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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Chapter 5

General Discussion

A range of explanations have been proposed for the differences in academic performance and problem behavior between native and ethnic minority students in the Dutch school context. In this dissertation, two possible explanations were investigated that have been relatively under researched. These explanations focused on affect regulation processes that possibly play a role inside the classroom. The first concerned the role of stereotype threat. The second explanation pertained to the affective quality of the teacher-child relationship.

In the first part of the dissertation, it was examined if school adjustment (i.e., academic performance and behavioral development) of ethnic minority students in the Netherlands could be affected by stereotype threat (Chapter 2 and 3). Also, an intervention aimed at reducing stereotype threat was tested. Previous studies, mainly conducted in the United States, have shown that a values-affirmation intervention can be very successful in improving the (academic) performance of members of negatively stereotyped groups. Therefore, in the present dissertation, this same values-affirmation intervention was tested in the Dutch school context (Chapter 3) to assess if it could also improve the academic performance of negatively stereotyped ethnic minority students in the Netherlands. In addition, it was examined if the intervention reduced the level of problem behavior of these students.

The second part of the dissertation concerned the role of the quality of the teacher-child relationship. Previous studies have indicated that the affective quality of the teacher-child relationship is associated with young children’s school adjustment (e.g., Buyse, Verschueren, Verachtert, & Van Damme, 2009; Graves & Howes, 2011; Jerome, Hamre, & Pianta, 2009; Rudasill, 2011), and that this relationship is even more important for the school adjustment of at-risk students (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; see Roorda et al., 2011 for meta-analytic findings). However, studies about associations between the teacher-child relationship and school adjustment among ethnic minority children are scarce, and most studies took place among relatively young children. In this dissertation, associations between teacher-child relationship quality and ethnic minority children’s behavioral adjustment in the school context were explored (Chapter 4), to estimate whether
interventions in this area could also be helpful in improving the school adjustment of these students.

In the remainder of this general discussion, several issues regarding stereotype threat, and the relationship between teachers and ethnic minority students will be discussed. First, difficulties with measuring stereotype threat will be addressed. Thereafter, several explanations for the absence of values-affirmation effects will be discussed, in the light of findings of other recent replication studies. Next, results of the study about teacher-child relationship quality and ethnic minority students’ behavioral adjustment will be briefly summarized, and implications will be provided. Subsequently, the results from the studies in the preceding chapters will be discussed in the light of possibilities for future interventions. The chapter will finish with some concluding remarks.

Difficulties with Measuring Stereotype Threat

As mentioned earlier, in most previous studies about stereotype threat, stereotype threat itself was not measured. In such cases, a manipulation that was assumed to induce stereotype threat was used instead. The most common manipulation is to use a diagnostic (e.g., this test will provide information about your intellectual capabilities) versus a non-diagnostic (e.g., this test will help us understand how students learn different things) test instruction (e.g., McKown & Weinstein, 2003; Steele & Aronson, 1995). Subsequently, the effect of this manipulation on the academic performance of the participants is measured and when an effect is found, this is ascribed to stereotype threat. In some exceptional cases, stereotype threat has been measured, but the items to measure it were very complex, and also seemed to be rather specific for the American context (Steele & Aronson, 1995). In studies examining a values-affirmation intervention against stereotype threat, a manipulation check in the form of a measurement of stereotype threat, was also absent. In these intervention studies, only the academic performance was used as an outcome. It was assumed that ethnic minority participants experienced stereotype threat, based on the negative stereotypes that existed about them in the society of the country where they reside. If there were effects of the values-affirmation intervention on the academic performance of negatively stereotyped students while there were no effects on the academic performance of majority students, this was taken to indicate that the ethnic minority students must have experienced stereotype threat, and that the intervention buffered them against this threat, causing their performance to improve.
Being able to measure individual differences in stereotype threat would give much more insight into how and when it affects the academic performance of ethnic minority students. However, stereotype threat itself is difficult to assess with an explicit measure. Stereotype threat may work subtle and might take place outside of conscious awareness. Furthermore, previous attempts to measure stereotype threat with an explicit measure have resulted in very complex questionnaire items, that might be difficult to understand (e.g., Steele & Aronson, 1995). Therefore, in this dissertation, we chose to measure meta-stereotypes instead. We reasoned that a premise of experiencing stereotype threat is that one should at least be aware that negative stereotypes about one’s ethnic group exist in society. Knowledge of the existence of negative stereotypes about one’s group could therefore be viewed as a precondition for experiencing stereotype threat. Contrary to the perhaps more implicit experience of threat, knowledge about the existence of negative stereotypes about one’s group (i.e., meta-stereotypes) is more conscious, and can probably be assessed with an explicit measure. In this dissertation, several attempts were made to do so.

