Equal opportunities?
*The effects of negative stereotypes and teacher-child relationship quality on the school adjustment of ethnic minority students in the Netherlands*

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In the Netherlands, as in many other countries, students with an ethnic minority background often underperform in school in comparison to native students. Although in recent years the achievement of ethnic minority students has slightly improved (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek [CBS], 2014), on average they still have lower language and mathematics skills and lower scores on the CITO test (i.e., the standardized nationwide test that students in the Netherlands receive at the end of primary education; Herweijer, 2009). As a result, ethnic minority students are underrepresented in the higher tracks of secondary education, which provide access to an academic education (Herweijer, 2009). For example, in 2009, 47 percent of the native Dutch students were enrolled in the two highest tracks of Dutch secondary education, against 22 percent of Turkish and Moroccan students and 31 percent of Antillean and Surinamese students. This situation had not changed in 2011: Only 21 percent of non-western ethnic minority students were in the higher educational levels versus 41 percent of native Dutch students (CBS, 2012). Additionally, in secondary education, ethnic minority students more often repeat grades than native Dutch students and show higher drop-out rates (Herweijer, 2009).

Apart from differences in academic achievement, there also seem to be behavioral differences between native Dutch and ethnic minority youths. Previous research has shown that ethnic minority students in the Netherlands are at higher risk of behavioral maladjustment and are more likely to come into contact with the law than native Dutch students (Blom, Oudhof, Bijl, & Bakker, 2005). In a study that followed youth from age 12 (in 1999) to age 24, it was concluded that 43 percent of Moroccan Dutch youth, 33 percent of Antillean or Surinamese youth, and 25 percent of Turkish youth were suspected of a crime at least once during this time period, against 16 percent of native Dutch youth (CBS, 2012). In addition, parent-reports showed higher levels of internalizing problems (e.g., anxiety and depression) for Turkish immigrant children between the age of 4 and 18 than for native Dutch students within the same age range (Bengi-Arslan, Verhulst, van der Ende, & Erol, 1997). Furthermore, although different informants (i.e., students, parents, teachers) did not always agree, Dutch teachers reported a
relatively high level of externalizing problems for Moroccan-Dutch students between the age of 4 and 18 (Stevens et al., 2003).

In this dissertation, several possible explanations for the differences in school achievement and problem behavior between native and ethnic minority students in the Dutch school context were considered and explored. More specifically, the focus was on the influence of negative stereotypes and of the quality of the affective relationship with the teacher. Both of these explanations are focused on affect regulation processes that take place within the classroom. Another important aim of this dissertation was to explore possibilities for interventions that can help to create more equal opportunities for ethnic minority students at school, compared to majority students. A values-affirmation intervention that was aimed at making ethnic minority students more resilient against stereotype threat was tested. This intervention was found to be very effective in reducing achievement gaps between ethnic minority and majority students in the United States (e.g., Cohen, Garcia, Apfel, & Master, 2006; Cohen, Garcia, Purdie-Vaughns, Apfel, & Brzustoski, 2009). In this dissertation, the intervention was put to test in the Dutch school context, and its effects on ethnic minority students’ academic achievement and problem behavior were tested.

Possible Explanations for Differences in Achievement and Behavior

The influence of negative stereotypes

Although factors such as a lower socio-economic status (SES) and a higher prevalence of single-parent families are risk factors for ethnic minority students, these factors cannot entirely explain the differences in school achievement (e.g., Herweijer, 2009). The question then arises what other factor or factors could (partially) explain the ‘achievement gap’ between native and ethnic minority students in the Netherlands.

In the United States, differences in academic achievement between African-American students and Caucasian American students have been associated with stereotype threat. Stereotype threat can be defined as being at risk of confirming other’s negative stereotypes about a group one belongs to (Steele & Aronson, 1995). These presumed negative stereotypes of others about one’s own (ethnic) group are meta-stereotypes (Vorauer, Main, & O’Connell, 1998). For example, imagine a female ethnic minority student in a classroom, who is about to take a
school test. This student is aware that others have a negative stereotype about her ethnic group (i.e., she has a meta-stereotype): her group is seen by others as unintelligent and not capable of achieving well at school. Although this student does not necessarily believe in this meta-stereotype herself, she might be concerned that if she underperforms on the school test, she may, unintentionally, confirm the negative stereotype that exists about her group. These concerns are called *stereotype threat*. During the test, the student will then probably have more worries and stress than non-stereotyped individuals, which will prevent her from concentrating on the test, which subsequently, ironically, leads to a poorer grade on the test and a confirmation of the negative stereotype.

