Promoting Positive Self-Esteem in Ethnic Minority Students: The Role of School and Classroom Context

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Abstract

Self-esteem is considered a core component of psychological well-being, and it has long been assumed that disadvantaged ethnic and racial minority children and adolescents suffer from low self-esteem due to discrimination and the internalization of prejudice. Yet research has contradicted this assumption and shown that they are able to maintain relatively positive self-evaluations and general self-esteem despite the threats of discrimination and prejudice. In this chapter we discuss past and future research on school and classroom characteristics that can promote positive self-esteem among ethnic minority students. We start by giving a broad overview of the nature and antecedents of self-esteem more generally, and then discuss the research on self-esteem in minority children and adolescents. Next, we consider research on three critical aspects of the educational environment that might contribute to the promotion of positive self-esteem among disadvantaged minority students: school ethnic composition, cultural diversity education, and students' relationship with their teachers. We end with a discussion of practical implications and directions for future research.

A handbook on the positive development of ethnic and racial minority[1] children would be incomplete without a discussion of self-esteem.

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[1]There is no consensus about how the terms ethnic and racial differ and whether they are applicable to different national contexts. Here we do not have the space to discuss this issue and we follow the ethnic and racial identity (ERI) approach (see Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014) in the use of these terms.

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Self-esteem is a core component of psychological well-being and has been extensively studied in developmental and social psychology (see Harter 2006; Mruk 2013). It generally is defined as the person's overall judgment of her worth as a person. Researchers such as Harter (2006) and Marsh, Shavelson, and colleagues (Marsh 1990; Shavelson et al. 1976) distinguish it from self-concept, which concerns individuals' beliefs and evaluations of themselves regarding particular activities (e.g., one's beliefs about one's ability in math). Numerous studies have examined the self-esteem of ethnic and racial minority members, and much of that research was con-

ducted among children and adolescents (see Gray-Little and Hafdahl 2000; Harter 2006; Twenge and Crocker 2002). These studies have challenged the assumption of a self-esteem deficit among disadvantaged minority children. Many of them appear to be able to maintain relatively positive self-esteem despite the threats associated with their minority position, such as discrimination and low social status. Particular circumstances and contexts can promote or hamper minority children's positive self-esteem, and in this chapter we consider the role of school and classroom characteristics. For children the educational environment is an important source of information about themselves because it is here that they (further) discover what they are capable of relative to others, and what important others outside the family think of them (see Harter 1999). Moreover, schools are institutions that tend to represent the norms and standards of the culturally dominant majority in society (Motti-Stefanidi and Masten 2013) and therefore education has special relevance to self-esteem development in ethnic minority students.

Before considering the different ways in which schools and educational contexts can affect the self-esteem of minority group children we will first discuss common conceptualizations of self-esteem and theoretical approaches for understanding self-esteem development. Subsequently we will give a short overview of the existing research on self-esteem of ethnic minority children. We focus predominantly on middle to late childhood but will also refer to research on other age groups.

Historical Overview and Theoretical Perspectives on Self-Esteem

Western psychology has taken a strong interest in the study of the self, beginning with the seminal work of James (1890). Especially in the last decennia of the 20th century high self-esteem was considered a panacea for all kinds of individual and social problems, and this idea was,

and still is, often endorsed by the general public. Although the research evidence for the claims of the "self-esteem movement" is not as clear or strong as assumed (Baumeister et al. 2003; Emler 2001), self-esteem is still regarded as central to individual happiness and psychological well-being (see Sowislo and Orth 2013).

The Nature of Self-Esteem

Definitions and models

Self-esteem is conceptualized in different ways, such as a motivation or need, as a ratio between one's achievements and one's aspirations, as an evaluative judgment about oneself, and as a self-feeling (Harter 2006). Further, distinctions between (1) trait-like and state-like self-esteem, (2) between global and domain specific self-esteem, and (3) between explicit (conscious) and implicit (unconscious) self-esteem, are made.

State- and trait-like self-esteem
All of us are familiar with temporary increases or decreases in self-esteem due to, for example, a compliment or a criticism. But most of us have also developed a more habitual or stable form of self-esteem. Trait-like self-esteem refers to how one feels about oneself on average or generally, whereas state-like self-esteem is assessed by asking how one feels about oneself right here and now (Heatherton and Polivy 1991). Empirically, Savin-William and Demo (1984, p. 131) found that "Self-feelings are apparently global and context dependent. The largest number of our adolescents had a baseline of self-evaluation from which fluctuations rose or fell mildly, most likely dependent of features of the context". There are several studies that examine situational or state dependent self-esteem. For example, Brown (1998) shows that ethnic stigma is a contextual experience that leads to negative self-feelings in the context of certain relationships. In one of our studies among Turkish-Dutch early adolescents we collected self-reports on experiences with peer

victimization, and assessed momentary self-feelings directly after these reports (Verkuyten and Thijs 2001). Results showed that peer victimization had a negative effect on momentary self-feelings, independently of the level of trait-like self-esteem. This suggests that peer discrimination might have a stronger negative impact on situational self-feelings than on trait-like feelings of global self-worth.

