

Study success of students from ethnic-minority backgrounds

An overview of explanations for differences in study careers

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Summary

Ethnic-minority students record less study success in comparison with their peers from majority backgrounds. In this chapter, we attempt to find an answer to the question of why this is so, and what educational programmes can do to reduce these differences. Research in this area is divided into three sections with overlapping themes. In the first theme, Tinto's model is central along with the terms 'social integration' and 'academic integration'. The second theme zooms in on explanations from the social domain, and the third explores research on factors in the learning environment. The literature shows that an initial answer to the question of what universities can do involves dealing with differences. The performances of ethnic-minority students improve in programmes in which the social integration of ethnic-minority and majority students is good, in which contact with teachers is good, in which teachers refer to differences positively and use them in their teaching, in which diversity is explicitly referred to as a positive value. A second answer involves, within the education system, promoting contact with their own community in combination with encouraging the maintenance of the cultural identity. Research has clearly shown that social support networks in their own community and a feeling of awareness of one's own cultural identity have a positive impact on the study success of ethnic-minority students.

Diversity in Higher Education

Increasing structural diversity

In the past decade(s), higher education in Western societies has become ethnically more diverse. The 'traditional student' who enters higher education straight from secondary education, who is on the brink of entering his twenties, who studies full time and whose parents are highly educated with middle or high incomes, no longer is the average student. Democratization of higher education, in combination with long-term effects of postcolonial en labor migration have led to an increasing number of students in general, and in increase of ethnic minority students in particular.

In Northern America, more than 90% of the 1971 U.S. freshman population was White/Caucasian. In 2006, their share decreased to just above 75% due to the strong emerge of Asian American/Asian (from 0.6 to 8.6%) Latina/o (from 0.6 to 7.3%) and

Multiracial (from 1.3 to 7.2%) students. The share of African American, the largest minority group, also increased, though less spectacular (from 7.5 to 10.5%) (Pryor, Hurtado, Saenz, Santos & Korn, 2007).

In Europe, the number of first year students of non-Western descent in Dutch higher education, who in the Dutch context are considered as ethnic minority students, more than doubled up to a total number of almost 16.000 students from 1997 to 2006. Though this number may seem small in absolute figures, in the relative sense this caused an increase from eight percent non-western influx of the total number of first year students in 1997 to thirteen percent in 2006 for both forms of higher education in the Netherlands (higher vocational education and university education) (Central Bureau of Statistics, Netherlands). In the UK some 14% of the undergraduates was of minority ethnic background in the academic year 2001 (Connor, Tyers, Modood & Hillage, 2004). Although figures of previous years are not entirely reliable due to changes in nationwide data collection and changes in ethnic categories through the years, the authors conclude that 'in broad terms, the trend is likely to be upwards, as the figures suggest' (p.41). Although on a nationwide scale the ethnic diversity of the student population increased, ethnic minority students are not evenly spread throughout the country. Ethnic minority students tend to enroll in less prestigious institutions (public institutions, vocational oriented tracks) in areas with a relative high proportion of ethnic minority residents (Connor et al, 2004; EUMC, 2004). Moreover, this group of students seem to be concentrated in a limited number of disciplines. Ethnic minority students as well as students from lower socio economic backgrounds more often choose 'high status' subjects such as medicine, law and economics (Van de Werfhorst et al, 2003; Wolff, 2007).

Less success

These developments in the student population along ethnic lines raise the question how well these non-traditional group of minority students are performing. Does access to higher education also mean that chances for success are more or less the same for both traditional and non-traditional groups of students? International data generally show that study careers of minority students are less successful. They earn less credits in the same amount of time (Hofman & Van den Berg, 2003; Swail et al, 2003; Severiens & Wolff, in press), they need more time to graduate, and retention rates among these students are lower compared to those of White students. In the North American case many evidence is available (see for example Bowen & Bok, 1998; Massey et al, 2003). Recently published figures show that by the age of 24, 6 to 7 percent of the low-income group students - a category with a relatively large number of African American, Latina/o and Asian students (the Pell Institute, 2005) attained a bachelor's degree -, compared to 52 percent among high income students (Mortensen, 2005). In a recent study on attainment of ethnic minority students in UK higher education Richardson (2008) finds that Asian students have half the chance and Black students one third of a chance obtaining a 'good' HE-degree compared to White students. The author concludes that 'even when the effects of (...) other variables are taken into account, students from ethnic minority are substantially and significantly less likely to obtain good degrees than are White students. In the Netherlands, in higher vocational education 68 percent of the White Dutch students graduates within six years, at universities this percentage is 55 percent. For ethnic

