



the british
psychological society
promoting excellence in psychology

US
UNIVERSITY
OF SUSSEX

The psychology of social class inequalities in the classroom

Workshop at the University of Sussex
28th April 2023

Summary report

SOCIAL CLASS EQUALITY
#MAKEIT10

AUTHORS

Dr Matthew Easterbrook, University of Sussex

Dr Ian Hadden, University of Sussex

Lewis Doyle, University of Sussex

Cagla Gayretli, University of Sussex

Contents

1. Executive summary	4
2. Stereotype threat and values affirmation	6
3. Helping teachers be their best selves	8
4. Belonging and context	10
5. Action planning	12
6. Next steps	14

1. Executive summary

The gap in educational outcomes in schools between students from low-income families and their peers is one of the most important and urgent issues that our society faces. On 28th April 2023, the University of Sussex hosted a small-group workshop to get to grips with how insights from psychology can help reduce these inequalities. For example, how can schools help *all* students, regardless of their background, trust school and feel that they belong and are respected there?

The workshop had a distinctive vision: to bring together theory and practice by giving teachers and headteachers the opportunity to exchange experience and knowledge with specialists from leading organisations in the psychology of education, teacher training, widening participation in university, local government, and education research funding.

The first part of the day was about deepening participants' understanding of the challenges faced by students from low-income families, the ways in which psychological factors can contribute to the resulting inequalities, and how understanding these factors can help us address them in practical ways that make radical improvements to these students' experiences of school. This consisted of keynote sessions by Professor Diane Reay of the University of Cambridge, Professor Kathryn Riley of University College, London, and Andy Richbell, headteacher of St Nicolas CE Primary School, and sessions by our own team, summarised in Sections 2 to 4.

The second part of the day, summarised in Section 5, was given over to supporting the school-based participants in developing concrete action plans to promote an inclusive and engaging culture in their schools, and to supporting the non-school-based participants in incorporating the ideas from the day into their work. This emphasis on actionable plans reflects our commitment to maximising the impact of the day.

This report is one of the early actions that the University of Sussex is undertaking to provide practical support to the workshop's participants. We will continue to work with participants over the coming months to support them to design, implement and evaluate their action plans and so help maximise the impact of the day. We aim to publish an impact report, including case studies, for widespread dissemination to practitioners and policymakers in 2024.

The day was jointly funded by the University of Sussex and the British Psychological Society as part of their senate campaign *#MakeIt10: Tackling Social Class Inequalities*. This campaign aims to increase the recognition of inequalities based on social class and socioeconomic status and include them in an updated Equalities Act 2010.

2. Stereotype threat and values affirmation

Main messages

- Stereotype threat is the fear that a student experiences of conforming to a negative stereotype of a group to which they belong. It can use up cognitive resources, provoke anxiety, and instil a fear of not fitting in at school.
- Values affirmation can reduce the impact of stereotype threat by reminding people of what is important in their life. This can increase their sense of belonging in school and improve their academic performance.

