



The Importance of Recognizing Students' Interests

Dr. Del Siegle, NAGC President

For the past 10 years, my colleagues and I have been studying student achievement and factors that predict whether or not young people do well in school. In our studies, three factors interact to form an achievement-orientation attitude. First, students who embrace learning believe they have the necessary skills to succeed. Educational psychologists refer to this as self-efficacy. Next, successful students find the learning task meaningful. They are interested in the task or see a purpose to it. Finally, they believe they have the necessary support to be successful. In other words, they do not see their efforts being blocked, and they believe they have the necessary resources and support to do well. When any one of these three factors is missing, it can impact student achievement negatively. In our work, one of these factors surfaces as an important issue with gifted students: student interest as it relates to making school meaningful.

We recently surveyed several hundred university honors students. We asked them to rate their skills in a variety of talent areas (ranging from athletics and music to mathematics and spelling), their interest in those talent areas, and the extent to which they believed natural ability and personal effort contributed to high levels of performance in the talent areas. In all cases, there was a strong, positive relationship between students' interest in a talent area and their assessment of their skill in that area. Students do well in talent areas that interest them. Interest was more related to performance than students' beliefs about the importance of effort or natural abilities.

In other research we have conducted with gifted under-achievers, we found that we were best able to improve students' grades when we increased the perceived meaningfulness of school. We did this by identifying students' interests and connecting these interests to their school experiences, as well as by determining what students valued and connecting those things to their school experiences. When students find school meaningful, they tend to do well. When students are interested in something, they tend to pursue it and excel at it.

Unfortunately, parents and teachers sometimes fail to recognize the important role that interest plays in high levels of performance and, also, the important role they themselves play in promoting children's interests. The educational psychologist Benjamin Bloom studied eminent individuals in a

variety of domains. He and his colleagues discovered that parents were often responsible for first exposing these outstanding individuals to the domains in which they eventually earned prominence. He also discovered that early teachers initially helped these eminent individuals develop an early appreciation for their talent domain. In other words, through exposure and modeling, parents and teachers can spark and promote interest. Parents should not underestimate the important role they play in exposing their children to a variety of learning experiences or the importance of recognizing and encouraging their children's interests when they surface. However, parents and teachers sometimes focus on children's weaknesses, rather than their strengths and interests.

Joseph Renzulli once noted that "Most public schools are practicing a deficit model. . . . We're so concerned with diagnosing what the child can't do and then we spend . . . the year beating him or her to death with it." Gifted education is about finding students' strengths and developing them. Children should not be expected to excel at everything. Although certain basic skills are necessary to function well in society, parents should not necessarily expect their children to be outstanding in all of them. Talent development is about recognizing children's interests and talents and helping them to explore and develop these interests and talents. For example, it may be more important to allow a gifted child with a passionate interest in art an opportunity to enroll in an art class, rather than another advanced academic or honors class.

In Nancy Green's interview with Don Treffinger (this issue; see url), he stated that part of creativity is bringing ideas to fruition. He talked about the importance of helping students see how to pursue their interests and passions. So, in addition to recognizing children's interests, parents also need to help their children explore those interests. Parents can provide opportunities for their children to explore their interests. Parents can model the importance of learning and pursuing interests beyond surface-level curiosity. They can make learning and exploring new and different topics enjoyable and fun. Parents can also help their children to embed their interests in school projects. Difficult tasks become easier when they are tied to children's interests.

Parents walk a fine line between encouraging their children and pushing them. Many parents become more vested in their children's interests and successes than their children do. Parents must be flexible enough to accept when their children's interests change.

One of the greatest gifts parents can give their children is the freedom to explore interests. When done well, it can set young people on a lifelong path of discovery and learning that culminates in a creative, productive life.

Parenting for High Potential is published quarterly and is distributed as a membership benefit by the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC).

The views expressed in the magazine are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of NAGC or its Board of Directors.

Copyright © 2009
National Association for Gifted Children
1707 L Street, NW, Suite 550
Washington, DC 20036
202-785-4268
www.nagc.org