minority groups the rates are much lower: 50 percent at the level of higher vocational education and around 40 percent at university level (Wolff, 2007).

In conclusion, the backgrounds of the student population are becoming more diverse and ethnic-minority students record less study success. Given this observation, we can ask the question of what educational programmes can do to reduce the differences in school performances and to offer diverse groups of students equal opportunities? It is important to answer this question not only from an egalitarian perspective but also from a pragmatic one. Through ageing and the decreasing number of young people, it is becoming increasingly important to use all available talent to the full.

The role of teaching in study success

Given the central question of this chapter, we have selected the role that teaching plays in the study success of ethnic-minority students as the perspective for seeking explanations. Our literature search indicated three relevant areas, viz.:

- Social and academic integration according to Tinto's model (1997, 1998)
- The social domain
- The learning environment

These are not independent areas; they often overlap. The areas have different perspectives and different underlying theoretical assumptions. The concept of 'social integration' from Tinto's educational model, for example, is also found in the social domain, from a more sociological perspective. Where Tinto's model takes the school as a starting point and zooms in on the way in which the instructional design of the programme either promotes the social integration of various groups of students or not, the starting point of the studies in the social domain is the students themselves. The social domain, for example, is more concerned with processes that take place in 'peer groups' and that either promote study success or not. In Tinto's model, academic integration mainly involves the quality of the contact between teachers and students and the quality of the lessons given. The studies that take the learning environment as their starting point, on the other hand, do not so much examine teaching and learning in themselves, but rather the underlying processes in the learning environment and its climate that affect study progress and achievement of students.

Below, we describe the most important studies in each of the areas, and we focus on research conducted in the last 15 years.

Social and academic integration

"When I sit with an ethnic-minority fellow student, I can open his bag with no problem. I wouldn't dare try that with Jan. With majority students, you deal in a business-like way. You go to meetings and do what you have to do. And then you go home."

Interview with an ethnic-minority student, p. 153 in Severiens et al. 2006

In Tinto's model, social integration refers to good social contact with teachers and fellow students. For most students, a group with whom they feel at home is an important deciding factor in the pleasure they experience in a programme, and it ultimately also determines the chances of whether they will record study success and complete the programme. Participating in all kinds of social activities, having many friends, feeling quite at home and enjoying school, are all signs that students are socially well integrated.

“When tests are marked, Dutch students more easily receive an additional tenth of a point. Example: last year, two Dutch youths achieved this in fifteen minutes while a youth from Cape Verde had to spend a whole day nagging for it. You don't want to say it's racism, but it looks like it.”

Interview with an ethnic-minority student, p. 144 in Severiens et al. 2006

Academic integration refers to the extent to which students feel at home in the programme regarding the field and the teachers and students who represent that field. Good academic integration means that students identify positively with the field concerned, that teachers talk to them about this and invite their students, as it were, to participate in the profession. An example is the extent to which students can ask (or dare to ask) their teachers questions (Severiens et al. 2006).

The underlying idea of the studies that investigate social and academic integration in groups of ethnic-minority and majority students, is that a relatively minor degree of integration is related to mediocre study progress or even to the decision to drop out of the study. However, this connection is not present in all the studies. For example, Nora and Cabrera (1996) describe several studies showing that ethnic-minority students are relatively often faced with negative contact among their fellow students and teachers. In their own research too, they find that ethnic-minority students experience more prejudice and discrimination. Although these experiences have a negative effect on 'academic experiences' and on social integration, no effect was found on study progress. In the study conducted by Berger and Milem (1999) significant connections were found between academic and social integration and study progress. Ethnic-minority students tend to spend less long in programmes due to lesser academic and social integration, but this relationship was found to be a general mechanism. This means that no differences were found between students of diverse ethnic backgrounds and their social and academic integration. Eimers and Pike (1997) conducted another study about integration in relation to ethnicity. This study shows that a lack of academic integration has negative effects on study progress, particularly for ethnic-minority students.