Summary

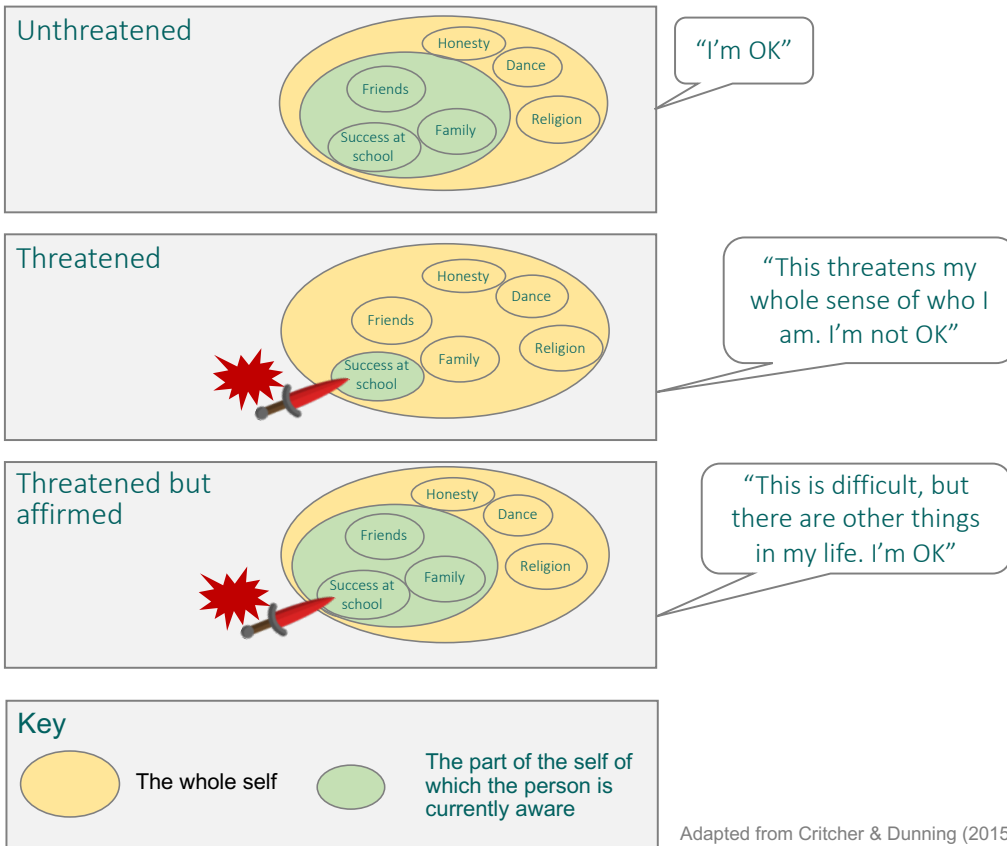
The sense that school is a threatening place in which you are unwanted, undervalued, and expected to fail because of your background, regardless of your own personal qualities, characterises the psychological experience known as *stereotype threat*.

Stereotype threat is brought about by the knowledge that there is a negative stereotype about your group that you are in danger of conforming to. It can use up your cognitive resources, provoke anxiety, and instil a fear of not fitting in or belonging in school. Over time, it can reduce your engagement with education so that you protect yourself from feelings of rejection and failure.

People have many identities – as a friend, a sibling, a son or daughter, a student, a fan of a certain football team, a dancer, an honest person, and so on. Depending on circumstances at any given time, people are aware of some of these identities while remaining unaware of others. However, when faced with a threat, such as an exam, individuals who are susceptible to stereotype threat can find that the threat looms so large that they focus only on their identity as a learner, losing touch with their other identities and the stability that these afford to their sense of self. A brief technique known as values affirmation, whereby individuals remind themselves of things that are important in their life—their strengths, relationships and values—can put such a threat into a broader perspective, lessening its importance and so reducing its impact. One of our own studies showed that values affirmation reduced the gap in scores in maths exams between students who are eligible for free school meals and their better-off peers by 62%.



The theory underpinning values affirmation



Suggested further reading

Whistling Vivaldi, Claude Steele (2010). W. W. Norton and Company.

3. Helping teachers be their best selves

Main messages

- Stereotypes are so pervasive that they can be thought of as a kind of smog that we constantly breathe in. They lead to biases that affect everyone, even teachers.
- We are developing a tool to give teachers insights into whether the signals they give their students in classroom interactions are affected by any unconscious biases they might have.

Our summary

Stereotypes are so pervasive that they can be thought of as a kind of smog that we are constantly breathing in without being aware of it. We use stereotypes because they are useful—they help us categorise a complex world and allow us to make quick decisions, especially when our cognitive resources are low. However, they feed into our attitudes and biases and can cause us to make materially inaccurate assessments of individuals.



These biases affect everyone—yes, even teachers. Our own research has found that teachers who graded a piece of work by a student who they believed was from a lower socioeconomic background gave lower grades than teachers who believed that the student was from a higher socioeconomic background, *even when the pieces of work were identical*. Other research has shown that children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are invited to participate in oral classroom discussion less often and for shorter periods of time.

Becoming aware of our own biases, although potentially uncomfortable, gives us a much better chance of overcoming them. We have been trialling and evaluating a method of self-observation to help teachers examine key dimensions of their classroom behaviour that they might not previously have considered. They watch a ten-minute section of a video recording of a lesson they recently taught, and complete a rubric that we are currently developing (see opposite for a short extract). This gives them insights into the signals they give different students in terms of their body language, verbal language and tone of voice along a range of dimensions such as warmth and encouragement of critical thinking. This helps them understand whether their interactions differ depending on a student's characteristics, such as their socioeconomic status. Feedback from teachers has been very positive so far and we are continuing to develop the tool.

Please rate **your behaviour in the interaction** based on the following dimensions:

For example, for 'warm', indicate how warm would you rate your body language, verbal language, and tone of voice during interactions with the other person.

