

What About Passion in Education? The Concept of Passion, why it is Important and How Teachers Can Promote it

Zuleica Ruiz-Alfonso (PhD)

University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, Spain

Lidia Santana Vega (PhD)

University of La Laguna, Spain

Elina Vilar Beltran (PhD)

Queen Mary, University of London, United Kingdom

Doi: 10.19044/esj.2018.v14n1p19 [URL:http://dx.doi.org/10.19044/esj.2018.v14n1p19](http://dx.doi.org/10.19044/esj.2018.v14n1p19)

Abstract

Is passion important in the educational context? What are the benefits of passion? Is it possible to foster students' passion? What are the teachers' characteristics or behaviors that foster students' passion? The aim of this study was to answer this questions by a literature review, as well as to present a global and current picture about the role of passion in Education. Although research on passion is really recent and, therefore, still scarce, the literature reviewed showed a great variety of passion's outcomes, which highlights the importance it has in the educational context. We also tried to summarize the teachers' characteristics studied up to now that can foster the students' passion. We concluded by presenting the potential implications of the articles reviewed within education, and presenting the main conclusions of the review.

Keywords: Passion; academic context; teachers; students

Introduction

Passion, as a strong inclination towards an activity, object or person, is a concept that is present in many contexts and that everybody could define or identify. For centuries, passion has aroused the interest of different disciplines, it has been studied by many philosophers, it has been the main thematic axis of novels and films, and it is an easily attributable characteristic to people who have surpassed for achieving the excellence in a specific field. Nevertheless, the popularity of the term has led it to acquire, throughout history, different meanings, and it is quite common to confer it different interpretations: From the religious passion, linked to the suffering of certain

evangelical events, to the sexual passion, understood as an emotional state in which the person wants to engage in a sexual activity.

However, in this paper passion is approached from a psychological-motivational perspective. Although from this perspective different authors have interpreted the term as a motivational tendency of the individual to reach its goals and purposes, the first empirical study analyzing the passion for an activity and as a motivational construct goes back to Vallerand et al. (2003). In this study, in addition to define the concept, the authors propose the Dualistic Model of Passion and suggest a scale to measure the construct. Since then and from this theoretical framework, there have been numerous studies that have demonstrated that passion, among others, propels persistence (Bonneville-Roussy, Vallerand, & Bouffard, 2013), impels concentration (Forest, Mageau, Sarrazin, & Morin, 2011), eases people to fully engage in an activity for a long time (Bonneville-Roussy, Lavigne, & Vallerand, 2011; Vallerand et al., 2007, 2008), and promotes a better students' academic performance and well being (Bonneville-Roussy et al., 2011, 2013; Vallerand et al., 2007). In this sense, although in recent years the number of studies has been increasing, studies analyzing the role of passion in the educational context is still scarce (Ruiz-Alfonso & León, 2016).

Thus, this review arises from the desire to answer the questions that emerge from this seeming lack of literature: Is passion important in the educational context? What are the benefits of passion? Can students feel passion for a specific subject and can it affect their performance? Is it possible to foster students' passion? What are the teachers' characteristics or behaviors that foster students' passion?

In order to answer this questions and to shed light on the role of passion in the educational context, we conducted this literature review. The paper is structured in five sections. In the first, the concept of passion towards an activity is defined according to the main theories. In the second, we tried to explain why passion is important within the educational context, showing the main passion's outcomes in education exploring so far. In the third, we described according to the literature, how passion can be promoted. In the fourth, implications within the academic context are drawn. Finally, in the fifth, we present the general conclusions of the review.

The concept of passion

Passion is a strong inclination towards a self-defining activity that one likes or loves, values, and to which one invests a significant amount of time and energy over a long period of time (Vallerand et al., 2003). This definition is the most extended and comes from the Dualistic Model of Passion, the main framework from which most of the research on passion to date has been developed. In this model, Vallerand et al. (2003) propose two types of passion