First, in Chapter 2, negative meta-stereotypes with respect to intellectual capabilities and problem behavior were measured among first-year pre-vocational native Dutch and ethnic minority students (Moroccan-Dutch and Turkish-Dutch). Our operationalization of meta-stereotypes was slightly different from that used in the literature. As opposed to perceived stereotypes about one’s (ethnic) in-group as a whole (e.g., Vorauer, Main, & O’Connell, 1998), we were interested in whether students felt personally negatively stereotyped, because we assumed that feeling personally negatively stereotyped would be a prerequisite for experiencing stereotype threat. We developed a new questionnaire to measure these personal meta-stereotypes (i.e., instead of merely asking Others think that my ethnic group is not smart, we asked Others think that I am not very smart, because of my ethnic background). In this way, negative meta-stereotypes with respect to intellectual capabilities as well as to problem behavior were measured. Results indicated that ethnic minority students indeed perceived more often than native Dutch students that others had negative stereotypes about their group’s intelligence as well as their group’s problem behavior. Unexpectedly, negative meta-stereotypes were not associated with ethnic minority students’ academic performance. As expected, both negative meta-stereotypes about intelligence and about problem behavior were associated with student-reported problem behavior. Only negative meta-stereotypes about problem behavior were associated with teacher-reported problem behavior.
By measuring personal meta-stereotypes, we attempted to come a step closer to stereotype threat. However, the measurement of personal meta-stereotypes also has some disadvantages. First, by adding a personal part to the questionnaire items, the items became more difficult to understand for the students, especially for students who’s native language was not Dutch. Second, there was a problem with the interpretability of a negative answer to this questionnaire. When students answered “yes” to the item Others think that I am not very smart, because of my ethnic background, it could be assumed that they perceived others to have a negative stereotype about them, which made them susceptible for stereotype threat. However, when students answered “no” to this proposition, then this answer was difficult to interpret. If they answered “no”, it could be so because they performed well at school and they did not think that others saw them as unintelligent. It is also possible that they did not perceive others to have negative stereotypes about them or their ethnic group. It is also possible that they did perceive that others held negative stereotypes about their ethnic group, but not about them personally. As a result, it is unclear what a negative answer to items on this questionnaire actually means. Therefore, in Chapter 3, we conducted two additional pilot studies, in which we measured meta-stereotypes in its original form, without the personalized component. In these studies, we simply asked participants to indicate to what extent they perceived that others hold certain negative stereotypes about their group. In these studies, more simple wording was used, and a more elaborate class instruction took place, in which it was stressed that students should indicate on the questionnaire what others think of their group instead of what they themselves think about their own group. Results indicated that ethnic minority students do perceive that others hold negative stereotypes about their group, both with respect to their groups’ intellectual capabilities as well as to their behavior.

A limitation of the above described studies it that they relied on self-reports of a quite sensitive topic. Students were asked to report on the negative stereotypes they perceived. These self-reports may have been subject to social desirability and self-presentation effects (Baumeister, 1987). In order to convey a positive image of themselves, and to protect their sense of self-integrity, students may have been unwilling to reveal their actual experience with negative stereotypes. Most previous studies that examined stereotype threat effects did not even measure the experience with or perception of negative stereotypes at all. Still, it is recommendable that future studies also include other methods to assess negative stereotypes. For topics that have the tendency to evoke social desirability, implicit
measures are often more reliable (e.g., van den Berg, Denessen, Hornstra, Voeten, & Holland, 2010). To measure the experience of negative stereotypes, possibilities for the use of more implicit measures should be considered for future studies.

