

SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

It's not what you say it's what you do: School diversity ideologies and adolescent mental health and academic engagement

Jane Leer^{1,2,3,4}  | Sarah E. Gaither⁴ | Anna Gassman-Pines^{3,4}¹Department of Psychology, San Diego State University, San Diego, California, USA²Carolyn A. And Peter S. Lynch School of Education and Human Development, Boston College, Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts, USA³Sanford School of Public Policy, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina, USA⁴Department of Psychology & Neuroscience, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina, USA**Correspondence**

Jane Leer, Department of Psychology, San Diego State University, San Diego, California, USA.

Email: jleer@sdsu.edu**Abstract**

This study examined the relation between schools' color-evasive versus multicultural diversity ideologies, school characteristics, and adolescent development. Across two datasets linking individual-level survey data ($N=1692$) and administrative records ($N=300,063$; $M_{\text{age}}=12.4$, 52% female, 48% male), schools' stated support for diversity (via a pro-diversity mission statement) was related to adolescent mental health and academic achievement, but in nuanced ways depending on individual racial/ethnic backgrounds, the racial/ethnic diversity of the student body and teachers, and the extent of racial disparities in discipline and gifted education. Findings suggest that communicating support for diversity without redressing systemic inequities in school discipline and academic tracking will not reduce racism-related achievement gaps and may instead exacerbate mental health disparities.

KEYWORDS

academic achievement, color-evasive, diversity, mental health, multicultural, schools

INTRODUCTION

Today's adolescents face increasingly widespread, politicized debates about how their schools should recognize diversity (Ramos, 2022; Stout & Wilburn, 2022). Is it better to actively teach about racial, ethnic, and cultural differences, or should schools downplay difference and emphasize similarities? Evidence consistently shows that valuing diversity—that is, making it acceptable to talk about social group differences and recognizing the role these play in society—supports belonging, health, and academic engagement among racially minoritized and White students (Baysu et al., 2020; Birnbaum et al., 2020; Brown & Chu, 2012; Byrd, 2017; Celeste et al., 2019; Del Toro & Wang, 2021a; Levine et al., 2019; Murrar et al., 2020; Schachner et al., 2021; Wang, Henry & Del Toro, 2023). In contrast, ignoring social group differences has been negatively associated with school belonging and achievement among minoritized youth (Birnbaum et al., 2020; Byrd, 2015; Celeste et al., 2019).

Schools' diversity-related values are likely to be especially influential during adolescence, relative to other developmental periods. Adolescents spend more time in schools

than almost any other setting, and experiences in school are known to influence nearly every aspect of adolescent development (Eccles & Roeser, 2011). Moreover, during adolescence, the developing brain is uniquely primed to be influenced by the context, and especially sensitive to experiences of social exclusion or identity-based discrimination in schools (Guyer et al., 2018; Sebastian et al., 2010; Spear, 2013). It is also during early adolescence in particular that young people develop the ability to think complexly about social constructs like race/ethnicity, to reflect on messages about diversity and patterns of racial/ethnic inequality observed in everyday settings, and to reason about the value and meaning of their own identity in relation to social group differences (Quintana, 1998; Williams et al., 2020). For these reasons, how schools value diversity is increasingly understood to be an important contextual driver of adolescent wellbeing and school engagement (Gray et al., 2018; Levine et al., 2019, 2023; Saleem & Byrd, 2021; Wang et al., 2023).

The link between schools' stated diversity values and youth outcomes likely depends on how such values are reflected in school social structures and social interactions, which has yet to be explored. Schools may make a public commitment

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to valuing diversity, for example via a diversity statement on their website, while at the same time doing little to attract a diverse student body and teaching staff or to address racial biases in the implementation of school policies (Kirkham, 2016). Research on diversity dishonesty in the workplace shows that when women and People of Color perceive a mismatch between what potential employers *say* versus *do* when it comes to diversity values, their sense of organizational fit and expected performance declines (Kroeper et al., 2022; Wilton et al., 2020), but this has been less studied in educational contexts. Adolescents are likely aware of disingenuous support for dishonesty, too, with potentially deleterious consequences at a time when young people are both uniquely primed to be influenced by their environment and actively constructing a more complex, identity-relevant understanding of social group differences (Guyer et al., 2018; Sebastian et al., 2010; Spear, 2013; Way et al., 2013; Williams et al., 2020).

This study therefore integrates literature on diversity ideologies from sociology, social psychology, and education research with theories of adolescent development to examine the relation between how schools say they value diversity, how these values are reflected in the school environment, and adolescent school belonging, mental health, and academic engagement. To address the potential gap between how schools describe their diversity values versus how such values are implemented, we examined the moderating role of schools' student and teacher racial/ethnic composition, racialized discipline gaps, and racialized gaps in Gifted and Talented placement. Further, this paper is the first to link school diversity ideologies to student achievement test scores, and the first to examine school diversity ideologies using a large-scale, population-representative sample of schools and youth spanning urban, rural, and suburban contexts with varying levels of racial, cultural, and socioeconomic diversity.

DIVERSITY IDEOLOGIES AND THEIR RELEVANCE TO ADOLESCENCE

Literature from sociology and social psychology describes two dominant diversity ideologies, or lay perspectives regarding how U.S.-institutions should handle diversity: color-evasiveness and multiculturalism (Bonilla-Silva, 2015; Plaut, 2014; Plaut et al., 2009). Color-evasiveness assumes that to reduce discrimination, it is best to emphasize individual uniqueness and ignore social group differences related to race/ethnicity. Color-evasiveness stems from color-blindness, an ideology that has defined mainstream U.S.-institutions and culture since the 1970s (Bonilla-Silva, 2014, 2015). A core tenet of color-blindness is the belief that the United States is now a "post-racial society," wherein racism is no longer a relevant explanation for contemporary patterns of social inequality (e.g., "I don't see race, I just see people"). We use the term "color-evasiveness" rather than "color-blindness" to resist positing dis/ability (blindness) as problematic and

to make clear that the decision to downplay race or embrace diversity, whether at the individual or institutional level, is a conscious choice (Annamma et al., 2017). In contrast, multiculturalism recognizes and values social group differences, for example through institutional rhetoric, policies, or activities that celebrate minoritized identities (Levine et al., 2023; Plaut, 2014).

Education researchers describe how schools transmit color-evasive and multicultural ideologies in myriad overt and subtle ways. For instance, curricula that strive to be race neutral (i.e., color-evasive) tend to center White narratives (e.g., emphasizing mainstream U.S.-centric holidays like President's Day over all other types of celebrations; Saleem & Byrd, 2021). This confers power and privilege to White students while sending the message to minoritized students that their identities are less valued. In contrast, curricula that directly engage the diverse cultural backgrounds that students bring to the classroom affirms the value of diverse identities (Ladson-Billings, 2016; Pinedo et al., 2021). Visual displays (e.g., books on display in the library) can also signal how schools value diversity by the extent to which diverse identities, cultures, and languages are incorporated (Brown & Chu, 2012), as can written material, such as mission or values statements that explicitly endorse diversity (Levine et al., 2019, 2023).

Even seemingly race-neutral discipline and academic tracking policies can convey meaningful information about how schools value diversity. Nationwide, in the 2015–2016 school year, Black students were more than three times as likely as White students' to receive an out-of-school suspension, and half as likely to be classified as Gifted and Talented (Shores et al., 2020). Repeated exposure to these patterns of exclusion inform youths' developing understanding of race and affect school belonging and academic engagement for both racially minoritized and White youth (Hughes & Watford, 2021; Kuchirko & Nayfeld, 2021; Saleem & Byrd, 2021).

