

Teachers' and Parental Attribution for School Performance of Ethnic Majority and Minority Children

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Abstract

This study examines whether teachers' and parental attributions for children's school performance differ depending on the ethnic background of the child. Using both quantitative and qualitative methods, real-life attributions within 54 teacher - parent conversations (15 ethnic majority; 39 minority) were examined. The results indicated that, compared with majority children, teachers attributed school performance of minority children more often to effort (also after controlling for the child's level of school performance). At the same time, the analyses showed that these differences in attributional behavior co-occur with differences in the teacher-parents' interaction and should be understood through including the conversational setting in which these attributions were made. The results are discussed in light of what the particular mismatches and lack of congruence in explaining school success between parents and teachers mean for the school performance of minority children.

Keywords: Attribution, Parents, Teacher, Ethnic background, School performance

1. Introduction

Worldwide, ethnic minority children generally rank lower in academic achievement than ethnic majority children (CBS, 2007; Martin, Martin, Gibson & Wilkins, 2007). Different explanations have been given to explain this achievement gap. The current study aims to apply attribution theory to school practice and to shed new light on the interactions between majority and minority parents and teachers, which might play a role in achievement differences of children. The research questions are: 1) are there differences in teachers' and parental attributions for children's school performance, depending on children's ethnic background (majority versus minority)? And 2) how can we understand the possible differences in attributions from the interactive construction of these attributions within the school context?

Particularly, we focus on the explanations parents and teachers express of children's school performance during parent conferences. These conferences concern a very distinctive context, in the final year of primary school, during which parents and teachers discuss the level of secondary education that is considered appropriate for the child. The final advice that is being formulated during this conference is based on the (negotiated) impression of both the teacher and the parents of the child's ability, and the child's score on 'Cito Final Test Primary Education', a nationally used standardized group test that all children in the Netherlands take in order to be able to assess each child's competence in common skills such as Dutch language, mathematics and study skills. As secondary schools consider the advice that is formulated during the conference when they make a decision about a child's admission to the school, these meetings have a great impact on the child's school career and therefore are considered extremely relevant for parents and their children.

Within this context, we are interested in how the attributions that are being made are shaped by the interactive process between the partners involved. Hereby, we will pay attention to the strategies of both partners and their (possibilities for) partnership. Previous studies on attribution often made use of vignettes, even though researchers pointed out that there is a need for studies that pay attention to more naturalistic materials and discursive processes when studying attribution (Potter & Edwards, 1990). Therefore, with the examination of attribution processes in a

real-life situation (real parent – teacher conferences), the current study contributes to the existing literature on attribution and to insights on how attributional processes function within real school contexts.

1.1 Ethnic Differences in Attributions for School Success

Attributions are the perceived causes of behaviours and events. Weiner (1985) formulated that people's attributions have an impact on affect, level of expectancy and achievement behaviour depending on their location on three dimensions: locus of control (within the individual; internal / or situation; external), stability (fixed or variable) and controllability (personal control or not). In achievement contexts, the level of performance is predominantly attributed to an ability factor (i.e. 'intelligence') and/or an effort factor (i.e. how much effort you put into it). Empirical studies confirmed that attributions influence expectancy and achievement behavior, which in turn affect performance (Georgiou, Christou, Stavriniades, & Panapura, 2002) and that attributions not only explain individuals' own behaviour, but also the behavior of others (Miller, 1995). In general, research has shown that attributions of caregivers and educators are part of socialization processes which influence the behaviour towards the child, which, in turn, affects the child's cognitions and achievements (Bempechat, 1999; Georgiou, 1999).

1.2 Teachers' Role in the Attributional Process: Ethnic Differences

Researchers mentioned the importance of teachers' attributions of children's performances, as these attributions influence teachers' expectations for the children and their teaching behaviour. These, in turn, influence the cognitions and behaviour of the children (Fennema, Peterson, Carpenter, & Lubinski, 1990; Peterson & Barger, 1985). Teacher's attributions of the school performance of a child determine the child's expectations, who they blame or praise, whether they feel helpless or proud, and if they give up or persist (Covington, 2000). It has also been confirmed that the type of feedback a teacher gives to a child depends on the expectations they have for that child (Van Oudenhoven & Siero, 1985). Additionally, researchers suggested that the attribution process differs for different ethnic groups, in particular as related to the school setting. That is, it has been found that teachers generally have lower expectations for ethnic minority children than for ethnic majority children (Van Ewijk, 2009; Weinstein et al., 2002). These lower expectancies, as already indicated, determine teachers' behaviour towards the children and, ultimately, the child's cognitions and behaviour (Fennema, Peterson, Carpenter, & Lubinski, 1990; Van Oudenhoven & Siero, 1985). Remarkably, however, although many studies focused on teachers' differential expectations, the attributions teachers make for the performances of majority and minority children did not receive as much attention. This is remarkable, since attributions can give more insight into the reasons behind different expectations, as attributions are theorized to underlie expectancy levels.

