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# "School is So Boring": High-Stakes Testing and Boredom at an Urban Middle School

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Existing evidence suggests that high stakes exams result in little increased learning among students (Amrein & Berliner, 2002; Klein, Hamilton, McCaffrey, & Stetcher, 2000; Koretz, Mitchell, & Stetcher, 1996). Yet, given the federal mandates for greater accountability, such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation and Race to the Top policies, and the "pervasive testing culture" (Moses & Nanna, 2007, p. 55), the use of high-stakes tests is presently an accepted practice.

The importance ascribed to standardized tests within public education has significant impact on pedagogical practices. The majority of teachers surveyed in two large school districts reported placing "greater emphasis on basic skills" and spending at least two weeks on practice tests and "test-taking strategies," with 68% reporting that they engaged students in "test preparation activities" a regular basis throughout the school year (Shepard & Dougherty, 1991, p. 14). A nationwide survey of teachers documented that across the country large amounts of classroom time is devoted to test preparation activities (Abrams, Pedulla, & Madaus, 2003, p. 18). Observations in two elementary schools indicate that in some school settings over 100 hours of instruction time is spent on test preparation and test administration (Smith, Edelsky, Draper, Rottenberg, & Cherland, 1990).

The shift in curricular focus towards test preparation has negative implications. Interviews with 59 teachers in two states suggest that when more time is spent on test preparation teacher discontinue

instructional activities that (a) are pleasant for the teacher and the children; (b) provide reinforcement of skills and promote in-depth understandings of content; (c) involve collaboration, independence, and higher order thinking skills; and (d) have goals that are not measured by tests (such as the development of attitudes) (Barksdale-Ladd & Thomas, 2000, p. 391).

These findings are supported by a qualitative metasynthesis of 49 studies examining the impact of high-stakes testing on the curriculum which finds substantial evidence of curricular narrowing to the subject matter on tests, and an increase in "the use teacher-centered pedagogies" (Au, 2007, p. 258). In sum, high-stakes testing has altered instruction such that in many classrooms more time is spent on test preparation at the expense of engaging and varied learning activities.

In this article, I document the effect of high-stakes test preparation on middle school students' boredom. Presented and discussed herein are the findings of an ethnographic study that followed a group of 30 urban, Latina/o, middle school students over the course of their middle school experience and documented, among other things, the ground-level impact the push toward 'greater accountability' in public education had on the students.

The analysis of the data is based on the understanding that the phenomenon of boredom is associated with schooling (Anderson & Ridley, 1978; Beaulieu, 1981; Corrigan, 1979; Dow, 2007; Fallis & Opatow, 2003; Farrell, Peguero, Lindsey, & White, 1988; Fogelman, 1976; Healy, 1984; Heron, 2003; Keiler, 2011; Larson & Richards, 1991; McGiboney & Carter 1988; Nelson, 1985; Robinson 1975; Rubin, 2007; Wasson 1981; Willis, 1977). While many studies document that boredom is regularly experienced by students, there is a need for investigations that focus on the interplay between classroom dynamics and curriculum that give rise to boredom (Belton & Priyadarshini, 2007; Doherty, 2002). Consequently, the findings discussed herein have the potential to contribute to the scholarship on schooling, curriculum, pedagogy, and boredom.

To be clear, the present article does not account for students' internal motivation or disposition. Rather, the present article focuses on the extent to which students were stimulated by their classroom curriculum and pedagogy. Examination of external influences accounts for the students' emic perspectives of boredom at school and points to the importance of curricular approaches that provide students with engaging, learning opportunities.

## LITERATURE

Sociologists have provided definitions of boredom that are congruent with the data collected. For Brissett and Snow (1993) boredom is situated and interactional and a situation is boring when individuals interpret their situated experience as neither entertaining nor conducive to social life. Likewise, Barbalet (1999) describes boredom as a situational phenomenon associated with the meanings (or meaninglessness) ascribed to activities being undertaken: "the emotional feeling of anxiety that an activity or situation holds no significance" (p. 637). According to Barbalet (1999), boredom can be curtailed by giving meaning to an activity or by introducing social interactions that offer stimulating exchanges.

