

Developing and Fostering a  
Passion for Learning and Engagement

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## Developing and Fostering a Passion for Learning and Engagement

In this talk, we explore the following questions: What is passion? How is it different from interest and flow? For us “passion” is a combination of motivation and affect while engaging in a task. Several of the following concepts can be used in trying to understand passion including (a) interest (enjoyment of a task), (b) attainment value (the extent to which doing the activity fulfills core aspects of one’s identity), (c) flow (being totally involved in the activity), and (d) mastery orientation (a focus on learning and mastery). There may also be aspects of other theories that can be brought in to this discussion, such as need for achievement and performance orientation, but for simplicity, we will focus on these four variables. However, none of these concepts completely captures what passion is. Passion is a rather rare state and is more characteristic of non-academic than academic achievement activities.

There is a need to learn more about how passion is manifested in different domains and what structural features support passion. To do this, we draw from Jacquelynne Eccles’ and colleagues’ longitudinal study of child and adolescent development. This study began in 1986 and has followed participants from kindergarten through college with a combination of survey and interview data collection. In this paper, we use both types of data, illustrating themes in the data with direct quotes from the interviews. First, using some of the quantitative data, we examined mean levels of self-reported interest in sports, music, and math over time (see Figure 1). In music, we only had data from participants at 1st to 6th grade. Interest in all three of these activities drops over the school years. Although on average interest declined, we were interested in identifying individuals who stayed committed to an activity (the outliers on the positive side). We suspected that a likely place to find passion in young people was among individuals who exhibited a high degree of commitment to an activity.

In order to examine what passion looks like across different domains, we chose to interview students from our larger study who were talented in either an academic or a non-academic domain. Talent was defined as a high degree of involvement coupled with high levels of performance. For purposes of simplicity, we will refer to non-academic domains (talent sample) and academic domains (gifted sample). For the talent sample, we chose students to interview on the basis of high ratings of interest, time commitment, and competence, by the students, their parents, and their teachers or by evidence of the child's talent in a phone interview with the parent. For the gifted sample, we chose students to interview on the basis of their being identified as gifted by their elementary school and being in the top 25% of the GPA distribution among the gifted students, which was a 3.7 or higher on a 4-point scale. When we interviewed them, the participants ranged from early to late adolescence.

Although adolescents reported similar reasons for participating in academic and nonacademic domains (enjoyment, competence, social reasons, and usefulness), we found a qualitative difference in the level of passion that was evident in the interviews in the talent sample. After reading the interview transcripts, each of the five interviewers rated each interviewee as to the degree to which he/she exhibited a passion for an activity. We conceptualized passion as a qualitatively different way of talking about their involvement than other interviewees. There was complete agreement about these ratings among the 5 interviewers. Examples of evidence of passion in these interviews include: (1) wanting to do the activity all of the time, (2) getting completely involved in the activity, (3) getting emotional release from the activity, (4) and seeing one's identity in terms of the activity. In total we found passion in 7 adolescents in sports, 2 in instrumental music, 3 in drama, 1 in vocal music, and 1 in art. These quotes illustrate their passion.

“I’d dance all day if I could. Forget school, forget dinner, forget everything.” (ID 3153)

Another adolescent said about basketball:

“I love the game. I just, I can't stop. I just want to play it all the time.” (ID 1198)

In order to future explore what constitutes passion, we examined differences between those individuals we rated as high in passion and the other talented adolescents we interviewed on self-reports of flow. Specifically, we examined mean differences in self-report on the following survey items: 1) excited, 2) getting completely involved, and 3) wanting to do something else. In both sports and music, those interviewees who we rated as passionate had higher means on all of the flow items (see Figures 2 and 3).