In our own qualitative research (Severiens et al. 2006), carried out among students at institutes for higher vocational education and at research universities, we saw that the experiences of ethnic-minority students involving inequality in the programme, like being treated 'differently' by fellow students and by teachers and feeling less at home in the programme, had an influence on their social and academic integration. As the 'academic integration' quotation above shows, this is expressed, for example, in the extra effort some ethnic-minority students have to make to get a higher grade during the discussion of test results, compared to majority students in the same programme. Conversely, more equality in the programme and more attention for diversity seems to lead to an equal

degree of social and academic integration and study progress for ethnic-minority and majority students. Another study conducted among teacher training programmes (Severiens et al. 2007) revealed that in programmes in which ethnic-minority students performed relatively poorly, social integration appeared to take place in a 'problematic' atmosphere. The quality of cooperation between students in such programmes is less when compared with programmes in which ethnic-minority students perform relatively well. Furthermore, the best academic integration, in terms of contacts between teachers and students, both ethnic-minority and majority students, is achieved in programmes in which the differences in study progress are small. In other words: the quality of academic and social integration is related to the study progress of ethnic-minority students. Where large differences exist to the disadvantage of ethnic-minority students, there are also a relatively large number of complaints, particularly from ethnic-minority students, regarding their interaction with fellow students and teachers.

To summarise, we can cautiously put forward that research based on Tinto's model in general shows that ethnic-minority students have less contact with their fellow students and teachers and are therefore less well socially and academically integrated. This has an adverse effect on the study success of ethnic-minority students. We put this cautiously because not all the research clearly points in this direction and the connections are not always strong (Braxton, 2000, Severiens & Wolff, in press).

The social domain

The social domain refers to the social networks and the bonds of students that are related to their school or study experiences. This domain largely involves contacts that are maintained outside regular classes. This involves contact with fellow students but the social domain can also involve, for example, support from parents and family or via contacts in other social situations (like clubs or societies).

Social contacts as a predictor of study success

Peers seem to play an important role in the extent to which students are able and desire to adapt to the demands that education makes of them (Tinto, 1993; Astin 1993), in the perseverance to continue and in ultimately obtaining school success (Terenzini and Pascarella, 2005). Peers can have either a positive or negative impact on study success. According to some authors, social aspects are particularly important for students from minority groups. In these groups, access to a support network is a better predictor of study success than are cognitive skills, for example (Fuertes & Sedlacek, 1994; Tracey & Sedlacek, 1985, 1987). Moreover, the social environment may have an influence on the choice of school and study and a social support network seems to be a major tool in remaining motivated at school or during a period of study (Wolff and Crul, 2003). Regarding the choice of school and study, ethnic-minority students seem to have a lesser degree of access to a network that can help them further in their school career than is the case for majority students (Severiens et al. 2007).

Acting 'White'

Steinberg (1996) also points to the role of peers as an important explanation of the difference in study success between Asian and African American students in the US. This difference is attributed to the fact that the peers of Asian students more often find education and performances to be important, while the peers of African American students least often emphasise the importance of academic performances¹. Gloria et al. (2005) shows that Latino peer groups help each other to 'survive' in education. A concrete negative example of this is the domino effect regarding dropping out. In a study conducted at a number of teacher-training programmes for primary education (PABO) (Severiens et al. 2007) several PABO teachers and programme managers said that dropping out never seems to involve just one student. Once an atmosphere is created among students of 'I won't make it', the chances are great that this view will spread across a larger group of students. The result is that a number of students drop out of the programme within a short space of time.

