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## **Achievement Gap Or Passion Gap?**

*While reformers and policymakers focus on achievement gaps, testing, and accountability, millions of students mentally and emotionally disengage from learning and many gifted teachers leave the field. Ironically, today's schooling is damaging the single most essential component to education – the joy of learning.*

Kristen Olson (*Wounded by School*, 2009)

What we claim to want and what we actually reward in practice are two very different things. Our students get mixed signals. Although passion is rarely figured into the achievement equation, students who lack passion, who feel disengaged from the school experience, are at greater risk for dropping out, have low interest and score low on standardised achievement tests (Osterman, 2000). While we vigorously support high standards, rigorous curriculum, and emphasise critical thinking, problem solving and intellectual scholarship for our students, we gain little if we have not stirred their hearts.

### **Listening To Our Students**

We know we often fail at reaching the heart, as evidenced in the following list of phrases heard daily from the mouths of our students:

- ◆ Do we have to do this?
- ◆ Is this for a grade?
- ◆ How many pages?
- ◆ Not again.

## 2 ♦ The Passion-Driven Classroom

- ♦ When are we ever going to use this stuff?
- ♦ I HATE school! School is jail.

We rarely hear the phrases:

- ♦ THIS ROCKS!
- ♦ Soooo cool!
- ♦ LOVE it!
- ♦ Give me more!
- ♦ UN-BEEEEEE-LIEV-ABLE!!!
- ♦ I'm not done yet! I need more time to make it better!
- ♦ Wow, you have got to see this!
- ♦ This is so amazing – let me show you!
- ♦ Look what I learned!
- ♦ You will not believe what I can do!

This is cause for alarm. These common and seemingly innocent comments are strong indicators that disengagement from rigorous intellectual endeavour is the norm. They confirm that students are going through the motions, following the rules, and interacting with content that holds little meaning for them. Most compelling is that these simple comments illustrate the canyon-sized gap that exists between the learning we have and the learning we desire. This gap is significantly separated by one intangible, unquantifiable and undeniably important variable: PASSION.

Merriam and Webster define passion in this way: “intense, driving, or overmastering feeling or conviction,” and “a strong liking or desire for or devotion to some activity, object, or concept.” Passion hooks our learners into making a commitment to their education each day. The gap between what learners are doing now and what they have potential to accomplish if passion were a part of the equation is what we call the Passion Gap. The Passion Gap is dangerous for everyone – from burning out our talented and gifted students to ignoring the ones in the middle to alienating and ostracising those with behavioural, cognitive or other challenges. Worst of all is having students who just plain give up.

We are losing millions of students and teachers in this gap. They are falling hard and fast. Learners like year one student, Houston, are just beginning to fall:

Houston is passionate about trucks, cars and super heroes, struggles a bit with reading, and has an average I.Q. Interestingly, he barely meets minimum requirements for year one. He comes to school and plays the game. He sits through calendar time getting the big idea that it's about the days of the week, counting and patterns, yet the truth is he really doesn't care. He thinks, "What's the big deal? It's Wednesday. I can look at the calendar myself. The teacher-lady will tell me what day it is anyway." He goes through the motions of "sounding-out" the short vowels and reading the guided book of the week, Dan Can Fan his Tan Can. He memorises the code, yet scores in the lower-middle stanine on his developmental assessment. Next, the students are directed to follow the usual writing routine: Write your name first, then copy and respond to the writing prompt of the day. Today's prompt reads, "The best thing ever about school is..." Houston gets excited and draws a picture of a car. He thinks it's the best writing work he's completed so far this year. He thinks, "Finally, something I'm interested in and know a lot about!" Proud of his work, he hopes to publish it in his classroom library. He writes his rendition of the prompt at the top, "The first car I ever made." Remembering that he was supposed to write his name first, he draws an arrow from his name to the beginning of his writing. He gets his paper back, a couple days later with the directions to do it over, this time, following the directions. Houston is confused. He did the best diagram with the best writing ever, and he didn't do it right. And this happens again and again, day after day, until his passion for learning is lost.