1.3 Parental Role in the Attributional Process: Ethnic Differences

Other studies focused on the role of parental attributions. A number of studies showed that parents usually attribute their child's achievement either to talents and biologically determined dispositions (internal factors) or to factors like the influence of parents, teachers, siblings and luck (external factors) (Goodnow & Collins, 1990; Stevenson et al., 1990). As for minority parents, from the literature it is known that they have higher educational aspirations for their children than majority parents (Phalet & Schönplflug, 2001). These high expectancies of minority parents are possibly a source of trouble given the lower expectancies teachers have for minority children.

The current study provides an opportunity to study the possible tension between parents' and teacher's attributions. Lasky (2000) maintained that teachers and parents experience negative emotions when their beliefs (or attributions) are not in agreement. Inconsistency in teachers' and parents' expectancies could cause tension in the process of commonly constructing attributions in the school context. Additionally, a lack of similarity or consistency could impede good communication, a condition for building positive school – home partnerships, which is an important factor in children's school performance (Epstein, 1995). Good and Nichols (2001) also suggested that dissimilar home and school expectations could weaken a child's academic performance.

Following this, we expected less correspondence between the teachers' and parents' attributions in the ethnic minority group than in the majority group. From the perspective of conversation analysis, we also expected the conversations to develop differently, depending upon the (initial) level of correspondence between parents and teachers. When there would be more correspondence in the attributions, we expected more room for a (mutually) constructive communicative process, in which both parents and teachers contribute to the conclusions (i.e. 'co-construction').

2. Method

2.1 Sample and set up

The study was conducted following the ethical standards of Utrecht University with respect to informed consent, protected data storage and other issues. After the review procedure of the Dutch National Science Foundation, it was decided that no ethical clearance was required given the design and content of the study. The sample consisted of 54 conversations (or conferences) between the primary school teacher and children's parents/caregivers. Before these conversations took place, the parents were informed about their child's score on the 'Cito Final Test Primary Education' and the level of secondary education that is normally associated with such a score (i.e. there are three broad levels ranging from lower vocational training to pre-university education associated with different test score categories). However, the test-score is not the only factor that determines the final advice that is being formulated (as the child could have had a bad day during the test), the opinion of both the teacher and the parents are also determining. In other words, the test score is not a given fact and there is room for negotiation. The conversations followed a certain order as the teachers had developed a simple agenda which recurred in every conversation, although there was room for variety, also depending on the input of the parent. The four participating schools were located in multi-ethnic neighborhoods in one of the largest cities in the Netherlands. The percentage of ethnic minority children in the participating schools ranged from 39 to 91%, which is quite common for Dutch urban areas where the immigrant population is concentrated. All conferences were conducted in Dutch. Five different teachers (4 female and 1 male) were included in the study, and they can be considered as representatives of the mainstream culture and they all had higher educational background. Parents were solicited to participate in the research before the conversation took place. Of the 65 approached parents, 54 (83%) agreed to participate. For the readability of the manuscript, we chose the term 'parent' to refer to the parent/caretaker who participated in the study. In 11 cases both mother and father were present; in 22 cases the mother was present and father not; in 19 cases the father was present and mother not; in 2 cases the child's older sibling was present. If both parents attended the parent – teacher conference, the responses of the parent who made the largest contribution to the conversation (i.e. highest number of utterances) were used in analyses.