What is involved here are general mechanisms, but the interaction between peers may comprise ethno-cultural elements as well. An example of this is the ethnographical study into an ethnically mixed 'middle-class high school' conducted by Ogbu (2003). This study was not conducted at higher education institutions, but is nevertheless discussed here as it uncovers the powerful relationship between social processes, identity and learning. Ogbu concluded, based, that the social pressure within groups of African American boys often had a negative effect on their study performances. We expect similar processes to occur in higher education. Studying hard is not cool, and is regarded as 'White' behaviour. This seems to apply to boys in particular. Once a fellow student performs above the average, he or she is no longer welcome in the group. It is not so much the good grades that are rejected but rather that the attitude and behaviour that is necessary to obtain good grades is regarded as 'White'. Some examples are speaking 'proper' English, enrolling in honours classes, paying attention during lessons, raising your hand to answer questions put by the teacher and socialising with White peers. The reason why this 'White' behaviour is rejected is that it is in conflict with a perceived African American identity. Such an identity is regarded as being in opposition to the White identity, instead of being just different. Massey et al (2003) refers to this process as the theory of oppositional identity.

"The working groups were annoying because all the other members of the group were Dutch and contact with them wasn't very good. Maybe because I come from another country... but I don't like them. They're very curious and not funny. I am not like them. But that's also because of me. I think that people find me antisocial because I don't talk very much. It would be different if I had just one other student from Aruba in my group."

Interview with an ethnic-minority student, p. 92 in Severiens et al. 2006.

¹ One problem with this theory is that students choose their own friends and these are often people who resemble them. The question is therefore whether the students perform more poorly because of their friends or if poorly performing students choose similar friends (cf. Massey et al. 2003).

Based on a comparative study of two ‘problem institutions’ with many ethnic-minority students (one in the Bronx and the other in the Bijlmer district of Amsterdam) (Paulle, 2005) puts several points regarding these group attitudes and oppositional identities into perspective. He encountered dominant ‘Black’ students groups with an anti-school attitude at both institutions. After further study he observed, however, that ‘Black’ is an ambiguous term that is interpreted by each pupil differently and which definitely does not always refer to ‘race’ or ‘ethnicity’, that certainly not all ethnic-minority students share the views of the dominant ‘Black’ student groups, that ‘non-Black’ students can also form part of these dominant student groups and that the anti-school attitude of members of the dominant student group is mainly adopted in a group process. Individual contact with members of the dominant group revealed that they too were aware of the importance of good schooling.

Pride in one’s own cultural identity

Why is the role of peers so important in the social domain? This can be explained by means of the life-world that peers share. Fellow students recognise and identify with one another. They are facing the same school challenges (completing study assignments and studying for exams and tests) and they often spend more time with each other, than, for example, with their parents or teachers. This communality can create strong bonds that ensure that peers take each other as examples and therefore have more influence on each other than other people who are involved in their education.

In an ethnically diverse population, this shared life-world can ensure that students of the same origin are attracted to one other. Ethnic-minority students often refer to a shared (family) background, a shared sense of humour and shared (educational) experiences that make them feel more closely bound to other ethnic-minority students than to majority fellow students. Johnson, Alvarez, Longerbeam, Soldner, Inkelas, Leonard and Rowan-Kenyon (2007) demonstrate this process. They found that of all ethnic groups, Asian Pacific American students participate the most in ethnic as well as inter-ethnic meetings. This student group in particular seems to create bonds with the institution via “contexts (...) that emphasize and celebrate their ethnic identities.” (p.536). In other words, the Asian Pacific Americans group establishes bonds in its own specific way, namely by underscoring and being proud of their own ethnic identity in their contact with students from different ethnic backgrounds and within the social domain of their education institution. This may be one of the explanations for the relatively good performances of Asian Pacific American students.

Pride in one’s own identity can be reinforced by joining social organisations in one’s own cultural community. Hurtado and Carter (1997), for example, found that Latino students who participate actively in their own community also integrate better into the education institution in which they are enrolled. Rhamie and Hallam (2002), in a study into successful African Caribbean students in the UK, point out that a strong individual basis can be laid through a system of combined support from parents, the school and social organisations (sports clubs, the church, etc.). The positive support of parents and organisations in which the students are active can even compensate for a lack of support from the school (for example discrimination and exclusion on the part of peers and teachers). Rhamie and Hallam argue that through positive feedback, children learn which attitudes and behaviour generate success, which in part explains the success of the

African Caribbean students interviewed. Although the possible positive influences on school and study performances of access to a network via organisations and clubs are general mechanisms, the examples referred to show that this particularly applies in the case of specific ethnic groups.

