

'A' for IGCSE at 10, but struggles in primary school



Twice-Exceptional learners, who are both gifted and have a learning disability, sometimes struggle to find a sweet spot in the mainstream system, and parents and experts are hoping there is more support for such kids



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Eleven-year-old Mohamed Mikail Mohamed Shahrom is way ahead of his peers in terms of his science knowledge, but finds it difficult to cope in primary school.

In October 2023, Mikail sat the International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE) combined science examination, which is similar to the GCE O levels, and scored 87, or an A.

This was despite having less than two months to prepare for the exam, which assesses physics, chemistry and biology concepts. It is usually taken by students from international schools.

But Mikail, who is in Primary 6, struggles in school as he has multiple special educational needs (SEN), including dyslexia and dysgraphia.

Dyslexia is a learning difficulty that affects reading and spelling, while dysgraphia is a neurological condition where a child has difficulty turning his thoughts into written words.

Mikail is among a group of children who are known as Twice-Exceptional (2E) learners, who are both gifted and have a learning disability.

The boy, who has three younger siblings, has been devouring information on topics such as astro-

physics, the immune system and the history of penicillin since he was young.

With his deep knowledge of science, Mikail says he is sometimes bored in school, and likes only recess and his co-curricular activity, which is sailing.

He does not do well when it comes to homework and tests which involve writing, says his mother Yvonne Neo, 41, a former secondary school science teacher.

"With dysgraphia, he has trouble writing down what he thinks. With dyslexia, he gets the words jumbled up," says Madam Neo, who describes his handwriting as erratic and disorganised with multiple cancellations.

He is not part of his school's elite science programme E2K.

In a bid to keep him engaged in learning, Madam Neo decided to sign him up for the IGCSE combined science exam, as mainstream students cannot sit the O levels in advance.

Mikail says he enjoyed preparing for the exam as "I learnt things I don't know".

Madam Neo says many programmes that can stretch him in science are inaccessible given his age and their budget.

"I understand why children can't

be accelerated beyond their age in school, but it greatly limits people like him because he may be held back until he loses interest.

"It isn't easy to parent a 2E child, but neither is it easy being a 2E student with little success at exams in school because of his SEN," adds Madam Neo, whose husband is a history teacher.

While there are no official figures in Singapore as to how many 2E children there are, an estimated 6 per cent of gifted children in the United States are 2E, according to the University of Iowa's Belin-Blank Center, while a study conducted in Australian schools puts the figure at 2 to 7 per cent.

According to psychologists, giftedness in 2E children could come in the form of academic achievement, talent in music and the arts, or advanced problem solving, creative or reasoning abilities.

At the same time, these children have learning or developmental challenges, in areas like speech and language, emotional and behavioural, or sensory and physical disabilities.

Psychologist Natalie Lim, who is the head of clinical services at Dynamics Psychological Practice, says typical characteristics of 2E children include having a wide

range of interests not related to school. The child performs well in complex or advanced tasks, but does relatively poorly in "basic" work.

These children may have poor social skills and difficulties with reading and writing due to cognitive processing deficits, she notes.

"They have advanced ideas and opinions expressed verbally, but not seen in written work. There may also be behavioural problems due to underlying stress, boredom and lack of motivation," she adds.

Dr Wilson Chan, a principal educational psychologist from The Gifted Lab, which conducts psycho-educational assessments, says 2E learners may be misunderstood.

Parents and teachers may be frustrated at why a child with gifted characteristics is unable to do well academically, makes careless mistakes in mathematics and spelling, or has poor handwriting.

"They may assume that the child is unmotivated or defiant or has a poor attitude, and may implement strict corrective measures, thereby heightening the child's academic-related frustration and school anxiety," he says.

Mohamed Mikail Mohamed Shahrom (above, centre), 11, struggles to cope in school even though he scored an A for the International General Certificate of Secondary Education combined science examination. With him is his family - (from left) mother Yvonne Neo; sister Nurul 'Afiya, seven; father Mohamed Shahrom; and sister Nurul Khalisha, nine. ST PHOTO: HENG YI-HSIN

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