– harmonious and obsessive – suggesting that these types differ from each other in the way in which the activity is internalized into the person’s identity. Additionally, harmonious and obsessive passion are also associated with different outcomes and experiences while performing the activity. So that, harmonious passion comes from an autonomous internalization of the activity into the person’s identity, and it leads people to freely engage in the activity they love. Harmoniously passionate people feel that the activity is in line with their values and other aspects of their life, and they experience higher levels of concentration, flow, affect and energy while performing it. On the contrary, obsessive passion comes from a controlled internalization of the activity into the person’s identity, and it occurs when the individual feels intrinsic or extrinsic pressures to perform the activity. Therefore, obsessively passionate people usually experience negative feelings while performing the activity, they have difficulties to remain focused on it, and they feel that the activity they love is in conflict with other aspects of their life (Bonneville-Roussy et al., 2011, 2013; Vallerand, 2015; Vallerand et al., 2003). Most studies on passion within the educational context have focused on harmonious passion because of its benefits for education (Bonneville-Roussy et al., 2011, 2013; Ruiz-Alfonso & León, 2016).

Although the vast majority of research on passion follows Vallerand et al. (2003)’s conceptualization, other authors have also tried to define, within the educational context, what passion is. Thus, Coleman & Guo (2013) use the term “passion for learning” to refer to the student-focused interest in a particular domain, which persists over time and is usually linked with a relative disinterest towards other activities that are interesting to their peers. Other authors as Day (2004) and Liston and Garrison (2004) have studied the concept of passion from the perspective of teachers, focusing on the passion that teachers have for their profession or the subject they teach. From this perspective, Day (2004) defines passion as the teachers’ love towards the subject they teach, towards their students, and towards the passionate belief that, through teaching, they can significantly influence in the lives of their students. Liston and Garrison (2004) also define passion towards teaching as the love of teachers towards the task of educating other people, towards the ideas, and towards their students.

Furthermore, a recent systematic review on passion and education conducted by Ruiz-Alfonso and León (2016) tried to identify the set of passion characteristics used by the different scholars to define the concept. The authors observed that all quantitative studies used Vallerand et al. (2003)’s definition, while authors from qualitative studies tended to used their own definitions and there was more disparity in the conceptualizations. Nevertheless, Ruiz-Alfonso and León (2016) analyzed the different works and extracted nine features of passion used by the different authors to define the concept. These

features were: 1) loved activity (the person feels a strong and positive inclination toward the activity, he or she love it); 2) identification (the person feels that the activity is something within the self, something that is part of who he/she is); 3) dedication (the individual spends a lot of time performing the activity); 4) persistence (passion for the activity is continued over a years or even a lifetime); 5) caring (passionate teachers are interested and concerned about their students); 6) positive relationships (passionate teachers usually have good relationships with students and other peers); 7) supportive context (passionate people usually feel reinforced by other people who support their passion); 8) positive emotions (passionate people usually feel good emotions while performing the activity); 9) domain specific: (passionate people shows love just for the passionate activity and a relative disinterest for other activities). Despite these common features, the authors observed that only some scholars had clearly defined the concept (Coleman & Guo, 2013; Day, 2004; Fredricks, Alfeld, & Eccles, 2010; Oliver & Venville, 2011; Vallerand et al., 2003) and of them, only Vallerand et al. (2003) provided a consistent theoretical-scientific framework, supporting the claim that their conceptualization is currently the most accepted among the scientific community.

Why passion is important in Education

Research on passion and education is really recent and, therefore, still scarce. However, different studies have focused on a great variety of passion's consequences within the educational context, especially on the harmonious passion's benefits. Thus, passion has been linked, among others, with students' performance (Bonneville-Roussy et al., 2011; Vallerand et al., 2007), deliberate practice (Vallerand, 2015), persistence (Mageau et al., 2009), goal orientation (Fredricks et al., 2010; Hobbs, 2012; Phelps & Benson, 2012), motivation to learn (Ruiz-Alfonso & León, 2017; Stoeber, Childs, Hayward, & Feast, 2011), different cognitive process as concentration or resilience (Gucciardi, Jackson, Hanton, & Reid, 2015; Ho, Wong, & Lee, 2011), and well-being (Bonneville-Roussy et al., 2011, 2013; Vallerand et al., 2007). In this sense, one of the consequences of passion most studied so far within the academic context has been students' goal orientation (Ruiz-Alfonso & León, 2016). Studies have shown that the most harmonious passion, the most learners' tendency to remain focused on the improvement of their own competence (Bonneville-Roussy et al., 2011; Fredricks et al., 2010; Hobbs, 2012; Phelps & Benson, 2012; Vallerand et al., 2007). According to Bonneville-Roussy et al. (2011) and Vallerand et al. (2007), passion also affects students' academic performance. They observed in a sample of music and colleague students, respectively, that harmonious passion affects performance, but they also noticed that this relation was not direct and was

mediated by other variables as mastery goals and deliberate practice, which is in line with other studies (Vallerand, 2015). Similarly, Ruiz-Alfonso and León (2016) observed, in a sample of high school students, that students' harmonious passion towards math affects their performance in the subject, but detected that this relationship was also mediated by another variable: The students' intrinsic motivation to learn.

