



Exploring the antecedents of boredom: Do teachers know why students are bored?



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HIGHLIGHTS

- 111 grade 9 students completed an open-ended antecedents of boredom questionnaire.
- Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 117 grade 9 teachers.
- Comparison of students' and teachers' perspectives revealed a strong correspondence.
- Theoretically postulated antecedents of boredom were mostly named by both groups.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 28 March 2013

Received in revised form

22 November 2013

Accepted 26 November 2013

Keywords:

Boredom
Antecedents
Emotions
School
Teachers
Students

ABSTRACT

In the current study, researchers explored if teachers can identify antecedents of students' boredom. First, an open-ended questionnaire was administered to 111 9th-grade students to explore their self-reported causes of boredom. Next, semi-structured interviews with 117 9th-grade teachers were used to examine the factors that teachers think make their students bored. Also, quantitative questions gauged teachers' agreement with students' responses. Our results revealed a high congruency as teachers identified most of the antecedents of boredom named by students. One notable incongruity, however, was that teachers did not mention themselves as antecedents of boredom unless they were explicitly asked about it.

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"When I know something that others don't know, and the teacher explains it ten times, then I get bored." (statement by student S4)

"When you don't understand the content and you therefore don't want to participate." (statement by student S5)

"There are two groups of students who get bored in class: On the one side there are students who have already understood the content material of the class [...] and on the other hand there are students who say from the outset 'I cannot do it [...]' " (statement by teacher T157)

1. Introduction

Boredom can be seen as a plague in modern society, particularly in schools (Hentig, 1987; Pekrun, Goetz, Daniels, Stupnisky, & Perry, 2010). Bored students cannot reach their cognitive and meta-cognitive potential, and thus are at a higher risk of many negative consequences, such as low grades, school absenteeism, and drop out (Bearden, Spencer, & Moracco, 1989; Goetz, Frenzel, Hall, & Pekrun, 2008; Tidwell, 1988; Wasson, 1981; Wegner, Flisher, Chikobvu, Lombard, & King, 2008). Outside the academic domain, high levels of boredom have been linked with drug abuse (Johnston & O'Malley, 1986; Orcutt, 1984; Samuels & Samuels, 1974), eating disorders (Abramson & Stinson, 1977; Leon & Chamberlain, 1973), hostility (Broadbent & Gath, 1979), depression (Giambra & Traynor, 1978), and delinquency (Harris, 2000; Newberry & Duncan, 2001; Vodanovich & Kass, 1990). Despite its importance for students' learning, achievement, and well-being, boredom is still a largely

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neglected construct in educational research (Pekrun et al., 2010). In the past two decades there has been an increase in theoretical and empirical research to fill this knowledge gap (Goetz & Hall, *in press*); nevertheless, one particularly underexplored aspect of boredom is its causal antecedents. This lack of research is astonishing because knowledge about how and when boredom occurs allows researchers and educators to develop and implement boredom reducing intervention programs in schools prior to its onset.

Of particular importance with respect to antecedents of boredom is the diagnostic competency of teachers; in other words, teacher's ability to identify when and the reasons why students are bored. Only when the occurrence and antecedents of boredom are accurately diagnosed can teachers adapt their instruction to meet the needs of their students and reduce their boredom. Knowledge on how accurately teachers can judge students' boredom could also strengthen the theoretical and practical training of teachers (e.g., by outlining what antecedents are underestimated), thus leading to an improved quality of instruction in schools and a reduced number of negative boredom consequences outlined above.

When investigating how teachers typically identify the antecedents of students' boredom it is important to know which of their judgments can be labeled as valid. Several theoretical assertions regarding the antecedents of boredom have been posited (Fisher, 1993; Larson & Richards, 1991; Pekrun et al., 2010; Robinson, 1975), which have received empirical support (Mitchell, 1993; Pekrun et al., 2010; Titz, 2001). A highly valid source of students' boredom and its antecedents is the students' own perception (Clausen, 2002; De Jong & Westerhof, 2001; Kunter & Baumert, 2006; Lüdtke, Trautwein, Kunter, & Baumert, 2006). They know when they are bored and they can be assumed to outline reasons for being bored in a highly valid manner. However, a gap in the literature exists that describes the quality of teacher's assessments of the causes of students' boredom. Thus, the purpose of the present study was to explore the teacher's perceptions of the antecedents of boredom and examine how much they are in accordance with students' self-reported boredom causes.