Research has shown that global self-esteem starts to develop around age eight and that its trait-like stability increases during adolescence and early adulthood (Harter 2006; Robins and Trzesniewski 2005). Although there is evidence of a drop in self-esteem in early adolescence (particularly if children make a school transition; e.g., Wigfield et al. 1991), longitudinal research has shown a gradual, but small, increase in average self-esteem during adolescence. These trajectories of change generally hold across race and ethnicity (e.g., Greene and Way 2005; Whitesell, et al. 2006) and have also been found for ethnic self-esteem (French et al. 2006). These changes appear to be quite common and cannot explain individual differences in self-esteem. The relative ordering of individuals' self-esteem is quite stable over time, comparable to the stability found for personality traits, and this rank-order stability has been found for different racial and ethnic groups (Trzesniewski et al. 2003).

Global and domain specific self-concept and self-esteem

There are various hierarchical models for the self-concept and most of them assume that it consists of multiple domains or dimensions. For instance, the model of the self-concept by Shavelson, Marsh, and their colleagues (e.g., Byrne et al. 1996; Marsh 1990; Shavelson et al. 1976) posits that (pre)adolescents' global self-worth (or global self-esteem) reflects their self-feelings in the academic, social, physical, emotional realms, which in turn are based on their self-concepts (or self-beliefs or self-perceptions) relating to more specific subareas (e.g., English, history, math, and science, for the academic domain). Other multidimensional models also make the distinction between global and domain-specific self-concepts but are less strictly hierarchical. For instance, Harter's (1982) Self-Perception Profile for Children measures children's perceptions of scholastic competence, athletic competence, peer likability, physical appearance, and behavioral conduct, as well as a their global self-worth. As in the hierarchical models, the former are regarded as sources for the latter. Yet the relative importance of each domain is assumed to vary from child to child, and global self-worth is considered to be more than the sum of the separate perceptions (Harter 1999).

Most of the research on racial and ethnic minority children has treated self-esteem as a general attitude toward the self in which trait-like global feelings of self-worth are examined (e.g., Gray-Little and Hafdahl 2000). In addition, research has focused upon trait-like feelings that children have towards their racial or ethnic group membership: racial or ethnic self-esteem. How a person feels about him- or herself in general is something different to how he or she feels about being a member of a specific ethnic or racial group (Crocker and Luhtanen 1990). Youngsters with high ethnic self-esteem feel good about their ethnic group and are proud of their ethnicity. These feelings are conceptually and empirically different from their global self-esteem. Yet the former may contribute to the latter and research in The Netherlands among preadolescents from different ethnic groups showed that ethnic self-esteem was moderately and positively ($r = 0.33$) related to global self-esteem (Verkuyten and Thijs 2006). Similar findings are reported in studies of African American adolescents in the U.S. (Rowley et al. 1998). The moderate association indicates that ethnic group belonging does not fully determine older children's self-feelings: there are many possible contingencies upon which children can base their global self-esteem (Crocker and Wolfe 2001).

Explicit and implicit self-esteem

In an article on racial identity, Erik Erikson (1966) argued that a sense of identity has conscious as well as unconscious aspects. He pointed out that there are aspects that are accessible only at moments of special awareness or not at all. In line

with psychoanalytical ideas he talked about repression and resistance. And he claimed that racial minorities would have more negative self-feelings on an unconscious or implicit level. The implicit-explicit distinction is also made in relation to self-esteem. Explicit self-esteem is the thoughtful response one typically gets on self-report questions that predominate in studies on self-esteem, whereas implicit self-esteem refers to 'the introspectively unidentified…effect of the self-attitude on evaluation of self-associated and self-dissociated objects' (Greenwald and Banaji 1995, p. 11).

An increasing number of researchers have emphasized the importance of the distinction between explicit and implicit self-esteem (e.g. Greenwald and Banaji 1995; Hetts and Pelham 2001). Both may develop differently resulting in a discrepancy in implicit and explicit self-evaluations. The distinction is important because it is possible that stereotypes and discrimination negatively affect the implicit rather than the explicit self-esteem of ethnic minority children. For example, in a study among Turkish-Dutch early adolescents it was found that perceived discrimination was associated with lower implicit ethnic self-esteem but not with explicit self-esteem (Verkuyten 2005).

Origins and antecedents

There are various theoretical propositions about the origins of self-esteem and these are closely connected to the way in which the concept is defined and examined. Roughly at least three broad and complementary processes can be identified (see Mruk 2013; Rosenberg 1979). The first one is the *self-perception process* that holds that children's self-esteem is based on their own perceptions and appraisals of their behaviors or accomplishments. This view has similarities with hierarchical self-concept models (e.g. Shavelson et al. 1976) that propose that global self-esteem is based on domain-specific self-concepts which, in turn, are based on behaviors in specific situations. The notion that children's self-esteem depends on their behavior does not mean that they always think less of themselves when they do not perform well in a particular domain. James (1890) indicated early on that the importance of a particular outcome for the self depends on one's pretensions for it. Thus even if their academic self-concept is not too positive, children can still have high self-esteem as long as they do not stake it on their academic accomplishments (see Crocker and Wolfe 2001; Harter 1999).

Second, *social comparison processes* are important for developing self-esteem (Festinger 1954). Comparisons with others provide important information about the self. An example is the big-fish-little-pond effect (BFLPE) which is the finding that children's academic self-concept reflects their academic achievement relative to those of their classmates rather than their absolute achievement (Marsh et al. 2008). Similarly, Rosenberg (1979) showed that racial minority children and adolescents (9–17 years) do not tend to have lower self-esteem because they compare themselves selectively with other racial minority children.