Research suggests that boredom is not correlated with academic ability or achievement. Students who resisted and opposed schooling reported being bored at school (Willis, 1977; Anderson & Ridley, 1978; Corrigan, 1979; Beaulieu, 1981; Larson & Richards, 1991). Additionally, high-ability and -achieving fifth to ninth graders also reported experiencing high rates of boredom at school, where they feel unchallenged and not very stimulated (Larson & Richards, 1991). School achievement, it seems, is not a valid predictor of whether students experience boredom.

Furthermore, students are more likely to be bored during "teacher-driven activities" (Larsen & Richards, 1991). In an examination of a summer program for struggling readers, students reported enjoying "fun" classes that involved hands-on activities and frequently growing bored in lecture-driven courses (Heron, 2003). Fallis and Opatow (2003), who relied on student interviews to collect data on 160 high school students who cut class, document that students cut class because they found schooling boring, which referred particularly to the "one-way, top-down, unengaged relationship with a teacher whose pedagogy feels disrespectful because it is not designed to tempt, engage or include students" (p. 108). Given these findings, it seems likely that those teachers who employ top-down instruction as a result of high-stakes testing demands (Au, 2007) fail to engage their students.

Numerous studies examining student boredom within the classroom have considered the association between boredom and the subject matter being taught. Data collected by Farrell et al. (1988) suggests that students identified by school officials as at risk of dropping out of school differentiated between 'boring' and 'interesting' classes based not on the subject matter of each class, but based on practices within the classroom. In their study of boredom and middle school students, Larsen and Richards (1991) document that boredom was "higher in classes with more abstract content (social studies, science, foreign language) as opposed to classes that deal with skill development (shop, music, gym)" (p. 430). Additionally, Keiler (2011) found that students were bored when their biology class had no demonstrations as well as when they did not understand the material. Thus, it seems boredom is associated with abstract book-driven curricula.

Boredom may influence students' behavior and disposition in the classroom. Older studies suggest that bored high school students are more apt to be disruptive (Fogelman, 1976; McGiboney & Carter, 1988; Robinson, 1975; Wasson, 1981). More recent research finds that a boring school experience leads some students to cut classes (Fallis & Opatow 2003) and exacerbates students' risk of dropping out of high school (Dow, 2007). A study of the figured world of learning at an urban school suggests that some students fail at their attempts to be "good students" and become academically disengaged because they rejected that frequent "boring and meaningless" classroom activities at their school (Rubin, 2007).

Researchers find that adolescents are often bored during their leisure time as well as at school. Evidence suggests that the adolescents' boredom is associated with being around adults and their limited sociocultural opportunities (Brissett & Snow, 1993; Shaw, 1996). While it may be tempting to associate boredom to adolescence, there is ample evidence indicating that adults also experience boredom, particularly at work (Fisherl, 1993; Hill & Perkins, 1985; Mikulas & Vodanovich, 1993; Molstad, 1986; O'Hanlon, 1981; Payne, 1999). Many scholars proffer that boredom in the lives of adolescents and adults is emblematic of modernity and (post)modern societies (Brissett & Snow, 1993; Darden & Marks, 1999; Conrad, 1997; Healy, 1984; Klapp, 1986; Spacks, 1995; Zijderfeld, 1979).

