

Developing and Fostering Passion in Academic and Nonacademic Domains

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore how passion was manifested among gifted and talent youth selected from a larger longitudinal study of child and adolescent development. The gifted sample included 25 high school and college students who were selected because they were in a gifted program in elementary school. The talent sample included 41 high school students who were selected because they were highly involved in athletics and the arts in middle childhood. The authors found that passion was more characteristic of participation in nonacademic activities (i.e., sports and the arts). Talented youth were more likely to talk about wanting to do their activity all the time, experiencing flow, getting emotional release from participation, and internalizing the activity into their identity. The authors also found that school settings, and especially regular classrooms as compared with gifted and advanced classes, appeared to undermine rather than support passion. The authors discuss implications of their findings for creating school environments that can foster passion.

Putting the Research to Use

We found very little evidence of passion in our interviews with gifted high school and college youth. Instead, most of these youth talked about being bored and that little motivated them besides demonstrating their ability. Unfortunately, many of the youth talked negatively about aspects of both the academic and social environment. We offer suggestions for teachers and schools on how to increase passion in the classroom. Students are more likely to experience passion in environments where they feel supported by peers who are of similar ability and motivation levels, where teachers model enthusiasm and press for understanding, where there is adequate challenge, and where are opportunities to work on varied, meaningful, and cognitively complex tasks.

Keywords

creativity, qualitative methodologies, high school, college or adult, social and/or emotional development and adjustment

There is a growing interest in how positive experiences are embedded in social contexts and how to create environments that allow individuals to flourish (Seligman, & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). The interest in the psychology of positive youth development has been partly fueled by evidence that a large number of youth appear to be bored, unmotivated, and unexcited about their lives (Larson, 2000; Larson & Richards, 1991). We believe that developing a passion toward activities is one way to help counter youths' discontentment and alienation. Developing a passion can increase motivation, enhance well-being, and result in more positive affect. Although the idea of finding one's passion has been discussed extensively in popular culture, there has been very little research devoted to this topic outside of the work on romantic passion. This study addresses this gap in the literature by examining how passion is manifested among youth who show high commitment and performance in either academic or nonacademic domains (i.e., sports or the arts), and exploring the individual and contextual factors that support passion.

Prior Research on Passion

We found few examples of empirical research on passion. One exception is work by Vallerand and his colleagues who have developed a model of passion (Vallerand et al., 2003; Vallerand et al., 2006; Vallerand & Miquelon, 2007). They define passion as a strong inclination and desire toward an activity one likes, finds important, and invests time and energy (Vallerand et al., 2003; Vallerand et al., 2006). Furthermore, they propose that there are two types of passion—obsessive and harmonious—that differ in terms of

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how passion is internalized into one's identity. Support for this conceptualization of passion has been found in research on the domains of sports, recreational activities, and work (Vallerand et al., 2003; Vallerand et al., 2006; Vallerand & Houlfort, 2003). Vallerand and his colleagues found that harmonious passion was positively associated with flow and positive emotion, and that obsessive passion was associated with negative emotion and affect. In addition, they found that the perceived value of activity participation and an autonomous personality predicted harmonious passion.

Related Constructs

Because the empirical research on passion is limited, we draw on related motivational constructs that have been discussed in both the gifted and educational psychology literatures to understand this idea. "Rage to master" is one example of a construct in the gifted literature that is similar to our notion of passion (Winner, 1996a, 1996b). Winner describes how gifted youth have a rage to master, or are intensely motivated to make sense of their domain, show an obsessive interest, and have the ability to focus sharply in their area of expertise. She has illustrated this idea with exceptionally gifted youth in mathematics, music, and visual arts (Winner, 1996a; Winner & Martino, 1993). Gifted children who have a rage to master are able to focus so intensely on their activity that they lose sense of the outside world (Winner, 2000).

Motivational theories related to values, or the reasons why an individual chooses a task, also can help us understand passion. Eccles and her colleagues have developed the most extensive model of task value (see Eccles (Parsons) et al., 1983; Wigfield & Eccles, 1992, for more description). According to this model, task value is a function of four distinct components: interest (enjoyment of the activity), attainment value (importance of doing well on the task for confirming aspects of one's self-schema), utility value/importance (importance of task for future goals), and cost (negative aspects of engaging in task). Attainment value is most related to our conceptualization of passion. Activities that become passions are central features of one's identity and help define the individual (Fredricks et al., 2002; Vallerand et al., 2003).

Intrinsic motivation theory also considers the reasons why individuals choose to engage in various tasks (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Much of the work in this area has focused on the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Deci and Ryan (1985) argue that individuals who are intrinsically motivated perceive themselves as the cause of their own behavior, whereas individuals who are extrinsically motivated believe they are engaging in an activity because of external incentives such as rewards, punishments, or a desire to please another. In general, studies have found that an emphasis on extrinsic reasons for engaging in a task can undermine creativity and cognitive flexibility (Hennessey, 1996; Stipek, 1996).

