The development of 2e students is often erratic and out of "sync" resulting in behaviors that seem to be contradictory.
4. Environment Counts: Students can flourish in an environment that respects and values their differences.
Home
School
5. Key to Success —Spotting and developing talent: Authentic enrichment opportunities are not extra-curricular. They are essential!

Notes:



For Post-Viewing Discussion

1. The film's title is "2e: Twice Exceptional." Is this a term you've heard before? Do you think it's widely known? Should it be? Why or why not?

2. The documentary chronicles several individual lives and stories that turn out to have some important things in common. What unique strengths of the students, teachers, and parents did you observe? Which of the student strengths might not have been recognized in a traditional school or classroom setting?

3. What impressed you about the ways the students discussed their lives, talents, anxieties, coping strategies, and growth?

4. What expressions of anxiety or discomfort did you hear most clearly? What challenges did the students face? How did they successfully address these challenges?

5. The film shows a predominance of 2e male students. Why do you think 2e girls are not represented as frequently?

6. What appeared to be some of the frustrating aspects of raising or working with a 2e child?

7. What did the teachers in the film have in common? Were there qualities of the individual teachers that would work best with certain kinds of minds?

8. Within the credits at the end of the film, one can see glimpses of the "rest of the story." How do these hints at "happy endings" suggest a balance between resources and attention for the development of students' strengths with resources and attention spent on "fixing" deficits?

9. What do you think would have happened if the focus had been only on remediating the weaknesses of students?

10. After seeing the film, how useful do you think the 2e category is for discussing learning differences and ways of addressing them? Can you think of better ways of addressing the issues the film dramatizes?

Questions for Specific Audiences

Parents

1. How did the parents in the film come to realize that their children were 2e? What steps did they take to understand and address the issue?
2. How do the parents' stories provide hope for you? How important is it for parents to have a support group of other parents raising a 2e child?
3. Studies clearly indicate that parents are the best advocates for assuring appropriate programming for their children. What can you take away from this film to help you understand the needs of your child and how to advocate for him or her?
4. What did you notice from the parents when they found someone who cared about their child's strengths?

Educators

1. Bridges Academy is not a therapeutic school; instead it focuses on providing a psychologically safe, intellectually vibrant environment with opportunities for enriching students' experiences and developing their abilities and talents. How feasible do you think this approach is for schools today? Why don't schools pay as much attention to students' strengths as they do to their weaknesses?
2. The film shows that these students evolved over time. How do you think the current focus on short-term, grade-level expectations for reading and writing, even for very young students, will affect those who are twice exceptional?
3. Think of a current student (or one you taught in the past) who came to mind as you watched the students portrayed in this film. What might you do (or have done) as a result of insights gained from watching the film? How might you talk to his/her parents regarding the strengths and challenges of their student?"
4. How might you use this film with your students or a group of students?

Counselors and Therapists

1. How do you think you would help a 2e client integrate the concept of being 2e into his or her personal identity?
2. In listening to student reflections, what was the value they placed on advocacy (both for themselves and for others)?
3. How does the concept of asynchrony contribute to understanding 2e students?
4. In what ways might anxiety be alleviated through the creation of more appropriate learning environments?
5. What are the relevant traits of being 2e that can be incorporated into your work with this population?
6. How might counselors work with parents of 2e students?

Resources:

A brief list for those seeking more information.

Links for each resource can be found on the 2e Center resources page at: **www.bridges.edu/center**

General Information:

These selections provide a broad look at characteristics, educational strategies, advocacy, and current issues.

- **The 2e Twice-exceptional Newsletter** is written for parents, professionals and educators, and provides extensive resources including an annotated bibliography of research and writings; articles on topics such as identification, schools, and programs; book reviews; and twice-monthly email briefings. In addition, the publishers offer the "Spotlight on 2e Series," a selection of useful booklets including "The Mythology of Learning: Understanding Common Myths about 2e Learners" and "Parenting Your Twice-exceptional Child."

- **Smart Kids with Learning Disabilities'** mission is to educate and guide parents of children with learning disabilities or ADHD.

- **To be Gifted and Learning Disabled: Strategies for helping bright students with LD, ADHD, and More** (Baum, S., & Owen, S., 2004, Prufrock Press), provides an in-depth overview of identification and diagnosis issues, patterns of accomplishments and failures, as well as information about programming, instructional strategies, and developing comprehensive IEPs.

- **The Twice-Exceptional Dilemma** is a handbook published by the National Education Association.

- **Supporting Emotional Needs of the Gifted (SENG)** was organized to bring attention to the unique emotional needs of gifted children. The website has a number of resources for twice-exceptional students.