In sum, our studies do show that ethnic minority students in the Netherlands meet the precondition of being aware of negative stereotypes about their group in Dutch society. Taken together with the stereotype threat effects that were found among immigrant students from the same descent in countries close to the Netherlands (see for an overview Appel, Weber, & Kronberger, 2015), it seems likely that stereotype threat takes place under ethnic minority students in the Netherlands as well, at least in the behavioral domain and possibly also in the domain of academic performance.

Values-affirmation Intervention: the Absence of Effects

In this dissertation, the effect of a values-affirmation intervention aimed to counter stereotype threat, was put to test. Resilience against negative stereotypes was hypothesized to reduce part of the differences in academic performance and behavioral problems between native and ethnic minority students. Values affirmation interventions have been shown to be highly successful in improving (academic) performance of negatively stereotyped individuals in previous studies, mainly carried out in the United States (Cohen, Garcia, Apfel, & Master, 2006; Cohen, Garcia, Purdie-Vaughns, Apfel, & Brzustoski, 2009; Sherman et al., 2013). However, in the studies included in the present dissertation (Chapter 3), such an intervention had no effect at all on the academic performance of ethnic minority or native students in sixth or seventh (i.e., first year prevocational) grade, nor on their level of problem behavior. Several explanations for the absence of intervention effects have been proposed and discussed in Chapter 3. At the time the study in Chapter 3 was performed, our explanations for the null results were mainly related to preconditions of experiencing stereotype threat and to contextual (e.g., cultural) differences between ethnic minorities in the Netherlands versus the United States (see Chapter 3). Here, we will repeat some of the arguments from Chapter 3, but also add insights from recent values-affirmation replication studies, to evaluate if our earlier explanations are still up to date.

In Chapter 3, we argued that perhaps certain cultural factors might explain the absence of intervention effects. The cultural factors that we described were mainly concerned with differences in background between ethnic minority students in the Netherlands or Europe and in the United States.
studies in the US have mainly been conducted among African-American or Latino-American students, whereas ethnic minority students in the present study were mostly from Morocco or Turkey. One cultural difference between Moroccan or Turkish students in the Netherlands and African-American students in the US is that they differ in power distance, one of the cultural dimensions of Hofstede (2001). Power distance can be defined as the degree to which less powerful members of society accept and expect that the power is distributed unequally. Whereas in cultures with a low power distance (e.g., the African-American culture; Gibson, 2008) the emphasis is on social equality and equal opportunity, cultures with a high power distance (e.g., the Moroccan and Turkish cultures; Hofstede, Pedersen, & Hofstede, 2002), are characterized by hierarchical structures and an emphasis on obedience and respect. This difference in power distance may have influenced the effectiveness of the intervention in multiple ways. For example, students from a culture with a high power distance might have been inclined to choose values that are seen as important by their community or those higher in the hierarchy, whereas students from a culture with a low power distance might have been more inclined to choose values that are personally important to them. Choosing values out of personal interest might be more related to intrinsic motivation, whereas choosing values that are seen as important to one’s community might be more related to extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation refers to doing things because they are seen as inherently interesting and enjoyable, whereas extrinsic motivation refers to doing something because it leads to some separable outcome (e.g., earn a certain reward or avoid a certain punishment; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Perhaps intrinsic motivation is needed for the intervention to be truly effective. More research is needed to examine context-dependent conditions that determine if the intervention has the intended effect or not.

Some might argue that the intervention could even have had a negative effect in our studies, because ethnic minority students in the Netherlands have a very different ethnic background than ethnic minority students included in the studies in the United States (e.g., African American or Latino American students). Many ethnic minority students in our studies (i.e., predominantly Moroccan-Dutch and Turkish-Dutch students) indicated that they had a religious (i.e., Islamic) background. In the affirmation exercises, these students often chose ‘religion’ as one of their most important values. Ironically, it could be argued that it is possible that this very choice evoked a decrease in feelings of self-integrity instead of an increase. In Western Europe, Muslims have been increasingly negatively stereotyped, partly due to negative media attention. One might therefore argue that
writing about their religion as an important value might have increased instead of decreased these students’ awareness of and worry about being negatively stereotyped. This proposed effect is similar to what happened in the study of Steele and Aronson (1995; Study 4). As a manipulation of stereotype threat, they asked half of the African-American and white participants to indicate their race right before taking a test, whereas the other half was not asked to do so. They found that this question to indicate their race seemed to work as a prime of negative stereotypes, as African-American students in the race-prime condition underperformed in comparison to African-American students in the no-race-prime condition, and to white students. It could be argued that something similar might have happened in our studies: writing about religion could have primed negative stereotypes, which may have increased instead of decreased feelings of threat. However, if this was the case, then we should have found a negative effect of the intervention. This was not what we found, as we only found null effects. Therefore, we conclude that if choosing religion as an important value increased feelings of stereotype threat, then this effect was not very strong.