We see the mechanism regarding “maintenance of one’s own identity” in relation to study success reflected in a slightly different way in the study conducted by Phalet and Andriessen (2003). They present a contextual model in which the hypothesis is that maintenance of culture in the home situation has a supporting effect in the private domain, while adaptation in the context of school is related to good school performances. Their study partially confirms this hypothesis. Students of Turkish and Moroccan origins who perform well are much more aware of their own ethnic identity and background and strongly resist adaptation to the dominant Dutch culture in the private sphere. On the other hand, in the context of school, the combination of maintenance of one’s own culture and adaptation seem to deliver the most success. Phalet and Andriessen state that this is because the retention of culture serves as a psychological buffer at school: it protects students and ensures they perform well.

In short, the literature on the social domain shows that the various social networks (peers, parents/family/extended family/organisations) can have both an encouraging and inhibiting influence on school and study success. In part this involves general processes and bonds that apply to all students, and seems to extend to ethnic-minority groups. But there also appear to be mechanisms with a specific cultural nature, of which ‘acting White’ is an example.

The learning environment

Three areas of research explore the learning environment. The first area employs the concept of institutional habitus to investigate the role of the institute in success of minority students. The second area compares students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU’s) and Predominantly White Institutions (PWI’s) to find out why learning environments in HBCU’s are more stimulating for minority students. The third area refers to teacher expectations.

Institutional habitus

Many studies reveal that ethnic-minority students in general felt less at home in the programme compared to their fellow students from the dominant culture. For example, various US studies show that African American students and Asian Pacific or Hispanic/Latino students feel less strongly that they belong in a programme than White American students (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Johnson, Alvarez, Longerbeam, Soldner, Inkelas, Leonard & Rowan-Kenyon, 2007). A study by Read, Archer and Leathwood (2003) focuses on the extent to which ethnic-minority students actually do belong and the degree to which ‘academia’ is foreign to them. One result of this study was that ethnic-minority students seek each other out to reinforce their sense of belonging. In addition, studies into dropping out show that for ethnic-minority students in particular the lack of a feeling of belonging (referred to in terms of ‘not fitting in’) is an important reason for dropping out (Zea, Reisen Beil & Caplan, 1997; Just 1999, Hurtado et al. 1999; Swail et al. 2003; Nora & Cabrera, 1996).

In a recent study, we saw that non-western ethnic-minority drop-outs from teacher-training programmes for primary education (PABO) felt less comfortable in the programme compared to their majority fellow PABO drop-outs (Severiens, Wolff, Rezai, Meeuwisse & de Vos, 2007). No less than 76% of the ethnic-minority drop-outs had been faced with inequality.

“If you don’t really feel comfortable, you can’t perform optimally. I feel as if I’m being watched all the time.”

Interview with an ethnic-minority student, p. 154 in Severiens et al. 2006

The question is why ethnic-minority students feel less comfortable. The concept of ‘institutional habitus’ as observed by Thomas (2002) provides insight into this issue. Thomas (2002) uses the concept of ‘habitus’ to describe the academic and social experiences of non-traditional students. Institutional habitus refers to the norms and practices of particular social classes or groups. Thomas was inspired by the work of Reay, David and Ball (2001), who define ‘institutional habitus’ as “the influence of a cultural group or social class on an individual’s behaviour, as it is transferred through an organization”. The source for this concept was the work of Bourdieu, who views the educational system as the primary institution where class differences are reproduced. The curriculum is biased in favour of those things with which middle-class students are already familiar. The consequence is that the dominant group of students feels like fish in water (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 127). On the other hand, students from non-traditional backgrounds may feel like fish out of water.