The third perspective considers the so-called *reflected appraisal process,* which describes how self-feelings are influenced by the perceived opinions and standards of others. This perspective includes symbolic interactionist theories in sociology (Cooley 1902; Mead 1934) but it is also consistent with sociometer theory (Leary and Baumeister 2000), as well as attachment theory (Bowlby 1982). The core idea is that significant others are a continuous and important source of feedback on one's personal qualities, competences, and worthiness, and that especially children rely on this feedback to develop a sense of self. According to Harter's (1999) developmental model the sensitivity to the judgments of others starts in early childhood and gradually changes over time. From middle childhood on children can assess the opinions and standards of others, internalize them, and use them as a basis for their self-feelings.

Self-Esteem in Minority Group Children

Until the end of the 1960s psychologists and sociologists alike assumed that disadvantaged ethnic and racial minority children and adolescents suffered from relatively low self-esteem. Given the three theoretical processes discussed, this assumption is not an unreasonable one to make. Despite the existence of so-called model minorities, many ethnic minority groups fare relatively poorly in various domains of life, such as education, work or health, and this might negatively affect the self-feelings of children from those groups. Furthermore, children from racial and ethnic minority groups are confronted with unfavorable images of their own group in the media and from others, and they can experience discrimination in school and other settings. Compared to majority group children, they have to deal with these negative messages more often and sometimes on a regular basis. Ethnic devaluation comes from various sources and in early adolescence disadvantaged minority children are clearly aware of the prejudice and discrimination that confronts them as member of their ethnic group (Verkuyten and Thijs 2002). Moreover correlational studies in different countries and among different disadvantaged minority groups have demonstrated that perceived discrimination can threaten the self-esteem of minority children and adolescents (Pascoe and Smart Richman 2009; Schmitt et al. 2014; Verkuyten and Thijs 2006).

The assumption of low self-esteem in children from some minority groups received initial empirical support but the research evidence was indirect, such as in the famous Clark and Clark (1947) doll studies in the 1930s and 1940s done in the U.S., which showed that black children "preferred" to play with white dolls. The interpretation of these findings was that minority group children come to internalize society's negative view about their group and therefore show the 'mark of oppression' (Kardiner and Ovesey 1951). After the 1960s, research in the U.S. started to examine the assumption of low self-esteem among minority groups by using standardized self-esteem scales, such as the well-known Rosenberg's self-esteem scale (Rosenberg 1965). In general, these studies showed that despite the existence of prejudice and discrimination, minority group membership was not systematically related to lower self-esteem. This finding was called the 'puzzle of high self-esteem' (Simmons 1978) and various explanations have been given for it (see Verkuyten 2005). Much of this research involved comparisons between African-American versus European-American youth (children, adolescents, and college students), and a meta-analysis on 257 of those studies concluded that self-esteem was actually higher for the former group (Gray-Little and Hafdahl 2000). A later meta-analysis included more ethnic groups and yielded the same conclusion: the average self-esteem was higher for European-Americans compared to some ethnic groups (Hispanic, Asian, American-Indian) but it was highest for African-Americans. As the latter are arguably the most stigmatized group in American society, these finding cannot be explained in terms of discrimination or low status positions (Twenge and Crocker 2002; Bachman et al. 2011).

There has been far less research on the relation between ethnicity and self-esteem in Europe. Generally speaking, ethnic diversity is less common and less accepted in in European countries in which there is a historically large native majority population, than in traditional immigrant countries like the U.S. and Canada. However, there also considerable differences between the major ethnic minority groups within and between European countries. For example, Pakistani-British, Algerian-French, or Surinamese-Dutch people have a history of colonialism which makes them more culturally similar to natives, than Turkish-German and Turkish- and Moroccan-Dutch people who have a history of labor migration. In addition to this, various ethnic groups differ in terms of socioeconomic status and outward appearances which may make them more or less easy targets of discrimination. Yet despite these differences, there appear to be no systematic self-esteem differences between various ethnic minority and majority groups, but rather a tendency for higher self-esteem

among the former (Verkuyten 1994). For example, in a large-scale, nation-wide study in the Netherlands, early adolescents of Turkish, Moroccan and Surinamese background had higher self-esteem than the Dutch (Verkuyten and Thijs 2006). Furthermore, a study that examined global and ethnic self-esteem among almost 40 different ethnic groups in 8 European countries, as well as in Canada, the U.S., Australia and New Zealand, found that all ethnic minority groups scored above the neutral mid-point of the scale suggesting a satisfactory level of self-esteem, and that there were no differences in self-esteem between minority and majority adolescents (Phinney et al. 2006).