In Chapter 3, we reasoned that the absence of intervention effects in our studies could also have been due to certain preconditions that were not met. One such precondition might be that the distribution of ethnic minority and majority students in the classroom should be approximately equal. The studies of Cohen et al. (2006; 2009) took place in classrooms with an approximately equal distribution of ethnic minority and majority students. In our studies, ethnic minority students formed the majority in most classes. We reasoned that if ethnic minority students form a large majority in the classroom, perhaps they experience less stereotype threat, because the out-group, and therefore the negative stereotypes, are less salient. Perhaps the intervention was not effective in our studies because the percentage of ethnic minority students in our classrooms was too high. To test this assumption, we conducted a post-hoc analysis (see Chapter 3), in which we only included students from classrooms with a relatively equal distribution of minority and majority students (i.e., comprising 50 to 71 percent ethnic minority students). This post-hoc analysis also did not reveal any intervention effects, suggesting that even in classrooms where there is a higher potential threat level (i.e., a more equal distribution), students still do not benefit from the self-affirmation intervention. Other recent replication studies have also focused on the influence of classroom composition on the effectiveness of the intervention. For example, Bratter, Rowley, & Chukhray (2016) performed a large replication study in black, Hispanic and mixed schools, in which ethnic minority students were in the majority.
percent). No intervention effects were found. Bratter et al. (2016) also argued that their pattern of null findings might be related to classroom composition. Similar to our line of reasoning in Chapter 3, Bratter et al. (2016) explained that a context with relatively many ethnic minority students might not trigger much stereotype threat, because intergroup contact is limited. Protzko and Aronson (2016) also reasoned that the working of the intervention might depend, in part, on classroom composition. They tested the intervention both in a school context where black and Hispanic students formed a large majority (94 percent) and in a school context where these students constituted a clear minority (26 percent). In both contexts, no intervention effects were found. The authors concluded that the intervention might be most successful in contexts in which ethnic minority students neither form a clear majority nor a clear minority. On the other hand, an earlier values-affirmation study by Bowen et al. (2013) showed that the intervention can also be effective when the percentage of ethnic minority students is very high (86 percent). Taken together, the results from the different studies seem to indicate that classroom composition is not an important determining factor for the effectiveness of the intervention. It seems more likely that there are other factors that define if the intervention will have the intended effect or not.

A second precondition for the success of a values affirmation intervention could be that there needs to be a salient achievement gap within the classroom. In most studies in which the intervention was successful, there seemed to have been a salient achievement gap, which was reduced by the intervention (e.g., Cohen et al., 2006; Harackiewicz et al., 2014; Sherman et al., 2013). Another recent replication study sheds more light on this issue. Borman, Grigg, and Hanselman (2016) did a large scale replication study (N = 1012; all 11 schools within one district in Wisconsin) of the original study of Cohen et al. (2006). They found similar but much smaller effects than Cohen et al. (2006). They explain their smaller effects by arguing that scaling up is always difficult. Also, compared to the original study, teachers received minimal training, because of the large number of teachers. A study by Hanselman, Bruch, Gamoran, and Borman (2014) that used the same data set as Borman et al. (2016) put some more nuance in these findings. Hanselman et al. (2014) showed that the effects of the intervention were concentrated in a subset of schools that were characterized as contexts with ‘high potential threat’. These were schools with very few ethnic minority students and, at the same time, relatively large achievement gaps. At schools with low potential threat (i.e., schools with more ethnic minority students and smaller gaps), there were no intervention effects. These results suggest that the intervention is only successful when there is
a combination of a low percentage of ethnic minority students and a salient achievement gap within the classroom. Perhaps the potential threat at the schools in our studies was not high enough to evoke much stereotype threat, because in most classrooms the percentage of ethnic minority students was higher than 50 percent, and at the same time, the achievement gap within the classrooms was absent. However, findings from the study of Bowen, Wegmann, and Webber (2013) contradict with the findings of Hanselman et al. (2014). Bowen et al. (2013) did find intervention effects in a group with a very high percentage of ethnic minority students (86 percent) and without a salient within classroom achievement gap. Therefore, a salient achievement gap (or a combination of a salient achievement gap and a low percentage of ethnic minority students in the classroom) also does not seem to be a necessary precondition for the intervention to work.