Thomas’s empirical research (2002) conducted at a British higher education institution with a high percentage of students from non-traditional groups (ethnic minorities, lower socio-economic backgrounds) points out that the relatively low drop-out rate at this institution can in part be attributed to the attitude of the teachers and guidance counsellors, who are aware of the differences in the cultural, social and educational backgrounds of their students and incorporate this information into the way in which they teach and assess. The atmosphere among the students is also such that friendships and cooperation are not hindered by differences in home situations or personal background. Thomas concludes from her research that students from non-traditional backgrounds stand a greater chance of succeeding in HE when they study in a habitus where diversity and differences are seen as enrichment, where they are valued and no group is denied access (Thomas, 2002, p. 431).

This result is also found in various other studies. The research shows that an institutional habitus in which differences have a positive meaning can ensure that students from minority groups can perform better (cf. Rendon, Jalomo & Nora, 2000). Van Laar and Levin (in press) concluded in their study that based on the experiences of African American, Latino, South Asian and White American students at UCLA (University of California, Los Angeles) a positive campus climate in respect of racial diversity can play an important role for students from minority groups regarding their feeling of well-being and their study progress. Van Laar and Levin point out that an increase in the number of students from ethnic-minority groups can lead to racial tension on campus. They therefore emphasise that:

“as institutions of higher education focus on achieving greater structural diversity, they must also make concerted efforts to communicate to students of all ethnic groups that the institution is devoted to their development.

Historically Black Colleges and Universities

Similar studies that connect institutional and programme culture to the ethnic backgrounds of students are mainly found in the US. An overview of studies into this area shows that African American students who study at Historically Black colleges and universities (HBCU's) experience more social and psychological support, are more content, feel more a part of the community and have a greater chance than African American students studying at 'White' universities, of persevering with their studies and completing them successfully (Fleming, 2002; Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen & Allen, 1999). Swail et al (2003) arrive at similar conclusions when they state the research shows that 'HBCU's support campus climates that foster students' self-pride and confidence, and lead to academic and social success' (p. 58). One characteristic that has remained constant throughout the history of HBCU's concerns the personal nature of the relationships between staff and their students.

Based on their overview, Hurtado et al. (1999) constructed a framework aimed at reaching a better understanding of the education climate at institutions. According to them, this is determined by four inter-connected dimensions: the historical legacy of institutions regarding the inclusion and exclusion of various ethnic-minority groups, the structural diversity by numeric representation of these groups in both staff and the student population, the psychological climate of perceptions and attitudes, and a behavioural dimension characterized by group interactions and relationships.

Staff expectancy

In the habitus and HBCU-sections we have seen that support in the learning environment can play an important role in study success. A special and central feature in this environment concerns the expectations of teachers and faculty members. First of all, positive role models and mentors expecting excellent performance, seem to be especially important for minority student success (Swail et al, 2003). Conversely, low expectations among teachers seem to lead to low performance of students, this is referred to as the Pygmalion Effect. Generally, teachers have lower expectations of their ethnic minority students, which results in few challenging questions and little challenging material. As a result, they perform less well. However, Ogbu (2003) is doubtful about the sequentiality of this effect. In his study he observed that Black students often indicate that teachers do not expect them to perform well, do their homework or pay attention in class. However, Ogbu observed few concrete examples of these low expectations and the students themselves gave mainly hypothetical examples. He concluded that it is difficult to indicate what comes first: the low expectations of teachers or the attitudes and behaviour of the students. That a relatively large number of Black students do not do their homework and are not very focused during classes could also be the cause of the low expectations of teachers. This student behaviour may be a result of stereotype threat (Massey et al 2003, Steele, 1995). The basic idea in this theory is that negative stereotypic expectations undermine the performance of members of the stereotyped groups.

To summarise, research that examines the learning environment exposes a number of processes and mechanisms that do not help to decrease differences in the study success of ethnic-minority and majority students. Thomas's research into institutional habitus and the analysis of HBCU's and teacher expectancy, however, also provides a basis for possibly restructuring this process. We will return to this issue in the conclusions.