Critically, schools are complex, multifaceted environments where both color-evasive and multicultural ideologies can co-exist. School leaders may provide rhetorical support for diversity—via a pro-diversity mission statement, for example—but rhetorical support alone is insufficient to confront systemic inequities such as racialized discipline disparities and academic tracking. How might a mismatch between what schools *say* versus *do* to support diversity affect youth?

Insight from social psychology and management literature on diversity dishonesty in the workplace provides some clues (Kroeper et al., 2022; McKay & Avery, 2005; Wilton et al., 2020). Studies show that when a (hypothetical) firm's promotional materials convey a commitment to diversity, but the firm's actual staff is not diverse and word of mouth evidence suggests a negative climate towards to diversity, women report greater identity threat (Kroeper et al., 2022) and Black and Latinx workers report greater concerns about fitting in, being authentic, and performing well at the

organization (Wilton et al., 2020). Building on this evidence, this study examined the developmental implications of multiple, and potentially conflicting messages about diversity in the school environment, focusing on adolescence.

There are several reasons why schools' approaches to diversity—including what school leaders *say*, versus what their actions *show*, are likely to be especially impactful during adolescence. Heightened brain plasticity makes adolescents uniquely attuned to environmental inputs, especially social exclusion (Guyer et al., 2018; Sebastian et al., 2010; Spear, 2013). Adolescence is also a key period for identity formation (Erickson, 1968), which includes the development of a more complex understanding of social group differences such as those based on race/ethnicity (Quintana & McKown, 2012; Way et al., 2013; Williams et al., 2020). Whereas young children are well aware of stereotypes about physical appearance (Shutts et al., 2016), it is during early adolescence that youth become increasingly aware of stereotypes related to the types of careers or educational pathways ascribed to members of different social groups (Way et al., 2013) and develop the formal operational skills necessary to reflect on every day racial/ethnic inequities in their school context (Hughes & Watford, 2021). Identity exploration during adolescence also includes a need for authenticity (Alchin et al., 2024). Authenticity is typically conceptualized in regards to the self—that is, the sense of being the “real me”—but adolescents are also sensitive to others' inauthenticity (Dixon-Ward & Chan, 2022) including (potentially) inauthentic, or disingenuous support for diversity from school leaders.

Further, early adolescence (roughly ages 9 through 14) is a peak time for the onset of adjustment problems, including increased mental health problems and decreased academic engagement (Eccles & Roeser, 2011; National Academies of Sciences Engineering and Medicine, 2019). According to stage-environment-fit theory (Eccles et al., 1991, 1993), these negative developmental changes result from a mismatch between adolescents' developmental needs and the extent to which their social environment meets these needs.

How schools handle diversity is therefore a critical component of stage-environment-fit. Schools' ability to demonstrate that diverse identities are valued shapes the capacity of the school environment to meet adolescents' developmental needs—in particular, the fundamental need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Gutman & Eccles, 2007). This is especially true for racially minoritized youth, who are disproportionately exposed to disconfirming messages about their belonging in schools and therefore more attuned to race-related messages from a young age (Gray et al., 2018; Williams et al., 2020). Thus, per stage-environment-fit theory (Eccles et al., 1991, 1993), schools that recognize and value diversity will support belonging among minoritized youth, thereby making disengagement less likely. In contrast, when schools communicate color-evasive ideologies, ignoring or delegitimizing social group differences, youth belonging to marginalized identity groups will be more likely to disengage.

EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE RELATING SCHOOL DIVERSITY IDEOLOGIES TO ADOLESCENT ACADEMIC ENGAGEMENT AND MENTAL HEALTH

Research shows that when schools value diversity, youth from immigrant and racially minoritized backgrounds report higher school belonging and improved physical, mental, and behavioral health. Support for diversity, as evidenced by school policy documents, was associated with higher belonging among immigrant middle school students in Belgium (Celeste et al., 2019). An experimental study found that communicating pro-diversity social norms, via posters or brief videos, positively impacted belonging among U.S. college students from minoritized religious and racial backgrounds (Murrar et al., 2020). Support for diversity (as evidenced by pro-diversity mission statements) was also associated with better cardiometabolic health among middle school Youth of Color in the United States (Levine et al., 2019), and a study of German secondary schools found that immigrant students who perceived their school environments as valuing diversity had improved socio-emotional adjustment relative to those who viewed their school as less supportive of diversity (Schachner et al., 2021).

There is also evidence linking multiculturalism (vs. color-evasiveness) to various domains of academic engagement. Experimental studies in university settings found positive effects of multicultural diversity statements on under-represented minority students' grades (Birnbaum et al., 2020; Murrar et al., 2020). Observational studies with adolescent samples also found a positive association between multicultural school environments and academic self-concept, grades, school engagement, and student-teacher relationships (Baysu et al., 2020; Byrd, 2015; Celeste et al., 2019; Del Toro & Wang, 2021a, 2021b). Relatedly, one way that schools can show they value diversity is by providing culturally relevant pedagogy—such as ethnic studies courses—which research has repeatedly linked to improved school engagement, grades, and academic attainment among marginalized youth in the United States (e.g., Bonilla et al., 2021; Cabrera et al., 2014; Ladson-Billings, 2014). In sum, these findings suggest that valuing diversity positively impacts achievement, but studies have not yet examined diversity ideologies in relation to achievement as measured by standardized test scores. This is a notable shortcoming considering that existing measures—grades in particular—may not be comparable across classrooms. Moreover, grades are biased to the extent that they reflect some mix of student effort, teachers' evaluations of student effort, and student content mastery (Bonefeld & Dickhäuser, 2018).

Contextual variation in the relation between school diversity ideologies and adolescent outcomes

How youth make sense of messages about diversity from school leaders likely depends on the extent of diversity they

are exposed to on an everyday basis in the school environment. People are more attuned to race-related contextual cues of belonging in diverse (vs. homogenous) settings (Geronimus et al., 2016; Murphy et al., 2018). The types of diversity-related messages that schools communicate may therefore be especially influential in schools that have a more diverse student body. Moreover, in the context of schools specifically, research with African American and Latinx adolescent tends to find that perceived discrimination increases as school racial/ethnic diversity increases (Benner & Graham, 2011; Seaton & Yip, 2009). In such contexts, school leaders' explicit support for diversity could provide the institutional support necessary for positive intergroup relations (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998). Consistent with this hypothesis, a study conducted in 66 Belgian schools found that support for multiculturalism in schools' policy documents was positively related to grades, but only in schools with a large share of immigrant-origin students (Celeste et al., 2019).

Aside from the overall level of racial/ethnic diversity in the school environment, the effects of multicultural or color-evasive messaging from school leaders may also depend on the extent to which youth are exposed to peers from their own versus other racial/ethnic groups. Studies show that young adolescents exhibit worse school-related affect (e.g., feelings of belonging, school liking, and educational aspirations) in schools with a greater proportion of racial/ethnic out-group (vs. in-group) members (Ackert, 2018; Benner & Graham, 2007). This is especially true for Black and Latinx youth attending majority-White schools, who have to navigate racial stereotypes about their academic abilities, behavior, and legitimacy in the school environment on a daily basis (e.g., Holland, 2012; Ispa-Landa, 2013). Thus, in majority-White schools, explicit support for multiculturalism from school leaders may help to support belonging among racially minoritized youth by signaling that diverse identities are valued.