Passion has been also linked with students' persistence (Bonneville-Roussy et al., 2013), the daily or weekly time they spent to the passionate activity (Bonneville-Roussy et al., 2011; Stoeber et al., 2011; Vallerand et al., 2007), and the students' academic engagement (Stoeber et al., 2011). It would be interesting to note that if a student persists on a task, spend a lot of time, and is committed to it, it is not uncommon to expect that it could also benefit his/her academic performance.

Moreover, passion has not been studied only in relation to students' academic performance, but its effects on other variables such as the students' well being or their deep strategy to learn have also been analyzed. Therefore, Vallerand et al. (2007) and Bonneville-Roussy et al. (2013) observed that harmonious passion was positively associated with students' subjective well-being and life satisfaction; and a recent study conducted by Ruiz-Alfonso and León (n.d.) noticed that students' harmonious passion affects their deep strategy to learn and their epistemic curiosity towards learning. On the one hand, these findings suggest that harmoniously passionate students are more likely to engage in the task meaningfully, analyzing and comprehending the information they receive and associating the new ideas with their previous knowledge. On the other hand, the authors noticed that harmoniously passionate students are more likely to feel an intrinsic desire to know, to adopt an exploratory behavior, and to be motivated by the acquisition of new ideas.

Undoubtedly, although much more research is needed on this topic, the literature carried out so far highlights, through the great variety of passion's outcomes identified, the important role of passion within the educational context.

How teachers can promote their students' passion

A recent study by Moeller et al. (2017) noticed that about the 80% of passion in adolescents from middle and high schools was due to the situational contexts. Notwithstanding that Moeller and colleagues assessed other activities that were not directly related to the educational context, their findings suggest that passion is not a fixed characteristic in people and that only about the 20% of passion is explained by individual differences. This study provides useful information on the scope of action that external agents may have in the development of passion. Specifically, within the academic

context, different studies have found that teachers, and what they do in the classroom, can help to promote students' passion.

Although most of the research on this issue has made a qualitative approach to explore how passionate students perceive their teachers, and that it is necessary to put more emphasis on this important topic (Ruiz-Alfonso and León, 2016), the literature reviewed has provided interesting clues that can help teachers to understand how they can foster their students' passion. Thus, Bonneville-Roussy et al. (2013) and Fredricks et al. (2010) noticed that teachers who ease students to engage in the activity from their self and not for external pressures, that is, supporting their autonomy, are more likely to foster passion in their students. Similarly, Coleman and Guo (2013) suggested that passionate students tend to perceive their teachers as supportive, encouraging, and caring. In addition, Fredricks et al. (2010) added that students usually develop passion for activities perceived as challenges, as well as for those activities in line with their own interests.

Despite the previous studies suggest how the students' passion can be fostered, until the research by Ruiz-Alfonso and León (2017), it has never been analyzed before the specific teachers' characteristics that could promote students' passion. In this study, the authors showed that math teachers who try to explain the usefulness of the contents they are teaching in class, as well as the usefulness of the activities they propose, are more likely to promote passion in their high school students. Similarly, another study by Ruiz-Alfonso and León (n.d.) identified three specific strategies of teachers that predict their students' passion: To provide students an optimal challenge, to focus on the process, and to offer them a positive feedback. Therefore, the authors encourage teachers to account for students' levels when teaching or assigning tasks, to value the process and not just the result, and to guide students for improvement through a feedback formulated in a constructive and positive way (Santana Vega, 2015; Carvalho, Martins, Santana, and Feliciano, 2014; Fontana y Santana, 2012). To our knowledge, these studies have been the first empirical researches on examining the relationships between students' passion and specific teachers' behaviors, which suggest that research on this topic is still limited, and efforts to explore how students' passion can be promoted are still warranted.

