

Conversations on Economic Inclusion with Faye Gary

Dionissi Aliprantis:

This is Conversations on Economic Inclusion. I'm Dionissi Aliprantis, the director of the program on economic inclusion here at the Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland. In our program, we aim to bring together researchers and practitioners to learn about what it takes for more people to participate more fully in the economy.

The Provost Scholars mentoring program at Case Western Reserve University (CWRU) aims to nurture robust and enduring relationships between Case Western faculty and staff and students in the East Cleveland City Schools. I spoke with the program's director, Professor Faye Gary, to learn what she sees as the necessary components for a program like this to succeed.

Before we get started, I should mention that the views expressed here are those of the participants and not necessarily those of the Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland or the Federal Reserve System. And now, here's my conversation with Professor Faye Gary.

Faye Gary:

Now, I have to think long and hard about any silver lining from COVID, but at least it's gotten us from a point of our denial, because I think we've been in denial about a lot of things in our nation. But COVID has just laid it bare and say, when you confront death and when you confront hospitals being full and when you confront people who don't trust the science, that brings us full circle. We need to do something about the basic structures in our society, including education. I'm editing a book, almost done, and we're looking at population health.

But one of the lessons learned from editing this book and writing five of the chapters is that unless we do what I've determined to be two basic things in our society or any society, we have to strengthen our educational system and we have to strengthen our healthcare system. Once we do that, then what we talk about, the social determinants of health will address themselves automatically over time because people will have a higher level of health literacy, will automatically have better jobs, better housing, safer neighborhoods, less violence.

But what happens is that in our society, we have set up a system that I explain by two additional concepts, and one is a concept of white privilege and the other is a concept of advantage. Now, let me see if I can explain it. White privilege is something that some people have at birth. You can't take it away from them. It's something that they did not necessarily earn. They were born white just as I'm born Black. That's white privilege. Now, that's a given in our society and in many other societies.

Fair skin, it's very important. But now the other is advantage. Now, in this society, despite my darker skin, I have had some advantage. Advantage is basically theoretical, but also can be concrete. I got advantages when I went to Saint Xavier College. I got advantage when I went to San Francisco and met good friends. I got some advantage when I was at University of Florida and met two men that I trusted explicitly, and they had white skin, and they were very powerful and very knowledgeable, all covered in Yale.

They came with the right pedigree and et cetera. All of that was impressive to me. But despite that, I would eat dinner with them at that table and they would tell me and reaffirm the advantage that I have. I would never have the privilege, but I could have the advantage. I think we have to make some distinction about that. Privilege helps to get advantage, and that's what happened to me. It was their privilege that made advantage for me.

If we look at the fact that we could stop talking so much about white privilege and say, "How can we take white privilege to extend advantages to other people," and it's initially theoretical, but it can be concretized and it also can be operationalized to help other people. I hope that makes sense.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

I think there's a lot of ways to see the work that you're doing with the Provost Scholars. There's the very basic caring about kids. There's thinking about our country, thinking about a university and how it relates to its community. There's a lot of ways of thinking about this program. Being at the Federal Reserve, we care about it a lot for how it affects labor market outcomes.

I'm just curious if you could speak a little bit about some of the success stories in terms of how kids have done in terms of their education, in terms of their later labor market outcomes, and ways that you think that this program is able to open doors for students that might otherwise not have been open.

Faye Gary:

Well, I would start with one of the things that is missing in under-resourced communities is networks to important people and important organizations, just networks, having relationships with people who can make a difference, who can provide the advantage, if you will. Once our children get into the program, they have an armamentarium of the network that they never even knew existed. They get through their mentors. They go to this dean, that program. They can go to the admissions office.

They can go to the think box. They can have a conversation with the career center. Just a variety of resources that existed case on many other college campuses. They have access to human and material resources. Human resources because that mentor can say, "Well, I'll call Bob. Oh, I'll call John and we'll make an appointment. I'll take you to see John, and he can tell you about the HoloLens." That's what happens. That's so powerful for these children. They become empowered and the sense of helplessness and hopelessness wanes and their dreams get fertilized, if you will.