The 54 children (26 boys and 28 girls) who were the subject of the conversations were mixed in ethnic background (i.e. 15 ethnic majority; 39 ethnic minority; of whom 22 Moroccan-Dutch, 3 Turkish-Dutch and 14 other ethnic background). A child was considered to have an ethnic minority background if one or both parents were born outside the Netherlands. This criterion refers to how ethnicity is defined in Dutch social context (Keij, 2000). (Note 1) Both fathers, $\chi^2(4, N = 48) = 12.88, p = .01$, and mothers, $\chi^2(4, N = 53) = 24.11, p = .001$, of the ethnic majority children had higher educational backgrounds than the ethnic minority parents. This difference in parental educational background matches the distribution in the general population (GGD, 2008). The complete conversations lasted on average 16.5 minutes ($M_{\text{majority}} = 16.47, SD = 5.28; M_{\text{minority}} = 16.46, SD = 7.70$) and were transcribed by trained research assistants.

2.2 Teachers' and Parental Attributions

When teachers or parents made a statement about how they explained the child's level of school performance (now or in the future), this was marked as an attribution in the transcriptions by the authors and a trained research assistant (a graduate college student). Next, following an adaptation of Graham's (1991) categories, these attributions were coded as belonging to different attribution categories. Graham's original categories (1991) focused on students' attributions for performance and did not differentiate between help from parents and from the school, nor included the category 'system'. These categories were added as they emerged from the current study's data. Consequently, the attribution categories used in the current study were: ability, effort, task difficulty, psychological factors, personality factors, help at home, help at school, educational system and 'other'. In Table 1 descriptions and examples of the categories can be found.

Additionally, for each attribution, it was determined whether the attribution concerned a so-called 'lack-attribution' (for instance, when the parent attributed the child's level of school performance to a lack of effort) or a so-called 'presence-attribution' (for instance, when the parent attributed the school performance to the presence of ability). The interrater reliability of the coding instrument was established to be good, Cohen's kappa = .71 (Zwaal, 2007).

The total number of attributions per category made by parents and teachers served as the continuous dependent attribution variables in the quantitative analyses. Besides, we examined ethnic differences in the mere presence of each attribution category with dichotomous dependent attribution variables (score 0: no attribution of this kind was made versus score 1: one or more attributions of this kind were made). Moreover, in order to establish how the attributions of the parents were interrelated with those of the teacher, we determined the number of times the parent,

in response to the teacher's attribution, went along with an attribution of the teacher (by an affirmative utterance); the number of times the parent contradicted or questioned the teacher's attributions (by expressing that they did not agree with the teacher or by posing a question that questioned the attribution made by the teacher); and the number of times the parents put forward an 'independent' attribution by themselves (i.e. an attribution that differed from the foregoing teacher's attribution).

Table 1. Definitions and examples of the attribution categories

Attribution category	Definition: when performance is ascribed to...	Example
Ability	child's aptitude or acquired skills	'Because Mike is able to do many things.' 'She is a very intelligent girl'.
Effort	child's temporary or sustained effort (endeavor)	'He is working really hard.'
Task difficulty	difficulty of the subject or task	'Math was difficult this year.'
Psychological factors	factors that refer to the child's psyche (motivation, concentration, fear of failure)	'She seems not really motivated.'
Personality factors	child's personality characteristic (seriousness, interested, structural personality)	'She is just interested in many things.' 'Miriam has always been eager to learn.'
Help at home	help the child receives at home from family members	'Fatima gets a lot of support from you and her sister.'
Help at school	help from school personnel	'We are giving him extra attention.'
System	the working of the educational system	'It's a problem that the cito-score is so determining.'
Other	other factors	'The divorce had a big impact on her school work.'

2.3 The Interactive Construction of Attributions in Context

Finally, in order to understand the attributions in their conversational context, 34 parent – teacher conversations (16 minority group, 18 majority group) were randomly selected from the total sample. In this part of the analyses we looked at the context in which the attributions were made, in particular at how the attributions made could be understood given what was at stake, as well as how they could be seen as interactive moves in which conversational partners also react upon each other's statements. Next, the analyses focused on how each party contributed to the overall attributive process and what interactive mechanisms were relevant in understanding the process of bringing up the attributions in these conversations. In carrying out this analysis, while taking the transcription with the marked attributions as a point of departure, we looked at the interactive construction of these attributions in the context of the conversation as a whole. For each transcribed conversation, text fragments were labeled using MAXQDA software, focusing on the above mentioned questions. Then, as a second step, for each transcript summaries were made paying attention to these focus points and the particular course of action in each conversation. As a third step, conclusions were drawn on general patterns that were characteristic for the sample as a whole, while specifically focusing on how possible differences in content could be explained by potential differences in the conversational process between both groups.