These similarly high levels of self-esteem are striking considering the different national contexts with their different histories of slavery, colonialism, immigration and integration policies, as well as the cultural diversity of the immigrant and ethnic minority groups concerned. They indicate that a disadvantaged minority position does not simply lead to lower explicit self-esteem. This is not to say that contextual and cultural differences do not matter for the ways in which minority children and adolescents think and feel about themselves. For example and in relation to cultural differences, research in cross-cultural psychology has shown that the self can have quite diverse cultural connotations related to distinctions such as independence versus interdependence and individualism versus collectivism (Markus and Kitayama 2010; Triandis 2001). One of the research findings is that personal self-esteem is sometimes lower in cultures that prioritize the group over the individual (e.g., Japan) versus cultures that prioritize the individual over the group (e.g., Canada) (Heine et al. 1999; Schmitt and Allik 2005; but for a different outcome, see Verkuyten 2005).[2] Research with implicit measures has shown that this finding cannot be explained by a higher concern with self-modesty in more collectivist cultures (Falk and Heine 2014). Twenge and Crocker (2002) referred to collectivism rather than the experience

of stigmatization in explaining their meta-analytic finding that native, Hispanic and Asian Americans reported lower self-esteem than European-Americans. Yet this interpretation was indirect as it was based on their finding that self-esteem was highest for African Americans, the most stigmatized group in the studies they analyzed. To complicate matters even more, the impact of the original culture may wane in the specific case of immigrants because of their exposure to new cultural norms and values in the host society. For instance, Hetts and colleagues (1999) compared two groups of Asian-Americans: those who were born in the US, and those who recently immigrated. They found that both groups had relatively high *explicit* global self-esteem. Yet they also measured *implicit* self-esteem (to be described below) and found that it was relatively low for the recent immigrants but relatively high for the American-born group. According to the authors, this was an effect of the latter's stronger exposure to the individualistic U.S. culture whereas for the recent immigrants the impact of the original, more collectivist culture was still lingering on a more implicit level.

In considering ethnic group differences in self-esteem it is important to note that most self-esteem measures are self-report scales on which children have to indicate how they feel about themselves. This method can be problematic if children do not yet have the capacity for self-reflection or when they have a tendency to give socially desirable responses (Harter 1999)—a tendency that might be stronger for some cultural groups than for others. In response to this problem, behavioral measures of self-esteem have been proposed (e.g., Savin-William and Demo 1984; Verschueren et al. 1998), as well as implicit measures such as the Implicit Association Test (Buhrmester et al. 2011, p. 366; Falk and Heine 2014). Implicit self-esteem is considered to be unrelated to cultural norms about self-presentation which is relevant when different ethnic groups are compared (Hetts et al. 1999). However, there has been very little research on implicit self-esteem in ethnic minority children. An exception is a study by Pelham and Hetts (1999) that examined the puzzle of high self-esteem among minority

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[2]There is no systematic evidence that collective self-esteem is higher in collectivistic cultures (Heine et al. 1999).

groups. They suggest that this puzzle may refer to the explicit self-esteem of minority youth and that on an implicit level minority youth might feel less positive about their ethnic group membership. They found that, relative to Anglo Americans, minority youth was lower in implicit ethnic self-esteem. In addition, however, minority group members were not lower on implicit personal self-esteem. A similar result was found in a study among Turkish-Dutch and native Dutch early adolescents (Verkuyten 2005). The Turkish-Dutch early adolescents reported an equally positive (explicit) ethnic identity but suffered from lower implicit ethnic self-esteem which was related to perceived discrimination. Hence, at an explicit or more conscious level, ethnic minority youth can endorse the kind of favorable conceptions of themselves that are common in western societies, whereas at an implicit or unconscious level their ethnic self-feelings can be more consistent with their disadvantaged minority position. Such a discrepancy can result in fragile and defensive high self-esteem (Jordan et al. 2003).

Current Research Questions Regarding the Influence of Education on the Self-Esteem of Disadvantaged Minority Children

The puzzle of high *explicit* self-esteem among disadvantaged minority children is a good example of resilience. The resilience framework resonates well with positive psychology and examines how children are able to receive "good outcomes in spite of serious threats to adaptation or development" (Masten 2001, p. 228). A distinction is made between two kinds of factors that enable children to deal with potential adversities: *promotive factors*, which compensate for the negative impact of the risks children face by having independent positive effects themselves, and *protective factors* which reduces the negative impact of risk factors by interacting with them (Masten 2007; Motti-Stefanidi and Masten 2013). In the case of learning disabilities, for example, academic motivation might be considered a

promotive factor whereas secure attachment can have a protective effect (see Margalit 2004).

Like the risk factors, these so-called resilience factors can involve characteristics of the child but also of the environment. In addition to the home environment, the educational context can play a crucial role. Schools have the important task of helping children to develop intellectually, socially, and emotionally (see Ladd et al. 2010), and from the moment children start formal education they spend many of their waking hours in the presence of their teachers and fellow students.

In the rest of this chapter we discuss current research on the different ways educational contexts can affect self-esteem in ethnic minority children. More specifically, we will consider the questions how schools and classrooms can promote the formation or preservation of positive self-esteem, and how they can protect children's self-esteem against prejudice and discrimination, and individual or group outcomes that are relatively unfavorable and 'disproportionally poor' (see Crocker and Major 1989). But first we will briefly discuss some methodological issues.