Occupational and institutional research beyond the realm of education points to action school administrators and teachers can take in order to minimize students' boredom. As in the case of students (Reid, 1986; Rubin, 2007), workers' boredom is associated with routinized, repetitive, and unstimulating tasks and lack of autonomy (Fisherl, 1993; Hill & Perkins, 1985; Mikulas & Vodanovich, 1993; Molstad, 1986; O'Hanlon, 1981; Payne, 1999). Similarly, researchers examining boredom at rehabilitation centers find that clients report being bored when activities were perceived as not meaningful (Bracke, Bruynooghe & Verhaege, 2006). Furthermore, while boredom at school can result in disengaged students (Dow, 2007; Fallis & Opatow, 2003; Fogelman, 1976; McGiboney & Carter, 1988; Robinson, 1975; Rubin, 2007; Wasson, 1981), boredom at the workplace can result in dissatisfied workers and reduced productivity (O'Hanlon, 1981; Smith, 1981). However, research also indicates that repetitive tasks workers find challenging or contributing to their skill set can stimulate workers and curtail boredom (Fisherl, 1993) and that rehabilitation facilities reduced boredom when they provided "clients with tasks characterized by a low degree of monotony and a high amount of intrinsic value" (Bracke et al., 2006, p. 211). It is quite likely that students may be equally responsive to stimulating work that is not monotonous.

To summarize, research suggests that amongst students boredom, writ large, is associated with tedious activities they find meaningless. Routinized and repetitive classroom activities lead some students to disengage academically, display

disruptive behavior, cut class, and drop out. With these significant consequences in mind, it bears asking whether the changes in instruction resulting from high-stakes testing are leading students to experience an increased sense of boredom.

## METHODS

This article is based on data collected for a 2.5-year ethnographic project examining Latino boys' construction of gendered identities. The study, which was doctoral research, followed a group of boys and girls who moved together as a class group over the course of their middle school experience (grade 6-8, age 11-14 years). Observations were carried out at Romero Elementary and Middle School, a bilingual, one-building public school in the greater metropolitan area of a Northeastern city in the United States. (All names, including the school's name, were changed). Romero was selected as the site because it was a predominantly Latina/o school and the principal was willing to have me on the premises. For the observation class group, I selected the sixth grade class (of two) that had more Latino boys.

Romero had a total student enrollment of approximately 380, of which approximately 85% were Latina/o. The middle school had approximately 90 students, of which over 95% were Latina/o. Over 75% of all students received free lunches. Romero is located near public housing in a working class, low income neighborhood populated mainly by African Americans and Latinos of Dominican and Puerto Rican heritage.

The ethnographic research consisted of both observations and conversational interviews. Consistent with qualitative methods (Patton 2002), I spent approximately fourteen to eighteen hours (two or three school days) a week observing. In the classroom, I typically sat in a corner and only walked around the room when students worked independently or in groups. At lunch, the students separated themselves by gender, with the boys sitting at one table and the girls at another. I sat with the boys, usually at one end of the table so I could observe and hear the girls as well as the boys. In the gym, I either stood off to the side and observed or played with students when invited to do so, making sure to take minor roles in the sporting action. (In order to maintain students' anonymity, each student was assigned various pseudonyms).

For the first couple of weeks, the students were not sure what to make of the fact that I, an adult in his mid-twenties and a stranger, was taking note of their actions. By the end of the first month, however, all of the students had initiated at least one interaction with me. The fact that I did not interfere in their daily routines, admonish them for any of their behavior, or "snitch" (i.e. tell on them) made students more comfortable with my presence. As a native Spanish-speaking Mexican-American, son of immigrants, I shared cultural and linguistic similarities with the students, which also facilitated my entry.

The Latina/o students in the class peer group I observed frequently referred to white people as "*Americanos*" (Americans). They used the term to differentiate between Whites, most of whom have generational roots in the U.S. and Latinos like themselves who are first and second generation. What is more, the Latino students at Romero regularly identified themselves and other Latinos primarily by their nation of origin. Students whose parents were born in the Dominican Republic, for example, usually referred to themselves as "Dominicans" and occasionally as "Latinos", "Hispanics," or "Spanish". Many of the students publicly demonstrated their national pride by frequently writing "DR#1" (Dominican Republic is #1) or "PR#1" (Puerto Rico is #1) on desks and inside textbooks and by wearing attire with their home country's national flag. The students had such strong attachment to their countries of origin, which many of them visited yearly, in large part because of the significant emphasis on national and cultural pride within their predominantly Caribbean-Latino neighborhoods. Overall, however, the Dominican culture was the dominant discourse amongst the students, a reflection of the demographics in the class, at Romero, and in their neighborhoods.

