

## Unequal perceptions of school subject value: exploring Key Stage 3 students' value attribution patterns and the psychological impact

The research aimed to explore secondary school students' perceptions of the 'value' of UK curriculum subjects; considering what, how and why specific subject value attribution patterns are important for students, and the psychological impact of this on their wellbeing and academic self-efficacy beliefs (SEB). The research used a mixed-methods, sequential design, conducted in two stages. Stage 1 explored students' value attribution for specific subjects; and relationships between attribution patterns, SEB and wellbeing. Stage 2 aimed to further explore and explain Stage 1 findings, and the relationships identified. In Stage 1, attainment data and questionnaires were collected from 38 Year 9 students. Thematic analysis explored students' value attribution for subjects; and Mann-Whitney and t-tests explored the relationships between attribution patterns, SEB and wellbeing. In Stage 2, nine participants were interviewed, and relationships identified were thematically analysed.

Three master themes (perceived usefulness, external factors and lessons' characteristics) justified the subject attributed value, highly biased towards English Baccalaureate (EBacc) subjects. Students with strengths in EBacc subjects had significantly higher SEB than those with strengths in non-EBacc subjects; the same results were found for students with strengths in subjects they had identified as 'important' versus those with strengths in subjects they had not identified as 'important'. Wellbeing measures did not yield statistical differences. Stage 2 findings suggested students with strengths in EBacc subjects felt cleverer, as their skills were respected by peers and appreciated by teachers; and EBacc subjects were perceived as more 'academic' than non-EBacc subjects. Students also discussed having fewer opportunities to progress in and receive positive feedback for skills in non-EBacc subjects, due to timetabling and the EBacc's academic value.

As previous literature indicates SEB relate to education and employment opportunities, the current research suggests potential future educational and social inequalities for students with strengths in non-EBacc subjects; problematic for social justice.

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