Identity appeared to play a central role in passion. Passionate individuals could not imagine life without the activity. Although these adolescents realized that participation required time, they were willing to make sacrifices because the activity was so central to how they defined their self. The following quote from an adolescent in soccer illustrates this theme:

A: “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.” (ID 3209)

In contrast, there was much less evidence of passion in the gifted interviews. We could not identify anyone in the gifted sample who was as passionate about academics as those in the talent sample. Furthermore, 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. Being a good student was central to their identities. 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." (1264)

Being the smartest was important to many of these adolescents not just for recognition, but also for personal fulfillment.

A: "I think by junior year I had my mind made up that I wanted, if at all possible, to be Number One. Because I thought I could, and ya know, I felt that if I didn't live up to my potential then, ya know, I guess there would be some feeling of dissatisfaction at the end."

However, there were some individuals who demonstrated a strong interest in a topic, although the way they talked about their activity was qualitatively different. That is, the gifted 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. For example:

A: "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."

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

A: "Not really. I don't get that excited or anything." (ID 1032)

Other adolescents identified previous interests they used to have as children:

A: "I wanted to be an entomologist, because I was all into bugs...I used to collect them all of the time, that was just like my hobby. I raised a couple of cropium moths, great big ones. I used to collect caterpillars. I put together a full collection for 4-H Fair one time." (ID 1057)

Or academic interests outside of school:

A: “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.” (ID 4325)

We also examined differences in the mean levels of flow in their favorite subject, music, sports and the arts for the interview sample and the whole sample. For these analyses, we created a scale from the interest and involvement in items, which were the most highly correlated. There were significant differences between the talent sample and the larger sample, but there were no differences between the gifted sample and the larger sample. Further, we found that adolescents reported the highest levels of interest and involvement in sports and the lowest level in their favorite subject (see Figure 4).

What are some explanations for why we found more evidence of passion in the non-academic sample? One factor may be the issue of choice (voluntary activity versus being non-voluntary in school).

“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.” (4155)

Another reason why we may have found less evidence of passion is that schools are not structured to foster passion for learning.

“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.” (ID 4202)

Gifted students reported several aspects of their schools that dampened their interest. For instance, they reported a lack of challenge in their regular classes. For example,

I: "Were there any classes where you felt really bored?"

R: "Virtually every class I had that wasn't advanced placement." (ID 1054)

In addition, they felt that teachers often had to cater to students who did not care.

"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." (1014)

They also felt that their academic interests were not supported by their peers.

"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." (ID 1032)

The curriculum was another aspect that may have dampened their interest. Several of the adolescents reported that the curriculum often lacked relevance to anything outside of school.

"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." (ID 4202)

How can we create environments that foster passion for learning? Our recommendations focus

on aspects of the task, opportunities for choice, and the social context. These are similar

dimensions that the talented adolescents reported as important to their continued participation.

One way to foster passion is to create more challenging tasks. Another way to foster passion is

make tasks more practical and relevant. The second aspect that is important is giving

adolescents some autonomy and choice over the types of tasks they work on and how to complete these tasks. One adolescent said:

A: "My teacher lets me skip the classes. That was really important that she let me move on my own pace, because if I had to stay in the slower pace, I would never have moved ahead and really gotten all of it (1046).

In addition, support from teachers and peers for learning is important. Interestingly, gifted students reported liking the gifted programs better than their regular classes. One of the reasons they preferred the gifted programs is that they were around other students who had similar goals and values and supported their academics.

A: "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." (ID 1436)

Finally, the adolescents talked about how they were more interested in subjects when their teachers modeled interest and enthusiasm and were competent teachers who cared about students' learning.

In conclusion, "passion" to learn seems rather rare. Unfortunately, "passion" was more likely to characterize non-academic achievement activities than academic activities. In addition, we explored the structural features that support passion. In general, typical school-type settings appear to undermine rather than support "passion." Finally, peer and teacher support for learning is a very important reinforcer of "passion."



