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Summary EN

The main objective of the present thesis was to gain more insight into the nature, early course and possible underlying mechanisms of ethnic differences in psychological, social, and educational adjustment comparing children of migrants with a *non-Western minority status*¹ with native Dutch majority children covering the entire elementary school period. Research in child development suffers from a lack of longitudinal studies on the psychosocial functioning of ethnic minority children with a family migrant background. Also, studies on the link between migration and mental health have mostly been focused on the period of adolescence and adulthood, leaving the elementary school age years a relatively obscure, unexplored area of research. However, these early school years constitute a distinctive formative period of primary education wherein children's social world expands dramatically, adequate social-behavioral adjustment is increasingly required, and sufficient emotional regulatory skills are needed. Despite the importance of these developmental changes—also in a context of a different host culture—few empirical studies have been conducted to investigate the psychosocial and educational functioning of children of non-Western migrants during this period.

Therefore, this thesis specifically aimed to investigate (1) the *development* of ethnic differences in the domains of behavioral, emotional, and social functioning across the entire elementary school period, (2) whether teacher reports of ethnic differences in externalizing problem behavior may alternatively be due to a behavioral assessment *bias* as a function of children's ethnicity, and (3) whether child social-behavioral factors help *explain* ethnic differences in externalizing problems and academic outcome. The empirical studies as presented in **Chapters 2** to **5**, addressed these gaps in our knowledge. **Chapter 2** investigated whether level differences in psychosocial adjustment between ethnic minority non-Western children and ethnic majority Dutch children are already observable in the early elementary school years, and whether these persist or change across the school years. In **Chapter 3** it was examined whether teacher-reported ethnic differences in the level and time-course of externalizing behavior could alternatively be explained by a possible ethnic bias in behavioral ratings, as much of the school-based research on ethnic differences relies on

teacher reports. Finally, **Chapter 4** and **5** were centered around unraveling possible mechanisms underlying the most often studied developmental outcomes of ethnicity-related risk, externalizing problem behavior and academic underachievement. **Chapter 4** explored ethnic differences in the association between peer social preference and externalizing problem behavior over the first years of elementary school. Considering the well-established relationship between psychosocial adjustment and academic functioning, **Chapter 5** addressed whether social-behavioral adjustment in the classroom contributes to ethnic disparities in academic achievement independently of children's cognitive skills.

In the present thesis a general picture emerged wherein it was found that non-Western minority children have a poorer psychosocial and educational adjustment, but do *not* show escalating development in problem behaviors when compared to Dutch natives. In **Chapter 2**, there were no ethnicity-related differences found in change in problem behaviors during the entire elementary school period. This suggests that non-Western minority children's psychosocial adjustment is poorer from the start of elementary school, yet its development over time may be considered comparable to that of native Dutch children. Considering ethnicity-related level differences, **Chapter 2** and **Chapter 4** showed that both teachers and peers reported ethnic differences in social and behavioral adjustment throughout the elementary school years. Compared to Dutch natives, non-Western minority children displayed particularly increased levels of externalizing problem behavior (aggression, oppositional defiant behavior, and conduct problems), and had poorer social behavior and more negative peer-related experiences (pro-social behavior, peer victimization, peer social preference) across various points in time. Importantly, these social and behavioral problems were already clearly observable at grade 1, and were found to persist up to the end of the elementary school period in grade 6. For the outcome dimension of internalizing problem behavior (anxiety), it was found in **Chapter 2** that peers concurred with teachers on reporting no ethnic differences on multiple occasions in time.

Importantly, it is possible that teacher reports of ethnic differences in externalizing problem behavior may be alternatively attributed to a behavioral assessment bias as a function of children's ethnicity. This possibility was examined in **Chapter 3**. The results of incremental stringent longitudinal measurement invariance (MI) tests showed no evidence for

systematic ethnic bias in teacher ratings of externalizing problem behavior in non-Western minority children versus native Dutch children. This suggests that teachers did not conceptualize externalizing problem behaviors differently (configural invariance), nor evaluate their saliency differently (weak factorial invariance), or rate degrees of displayed behaviors as more or less problematic as a function of children's ethnicity. Thus, teacher reports of ethnic differences in mean-level externalizing problem behavior between native Dutch and non-Western minority children in this sample are unlikely the result of ethnically stereotypical behavioral assessments, and can therefore be interpreted unambiguously.