### Data Analysis

The data analysis entailed the coding of field notes and interview transcripts (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The coding scheme resulted from an initial review of the data, which revealed recurring patterns, such as references to boring classroom activities. From subsequent thematic and axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), emerged typologies that helped organize the findings section. To assess whether themes were representative (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and trustworthy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), at the beginning of each week's data collection I sought out disconfirming evidence, which either refined my themes or altered them.

## FINDINGS

At Romero, standardized test scores served as the ultimate measure of the school's performance. As a result, entire class periods-hours at time were spent teaching to the test, to the practice tests, and to the pre-practice tests in order to prepare

students for both district-wide and statewide assessments. Between the practice tests, the actual tests, and the various quizzes and exams given by teachers, the students were required to sit quietly at their desks for long stretches of time, or risk being accused of being disruptive or cheating. Additionally, during the sixth grade, most of the students had a double period of math in preparation for the upcoming state exam. Students found the experience excruciatingly frustrating, repeatedly summing up their feelings with some variant of the statement, "School is so boring." On its face, the complaint is little more than a common remark heard daily in schools throughout the country. However, an interrogation of what the students deem "boring" reveals what, in fact, the students were communicating with their criticism.

Boredom is a social phenomenon that is quite telling when we consider Barbalet's (1999) definition: "the emotional feeling of anxiety that an activity or situation holds no significance" (p. 637). From this perspective, the data suggests that the students' boredom was largely due to a disconnect they felt between the act of learning and the significance of schooling. The students repeatedly expressed their desire for learning to have more relevance by asking their teachers some variant of the question, "Why do we have to know this?" If, and when, teachers responded that they needed to know the curriculum because it would be covered in a test, students displayed their displeasure by shaking their heads, sighing loudly, and/or sucking their teeth. The students' apparent disgust was mostly directed at the various standardized tests they were prepped for and which they were expected to pass.

Like other students (Heron, 2003; Keiler, 2011), the boys and girls at Romero also indicated that they were less bored when engaged with more interactive, hands-on activities, such as conducting experiments and making posters, rather than teacher-lectures. They regularly complained, more often than not in their math and science classes, that class instruction needed to be "more interesting". During the 6th grade, the students bemoaned the fact that they had a double period of math in order to prepare them for a standardized test because each class period involved having to listen to lectures from their teacher or silently working on math problems from their textbooks and test preparation materials. Additionally, the students found it unfair that they were the only students in the middle school who had a double period of "boring math" instruction that rarely included group activities or projects. One afternoon, the boys in the class rebelled by going "on strike." Here is how Leonardo, one of the boys, described the incident, while smiling:

we didn't take out our math books. We came back from the park [late] with Coach Taylor and asked Ms. Connor if we could drink water and she said no. So, we weren't going to do math. None of the boys took out their books. We just talked.

While the impetus for the strike was the boys' perception that their teacher, Ms. Connor, was unreasonable, they were not seeking to engage her in a power struggle. They readily agreed amongst themselves to not do math that day because as strongly as they believed they deserved water, they were even more adamant that having to experience back-to-back "boring math" periods was unjust.

Later that afternoon, Ms. Connor told the boys: "The good in me is dead. I'm not going to be nice anymore." She subsequently shared with me that she was frustrated because tries hard "to teach them math" and prepare them for the state exam because many of them had not done well on the math section on their previous exam, and yet the boys refused to follow along while she explained the material on the chalkboard. It was not clear whether Ms. Connor knew that her lectures "bored" some of her students and that, like students in other studies (Keiler, 2011), those having a hard time with the material might have been more susceptible to boredom.

