

Jessica: A Case Study Approach

Cecelia Boswell

This piece presents the questions we often pose in reference to twice-exceptional students. The purpose of this student's story is to provide entree for a teacher-to-teacher discussion about this student, Jessica*, who offers the outward appearance of gifted abilities, yet struggles in math and reads slowly. At the end of this piece are discussion questions that will add insight into teachers' belief systems and experiences. Additional readings are provided for reference.

Jessica

It is often difficult to identify gifted and talented learners with learning disabilities. These unique learners have remarkable strengths in one or more areas and significant weaknesses in others. According to Susan Baum (2004), these students can be grouped into three categories: students identified as gifted who also have subtle learning disabilities; students identified as having a learning disability, but not identified as gifted; and unidentified students whose giftedness and learning disabilities mask each other so that the student functions at or slightly below grade level.

Jessica's case study introduces educators to an 11-year-old student and past participant in the elementary gifted program. Jessica's parents are concerned about the apparent discrepancy between their daughter's efforts and achievement.

Jessica comes from an intact middle-class family living in a small Midwestern community. Her father owns his own business, and her mother is an elementary school teacher. The family values education and begins dinner each evening by asking the children about their school day. If time allows, the conversation typically turns to current events.

At 11, Jessica is arguably one of the most well liked girls in the sixth grade. Friends describe her as smart, cute, and fun. They envy her ability to get along with everyone—popular kids, jocks, and nerds all like Jessica. She swims competitively, has a great voice, and knows the lyrics to “all” the songs. Last year, when Jessica was cast as the lead in a summer stock production of *Annie*, family and friends filled the audience.

Though classroom work is not easy for Jessica, she loves attending school. She likes interacting with her classmates and enjoys several of her classes. She finds science interesting, especially class demonstrations and experiments. She actively participates in social studies and language arts class discussions, but finds keeping up with the

reading to be an ongoing challenge. Choir is her favorite and math is a struggle.

Teachers enjoy Jessica in class, describing her as a “respectful and conscientious student.” Comments shared during conferences and on report cards indicate her assignments are thorough and on time. Although group work, experiential learning, and projects are particular strengths for Jessica, classroom and achievement test scores are typically in the average to low-average range. This is somewhat surprising given her third-grade Cognitive Abilities Test (CogAT) score of 129 and past participation in the elementary gifted program.

Though Jessica's mother is worried about her daughter, colleagues at school have confirmed with assurance that Jessica is a “great kid, doing just fine.” When Jessica admits during her sixth-grade conference that homework at times can seem overwhelming, her teachers are surprised. They assume her contributions to class discussions reflect a wide range of knowledge and above-average reading ability. They are not aware that Jessica reads very slowly, often re-reading passages many times for basic comprehension. They have no idea how hard she works or how frustrated she is about schoolwork.

With an eye on the future, Jessica's parents are concerned her test scores and grades are not an accurate indication of their daughter's ability. They worry about state assessments required for graduation and college entrance exams. Jessica realizes she spends far more time on her homework than her peers and is beginning to wonder if something is wrong. Jessica questions her own capability, and whether school administrators will permit her to take the enriched and accelerated courses that interest her.

Discussion Questions

1. Based on the *NAGC Pre-K–Grade 12 Gifted Education Programming Standard 1: Learning and Development Student Outcomes 1.1 Self-Understanding* refer-

encing self-understanding, is Jessica a gifted student? If so, in what areas does she exhibit gifted characteristics? Does she demonstrate self-knowledge with respect to her interests, strengths, identity, and needs in socio-emotional development and in intellectual, academic, creative, leadership, or artistic domains? What evidence supports your choice(s)? What seem to be Jessica's special needs? What possible course of action might one take to address those needs?

2. What type of assessment is likely to provide the most accurate picture of Jessica's strengths and relative weaknesses? Why? Who should assess Jessica?
3. Why were Jessica's needs and her parents' concerns overlooked?

Additional Readings

- Besnoy, K. D. (2006). *Successful strategies for twice-exceptional students*. Waco, TX: Prufrock Press.
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About the Author

Cecelia Boswell, Ed.D., is an educator with more than 40 years of experience in education. She most recently served as Executive Director of Advanced Academics for Waco ISD. She is an independent consultant working nationally and throughout Texas. She is currently a board member for the Council for Exceptional Children-The Association for the Gifted.

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