

Students' Perceptions of the Relationship between A-levels, Expectations, Values, Task Demands, Goals and Identities: A Qualitative Pilot Study

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According to Eccles' expectancy-value model of achievement motivation students' expectations and values relate to their performance and are influenced by goals and identities. When specific identities are important to an individual the tasks associated with them will have value and the individual will be motivated to act them out. This study explores students' perceptions of the relationship between their identities, goals, task demands, and their expectations and values for A-levels. Purposeful sampling of twenty A-level student participants and semi-structured interviews were employed. The results indicated that students attached value to doing well in their A-levels; they were perceived as important for the way they saw themselves, for their educational and occupational goals and future lives. Seemingly A-levels both confirmed aspects of students' identity but were also perceived to facilitate change and have positive effects. Overall, it appeared that A-levels are perceived to be important for the development of young people and illustrates ways in which these qualifications might shape how individuals see themselves and the impact upon them. The relationships are however complex and warrant further explanation including research methodologies employing student voice.

Introduction and theoretical framework

A-Levels are profoundly significant, high-stakes assessments studied by over 230,000 young people in upper secondary schooling in England (Department for Education, 2019). The results can have life-long effects on self-image, mental health and options for education and employment. Little research exists, however, on how students see A-level qualifications and studies exploring achievement motivation in the context of high stakes testing are rare, especially studies including student voice.

The expectancy-value model (EVM) of achievement motivation suggests that a students' beliefs about ability and expectations for success are a strong predictor of grades (Eccles et al., 1983; Eccles & Wigfield, 1995; Guo, Parker, Marsh, & Morin, 2015; Trautwein et al., 2012). Expectations comprise of individual perceptions of both current competence and probability of success in the future (Eccles & Wigfield, 1995; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). Differences in task value are argued to underlie differences in role choice behaviour and achievement (Eccles, 1987; Eccles et al., 1983; Eccles, Adler, & Meece, 1984). The value attached to a task because it meets an individual's needs (known as subjective task value – or STV) is a function of; intrinsic value (anticipated enjoyment of studying A-levels), attainment value (importance attached to doing well in them), utility value (whether they fulfil a personally important goal) and perceived cost of participating in an activity. Empirically, most research focuses on the first three of these components.

According to the EVM a number of factors influence these expectations and values including a student's goals, identities, and perceived task demands (effort required and perceived task difficulty). These in turn are thought to be influenced by socio-cultural factors - socio- economic demographics, gender and ethnicity (see Eccles, 2007) - and important others (see family socialisation models, Eccles & Davis-Kean, 2005).

An expectancy-value model of A-level motivation has been reported elsewhere (Brown, 2018a, 2018b). The current pilot study, employing semi-structured interviews, was one phase of a large mixed-methods study, the quantitative findings of which have been previously reported (Brown, 2018a, 2018b). These results indicated that expectations and value were related to each other and to achievement. Students attached more value to doing well than the usefulness or enjoyment of A-levels, they were less interested in them when they perceived them to be difficult, and when greater effort was perceived to be required they placed more value on attainment and usefulness of these qualifications.

Identity is a powerful construct that guides life paths and decisions (Kroger, 2007). Adolescence is a key time when identities begin to take shape; it has implications for their competence and motivation, and the decisions about what to do with their lives (Wigfield & Wagner, 2007). Therefore, looking at the links between motivation, identity and achievement in A-level students is potentially important. Identity is a complex concept that has been discussed from developmental perspectives (Berzonsky, 1990, 1993, 1998; Erikson, 1963, 1982; Marcia, 1966) and social perspectives (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, 1987) amongst others. It is beyond the scope of this paper to review all identity theories, where the focus is on EVM, however this theory is chosen firstly because it aligns and draws upon many of the different perspectives (e.g., Marcia, 2002; Erikson, 1980; Harter, 1998; Kroger, 2004) and also focuses on the questions commonly asked by them (Eccles, 2009), including ‘Who Am I? What am I about? What is important to me? What do I value?’. Secondly it draws together the fields of identity and motivation.

Eccles’ believed that expectations and values are influenced by identity (Eccles, 2009). This has been little tested empirically however making this study an important one. Eccles (2009) postulated that identity comprises of three components; a *value component* (the

importance attached to specific individual characteristics and groups to which one belongs); a *content component* (beliefs about the activities and behaviours which allow successful enactment of identity) and an *expectancy component* (beliefs about the ability to enact these behaviours). These components may be important in relation to A-levels and whether students' attach value to them, believe they fit with their identity and will be successful in them.