Steele and Aronson (1995) were the first to reveal stereotype threat effects on the academic achievement of African-American students. Thereafter, many studies have shown that stereotype threat can affect the achievement of all kinds of negatively stereotyped group members, including the academic achievement of immigrant students in the US (i.e., Latino students) and Europe (i.e., Turkish and Moroccan students; see for an overview Appel, Weber, & Kronberger, 2015). Since stereotype threat has been shown to affect the academic achievement of immigrant students with a Turkish or Moroccan background in France and Germany (Appel, 2012; Berjot, Roland-Levy, & Giraud-Lidvan, 2011; Chateignier, Dutrévis, Nugier, & Chekroun, 2009; see Appel et al., 2015 for an overview), it is likely that the academic achievement of immigrant students from the same descent in the Netherlands also suffers from stereotype threat.

Although previous studies have not directly examined stereotype threat effects on behavior, they have provided reason to assume that differences in problem behavior may also be partially attributable to negative stereotypes. For instance, a study of Kamans, Gordijn, Oldenhuis, & Otten (2009) has shown that when an individual feels negatively stereotyped by an out-group and at the same time dislikes this out-group, then this can lead to assimilation to instead of rejection of the negative stereotype. Imagine for example a male student with an ethnic minority background who is in a classroom with both students of his own ethnic background (in-group) and students with an ethnic majority background (out-group). He knows that the ethnic majority sees his group as aggressive and criminal (i.e., meta-stereotype) and feels personally affected by this negative stereotype. To protect his in-group identity, the individual may want to distance himself from the out-group, by creating an in-group identity that is distinguished from the out-group. According to Kamans et al. (2009), meta-stereotypes give information about how the out-group is presumed to perceive the in-group (i.e., as
aggressive and criminal), but also about how the out-group is presumed to perceive themselves (i.e., as less aggressive and criminal). Therefore, showing behavior opposite to the negative meta-stereotype, for example behaving non-aggressively, will not create more distance between the individual and the out-group, because it makes the individual more similar (i.e., less aggressive and criminal) to the out-group. To create more distance, the individual might instead be more inclined to behave in line with the negative meta-stereotype (i.e., aggressive and criminal) and ironically, this leads to confirmation of the negative group stereotype. Indeed, this is what was found in the study of Kamans et al. (2009): Students with a Moroccan background who felt negative about the native Dutch out-group and who felt personally stereotyped by them, were inclined to legitimize behavior in line with the negative meta-stereotypes, such as loitering, aggressive and criminal behavior.

Because ethnic minority students in the Netherlands are assumed to be negatively stereotyped in the intellectual domain (e.g., CBS, 2005; Nievers, Andriessen, & Ross, 2010; Verkuyten & Thijs, 2000), and stereotype threat effects on academic achievement have been shown among ethnic minority students in neighboring countries (Appel, 2012; Berjot et al., 2011; Chateignier et al., 2009), in this dissertation it was expected that stereotype threat might be a partial explanation of the achievement gap between native and ethnic minority students in the Netherlands as well. Furthermore, because ethnic minority students in the Netherlands are also negatively stereotyped in the behavioral domain (e.g., CBS, 2005; Nievers et al., 2010; Verkuyten & Thijs, 2000), it was expected that differences in actual problem behavior between native and ethnic minority students in the Netherlands could also be partially explained by negative stereotypes. To further examine these expectations, the present dissertation describes a study that examined how ethnic minority students’ negative meta-stereotypes about their intellectual capabilities and behavior are associated with their actual academic achievement and actual level of problem behavior (see Chapter 2).

The role of teacher-child relationship quality

Another important factor in the school adjustment (i.e., academic achievement and behavioral development) of students is the quality of the individual affective relationship between the student and the teacher (e.g., Henricsson & Rydell, 2004; Henricsson & Rydell, 2006; O’Connor, Dearing, & Collins 2011; Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, & Oort, 2011). Research about teacher-child relationship quality in the past two decades is inspired by an extended attachment perspective, in which three
dimensions are often distinguished (Pianta, Hamre, & Stuhlman, 2003). Closeness reflects the degree of warmth and openness in the relationship, whereas Conflict refers to the degree of negative and coercive teacher-child interactions. Dependency reflects clingy and overtly dependent behaviors of the child. A favorable teacher-child relationship is characterized by a high degree of closeness and low levels of conflict and dependency (Pianta et al., 2003; Verschueren & Koomen, 2012).