As described above, many recent values-affirmation replication studies have shown that the effects are difficult to replicate. Although some replication studies have found similar effects as the original study of Cohen et al. (2006; 2009) (e.g., Sherman et al., 2013), in other more recent replication studies the effects were much smaller (Borman et al., 2016), or there were no effects at all (Bratter et al., 2016; Dee, 2015; Hanselman et al., 2016; Protzko & Aronson, 2016). Another recent study by Hanselman, Rozek, Grigg, and Borman (2016) again confirms this. Hanselman et al. (2016) did a replication study in response to the study by Borman et al. (2016). As described above, Borman et al. (2016) did a large scale replication study (N = 1012; all 11 schools within one district in Wisconsin) of the original study of Cohen et al. (2006) and found similar, although smaller, effects as Cohen et al. (2006). Thereafter, Hanselman et al. (2016) attempted to replicate the findings of Borman et al. (2016) with a new large scale study. To rule out the possibility that differences in intervention results would be attributable to differences in research context, the study took place with the same research team in exactly the same schools as Borman et al. (2016) used, only with a different cohort of students.Surprisingly, Hanselman et al. (2016) were not able to replicate the findings of Borman et al. (2016): They found no effects of the intervention in this second cohort. Hanselman et al. (2016) did an extensive analysis which included many moderators that were proposed in the literature (i.e., moderators related to features of the delivery of the intervention assignments, individual characteristics of the students, or aspects of the social context). None of these moderators provided an explanation for the differences in results. These results show that even when contextual factors are kept as equal as possible, and moderators from the literature
are ruled out, it was still not possible to replicate the findings. This indicates that the effect of the values-affirmation intervention is very fragile (cf. Hanselman et al., 2016). There is a strong need to unravel the contingencies that determine if the values-affirmation intervention will be successful or not.

The Role of Teacher-Child Relationship Quality

A second explanatory factor for differences in school performance and problem behavior between native and ethnic minority students in the Netherlands could be that ethnic minority students have less positive relationships with their teacher than native students (e.g., Hamre & Pianta, 2001). Studies investigating associations between the affective quality of teacher-child relationships and ethnic minority students’ school adjustment at the end of primary education were scarce. Moreover, most research about these associations took place among young children (i.e., kindergarten to the first grades of primary education). Therefore, in Chapter 4, we examined such associations among ethnic minority students in sixth grade. To examine bi-directional associations between ethnic minority children’s behavioral adjustment and their relationship with the teacher, a cross-lagged examination was performed. While most previous studies only used teacher-reports of both relationship quality and children’s behavioral adjustment, thereby neglecting child perceptions, both teacher and student reports of relationship quality (i.e., closeness, conflict and dependency or negative expectations) as well as of student’s behavioral adjustment (i.e., internalizing, externalizing and prosocial behavior) were included in the present study. Moreover, to prevent shared informant bias, only cross-informant models were used. As a result, two types of models were estimated: (a) models with child-reports of teacher-child relationship quality and teacher-reports of behavioral adjustment and (b) models with teacher-reports of relationship quality and child-reports of behavioral adjustment. Separate models were estimated for each relationship dimension (see Chapter 4).

As only two measurement occasions were used, no firm conclusions could be drawn about causality. However, results suggested that child-teacher dependency predicts ethnic minority children’s problem behavior at the end of primary education. In contrast, children’s behavioral problems seemed to predict subsequent relational conflict and closeness, and not the other way round. Put differently, more externalizing problems at the beginning of the school year were consistently associated with a more conflictual teacher-child relationship at the end of the school year, and teachers experienced a less close relationship with these
children at the end of the school year. Furthermore, when teachers reported more dependency at the beginning of the school year, children reported more externalizing and internalizing problems at the end of the school year. Whereas in previous research it was proposed that dependency might not be a relevant relationship dimension anymore for older children, because they become increasingly independent from their teacher (Ang, 2005), our study seems to suggest otherwise, at least for this group of ethnic minority students.