Figure 1- Average Interest Over Time in Music, Sports, and Math

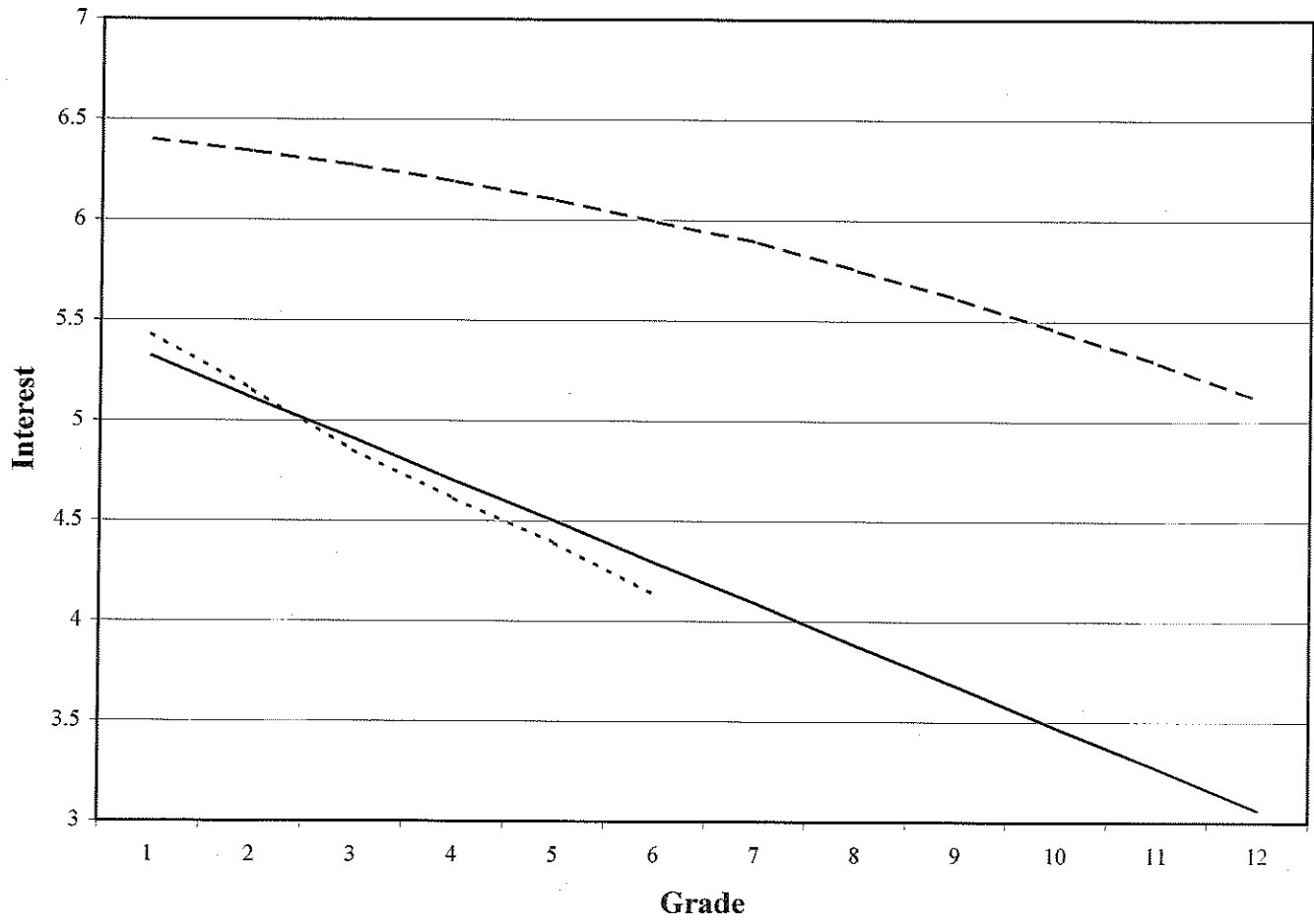