Research Methodology: Cluster Sampling and Multilevel Analysis

To examine properly the impact of the educational context on children's self-esteem it is important to use a cluster sampling procedure and to study a whole array of classrooms and schools. Many school and classroom characteristics are interrelated and it is impossible to evaluate their unique contributions based on findings in just a few schools. For instance, in the Netherlands, where schools are relatively free in their implementation of diversity education, multicultural education is more emphasized in schools with an ethnically mixed population than in schools that have a majority of native Dutch pupils (van Geel and Vedder 2010; Verkuyten and Thijs 2002), and classes with a larger proportion of minority students tend to be smaller in size (Verkuyten and Thijs 2002). Studies that sample classrooms (or schools)

instead of individual students have hierarchically nested data which should be analysed with multilevel modeling. Multilevel analysis corrects for dependencies between observations (e.g., student data) nested in the same units (e.g., classes), and it can handle variable numbers of observations per unit (Snijders and Bosker 1999). Multilevel research on students typically starts by examining how much of the variance in a particular dependent variable (e.g., self-esteem) depends on the school classes students are nested in, and it seeks to explain this higher-level variance by properties of the classroom context. In addition, this kind of research can examine whether the classroom context makes a difference for the relation between variables at the student level (e.g., perceived discrimination and self-esteem).

The use of cluster sampling also allows researchers to construct more 'objective' classroom (or school) measures based on students' subjective perceptions. For example, in one study (Thijs et al. 2012) we asked children about their teacher's attitudes toward cultural diversity and it appeared that there was considerable agreement among classmates. Taken together the individual judgments in each classroom formed a reliable scale and could be averaged to create a classroom-level variable. Because this aggregate measure reflected classmates' shared perceptions about their teacher it was less biased than individual perceptions. Unfortunately most empirical studies have not used aggregation techniques.

Empirical Finding on the Role of School and Education in Minority Children's Self-Esteem

In this section we discuss research on three critical aspects of the educational environment that might contribute to the promotion of positive self-esteem among disadvantaged minority students: school ethnic composition, cultural diversity education, and students' relationship with their teachers. These three aspects have been found to be important for children's interethnic relations (Verkuyten and Thijs 2013). We will

consider existing research, but also discuss possibilities for future study.

School ethnic composition

In 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court made a historic decision by declaring that it was unjust and illegal to sanction school ethnic segregation by law. Ever since this famous *Brown versus Board of Education* ruling there have been regular and sometimes heated debates about the ethnic or racial composition of schools, not only in the U. S. but also in Europe. In many western countries schools tend to be more segregated than the communities they serve and the segregation tends to be higher in primary than secondary schools.[3] One of the original arguments against law-based segregation was that it sends out a message of inferiority to minority students which would leave a 'mark of oppression' (Kardiner and Ovesey 1951) in the form of self-hatred and low self-esteem (Zirkel 2005). This has led to the more general claim that segregation per se has negative implications for the self-esteem of minority group children. Studies in Europe have shown, however, that there are little to no effects of school ethnic segregation (proportion of minority students) on the global or ethnic self-esteem of ethnic minority children (Agirdag et al. 2012; Kinket and Verkuyten 1997; Verkuyten and Thijs 2004a). And research in the U. S. indicates that African-American students are more, rather than less, likely to have high self-esteem in schools with a higher proportion of African-American students (see the meta-analysis by Gray-Little and Hafdahl 2000). Apparently school ethnic segregation does not undermine the self-esteem of ethnic minority students and there are several reasons for this.

Social comparisons

One self-esteem 'advantage' of segregation is that it decreases the likelihood of making

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[3]Please note that this is an example of de facto rather than de jure segregation (see Zirkel 2005).

unfavorable comparisons with majority group peers. In general, children from (many) ethnic minority groups would be more likely to have more negative domain-specific self-feelings because on average their individual outcomes are 'disproportionally poor' compared to those of the majority group (see Crocker and Major 1989). However, an important question is whether in their everyday life minority children make such intergroup comparisons. According to Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory, comparisons with others provide relevant information about the self. Yet those others need to be similar to the self because "if the only comparison available is a very divergent one, the person will not be able to make a subjectively precise evaluation of his opinion and ability" (Festinger 1954, p. 121). This means that in more segregated situations minority children may be more likely to compare themselves to their co-ethnic peers rather than to ethnic majority peers (see Crocker and Major 1989; Rosenberg 1979).

The fact that children's self-esteem is typically based on comparisons with others in their direct environments is shown by the earlier mentioned big-fish-little-pond-effect (BFLPE). This implies that an academically weak student can have more positive academic self-esteem than a strong student as long as the former but not the latter outperforms her classmates (Marsh et al. 2008). To our knowledge research on the BFLPE has not explicitly focused on ethnic minority children, but the effect can explain why ethnic school segregation can protect the self-esteem of students that have an ethnic achievement gap. For instance, in our research we examined the academic self-esteem of ethnic minority preadolescents (from either Turkish, Moroccan, or Surinamese backgrounds) compared to that of native Dutch contemporaries (Thijs and Verkuyten 2008). Despite evidence for lower absolute academic achievement among the minority children there were no systematic group differences in academic self-esteem. Importantly, the classrooms involved in this research were relatively segregated—as the average proportion of native Dutch classmates was smaller for the minority than for the majority

children—and in another study we demonstrated that the BFLPE held for both the minority and the majority students (Thijs et al. 2010).[4]