		Person 1	Person 2
Warm (e.g., smiling, positive language, comforting...)	Body language (facial expressions, eye contact etc.)	Cold <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> Warm	Cold <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> Warm
	Verbal language	Cold <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> Warm	Cold <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> Warm
	Tone of voice	Cold <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> Warm	Cold <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> Warm

Suggested further reading

Biased: Uncovering the Hidden Prejudice That Shapes What We See, Think, and Do, Jennifer Eberhardt (2020). Penguin.

4. Belonging and context

Main messages

- Students who are unsure about whether they belong at school are likely to interpret routine setbacks as confirmation of their fears that they don't fit in.
- Brief interventions can help students normalise their perceptions of these everyday setbacks so that they see them simply as things that everybody experiences.
- However, these types of interventions are really just sticking plasters and the more fundamental aim should be to address the root causes of the issues they address.

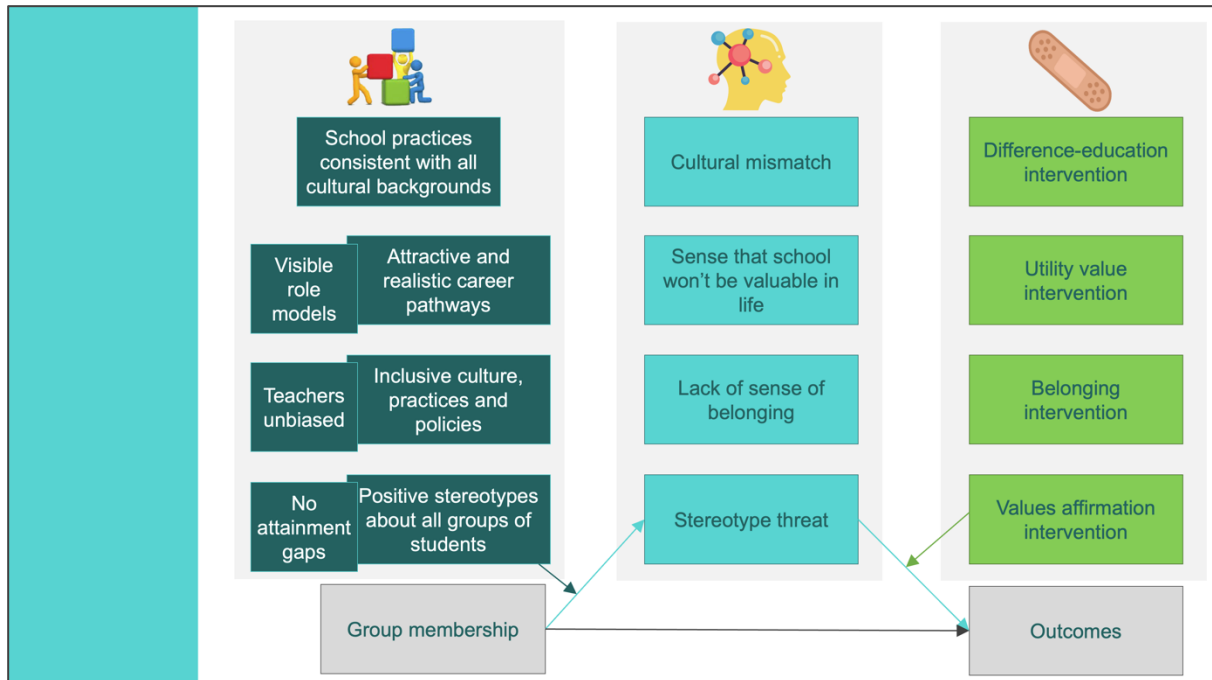
Summary

Students who see that 'people like me' do not seem to be fully valued in school are likely to be unsure about whether they belong there. This makes them likely to interpret routine setbacks as confirmation of their fears that they don't fit in: a lower grade than they were expecting, a brusque remark from a teacher, or even something as simple as getting lost. This can lead the student to think, "This is yet another thing I can't do right, I really don't belong here".



If we can help students normalise their perceptions of these everyday setbacks so that they see them simply as things that everybody experiences, then we can transform their experience of school. Brief interventions have been shown to be able to do just that. Students read short essays and quotations from older students who initially had these uncertainties about belonging, but who write that these diminished over time as they realised that everyone, no matter their background, struggled with the same sorts of setbacks.