Deci, Ryan, and colleagues (e.g., Ryan & Deci, 2000) have expanded the extrinsic–intrinsic dichotomy in their discussion of internalization, the process of transferring the regulation of behavior from outside to inside the individual. "Integrated regulation," when an individual thinks the activity is valuable and important to the self, is most similar to our notion of passion.

Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, and Whalen (1993) discuss intrinsically motivated behavior in terms of "flow," a relatively rare subjective state in which individuals are so involved in an activity to the point of "losing track of time and being unaware of fatigue and everything else but the activity itself" (p. 14). Individuals in a state of flow share several characteristics, including an intense and focused concentration, a merging of action and awareness, a loss of self-consciousness, a feeling of control of one's actions and environment, and high levels of intrinsic satisfaction (Csikszentmihalyi & Rathunde, 1993; Jackson, 2000; Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). The phenomenology and consequences of flow have been examined in such diverse samples as talented youth (Csikszentmihalyi et al., 1993), elite and nonelite athletes (Jackson & Csikszentmihalyi, 1999), artistic and scientifically creative individuals (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996), and social activism (Colby, & Damon, 1992).

Closely related to the notion of intrinsic motivation is the work on interest. Researchers have distinguished between situational interest, an affective reaction that is triggered by environmental stimuli, and individual interest, or a relatively enduring predisposition to reengage in an activity over time (Hidi, 2001; Hidi, Renninger, & Krapp, 2004; Renninger, 2000). To expand on the distinction between situational and individual interest, Hidi and Renninger (2006) developed a four-phase model of interest development. At the highest phase is a well-developed personal interest, which is most similar to our conceptualization of passion. A well-developed personal interest is characterized by positive feelings, greater knowledge and value for content area than other activities, and a desire to pursue the activity if given the choice.

Cohen (1988, 1990) outlined a similar distinction in types of interest among young gifted children. Type 1 interests are responses to external stimuli or novelty in the environment. In contrast, Type 2 interests are provoked by internal stimuli and imbalances that lead the child to ask big questions to regulate and balance his or her environment. Type 2 interests are similar to our notion of passion. These interests are characterized by an involvement that endures over long periods of time, an unwillingness to leave the activity, a willingness to tackle difficult problems, and positive affect and excitement.

Achievement goal theory, and most specifically the distinction between mastery and performance orientation, is also relevant to our discussion of passion. A mastery goal orientation reflects a focus on mastering the task, learning, and understanding, whereas a performance goal orientation reflects a focus on demonstrating one's ability relative to others (Ames, 1992; Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Nicholls, 1984).

In general, mastery goals are associated with more adaptive patterns of socioemotional and learning outcomes (Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2000). Dweck and her colleagues (Dweck, 1999; Dweck & Leggett, 1988) argue that mastery-oriented students are more likely to believe that intelligence is malleable. These children prefer challenging tasks and put forth effort to increase ability. On the other hand, students who are performance oriented are more likely to believe that intelligence is a fixed entity. These students tend to avoid challenge, believe that effort does not increase ability, and choose safer tasks where they can look smart (Dweck, 2002; Dweck & Leggett, 1988).

Drawing on these related literatures, we believe that for an activity to become a passion, an individual will perceive the activity as valuable, devote significant time and energy to it, hold mastery goals, choose to engage in challenging tasks, experience positive outcomes during task involvement (i.e., positive emotions, flow, and concentration), and incorporate the activity into his or her identity.

Factors That Support Passion in Academic and Nonacademic Domains

The research comparing youths' experiential state in school and voluntary out-of-school contexts can inform our understanding of the factors that support passion across academic and nonacademic domains. One example of this work is research by Larson and his colleagues (Larson, 2000; Larson & Kleiber, 1993; Larson & Richards, 1991). In a series of studies, they used experience sampling techniques to compare adolescents' emotion and behavior in school and in structured voluntary activities, such as extracurricular contexts and community organizations. They found differences across these two contexts; youth in school reported low intrinsic motivation, difficulty concentrating, and high rates of boredom, whereas youth in structured voluntary activities reported high motivation and high concentration.

Larson (2000) argued that the reason why youth experience positive experiential states in structured voluntary activities is that these contexts are particularly suited for developing initiative, a capacity to direct attention and effort over time toward a challenging goal. Observations of youth in out-of-school contexts support this argument; when youth work on challenging problems, they develop plans, monitor their strategies in response to feedback, and engage in problem solving (Heath, 1998; Rogoff, Baker-Sennett, Lacasa, & Goldsmith, 1995). Other possible explanations for the favorable emotions and behavior in sports and the arts is that participation in these contexts offers youth the opportunity to (a) develop social, physical, and emotional competencies, (b) form supportive and close relationships with nonfamilial adults and prosocial peers, and (c) engage in identity exploration (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Hansen, Larson, & Dworkin, 2003).