Figure 2- Differences in Flow Items by Passion in Sports

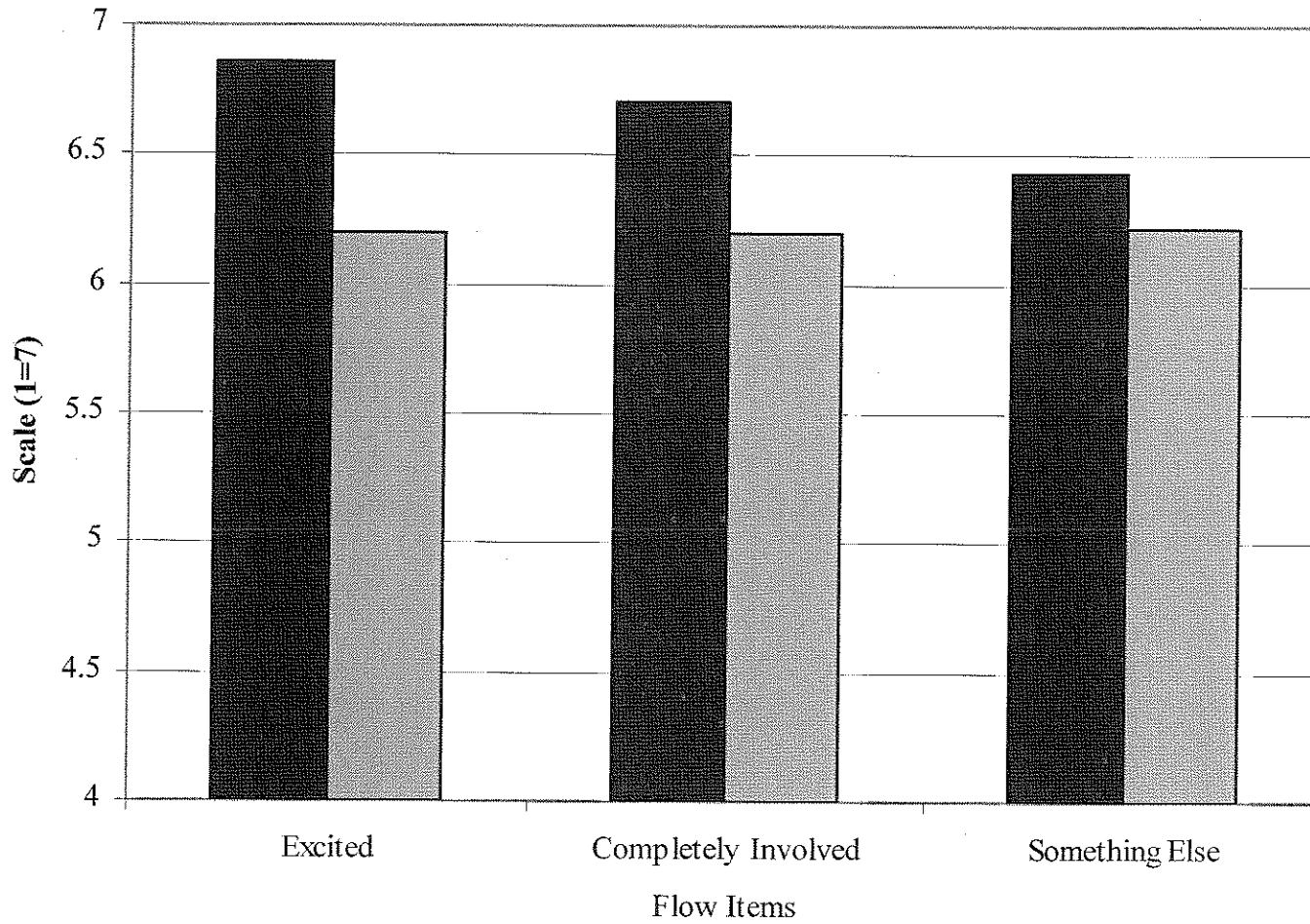


Figure 3- Differences in