The Moderating Roles of Race and Ethnicity: Examining the Effects on Student-Teacher Relationships, Cultural Pluralism, and Sense of Belonging

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Introduction

o Cultural pluralism promotes differences between cultural groups and encourages respect for and knowledge of other customs and traditions. Research highlights the benefits of cultural pluralism for minority students: increased self-esteem, academic self-concept, and achievement (Oczlon et al., 2021). But, there is a lack of research on cultural pluralism on U.S. populations.

o Research on student-teacher relationships demonstrates that positive relationships increase student belonging, motivation, academic achievement (Allen et al., 2021; Ibrahim & El Zataari, 2020; Visser & Arends, 2019). However, research on race highlights that teachers bias' can prohibit positive relationships for minority students (Bjorklund, 2019; Marx, 2008; McClain, 2019).

o Sense of belonging in school measures the feelings of security and support perceived by students. While higher levels lead to positive academic outcomes (Faircloth & Hamm, 2005; Neel & Fulgini, 2013), racial and ethnic minorities showcase complex relationships with sense of belonging that need to be further studied.

o Little research examines how teacher-student interactions and the environment of the classroom impact a sense of belonging. This gap in knowledge led us to ask, **how do student-teacher relationships and cultural-pluralism relate to sense of belonging among middle school students**?

Hypotheses

o H1: We hypothesized that cultural pluralism and teacher support would be positively associated with sense of belonging among middle school students.

o H2: When teacher support is rated highly, we expected that there would be a larger increase in sense of belonging among Black students in comparison to White students. Further, we predicted that students who identify as Black or African American would display larger increases in sense of belonging when cultural pluralism is high in comparison to White students.

o H3: We predicted that Latino/a middle-school students would have greater increases in sense of belonging when cultural pluralism and teacher support are rated highly, compared to non-Hispanic students.

o H4: Further, we expected White and non-Hispanic students to be less affected by their school's environment of cultural pluralism and student-teacher relationships.

Methods

o The data used in this study is from the School Safety and School-Based Mental Health Services in a Large Metropolitan School District project conducted by researchers at Research Triangle Institute (RTI) International (Morgan-Lopez et al., 2020).

o Survey data was collected from 34 middle and K-8 schools within the public educational system of Charlotte-Mecklenburg County, North Carolina. The SBMH Student Survey was randomly distributed to students in grades 6, 7, and 8.

o Three waves of data were collected: Fall 2016 (Wave 1 - baseline), Spring 2017, and Spring 2018. Our current study used data from Wave 1.

o **Measures:**
  o Participants completed a survey regarding the following measures:
    o Support for Cultural Pluralism
    o Teacher Support Subscale
    o Psychological Sense of School Membership
    o Race
    o Ethnicity

o **Participants:**
  o N= 4,021
    o Race:
      o 25.7% White students
      o 50.3% Black students
      o 24% Selected no race or other race
    o Ethnicity:
      o 35.9% Hispanic students
  o For the purposes of our analyses, we excluded participants with nonresponses to questions regarding student-teacher relationships, support for cultural pluralism, and student sense of belonging, which reduced our respondent pool to 2,805.

o **Statistical Analyses:**
  o Multiple Linear Regression

Results

o Significant positive relationships were found between sense of belonging and cultural pluralism and sense of belonging and student-teacher relationships among all students. See Figure 1.

o Overall, Black students had a higher sense of belonging. In addition, greater endorsements of cultural pluralism significantly predicted sense of belonging, with a stronger predictive relationship among White students than among Black students. Thus, race significantly moderated the relationship between cultural pluralism and sense of belonging. See Figure 1 and 2.

o Consistent with our hypothesis, Hispanic or Latino students had a sense of belonging rated significantly lower in comparison to their non-Hispanic peers. However, the effect of cultural pluralism on sense of belonging was not significantly moderated by ethnicity. See Figure 1.