The research on the conditions that make the experience of flow possible also can provide insight into factors associated with passion. Flow is more likely to happen in situations when there are clear goals and immediate and unambiguous feedback, a situation more characteristic of sports and artistic activities than of most classrooms (Csikszentmihalyi et al., 1993). In many classrooms, the purpose of activities is not clear, and it takes a long time to get feedback on performance. Flow is also more likely to occur in situations where there is a balance between skills and perceived challenges (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). The balance of challenges and skills is not static; individuals need to both find new challenges to avoid boredom and develop new skills to avoid anxiety (Csikszentmihalyi & Rathunde, 1993).

Although passion is less common in schools, the literature on motivation and engagement provides some insight into how classrooms might be structured to support passion. Some scholars have argued that interest and engagement will be enhanced in classrooms where tasks have a moderate level of difficulty, are authentic and personally meaningful, provide opportunities for collaboration, and permit diverse forms of talents (Newmann, Wehlage, & Lamborn, 1992; Renninger, Sansone, & Smith, 2004; Stipek, 1996). Motivation is also higher in classrooms where students are given the opportunity to make real choices, with decisions based on effort and ability, and where they are given the opportunity to develop responsibility and independence (Ames, 1992; Eccles, Wigfield, & Schiefele, 1998). Unfortunately, tasks that require recall and repetition with limited opportunities for autonomy are still the most common instructional method in most classrooms (Larson, 2000; Newmann et al., 1992).

The social context has also been linked to motivation and engagement. Several studies have found that motivation and engagement is higher in classrooms where teachers are caring, support student autonomy, and adapt instructional practices to meet students' needs (Davidson, & Phelan, 1999; Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Wentzel, 1997). Other research highlights the importance of peers as socializing agents of motivation and engagement (Ryan, 2000). Adolescents tend to affiliate with other students of similar motivational and achievement levels. Researchers have found that affiliating with peers who like school and are engaged in school predicts increases in engagement and motivation over time (Kindermann, 1993; Ryan, 2001).

Other scholars have outlined the instructional practices that differentiate mastery versus performance-oriented classrooms. Teachers in mastery-oriented classrooms provide diverse opportunities to demonstrate mastery, define success in terms of improvement, emphasize effort and working hard rather than performing or getting the right answer, and treat errors and mistakes as a natural part of learning. In contrast, teachers in performance-oriented classrooms are more likely to emphasize grades and tests, use public evaluations, and highlight relative ability (Ames, 1992; Stipek, 1996).

Finally, self-determination theory provides insight into how classroom environment can be structured to either support or undermine the development of passion. According to this model, individuals have three fundamental psychological needs: relatedness (a desire to feel connected to others), autonomy (a desire to feel a sense of personal initiative), and competence (a desire to interact with the environment; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Deci & Ryan, 1991; Ryan, Connell, & Deci, 1985). Several studies have linked students' perceptions of the extent to which classrooms meet these three needs to engagement and intrinsic motivation (Connell, 1990; Fredricks et al. 2004; Deci & Ryan, 1991). This body of literature suggests that youth would be more likely to experience passion in classrooms: (a) where teachers and peers create a caring environment, supporting the need for relatedness; (b) where students have choice and relative freedom from external controls such as rewards and grades, supporting the need for autonomy; and (c) where feedback is clear and students have information on how to achieve desired outcomes, supporting the need for competence.

Gifted children face additional challenges in schools that may undermine the development of passion. One issue for gifted youth is the lack of challenge in regular classrooms that can lead to boredom and underachievement among gifted youth (Baker, Bridger, & Evans, 1998; Csikszentmihalyi et al., 1993; Reis & McCoach, 2000). Another issue is that gifted youth perform better with unstructured and flexible assignments, preferring to select their own learning experiences as opposed to engaging in a task selected by the teacher (Winner, 1996b; Winner, E. 1997). There are also differences in the quality of instruction and learning opportunities in gifted and regular classrooms. In a recent qualitative study, gifted students reported that their teachers who taught gifted classes were more enthusiastic, had higher expectations, and treated them with greater respect as compared with the "nongifted" classes (Hertzog, 2003). Gifted programs also had more activities that engaged them in higher-level thinking, including discussion, hands-on learning, and problem solving than did nongifted classrooms.

Purpose

Because we were interested in exploring how passion is manifested in academic and nonacademic contexts and what features support passion, we selected two samples of youth from a larger longitudinal study to interview in-depth about their activity involvement. We selected youth who exhibited a high degree of involvement coupled with high levels of performance in either an academic or nonacademic domain (i.e., sports or the arts). This sampling procedure is in accordance with Patton's (1990) recommendation for qualitative researchers to purposefully select cases at the extremes of a distribution because they are more likely to contain rich information. Students with a high level of involvement and

performance can give us the most insight into passion. For purposes of simplicity, we refer to the nonacademic domains as the talent sample and the academic domains as the gifted sample. Scholars who study the gifted have been unable to agree on a single definition of the phenomenon. We do not claim to define it here but rather use it to capture the wide range of academic skills and abilities that our sample brings.