Support and discrimination

There are other reasons why a more segregated context can protect the self-esteem of disadvantaged minority children. In these contexts minority children can experience a stronger sense of ethnic group belonging and stronger peer support, which promotes the development of positive (ethnic) self-esteem. In addition, segregation often implies less direct exposure to prejudice and discrimination (Rosenberg 1979). Both of these possibilities were addressed in our studies among preadolescents and we found most support for the second one. We used a multilevel approach by sampling 182 school classes (grades 5–6) from 82 schools in 30 different cities. We assessed a number of classroom characteristics including the proportion of various ethnic groups in the classroom and we measured students' ethnic and global self-esteem. For minority students, ethnic self-esteem (but not global self-esteem) was higher if they had proportionally fewer native Dutch classmates. Additional analysis showed that there were no effects of the proportion of co-ethnic students which indicated that it was the presence of the majority out-group rather than the ethnic in-group that mattered for children's self-esteem (Verkuyten and Thijs 2004a). Majority group peers are the likeliest perpetrators of discriminatory peer behavior, at least according to children's own perceptions (Verkuyten et al. 1997). Indeed, in an earlier study we found that ethnic minority children with proportionally more native Dutch classmates

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[4]Even in the absence of tracking there can be strong differences in absolute achievement levels between schools and classrooms, due to factors such as the composition of the student body or the quality of the teaching. This means that the absolute achievement differences within classrooms are relatively small, and that the academic achievement gap will not show up in the self-perceptions of minority versus majority children.

reported more experiences with ethnic peer victimization (Verkuyten and Thijs 2002).

However, ethnic composition entails more than the degree of majority-minority segregation. Schools and classrooms also differ in terms of the number of ethnic groups and this can be captured by diversity indexes. For example, higher scores on the Simpson diversity index imply that more different groups are present and also that the sizes of these groups are more equal. Graham and Juvonen and colleagues, in their studies in the U. S., have used this index to evaluate the imbalance of power thesis. This is the idea that school and classroom diversity has positive consequences for students' social relations and psychological well-being because it decreases the likelihood of imbalanced power relations between different ethnic groups. Their findings support the thesis by showing that higher diversity is associated with less peer victimization and higher self-esteem among Latino and African-American students (Graham 2006; Juvonen et al. 2006). This kind of research demonstrates that it is not only the relative presence of the in-group (versus the majority out-group) that matters for the self-esteem of ethnic minority children but that it is also crucial to consider the nature of the relations between different ethnic minority groups at school. Furthermore, questions on the implications of school (de)segregation should not only consider self-esteem and intergroup relations but also the possibilities for intercultural contacts and learning, and academic achievement.

Diversity education

In many western countries there has been the development and implementation of school curricula and educational practices that focus on the acknowledgment, acceptance, and recognition of ethnic and cultural diversity. The variation in this so-called multicultural (or intercultural) education is substantial, but there is quite some agreement that a major goal of these approaches is to foster ethnic tolerance and equality (Kahn 2008; Portera 2008). The vast majority of the theorizing and research on diversity education

has been conducted in the U.S. and is influenced by the country's long history of slavery and continuous immigration. An influential framework is Banks' (2004) conceptualization of five aspects of multicultural education: cultural content integration in the curriculum, learning to question and consider how knowledge is constructed, prejudice reduction, equity pedagogy, and empowering school culture. In the non-settler European countries, the situation is different because there is a historically large native majority group and a relatively recent inflow of labor migrants and ex-colonial minorities. In Europe the notion of multicultural education is less well articulated and there are debates about the need for intercultural and citizenship education rather than forms of multicultural education. Furthermore, although there are some qualitative studies (e.g., Doppen 2007) there is a lack of large-scale quantitative research on cultural diversity education. To our knowledge, one of the exceptions is our research in the Netherlands (see Verkuyten and Thijs 2013). Multicultural education might both directly and indirectly enhance the positive self-esteem of ethnic minority children.

Direct effects of multicultural education

It is likely that multicultural education fosters positive global and ethnic self-esteem in ethnic minority students because it tends to recognize their identity and support their heritage culture. In our study among Turkish-Dutch, Moroccan-Dutch, Surinamese-Dutch, and native Dutch preadolescents (Verkuyten and Thijs 2004a) we measured in different ways the degree of multicultural education in the classroom. We asked teachers how much attention they pay to teaching about cultural differences and discrimination, and we asked students to report on their teacher's educational practices as well as on the (probable) teacher and student reactions to discrimination in the classroom. Results showed that teachers' own reports of multicultural education were unrelated to the global and ethnic self-esteem of the

students of different ethnic groups. Yet, there were two effects of children's perceptions that were consistent with our theoretical expectations: Children who perceived more multicultural teaching reported higher global self-esteem, and children who indicated that their teacher and the students would stand up against discrimination reported both higher global and ethnic self-esteem. Interestingly, these results were similar for the ethnic minority and majority children. They therefore suggest that multicultural education and educational practices can have a beneficial impact on the self-feelings of all students regardless of their ethnic background. This was also found in an earlier study among Turkish-Dutch and native Dutch preadolescents (Kinket and Verkuyten 1997).

Indirect effects of multicultural education

A central aim of most forms of multicultural education, both in Europe and North America, is to improve inter-ethnic relations among children by reducing ignorance and misunderstandings about cultural differences and by transmitting norms against prejudice and discrimination (Verkuyten and Thijs 2013). The available evidence in the North American context indicates that multicultural education is moderately successful in reaching these goals (Aboud et al. 2012; Bigler 1999; Stephan et al. 2004). This means, for example, that multicultural education can contribute to less ethnic peer victimization and discrimination at school. By reducing these risks, it may indirectly increase the self-esteem of ethnic minority students.

