

## THROUGH ANOTHER'S EYES

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# Gifted Education and the Romance of Passion

**F**ew topics in the field of education are as engaging to parents and educators of gifted youth as the role of passion in learning. We cherish the image of a classroom filled with sparkly eyed children racing to school to pursue projects they love. We devour stories of individuals who as adults have gone against the odds to follow their bliss.

And when we encounter a student for whom the lights never seem to go on, we strive to find something—anything—that will possibly ignite the student's inner flame. We want gifted students to become contributing members of society and believe that to achieve this, we must encourage students to pursue ideas and projects they love. And, of course, we should. Why then, do I find myself wanting to challenge the notion of passion in education? Why do I feel myself cringing when I read about falling in love with an idea (Betts, 1985; Kaufmann, 1986; Torrance, 1995) even when I have written about this myself? Why am I sitting at my desk wondering if the proliferation of articles and books extolling passion in teaching and learning has actually done more harm than good?

Reflecting on my rather surprising reaction to this topic, I realize that I am not against passion as a significant part of the educative process, but am concerned that the romanticized interpretation of passion as excited, turned on, or exhilarated has so diluted the concept that it has been rendered as bland and as meaningless as "have a nice day." At the risk of sounding like a curmudgeon, I would like to suggest not that we abandon our interest in passion, but that we reexamine our ideas about it and incorporate a broader and more complex array of feelings and experiences into our definition—even if some of

these are dissonant with the positive, uplifting images typically associated with the term.

Two experiences have brought me to my present understanding of the role of passion in education. The first was my attempt to write a heartfelt note to my husband on the occasion of our first anniversary 13 years ago. I remember going to a thesaurus where the synonyms listed for passion were words like intense, emotion, joyful.

Not satisfied with those, I went to the dictionary for more information and was shocked to find that the more complete definition included such phrases as to endure, to suffer, to be affected by outside influences, and to experience extreme compelling emotions such as anger, rage, love, and so forth. While I decided to use the thesaurus definition for the anniversary note, the notion of passion has so vastly multidimensional haunted me; especially as I thought about my early years in the classroom when I typically identified as having real passion only those students who pursued projects with obvious energy, animation, and zest. These students were usually verbally gifted extroverts whose stories kept me and everyone else around them riveted to their every word. At the same time, I recalled the students whom I often dismissed as "underachievers" because they did not communicate this same level of excitement about their work, at least not in a way that I recog-

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nized. Reading the dictionary definition of passion made me want to go back to those students and apologize for perhaps not hearing, observing, and supporting them as well as I might have if I'd understood the many different ways in which real passion can be expressed.

While this single incident had a great impact on my understanding of passion, an even greater influence has been my investigation of the 1964–1968 Presidential Scholars, which began as my doctoral dissertation and has endured as my primary research interest, my passion for the past 20 years. This study focused on the post-secondary development of a group of highly gifted individuals who, in their adolescence, won one of the most prestigious awards then available to high school students, the Presidential Scholars Medallion that identified them as potential high achievers and leaders in the future. The initial goal of this study was to follow them into their adulthood to find out to what extent that prediction came true. At the outset of the project, I fully expected to uncover multiple tales of lives that followed a smooth trajectory from childhood passions to adult careers. In the earliest stages of the research, conducted when these students were in their late 20s, these stories did abound. One woman, long interested in music, lived out her dream of becoming a concert pianist. A boy who won dozens of science competitions became a world-class scientist. Many others pursued careers that were echoes of subjects they had fallen in love with in their youth. "Aha!" I thought as I read these

accounts. Following one's bliss is the most important factor in success just as I'd always thought!

Recent interviews conducted as the Presidential Scholars reached mid-life, however, have revealed other aspects of the nature, role, and influence of passion in gifted students' lives and have generated a new line of thinking about the topic. For example, I have learned that passion does not always emanate from positive situations and, in fact, often has its roots in negative experiences or circumstances. One male Presidential Scholar, now a 50-year-old member of the clergy, reported being taunted, beaten, and rejected by classmates for his intellectual prowess. As a child, he never expressed interest in any particular subject, probably because he used most of his available energy for emotional and physical survival. As an adult, however, he turned his feelings of despair and isolation into a career ministering to "people on the edge." Living in poverty but passionately committed to his work, he attributed his persistence in part to his early disenfranchisement:

I thought the loneliness would kill me as a kid. I was scared all the time. But that fear is what allowed me to feel compassion for such a wide variety of people. I can empathize with what it's like to be on the outside looking in. So in a strange way, I'm glad I grew up as I did, though I would not wish those experiences on anybody else.