As we only examined ethnic minority students, we cannot determine to what extent our results are specific to that group. As studies examining associations between behavioral adjustment and the affective quality of the teacher-child relationship among children at the end of primary education are scarce, it is also not possible to contrast our findings to studies which included mostly majority students. There is a strong need for replication studies which include larger groups of both ethnic minority and majority students, to be able to make this comparison.

Although in this cross-lagged study we only examined associations between relationship quality and problem behavior, other research suggests that our findings could also have implications for the academic achievement of these students. For example, Stipek and Miles (2008) showed that the negative association they found between aggressive (i.e., externalizing) behavior at school and academic achievement in children from first to sixth grade was partially mediated by conflict in the relationship with the teacher. This conflictual relationship with the teacher was accompanied by lower academic engagement of the student. These results show that once behavior and relationship patterns are negative, academic achievement is also likely to suffer, and children easily end up in a negative spiral, in which problem behavior, a negative relationship with the teacher, and low academic achievement reinforce each other.

Possibilities for Future Interventions

As mentioned before, this dissertation also aimed to find opportunities for interventions that can help reduce differences in academic performance and behavioral problems between native and ethnic minority students in the Netherlands, as far as these differences are related to unequal opportunities created by differences in affect-regulation processes. More specifically, ethnic minority students in the Netherlands, as in many other countries, often experience certain obstacles that are not experienced by native students, such as negative stereotyping
Chapter 5

or negative expectations of teachers. Therefore, the focus was on creating equal opportunities by removing such obstacles. The values-affirmation intervention that was examined in this dissertation (Chapter 3) was an attempt to diminish the academic performance and behavioral differences by buffering students against negative stereotypes that exist about their group’s intelligence and behavior. As we have seen, this intervention did not have the intended effect. The question how to improve academic performance and reduce problem behavior of ethnic minority students thus remains. In the following, some suggestions for other interventions are made, based on the findings of the studies described in this dissertation.

As outlined in the previous paragraph, the findings from the cross-lagged study described in Chapter 4 suggest that dependency is an important relationship dimension for the school adjustment of sixth-grade ethnic minority students in the Netherlands. Ethnic minority students who showed more dependency on their teacher at the beginning of the school year had more internalizing and externalizing behavior at the end of the school year. These results seem to suggest that if the teacher would succeed in supporting ethnic minority students’ autonomy, this could contribute to a decrease in their problem behavior. Ironically, a study in which Dutch sixth grade teachers were interviewed recently showed that teachers are inclined to use a more controlling, instead of a more autonomy-supportive, teaching style when teaching ethnic minority students (or other at-risk students) (Hornstra, Mansfield, van der Veen, Peetsma, & Volman, 2015). These teachers indicated that they expected that ethnic minority students would not be capable of handling an autonomy supportive teaching style, and that they required a teaching style in which the teacher provided more structure. However, Hornstra et al. (2015) argue that teachers often seem to confuse providing structure with a controlling teaching style (Reeve, 2009). Using a controlling teaching style is the opposite of using an autonomy-supportive teaching style, whereas structure can be provided in combination with either an autonomy-supportive or a more controlling teaching style (Hornstra et al., 2015). Ethnic minority students might need more structure, but this structure can thus also be provided in an autonomy supportive way, teaching students to become less dependent on their teacher.

Another reason why teachers might not be inclined to use an autonomy-supportive teaching style is suggested in a review study by van der Veen, Weijers, Dikkers, Hornstra, and Peetsma, (2014). The authors describe that teachers propose that at risk students (e.g., ethnic minority students) might benefit less from an autonomy-supportive teaching style, because it requires more verbal and meta-cognitive skills from the students. However, the results from their review
study seem to suggest that this is not necessarily true. Autonomy-supportive teaching does not necessarily require more verbal and meta-cognitive skills, if structure is provided concurrently. Moreover, some autonomy supportive activities, such as providing meaningful explanations and considering the feelings of students, do not require more verbal or meta-cognitive skills of the students (van der Veen et al., 2014). Furthermore, van der Veen et al. (2014) argue that autonomy is a universal basic need for every individual, and it has been shown to positively influence motivation and academic performance of both majority and ethnic minority students (Abad & Sheldon, 2008; Lynch et al., 2011; Vansteenkiste et al., 2005). Supporting students to become more autonomous and less dependent in the teacher-child relationship might therefore not only diminish the level of problem behavior of these students, but might also improve their academic performance. As was stated in Chapter 4, teachers should be made aware of these findings and should receive training in how to promote their students’ autonomy.