While the boys' behavior during math class may give the impression that they rejected schooling and the societal value associated with it, such is not the case. The boys, and their female classmates, actively engaged in class activities that, according to them, were "not boring" and gave them an opportunity to "talk" or "share". In every other 6th grade class, the boys regularly, enthusiastically raised their hands and volunteered when the teacher asked the entire class a question or asked for students to share their written work. During the 6th grade, the boys also occasionally affirmed each other's academic success in a very expressive fashion. The clearest example of this is a spontaneous celebration that erupted in Social Studies class after a geography quiz on India:

Immediately after each student turns in his or her quiz, Ms. Ross grades it, records the grade, and hands it back to the student. After receiving his grade, Carlos walks from Ms. Ross's desk over to me smiling. When he gets to me, he says loudly, "I'm going to show it to my mom!" Then, he holds up his quiz with his left hand. I see a "100%" written in red ink. I nod, and before I can say anything, Carlos raises his right hand indicating that I give him a 'high five.'

Then, Leonardo comes over, a big smile on his face, and shows us that he also got "100%." Pedro who is sitting with next to me tells Carlos and Leonardo, "I got a 'good job'." All three boys smile and nod their heads. Judy, a female student, yells "Yeah!" and begins to dance, flailing her arms in the air and moving her hips from side to side. Anna, another student, looks over at Judy, who says, "I got a 100%." Groups of students begin to talk about how they did on the quiz.

In the meantime, Ms. Ross is grading Hector's quiz. When she is done, she says "Holy cow," surprised (she informs me later) that Hector got a perfect score. Hector sees the quiz, smiles, raises his hands in the air, and screams loudly, "Yeah!"

The students did not display this sort of excitement in their math class. What is more, unlike in their Social Studies class, in math class the students were more apt to be "off task," as their teacher put it, by engaging in disruptive or distracting behavior that they considered entertaining, such as arm-wrestling.

During the 8th grade, the students voiced frustration with their science class because they were bored of the lectures covering the material that the teacher said would "be on the state exam". Half-way through the semester the students apparently had had enough. They vigorously urged their teacher to ask me to help mediate the matter by compiling their concerns and suggestions—out of the teacher's earshot. The teacher and I stepped into the hallway. He told me he was willing to have me mediate as he hoped that would bring an end to the side conversations and note passing that took place during class. I agreed to mediate and met with the students while the teacher headed downstairs. Twenty minutes later, I reported back to the entire class—to all the students and the teacher—without attributing any comments to a specific student. Among the issues the students raised was their desire for "fun group projects," hands-on "experiments", and more entertaining educational films. By negotiating with their teacher, the students affirmed their identities as learners and indicated that schooling, as they were experiencing it, was not meaningful enough to keep them from feeling a sense of boredom.

With both their strike in math class and their negotiation in science class, the students resisted instruction they found unstimulating. Their resistance, however, was not defiance undertaken for the sole purpose of challenging teachers. It should not be classified as resistance in the traditional sense which equates resistance with the questioning of authority and academic disengagement. Rather, the students' resistance should be considered from Abowitz's (2000) theoretical perspective which defines resistance as "communication; that is, a means of signaling and constructing new meanings, and of building a discourse around particulars problems of exclusion or inequality" (p.877). From Abowitz's perspective, the students at Romero were clearly communicating both their displeasure with "boring" curriculum activities and their appreciation for more meaningful curriculum, granted their communication was much more effective in the latter incident than in the former.

The students' experiences with boredom at Romero influenced their future plans, namely their college aspirations. During lunchtime, as a group of boys bemoaned the boredom they felt in their classes, one of them turned to me and asked, "Is college *this* boring, Richard?" The question caught me off guard. While I processed the query, another boy chimed in, 'It's more school. What do you think? I'm not going to college.' Like this boy, a good number of the students equated college with more schooling and, thus, with more boredom. This conclusion makes sense when one takes their schooling experience into account and considers the fact that most of them had little contact with college graduates aside from their teachers. Wanting to pique the boys' interest in attending college, I responded to the question by telling them that college provides experiences quite different from those at Romero. I pointed out that college is not as regimented; that courses are more topical. I explained to them that there are courses in which students examine the world of Hip Hop, some in which the curriculum revolved around films and television shows, and still others that involved regular outings into the surrounding communities as well as written work and exams. Seemingly fascinated, they pressed me for details about these college classes and my experience. I abided as they interjected with commentary, such as "wish we had that" and "how come *our* classes aren't like that?"