The effect of schools' stated support for diversity on youth outcomes may also depend on teacher diversity, which prior work has not examined. At least 80% of public-school teachers in the United States are White (Taie & Goldring, 2017). White teachers *can* implement inclusive school environments (Ullucci, 2011), but U.S. teachers rarely receive adequate training to confront their own racial biases (Durand & Tavaras, 2021; Gay, 2018; Pagán, 2022). Teachers of color bring valuable sources of knowledge and lived experience to the classroom that may make them better able than White teachers to readily apply multicultural approaches. Having a greater percentage of teachers from minoritized backgrounds may lead to more effective implementation of multicultural ideologies, ultimately resulting in more positive outcomes for youth.

Building on the notion of dishonest or disingenuous support for diversity, the implementation of school discipline and academic tracking policies are another potential source of contextual variation that prior work has not considered. School leaders may make a public commitment to endorsing

multiculturalism (e.g., via their mission statement), while at the same time doing little to ameliorate racial biases in discipline or placement in advanced coursework or gifted education programs. The potential implications of superficial support for diversity have not been examined with youth, but research on diversity dishonesty in the workplace (Kroeper et al., 2022; McKay & Avery, 2005; Wilton et al., 2020) suggests that a mismatch between how schools say they value diversity versus what their actions demonstrate may result in worse outcomes for Youth of Color.

CURRENT STUDY

This study used individual-level survey and administrative data matched to multiple sources of contextual data to examine the relation between school diversity ideologies and three adolescent outcomes: school belonging, mental health, and academic achievement test scores. We used mission statements as an observable proxy for diversity ideologies (Levine et al., 2019; Starck et al., 2021), since they offer an objective, setting-level measure that builds on prior work using mostly self-reported measures of school diversity ideologies. We examined two research questions. First, what is the relation between explicitly valuing diversity (vs. not) and adolescent school belonging, mental health, and academic achievement across majority and minoritized racial/ethnic groups? Second, what is the moderating role of student and teacher racial/ethnic composition and two proxies for how schools put into practice their diversity values: racialized gaps in exclusionary discipline and racialized gaps in placement in Gifted and Talented programs? Consistent with prior work, we hypothesized that explicit support for diversity (via a pro-diversity mission statement) would be positively associated with adolescent outcomes, especially among youth from racially minoritized backgrounds. Considering the potential harms of a mismatch between institutional diversity rhetoric versus practices (Kroeper et al., 2022; McKay & Avery, 2005; Wilton et al., 2020), we expected that for Youth of Color specifically, the potential benefits of valuing diversity would be concentrated in schools that were also diverse and that treated students equitably.

METHODS

Data

Individual-level data came from two sources. The main analysis used survey data from Project RAISE (Research on Adaptive Interests, Skills, and Environments), a probability-based sample of 2,104 young adolescents attending in 851 public schools across North Carolina (Rivenbark et al., 2019). As discussed above, school diversity ideologies are likely to be especially influential in this age group, given heightened attention to social inclusion and exclusion, identity formation, and the development of a more complex understanding

of the self (Erickson, 1968; Updegraff et al., 2014; Way et al., 2013; Williams et al., 2020). RAISE participants were selected via a simple-random-sample from the population of North Carolina public school students in grades 5–8 during the 2014–2015 school year. Ninety-six percent of participants ($N=225$) agreed to have their school records linked, which enabled individual-level survey data to be matched to student and school-level administrative records available from the North Carolina Education Research Data Center (NCERDC). All procedures, protocols, and measures were approved by the Duke University Institutional Review Board (Protocol Number 2021-0427).

The second source of individual-level data consists of NCERDC administrative records from the full population of 5th through 8th grade students enrolled in the schools that RAISE participants attended ($N=300,063$). These administrative records include data on achievement, but the other dependent variables—school belonging and mental health—are not included in standard administrative data collection. Thus, we used the RAISE sample for our main analyses, and the administrative data for a complementary analysis—conducted on a much larger, population-representative sample—of the relation between valuing diversity and achievement.

To derive measures of schools' diversity ideologies at the time that outcome data were collected (the 2014–2015 academic year), we developed a novel dataset of mission, vision, and values statements (hereafter, “mission statements”) gleaned from school websites, student handbooks, school improvement plans, and newspaper articles. Working with a team of undergraduate research assistants, archived digital records were located using the Way Back Machine, schools' social media pages, and school board websites from the 2014–2015 school year. Using this approach, we were able to identify mission statements for 720 schools (archived records of mission statements could not be found for 131 schools in the RAISE sample). Two single-sex academies and three full language immersion programs were excluded from the analysis, and an additional 25 schools were dropped due to missing data on covariates. The final analytic sample includes 690 schools (with $N=1692$ RAISE participants and $N=300,063$ students in the administrative dataset) and was somewhat skewed towards larger schools, traditional public schools (as opposed to public charter schools), middle schools (versus primary or other types of schools), and schools that served a somewhat more racially/ethnically diverse student population (Table S1).

Measures

Dependent variables

School Belonging was measured as adolescents' self-reported psychological sense of school membership (Goodenow, 1993), a six-item scale (e.g., “I feel like a real part of my school”), with responses ranging from 1 (not at all true) to 5 (very

true) ($\alpha=0.84$). A composite score averaged across all six items and was standardized.

Mental health was measured using the Kessler Psychological Distress scale, which consists of six questions about psychological distress experienced in the last 30 days (e.g., “in the past 30 days, about how often did you feel hopeless?”), ranging from 0 (none of the time) to 4 (all of the time) ($\alpha=0.66$). A composite score averaged across all six items and was standardized.

Reading and math achievement came from end-of-grade achievement tests, standardized by grade within the full population of North Carolina public school students, such that a score of zero represents the state average grade-specific reading or math achievement test score in 2014–2015. Because we did not hypothesize differential effects for reading versus math achievement, and in order to reduce the number of comparisons examined (Schochet & Mathematica Policy Research Inc., 2008), we created a composite indicator of achievement by taking the mean of students' reading and math test scores.

Independent variable: School diversity ideology

Mission statements were coded using a dichotomous coding scheme, with explicitly valuing diversity = 1, and not explicitly valuing diversity = 0. Statements were coded as valuing diversity if they mentioned embracing, celebrating, or valuing diversity (e.g., “we inspire students to become life-long learners who will embrace diversity, academics, and creativity”), serving a diverse student body (e.g., “our team is committed to building an educational environment that will serve our diverse student population”), fostering a diverse learning environment (e.g., “our purpose is to provide a rigorous, diverse curriculum that prepares students to contribute and succeed within their local and global communities”), promoting an understanding of diverse cultural groups (e.g., “educators pride themselves on being culturally responsive”), or emphasizing multiculturalism (e.g., “students will be successful citizens in a multicultural society”). A team of five undergraduate research assistants conducted the coding, with high inter-rater reliability (Kappa 0.98). Disagreements were discussed until a consensus was reached. The undergraduate coding team included one Black man, one Multiracial woman, one Black woman, one White woman, and one Asian American woman. Mission statements were relatively short ($M_{\text{word count}}=64.3$), which facilitated manual coding based on a simple coding framework with limited room for ambiguity. Each school was given one code, such that mission, vision, and values statements were evaluated together as a singular proxy for diversity ideology, rather than coding statements separately.