A recent meta-analysis showed that both positive and negative teacher-child relationship qualities are associated with children’s school engagement and academic achievement (Roorda et al., 2011). Other studies found that the teacher-child relationship is also associated with children’s behavioral adjustment (e.g., Doumen et al., 2008, Mejia & Hoglund, 2016; Roorda, Verschueren, Vancraeyveldt, Van Craeyveldt, & Colpin, 2014; Zhang & Sun, 2011). Once the teacher-child relationship is negative and children show negative behavioral adjustment, the teacher and child may easily end up in a negative spiral in which negative interactions, negative behavioral adjustment and underperformance at school reinforce each other (Stipek & Miles, 2008). Imagine for example a child who has a high amount of conflictual encounters with the teacher. This child may have these encounters with the teacher because he shows aggressive behavior in the classroom. Therefore, the teacher may discipline this child relatively often, leaving less time for the teacher and the child to focus on the learning of the child. The child may also develop negative feelings towards the teacher, resulting in lower motivation to do the work the teacher assigns. The lack of motivation and time spent on school work may lead to lower academic achievement, which in its turn may lead to even more frustration in the child and more aggressive behavior, and more conflict in the teacher-child relationship and so on. This was precisely what Stipek and Miles (2008) found in a longitudinal study among children from kindergarten to fifth grade, from low-income and mostly ethnic-minority families. The association between children’s aggressive behavior and their school engagement and academic achievement was mediated by teacher-child conflict. Moreover, teacher-child conflict and children’s academic achievement in turn influenced children’s level of aggressive behavior.

Apart from the study of Stipek and Miles (2008), most studies about the teacher-child relationship and children’s school adjustment have taken place among children from middle class families. Albeit some exceptions (Mejia & Hoglund, 2016; Rey, Smith, Yoon, Somers, & Barnett, 2007), not much is known about associations between the teacher-child relationship quality and school adjustment of ethnic minority children, especially not from sixth grade onwards.
This is rather surprising, given that researchers have suggested that the teacher-child relationship might be especially important for children who are at risk of negative school adjustment (e.g., lower engagement and grades, and disruptive classroom behavior), as for example ethnic minority students (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). According to this ‘academic risk perspective’, at risk students have more to gain, or lose, from the degree of support provided by the teacher-child relationship (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). Previous studies have indeed shown that negative teacher-child relationships can have more deteriorating effects for at risk students (e.g., students with learning difficulties) than for other students (Roorda et al., 2011), whereas positive teacher-child relationships can benefit at-risk (e.g., ethnic minority) students’ school adjustment more than that of not-at-risk students (i.e., majority students; Burchinal, Peisner-Feinberg, Pianta, & Howes, 2002; Meehan, Hughes, & Cavell, 2003).

As described above, ethnic minority students in the Netherlands can be viewed as being at risk of negative school adjustment, as they seem to be at higher risk of academic underperformance and of behavioral maladjustment than native Dutch students. At the same time, research has shown that ethnic minority students may be at higher risk of developing negative relationships with their teachers (e.g., Jerome, Hamre, & Pianta, 2009; Thijs, Westhof, & Koomen, 2012). For example, Jerome et al. (2009) showed that African American students in the United States were more likely to have conflictual relationships with their teacher in kindergarten than Caucasian White students, and that this ‘gap’ continued to grow until middle elementary school. One might thus expect that for ethnic minority students, these negative cycles between children’s school adjustment and the teacher-child relationship may be even more pronounced. Therefore, in the present dissertation, a first step was taken to acquire more knowledge about these processes among sixth grade ethnic minority students in the Netherlands. Following previous studies that have investigated reciprocal associations between the teacher-child relationship and young children’s behavioral adjustment (Doumen et al., 2008; Mejia & Hoglund, 2016; Roorda et al., 2014, Zhang & Sun, 2011), the present dissertation includes a study that examined these reciprocal associations for ethnic minority students at the end of primary education (see Chapter 4).
Values-affirmation Intervention

An important objective of this dissertation was to examine the effectiveness of an intervention aimed at reducing ethnic minority children’s underperformance at school and their level of problem behavior in the Dutch school context. The intervention was developed in previous research to diminish the negative effects of stereotype threat (Cohen et al., 2006; 2009).

Stereotypes are often widespread across society and once established, they are pervasive and difficult to change. Therefore, an intervention that focuses on the negatively stereotyped individual instead of the society that holds the negative stereotypes, would probably be more successful in reducing stereotype threat effects. One such intervention that has been examined in previous studies is a values-affirmation intervention. Cohen et al. (2006; 2009) were the first to show that this intervention reduced the achievement gap between African-American and Caucasian American students in the United States. Since then, several other longitudinal studies found that a values-affirmation intervention was successful in improving the academic achievement of other negatively stereotyped groups, such as Latino American students (Sherman et al., 2013), students from low SES backgrounds (Bowen, Wegmann, & Webber, 2013), and female students in a physics class (Miyake et al., 2010). However, most of these studies have taken place in the US. Therefore, in this dissertation, two studies are described that investigated whether this values-affirmation intervention would have the same positive effect on the academic achievement of ethnic minority students in the Netherlands. Furthermore, effects of the values-affirmation intervention on the level of problem behavior of ethnic minority students were also examined, which has not been done before (see Chapter 3).