We hypothesize that passion is a rather rare state. We expect that a likely place to find passion in young people is among individuals who exhibit a high degree of commitment to an activity. Based on the prior literature on passion and related constructs, we expect to document more instances of passion in nonacademic (i.e., sports and the arts) than in academic achievement activities. Finally, we expect that passion will be higher in contexts where individuals perceive positive relationships with adults and peers, where there is some choice, where there is adequate challenge, and where the goals and feedback are clear. We also expect these factors to be more characteristics of nonacademic contexts than academic environments.

Method

Sample

This article uses data from the Childhood and Beyond Study, a longitudinal study of development in childhood and adolescence conducted by Jacquelynne Eccles and her colleagues at the University of Michigan. Three cohorts of children in kindergarten, first, and third grades in four public elementary school districts in southeastern Michigan were followed over eight waves of data collection through their high school years. During the first four waves of data collection (1987-1990), survey and interview information was collected from the children, their teachers, and parents. After a 4-year gap in funding, three more waves of survey data were collected from the participants while they were in 7th through 12th grades. In general, families were two-parent intact (93%), middle-class, and White (95%). At the beginning of the study, the mean family income ranged from \$10,000 to \$80,000 and up, with a median of \$50,000 to \$59,999. In addition, the parents tended to be educated. Fathers' median education was an associate degree; mothers' median education was some college or technical school. This sample was explicitly selected so that family income and neighborhood resources would not be obstacles to children's activity involvement.

Talent Sample

Participants. From the larger longitudinal study, we used the survey data to purposively select the most highly involved and competent individuals in childhood to interview about their participation in nonacademic domains when they

reached adolescence. The parent, child, and teacher survey items at Waves 3 and 4 (1989 and 1990) were used to identify participants who were perceived (by themselves and by parents and teachers) as being highly competent (7 on a 7-point scale) in at least one nonacademic activity, who valued engagement in that activity very highly (7 on a 7-point scale), and who spent considerable time (by self- or parental report) involved in that activity (more than 5 hours per week in music or more than 7 hours per week in sports). The interview sample included 41 adolescents (15 males, 26 females) in Grades 9 ($n = 12$), 10 ($n = 14$), and 12 ($n = 15$). Twenty-four adolescents were involved in a single activity and 17 pursued more than one activity (e.g., choir and softball). There were 26 adolescents who pursued sports (football, soccer, baseball, softball, basketball, swimming, and gymnastics); 12 were in instrumental music (e.g., piano, violin, guitar, trumpet); 9 adolescents sang in a choir; 6 were involved in dance; 5 adolescents were in drama; and 2 adolescents were in art. (Note: Numbers add up to 60 rather than 41 because some participants were involved in multiple activities.) Youth participated in their activity during the after-school hours, either as part of an extracurricular school-based activity, as part of a club or team in the community, or in both contexts. At the time of the interview, all these adolescents were involved in or had recently quit participating in one or more of the following activities: sports, instrumental music, singing, drama, dance, or art.

Procedure. Each adolescent's family was initially contacted by phone by one of the five researchers and informed that their adolescent had been identified from his or her previously completed surveys as being one of the most highly involved in an out-of-school activity. Parents were asked whether they and their child would agree to be paid (\$10 for adolescent, \$15 for parent) for completing interviews about the adolescent's involvement and its effect on the family. Each interview was conducted by one of five female researchers who attended two training sessions given by experienced researchers in interviewing methods. The training sessions covered issues such as establishing rapport, effective communication techniques, specific strategies for eliciting responses, and ethical issues. One parent (typically the mother) and the adolescent were interviewed individually in their homes during the fall and winter of 1995/1996.

Interviews. We chose to use a semistructured in-depth interview to prompt discussion about each adolescent's involvement in his or her activity from childhood to adolescence. The interview questions were organized around the following areas: (a) general changes in the adolescent's life over the past 3 to 4 years; (b) the adolescent's general hopes and plans for the future; (c) the adolescent's history of involvement and accomplishment in the activity; (d) hopes and concerns about the activity; (e) the impact of the activity on other aspects of life, such as school, peers, and the family; (f) the role of significant others such as family members,

coaches or teachers, and peers on his or her involvement, and (g) hopes and plans for involvement in the future. If the adolescent was involved in multiple activities, the same set of questions was asked about each activity separately. Each interview was audio-taped and lasted from one to one and a half hours.

Gifted Sample

Participants. From the larger longitudinal study, we chose a subsample of students to interview on the basis of their being identified as gifted by their elementary school and being in the top 25% of the grade point average distribution among the gifted students, which was a 3.7 or higher on a 4-point scale. We selected 34 (20 females, 14 males) students who ranged in age from 17 to 21.