Furthermore, she argues that identity involves perceptions related to skills, characteristics and competencies (the 'Me' self) and perceptions related to personal values and goals (the 'We' self). Eccles assumed people have both personal identities which make one feel unique and collective identities which strengthen ties to highly valued groups, e.g. on basis of gender, race, religion, social class, culture and family. The process of forming these selves is seen as fluid and dynamic and maturation results in exposure and selection of different situations the individual uses to shape new views of themselves (Eccles, 2009). A-levels may be one such situation or context in which such selves therefore begin to form or develop.

A key notion of this EVM theory is that when specific identities are important to the individual then the activities, behaviours and tasks associated with them will take on high subjective value and the individual will be motivated to act them out (Eccles, 2009). It was not possible to explore this in depth in the quantitative phase of the study and the qualitative data therefore sought to address the gap and obtain more nuanced information on the perceived relationships between A-levels, expectations, values and students' goals and identities.

Based on this theoretical model the research question explored was;

- What are students' perceptions regarding the relationship between their identities, goals, task demands (effort and task difficulty) and their expectations and values for A-levels?

Method

Participants

Convenience sampling was used to recruit sixth form students (aged 16-18 years) from 10 schools in one geographical County and included seven state and three independent schools. In order to recruit 20 interviewees a purposeful sampling technique and a maximal variation strategy was employed, where 'diverse individuals are chosen who are expected to hold different perspectives on the central phenomenon' (Creswell & Clark, 2011 p.174). Key demographic variables were therefore given as indicators for selection including gender, socio-economic background and ethnicity and these are known to relate to possible differences in expectations, values and achievement (e.g. Eccles and Wigfield, 1995; Guo, Marsh, Parker, Morin, & Seeshing Young, 2015). Academic achievement was not used as there are suggestions that teachers' estimated grades range in reliability as predictors of actual results (from. $r=0.45$, Wilson, 1982 to $r=0.82$, Baird, 1997). Also, the results themselves are not available until students leave school so it would have been impractical to select them as interviewees at this stage. A senior member of staff invited two students to participate. In one school there was only one participant and in another there were three.

The sample comprised of nine male and 11 female participants as shown in Table 1. There were 13 students from state schools and seven from independent schools of which six were in the lower 6th (year 12) and 14 were in the upper 6th (year 13). The majority of students identified as White British ($n=14$).

Table 1 here

Instrument and Procedure

Semi-structured interviews were used to examine students' perceived relationships between their expectations, values and A-levels including plans for the future. The interview questions derived from the theoretical framework (EVM) and assumptions that achievement is related to expectations and values; that these expectations and values are determined by socio-cultural factors, goals, identity and task demands and that when a particular goal or identity is important to an individual then tasks (in this case A-levels) will have higher subjective task value. The interviews were conducted in a tutor period just prior to students sitting their final examinations. With their permission the interviews were audio recorded. The study received full approval from the institutional ethics committee.

Based on the theoretical framework students were asked;

- their name, school, year group
- qualifications being studied, ethnicity, parental occupations (as an indicator of socio-economic status)
- whether and how A-levels have helped them to become the person they want to be
- if this influences the effort they put in
- if A-levels confirmed or changed the way they saw themselves and how
- to provide any further information on how they wished to add to the issues discussed

Interviews lasted approximately 20 minutes. Coding was done using paper copies of the transcripts and then using NVivo software, allowing multimodal ways of analysing the data.

Firstly deductive coding was used based on Eccles' theoretical framework which highlighted that expectations and values may be influenced by a student's background, goals relating to their identities and their perceived task demands. Codes included; students' background, qualifications, expectations & values, effort, task difficulty, identity (see Table 2).

Table 2 here

As these codes did not capture all aspects of the relationships described by interviewees, in the second stage the researcher used inductive coding to identify further themes and patterns relating to the relationship between expectations, values, goals, identity, influences and A-levels. Those identified included experiences, future plans, cultural identity, previous academic experiences and subjects.