## CONCLUSION

In 1985, while commenting on Canadian public education, Nelsen (1985) wrote the following: "What today's students are saying is relatively simple to understand: Many find learning in schools an uninteresting, boring, and impersonal standardization to bureaucratic routine" (p. 149). Twenty-six years later, the evidence collected at Romero suggests that the "testing culture" in the U.S. may also be contributing to a sense of boredom among students by pressuring teachers to focus on lecture-driven instruction on exam material (Moses & Nanna, 2007, p. 55). Classes with regular lectures, test preparation, and practice exams involved few group activities and projects, and led students to report experiencing both a disconnect from the act of learning and boredom. They communicated this sense of meaninglessness to their teachers in words and deeds—an indication of their interest in their own education.

The answer to the question of why some of the classes at Romero were not as interesting as the college courses seems clear—many of their teachers sought to prepare them for high-stakes exams by narrowing the curriculum. In the age of high-stakes testing and teacher accountability, there is tremendous pressure on teachers not to venture beyond the district-approved curriculum and to make the most of class time by teaching test-related material. As Laguardia and Pearl (2009) explain, the "so-called reforms" resulting from No Child Left Behind (NCLB) are undermining the most central aspect of education—the teacher-student relationship, which "determines whether there will be investment and growth or whether there will be dreary days of boredom" (p. 357). In the end, much of the boredom and frustration the students at Romero experienced with the

curriculum was largely due to the pressures of high-stakes tests, the very tests that they came to “hate” and dismiss as “stupid”.

The students at Romero provide insights into how schools can curtail student boredom. Like occupational and organizational researchers (Bracke et al., 2006; Fisherl, 1993), the students call for less tedious activities. They suggest more activities that have students moving around the room and interacting with one another as well as their teachers rather than just sitting at their desks taking notes. The boys and girls at Romero seemed to understand that, as Barbalet (1999) purports, stimulating exchanges can bring meaning to an otherwise boring situation. What is more, the evidence presented herein and other recent data (Christianakis, 2011) indicate that students are willing to communicate their displeasure with curriculum driven by high-stakes testing. Accordingly, students’ boredom within the classroom can be addressed in part by simply listening to students.

The very high-stakes exams that proponents suggest will prepare students for college may, ironically enough, result in situated boredom within classrooms, leading fewer students to consider further education. As the data shows, boredom in the classroom led many Romero students to question whether they wanted to attend college. Future research should examine the extent to which boredom in the era of high-stakes testing curtails students’ college aspirations and perhaps even results in a peer culture that rejects the pursuit of higher education. The resulting data could prove of particular significance to educational policymakers given that among low-income urban minority students, “the single best predictor of 4-year college enrollment” is friends’ plans (Sokatch, 2006, p. 128). In addition, since exit exams increase drop out rates, particularly among underperforming students (Catterall, 1989; Haney, 2000; Jacob, 2001; Madaus & Clarke, 2001), and boredom is associated with both cutting class (Fallis & Opatow 2003) and dropping out (Dow, 2007), it seems worthwhile to further examine whether the emphasis on exam curriculum and any resulting boredom are driving struggling students out of school.

Sadly, the unintended consequences of high-stakes testing are likely to rob additional students of intellectually-engaging activities that encourage the development of higher order thinking skills. Recently, President Barack Obama has implemented neoliberal educational policies that extend the conservative educational agenda of the George W. Bush administration and emphasize greater accountability (Carr & Porfilio, 2011). This further institutionalization of standardized testing within public education, likely leaves students, especially low-income, minority students like those at Romero, to contend with schooling experiences that feel meaningless. Going forward, it is imperative that educators think critically about the effects of narrow curricula on the meaningfulness of students’ educational experiences.

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