3. Results

3.1 Quantitative Analyses: Differences in Attributions per Category

3.1.1 Teachers

To test for differences in the frequencies in use of the different attribution categories by teachers, depending on the child's ethnic background (minority versus majority), we performed univariate analyses of variance with ethnic

background as a factor (0 = ethnic majority; 1 = ethnic minority) and the frequencies of all teacher attribution categories as continuous dependent variables. In Table 2, we present the means and standard deviations per ethnic group for the continuous attribution variables (teachers). The results indicated a significant difference in the number of attributions teachers made to the 'presence of effort' depending on whether it concerned an ethnic minority or majority child, $F(1, 50) = 8.13, p < .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .14$. The means in Table 2 demonstrate that, when it concerned a child with an ethnic minority background, teachers attributed the level of school performance more often to the presence of effort, compared with a majority child. (Note 2)

Table 2. Teachers' attributions: Means and standard deviations per ethnic group (majority versus minority)

Attribution category	Majority group		Minority group	
	Means	SD	Means	SD
Ability (lack)	1.87	2.07	2.30	2.34
Ability (presence)	2.60	2.03	3.43	3.66
Effort (lack)	1.07	1.28	1.05	2.46
Effort (presence / 'not a lack')*	1.00	1.07	3.65	3.51
Psychological factors (lack)	.53	.92	.14	.54
Psychological factors (presence)	.20	.56	.43	.84
Personality factors (lack)	.40	1.06	.08	.36
Personality factors (presence)	.33	.72	.76	1.40
Help at home (lack)	.07	.26	.00	.00
Help at home (presence)	.07	.26	.11	.32
Help at school (lack)	.00	.00	.05	.23
Help at school (presence)	.20	.56	.73	1.39
System (lack)	.00	.00	.00	.00
System (presence)	.00	.00	.00	.00
Task difficulty (only presence)	.07	.26	.22	.53
Other factors (lack)	.00	.00	.08	.28
Other factors (presence)	.00	.00	.14	.59

* = Significant difference between the ethnic groups.

Next, we tested for differences in whether or not a certain kind of attribution was made by the teacher (i.e. independent of the frequency) depending on the child's ethnic background. Therefore, we performed χ^2 -tests with the dichotomous attribution variables (0 = attribution category was not mentioned; 1 = attribution category was mentioned) as dependent variables and ethnic background of the child as factor. The results indicated a significant difference in the occurrence of attribution to a lack in psychological factors (such as a lack in the child's motivation or concentration) depending on ethnic background of the child, $\chi^2(1) = 5.22, p < .05$. The percentages per ethnic group indicate that teachers made such attributions (once or several times) with 33% of the ethnic majority children versus only with 8% of the minority children.

3.1.2 Parents

All analyses were also performed with the parental attributions as dependent variables. In Table 3, we present the means and standard deviations per ethnic group for the attributions of parents. The results of the analyses of variance indicated that there was a significant difference between the minority and majority parents in the frequency of attributions to psychological factors, $F(1, 52) = 4.14, p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .07$. The means in Table 3 show that majority parents more often attributed to psychological factors compared with minority parents.

The χ^2 -tests with the dichotomous attribution variables of parents as dependent variables indicated that the parents differed in whether or not they attributed to the personality of the child, $\chi^2(1) = 4.15, p < .05$. The percentages per ethnic group showed that of the majority parents, 33% made one or more attributions to the personality of the child (for instance, eager to learn, confident personality) against only 10% of the minority parents.

Table 3. Parental attributions: Means and standard deviations per ethnic group (majority versus minority)

Attribution category	Majority group		Minority group	
	Means	SD	Means	SD
Ability (lack)	.73	1.91	.26	.55
Ability (presence)	.47	.83	.51	1.21
Effort (lack)	.20	.78	.10	.31
Effort (presence)	.40	.63	.49	1.17
Psychological factors (lack)	.40	1.06	.05	.22
Psychological factors (presence)*	.27	.70	.03	.16
Personality factors (lack)	.07	.26	.00	.00
Personality factors (presence)	.40	.63	.18	.60
Help at home (lack)	.00	.00	.00	.00
Help at home (presence)	.33	.82	.46	1.23
Help at school (lack)	.07	.26	.05	.22
Help at school (presence)	.07	.26	.08	.35
System (lack)	.00	.00	.05	.22
System (presence)	.00	.00	.00	.00
Task difficulty (only presence)	.00	.00	.03	.16
Other factors (lack)	.00	.00	.05	.22
Other factors (presence)	.00	.00	.00	.00

* = Significant difference between the ethnic groups.