Other psychological barriers, such as stereotype threat or a sense that school won't be valuable in life, can hold some groups of students back. While there is a range of psychological interventions that can, in the right circumstances, successfully address these barriers, these are really just sticking plasters. The more fundamental aim should be to address the root causes of the barriers. However, many root causes, such as widespread negative stereotypes about the academic ability and behaviour of children from low-income families, are deeply embedded in society. This means that it may be necessary to use a blended approach, understanding the context of your particular school and addressing the root causes where possible, and the symptoms where this is not feasible.



Suggested further reading

People like us..., Matt Easterbrook (2022). In *The Psychologist*.
<https://www.bps.org.uk/psychologist/people-us>

5. Action planning

Main messages

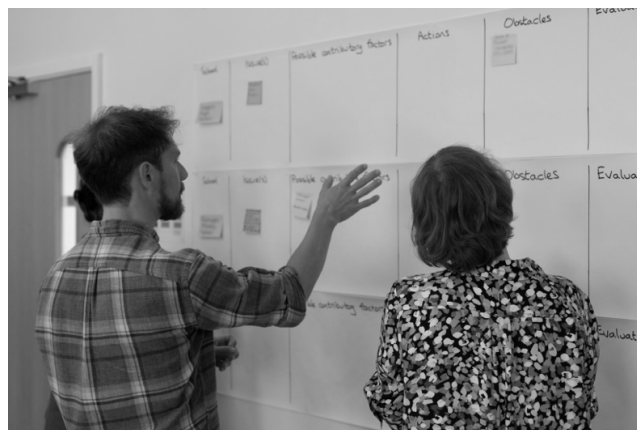
- In collaboration with workshop participants, teachers and headteachers developed draft action plans to address some of the big issues faced by their school, based on the ideas that had been covered earlier in the day.
- Similarly, participants from non-school organisations developed draft action plans aimed at establishing ways to incorporate the day's ideas into their work.

Summary

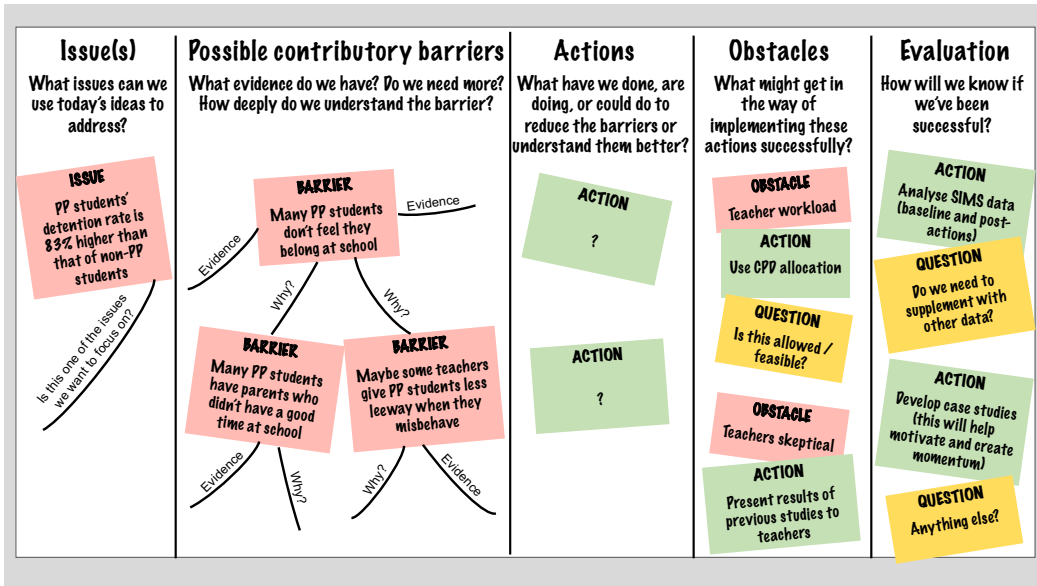
The second part of the day was given over to a collaborative exercise to support the school-based participants in developing concrete action plans to promote an inclusive and engaging culture in their schools, and to support the non-school-based participants in incorporating the ideas from the day into their work. This emphasis on actionable plans reflects our commitment to maximising the impact of the day.