Moderators

Adolescent race/ethnicity: RAISE participants self-reported their race and ethnicity, and we created a binary measure, wherein Youth of Color = 1, and youth who identify as

White alone=0. Multiracial participants were considered Youth of Color based on evidence that Multiracial adolescents face identity-related threats to school belonging similar to those faced by monoracial Students of Color (Rozek & Gaither, 2021). In analyses using the individual-level administrative records, given greater sample size, we examined the role of race/ethnicity as an individual-level moderator by conducting analyses separately on Asian, Black, Hispanic, American Indian, Multiracial, and White subgroups (Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders made up less than 1% of the administrative sample and were not included due to lack of power).

School-level racial/ethnic composition was measured using the Simpson's index, which considers both the number and proportion of ethnic-racial groups and has been widely used in studies linking school diversity to developmental outcomes (see Graham, 2016; Witherspoon et al., 2023). Values range from zero to one, with higher scores indicating more racial-ethnic groups that are more evenly represented, or a higher probability that two randomly selected students will be from different groups. We also report findings using an alternative measure of school-level diversity—exposure to racial-ethnic outgroup members, following Witherspoon et al. (2023). Given past work showing a disadvantage for racially minoritized youth attending schools that are majority-White (e.g., Holland, 2012; Ispa-Landa, 2013), this measure was operationalized as the percentage White students (for Youth of Color), and the percentage of students from racially minoritized backgrounds (for White youth). The use of this alternative measure is critical to aid in interpreting our study findings, given that index scores like the Simpson's can produce identical values under conditions that vary considerably in terms of exposure to any specific racial/ethnic group (as an example, a low score on the Simpson's index—indicating low diversity—could be either a majority-Black school or a majority-White school, the implications of which would be very different for White versus Black students; see details in White et al., 2018; and Witherspoon et al., 2023).

School-level teacher diversity was measured using the Simpson's index and (separately) using the same outgroup exposure measure described above, based on data from 2013, which is the last year for which data are available on teacher racial/ethnic composition.

School-level racialized discipline gaps were measured as the excess risk of out-of-school suspension, expulsion, or transfer to an alternative learning program (i.e., exclusionary discipline) for Students of Color versus White students, using administrative records on disciplinary incidents from the NCERDC. Following prior work (Bottiani et al., 2017), we calculated the risk of exclusionary discipline by dividing the number of students per school who received exclusionary discipline by the total number of students at the school, separately for White students and Students of Color. Excess risk was then estimated by subtracting White students' risk of exclusionary discipline from Students' of Color risk of

exclusionary discipline. This measure was calculated as a 3-year average using data from the 2014–2015 school year and the 2 years prior, both to retain more data due to missing administrative data in the 2014–2015 records, and to smooth over unreliable fluctuations from year-to-year reporting errors. Findings are similar using only the 2014–2015 data (available upon request).

School-level racialized gaps in gifted education were calculated as the difference in the percentage of White students versus Students of Color participating in Gifted and Talented (GT) programming, with higher values indicating an overrepresentation of White students in GT. This measure was similarly calculated as the 3-year average from the 2012–2013 through 2014–2015 school years. Students take a screening test to qualify for GT education, but teachers are less likely to refer Students of Color for screening (Elhoweris, 2008) and assessors rate screening tests from students with Black-sounding names systematically lower than those without Black-sounding names (Fields, 2004).

All school-level moderators were created using data from administrative records from the NCERDC, which were matched to the individual-level survey and administrative data using school IDs.

Covariates

Individual-level covariates included grade, gender, and economic disadvantage (based on NCERDC designations of family income less than 185% of the federal poverty limit). School-level covariates included school size (total enrollment), the percentage of students achieving grade-level proficiency in reading and math, the percentage of students who were economically disadvantaged, school type (elementary or middle school, vs. other), whether the school was eligible for Title 1, was a charter or a magnet school, the school's location in city, suburb, or town (vs. rural area), the mission statement word count, the overall percentage of students who received exclusionary discipline, and the overall percentage of students placed in GT.

Analysis

To examine the relation between schools' diversity ideologies and adolescent outcomes (RQ1), we regressed each dependent variable on school diversity ideology, the interaction between diversity ideology and student race/ethnicity, and all covariates and moderators, with standard errors clustered at the school level to account for non-independence of errors between students at the same school. We used OLS regression with clustered standard errors rather than multi-level models because the small cluster-sizes in the RAISE sample (between 1 and 3 participants per school) would make measures of within-school variance unreliable. Next, to examine contextual variation in the relation between school diversity ideologies and adolescent outcomes (RQ2), we interacted

valuing diversity with each of the hypothesized moderators: student diversity, teacher diversity, racialized discipline gap, and racialized gap in GT. This analysis was conducted separately on subgroups by race/ethnicity, and all continuous moderators and covariates were mean centered to minimize collinearity.

RESULTS

Sample description

Table 1 presents the demographics for the RAISE sample and the sample of individual-level administrative data in comparison to the population of 5th through 8th grade public school students in North Carolina during the 2014–2015 school year. Both samples, but especially the administrative sample, were representative of the population in terms of race/ethnicity and economic disadvantage. The RAISE sample was skewed towards youth with higher reading and math achievement compared to the state average, however.

Ninety-three schools (13% of the sample) explicitly valued diversity in their mission statement while 597 (87%) did not. Schools that communicated support for diversity in their mission statement had a somewhat more diverse student body, composed of a greater percentage of Asian and Hispanic youth and a lower percentage of White youth (with a roughly equal percentage of Black youth), both in the 2014–2015 school year and in the 10 years prior (Table 2). They did not have a more diverse teaching staff, however.

Data on school-level disciplinary environment and GT placement provide some evidence of the extent to which school policies and practices aligned with stated support for diversity (Table 2). Schools with pro-diversity mission statements had somewhat lower levels of racialized discipline gaps, though this difference was small. On average 5% of White students and 9% of Students of Color were suspended or expelled in schools that valued diversity, compared to 6% of White students and 11% of Students of Color in schools that did not. However, racialized gaps in GT were *larger* in schools that explicitly valued diversity. White students were three times as likely to participate in GT in schools that had

TABLE 1 Sample characteristics.

	RAISE survey sample			Individual-level administrative records	Population
	Overall	Youth of Color	Mono-racial White Youth		
Age	12.4 (1.1)	12.4 (1.1)	12.3 (1.1)		
5th Grade	19%	18%	20%	10%	24%
6th Grade	29%	32%	27%	29%	25%
7th Grade	33%	33%	32%	30%	25%
8th Grade	19%	17%	20%	30%	26%
Gender (girl)	52%	54%	51%	49%	49%
Economically disadvantaged	46%	64%	28%	48%	55%
Race: White	64%	23%	100%	52%	51%
Race: Black	29%	62%	0%	25%	26%
Race: American Indian	7%	14%	0%	1%	1%
Race: Asian	5%	10%	0%	3%	3%
Race: Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	1%	3%	0%	<1%	<1%
Hispanic or Latino	15%	30%	0%	15%	15%
Multiracial	14%	28%	0%	4%	4%
School belonging (1–5)	4.2 (0.8)	4.2 (0.77)	4.2 (0.82)		
Psychological distress (0–4)	0.89 (0.61)	0.94 (0.62)	0.83 (0.58)		
Reading achievement (standardized)	0.26 (1.00)	−0.07 (1.00)	0.59 (0.89)	0.02 (1.0)	0.0 (1.0)
Math achievement (standardized)	0.29 (1.03)	−0.03 (0.99)	0.61 (0.96)	0.03 (1.0)	0.0 (1.0)
N (youth)	1692	843	849	300,063	455,324

Note: Table shows sample means and standard deviations in parentheses for continuous variables; percentages for dichotomous variables. Racial categories and Hispanic/Latino ethnicity were not mutually exclusive in the RAISE data, so sample %s total to >100%. Administrative data include the population of 5th through 8th grade Asian, American Indian, Black, Hispanic, Multiracial, and White students enrolled in the 690 schools included in the analytic sample. Population data describe the population of 5th through 8th grade students in all North Carolina public schools during the 2014–2015 school year.