Procedure. Interviews were conducted by three female researchers with backgrounds in motivation and development. Each adolescent's family was initially contacted by phone and told that their adolescent had been selected to be interviewed in depth because they were in a gifted program in elementary school. Parents were told that they would be paid for their time (\$5 for parents, \$15 for adolescents). Five families refused because they were too busy or not interested, 2 adolescents were at school out of the state, and 2 had previously been interviewed for the talent study. Therefore, we interviewed a total of 25 students (16 females and 9 males). Fifteen students were currently in college, and 10 were about to begin college in the fall of 1998. Interviews took place at the participants' homes. One parent (typically the mother) and adolescent were interviewed separately at their home in the summer and fall of 1998. In two cases, the adolescents were interviewed at their college, and we did not collect parent data from these adolescents. The interviews lasted approximately one and a half hours. In this article, we only use the interview data collected from adolescents.

Interviews. We interviewed the adolescents about their lives in general and about their experiences growing up gifted. Specifically, we asked about (a) their academic experiences in elementary, middle, and high school; (b) their involvement in special gifted or enrichment programs in school; (c) their perceptions of giftedness and what it's like to be gifted; (d) the impact of their social relations on their academics and vice versa; (e) how they feel about themselves and their lives; (f) what they would change and would not change about how their parents raised them; (g) what other adults have had an impact on them and who they admire; and, finally, (h) their aspirations for the future. The participants who were in college at the time of the interview were asked additional questions regarding the high school to college transition, the difference between academic and social experiences in high school and college, and whether they were in any special academic programs in college.

Interview Analysis

We used a combination of induction, deduction, and verification techniques to analyze the interviews. First, a member of the research team read through each transcript and wrote a summary of overall themes for each adolescent in several areas, including (a) perceptions of activity structure, (b) teacher support, (c) peers, (d) psychological issues, (e) motivation, (f) identity and values, (g) passion/high interest, and (h) future expectations. The summaries were then exchanged with another team member to verify the conclusions. Next, based on the interview transcripts, each interviewee was rated as the degree to which he or she exhibited a passion for an activity. To be rated as passionate, we looked for a qualitative difference in the way the youth talked about their involvement in these activities. Examples of evidence of passion in these interviews included (a) wanting to do the activity all the time and devoting significant time and energy to it, (b) getting completely involved in the activity and experiencing flow, (c) getting emotional release from the activity, and (d) seeing one's identity in terms of the activity. Next, we examined similarities and differences in themes for the youth who we rated as "passionate" and "nonpassionate."

We found a difference in the overall level of passion across the two sets of interviews, with youth in the talent sample talking in a qualitatively different way about their involvement than youth in the gifted sample. We identified 7 adolescents in sports, 3 in instrumental music, 1 in vocal music, 1 in drama, and 1 in dance who spoke passionately about their involvement. In contrast, there was less evidence of passion in the gifted sample. In fact, we were unable to identify anyone in the gifted sample who was as passionate about their schoolwork as those in the talent sample were about their activity, though there was one youth who talked passionately about several interests outside of school and a few who demonstrated strong interest in a subject area.

Passion in Talent Sample

One characteristic of youth whom we rated as passionate in a nonacademic domain is that they wanted to do the activity all the time. These youth described being a state of flow in which they became so involved in the activity that they lost track of time and forgot about everything but the activity (Csikszentmihalyi et al., 1993). The following three quotes illustrate this theme:

I'd dance all day if I could. Forget school, forget dinner, forget everything. (Female, 9th grade, dance)

I love the game. I just, I can't stop. I just want to play it all the time. (Male, 10th grade, baseball)

You just love it so much . . . If I could act all the time I would (Female, 12th grade, drama)

Another characteristic of youth who were rated as passionate is that they reported feeling an emotional release from participation. This was especially true of the youth who showed passion in the arts and drama. The following two quotes illustrate this theme:

I get my self-satisfaction out of playing, even if I'm not playing well . . . I love to play. . . . When I want to be alone I play my violin. When I'm feeling depressed I play my violin. And even when I'm . . . feeling really happy I'll play my violin and I'll feel happier. (Female, 12th grade, violin)

I loved it (drama) so much. I think at that point it was kind of an escape from my life because my life was so difficult. Just the teasing I got. I wasn't secure with myself. And being someone else was very wonderful and just the fact that I could do it well. I wasn't good at math and all this stuff and I found something I was really good at. (Female, 12th grade, drama)

Identity also appeared to play a central role in passion. The individuals who were rated as passionate could not imagine their lives without the activity. Although these adolescents realized that participation required time and effort, they were willing to make sacrifices because the activity was so central to how they defined themselves. The following quote illustrates this theme:

I just can not see [soccer] not being part of my life. If I couldn't play sports I just don't know what I'd do. Sports are just like a really important part of my life. (Female, 9th grade, soccer)

Adolescents' developing identities and values also affected their decisions about participation in the future. Although most adolescents wanted to participate in their activity as a hobby in the future, 9 of these adolescents reported aspiring to a professional career directly as an athlete, actress, or musician or indirectly through production, coaching, or teaching. Although we did find more evidence of passion in the talent sample, it is important to acknowledge that the larger group of "nonpassionate" youth in athletics and the arts described their activity in qualitatively different ways than did this smaller group of "passionate" individuals. These youth talked about the time commitment required and how they were either unwilling or unhappy about making the investment and sacrifices necessary to achieve success in the domain (see also Fredricks et al., 2002).