And then they can make plans for themselves because they know that they have a safety net. They can call a mentor if they say whatever, they could tell Ms. Kate that they need some help with biochemistry or whatever, and we try and provide that. That doesn't happen. They don't have anybody in that neighborhood to tutor them in biochemistry. Let's just be honest about it. There's nobody in their church who can help them, but there's somebody here who can. That's I would say networking.

To say that what I have, I will also share with you, and that, again, is the advantage that comes with sharing resources and opportunities that they would not otherwise have. That's so reaffirming. It provides consensual validation that I can do this. The mentor tells them every time, "You can do this, I will help you do this. Get your grades good and you can come to Case and you get a scholarship," et cetera, et cetera, et cetera If you don't come to Case, we'll help you go wherever else you wish to go." And we do that too.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

How do you extend advantage to more kids and to more people as they develop and as they grow?

Faye Gary:

Well, first, I think as a clinician, I have to understand the obstacles and I have to have some appreciation for the obstacles and the impact that they have on the child from various levels, as an individual, as an interpersonal level, societal level, policy level. I have to understand that. That's an obligation that I have as a clinician. Now, it's not always been this clear to me. It evolves over time, and it evolves with

conversations with colleagues who are interested and who are just as invested or even more so than I am.

I have learned that policy drives our daily behaviors. I think that policies in schools in some areas are too restrictive, and in other areas not nearly restrictive enough. Now, the school systems vary and they're in certain communities, and Ms. Kate and I work in a school system where there are a lot of needs among the children in that school system. There are school systems like this all over the nation, but I think we work in an under-resourced community. Now, let's take another policy and the policy about what is excellence on an essay or what is excellence for a biology project?

What is the policy about excellence at the school? What is the policy about children must know how to read by the second or third grade? And how is that policy manifested? Who monitors that policy, and who's responsible for that policy? What happens if a child can't read a third grade? Now, I have a student who just finished her doctoral visitation. I was the chair of her committee, and she looked at maternal deaths in certain region of the nation. In our literature review, we found that maternal deaths is related to third grade reading scores.

Now, that was a new find for me. I know about reading scores and prison beds. I know about reading scores and economic growth over time, but I had not related it to maternal deaths. Those policies that speak to excellence for academic learning, I think are too relaxed and serve at a great disadvantage for children in under-resourced communities. Those are differences in policies in one system.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

I'm going to ask you to speak a little bit, I guess, in two different directions here. We recently spoke with Richard Rothstein, the author of *The Color of Law*. I think he would argue, I don't want to put words in his mouth, but I think there is an argument to be made that given historical investments, just given our history, that it's very difficult for a school system to maybe attain that excellence.

It's not having anything to do with the potential of the individuals there, but it has to do with the state of poverty, the state of environmental pollution, all of those factors that make it difficult in a school. I guess my question to you would be, how can we support those schools? How can we support those students to reach that level of excellence?

Faye Gary:

Well, I think we did it in our little country school after we built the fire in the stove to stay warm and baked our potato for lunch. But we never strayed from the fact that we were all capable of learning how to read. Our teacher told us we were beautiful and we were bright and one day America would recognize us. We know that poverty exists, but we know that poverty exists because of the policies that have been developed that created it. We create poverty and we create systems that keep poverty in place, that maintain poverty.

It's no mystery about that. Now, George W. Bush was not my favorite president. I have no qualms about that. He did some good things, but one of the things he said that I resonate with when he did his No Child Left Behind, for another discussion, but in that narrative, he said that Black children, and probably brown children too, suffer from the bigotry of low expectations. I would begin with the bigotry of low expectations. I don't want anybody teaching my children who don't think they can excel.

Now, I do not subscribe to the notion that poverty in and of itself prevents a child from learning. I think what we need to have is a system that recognizes what a child needs and provide it. That's a safe place. I think going to school from 8:30 to 3:00 and going home to a system that does not continue to support

the child is not helpful. If I had my magic wand, I would have children in school from about 7:00 in the morning, about 8:00 or 9:00 at night. I would also involve parents. Parents need to be educated.

