

How a simple psychological intervention could help boost school grades for low-income students

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A joint research team of psychologists from the University of Sussex and the London School of Economics may have found a highly effective way to help school students from low-income families improve their

academic grades. The apparently simple intervention—a few short writing exercises throughout the year—reduced the attainment gap with their peers by a remarkable 62 percent.

The team drew on research that suggests that students from [low-income families](#) often feel that they are expected to do badly in school simply because of their [social background](#). This ignites a feeling of stereotype threat—a fear that they will confirm those negative expectations—which significantly impairs their academic performance. The team trialled an intervention called values affirmation, which encourages students to reflect on something in their life that is important to them. This can enable them to focus less on this sense of stereotype threat and as a result engage better with school and improve their academic performance.

Over an [academic year](#), over 500 students in Key Stage 3—that is aged 11 to 14—took part in a randomised controlled trial to test the intervention. Three times throughout the year, teachers gave their students a 20-minute writing exercise. Half the students acted as a [control group](#), while the other half wrote about something important in their life—a values affirmation. They wrote about subjects like their family, their friends and their favourite sport.

The researchers then looked at [exam results](#) to see if values affirmation had helped the students who were eligible for free school meals (an indicator that they are from a low-income household). Not only did it reduce the attainment gap by 62 percent, but it also reduced the level of stress reported by students with free school meals.

The research is published this week in the *British Journal of Educational Psychology* in the article "Self-affirmation reduces the socioeconomic attainment gap in schools in England."

Ian Hadden and Dr. Matt Easterbrook from the University of Sussex,

along with Professor Paul Dolan of the LSE, undertook the research. While the result is very promising, the team emphasises that the technique needs further testing and they now aim to commission more research in schools with a range of demographic and academic profiles.

Ian Hadden, the doctoral researcher in the School of Psychology at the University of Sussex who led the study, explained the context of the research:

"Many people in our society simply don't expect young people from low-income households to do well at school. And when people are exposed day in, day out to these types of negative stereotypes, they can experience a phenomenon known as stereotype threat—the fear that they will conform to that stereotype. It can be a surprisingly powerful force—it can stress you out, reduce your sense of control over life and make you lose confidence in yourself. This result suggests that in the UK it could be a particularly serious barrier for students from households with lower family incomes.

"Fortunately, values affirmation seems to be a potentially effective antidote to stereotype threat. It seems that by reconnecting more deeply with something important in their life, students who are experiencing [stereotype](#) threat can start to see the threat with more perspective and so reduce its damaging effects."

Dr. Matt Easterbrook, lecturer and expert in educational and social inequality in the School of Psychology at the University of Sussex, said:

"For values affirmation to narrow the socioeconomic attainment gap by 62 percent is a really exciting finding. Although other studies have found that similar interventions can close attainment gaps between [ethnic groups](#) in the US, this is the first time that it's been shown that values affirmation can help to close the social class attainment gap in the UK.

"However, we really need to do more research so that we more fully understand how and for whom the intervention works before we can confidently recommend it to all schools.

"It's also important to point out that the intervention tackles only the symptoms of a wider social problem—that many people expect students eligible for free school meals to do badly at [school](#) not because of their ability, but simply because of their family's economic circumstances. To really reduce the social class achievement gap, we need to work to remove the detrimental stereotypes that disadvantage these students."

More information: Ian Robert Hadden et al. Self-affirmation reduces the socioeconomic attainment gap in schools in England, *British Journal of Educational Psychology* (2019). [DOI: 10.1111/bjep.12291](https://doi.org/10.1111/bjep.12291)

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