Fast forward, Houston age 15, now in secondary school:

He appears to be the model student. He gets his assignments done on time, earns good grades and receives few complaints from his teachers concerning inappropriate behaviour and attitude. It has been years, however, since learning excited and made sense to him. Now, he's going through the motions of school. He doesn't connect with what he is learning and sees little reason for why he must know it. Houston has become an endangered learner indeed.

His family shared this story with us:

Houston was laying on the lounge room couch with a book over his face. As evidenced by the pile of sticky notes, empty soft drink cans and scattered food wrappers, he had been studying for some

time. Mum asked him about what he was studying. He pulled the book down from over his eyes and reluctantly replied, "It's, um, biology or somethin'." He sits up and flips the book back open, grabs his highlighter, and with a roll of his eyes says to her: "I gotta take this subject. I don't know why..." Then he says the very words no teacher (his mum happened to be a teacher) ever wants to hear: "This sucks! School sucks! I'LL NEVER USE THIS STUFF ANYWAY. Why does it even matter?" and he continues with his work.

Houston's story illustrates that the problem we face with student achievement goes far deeper than frustration or lack of motivation, and way beyond simple boredom. Students are not falling through the cracks because our standards are low, or because our classrooms are ill equipped with the latest technology, or because we failed to use the right book or strategy. They are falling because we have not yet found a way to sustain the energy, excitement and love for learning they came with when they first entered our classrooms.

In the preface to this book, we introduced you to our young friend, Haley. We're confident that each and every day, thousands of little "Haley's" run to school! They are excited, inquisitive and on fire to learn. For most young learners and students, there are not enough hours in the day to quench their insatiable curiosity or satisfy their need to know more. Yet, by the time they reach secondary education, enthusiasm, engagement and love for learning is at an all-time low.

What is learning like at your school? How many learners like Haley are present, actively engaged and interested in the texts and topics they are exploring? More important, how many students are passionate about their learning?

## **Minding the Passion Gap**

Finding our way out of the gap is possible, and it will be the little steps we take that will make the most difference. It is our attention to detail that arms us in this fight. What will matter most is how we respond to the first roll of the eyes, the heads on the desks, and how our ears perk up at the first whispers of, "Do we really need to know this stuff?" The potential for teachers and schools to remain relevant and powerful forces in children's lives is enormous, but it is critical that we are clearly aligned in our values, words and behaviours. What types of behaviours are rewarded by our schools and in our classrooms and what types are "punished"? What will we do to address this gap between what we say we want, and what we actually do in our classrooms?

We start by recognising and admitting when we are disconnected from our students. To help illustrate what we mean by recognising when we are creating a gap, we introduce you to key research by Westby and Dawson (1995). They studied the characteristics of creative and non-creative students, then asked teachers to rate their favourite and least favourite students based on those traits.

First, teachers were asked if they valued joy, creativity and working with passionate students. They overwhelmingly answered “Yes!” Next, they were asked to look at their own students and rate them on a variety of traits, ranging from highly creative, such as being determined, independent, individualistic, impulsive and likely to take risks, to traits that are associated with low levels of creativity, such as peaceable, reliable, tolerant, steady and practical. After they rated their students on these traits, they were asked to rate them from their least favourite to most favourite students.

Interestingly, there was a significant negative correlation between the degree of passion of the student and his favourable teacher rating. In essence, there was a passion gap. The most creative and passionate students were the least favourite of the teachers across the entire sample surveyed. Additionally, the students who were rated as favourites possessed traits that would seem counter-productive to creative behaviour like conformity and the unquestioning acceptance of authority.

The passion gap has been around and recognised for some time now. Feldhusen and Treffinger (1975) concluded that 96% of teachers reported that creativity should be promoted in the classroom. However, when asked which students they actually preferred to teach, teachers chose the students who were most compliant. These studies confirm what we suspect: What we claim to want and what we actually reward in practice are two very different things.

