Surprising study results: Students are bored during exams

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In the case of boredom, we think of many situations in life but intuitively not of exams. However, an international team of academics led by Thomas Götz from the University of Vienna has now studied exactly this phenomenon of test boredom for the first time and found remarkable results. According to the study, school students are actually very bored during exams. The study also showed that utter boredom has a negative effect on exam results. The research results have been published recently in the *Journal of Educational Psychology*.

Although boredom is currently a very intensively studied phenomenon, test boredom has so far been completely ignored in the research. For the first time and on an international basis, psychologists from the University of Vienna, the University of Konstanz, the University of Zurich, the University of Applied Sciences and Arts Northwestern Switzerland, the LMU Munich, the City University of New York, the University of Essex and the Australian Catholic University (Sydney) have now been able to show that test boredom does actually occur and that it clearly deteriorates performance.

The main causes were being both underchallenged and overchallenged during the exam. In addition, test boredom was significantly higher when the exam content had no personal relevance for the students. The main result of the study was that a high level of test boredom had a negative effect on exam results.

The academics proposed the so-called abundance hypothesis for the first time in their study, which they were able to confirm. On the one hand, the abundance hypothesis states that boredom especially deteriorates exam performance if students are overchallenged, because all mental resources would have to be allocated to completing the tasks, i.e., those that are used for experiencing boredom but are no longer available for working on the tasks.

On the other hand, in the case of boredom as a result of being underchallenged, resources are available in abundance for processing the tasks anyway.

Exam tasks should relate to the reality of students' lives.

In the study, a total of 1,820 German students in the 5th to 10th grades were examined. Questions about the extent of boredom, of being underchallenged and overchallenged and the personal relevance of the tasks were directly included in the test, between the different tasks.

From the study results, the researchers also derive some recommendations for teachers and guardians. "In order to combat test boredom, teachers should prepare exam tasks in such a way that they relate to the reality of students' lives. In addition, the tasks should not be very underchallenging or overchallenging," explains educational psychologist Thomas Götz from the University of Vienna.

"Parents or guardians can also support young people by starting an open conversation about possible overchallenging or underchallenging tasks at school. Especially in the case of being overchallenged at school, it is important to react quickly to avoid boredom and also other negative consequences, such as a downward spiral of poor performance."

This first study of test boredom also opens up a completely new field of research. The academics are making a decisive contribution to clarifying the negative effects of boredom in school. "A large number of studies already show that boredom has not only a detrimental effect on learning and performance but also on mental and physical health. With our work, we are now expanding the view to a central area in the everyday school life of children and adolescents, namely exams," says Götz.

More information: Thomas Goetz et al, Test boredom: Exploring a neglected emotion, *Journal of Educational Psychology* (2023). DOI: 10.1037/edu0000807

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