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Teaching in ethnically diverse classrooms: Examining individual differences in teacher self-efficacy

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ABSTRACT

Using data of 40 native Dutch teachers and their native majority ($n = 112$) and ethnic minority students ($n = 180$), this study examined to what extent teachers experience differences in self-efficacy in teaching individual majority and minority students. We hypothesized that teachers would feel less self-efficacious in relation to ethnic minority students and that the difference in self-efficacy would be more pronounced when ethnic group differences are more salient (i.e., in the context of behavioral problems, ethnically less diverse classrooms, and for teachers with high ethnic identification). Our results show that teachers feel somewhat less self-efficacious with ethnic minority versus majority students. And, the difference in self-efficacy with minority versus majority students was more pronounced in relation to internalizing problem behaviors and somewhat more distinct in classrooms with relatively few ethnic minority students. The findings indicate the importance of a student specific assessment of teacher self-efficacy in diverse school contexts.

1. Introduction

The concept of teacher self-efficacy refers to teachers' beliefs in their ability to bring about desired student outcomes (Guskey & Passaro, 1994) and it is a powerful predictor of higher student motivation (Schunk, 1991) and academic achievement (Caprara, Barbaranelli, Steca, & Malone, 2006; Ross, 1992), as well as less teacher stress and burnout (Schwarzer & Hallum, 2008; Wang, Hall, & Rahimi, 2015). The positive effects of self-efficacy are commonly explained with Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory, which states that self-efficacious people are more task-involved and persistent in the face of obstacles. In an educational context, self-efficacy thus results in positive and effective teachers' classroom behaviors. Recently, Zee and Koomen (2016) conducted a review of 165 research papers, which indeed revealed positive links between teacher self-efficacy and instructional support, classroom organization, and emotional support. Moreover, some of the studies in their review tested and found indirect effects on teacher well-being and student academic adjustment via teachers' behaviors.

Until recently, few studies have investigated teacher self-efficacy in ethnically diverse classrooms (Siwatu & Starker, 2010; Tucker et al., 2005). Yet, studies on student-teacher interactions have shown that teachers – who typically belong to the ethnic majority group (e.g. Hughes, Gleason, & Zhang, 2005; Thijs, Westhof, & Koomen, 2012) – tend to report differential experiences with ethnic minority and majority students. For example, teachers appear to hold biased expectations towards minorities (Tenenbaum & Ruck, 2007; van den Bergh, Denessen, Hornstra, Voeten, & Holland, 2010) and to have less favorable perceptions of their relationships with ethnic minority versus majority students (Hughes et al., 2005; Thijs et al., 2012). It is unclear, however, whether teachers also experience different levels of self-efficacy in relation to students of different ethnicities. Given the increasing ethnic diversity in

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schools and the importance of teacher self-efficacy for effective education, a closer investigation of these questions is timely and pertinent.

The present study, therefore, examined whether teachers' sense of self-efficacy with individual students depends on the ethnicity of those students. We gathered data in the Netherlands, where elementary school children typically have one or two teachers the whole year round (Thijs & Verkuyten, 2014), and we investigated native Dutch primary school teachers (grades 4–6) in relation to students who were either native Dutch (ethnic majority) or of non-Western immigrant-origin (ethnic minority). In the Netherlands, students of non-Western backgrounds do relatively poorly in school on a variety of indicators (Gijsberts, Huijnk, & Dagevos, 2012). For instance, on average they score lower on standardized tests at the end of primary school and are represented more often in vocational rather than academic tracks than their peers with native-born parents (Van de Werfhorst & Van Tubergen, 2007). Moreover, people from Turkish, Moroccan, Surinamese, or Antillean immigrant-origin (the largest groups in our sample) face relatively high levels of discrimination in the Netherlands, and have low socioeconomic status (SES) as they experience, for instance, high levels of unemployment and poorer housing (Huijnk, Gijsberts, & Dagevos, 2014).