- **Misdiagnosis and Dual Diagnoses of Gifted Children and Adults: ADHD, bipolar, OCD, Asperger's, depression, and other disorders** (Webb, J. T., Amend, E. R., Webb, N.E., Goerss, J., Beljan, P., Olenchak, F. R., 2005, Great Potential Press).

State Policies:

The following selected state and district guidelines can help educators better serve 2e students.

- Twice-Exceptional Students Gifted Students with Disabilities; Level 1: An Introductory Resource **(Colorado Department of Education).**
- Twice-Exceptional: Students with Both Gifts and Challenges or Disabilities **(Idaho Department of Education).**
- Twice-Exceptional Guide **(Ohio Department of Education).**
- A Guidebook for Twice-Exceptional Students: Supporting the Achievement of Gifted Students with Special Needs **(Montgomery County Public Schools).**
- Supporting the Identification and Achievement of the Twice-Exceptional Student – Frequently Asked Questions **(Virginia Department of Education).**

Legal Information:

The Wrightslaw website provides detailed information about the educational rights afforded 2e students and families.

Bridges Academy: Educating the Exceptional[2]

Bridges Academy is unlike any other school — independent, charter, or public. Our promise is to use our strength-based program to **unlock human potential.**

We educate a unique population of students with learning differences who are amazingly bright, outside-the-box-thinkers, and capable of developing expertise at a very young age in any number of fields —from robotics to religion, string theory to Sanskrit, politics to poetry.

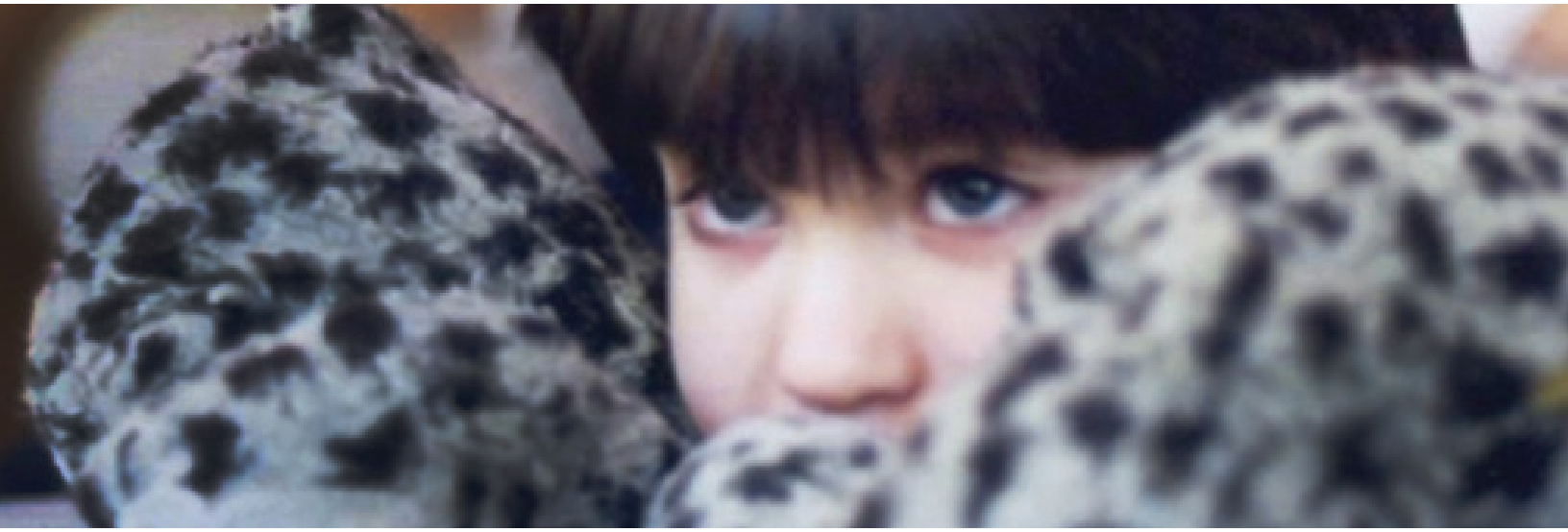
We believe it is possible to **tap into student passions** when designing and aligning educational experiences. The community dedicated to quality education for all students is growing.

We look forward to working with you through the 2e Center,

Carl Sabatino

Carl Sabatino
Head of School

If you found the material in this film stimulating and would like to learn more about twice exceptionality and "strength-based, talent-focused" learning environments, please contact the 2e Center at Bridges Academy: **www.bridges.edu/center**



The 2e Center for Research and Professional Development at Bridges Academy

The 2e Center provides a growing list of research, resources, and strategies for teachers, parents, and other professionals to address the complex needs of 2e students. The Center also offers opportunities for professionals to connect and share expertise that can help 2e students thrive.

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