Similarly, a 48-year-old artist living in New York ascribed her passion for art to a painful childhood where her family, who valued, praised, and rewarded her male siblings for their pursuits, would belittle her anytime she expressed an interest in anything but typical female activities. Also, in her urban, working class, ethnic neighborhood, girls were not encouraged to pursue their education beyond high school.

I never did anything artistic in my childhood. It would have been too humiliating, so I shut down. But watching other kids at school pursue their interests, I did learn to be a good observer. This, I believe, was where I got my eye for detail, color, and line. When I finally got away from my family and moved across the country, I was able to use these abilities. It was actually even sweeter because I had to wait so long to get there.

Another aspect of passion that I learned from the interviews is that different types of personalities express passion in different ways, and, sometimes, the manifestation of these interests might not be apparent to observers. One woman, an eminent geologist at a prestigious midwestern university, said that because she was extremely shy and quiet, her teachers, friends, and even her parents never knew about her interest in geology.

*continued on page 49*

## Gifted Education and the Romance of Passion

*continued from page 21*

Other kids got a lot of attention because they were “out there” with their passions. They would talk about them with anybody who would listen. I, on the other hand, was very circumspect. Like when I was very young, I would bring little rocks to bed and examine them with a flashlight, or I would hide my books on rocks while pretending to be interested in other things. Everybody was very surprised when finally I declared my major because they all thought I was on my way to a degree in English. Nobody ever knew.

Another man in his late forties talked about how his love of cars was something he dared not reveal to his high achieving and status conscious parents.

I went to school in a very upwardly mobile suburb where classes like auto mechanics were strictly out of reach for kids in the advanced classes. I finally talked the shop teacher into letting me sit in on a class but I was so scared of being found out that I had to keep all my materials hidden in the shop room. I went to law school but it was a terrible strain for me.

Now, happily, he owns one of the most lucrative automobile dealerships on the east coast and hires for his shop highly educated people who have exchanged fast-paced careers and potentially affluent life styles for their love of cars.

Finally, the interviews taught me that passion itself can frequently generate negative feelings such as disappointment, anger, or self doubt, especially when individuals are forced to face their limitations, or when they must abandon a long-cherished goal or interest. Sometimes these experiences result in an

apparent loss of passion; although, as several stories suggest, this may also lead to an opportunity to reconfigure one's pursuit. “I finally had to admit to myself that I was no longer suited to academic life, just as it was no longer suited for me,” a former professor of education admitted.

It was the hardest thing I ever had to do because I had been so successful. I quit the university and spent a long time wandering around aimlessly. I still had a passion for teaching but just couldn't hack all the things that went along with university life. My friends and colleagues couldn't believe how apathetic I seemed to be. But I wasn't really apathetic—I was just trying to find a new niche.

An inventor echoed these sentiments in his description of his disillusionment with his career. “I expected to be much farther along by now,” he reported wistfully.

People just don't understand my ideas. I don't know what I was expecting, but it wasn't this. I pursued my dream, but it just didn't work. Sometimes I beat myself up over it, but in my heart, I know I did the best I could. It just wasn't good enough. I've been at it since I was a kid—I guess it's time now for a break. It's a pretty anxious time for me but something I have to get through. And then, I'll try some new ways.

From these interviews and others, I have become increasingly convinced that passion, with its complex and sometimes conflicting facets, is a much more elegant notion than the stereotyped versions of happiness or bliss. If this is so, we are doing a disservice to students when we equate passion with doing what you love unless we also acknowledge the darker

emotions—fear, anxiety, disillusionment, frustration—that comprise real passion. To do otherwise would be like presenting students with an artist's palette limited to shades of red and orange while pretending that greens and blues and purples do not exist. How, then, can educators and parents foster true passion in students?

First, we must help them understand that passion can emanate from and flourish in a broad range of circumstances, issues, and emotions. We must teach them that even the most difficult experiences can generate passion, and we must demonstrate that passion can also be a source of sustenance in the hardest of times. Second, we must learn to identify passion in students who do not fit the idealized picture of a passionate learner, and, at the same time, we must recognize passion in the students whose communication styles are different from our own. We must become aware of our biases about passion and understand that some behaviors or qualities we would typically overlook might in fact be the real thing. Third, we must teach our students that true passion is more than the drama and exhilaration that comes from finding and doing something they enjoy; other compelling ingredients such as commitment, hard work, sacrifice, and accountability are significant, as well. GGT

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## Author Note

Identifying characteristics of the subjects mentioned in this article have been changed.