Rather than measuring teachers' self-efficacy with their students or the classroom in general (Chan, 2008; Gibson & Dembo, 1984; Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001), we used a newly developed instrument to assess teachers' sense of self-efficacy at the level of individual students (Zee, Koomen, Jellesma, Geerlings, & de Jong, 2016). Thus, we focused on possible differences in teachers' self-efficacy in relation to individual majority and minority students. Additionally, we examined whether the difference in self-efficacy depends on student problem behavior, teacher ethnic group identification, and/or the ethnic classroom composition.

1.1. Teacher self-efficacy

Self-efficacy has proven to be a very useful concept for understanding the motivations and behaviors of individual teachers. However, educational researchers have operationalized teacher self-efficacy in different and sometimes contrasting ways (Klassen, Tze, Betts, & Gordon, 2011; Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001). Bandura (1997, p. 3), who coined the term, defined self-efficacy as “beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments”. In his social cognitive theory (1977) he distinguished these beliefs from so-called *efficacy expectations*, i.e., the convictions that the required courses of action, if adequately performed, would indeed lead to the desired outcomes. Paralleling this distinction, Gibson and Dembo (1984) developed a teacher self-efficacy measure, which measured both *personal teaching efficacy*, involving teachers' personal beliefs about their ability to influence students' learning and behavior, and *teaching efficacy*, involving teachers' convictions that it is generally possible for teachers to influence their students. Although teaching efficacy is an integral component of teacher self-efficacy in Gibson and Dembo's model, later researchers have questioned its value and focused on personal efficacy only (Klassen et al., 2011; Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001).

Next, whereas teacher self-efficacy was initially considered to be a general teacher characteristic (Gibson & Dembo, 1984; Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1995) later research has examined how self-efficacy can vary within teachers. It has been shown, for example, that teachers can experience different levels of self-efficacy when teaching different subjects and different types of students (Raudenbush, Rowan, & Cheong, 1992; Ross, Cousins, & Gadalla, 1996). Another line of research has examined teacher self-efficacy in specific domains of teaching (Tsoloupas, Carson, Matthews, Grawitch, & Barber, 2010; Woolfolk Hoy & Burke Spero, 2005). The most prominent work in this field was conducted by Tschannen-Moran and Woolfolk Hoy (2001, 2007) who developed a domain-specific instrument pertaining to three unique but interrelated domains of teaching: instructional strategies, classroom management, and student engagement. Recently, Zee, Koomen, et al. (2016) used Tschannen-Moran and Woolfolk Hoy's (2001) instrument to construct a domain-specific measure for teacher self-efficacy at the student level. They added a fourth domain of emotional support – which is considered important for students' academic engagement and achievement (Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, & Oort, 2011) – and they formulated items that pertained to individual students rather than students in general (e.g., “How much can you do to adjust your lessons to the proper level for this particular student?” rather than “How much can you do to adjust your lessons to the proper level for students?”). The study showed that teachers do not only experience different levels of self-efficacy in varying domains of teaching but also with individual students in their classrooms (Zee, Koomen, et al., 2016). Given the novelty of this approach there has been no research on the effects of this student-level self-efficacy yet, but it stands to reason that it affects teachers' student-specific classroom behavior and thus helps to explain the educational adjustment of individual students (see Zee & Koomen, 2016).

1.2. The role of student ethnicity

Very little is known about teacher self-efficacy in relation to students from different ethnic or racial backgrounds (further referred to as *ER minority students*; see Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014).¹ The available research has taken a between-teacher approach by focusing on whether teachers feel generally self-efficacious in dealing with a diverse group of students (Siwatu, 2007; Tucker et al., 2005). Although such an approach is clearly relevant, it neglects the distinction between different domains of teaching and it cannot be used to determine whether the same teacher experiences different levels of self-efficacy while interacting with individual ER minority versus ER majority students. In the present study, we used Zee, Koomen, et al.'s (2016) measure to examine teachers' self-efficacy

¹ Following Umaña-Taylor et al.'s (2014) integrated conceptualization of ethnic and racial identity we do not make a distinction between ethnicity and race because we are concerned with majority group teachers and their relations with the particular groups of ethnic/racial minority students in the context of the country they live in.

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