A values-affirmation is a short and simple intervention. It consists of two or three short writing assignments across one school year that each take approximately fifteen minutes to complete. Students receive these assignments from their teacher during school hours, preferably before a school test. In the assignments, a list of eleven to twelve values is presented to them (e.g., music, athletic ability, relationships with friends and family). The students are asked to choose the two or three values that are most important to them, and to subsequently write a short paragraph about why those values are important to them. Shortly after the intervention, teachers resume their lesson plan. The idea behind this simple intervention stems from self-affirmation theory (Steele, 1988), which states that people are motivated to maintain a sense of self-integrity.
However, when negatively stereotyped, this sense of self-integrity is threatened. By focusing individuals on other parts of the self that are important to them (i.e., sports, music) besides the threatened part (e.g., intellectual capabilities or behavioral integrity), self-integrity can be reaffirmed and the feelings of threat are diminished (Critcher & Dunning, 2014; Sherman, 2013). In the case of academic achievement, this reduction of feelings of threat and stress will probably enable the individual to have a better concentration on school work and to perform better. In the case of problem behavior, it could be expected that a re-affirmation of self-integrity probably makes protecting the in-group identity (e.g., by behaving in line with a negative meta-stereotype) less relevant, and therefore, the level of problem behavior will presumably be reduced.

Ethnic Minority Students in the Netherlands

Most ethnic minority participants in the present dissertation had a Moroccan-Dutch, Turkish-Dutch or Surinamese or Antillean background, reflecting the largest groups of immigrants in the Netherlands from the past decades. Turkish and Moroccan immigrants came to the Netherlands in the sixties and seventies of the 20th century as guest workers, to fill positions in the lower segments of the labor market. They originated from the lower socio-economic segments and were mainly low-educated or unschooled (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2002). Another large group of ethnic minority residents in the Netherlands came from (former) colonies, such as the Antilles and Surinam. Most Surinamese and Antillean immigrants came to the Netherlands around 1975, when Surinam became independent of the Netherlands. These immigrants originated from all social classes.

Dissertation Outline

In this dissertation, two possible explanations for underachievement at school and behavioral maladjustment of ethnic minority children in the Netherlands were explored. First, it was examined how negative stereotypes were associated with the academic achievement and behavioral adjustment of both ethnic minority and majority students in the Netherlands. Second, associations between the affective teacher-child relationship quality and ethnic minority children’s behavioral adjustment were investigated. Finally, an intervention aimed at creating resilience against stereotype threat was tested.
In Chapter 2, it was examined how negative meta-stereotypes were associated with the academic achievement and problem behavior of ethnic minority and majority students. With a newly developed questionnaire, two forms of negative meta-stereotypes were measured: Meta-stereotypes in relation to intellectual capabilities, and in relation to problem behavior. Participants were first year pre-vocational students (i.e., seventh grade), with a native Dutch, Moroccan-Dutch or Turkish-Dutch background. The aim of this study was to examine if ethnic minority students in the Netherlands indeed perceived negative stereotyping, and to verify if they suffered more from these negative stereotypes than native Dutch students.

In Chapter 3, two randomized controlled intervention studies are reported. In these studies, a values-affirmation intervention, which was aimed at making students more resilient against stereotype threat, was tested. The first study was conducted among first-year pre-vocational students (i.e., seventh grade). In this study, the guidelines and procedures of the original intervention were followed as closely as possible (Cohen et al., 2006; 2009; see also Sherman et al., 2013). The outcomes of the study concerned school achievement and student’s self-reported problem behavior.

The second study was conducted among ethnic minority students in their final year of primary education (i.e., sixth grade). Whereas students in seventh grade are already subdivided into different academic achievement levels, in Grade 6, students with various academic achievement levels are still in the same class. Again, procedures of the original intervention were followed (Cohen et al., 2006; 2009; see also Sherman et al., 2013). However, because the students in this study were relatively young, a help-with-reflection condition was added to the original paradigm. In this condition, students reflected on their important values with the help of a teaching assistant. Results of the standardized nationwide CITO test were obtained as an objective indicator of academic achievement. In addition to student-reports of problem behavior, in this second study also teacher-reports of problem behavior were included for a random selection of students. In both studies, multilevel analyses were performed to control for variance between classes.

In Chapter 4, a longitudinal study is described in which reciprocal associations between ethnic minority children’s behavioral adjustment and aspects of teacher-child relationship quality were examined over the course of one school year. Teacher-reports as well as student-reports of both behavioral adjustment and relationship quality were included. Participants were ethnic minority students in their final year of primary education (i.e., sixth grade) and their teachers. Teachers
and students reported on internalizing, externalizing, and prosocial behaviors and closeness, conflict, and dependency or negative expectations in the teacher-child relationship at the beginning and near the end of the school year.

Finally, in Chapter 5, the findings of the different studies described in this dissertation are discussed in relation to each other, and implications for educational practice and future research are considered. Ideas for possible future interventions are discussed as well.