TABLE 2 School descriptive characteristics.

	Values diversity	Does not	<i>p</i> -Value
Student diversity			
2014–2015 Student diversity			
Asian (%)	4%	2%	0.00
American Indian (%)	<1%	2%	0.00
Black (%)	26%	24%	0.35
Hispanic (%)	18%	15%	0.02
Multiracial (%)	4%	4%	0.91
White (%)	47%	53%	0.03
Simpsons Diversity Index	0.55 (0.16)	0.51 (0.16)	0.02
Prior trends in student diversity			
Simpsons Diversity Index 2004–2005	0.46	0.41	0.01
Simpsons Diversity Index 2009–2010	0.49	0.45	0.05
Change in Diversity Index from 2005 to 2015	0.08	0.09	0.08
Teacher diversity			
Simpsons Diversity Index	0.25 (0.17)	0.22 (0.18)	0.18
% from racially minoritized backgrounds	17%	17%	0.86
Discipline environment and gifted and talented placement			
Excess risk of suspension or expulsion for Students of Color	0.04 (0.04)	0.05 (0.06)	0.03
% of all students suspended or expelled	7%	9%	0.03
Excess placement of White students in Gifted and Talented	0.14 (0.12)	0.11 (0.09)	0.03
% of all students placed in Gifted and Talented	13%	11%	0.07
Additional school characteristics			
Economically disadvantaged (%)	48%	54%	0.07
Achieving grade level proficiency (%)	58%	56%	0.21
Title I Eligible School	20%	17%	0.48
Teacher turnover rate	15%	14%	0.27
Average daily school attendance Pct	95%	95%	0.00
Total students (all grades)	714 (298)	655 (28)	0.08
Primary school	51%	41%	0.08
Middle school	46%	55%	0.14
Other type of school	3%	5%	0.43
Magnet school	13%	4%	0.02
Charter school	2%	5%	0.12
City	33%	25%	0.12
Suburb	24%	20%	0.47
Town	3%	12%	0.00
Rural	40%	42%	0.64
Mission statement word count	98.4 (73.9)	60.4 (53.4)	0.00
<i>N</i> (schools)	93	597	

Note: Table shows sample means and standard deviations in parentheses for continuous variables; percentages for dichotomous variables. *p*-Values represent the statistical significance of the difference in means between schools with mission statements that value diversity versus schools with mission statements that do not value diversity.

pro-diversity mission statements, compared to 2.5 times as likely in schools that did not.

Schools with pro-diversity mission statements were also disproportionately magnet schools (vs. traditional public schools) and were more likely to be in cities or suburbs versus

towns. School mission statements valuing diversity were also longer on average compared to mission statements that did not value diversity. These differences were accounted for in all analyses by including school type, location, and mission statement word count as covariates.

Relation between rhetorical support for diversity and adolescent school belonging, mental health, and academic achievement

In the full RAISE sample combining all races/ethnicities, there was no evidence of a main effect of a pro-diversity mission statement on school belonging, psychological distress, or achievement (Table S2).

However, adding interaction terms between pro-diversity mission statement and school-level moderators provides some evidence of contextual moderation (Table 3, and see Table S3 for the full regression output). For Youth of Color, after accounting for contextual moderation by adding interaction terms, there was a statistically significant main effect of a pro-diversity mission statement on psychological distress ($\beta = 0.29$, $p = .02$, 95% CI [0.05, 0.53]). Because the school-level covariates were mean-centered, such that a value of zero represents the sample average, this finding implies that in schools with average levels of student diversity, teacher diversity, racialized discipline gaps, and racialized gaps in GT, a pro-diversity mission statement was associated with increased psychological distress. To put these findings in context, the average school attended by Youth of Color in the RAISE Sample was majority White, had a teaching staff that was more than 75% White, and exhibited substantial racial gaps in gifted education, and, to a lesser extent, exclusionary discipline. Further, although the interaction between student diversity and valuing diversity was only marginally significant ($\beta = -1.55$, $p = .07$, 95% CI [-3.22, 0.13]), simple slope analyses revealed that the positive association between valuing diversity and psychological distress for Youth of Color increased as schools become less diverse, and was only significant at lower levels of diversity. The simple slope at 1 SD below the mean Simpson's

index score was $\beta = 0.47$, $p = .02$, 95% CI [0.07, 0.87]; compared to $\beta = 0.04$, $p = .78$, 95% CI [-0.21, 0.30] at 1 SD above the mean Simpson's index score (Figure 1a). As shown in Table S4 and Figure 1b, analyses using exposure to racial/ethnic outgroup members (% White) rather than the Simpson's diversity index aid in interpreting these findings by showing that the positive relation between rhetorical support for diversity and psychological distress was unique to Youth of Color in schools that were not very diverse because they were *majority-White* schools.

For White youth, the relation between rhetorical support for diversity and psychological distress varied according to school-level teacher diversity and racialized academic tracking, as evidence by the significant interaction terms in Table 3 (Column 5). Rhetorical support for diversity was associated with higher psychological distress at greater levels of teacher diversity (Figure 2a). The simple slope at 1 SD above the mean Simpson's index score was $\beta = 0.34$, $p = .04$, 95% CI [0.02, 0.66]; compared to $\beta = -0.20$, $p = .25$, 95% CI [-0.54, 0.24] at 1 SD below the mean. Findings were similar when using the alternative measure of teacher racial/ethnic composition (i.e., outgroup exposure, the % teachers from racially minoritized backgrounds) rather than the Simpson's index (Table S4). That is, valuing diversity was associated with increased psychological distress for White youth in schools with a greater proportion of non-White teachers.

A pro-diversity mission statement was also associated with higher psychological distress for White youth in schools with low racialized GT gaps, and lower psychological distress in schools with large racialized gaps in GT (Figure 2b). However, racialized gaps in GT were highly correlated with the overall percentage of students participating in gifted education ($r = 0.75$, $p < .001$). Thus, although this interaction was consistent with and without controlling for school-wide participation in GT, this finding may reflect

TABLE 3 Relation between school diversity values and adolescent outcomes (RAISE sample).