Implications in the educational context

Allowing the present literature review and, the great variety of passion's outcomes in education, teachers are invited to notice the importance of passion in the educational context, as well as the significance that they acquire in the passion's development of their students. Teachers should be aware of the great privilege that they have to infect and help students to develop their passion, both towards the subject they teach and to other

activities outside the classroom, because it will also influence what students do in class (Fredricks et al., 2010; Haerens, Vansteenkiste, Aelterman, & Van den Bergh, 2016).

Likewise, this review gathers useful and practical tools that teachers could consider to improve their students' passion. In this way, especially following the empirical studies on the topic, it is recommended that teachers do not only focus on the explanation of concepts. They should underscore on the usefulness and relevance of the contents that they explain in class, as well as the practical application of those contents in other subjects or in the students' daily life. Moreover, it is also important that teachers emphasize the importance of internalizing the meaning and usefulness of class activities, valuing the process and not only the final result obtained by the students. In addition, the proposed activities must be adjusted to the class' level. Finally, it is recommended that teachers offer a positive feedback to their students, in other words, to guide them through constructive and positive instructions, emphasizing what students have done well, what they should improve, and how they can do it to improve.

Conclusion

From this literature review, the following conclusions can be drawn: 1) The most accepted, extended and validated conceptualization of passion comes from the Dualistic Model of Passion (Vallerand et al., 2003), from which the authors define passion as a strong inclination towards an activity that one likes or loves, highly values, with which the individual feels identified, and to which he/she invests a lot of time in a regular and endured time; 2) From a psychological-motivational perspective, the study of passion is very recent, and the analysis of its role in the educational context is still scarce; 3) One of the most important consequences of harmonious passion in the educational context is the students' goal orientation; 4) Harmonious passion also affects students' well-being, time spent to an activity, persistence, academic engagement, performance, deep strategy to learn, and epistemic curiosity; 5) Passion is not a fixed characteristic in people, and there are certain strategies that teachers can apply to promote students passion, as supporting students' autonomy, emphasizing the usefulness of class content, proposing activities that fit the students' level, offering positive feedback, and focusing on the process and not only on the final result.

References:

1. Bonneville-Roussy, A., Lavigne, G. L., & Vallerand, R. J. (2011). When passion leads to excellence: The case of musicians. *Psychology of Music*, 39(1), 123–138. <http://doi.org/10.1177/0305735609352441>
2. Bonneville-Roussy, A., Vallerand, R. J., & Bouffard, T. (2013). The

- roles of autonomy support and harmonious and obsessive passions in educational persistence. *Learning and Individual Differences*, 24, 22–31. <http://doi.org/10.1016/j.lindif.2012.12.015>
3. Carvalho, C.; Martins, D.; Santana, L. E. y Feliciano L. (2014). Teacher Feedback: Educational Guidance in Different School Contexts. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* 159, 219 – 223. doi: 10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.12.360
 4. <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1877042814064908>
 5. Coleman, L. J., & Guo, A. (2013). Exploring children’s passion for learning in six domains. *Journal for the Education of the Gifted*, 36(2), 155–175. <http://doi.org/10.1177/0162353213480432>
 6. Day, C. (2004). The passion of successful leadership. *School Leadership & Management*, 24(4), 425–437. <http://doi.org/10.1080/13632430410001316525>
 7. Fontana K. y Santana Vega, L.E. (2012). Dimensione rilevanti dell’educazione nella tappa della scuola primaria. *Difficoltà di apprendimento*. 17(4), 545-570.
 8. Forest, J., Mageau, G. A., Sarrazin, C., & Morin, E. M. (2011). “Work is my passion”: The different affective, behavioural, and cognitive consequences of harmonious and obsessive passion toward work. *Canadian Journal of Administrative Sciences*, 28(1), 27–40. <http://doi.org/10.1002/cjas.170>
 9. Fredricks, J. A., Alfeld, C., & Eccles, J. S. (2010). Developing and fostering passion in academic and nonacademic domains. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 54(1), 18–30. <http://doi.org/10.1177/0016986209352683>
 10. Gucciardi, D. F., Jackson, B., Hanton, S., & Reid, M. (2015). Motivational correlates of mentally tough behaviours in tennis. *Journal of Science and Medicine in Sport*, 18(1), 67–71. <http://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsams.2013.11.009>
 11. Haerens, L., Vansteenkiste, M., Aelterman, N., & Van den Bergh, L. (2016). Toward a systematic study of the dark side of student motivation: Antecedents and consequences of teachers’ controlling behaviors. In W. C. Liu, J. C. K. Wang, & R. M. Ryan (Eds.), *Building autonomous learners* (pp. 59–81). Singapore. <http://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-287-630-0>
 12. Ho, V. T., Wong, S. S., & Lee, C. H. (2011). A Tale of Passion: Linking Job Passion and Cognitive Engagement to Employee Work Performance. *Journal of Management Studies*, 48(1), 26–47. <http://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6486.2009.00878.x>
 13. Hobbs, L. (2012). Examining the aesthetic dimensions of teaching: Relationships between teacher knowledge, identity and passion.