3.2 Quantitative Analysis: Attributions as 'Reactive'

The final quantitative tests were χ^2 -tests to see whether there were differences between majority and minority parents in the occurrence of different types of reactions to the teacher's attributions (agreement, contradiction, questioning and 'independent' attributions; 0 = this reaction did not occur versus 1 = this reaction occurred once or more during conversation). The results demonstrated that the ethnic groups of parents differed significantly in whether they made 'independent' attributions (i.e. attributions that differed from the foregoing teacher's attribution), $\chi^2(1) = 5.71, p < .05$. The percentages per ethnic group showed that, of the ethnic majority parents, a percentage of 87% made one or more independent attributions during the conversation (versus 13% did not make such attributions), while in the minority group, this was more evenly distributed (i.e. respectively 51% versus 49%).

3.3 Qualitative analyses: Attributions in context

Given the setting of the conversation, as a rule, parents had an interest in arguing for a higher advice, while the teachers pleaded for 'realism'. This was the case for both minority and majority parents. Moreover, as these conversations did not happen at the end of the school year, school success was, besides something that needed explanation, at the same time something open to change. In the conversations the distinctive explanations were weighted against each other. For instance, ability was often weighted against effort (the child should work harder) combined with 'external' factors (how the social environment is able to support greater effort) in all cases. However, the issue of how this internal-external dynamic should be managed differed considerably between the conversations with minority and majority parents. Whereas for majority parents a dominant focus of the conversation was the establishment of the right psychological and motivational structure so that the child would take initiative, the discussions with minority parents centred around the extent to which parents or teachers should force the child to work hard, or prohibit other non-school related activities in order to obtain better school results.

Besides these differences in content, the process through which these accounts were constructed was different. While the diagnosis on what went wrong or what should be done was more commonly constructed in case of the conversations with majority parents, they were more characterized by opposition or a passive position by the parent in case of the conversations with minority parents. In the conversations with minority parents, the effort explanations were often subject to strife between the parties as in the following example (all original names were replaced).

Fragment 1. Example of teacher making ‘not a lack of effort’ attributions in conversation with a parent of ethnic minority child (T = Teacher; F = Father)

1. T: Well, he finds it a bit difficult at school
2. F: Yes
3. T: you can see that, but, I think, you have known that already, isn't it (childish tone)?
4. F: mmyes
5. T: if you look at the marks
6. F: yes
7. T: you see that his marks are always a bit at the lower side. With arithmetic he is at the lower side
8. F: hmmm
9. T: with reading at the lower side and reading comprehension
10. F: (lowly): yes
11. T: and spelling
12. F: (very lowly): yes
13. T: arithmetic, he finds all these subjects difficult
14. F: ohh, 't' .. yes
15. T: he tries very hard, but he simply finds it very difficult
16. F: yes
17. T: So, it, he, it is not the case that he does not work hard enough (F: or something like that) or something like that
18. F: (lowly): myes
- (...)
19. F: perhaps should help. But I now, should not help (hear?), the wife (??). I stand, because I stand, teacher..
- (...)
20. T: Well, so, it is not Karim's fault. He really works hard.
21. F: hm, but ehmmm..
22. T: but, in fact..., better is not possible [cause he does..
23. F: [Sooooooooo..]
24. T: so, eh (hesitating), he does a lot, but he finds it superdifficult.
25. F: (disappointed) well....

Note. Transcript notation: Normal sentence punctuation has been used as far as possible in order to make the transcripts accessible to lay readers. The use of (.) indicates a brief pause in speech of 1 second; (..) a pause of 2 seconds; (...) a pause of three seconds; (text) indicates speech which is unclear or in doubt in the transcript; the use of [text] indicates the start and end points of overlapping speech; { text } indicates the tone of voice.