	Youth of color			White youth		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	School Belonging	Psychological Distress	Achievement	School Belonging	Psychological Distress	Achievement
Pro-diversity mission statement	0.068 (0.118)	0.295* (0.123)	0.076 (0.096)	-0.041 (0.104)	0.077 (0.106)	-0.079 (0.093)
Contextual moderators						
× Student diversity	-0.601 (0.820)	-1.549 (0.854)	-0.181 (0.669)	1.080 (0.872)	-0.758 (0.625)	-1.249 (0.728)
× Teacher diversity	-0.129 (0.626)	-0.646 (0.652)	0.091 (0.511)	-1.703 (0.873)	1.802* (0.819)	0.299 (0.742)
× Racialized discipline gap	-2.636 (2.171)	0.156 (2.260)	-0.618 (1.771)	0.200 (2.090)	-1.616 (2.355)	-1.656 (2.079)
× Racialized GT gap	0.961 (0.775)	-0.628 (0.807)	0.448 (0.632)	-0.595 (1.183)	-2.998** (0.963)	1.444 (1.014)
Adj R^2	-0.002	0.025	0.290	0.051	0.037	0.204
N (youth)	843	843	840	849	849	849

Note: OLS regression coefficients with standard errors clustered at the school level in parentheses. Dependent variables are standardized. All models include main effects for student diversity, teacher diversity, the racialized discipline gap, and the racialized gap in Gifted and Talented (GT) placement, in addition to student-level covariates (grade, economic disadvantage, and gender) and school-level covariates (number of students, Title 1 eligibility, magnet or charter status, level, % of students achieving grade-level proficiency, % economically disadvantaged, location, the percentage of students receiving exclusionary discipline, the percentage of students placed in GT education, and the mission statement word count).

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

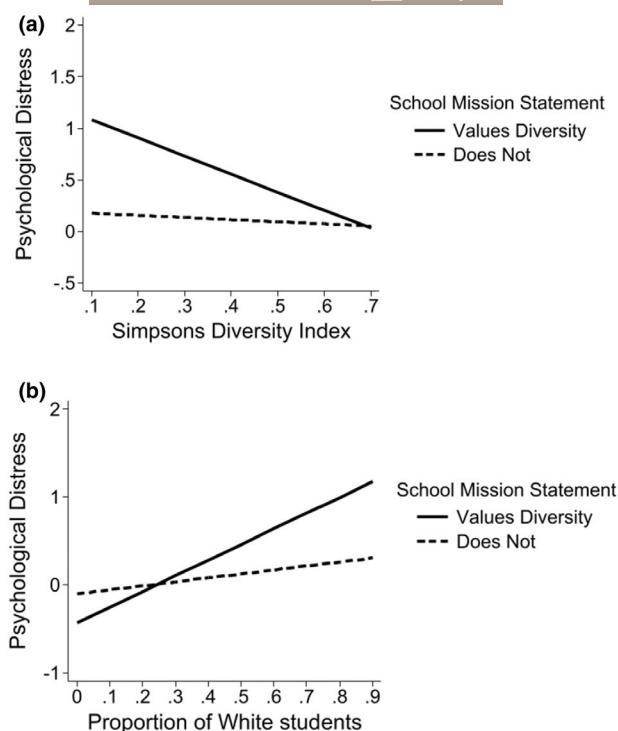


FIGURE 1 Contextual variation in the relation between pro-diversity mission statements and psychological distress among Youth of Color. Figure shows the relation between pro-diversity mission statements and psychological distress for Youth of Color according to the overall extent of diversity among the student body (as measured by the Simpson's Index; 1a) and according to outgroup exposure (as measured by the proportion of students that are White; 1b). Both models include student and school-level covariates, as described in Table 3.

structural differences between schools with a high versus low percentage of students participating in gifted education, rather than any moderating role of racialized gaps in GT placement specifically.

There was no evidence of moderation by exclusionary discipline for Youth of Color or White youth, though these results were imprecise, as indicated by the large standard errors for the interaction terms between pro-diversity mission statements and racialized discipline gaps shown in Table 3.

Secondary analysis using individual-level administrative records

Findings from the administrative data provide further evidence of contextual moderation in the relation between school diversity values and youth achievement (see Table 4 for the main findings and Tables S5 and S6 for full regression output). However, whereas analyses using the RAISE sample revealed evidence of contextual moderation for psychological distress, analyses using administrative records focused on achievement exclusively. The RAISE sample may have been underpowered to detect contextual moderation in the effects of school diversity values on achievement. Moreover, analyses with the RAISE sample examined contextual

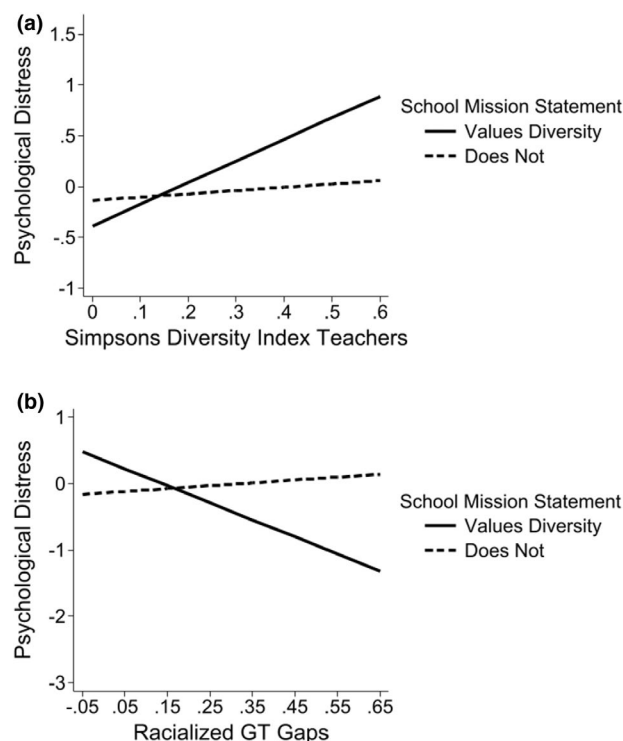


FIGURE 2 Contextual variation in the relation between pro-diversity mission statements and psychological distress among White youth. Figure shows the relation between pro-diversity mission statements and psychological distress for White youth, according to the overall extent of diversity among the teaching staff (2a) and racialized gaps in Gifted and Talented education (2b). Both models include student and school-level covariates, as described in Table 3.

moderation for Youth of Color and White youth, but the administrative sample is significantly larger, which enabled a more nuanced analysis of contextual moderation across multiple racial/ethnic subgroups. Evidence of contextual moderation emerged for Asian and Multiracial youth, but for Black, Hispanic, American Indian, and White youth there was no evidence of a main effect of school diversity values nor contextual moderation.

Among Asian youth, findings from the administrative data show that pro-diversity mission statements were positively associated with achievement in the presence of a more diverse teaching staff (Table 4, Panel A). The simple slope at 1 SD above the mean Simpson's index score for teacher diversity was $\beta = 0.18$, $p = .001$, 95% CI [0.08, 0.27], and negatively associated with achievement when schools had a less diverse teaching staff (at 1 SD below the mean Simpson's index score, $\beta = -0.17$, $p = .003$, 95% CI [-0.28, -0.05]). At average levels of teacher diversity, there was no evidence of a relation between valuing diversity and Asian student's achievement ($\beta = 0.00$, $p = .91$, 95% CI [-0.07, 0.08]). Findings using the outgroup-centered measure of teacher racial/ethnic composition (i.e., % White teachers) help to contextualize these findings (Table 4, Panel B). Specifically, there was a positive association between pro-diversity mission statements and Asian youths' achievement when a smaller proportion of teachers were White. The simple slope at 1 SD

TABLE 4 Contextual variation in the relation between school diversity values and adolescent achievement (administrative sample).