o Contrary to our hypothesis, it was found that the effect of student-teacher relationships on sense of belonging was not significantly moderated by race and ethnicity. See Figure 1.
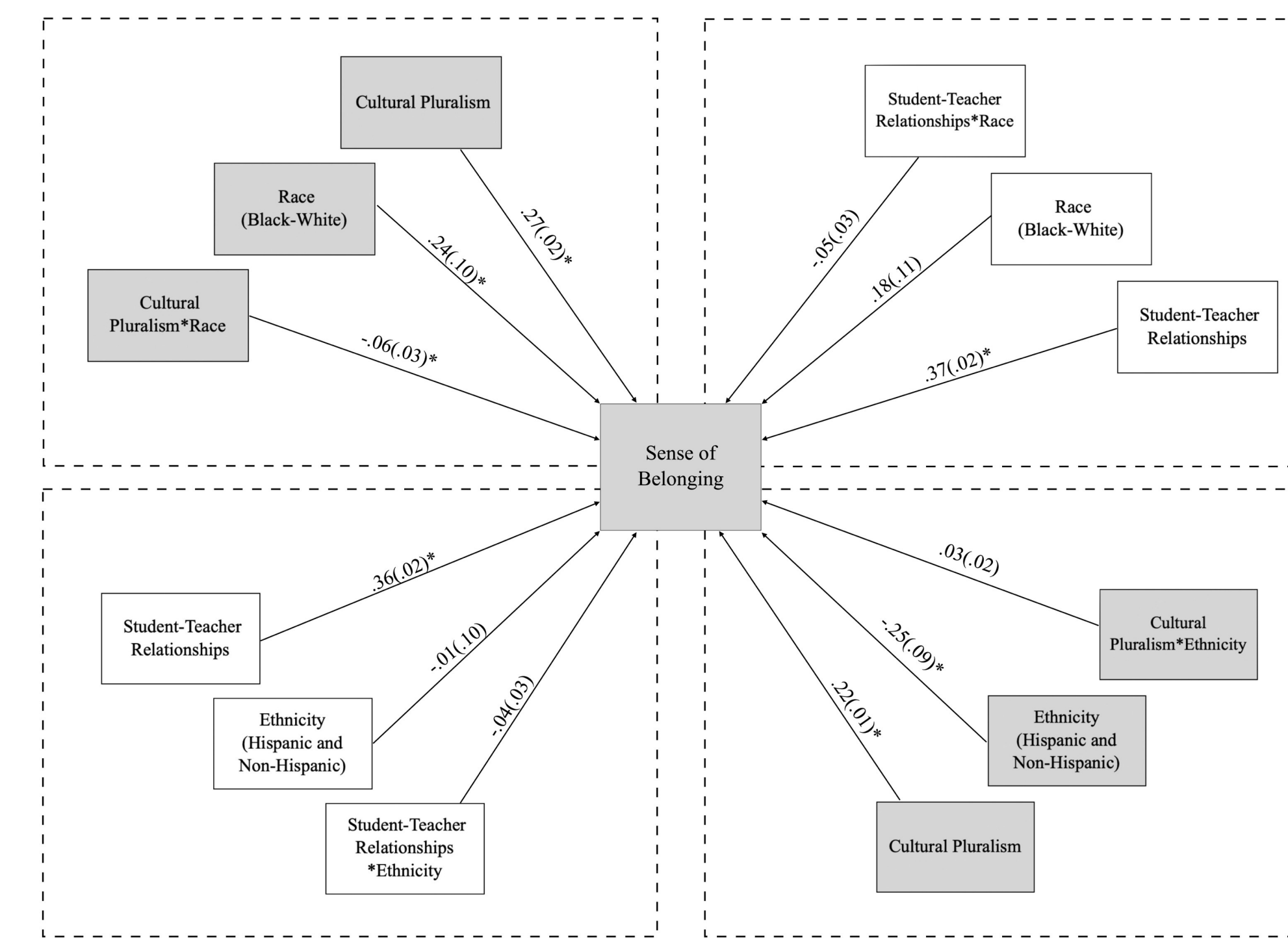