We are all guilty in preferring compliance when we admit that we favour the following student behaviours:

- ♦ Raising hands to speak
- ♦ Answering our questions
- ♦ Following the directions on assignments
- ♦ Filling in our blanks
- ♦ Pursuing topics we deem important

However, Ken Kay, president of the Partnership for 21st Century Skills (2008), states that we need our students to be:



- ♦ Adaptable
- ♦ Flexible
- ♦ Creative
- ♦ Innovative
- ♦ Leaders
- ♦ Cross-cultural

This is the skill set that has been the subject of countless national and international discussions and research initiatives (The Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2008). The skill set that we consider to be key in enabling students and companies to differentiate themselves from others across the globe is the very skill set most at risk within our schools. Including passion in our objectives is the only way these 21st century skills can be taught and outcomes be met. If we study those who embody this “new skill set” across any discipline, field or domain, we will discover that a fierce passion is at the foundation of their work and accomplishment. It was the passion that Donald Bradman possessed for the game that fuelled him to practise in the way that he did. It was how Albert Einstein passionately pursued his questions about the world that led him to the theories that changed it. It will be the passion that students hold, not for every school subject, but for the ACT and PRIVILEGE of learning that will allow them to reach rigorous outcomes and excellence.

How do we put this into practice? Is this too much to ask? Let us clearly state that we are not giving up our expectations for classroom management and for appropriate, respectful behaviour. On the contrary, we know that including passion as part of our teaching mindset will take care of many of these issues. We are advocating that we need both the outcomes we seek as well as the 21st century skills in the teaching equation, and we can have both through the Learning Clubs framework in the Clubhouse Classroom. Before we delve into the nuts and bolts of setting up a Clubhouse Classroom, we must first address how to close the passion gap.

## Closing the Gap

We stated earlier that one of the first steps in closing the gap is recognising when we are disconnected from our students and admitting it. The next step is taking action. Parker Palmer, in his text *The Courage to Teach* (1998), moves us into taking action: “We can, whenever and wherever we choose, successfully

teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us. We already know more than we need to know in order to do that. But what we are missing right now is the will, the passion, and the courage to actually do and make those kind of changes that will render young people successful" (p. 173).

Palmer reminds us that we know more today about how people learn than at any other time in history. Closing the passion gap is possible when we remember "the people" in the learning equation. This will be accomplished by understanding what passion is, what passion can do, where it comes from, and how to make it a part of learning – putting passion into practice.

What does putting passion into practice look like? In the chapters ahead, we will answer this in detail across year levels and subject areas. All learners can reach a new level of scholarship and engagement when we commit to these three simple truths:

- ♦ Know and Show Your Passion
- ♦ Know and Show the Students' Passion
- ♦ Know and Show the World Passion

### **Step One: Know and Show Your Passion**

Douglas Kaufman (2002) says it well: "If I want my students to be passionately literate people, I, too, must be a passionate person who reads, writes, and learns in front of them" (p. 51). When we are joyful, amazing things happen. When we shared Houston's story at a recent conference (ironically at a session for educators interested in transforming education), a participant in the audience said what many of us have thought at one time in our careers, "That's too bad, but the reality is that school isn't always interesting, and our kids have to learn to deal with it. After all, how is it possible to make something like trigonometry or physics passionate?"

Professor Richard Marin whole-heartedly agrees (as, we believe, would most practising scientists and mathematicians). Listen in to journalist Anna Neumann's interview (2009) with Dr Marin as he describes the world of sub-atomic quantum mechanics and microphysics for us:

I think physics is much more of an addiction than a choice of career. Physics is part of such a large fabric to me. When I was deciding what field to choose over twenty years ago, I had a dilemma between philosophy and mathematics and physics. Those are the things I was drawn to. And I never separate them in my mind, even though I've chosen to be a physicist.