	(1) Asian	(2) Black	(3) Hispanic	(4) Am Indian	(5) Multiracial	(6) White
Panel A						
Pro-diversity mission statement	−0.023 (0.043)	0.000 (0.024)	0.006 (0.022)	0.096 (0.096)	−0.024 (0.029)	0.018 (0.018)
Contextual moderators						
× Student diversity	0.181 (0.223)	0.223 (0.148)	−0.217 (0.149)	0.831 (0.716)	0.167 (0.201)	0.187 (0.113)
× Teacher diversity	1.136 (0.241)	−0.112 (0.123)	0.153 (0.141)	−0.342 (0.687)	−0.030 (0.190)	0.138 (0.152)
× Racialized discipline gap	−1.892 (0.978)	0.535 (0.338)	−0.098 (0.436)	0.876 (1.734)	−0.691 (0.684)	−0.365 (0.444)
× Racialized GT gap	0.035 (0.241)	−0.268 (0.195)	0.090 (0.172)	0.590 (0.616)	0.382 (0.204)	−0.170 (0.128)
Adj R^2	0.316	0.153	0.105	0.149	0.209	0.206
N (youth)	8890	73,145	46,054	4015	11,630	155,024
Panel B						
Pro-diversity mission statement	0.426 (0.116)	−0.050 (0.054)	0.049 (0.071)	−0.107 (0.381)	−0.014 (0.107)	0.107 (0.064)
Contextual moderators						
× % Outgroup members (students)	−0.102 (0.209)	0.004 (0.105)	0.091 (0.138)	−0.520 (0.579)	0.139 (0.190)	−0.041 (0.096)
× % Outgroup members (teachers)	−1.103 (0.331)	0.111 (0.162)	−0.176 (0.199)	0.674 (1.193)	−0.085 (0.293)	0.351 (0.212)
× Racialized discipline gap	−1.986* (0.809)	0.511 (0.328)	−0.113 (0.372)	0.518 (1.674)	−0.392 (0.655)	−0.205 (0.381)
× Racialized GT gap	0.197 (0.255)	−0.172 (0.160)	0.019 (0.162)	0.711 (0.510)	0.469* (0.195)	−0.110 (0.139)
Adj R^2	0.318	0.158	0.108	0.150	0.212	0.207
N (youth)	8890	73,145	46,054	4015	11,630	155,024

Note: OLS regression coefficients with standard errors clustered at the school level in parentheses. The dependent variable in all models is achievement (mean standardized reading and math achievement test scores). All models include main effects for student diversity, teacher diversity, the racialized discipline gap, and the racialized gap in Gifted and Talented placement, in addition to the student- and school-level covariates described in Table 3. Panel A examines contextual variation by student and teacher diversity (as measured by the Simpson's Index) and Panel B examines contextual variation by racial/ethnic outgroup exposure.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

below the mean, i.e., a school where 65% of the teachers were White was $\beta = 0.20$, $p = .005$, 95% CI [0.06, 0.34]. Conversely, there was a negative association between pro-diversity statements and achievement when teachers were nearly all White (i.e., 95% White, or 1 SD above the mean; $\beta = -0.13$, $p = .013$, 95% CI [−0.25, 0.03]). In other words, the positive relation between a pro-diversity mission statement and achievement for Asian youth was dependent upon having a more diverse, meaning less White teaching staff. Of note, even in schools where the teaching staff was more diverse (less exclusively White), Asian youth were still exposed to very few same-race teachers, since across the 690 schools in our sample, the percentage of teachers who were Asian ranged from zero to 15%, with a mean of zero.

There was also some evidence that for Asian youth, the relation between rhetorical support for diversity and achievement was moderated by school-level racialized discipline gaps (Table 4, Panel B). Rhetorical support for diversity was positively associated with achievement when discipline gaps were small (meaning Youth of Color and White youth were suspended or expelled at roughly equal rates), with a simple slope of $\beta = 0.11$, $p = .027$, 95% CI [0.01, 0.21] at 1 SD below the mean, and negatively associated with achievement

when racialized discipline gaps were large, with a simple slope of $\beta = -0.12$, $p = .087$, 95% CI [−0.26, 0.01] at 1 SD above the mean.

Finally, for Multiracial youth, there was some evidence of a significant interaction between pro-diversity mission statements and racialized gaps in GT (Table 4, Panel B). Pro-diversity mission statements were negatively associated with achievement when racialized GT gaps were small (meaning Youth of Color and White youth were placed in GT education at more equal rates) ($\beta = -0.12$, $p = .018$, 95% CI [−0.22, −0.02]), and positively associated with achievement when gaps were larger (at 1 SD above the mean, $\beta = 0.06$, $p = .15$, 95% CI [−0.02, 0.15]). However, as noted, we interpret these findings with caution given the high correlation between racialized GT gaps and the overall percentage of students participating in gifted education. Although these findings were consistent with and without controlling for school-wide participation in GT, this interaction may reflect school resource differences (since better resourced schools, serving higher-income students, also tend to have higher school-wide GT participation; Peters & Carter, 2022). Moreover, like the findings for racialized discipline gaps described above, these findings were less

robust, as the interactions between a pro-diversity mission statement and racialized GT gaps only emerged when school-level teacher and student racial composition was measured as exposure to racial/ethnic outgroup members, rather than the Simpsons index (i.e., Panel B versus Panel A in Table 4).

DISCUSSION

Using an interdisciplinary framework bridging research on color-evasive and multicultural ideologies and adolescent stage-environment-fit theory, this study examined the relation between schools' diversity ideologies, school characteristics, and adolescent development. Findings show for the first time the potential developmental implications of superficial or disingenuous support for diversity. Across two different datasets, the relation between schools' stated support for diversity and adolescent mental health and academic achievement depended on how such values were reflected in the school environment.

Unexpectedly, among Youth of Color, pro-diversity mission statements were associated with increased psychological distress. To understand why, however, it is necessary to consider whether schools that said they valued diversity also acted upon those values. We found minimal evidence that they did with the measures we had available. Only 13% of schools emphasized diversity in their mission, vision, and values. Compared to schools that did not emphasize diversity in their mission statement, those that did had a somewhat more diverse student body, but not teaching staff, nor did they implement more equitable discipline and academic tracking policies. Even in schools that said they valued diversity, Youth of Color were still more than twice as likely as White youth to be suspended or expelled and less than half as likely to participate in gifted education.

These findings complement research on the negative effects of diversity dishonesty in the work place (Kroeper et al., 2022; McKay & Avery, 2005; Wilton et al., 2020) by suggesting that young people, too, are aware of a mismatch between what organizations *say* versus *do* when it comes to supporting diversity. When schools emphasize the value of diversity, but do not hire diverse teachers nor work to reduce racialized disparities in discipline and academic tracking, the environment may feel more threatening, leading to psychological distress—especially during adolescence, a critical period for the influence of contextual inputs, heightened attention to social group differences, and the onset of mental health problems (Guyer et al., 2018; Sebastian et al., 2010; Spear, 2013; Way et al., 2013; Williams et al., 2020). These contextual factors may also explain why, in contrast with prior work (Celeste et al., 2019; Murrar et al., 2020), valuing diversity was not related to Youth of Color's school belonging.

Importantly, the positive association between pro-diversity mission statements and psychological distress for

Youth of Color was primarily observed in schools that were majority-White. This contrasts with our hypothesis that a pro-diversity mission statement in such contexts would support wellbeing among Youth of Color by sending the message that diverse identities are valued. Instead, study findings suggest that the disconnect between diversity words versus actions was especially damaging in majority-White schools, where Youth of Color had few same-race peers and may have been exposed to more discrimination (Gray et al., 2018; Holland, 2012; Ispa-Landa, 2013).