Conclusions

To explain why the school careers of ethnic-minority students generally progress less smoothly, we searched for literature on the role of education itself. There is a large area of study that also offers explanations for differences that we do not discuss: the role of the tools (the capital) of the students themselves. We have not discussed what the role is, for example, of cognitive and learning skills (human capital) or the role of motivation and belief in one's own capabilities (identity capital). The role of parents and the extent to which they can help their children find their way in education (cultural capital) was dealt with indirectly, as was the role of good networks and social support (social capital). The reason for not starting from capital theory to seek explanations from the individual perspective is that this approach offers fewer reference points for solution directions. By explicitly choosing for a literature description of research carried out from the perspective of the school and the learning of students, the answer to the central question: 'What can institutions and programmes do to reduce differences in school careers?' comes more quickly into focus.

We divided the research conducted in the past 15 years into three themes: Tinto's model is the central focus of the first theme, in the second the focus is on processes in the social domain, and the third theme looks at research that takes processes related to inequality in the learning environment as its starting point. The research into the differences in study performances and school careers conducted using Tinto's model, explains these differences through the lower degree of social and academic integration of ethnic-minority students. This means that, in general, ethnic-minority students maintain less good contact with their fellow students and teachers. The studies within the social domain give more background regarding social integration. For example, we see that peer support networks are of additional importance to ethnic-minority students in terms of good study performances. On the other hand, these peer networks can also have a negative impact. For example, Ogbu (2003) shows in an insightful manner how group processes in which 'Black' identity is defined in opposition to 'White', withhold African American students from doing their best and achieving good school performances. The studies we discussed in the third theme, the learning environment, factually elaborate Tinto's academic integration. These studies oppose, more explicitly than Tinto does, the idea that students in minority positions have to integrate and insert themselves into the academic culture in order to be successful. Using the concept of 'institutional habitus', Thomas (2003) shows how institutions that take the differences between students as their basis, instead of striving for homogeneity, ensure that ethnic-minority students perform better. Teacher expectancy also plays a role in this: the low expectations of teachers, a poor learning attitude and poor school performances seem to have a reciprocal negative effect on one another.

The literature offers two clear reference points for answering the question of what institutions and programmes can do to reduce differences. The first answer involves dealing with differences. The performances of ethnic-minority students improve in programmes in which the social integration and the contact with teachers of ethnic-minority students is good, in which teachers regard differences as enriching and use them in practice in classes and in which diversity is explicitly referred to as a positive value. Such a diversity-friendly climate could, for example, be encouraged by designating diversity as a professional competency for teachers. Similarly, Rendon et al. (2000) argue that the greatest challenge for education institutions is to change their direction towards being truly multicultural institutions. The following quotation from a teacher expresses such a climate:

“We are open to all nationalities and cultures. We are an international programme and it is therefore normal that the focus is on cultural differences and how to deal with them. If you are unable to put yourself in someone else’s culture, then you cannot practice your profession.”

Interview with a majority teacher, p. 134 in Severiens et al. 2006

The second answer to the question of what education can do involves promoting contact in one’s own community in combination with encouraging the retention of one’s own cultural identity in the education system. Research has clearly shown that social support networks and a feeling of awareness of one’s own cultural identity have a positive impact on the performances of ethnic-minority students. If universities or programmes succeed in making contact with these networks, this contact could then be used to distribute information within the networks, for example, to disseminate the message that a school or programme regards the diverse backgrounds of its pupil or student population as an enrichment and will actively use it in the curriculum. It is plausible that this would give minority groups a sense of recognition which would probably have a positive effect on feeling comfortable and ultimately on school performances and study success. The quotation below is a good example of a teacher who works in this way:

“(We teach in a way that ...) is specifically connected to the specific everyday lives of ethnic minorities, like unequal distribution of income and Turkey’s entry into the EU. But also issues like segregation to which we have devoted three lectures. These are topical subjects, especially because we have many ethnic minorities here.”

Interview with a majority teacher, p. 95 in Severiens et al. 2006

One of the main conclusions of the study by Severiens et al. (2006, 2007) is that ethnic-minority students are more dependent on the quality of teaching, while majority students rely on their more favourable starting point (on their “capital”). This result makes it even more important to translate the two directions referred to above into good and stimulating education for ethnic-minority students.

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