Results

The themes presented in these results are based upon the EVM during the deductive coding phase one and those that emerged from the participants themselves during the inductive coding phase two. They highlight the value students attached to their A-levels, the perceived links between A-levels and identity, and their associations with task demands and students' reported influences upon their choices. Pseudonyms were used in order to ensure anonymity of participants.

Valuing A-levels

The data suggests that students attach value to doing well in their A-levels. 181 references were made to expectations and values, although these may reflect socially

desirable responses in relation to the implied wording in the question. Nevertheless they are in line with the literature that suggests attainment value is important in terms of identity (Eccles, 2009), and that intrinsic value allows individuals to seek both personal enjoyment of engaging in A-levels, confirm characteristics central to their self-image, and place more value on tasks that are consistent with their identity and goals (Eccles, 2009). As expected A-levels were seen as important for students' educational and occupational goals and for their future lives;

Fiona: I have to have certain grades in my A level to be able to access them. [Referring to either going to University or joining the Army]

Grace: Yes, they'll help me get into uni because I've decided what I want to do [Adult Nursing]

Interviewer: And so how do your A-levels help you do that?

Grace:I've picked health and social to help me with that so it gives me background knowledge on diseases and things that all link.

Students also perceived them as important for the way they see themselves;

John: Yes, I need 3 As..... I want to do well anyway because it feels good when you do well.

Ethan: I think they will be useful to a point where say, if I'm going for a job, like that I enjoy, people will, like, they'll look and be like oh he's got A levels he can be taught.

Identity

It is known that students select experiences that enable them to shape their own beliefs (Eccles, 2009) and that identity is a construct that guides life paths and decisions (Kroger, 2007). These interviews highlight how students perceive their identity and A-levels

to interact. For eleven students A-levels confirmed aspects of their identity, what interests them, what they enjoy and plan to do, with 14 references were made to this overall;

Christian: ...I've always seen myself as a hands on person...I asked to do engineering... it's basically confirmed that what I want to do is what I'm doing now

Daisy: I think they've confirmed the way I saw myself as someone who wants to succeed and wants to do well...

However, interestingly, a greater number of references were made to the perceived ways A-levels have facilitated change; with 23 references were made to this from 15 students. This included facilitating revisions to goals, values and expectations;

John: So before I did my A levels, I don't think I did, I don't think I did know, who, what I was going to be.

Isabel: I didn't know what I wanted to do when I came to A-levels I kind of just picked subjects which I was good at and then now looking at them I'm kind of like got more of an idea of what kind of career I want to have when I'm older.

Grace: They've changed because at the start I thought I enjoyed writing essays and looking at researchthen I think the grades I got in my first year was a bit like, mmm, maybe not, I need to look at what I'm actually good at and re-evaluate my decision.

and their academic skills;

Christian: I think it's given me a bit more independence working in 6th form.

Ian: I think they've made me more organised.

Importantly A-levels were perceived to facilitate positive personal change;

Chloe: I think they've probably changed the way that I see myself as a lot more, like, confident in a way...I come to see myself as more like an open person, like I'll happily just give my opinion on something.

Angela: ... they (A-levels) make me want to study hard and become a better person get a good job, be able to become independent....no one's really gone to university in my family or studied anything higher so... they've changed me. They've made me better.

Task Demands – Effort and Task difficulty

Students linked effort to their expectations and values in line with previous work (Eccles & Wigfield, 1995);

Daisy: Having an offer for medicine and being right I've got to get these grades has definitely boosted the amount of effort that I've put in to because I know that's it's very important.

David: I'd say I probably do put a reasonable amount of effort into my A-levels but that's not necessarily with a clear end goal in sight I think it's probably just to give myself the best opportunities.

Task difficulty was also linked to expectations and values with nine participants discussing this. Theoretically Eccles (Eccles et al., 1983; Eccles & Wigfield, 1995) proposed that expectations and STV are negatively related to task difficulty however, interestingly, in this study the students perceived positive rather than negative effects;

Chloe: A lot of my friends have, like, we've discussed before like how different the jump is and how like we should probably try a bit harder or you don't see yourself as good at something that you thought you were in GCSE... I was kind of like this is a bit harder now and I was like maybe I have to try a bit harder now and it made me think that I wasn't as good as I thought I was.

Hannah: Sometimes it's so challenging that you don't think you can do it but then you actually do do it and you think oh I can overcome any challenge kind of thing.