In fragment 1, the teacher introduces her explanation for the disappointing school result in turn 1: ‘The child finds school difficult.’ This claim is supported by referring to ‘objective’ school results in the following turns (up until turn 13). The father does only passively support these accounts with ‘hmm’ and ‘yes’ in turn 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12 and 14. The father obviously has a hard time arguing against the teachers’ argument, as he does not directly oppose this view. He does, however, bring in his own account when he suggests that the school should perhaps help his child. The teacher then extensively makes clear that the child is getting a lot of extra help, but still finds learning difficult. Towards the end of the conversation, the teacher (in turn 20) directly contradicts the presupposed explanation of the father that it is the child’s fault because he has not worked hard.

The example is illustrative for the conversations with minority parents not only in that it is focused on effort explanations. It is also illustrative of the interactive dynamics typical for these conversations. First of all, the explanations that were brought in were not supported by both parties, but were subject to strife. Although the effort explanations in fragment 1 (see turn 15, 17, 20, 22, 24) were brought in by the teacher, it clearly anticipates an effort explanation of the parent and contradicts it. In fact, this ‘not effort’ argument of the teacher functions in the conversation as an argument for a lack of ability (it doesn’t make sense to try harder when there is a lack of ability). This example is illustrative of the lack of a shared vision that seems to underlie the conversations of minority parents

and teachers. Explanations were not commonly build or co-constructed between the conversations partners, but, rather, as a rule, were brought in by one partner and only passively supported or explicitly contradicted by the other.

The pattern was different for majority parents. That is, the conversations between the teacher and the parents of ethnic majority children showed more often evidence of an attributional process of ‘co-construction’. Fragment 2 is illustrative of this pattern. It not only illustrates the focus on psychological explanations, which was also evident from the quantitative analyses, it also shows how both parties commonly construct this explanation as the conversation develops.

Fragment 2. Example of co-construction with ethnic majority parent (T = Teacher; M = Mother).

1. T: Yes and ehm, this conversation we also look again into the ehm secondary education
2. M: hmm(.)
3. T: The last time, eh well, we’ve actually talked about what you were thinking of, then(.) And eh, I am curious whether that remained the same for you (.)
4. M: Yes, yes I think so that he ri- higher general education – pre-university right
5. T: yes
6. M: that he would be able to manage that [and eh(..)]
7. T: [Yes, I] have actually at the moment put the higher general education a bit between brackets,
8. M: hmm
9. T: because I think he is too smart for that(.)
10. M: Hmm(.)
11. T: And ehm, yes(.)
12. M: Yes, it will, I also think, with him, it depends very much on his motivation eh
13. T: yes
14. M: does he like it and will he do something for it (.)
15. T: Yes(.)
16. M: And eh, yes without a doubt, he must do something for it, right? Because eh at a certain moment those languages and all that, you still need – need to learn it.
17. T: yes
18. T: No, I also think so and also want to add a note actually that he should not start it like he started last year with me,
19. M: yes
20. T: cause then he is going to have many difficulties(.)
21. M: yes
22. T: And so at the moment that he starts well, I just think that pre-university should be possible, possible
23. M: yes
24. T: He should simply be able to do that(.)
25. M: Yes(.)

Both the parent and the teacher build the explanation that the child will only do well if he is motivated (lines 12-22). The fragment is also illustrative of the initiative majority parents take in building explanations. In line 12, for instance, the mother started with bringing in the conditional explanation for the child’s success (he will only do well if he is motivated). The teacher supported this explanation in line 18, 20 and 21. Both the parent and the teacher co-constructed this explanation, and strengthened it as the conversation develops.

The fragments illustrate the differences in the kind of roles the parents generally assume in the attributional process. It seemed that while the conversational frame in the case of the minority parents was defined by the assumption that relatively large differences existed between the teacher and the parents in terms of identity, knowledge of the system, language, pedagogical views, this was much less the case for the majority parents.

4. Discussion

In explaining the differences found in this study in conversations with teachers and ethnic majority parents, as compared to those with minority parents, we will first pay attention to the content of their explanations, while then also focusing on the conversational dynamics in which they were uttered. One explanation does not rule out the other, and both are equally relevant to understand how attributions are made in real life settings, as opposed to how they function in more controlled settings.