Passion in Gifted Sample

In contrast to the passion that we had witnessed among some talented youth, the gifted youth reported little positive affect toward academic domains. Many of these adolescents discussed being bored in school and some even had difficulty coming up with anything in school that interested or motivated them besides getting good grades.

It (high school) was boring for the most part, and pretty tedious. They gave you like homework that was pointless to do. There was little chance for individualized kind of focus on anything that interests you. (Female, taking year off before college)

Identity in the gifted interviews seemed to revolve around the importance of being a good student in general, not in engaging in a particular academic content area. For example,

If I didn't do well, then I felt really bad, cause that was who I thought I was, like the smart person, you know. I wasn't that fun maybe, and you know maybe I wasn't even that nice, and maybe I wasn't cute, but I was smart. So if I wasn't smart anymore then I wasn't anything, so I had to make sure I maintained that. (Female, taking a year off before college)

Being the smartest was important to many of these adolescents not just for recognition, but also for personal fulfillment. Maintaining their identity as a "smart person" appeared to cause several of these youth a great deal of stress and resulted in mental health problems for a few of the youth in the sample. In fact, four of the gifted females were actually taking time off from college either because of mental health issues or because having been so disappointed by high school; they were questioning whether college (i.e., more of the same) was really the best place for them.

Some of the youth talked about having a strong interest in a particular subject and doing extra work to learn more about it. However, the way they talked about this interest was qualitatively different from the way the youth in the talent sample talked about their activities. That is, these adolescents did not appear as wrapped up in academics and did not appear to have as much evidence of being in flow in schoolwork as the talented adolescents did in their sports and arts activities. The following two quotes illustrate this:

Adolescent: I think [science] is really neat, and I just think it is exciting to be looking at little creatures under the microscope. I just think it is really exciting and something that's . . . like not everybody else is doing this.

Interviewer: Did you ever kind of get so involved that you lose track of time?

Adolescent: Not really. I don't get that excited or anything. (Female, starting junior year college)

Interviewer: How do you feel when you are doing math?

Adolescent: Well, I don't get all excited or anything, I mean, it's schoolwork (Male, starting college)

Interestingly, some gifted youth talked more positively about academic interests outside of school, which were more related to their personal interests or future plans. The following quote illustrates this theme:

I'm all but addicted to the Discovery channel, the history channel. I tend to read all of the time, history books, politics, that kind of stuff, and it ends up being unrelated to anything I am taking. (Male, starting junior year college)

Only one student's description of her involvement was similar to the way in which talented youth talked about their activities.

It was an outlet for me . . . I used to write a lot of poetry. So I guess it was like a way of dealing with problems for me, it was an outlet, you know, like I'd get things out through writing. . . . A lot of time I would feel compelled to write. I would feel there was something inside of me that had to be put on paper. (Female, taking year off of college)

Individual and Contextual Factors

Talent sample. One factor that may help explain the greater incidence of passion among the talented youth is differences in the degree of choice in academic and nonacademic contexts. In general, participation in activities such as sports or music during the after-school hours is voluntary. In contrast, choices are more constrained in school settings.

I think more than anything else . . . [singing] makes me happy. It's just like one of those things where you get involved. I am doing it, you know, because I want to not because somebody, you know, forced me into doing it or whatever. (Female, 12th grade, music)

Youth in the sports and arts also may have more evidence of passion because they were more likely to report having supportive teachers and peers who both encouraged their participation and demonstrated and modeled excitement towards

the activity (see Patrick et al., 1999, for more discussion of social themes among talented youth). However, the positive social benefits were not expressed by all youth who were rated as showing passion in the domain. Three females in the arts discussed how they were viewed as strange or different by peers at their school, largely because of their passion for the activity.

Another possible explanation for the higher incidence of passion among the talented youth as compared with the gifted youth is that they were more likely to receive frequent public recognition and positive feedback about their ability for their involvement. These youth talked about how this recognition and feedback about their ability increased their enjoyment in the domain.

Gifted sample. One reason we may have found less evidence of passion in the gifted sample is that schools are often not structured to foster passion for learning. The following quote by a female taking a year off a college illustrates this idea.

There are so many things schools can do to help kids think that learning was fun. I think kids are naturally inclined to want to learn, but it kinds of gets killed off slowly through school.

Many of the gifted adolescents talked about aspects of their schools that dampened their interest. For instance, they reported a lack of challenge in many of their regular classes. For example,

Interviewer: Were there any classes where you felt really bored?