However, multicultural education can also have unintended effects. By highlighting the differences between ethnic groups, multicultural initiatives may actually increase stereotypical thinking about ethnic others (Bigler and Liben 2007). Thus "curriculum-based interventions may potentially increase children's racial and ethnic bias via the attention they draw to such groups" (Bigler 1999, p. 700). This is especially relevant for younger children who lack multiple classification skills, i.e. the ability to consider

that people belong to different types of nonexclusive categories at the same time (e.g., female, African-American, left-hander) (Aboud 1988). For younger children, ethnic groups may become all-important if multicultural education neglects cross-cutting or overarching categories or the many individual differences that exist within ethnic groups. In addition, multicultural education might backfire if it neglects the cultural distinctiveness and identity of majority students (Tajfel and Turner 1979). Research among white American adults (including university students) has shown that they can be hesitant in embracing multiculturalism when they feel left out and developed a sense of 'what about us' (Plaut et al. 2011). When this happens, multiculturalism can increase rather decrease negative reactions towards ethnic minority groups (Morrison et al. 2010). To our knowledge these processes have not been examined among children and adolescents but it seems an important line of investigation to pursue.

Multicultural education can also have the effect of making children more aware of prejudice and discrimination. In our research, we measured children's own experiences with peer ethnic victimization as well as their perception of the experiences of members of their ethnic group (Verkuyten and Thijs 2002). We related these experiences to teachers' assessments of their multicultural teaching and students' perceptions of this teaching, as well the classroom reactions against discrimination. It appeared that students reported less personal experiences with ethnic victimization in classrooms where discrimination was actively resisted (according to the aggregated student perspective), and perceived less victimization of their ethnic group if their teacher reacted more against discrimination. Yet, the teacher's multicultural teaching as perceived by the children was associated with higher experiences and perceptions of ethnic victimization. This suggests that multicultural education can make children more sensitive and attentive to discrimination and thereby more vulnerable to it.[5]

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[5]Related to this, there is evidence that minority parents' attempts to prepare their children for discrimination and

Relationships with Teachers

In developmental and educational psychology the student-teacher relationship is seen as a micro-system with important implications for children's adjustment (Pianta et al. 2003). Various studies have shown that the quality of this relationship is uniquely associated with many positive outcomes including higher academic achievement and educational engagement (Roorda et al. 2011), and less social, behavioral, and emotional problems (Baker 2006; Rudasill et al. 2010). Although relatively few studies have examined ethnic group differences in teacher-student relationships, these relationships appear to be more important for the school adjustment of ethnic minority than majority students (e.g., den Brok et al. 2010; Murray et al. 2008). One of the explanations for this finding is that a supportive bond with the teacher can help to bridge the relatively large gap that sometimes exists between the home and school environment (Suárez-Orozco and Pimentel 2009). For example, Suárez-Orozco and Pimentel (2009) interviewed immigrant adolescents about their school experiences. The adolescents reported that teachers who cared for them and helped them with the language barrier made a difference in their cultural transition. Unfortunately, some adolescents also perceived cultural insensitivity and discrimination by teachers.

Direct effects

Very few studies have examined the direct impact of the student-teacher relationship on children's self-esteem, and there is even less research that makes a comparison between minority and majority students. Theoretically, however, self-esteem is one of the more important outcomes of this relationship because it can function as a potential secondary attachment bond (Ainsworth 1989). This means that it can be

an important source of emotional support and comfort that provides children with the necessary security for exploration and initiative (Verschueren and Koomen 2012). Children who are securely attached to their caregivers learn that they are socially accepted and worthy of love and affection, and this promotes the development of high self-esteem (Verschueren and Marcoen 1999).

In line with these propositions, research has shown that children (Verschueren et al. 2012) and early adolescents (Ryan et al. 1994) who have high quality relationships with their teacher also have more positive self-esteem. To our knowledge, only two studies have compared the importance of teachers for the self-esteem of children of different ethnic groups. Both of them found no group differences; however, both were done in the U.S., one study was limited to early adolescent girls from three schools in Texas (Carlson et al. 2000), and the other made the broad distinction between students from western-European versus non-western-European backgrounds (Agirdag et al. 2012). Furthermore, most teachers in both the U.S. and Europe tend to belong to the ethnic majority group (Hamre et al. 2007; Thijs et al. 2012; Zirkel 2008) and research has shown that the quality of the relationship can be compromised when the teacher and the student do not share the same ethnicity (Ewing and Taylor 2009; Saft and Pianta 2001). This is especially likely when there is cultural miscommunication and when teachers have unfavorable attitudes toward ethnic diversity (Thijs et al. 2012). Related to this, research has shown that minority students can feel discriminated by their teachers which leads to lower self-esteem (Wong et al. 2003).

Indirect effects

In addition to promoting positive self-esteem in minority children, the student-teacher relationship might also play an indirect, protective role. Children who can trust their teachers and feel comforted by them are more resilient in dealing with stressful life events (Pianta et al. 2003).

(Footnote 5 continued)
bias can have unintentional negative effects on self-esteem (Hughes et al. 2009).

A longitudinal study among immigrant adolescents from 54 different countries in Sweden shows that this also holds for the risks associated with a minority position. It was found that ethnic victimization predicted lower self-esteem over time, which in turn was related to lower school adjustment. However, these effects were not significant for children who reported positive relationships with their teachers (Bayram Özdemir and Stattin 2014).