Using Post-Its on large templates stuck to the walls (see the photo below and the diagram opposite), each teacher or headteacher identified one or more issues that they considered to be important for their school to address, such as students from some groups not feeling part of the wider school community. A number of participants then worked with the teacher to flesh out what barriers might be contributing to that issue, based on the ideas that had been covered earlier in the day, exploring the reliability of the evidence base and using the 'Five Whys' technique to try to establish their root causes. Next, the group considered what actions the school could take to reduce those barriers, and how to overcome any obstacles that might get in the way of implementing those actions. Finally, the group worked on how to evaluate the success of the resulting action plan, such as developing case studies to use within and beyond the school to motivate and create momentum.

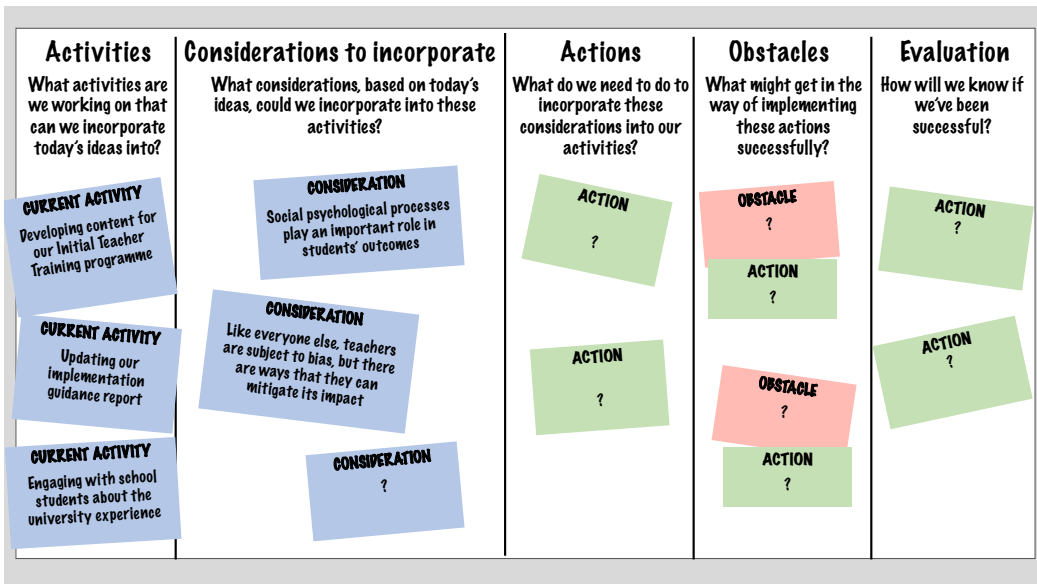
After each teacher had completed their action plan as far as possible, the participants who were from non-school organisations followed a similar exercise to establish ways to incorporate the day's ideas into their work.



Schools



Non-schools



Suggested further reading

The Five Whys – Encouraging Inquiry in the Classroom , PeachPublications.com
<https://peacheypublications.com/the-five-whys-encouraging-inquiry-in-the-classroom>

6. Next steps

Participants' responses in the evaluation form at the end of the workshop indicated that the workshop was a success. All indicated that it was useful, with over 80% saying that it was very useful. Almost all participants left with new perspectives and 80% had fairly clear or very clear actions to take back to their workplace, with the majority reporting high confidence that those actions would be successfully implemented. There was palpable enthusiasm to bring change back to the workplace.

The next stage is crucial – implementing the action plans developed during the day and evaluating their success. Below are a few examples of the actions that participants took away with them to implement in their workplace. We are committed to providing practical support in working through how to design, implement and evaluate these action plans, and to help develop case studies to demonstrate their impact to a wider audience. We aim to publish an impact report for widespread dissemination to practitioners and policymakers in 2024.

EXAMPLE ACTIONS TAKEN AWAY FROM THE DAY

“Some actions about building belonging already on our agenda but now with logistical thoughts on how.”

“Make sure that children’s own ideas drive the project we are involved in.”

“The potential impact of work on belonging – review of evaluation metrics.”

“Embed and develop a sense of belonging in school, knowing some theory behind this.”

EXAMPLE FEEDBACK ABOUT THE DAY

“I feel positive and empowered to return to school and make some changes.”

“It provided good research background for our work going forward.”

“Really enjoyed having the headspace to explore this with other individuals - find this way of learning very powerful.”

“The conference was great! Even though we have been doing a lot in this area I still have come away with new ideas and perspectives.”

**We'd like to thank all the participants for their
immense enthusiasm, and we look forward to
working with you!**



Lewis, Matt and Ian