Adolescent: Virtually every class I had that wasn't advanced placement. (Male, starting college)

In addition, teachers may have contributed to these adolescents' boredom in school. They talked about how some of their teachers lacked enthusiasm, only did the minimum required, were disrespectful, and were unable to relate to some of the youth. One reason some youth may have had negative feelings toward some of their teachers is that they felt they had to cater to students of lower academic ability and students who did not care, especially in their regular (as opposed to advanced) classes. The following two quotes illustrate this theme.

Like I'd go to calculus every day and I'd be the only one talking to the teacher at all. Everyone else would be like sleeping, or just like had no idea what was going on. (Female, thinking about taking time off of college)

I was stuck with a lot of kids who either didn't care about school or they were looking for like a free ticket

in class and the teachers geared their discussions and teaching toward these kids . . . I could sleep through class and still do well because it was geared so below me. (Male, starting college)

Some also felt that their academic interests were not supported by their peers and that it was not cool to be perceived as smart.

Everyone had their cliques set and then I was this new, little dorky kid, and I was made fun of the first day of school for reading on my own. . . . They totally made fun of me, and so I never brought a book to school again till like senior year. (Female, starting junior year college)

At that point [elementary school] it was still considered cool to be smart. At least I thought it was, but that changed in middle school. All of a sudden in middle school, if you did well in school you were a nerd. That wasn't cool at all. (Female, taking a year off of college)

The curriculum was another aspect that may have dampened their interest. Several of the gifted adolescents thought what they were learning in their classes was of little practical value and often lacked relevance to anything outside of school. The following quote illustrates this idea:

We didn't, really like in any of my history classes, correlate any of the events to current affairs, nothing was ever brought up to speed as to why it was relevant to you . . . Since we are reading textbooks that are so generalized and watered down, to make everything seem like, oh this is what happened and it has no relation to what is happening now. (Female, taking year off college)

Many of these adolescents reported that they liked both their gifted programs and advanced placement classes more so than their regular courses. One reason that they may have preferred the advanced programs and classes is that they offered an opportunity to be around other students who had similar goals and values and supported their academics.

I was in the [science, math, and computers] program, and that really pushed me to take the advanced classes, and you're surrounded by, 30 other smart people, and that was more competitive. It pushed you to do well. (Male, starting senior year in college)

In addition, the youth talked about how their advanced or gifted courses were more challenging, offered more opportunities for choice, and tended to have a more innovative curriculum as compared with their regular courses.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine whether and how passion is manifested among youth who show high commitment and performance in either an academic or nonacademic domain (i.e., sports and the arts). Because there has been little empirical work on passion, our conceptualization was based largely on the motivational literature on related constructs, including rage to master, value, intrinsic motivation, flow, interest, and goal theory. Youth whom we identified as passionate were more likely to talk about being so completely wrapped up in their activity that they wanted to do it all the time, hoping to continue their activity in the future if given the opportunity and choice, experiencing joy and emotional release from participating, and defining themselves in terms of their involvement in the domain. Our findings support the themes of prior literature as described in the introduction. However, in line with our expectations that school settings do not tend to foster passion, these themes primarily surfaced among the talented youth.

We found that passion was more characteristic of nonacademic activities such as sports and music than academic activities. In fact, none of the youth in the gifted sample talked about their involvement in the same way as the youth in the talent sample. Many of the gifted interviewees were motivated primarily by grades and maintaining the image as a good student. These youth appeared to endorse a performance orientation, as they were more concerned about demonstrating high ability and showing that they were smart, as opposed to being motivated by learning and mastering new skills (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). This portrayal is very different from Winner's description of highly gifted youth in the arts who exhibited a rage to master, or an intense desire to make sense of the domain (Winner, 1996a; Winner & Martino, 1993). It is also different from Csikszentmihalyi's concept of "flow" in which individuals exhibit such intense concentration on an activity that they are unaware of anything else (Csikszentmihalyi et al., 1993).

One explanation for the difference between our conclusions and Winner's description of gifted youth is characteristics of the two samples. Our sample included youth who were simply identified and took part in gifted programs in school, whereas Winner focused on profoundly gifted and talented youth. Our sample is more reflective of high-achieving youth who attend special programs but are not necessarily at the elite level. The differences in our findings may also be a function of age or developmental stage. Although youth in our gifted sample are at the high end of the intelligence distribution, they are nonetheless part of the general population, which is subject to the stereotypical social and developmental context of high school. It is clear from the interviews that many of the youth were more interested in school when they were younger, but when they reached middle and high school, intelligence and high achievement was less valued among

their peers. A tension between beliefs in their abilities and negative affect toward school was evidenced in many of these youth. At this developmental stage, they were in a limbo between a childhood where social issues did not matter as much and adulthood where they will likely have found a niche for themselves. If we had interviewed them earlier or later, we may have come to different conclusions about their academic passions.