Other directions for future interventions come from the studies described in Chapter 2 and 3. In both studies, ethnic minority students indicated to perceive that others hold negative stereotypes about their ethnic group, both related to academic performance as well as to problem behavior. We argued that negative stereotypes could lead to stereotype threat, but empowering the child against these negative stereotypes with a values-affirmation intervention failed (Chapter 3). However, negative stereotypes might also influence ethnic minority students by other routes, for example through the teacher. In a study conducted at Dutch primary schools, van den Bergh et al. (2010) showed that in classrooms where teachers were more negatively prejudiced about ethnic minority students, the achievement gap between native and ethnic minority students was larger than in classrooms where the teacher was less negatively prejudiced. Prejudice was measured with an implicit association test (IAT; Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998), which measured implicit attitudes towards ethnic minority students. The association between negative implicit attitudes (i.e., prejudice) and students’ academic achievement was found to be mediated by teacher expectations: teachers who had more negative implicit attitudes towards ethnic minority students had lower expectations of these students with regard to intelligence and prospects for these students’ school careers, which created differences in academic performance between native and ethnic minority students. As van den Bergh et al. (2010) pointed out, teachers may often be unaware of how their implicit negative attitudes shape their expectations of ethnic minority students. Moreover, these negative expectations are often conveyed to students in very subtle ways of which teachers
are perhaps also unaware. For example, they tend to provide students of whom they have lower expectations with less informative feedback and less opportunities to respond in the classroom (Rosenthal, 1994; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). Since teachers are often unaware of these unconscious processes, it is not easy to intervene. However, van den Bergh et al. (2010) suggest that measuring teachers’ implicit attitudes may already be a first step towards a solution. The IAT (Greenwald et al., 1998) they used provides teachers with a quick and easy way to find out what their implicit attitudes are, which they may not have been aware of. Teachers can fill out this IAT individually, and others do not necessarily have to get insight into the results, which is an advantage with this rather sensitive issue. This awareness hopefully instigates a change in the teacher’s reactions towards ethnic minority students. These changed reactions can then hopefully contribute to improvement of the students’ academic performance. This way, the child becomes empowered against negative stereotypes through the teacher.

According to Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory (1989; 1995), the development of children cannot be understood without taking into account the context in which they are reared. The most influential actors in a child’s life are those from the micro-system, for example family, teachers, peers, and actors from their neighborhood. This supports our appeal to include teachers in interventions to improve school performance and reduce problem behavior of ethnic minority students. Furthermore, interrelationships among the actors from the micro-system, represented by the meso-system, determine for a large part which developmental opportunities children receive. However, all of these different actors in students’ lives (e.g., parents, teachers, the child him- or herself) may have different expectations of the student’s capabilities and possibilities, and this may be even more so for ethnic minority children. An important challenge for all actors in the meso-system is to work together, to make sure that they are on the same page, and convey the same positive, and realistic, expectations to the child.

Concluding remarks

To conclude, the studies described in this dissertation highlight the importance of testing educational interventions anew before implementing them on a large scale in new contexts. It is important to be aware that interventions that are successful in one context do not necessarily have the same positive effects in other contexts. Publication bias may also form a serious problem on this account. Studies with null-results often remain unpublished, whereas they do provide very
useful information, that may prevent scaled-up implementations of educational interventions that are not effective.

Furthermore, the studies in this dissertation also show that the often complex situations which ethnic minority students are in can never be understood without taking into account contextual factors. The fact that ethnic minority youths underperform academically or have more problematic behavior does not necessarily imply that they, or their families, are the ones to blame. Of course, all individuals bear responsibility for their own life and actions, but these actions should always be understood in light of the circumstances in which they live. There are many sides to every story.