The most prominent and robust ethnicity effect across informants and time-points was found in the outcome dimension of externalizing problem behavior. In the study reported in **Chapter 4**, non-Western minority children received lower peer nominated social preference scores than native Dutch children in the first few years of elementary school. As expected, a low social position among peers was found strongly associated with externalizing problem behavior. Surprisingly however, this link appeared to be more pronounced for non-Western minority children versus native Dutch children. The experience of a low social position was found to affect non-Western minority children more than other children in their behavioral adjustment.

Considering the ethnic gap in achievement, **Chapter 5** showed that non-Western minority children obtained on average lower standardized test-scores on the Dutch national End of Primary School Test. In an attempt to explain the ethnic difference in achievement test-scores, it was found that the increased behavioral problems (opposition-conduct problems) and poorer peer relationships (lower peer social preference and more affiliation with deviant friends) among non-Western minority children did not contribute to their underachievement when basic cognitive competencies (verbal ability and working memory skills), and classroom attention-deficit/hyperactivity (ADH) were controlled for.

The results of this thesis may have practical and theoretical implications for researchers, policy makers, (school) psychologists, teachers, and mental health care institutions working with ethnically diverse youth.. First, the increased levels of social-behavioral problems that are found among non-Western minority school-aged children are already observable at elementary school-entry and continue to persist until the end of elementary

school. These childhood problems have previously been associated with a variety of proximal and distal outcomes such as social exclusion, conduct and depressive disorder, school failure, and delinquency. Therefore, these findings advocate more attention and professional care for non-Western minority youth at an early stage as this youth forms an at-risk group for psychopathology development and societal maladjustment. Second, regarding ethnic differences in the early course of psychosocial adjustment, no evidence was found for escalating developmental patterns in externalizing problem behavior, internalizing problem behavior, or in social behavior and experiences. Children with a non-Western migrant background thus likely go through the same developmental courses as ethnic majority Dutch natives. This suggests no need for ethnically different or adjusted *prediction* models for child development. Third, in the present thesis, classroom peer nominations confirmed teacher reports of increased levels of externalizing problem behavior and measurement invariance tests on the item level of the constructs oppositional defiant behavior and conduct problems indicated that teachers did not show systematic differential (biased) assessment as a function of children's ethnic group membership. Therefore, when screening for externalizing problems, elementary school teacher reports can be considered a valid method to assess the behavioral adjustment of ethnically diverse children in the Netherlands. Fourth, the increased sensitivity for (forms of) social exclusion among non-Western minority elementary children underscore the importance of early implementations of prevention interventions that are focused on improving their social status and behavioral adjustment. Especially during early development, non-Western minority children may integrate better into the primary educational system if they are assigned to beneficial pre- or elementary school based programs directed at the enhancement of behavioral regulatory skills, language proficiency, and peer pro-social interaction. School-based approaches are a known efficient and cost-effective way to reduce behavioral problems and ameliorate social-emotional skills. Finally, considering that cognitive skills and ADHD accounted for the academic achievement gap, interventions aimed at providing language-rich and cognitively stimulating environments are a promising avenue. Given that non-Western ethnic minority children experienced more academic problems that were particularly related to cognitive skills, they may benefit from early child-

hood programs that specifically train language skills, the mental retention and use of task-relevant information, and attentional strategies.

In conclusion, the present thesis shows that non-Western ethnic minority children face a more complicated, but not different development during the elementary school period. They are faced with substantial developmental adjustment problems at school-entry which persist throughout the end of elementary school. It was particularly evident that non-Western minority children display more externalizing problems and experience more peer relational problems across the school years than Dutch majority children. The increased externalizing problem behavior could not be explained by potential ethnically biased teacher report. Findings related to possible mechanisms underlying the increased externalizing problems indicate that non-Western minority children are more affected by peer-nominated low social preference scores than ethnic majority Dutch children are. Interestingly however, it was found that when cognitive skills and ADHD were accounted for, the social and behavioral adjustment of non-Western minority children did not contribute to their poorer academic achievement. Children of non-Western migrants may benefit from home and/or (pre-)school programs that aim to improve social competencies, behavior regulation skills, and verbal and non-verbal cognitive function.