4.1 Ethnic Differences in the Content of the Attributional Process

The results regarding the use of different kinds of attributions by the teacher showed that teachers more often use attributions to a lack in psychological factors (such as motivation) when it concerned a majority child, compared with a minority child. This was also reflected in the differences found between both groups of parents. Talking about the psychology of the child might be more common in conversations with parents with a Western cultural background. Parents in Western cultures are used to assisting their children with school and are more experienced with seeing their children, in general, as psychological beings and, more specifically, as young learners (Epstein, 1987). Furthermore, the results indicated that teachers used more effort explanations in conversations with minority parents. It is possible that the teachers in the current study anticipated an emphasis on effort of ethnic minority parents and that they wanted to prevent the parents from pushing the child too hard to avoid detrimental consequences of such high parental pressure. Previous studies did confirm that ethnic minority parents place high value on attaining high educational goals (they wish a better life for their children) and that children experience high pressure from their parents to perform well in school (Smit & Driessen, 2002).

Besides the differences in the content of the attributions, the study showed how the conversational context differed considerably for both groups. The attributional process was much more bi-directional in the conversations with majority parents, whereas it was more uni-directional or characterized by opposition in the conversations with minority parents. This uni-directional quality might be not a characteristic of the ethnic group itself, but rather something related to their relative outsider positions as migrants. Similar results have been found in a study by Greenfield, Quiroz and Raff (2000) who described that Latino immigrant parents in the US took on a passive attitude in these teacher-parent conversations.

Besides the effect that this might have on the development of partnerships between parents and teachers, we assume that content issues also operate together with the conversational context. For instance, the greater use of attributions to a lack in psychological factors seems to fit better with the more open and co-constructive nature of the conversations with majority parents. It might take a certain consistency in view and an assumed shared vision to move to the psychological domain. Furthermore, to point to another issue of the conversational process that likely impacted upon the thematic content, the results indicated that teachers more often indicated that the school performance of the ethnic minority children was not due to a lack of effort (i.e. presence of effort attribution) compared with a majority child. We suppose that these 'it is not a lack of effort' attributions are polite forms of 'lack of ability' attributions. It is known that teachers are reluctant to directly tell parents that their child is not intelligent, or that the child lacks in ability, because of the risk of damaging the parents' self-worth (Graham, 1991). In sum, these points show that, although the differences in content in the attributional process are in themselves interesting and relevant, we should always be aware of the particular social and conversational setting in which they are expressed to understand their full meaning.

4.2 Consequences for Practitioners

If we first look at the differences in terms of content it should be noted that by emphasizing that the school performance of the child is not due to a lack of effort, teachers can signal to the parents and the child that the child should give up trying because he or she would not be able to improve the performance (Mineka & Hendersen, 1985). In line with motivational theory, it has been maintained that individual failure perceived as caused by a lack of ability results in performance decrements (while failure ascribed to a lack of effort results in performance increments because the student perceives he or she can do something about it, i.e. try/work harder; put more effort in). Another point is that, when teachers prevent parents from attributing school performance to low effort, they may instead stimulate attributions to external factors such as blaming the system and the school. It may prevent parents from supporting their child in doing well at school as well, which obviously is problematic. Research on successful individuals with an ethnic minority background indicated that motivational support from parents (by for instance stressing the value of working hard or of education in general) may be even more important for minority children than whether the parents can help with homework (Bempechat, 1999). For ethnic minority children, these consequences can therefore be harmful.

Moreover, by attributing the school performance of majority children more often to a lack in psychological factors, while attributing the performance of minority children more often to ‘not a lack in effort’ (which seems a polite or disguised form of ‘lack in ability’ attribution), teachers seem to attribute more ‘fixable’ causes to majority children and more unrepairable causes to minority children. This difference in attributions could underlie differences in expectations of teachers for ethnic majority and minority children. More research is needed, however, concerning the link between these attributions and teachers’ expectations of both groups of children and the influence of these factors on the performances of children.

Second, while looking at our findings from the perspective that attributions never exist ‘as such’, but always happen in particular social dynamics, the particular mismatch and lack of congruence in explaining school success between parents and teachers becomes another point of concern. Teachers should be made aware of these different belief systems and be challenged to think about how these might impact upon their ability to build a partnership with parents that is needed to support the child (also see next paragraph).

