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Teacher Passion: A Student Perspective

by Rebecca Stetler

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INTRODUCTION

The educational system is relied upon to develop children and shape society. Education is a vital factor in children's growth into who they will be and how they will influence others. Education opens doors for improvement, inspires innovation, and allows for opportunities that provide hope. The quality of this education relies directly upon the quality of the teachers providing it (Rowe, 2003). This study analyzes teacher passion in order to determine its impact on student outcomes to further determine the importance of teacher quality in education. This study shows that teacher passion is an important characteristic of teacher quality in relation to student outcomes.

In the ongoing scholarly discussion regarding educational effectiveness, few studies have analyzed teacher passion, commitment, or quality as a determining factor. In his piece, "The Importance of Teacher Quality As A Key Determinant of Students' Experiences and Outcomes of Schooling," Ken Rowe (2003) analyzes the research regarding influential factors of educational outcomes and student educational experiences, recognizing teacher quality as one of the most, if not *the* most, significant factor (p. 15). He also recognizes that in the plethora of available research studies regarding educational effectiveness, relatively few, and only fairly recent studies, have focused on "teacher quality and instructional effectiveness" (p. 18). Many studies have tried to find a link between school organization and student outcomes, but they have failed. Rowe speculates that this is because these factors are not directly related, but rather indirectly with the mediator of teachers (p. 19). This is why he calls for attention to teacher quality, which is what directly affects student outcomes (Rowe, 2003). To develop a more clear focus, I have chosen to concentrate on the impact of teacher passion. Passion has been shown to be a key factor in teacher quality by many studies, one saying that "the link between learning and education argues that all pedagogical approaches fail unless passion is created in the classroom" (Serin, 2017, p. 61).

Some currently existing research in this field asks teachers to define passion. In one such study by Crosswell and Elliott (2004), thirty teachers were interviewed in a fairly open format, allowing them to elaborate on their answers. Teachers described their views of teacher commitment throughout their careers. Their responses were grouped into six categories: passion, investment of time,

attention to student needs, responsibility to share knowledge, upholding professional knowledge, and participation in the school community. The category that remained prominent throughout each interview was passion. Teachers defined this passion using words such as love, enthusiasm, and an emotional connection to their work and/or students.

These studies define teacher passion, and a study published in the *Journal of Educational Psychology* describes the importance of teacher passion by analyzing its influence on student and personal outcomes. This study concludes that harmonious passion helps “teachers personally derive the best out of their teaching involvement while sustaining students’ interest toward education” (Carbonneau, Vallerand, Fernet, & Guay, 2008, p. 985). An important note about this study, though, is that its participants are teachers, and it therefore only includes teachers’ views and not students’ views of teacher passion and its impacts. In fact, every study on teacher passion I was able to find included only teacher feedback. The shortage of knowledge regarding student perceptions of teacher passion and its impacts is problematic.

METHODOLOGY

A study was conducted to fill these gaps in the knowledge of student-perceived effects of teacher passion. College students participated, answering questions about their perceptions of prior high school teachers. Participants were asked a mixture of multiple-choice and extended response questions. To avoid confusion between various meanings of passion, participants were provided with a definition of passion, which restricted the idea of ‘passion’ in the study to harmonious passion. This definition was, “Passion is a willingness, tendency (by free choosing), and motivation to spend time and energy on an activity.” This is a comprehensive understanding of harmonious passion according to Vallerand et al. (2003), Serin (2017), and Carbonneau et al. (2008).

The survey consisted of five sections. The first section included demographic questions regarding year in college, size of high school graduating class, and the type of area where the high school was located (rural, suburban, or urban). The questions in the second section provided generalities about the presence of teacher passion in the participant’s high school. To identify more specifics of what features cause students to characterize a teacher as passionate, the third section asked participants to identify and answer questions regarding their most passionate high school teacher. To compare, the fourth section asked very similar questions with participants considering their least passionate high school teacher. The fifth section allowed participants to elaborate, asking about any academic successes or

failures they would attribute to the teachers' level of passion. The final question allowed participants to share any other information they found pertinent.

The survey was distributed through Facebook, where many Bowling Green State University (BGSU) students had the option to participate. There were thirty-seven participants, consisting of 20 first year students, 15 second year students, and 2 third year students at BGSU. Of these thirty-seven participants, ten graduated high school in a class of less than 150 students, ten in a class of 151-300 students, eleven in a class of 301-500 students, and six in a class of more than 500 students. Eleven of their high schools were located in rural areas, twenty were located in suburban areas, and six were located in urban areas.