The relation between school diversity values and youth mental health was not unique to Youth of Color, however. Rhetorical support for diversity was also linked to increased psychological distress for White youth in schools that had a more diverse (less exclusively White) teaching staff and low levels of racialized academic tracking. Other studies have found similar findings of a negative relation between multicultural school environments and White youth's health and school experiences (Baysu et al., 2020; Levine et al., 2019). However, this is the first study to find that the potential negative implications of school leaders' support for diversity for White youth depend on the context. It is possible that White youth feel a threat to their privileged majority-identity status when school leaders emphasize the value of diversity, especially when such leaders are themselves from racial minority backgrounds (Dover et al., 2016). White individuals also tend to perceive diversity as less self-relevant (Plaut et al., 2011), so some White youth may feel excluded in multicultural school environments, particularly if such environments fail to show how multiculturalism can benefit and *meaningfully involve* all youth, regardless of racial/ethnic background.

Potential explanations can also be gleaned from the North Carolina context. At the time of the study (2014–2015), North Carolina was recovering from the Great Recession and was one of nine states to exceed an unemployment rate of 11% (Gitterman et al., 2012). Economic precarity and inequality can negatively affect intergroup relations (Jetten et al., 2017; Tanjitpiyanond et al., 2022). The mid-aughts were also marked by heightened anti-immigrant rhetoric in North Carolina and growing political polarization (Lan Rong & Hilburn, 2017). Thus, in this recession-impacted context, messages about diversity may have felt threatening to White youth.

In terms of achievement, rhetorical support for diversity via a pro-diversity mission statement was positively related to achievement for Asian youth, but only in the presence of a more diverse (less White) teaching staff, and (to a lesser extent) only when schools did not disproportionately discipline Students of Color. The role of teacher diversity may be especially important for Asian students, many of whom are harmed by attitudes assuming Asian students to be uniformly high achieving (i.e., the model minority myth, Xie et al., 2021). A more diverse teaching staff may be better able to effectively implement cultural socialization, and research shows that cultural socialization around the model minority myth can support Asian youth wellbeing (Xie et al., 2021).

Notably, pro-diversity mission statements were not related to achievement for Black, Latinx, or American Indian students—even though these youth are likely the ones who school leaders have in mind when they say that they “support diversity.” At the same time, Youth of Color in the RAISE sample (for whom pro-diversity statements were associated with increased psychological distress) were primarily Black, Latinx, and American Indian (including Multiracial students who identified as one of those categories). Thus, taken together, these findings suggest that communicating support for diversity *while doing little to redress systemic inequities in school discipline and academic tracking* will not reduce racism-related gaps in school achievement and may exacerbate mental health disparities.

Study findings are consistent with stage-environment-fit theory (Eccles et al., 1993; Eccles & Roeser, 2011) as they demonstrate the potential harms of a mismatch between adolescents' developmental needs and the extent to which their social environment meets these needs. By using multiple, setting-level measures of schools' support for diversity, we complement prior work using self-reported measures of diversity ideologies (Baysu et al., 2020; Byrd, 2015; Celeste et al., 2019; Del Toro & Wang, 2021a, 2021b) to show how different, potentially conflicting messages about race in the school environment combine to shape adolescent mental health and academic engagement. Our findings also complement scholarship in sociology (Douds, 2021) and education research (Kirkham, 2016) on performative multiculturalism, wherein cultural and racial differences are engaged with only selectively and commodified. This work shows, for example, how schools claim to “celebrate diversity” as a way to increase enrollment among both White and racially minoritized families, without actually recognizing and addressing racial inequality in the school environment (Kirkham, 2016). We find performative multiculturalism may also have negative developmental implications, especially among youth from racially minoritized backgrounds who are disproportionately exposed to threats to their belonging in the school environment (Gray et al., 2018).

Strengths, limitations, and future directions

Schools value diversity in myriad ways that are not captured in a mission statement. Future work should examine how publicly communicating support for diversity relates to other aspects of the school environment, such as conversations about race or discussions of systemic inequality in the classroom. Future work should also examine how Youth of Color and White youth may interpret messages about diversity differently, the extent to which both groups feel included or excluded from a multicultural school orientation, and how the contextual effects of school diversity ideologies unfold over time throughout adolescence.

Relatedly, this study was not able to assess the extent to which participants were aware of racialized inequities in

their school context. However, past work suggests that young people do notice, and are affected by, school-based inequities such as racialized discipline disproportionality (Bottiani et al., 2017; Larson et al., 2019). For example, school-level Black-White discipline gaps were associated with Black students' perceptions of less equity in the school environment, less school belonging, and increased behavior problems (Bottiani et al., 2017), and with decreased academic engagement among White students (Larson et al., 2019). These findings are consistent with the notion of *racial regularities*—repeated exposure to patterns of inequality that shape how young people come to understand the meaning and value of social constructs like race (Hughes & Watford, 2021).

Given heightened political and media attention to issues of diversity and inclusion in recent years (Kelly, 2023; Ramos, 2022) it is worth considering how our findings would differ if the data had been collected more recently. Using data from 2015, we found that only 13% of schools valued diversity in their mission statements, but this percentage would likely be higher today. In fact, as of 2022, an estimated 34% of school districts nationally mentioned diversity, equity, or inclusion in their mission statements, though there was substantial variation according to local political and demographic characteristics (Odabas & Aragao, 2023). Mentioning diversity, equity, or inclusion was significantly more common in Democratic-voting areas, urban areas, high income areas, and areas with a low share of White residents, compared to Republican-voting areas, rural areas, low- or medium- income areas, and areas with a greater share of White residents (Odabas & Aragao, 2023). Future work should therefor consider contextual variation not just according to school-level factors like student/teacher diversity and racialized discipline disparities, as we did in this study, but also according to the broader sociopolitical macro-system within which schools are located.

Finally, it is important to emphasize that although we employed a more robust set of school-level controls than has been used in prior observational studies of school diversity ideologies (e.g., Baysu et al., 2020; Celeste et al., 2019; Levine et al., 2019), our findings are not causal. Several potential confounders are plausible. For instance, families who chose to send their children to a school that explicitly emphasizes diversity may also engage in more home-based racial-ethnic socialization practices, which could affect how youth interpret race-related messages in their school environment.

Implications for school leaders and policy makers and conclusions

This study shows the need for thoughtful, action-oriented diversity and inclusion practices in schools. Our results show that merely making a statement in support of diversity is not enough to change school climate or positively influence student outcomes—diversity statements need to be paired with behaviors to see positive effects on students. Specifically, proclaiming support for diversity *while doing little to redress*

systemic inequities in school discipline and academic tracking may actually result in heightened mental health concerns for both White youth and Youth of Color. We argue this is likely due to the perceived incongruence—school leaders say they endorse positive diversity-related ideologies, but their behaviors do not follow those statements. The focus of this study was on mission statements as a proxy for school diversity ideologies, but our findings may have implications for messages about diversity embedded in other types of school communication materials and policy—such as book bans. Districts in more than 26 states have banned books that center race and racism (Ramos, 2022), our findings suggest these bans may exacerbate racial disparities in youth mental health and academic engagement.

In sum, this study provides novel evidence for contextual variation in the relation between school diversity ideologies and youth mental health and achievement and highlights the need to link words and symbols to action, especially in academic settings.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are from the Center for the Study of Adolescent Risk and Resilience (C-StARR) at Duke University. Restrictions apply to the availability of these data.

PATIENT CONSENT STATEMENT

N/A.

ORCID

Jane Leer  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7594-217X>

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