Heidi: Doing A-levels is they're really really hard and you have to be dedicated and I feel like that's helped me a lot.

Conclusion

An aim of this research was to explore students' perceptions of the relationships between their identity, goals, task demands (effort and task difficulty) and their expectations and values for A-levels. The results suggest that studying A-levels confirm aspects of students' identity but also facilitate changes to their goals, academic skills and personal perceptions of themselves. It was particularly interesting to find that students' perceived there to be many positive rather than negative relationships between identities, goals, task demands and expectations and values for A-levels e.g. they raised expectations of themselves, their goals for the future, 'made them better'. It was also interesting to find that task demands seemingly increased rather than decreased motivation for A-levels. These are important findings providing insight into how students perceive A-level qualifications and the impact upon them – highlighting both positive and negative effects – and contrary to the literature surrounding the demotivating role of factors such as task difficulty (Eccles & Wigfield, 1995). Although teachers recruited interviewees to avoid researcher bias it should be noted however that student participation of those doing well and had a positive attitude towards A-levels cannot be ruled out, although the data did not indicate such a bias on the face of it.

This pilot study makes several potential contributions. Students often face a lack of recognition for who they are and researchers need to give them a voice (O'Boyle, 2013) which this study has attempted to do, albeit on a small scale. Actively listening to what students say about their educational experiences in this way has potentially improving and empowering effects such as an increase in self-worth, self-respect and learning as well as a greater sense of agency (O'Boyle, 2013). These are therefore possible benefits to the student

participants in this study. A-levels were clearly significant for the development of the young people in this sample – they are not a passive part of the process. This is perhaps imperative to reflect upon in the climate of a global pandemic where A-level students have suffered significant disruption to their usual schooling.

Links between Eccles' expectancy-value model and identity has been theorised but not explored qualitatively in the context of high stakes examinations and therefore this study is an initial step towards such exploration. This is especially important given the significance of A-level qualifications for future life pathways. This research has the potential to pave a way to understanding the nature of this important qualification and the impact of A-levels on individuals. Insights from this small sample may be useful for researchers and policy makers as they strive to understand multiple pathways that lead to positive outcomes for young people. This is, however, a small-scale study and the findings may not therefore be generalised to a larger population. Due to practical constraints, the interviews were short and can only yield provisional data. These analyses are exploratory, descriptive and interpretative rather than confirmatory, comprehensive and nomothetic (Rennie, Watson, & Monteiro, 2002) and should be considered tentative in character (Stiles, 1993). The findings do however provide a valuable starting point for future research on the links between A-levels, motivation and identity.

In a funded follow-up study the sample size and geographical area from which it is drawn will be significantly increased. Two in-depth interviews will be conducted at different time points in A-levels and the issues emerging from this pilot study further explored in more detail. Whether COVID-19 has affected A-levels, perceptions and future plans will also be explored. This further work seeks to overcome the limitations and make a more substantial

contribution to the field in a timely fashion given the importance of these high-stakes qualifications for future life pathways and the context of a global pandemic.

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Table 1: *Sample descriptor*

Variable	N (20)
<i>Gender</i>	
Male	9
Female	11
<i>School Type (n=10)</i>	
State (n=7)	13
Independent (n=3)	7
<i>Year Group</i>	
12	6
13	14
<i>Ethnicity</i>	
White British	14
White Other	1
White British/ Black Caribbean	1
African	2
Chinese	1
Filipina	1

Table 2 *Codes used in Stage One based on Eccles Theoretical Framework*

Code	Description
<i>Background</i>	
Gender	Male, female
SES	Parental occupation
Ethnicity	Ethnic group (based on categories used by Office of National Statistics)
<i>Qualifications</i>	
AS	Level
A-level	Level
Other	e.g. BTEC
Subject choices	Subjects studied
<i>Expectations and Values</i>	
Intrinsic value	Anticipated enjoyment of activity
Attainment value	Value doing well/ subject or career choice fits with person's identity
Utility value	Value task has because it fulfils a goal
Perceived cost (s)	Cost of participating, e.g. anxiety, fear of; failure, social consequences, loss of energy
<i>Effort</i>	How much effort is applied
<i>Task difficulty</i>	How difficult student finds task
<i>Identity</i>	
Changed identity	Changed student's opinion of who they thought they were
Confirmed identity	Confirmed student's opinion of who they thought they were