- Teaching and Teacher Education*, 28(5), 718–727.
<http://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2012.01.010>
14. Liston, D. P., & Garrison, J. W. (2004). *Teaching, learning, and loving: Reclaiming passion in educational practice*. New York: RoutledgeFalmer.
 15. Mageau, G. A., Vallerand, R. J., Charest, J., Salvy, S.-J., Lacaille, N., Bouffard, T., & Koestner, R. (2009). On the development of harmonious and obsessive passion: The role of autonomy support, activity specialization, and identification with the activity. *Journal of Personality*, 77(3), 601–46. <http://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6494.2009.00559.x>
 16. Moeller, J., Dietrich, J., Eccles, J. S., & Schneider, B. (2017). Passionate Experiences in Adolescence: Situational Variability and Long-Term Stability. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 27(2), 344–361. <http://doi.org/10.1111/jora.12297>
 17. Oliver, M., & Venville, G. (2011). An exploratory case study of olympiad students' attitudes towards and passion for science. *International Journal of Science Education*, 33(16), 2295–2322. <http://doi.org/10.1080/09500693.2010.550654>
 18. Phelps, P. H., & Benson, T. R. (2012). Teachers with a passion for the profession. *Action in Teacher Education*, 34(1), 65–76. <http://doi.org/10.1080/01626620.2012.642289>
 19. Ruiz-Alfonso, Z., & León, J. (2016). The role of passion in education: A systematic review. *Educational Research Review*, 19, 173–188. <http://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2016.09.001>
 20. Ruiz-Alfonso, Z., & León, J. (2017). Passion for math: Relationships between teachers' emphasis on class contents usefulness, motivation and grades. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 51, 284-292. <http://doi.org/10.1016/j.cedpsych.2017.08.010>
 21. Ruiz-Alfonso, Z. & León, J. (n.d.). Teaching quality: Relationships between passion, deep strategy to learn and curiosity in math.
 22. Santana Vega, L.E. (2015). *Orientación educativa e intervención psicopedagógica*. Madrid: Pirámide.
 23. Stoeber, J., Childs, J. H., Hayward, J. A., & Feast, A. R. (2011). Passion and motivation for studying: Predicting academic engagement and burnout in university students. *Educational Psychology*, 31(4), 513–528. <http://doi.org/10.1080/01443410.2011.570251>
 24. Vallerand, R. J. (2015). *The psychology of passion: A dualistic model*. (R. J. Vallerand, Ed.). New York: Oxford University Press. <http://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781107415324.004>
 25. Vallerand, R. J., Blanchard, C. M., Mageau, G. A., Koestner, R., Ratelle, C. F., Leonard, M., ... Marsolais, J. (2003). Les passions de

- l'Ame: On obsessive and harmonious passion. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 85(4), 756–767. <http://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514-85.4.756>
26. Vallerand, R. J., Mageau, G. A., Elliot, A. J., Dumais, A., Demers, M. A., & Rousseau, F. (2008). Passion and performance attainment in sport. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 9, 373–392. <http://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2007.05.003>
27. Vallerand, R. J., Salvy, S.-J., Mageau, G. A., Elliot, A. J., Denis, P. L., Grouzet, F. M. E., & Blanchard, C. M. (2007). On the role of passion in performance. *Journal of Personality*, 75(3), 505–534. <http://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6494.2007.00447.x>