Figure 1. The model shows four separately run linear regressions, indicated by the dotted boxes. For each variable, the figure provides the unstandardized regression coefficients (*b*), the standard error values (*SE*) in parentheses, and significance (*p*<.05) denoted by an asterisk, respectively.
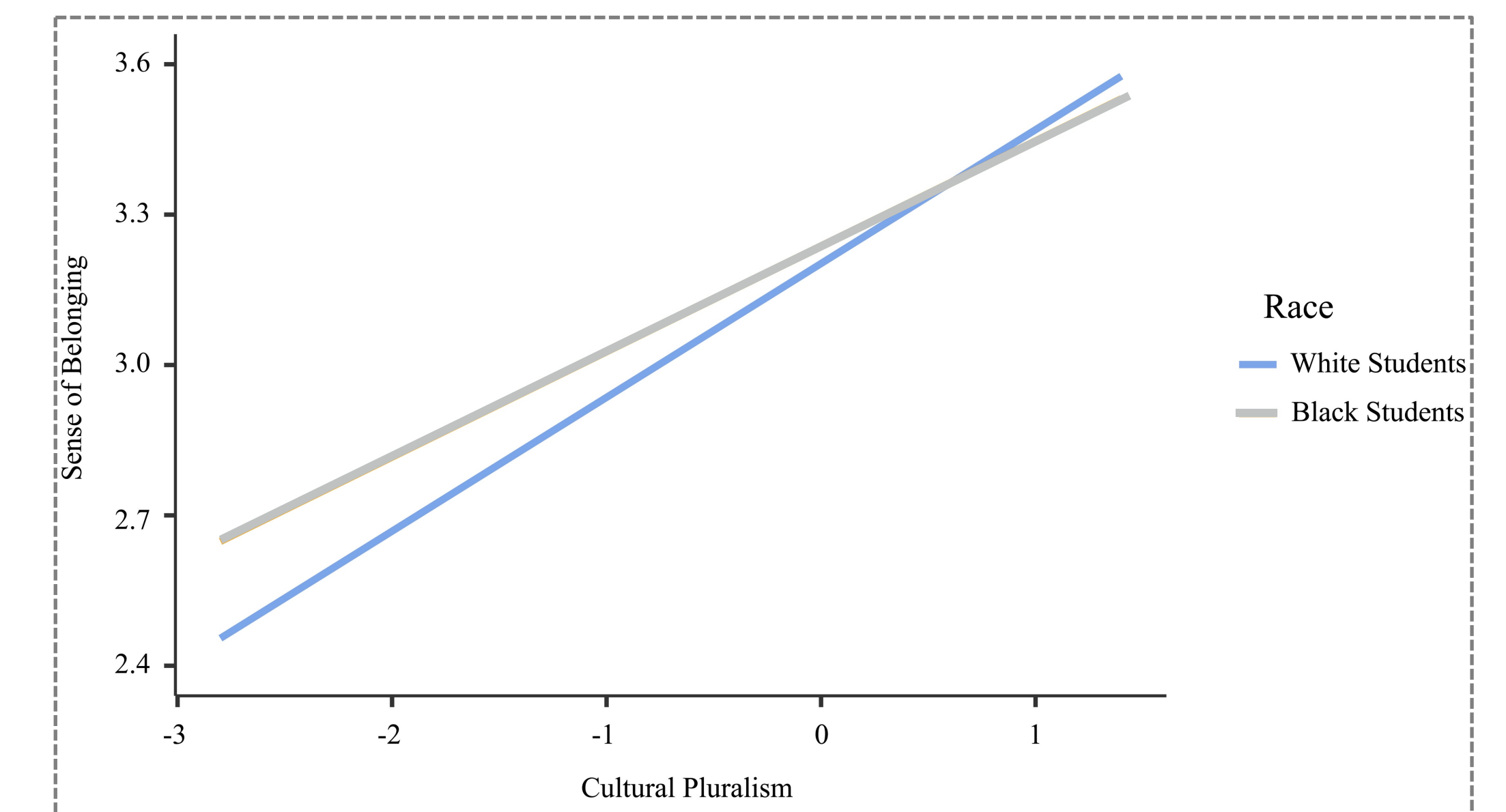

Figure 2. The model shows an interaction effect on the moderating effects of race (White students and Black students) on the relationship between cultural pluralism and sense of belonging.

Conclusion

o Higher reports of cultural pluralism and positive student-teacher relationships are associated with an increased sense of belonging in middle school students.

o Ethnicity does not moderate either of these relationships. Race moderates the relationship between cultural pluralism and sense of belonging.

o White students displayed a larger increase in their sense of belonging than Black students when cultural pluralism is high. Given that Black students are the majority racial group across the middle schools within our sample, it is suggested that the minority racial population within schools benefit more from a cultural pluralism environment.

o Targeting specific cultural and social belonging inadequacies within schools is relevant for students of all backgrounds.

o Celebrations of cultural and racial diversity in classrooms can show students that their differences are valued. Additionally, teachers should strive to get to know their students better to be more aware of their needs and better address problems, taking into consideration the student's identity.

Acknowledgments

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