Future Directions and Policy Implications

There is a long research tradition on the self-esteem of ethnic and racial minority group children but much less is known about the role that schools and education can play in the development of self-esteem in children of these groups. School is a very important everyday context for children and it is clear that schools matter for how children feel about themselves. It is less clear, however, how schools play a role in self-esteem development and whether this role differs for ethnic minority and majority students, for global and domain-specific self-esteem, for personal and ethnic self-esteem, and for explicit and implicit self-esteem. Research typically focuses on global self-esteem but there are different self-feelings that can be distinguished and therefore provide a more detailed understanding of how ethnic minority children are doing. For example, global self-esteem can be based on different domains for ethnic minority than majority children. It has been suggested for instance that African American adolescents diminish the value of academic achievement on their global self-esteem as a self-worth protection (Osborne 1997) and there is also evidence for this process of disengagement in the Netherlands (Verkuyten and Thijs 2004b). Furthermore, personal self-esteem can be relatively independent of ethnic self-esteem and explicit and implicit self-esteem can differ resulting in a fragile, defensive self-esteem. These distinctions provide various directions for future research that could greatly advance our understanding of the self-esteem of minority group children.

Future research should also systematically examine the role of various school and educational characteristics for ethnic minority children's self-esteem. The existing research has focused predominantly on ethnic segregation and forms of cultural diversity education, and the findings are not unequivocal. For example, multicultural education with its acceptance and recognition of cultural diversity and group identities can be important for developing positive self-esteem. The evidence, however, is limited and in practice the variation of multicultural ideas, initiatives and programs is substantial (Banks 2004), and not all of these can be expected to have a similar effect on children's self-esteem. Additionally, there might be important contextual and country differences that shape the forms and content of cultural diversity education and thereby have an effect on students' self-esteem. Further, there is the danger that the thinking in terms of groups and group differences, which is inherent in multiculturalism, leads to reified group distinctions that promote group stereotyping and negative inter-ethnic relations which may hamper a positive sense of self. These unintended and subtle processes are not always easy to examine in large-scale quantitative research. In-depth studies that more closely examine what exactly happens on a day-today basis in classrooms and in the educational process might be very useful here. This type of research can give a more detailed understanding of the proximal processes that are involved.

Furthermore, it is important that future research examines different school characteristics in combination with each other. It might be the case, for example, that the effect of the ethnic composition of the classroom (level of segregation or diversity) on children's self-esteem depends on multicultural education. Ethnically mixed classrooms might hamper a positive sense of self when there is not a school climate of acceptance and endorsement of diversity. In such a context ethnic minority students might face more negative stereotypes and discrimination

compared to a mixed context in which multi-culturalism is endorsed. Similarly, the impact of ethnically mixed classrooms on students' self-esteem might depend on the quality of the teacher-student relationships, and vice versa. For example, a majority group teacher might follow a multicultural curriculum in her classroom but might also have frequent conflictual interactions with her minority group students. This could potentially undermine the perceived consistency and effectiveness of her diversity teachings and could make children insecure about their acceptance and value. To our knowledge, there are no studies on these topics but examining whether teachers 'practice what they preach' is an important task for future research.

There have been many popular ideas and programs about improving children's and adolescents' self-esteem that have been implemented in many schools, especially in the United States. And although the expectations and promises of these programs are substantial, there is little systematic and methodological sound evidence for drawing firm conclusions about what works and why (see Emler 2001). It also is unclear whether interventions work equally well for different ethnic and age groups and in different countries, and whether there are long-term effects. Furthermore, it is important to note that the explicit concern with planned interventions for self-esteem improvement does not exist, or is much less common, in other countries than the United States.

In addition to these initiatives that directly try to address children's self-esteem there are interventions that can improve self-esteem more indirectly. As noted, many studies have demonstrated that negative experiences such as ethnic exclusion, victimization and discrimination tend to have negative effects on minority children's self-esteem. This means that it is important to address these negative behaviors in a systematic and effective way. Unfortunately, the various programs and initiatives for countering ethnic prejudices, peer victimization and harassment are not always very successful (Aboud et al. 2012). One key issue is that it is necessary to have a better understanding about children's own perceptions, interpretations and reasoning about these negative behaviors. Effective interventions are more difficult without such an understanding and an appreciation of the importance of the ways that children among each other negotiate, share and create meanings and interpretations.

Finally, in future research and in developing effective interventions to improve self-esteem it is important to consider the role of parents. Parents have great emotional significance for children and a large influence on the development of self-esteem well into adolescent years (Emler 2001; Harter 1999). The importance of parental acceptance, approval, nurturance and support to self-esteem is found in various (western and eastern) countries (e.g. Faruggia et al. 2004; Scott et al. 1991), and among both ethnic majority and minority groups (e.g. Greenberger and Chen 1996). Furthermore, ethnic minority families are sometimes able to filter out racist and discriminatory messages from the dominant community and to provide positive feedback that will enhance self-esteem (see Hughes et al. 2009). Thus both parents and schools are influential in the development of children's self-feelings. But research on the role of parents tends not take the role of the school into account and vice versa. Yet, it can be expected that for a teacher-student relationship to have a positive effect on the self-esteem of minority children it is of importance that parents also have an emotional supportive relationship with their child. This would mean that there can be important individual differences that are responsible for school and education having a positive effect on the self-esteem of some minority children but not of others.

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