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My research agenda bridges the divides between research, practice and policy through partnerships that improve youth outcomes and promote racial equity. I study the intersection of race and socioeconomic status in the etiology, prevention, and treatment of mental health and substance use problems, and the promotion of academic achievement. I am particularly interested in understanding how evidence-based prevention programs and practices (EBP) consider culture and race, and the impact of EBPs on racial equity. My work frames youth development in a life course perspective, with experiences in childhood and adolescence serving as building blocks of cumulative adversity or advantage and, as such, are critical social determinants of lifelong health and social disparities. My research interests stem from my experience providing mental health services and managing the implementation of EBPs within a racially and culturally diverse community mental health center in Los Angeles, where I observed discrepancies between community's needs and the goals of the interventions. Drawing on my seven years of experience as a therapist and supervisor, I situate my research in mezzo level practice, working in partnership with organizations to develop systems that incorporate the judicious use of data into everyday practice. Utilizing principles of community-based participatory research and design-based research, my work elevates the importance of the local context and practice knowledge to inform the development of practice-relevant data systems. To each of the three primary research areas discussed below, I bring research experience acquired during my involvement with several NIH-funded projects, including survey design, focus group design, and qualitative content analysis. My quantitative analysis skills include survey psychometrics, as well as structural equation, growth, and hierarchical modeling.

Race and evidence-based interventions

Many EBPs are implemented in communities of color without specific evidence of generalizability and, in the case of school-based interventions, do not address the context of racial disparities in youth outcomes. My qualifying paper focused on social emotional learning (SEL) programs, one type of school-based prevention program that aims to improve behavioral and academic functioning. To evaluate the generalizability of SEL interventions to communities of color, I conducted a systematic review to examine 1) the degree of representation of racially diverse students in SEL trials, and 2) the extent to which the existing evidence base for SEL interventions finds intervention effects for students from different racial groups. I found that few studies examined differences in intervention effects by race, and those that did were limited by low statistical power, unspecified analysis strategies, or incomplete reports of interaction test results. Thus, there is little evidence to support the widespread dissemination of these programs to racially diverse schools, or guide schools with respect to the potential effect of SEL programs on education-related disparities for students of color. This work will serve as a launch pad for building theory and intervention frameworks that meaningfully incorporate cultural and racial diversity to move beyond existing cultural adaptation models.

Research-practice partnerships and data-informed systems

With the support of my TL1 fellowship, I designed a dissertation project in partnership with the Seattle Public Schools (SPS), a racially and ethnically diverse district, to develop a data infrastructure to support practice improvement methods, particularly geared towards their strategic goal of eliminating gaps in achievement and discipline for students of color. School climate, known as students' experiences of feeling emotionally and physically safe, connected to school community, and respected by adults at school, is an important characteristic of schools related to both achievement and disciplinary outcomes. My work with SPS involves analyzing the psychometric properties of the annual student climate survey to develop a new practice aligned survey. A stronger survey will enable student data to be used more effectively as an evaluation and accountability tool. My dissertation uses hierarchical and structural equation modeling to investigate the associations of school climate with student achievement and disciplinary actions over time and assesses whether these associations differ by race. It is critical to know whether school climate reform efforts are linked with outcomes as expected, and whether school climate has the same impact for students from different racial backgrounds. This work will inform policy and practice in schools as to whether current strategies focused on school climate have the potential to contribute to equity in school systems. It will also advance my broader research agenda of understanding how data-informed systems can be used to promote equity in a practice-informed manner.

Social environmental influences on mental health and substance use

My work in this area focuses on the etiology of mental health and substance use problems across development, including potential risk and protective factors across ecological levels that could serve as targets of preventive interventions. Problems with mental health and substance use are known to be multiply determined, but less is known about the developmental timing and reciprocal influence between domains of risk and protective factors. This work has resulted in a number of collaborations and papers focused on social environmental risk and protective factors including individual, peer and family functioning, socioeconomic status, and neighborhood influences on the development of mental health and substance use problems.

Future directions

My future work will involve incremental steps toward developing a theoretical framework for community relevant intervention design. This work will begin by highlighting gaps in our understanding of how the experiences and strengths of diverse communities are poorly represented in existing intervention development models, which serves to inadvertently reinforce systems that undermine equity. Toward this effort, I plan to 1) leverage my experience obtaining external funding, as I did for my dissertation funding through the NIH Institute of Translational Health Sciences (TL1 TR000422); 2) outline the ways that colorblind racism underlies current strategies of intervention development; 3) apply these concepts to the development of racially and culturally relevant etiological models of youth development; and 4) use my partnership with Seattle Public Schools as a model for future collaborations with local health service organizations, especially community mental health centers and school districts, to ensure my research is practice-relevant, reflect community values, and are readily applied.