1.1. The definition of boredom

In recent psychological research, boredom has often been defined as an "affective state composed of unpleasant feelings, lack of stimulation, and low physiological arousal" (Pekrun et al., 2010, p. 532). As boredom is not a prototypical or basic emotional experience (e.g., Ekman, 1984; Shaver, Schwartz, Kirson, & O'Connor, 1987), it has alternatively been classified as an affect or mood. However, from the perspective of component-process definitions of emotions (Kleinginna & Kleinginna, 1981; Scherer, 1984), boredom can be identified as an emotion characterized by the following components (cf. Pekrun, 2000): affective (aversive feelings), cognitive (perception of time passing slowly), motivational (urge to change the situation or activity), physiological (low arousal), and expressive (postural or facial expressions).

It is important to note that boredom is not merely the opposite of interest (Goetz & Hall, *in press*; Pekrun et al., 2010); in fact, boredom constitutes more than the absence of interest. Lack of interest is affectively neutral and does not cause emotional pain, whereas boredom is emotionally distressing. Due to different affective loads, lack of interest and boredom also have different motivational consequences (Goetz & Frenzel, 2006). While a lack of interest neither implies the wish to engage with an activity nor to avoid it, boredom typically triggers strong impulses to escape the situation. Lack of interest can be an antecedent of boredom, but is not identical to boredom.

Academic emotions are defined as emotions tied to learning situations or achievement-related activities (Pekrun, 2006). Boredom, as experienced in academic settings such as during classroom activities or while completing homework, can be classified as an academic emotion. The present study investigates academic boredom and its antecedents in school settings as perceived by students and teachers.

1.2. Antecedents of boredom

1.2.1. Theoretical framework

There exist only a few theoretical perspectives on the causal antecedents of boredom (Goetz & Frenzel, 2006). The theories share some specific antecedents but also each contains unique aspects, suggesting that a complex array of factors inside and outside of classrooms evoke this emotion.

One prominent theory on academic emotions, Pekrun's (2010) control-value theory, provides a valuable theoretical framework that can be applied to predict boredom in students. Pekrun describes how students' emotions have both individual (subjective) and environmental determinants. The subjective antecedents consist of situational control and value appraisals. Boredom arises in students, for example, if they perceive either very high or not enough control over the situation (Pekrun, Frenzel, Goetz, & Perry, 2007) and/or if they perceive a situation as low value, meaningless, or irrelevant for their needs (Pekrun et al., 2010). Environmental influences on students' emotions, such as instructional quality, can also affect students' control and value beliefs, and thus impact the development of boredom and other emotions in a more indirect way (Goetz, Frenzel, Stoeger, & Hall, 2010).

The antecedents of boredom proposed by Pekrun (2006) align with Fisher's (1993) classification of the antecedents of boredom; however, her research was applied only to professional or working situations and not to learning or scholastic settings. Fisher discriminated between antecedents of boredom that lie outside the person (e.g., task and environmental conditions), antecedents that originate inside the person (e.g., their personality), and antecedents that derive from the fit between person and environment. For example, an inadequate fit of the environment to the person, such as tasks that are too difficult or too easy to complete for students when having their level of competence in mind, can lead to being over or under challenged (Acee et al., 2010; Goetz & Frenzel, 2010), which in turn evokes boredom.

Hill and Perkins (1985) provide a general theory on boredom in which situational monotony is named as the main antecedent of this emotion. More precisely, the subjects' perception of a situation may lead to boredom if it is interpreted as repetitious. This process is influenced by aspects of the situation (e.g., if the person has the possibility to escape the situation), the person (e.g., if the person has a general tendency to be bored or boredom proneness), as well as the task (e.g., if the task contains of several activities a person can choose from).

Robinson (1975) provides a theory on boredom in school in which monotonously instructed classes are identified to be the most common proximate cause of boredom. He also claims that a subject domain that is perceived as useless can lead to boredom. Additionally, characteristics of other persons can also provoke boredom (Leary, Rogers, Canfield, & Coe, 1986; Robinson, 1975); in a classroom setting in particular, the teacher as a person, as well as their voice or way of talking, may evoke boredom in students to some extent. The same might be true for fellow students, for example in situations when they give a class presentation.

In conclusion, the few existing theories on the antecedents of boredom provide several different assumptions, but also show some analogies to one another. The antecedent monotony, for

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