Flow Items by Passion in Music

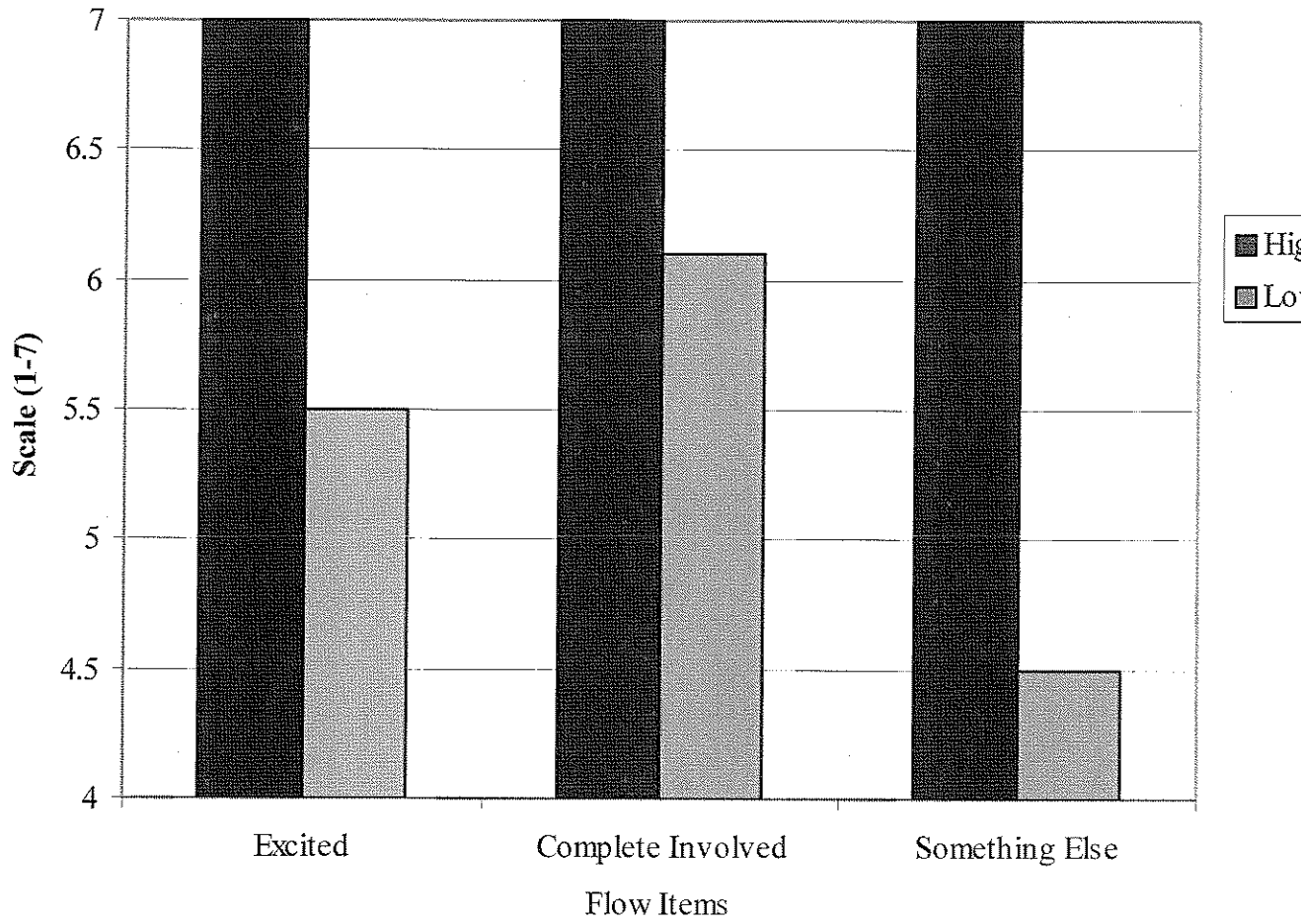


Figure 4- Differences in Flow By Domain