In contrast, the youth in our talent sample were a few years younger at the time of our interviews, and unlike academics, some of the youth were involved in activities for which they actually gained status and recognition among their peers. Elsewhere, we have discussed the importance of peer acceptance for persistence in a talent domain (Fredricks et al., 2002). Regardless of social status, however, the youth in the talent sample were more likely to reap personal benefits from their activity, which kept them engaged. The favorable affect expressed by these youth is consistent with research by Larson and his colleagues using experience sampling methods (Larson, 2000; Larson & Kleiber, 1993; Larson & Richards, 1991); they found that structured voluntary leisure activities (i.e., extracurricular activities and community organizations) were the one context in which youth reported high challenge, intrinsic motivation, and concentration.

Our findings suggest that voluntary nonacademic activities such as sports and the arts are more likely to be structured in a way to support passion than in traditional academic environments. Self-determination theory may help explain the higher passion in nonacademic activities; individuals' need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness were more likely to be met in athletics and the arts than in academic domains. Youth in our talent sample were more likely to talk about having opportunities to make choices, receiving public recognition for their ability, and being supported and encouraged by teachers and peers. In an era of accountability pressures and fiscal constraints, the value of participating in structured, voluntary, nonacademic activities is being questioned. Many districts have either made cuts or are considering making cuts to their arts and athletic programs as a way to balance the budget and focus more attention on academic preparation. Our findings contribute to the research suggesting that educators should reevaluate these assumptions because of the potential of these activities to ignite youths' passion and counter the high rates of alienation and boredom that adolescents report in other areas of their lives.

Increasing Passion in Schools

In terms of academics, our findings suggest that school settings appeared to undermine rather than support passion. Many gifted students reported being bored, especially in typical classrooms. They felt they were not challenged in these classes and many thought that the curriculum was uninteresting and not relevant to their lives. Teachers also appeared to

contribute to the lack of passion in schools, especially in classes where youth felt that the teachers had to cater to “regular students” who often had lower motivation and academic ability. Consistent with prior research (Hertzog, 2003), we found that youth had more positive experiences in gifted programs and advanced classes than in their regular curriculum.

The results of our study indicate several ways in which schools might better support the development of passion and better serve the needs of gifted youth. Teachers are more likely to create classrooms that increase motivation and potentially ignite passion when they (a) model enthusiasm, (b) demonstrate caring, (c) adapt instruction to students’ needs and interests, (d) press students for active learning and understanding, and (e) provide clear and frequent feedback. Creating a more intellectually stimulating and challenging environment is also critical. The introduction of cognitively complex tasks that are both meaningful and challenging and allow youth to pose and solve real-world problems can help accomplish this goal. Providing opportunities for students to incorporate their outside interests and future plans in their schoolwork is also likely to be beneficial. Finally, teachers should give youth some choice over the types of activities they work on and some control over how they complete these activities.

Creating a supportive social context also may increase the incidence of passion. We found that youth had more positive feelings toward school in classes where their learning was supported, encouraged, and valued by their peers. This is more likely to occur when gifted students are placed in classrooms with other students at their ability level (Hertzog, 2003). Grouping students for instruction allows each student to receive an appropriate level of challenge and support (Tomlinson, 1999). Although the research tends to show that grouping gifted students together for instruction benefits them and does not detract from the learning of other students (Kulik & Kulik, 1992; Tomlinson, 1999), there is a belief that this practice is not egalitarian (Stanley & Baines, 2002). Furthermore, many educators believe that it requires too many resources, and there is opposition from parents who do not wish their children to receive “lesser” instruction. The findings of our study bear of the unfortunate effects of neglecting the needs of gifted students. As we saw from the gifted youth in our sample who were taking time off before college, gifted students may even be wary of continuing their education because school no longer nurtures their development.

Limitations

Our findings need to be interpreted in light of the following methodological issues. First, to get at some of the unique issues related to participation in academic and nonacademic contexts, we asked somewhat different questions across the two samples. For example, we asked the gifted youth about their perceptions of being gifted, whereas we asked the talented youth about how involvement in their activity affected

their lives. Second, youth were not asked directly about passion. Instead, we inferred their level of passion from their interview responses. We also did not observe the youth to see if they indeed exhibited passionate engagement in their activities. As noted earlier, another issue is that the two samples were made up of different youth at different ages. The interviews took place at different times in their adolescence; those already in college (the majority in the gifted sample) may have looked back on high school with a more negative view than those still in high school (the majority in the talented sample). Moreover, it is important to acknowledge these youth were interviewed over a decade ago, though we believe these findings echo the experiences of many gifted students in this standards and accountability focused educational era. Finally, our sample is drawn from primarily two-parent, middle-class European American families who had resources to support the development of passion in academic and nonacademic domains. Although this sample is not representative of the larger population from which it was drawn, the idea of purposive sampling is in accordance with recommendations outlined by other qualitative researchers and can provide insight for issues for further investigation (Patton, 1990). Even among this advantaged sample, we documented low levels of passion in academic contexts. There remains a need for research with children growing up in less resource-rich families and communities where passion may be the only resource available for advancement.

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