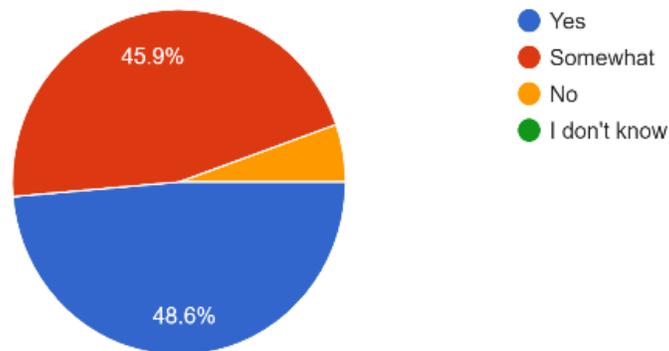
RESULTS

IDENTIFYING PASSION IN TEACHERS

The two pie charts shown below (Graph 1 and Graph 2) display the results of the general questions about whether students believed their high school teachers to have been passionate about their jobs. These show the variety in general opinions of teacher passion by the participants before identifying specifics in future questions.

Did you think your high school teachers generally seemed passionate about their job?

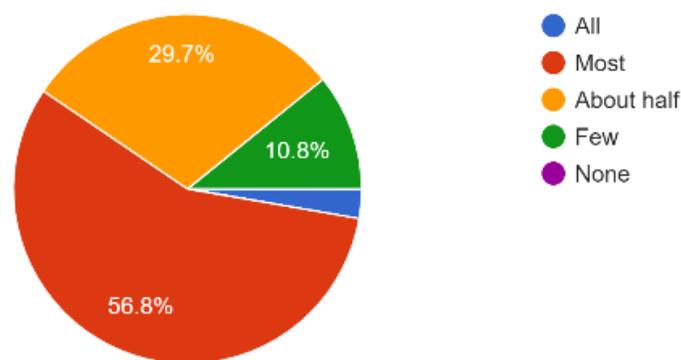
37 responses



Graph 1

How many of your high school teachers seemed passionate about their jobs?

37 responses



Graph 2

When asked to describe the features that characterize a teacher as passionate about their job, many students identified some sort of emotion or attitude toward teaching, especially excitement. The table below, Figure 1, categorizes the responses.

What features characterize a teacher as passionate about their job?

| | Connection/ Relationship with students | Attitude | Time put in | Teaching Style | Knowledgeable of subject area |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|----------|----------------|-------------------|----------------------------------|
| Number of responses that included this idea (out of 33) | 18 | 16 | 2 | 11 | 5 |
| Percentage of responses that included this idea | 54.55% | 48.48% | 6.06% | 33.33% | 15.15% |

Figure 1

MOST PASSIONATE TEACHER

In the next section, where participants considered the most passionate teacher they had in high school, the first question allowed participants to type what caused them to feel that this teacher was passionate. Figure 2, below, details participants' responses, divided into five categories based on identified similarities between responses. Some responses described various characteristics, allowing the response to fall into multiple categories. Many participants saw the teacher's connection to or relationship with students as a key determinant in their passion. Participants said this teacher "cared about my success in and outside the class room" and "wanted to see me do well." Twenty-one of the twenty-nine responses to the question, "What made you feel that this teacher was passionate?" in some way mentioned this relationship.

What made you feel that this teacher was passionate?

| | Connection/ Relationship with students | Attitude | Time put in | Teaching Style | Knowledgeable of subject area |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|----------|----------------|-------------------|----------------------------------|
| Number of responses that included this idea (out of 29) | 21 | 10 | 9 | 4 | 3 |
| Percentage of responses that included this idea | 72.41% | 34.48% | 31.03% | 13.79% | 10.34% |

Figure 2

In further multiple choice and checklist questions about this passionate teacher, 100% of participants agreed that their most passionate teacher cared about their students' academic success, 91.9% thought this teacher cared about their students in areas of life other than academics, 81.1% thought the teacher was passionate about course material, 97.3% identified that the teacher put time into their work, 97.3% felt that this teacher made them more excited to go to class, 89.2% felt the teacher made them more excited about the material covered, 100% believed they learned more in this teacher's class than others due to the teacher's level of passion, and 100% described their student-teacher relationship with this teacher as positive.

LEAST PASSIONATE TEACHER

When asked to consider their least passionate teacher, participants often described an “uncaring,” “unengaged” teacher who “didn’t care about the student or about how they performed” and had “boring lessons.” The table below (Figure 3) shows participants’ responses divided into categories, similar to Figure 2.

What made you feel that this teacher was not passionate?

| | Connection/ Relationship with students | Attitude | Time put in | Teaching Style | Knowledgeable of subject area |
|------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|----------|----------------|-------------------|----------------------------------|
| Number of responses that included this idea (out of 30) | 7 | 18 | 6 | 11 | 1 |
| Percentage of responses that included this idea | 23.33% | 60% | 20% | 36.67% | 3.33% |

Figure 3

In the multiple choice questions concerning this unpassionate teacher, 70% of participants felt that the teacher made them less excited to go to class, 62.2% felt the teacher made them less excited about the material covered, 67.7% felt they learned less in this teacher’s class than others due to the teacher’s level of passion, and only 10.8% described their student-teacher relationship with the teacher as positive.