With respect to the impact of the lack of a common attributional process for minority parents, Epstein (1987) suggested that teachers and parents are thought to share common goals for their children, and that these goals are achieved most effectively when teachers and parents really work together. If this is not the case, parents will not be fully informed about or will not fully understand the schools’ expectations for their children or for themselves as parents and, as a consequence, they cannot shape their behaviour to provide useful assistance. Other studies indicated that minority parents would like to have more contact with school, but that they wish more initiative taking from the part of the school (Booijink, 2007). It is therefore very important to stimulate parents, but also teachers, to put effort in the school – home contact. Teachers should be aware of the kind of partnership they express in their conversations with parents, and should be taught to pay extra attention when they speak with ethnic minority parents. Other researchers also stressed the importance of positive home – school relationships (which also seems more important than parents’ involvement per se), especially for children with ethnic minority background (Hughes & Kwok, 2007). Teachers should be educated better about how they can establish positive and supportive relationships with parents and their children. Such relationships will increase the chances of attaining good educational levels. In the Netherlands the government promotes programs that are aimed at strengthening parent – school partnerships, as strong partnerships are considered of main importance in child development. In the year 2012 a program has been developed by the ministry of education called ‘Parents and Schools together’ (‘Ouders en School Samen’). The program aims at strengthening parent-teacher relationships to support school learning in the home, but also stimulates schools to take part in child raising issues. Special attention is paid to ethnic minority parent – school partnerships. On a national website, workshops, video material and documentation can be found with guidelines for the promotion of parent – school partnerships or parent involvement. Examples of recommendations for schools and teachers are: aim at personal contact, discuss mutual expectations, take away insecurities of parents (provide confidence by stressing that parents are able to support their children; explain difficult or professional terms), talk with parents (instead of to parents), and if parents are absent inform why. Research results show that parental involvement recently is better organized within schools (Ministry of OCW, 2012). Yet, addressing the specific problems of ethnic minority parents, remains an issue of concern as given the overall policy to not consider minorities as a specific group.

4.3 Limitations and Conclusion

First, as a consequence of the nature of the combination of quantitative and qualitative analyses (profound and labor-intensive) the sample of the current study was too small to pay attention to differences within the minority group (for instance differences in linguistic competence and educational background) that might be determining for the parents’ contributions to the conferences. Second, the sample was a convenience sample as we were dependent on the willingness to cooperate of schools, teachers and parents. We did test whether there were significant differences in general ability test scores of children whose parents cooperated versus children whose parents refused to cooperate and the results indicated no significant differences. Third, as a result of studying real situations (parent – teacher conferences) we were not able to control the situation, as is the case when working in the lab or with questionnaires referring to hypothetical situations. Future studies could aim at involving larger samples to be able to further examine possible differences as a result of characteristics of the children, parents, but also of teachers (for instance, also involve ethnic minority teachers).

In conclusion, we think the current study is valuable because it reveals how attributions, and in particular differences in attributions, behave in real life settings (in this case: in a strategic setting for children’s school careers). With the combination of qualitative and quantitative analyses we were able to show significant differences between ethnic groups in how school results are explained, but also in how these were shaped by the conversational setting of the

school. Finally the study showed how this conversational setting creates and represents inequalities between ethnic groups. The main practical implication of the research is that efforts should be made to promote more equal, bi-directional and communicative partnerships between teachers and all parents, as such relationships are for the benefit of all children, irrespective of ethnic background.

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Notes

Note 1. In all cases, ethnic background of the parent/caregiver whose utterances were used in the analyses matched ethnic background of the child. Of the 39 children with ethnic minority background, only 4 had one parent who was born in the Netherlands. This group was too small to perform additional analyses (for instance, a precondition for performing a χ^2 -test is that a maximum of 20% of the expected frequencies are lower than 5, and with a group of 4 this percentage is consistently higher). Therefore, we kept in line with the way ethnic background is defined by most national institutes (i.e. if one parent is born outside the Netherlands, a child is considered as an ethnic minority child).

Note 2. To find out whether the difference in teachers' attribution depended on differences in the child's level of school performance, we also performed the analysis with a control for the level of advice the teacher presented (from 1 –lowest possible- to 14 –highest possible advice-). The results indicated that the difference in teachers' attribution to the presence of effort remained significant, $F(1, 49) = 9.06, p < .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .16$. Additionally, we performed the analysis with a control for the Cito-test score. Again, the difference in teachers' attribution to the presence of effort remained significant, $F(1, 51) = 8.65, p < .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .15$. Also, we performed the analysis with a control for the total number of attributions the parents made (i.e. as an indication of communicativeness / linguistic skills), to see whether this difference in teacher attribution was due to communicativeness of the parents. Again, the difference in the number of teachers' attribution to the presence of effort remained significant, $F(1, 49) = 10.33, p < .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .17$.