

A need to break the stigma

FROM C1

BRIGHT BUT UNFOCUSED – IT TURNED OUT TO BE ADHD

In primary and secondary school, Melina Leong was often distracted and did not pay attention in class.

Although she could focus for only short periods of time, the 17-year-old, who is now in the first year of junior college, picked up information fast and, with the help of tutors, she was able to cope in school.

She has also been performing with the Singapore Symphony Children's Choir since she was 10 and recently scored a distinction for her Grade 8 piano exam.

She did not suspect there was anything wrong until her friend sent her a video clip on traits of people with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) when she was in Secondary 3, joking that it sounded like her.

She realised that she indeed had many of the characteristics and read up on the topic.

When she asked her parents to take her to a doctor, they told her she did not have ADHD as she “never struggled in school”.

It took a year before her parents agreed to an assessment and she was diagnosed with the condition at age 16.

She finally understood why she was unmotivated, because ADHD affected her dopamine levels.

Her mother Chia Gin Gin, 45, a housewife, says Melina has a good memory and was able to absorb enough information to get by in school before her attention span ran out. But she takes three-hour naps after school.

“She compensates, but at a huge energy cost, so she gets very tired,” says Madam Chia, whose husband Douglas Leong, 56, is an in-house legal counsel.

Mr Leong also sits on the board of the charity Unlocking ADHD, which runs events and provides resources to support people with ADHD.

Melina, who has a younger brother, aged 14, adds: “I was not hyperactive in class, so my teachers just thought I was not concentrating”.

Experts say a common phenomenon which makes the identification of 2E learners challenging is that their giftedness and learning disability could mask each other.

Dr Adrian Loh, a senior consultant psychiatrist at private clinic



Classically trained singer Melina Leong (centre, with her parents Chia Gin Gin and Douglas Leong) suspected she had ADHD from reading up on the symptoms and was diagnosed with the condition in May 2023. ST PHOTO: SHINTARO TAY

Promises Healthcare, says it may apply more to girls as they are quieter.

“What we do know now is a lot of girls are being missed. They often compensate for their deficits with their abilities. So that’s where an awareness of twice-exceptionality is important,” he adds.

Ms Lois Lim, a principal educational psychologist at Firm Foundation Psychological Practice, which specialises in children’s learning, notes that a gifted child might use memory strategies to overcome initial reading difficulties.

In other cases, the learning disability might hide the giftedness – a gifted dyslexic child could look like an average student on literacy tasks.

Another challenge in identifying 2E learners could be the stigma attached to the SEN label, as they often need additional support, says Professor Kenneth Poon, dean of

education research at the National Institute of Education.

But parents should understand that the diagnosis could help them gain knowledge about the challenges 2E learners face and they can then find the most effective approaches to support their child, he adds.

MORE SUPPORT WOULD HELP 2E LEARNERS THRIVE

Primary 4 pupil Syed Ali Alswij, 10, is eloquent, but when it comes to work that requires lengthy writing, he struggles as his hand hurts.

In 2023, he was diagnosed with severe dyspraxia, a developmental coordination disorder that affects motor skills.

Although dyspraxia does not affect intelligence, it can impact learning in a traditional classroom.

His mother, Dr Hana Alhadad,



Dr Hana Alhadad with her children (from left) Alya Fatima Alswij, six; Syed Ali Alswij, 10; and Amal Fatima Alswij, eight. Ali, a Primary 4 pupil, has severe dyspraxia, a developmental coordination disorder that affects motor skills. ST PHOTO: KEVIN LIM

46, a researcher, says his visual-spatial intelligence scores were high on the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children test he took, but processing speed scores were low.

He finds it difficult to understand arithmetic when verbal instructions are given, but has no issues with geometry.

“He translates instructions into a visual picture. But not everything can be translated so that’s when he gets confused,” says Dr Hana.

“During that process, it looks like he’s daydreaming, but he’s actually translating the auditory into visual,” she says.

She hopes there is leeway to type in exams rather than having to hand-write answers, as this would help Ali cope better.

A common thread among the 2E learners is that they may not thrive in school.

Ali, who has two younger siblings, says: “School is tiring. I have a lot of uncompleted work. Sometimes I don’t understand what the teacher is saying because I’m a slow learner.”

“I hope there can be fewer worksheets. They give me a lot of pain.”

Mikail wishes his schoolmates did not know he excelled in science.

“I wish students are more aware of kids with differently abled brains and not make fun of us. They may not say anything, but will still laugh among themselves,” he adds.

Teachers may have to take the first step to recognise the strengths of these learners.

Dr Geetha Shantha Ram, director of specific learning differences assessment services at the Dyslexia Association of Singapore, did a qualitative study in 2022 on pre-school teachers who taught pupils who were potentially gifted and learning disabled.

She found that the teachers were focused on trying to fix the deficits of the children, with the giftedness used only to support the weaknesses.

“If adults are fixated on deficits, the children’s sense of self-worth will dip. By flipping the attention to strengths, we’re able to help the learner identify his true self-worth,” she says.

She hopes there can be more awareness of twice-exceptionality so that parents and teachers can provide more support for children.

“Positive external support is a huge factor in enabling them to overcome difficulties.”