STUDENT OUTCOMES

When asked about the academic successes and/or failures the participants attribute to high school teachers’ passion or lack thereof, some students shared that a student’s attitude is often a reflection of the teacher’s attitude. They made statements such as “the teachers had no passion and didn’t want to be there, so I didn’t want to be there either” and “[l]evels of student academic passion is attributed to those of their teachers.” Successes that participants attributed to their teacher’s level of passion included learning leadership skills, finding their own passion, succeeding in outside organizations, choosing to go to college, and earning satisfactory grades. Other participants identified failures due to a lack of passion in their teachers, expressing that the teachers did not prepare them for tests or for college. A few participants also noted that they did not attribute their academic

success or failure to the teacher: “[A]cademic success was my doing. They merely guide.”

DISCUSSION

Of the participants who were in a graduating high school class of three hundred or less high school students, 55% said most or all of their high school teachers (given the options of none, few, about half, most, or all) were passionate about their jobs. Of the participants who were in a graduating high school class of more than three hundred, 64.71% said most of their high school teachers were passionate about their jobs. Therefore, the size of the high school does not appear to have a major impact on the relative number of passionate teachers employed there.

Overall, I found that teachers were more likely to label themselves as passionate than students were to label their teachers as passionate. According to a study using teacher participants, 93.1% of participants “met the criteria for at least a moderate level of passion toward teaching” as determined by input provided by these teachers themselves (Carbonneau, Vallerand, Fernet, & Guay, 2008, p. 984). According to my study, far less teachers are identified as passionate from the view of students. As Graph 1 shows, only 48.6% of students answered “Yes” to “Did you think your high school teachers generally seemed passionate about their job?” Graph 2 shows only 59.5% of students answered “Most” or “All” to “How many of your high school teachers seemed passionate about their jobs?” This shows the differing perspectives of high school teachers and their students and reveals the importance of including the perspectives of various groups.

A study done by Seog Hun Jo (2014) of Gachon University involved an online survey of 348 teachers, most of whom had been teaching for more than fifteen years. It showed that “favorable student relationships were significantly associated with positive emotions” (p. 126). This agrees with my survey of student views of teacher passion, where 100% of students identified their student-teacher relationship with their most passionate teacher as positive, rather than negative or neutral, and 72.41% fondly described their relationship with their most passionate teacher as a key determinant in recognizing this teacher as passionate.

My study reveals some features that are more prevalent in student descriptions of their most passionate teacher than the opposite feature is in student descriptions of their least passionate teacher. A positive connection or relationship the teacher had with students was the most commonly identified feature of most passionate teacher at 72.41% of responses, while a negative connection or relationship with the least passionate teacher was only identified in 23.33% of responses. Furthermore, the most common element of least passionate teachers was

a negative attitude at 60% of responses, while a positive attitude was only identified in 34.48% of most passionate teachers.

This study revealed various types of student outcomes related to teacher passion. The most common type was academic success: 100% of students surveyed believed they learned more in their most passionate teacher's class than others due to the teacher's level of passion. Other participants attributed finding their own passion at least partially to their teachers' passions. Other successes participants attributed to teacher passion were leadership skills, caring about their grades, and going to college.

My study also shows that a teacher's level of passion greatly affected the student's level of excitement to go to class, their level of excitement about the material covered, and the amount they learned. This is shown by the majority of participants responding that they were more excited to go to class, more excited about the material covered, and felt they learned more with their most passionate teacher; likewise, the majority of participants responded that they were less excited to go to class, less excited about the material covered, and felt they learned less with their least passionate teacher.

A very strong correlation was evident between teacher passion and teacher-student relationships. 100% of participants identified that their relationship with their most passionate teacher was positive, while only 10.8% of participants described their student-teacher relationship with their least passionate teacher as positive.

CONCLUSION

This study shows the characteristics of teacher passion according to recent high school graduates. Key features associated with teacher passion recognized are the emotion or attitude of teachers and the student-teacher relationship. This study also analyzed variance between student identification and teacher identification of teacher passion, finding that teachers are more likely to identify themselves as passionate than students are to identify their teachers as passionate.

LIMITATIONS

Future research regarding teacher passion could focus on teacher passion in association with the amount of time the teacher has been teaching. The final question of the survey allowed participants to leave any comment they would like about teacher passion or the survey in general. One participant wrote that the "WAY more passionate teacher was a first year teacher vs the other, who had been

teacher for 10+ years.” This leads to a new question about teacher burnout and continuing educational effectiveness that could be addressed in future research.

Though this study revealed a strong and significant correlation between teacher passion and student-teacher relationships, it did not identify if or how this relationship directly impacted educational outcomes for the student. Indirectly, it can be assumed that positive student-teacher relationships cause increased learning, since this study reveals that student-teacher relationships are key in teacher passion, which impacts the amount learned. However, this is an indirect relationship, so a future study could focus on this component to determine if this correlation is true when analyzing the pair’s direct relationship.

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