Parents need to have their GEDs. There's some initiative now to get that. Some parents feel that when you talk about education, they don't know a thing, so they shut down. They don't want to expose their lack of knowledge. They don't come to the school. It's a foreign place. School has to become a part of the community. Now. When I was growing up in [inaudible] everything happened at the school. The church burned down, so we went to the school. The operators were at the school.

The fairs were at the school. That was the only place we could go. We were Black children, we couldn't go to the library. We couldn't go to restaurants. Everything happened at the school. Everything. The teachers and the principals, they lived next door to the students. We were one collective community. That's not the case anymore. Now, what I learned is that the teachers live one place and they come to work at a school and they go back. And that's especially in poverty areas. Teachers don't live in the poverty.

They come to it, they teach the students, and they go back. That works okay for some and not so well for others. But I think that The Color of Law has been disadvantageous and has presented policies that create and maintain poverty. That's what I think. The policy does not come with a sufficient armamentarium of resources to correct the policies that have been in place over time.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

I'm curious, when we think about the set of policies that created the poverty we're thinking about and thinking about schools and supporting those schools, and I'm coming back to this question of academic excellence and helping kids to achieve that despite maybe they're growing up in a family of poverty or in a community with high rates of poverty and helping put them on a trajectory for full participation in the economy, in the labor market.

I'm curious in that context to hear about your work with the Provost Scholars. Could you describe to me a little bit about the principles behind the Provost Scholars? What are the principles behind what you're looking for in the mentors, as you said earlier? How do you foster those relationships, and what is it that you're looking to do?

Faye Gary:

Well, the program has two basic umbrellas, and that is academic excellence and social emotional learning. Just about everything we do falls under one of both of them. There's a lot of overlap. Those are the two pillars of our program. Everything we do, we ought to be able to link it to one or both of these. The mentors, who are excellent in whatever they do, most of them are professors at the university. They're excellent in their fields in music and dance and biology and biochemistry and medicine, et cetera, et cetera.

We want the children to see others who have excelled, and we want them to develop a relationship with other people who have excelled and who have done well. And that relationship gets developed over a period of time. It gets developed through the mentoring. They could go to their mentor's offices. They go to the student center where they talk in general, and they talk specifically in general about things. They go to a basketball game together with special permission. They go play catch football together.

They go to a lecture with their mentor. They go to a lecture that their mentor is giving. They go to the offices. They meet their deans, et cetera, et cetera. You expose them to a bold new world with the person who caress for them. The mentors, we have mentors who've worked with students for four and

five years. Dr. Thompson, for an example, her mentee right now is our student assistant. She's been working with Dr. Thompson since she was in eighth grade, and she's a junior at Case Western Reserve University.

And my mentee who's now at Ohio State in graduate school and another mentee is getting ready to go to law school, on and on and on and on. They learned that the mysticism about skin color is removed and they see a human being. They see a human being who cares for them. They see a human being who shows up every Tuesday and addresses whatever the agenda is that Ms. Kate tells us we have to do and where we can go and what time we have to be back. They go to the museum together.

They go to the library. They work on essays. They go to the think box, but it's the relationship with no strings attached. I'm here because I care about you. We make it very clear that nobody gets paid anything. The mentors don't get paid to die. They are volunteers. Initially, we don't hear it very much now, but would you believe initially the faculty and the students and the parents would question that? That's all been archived now. But initially they would say, "Why they're doing this for our children?"

They never did anything before. What do they want from us?" I've had some of the children would ask me, "Well, Dr. Gary, what do you want from me? You're not coming here for nothing." That's the mentality of the children and their parents. That's gone. We have relationships and it's very clear. It's very transparent. We've been true to our word. We don't have to struggle with basic trust, and we don't have to struggle with whether there's any manipulation anymore. These children remain with their mentors and their mentors with their children years later.

I mean, almost all of them at some way and at some level are in touch with their mentors. Let me give you an example. One of my mentee called her good friend's mentor, who's in the Weatherhead School, and say, "I need some money. I need to talk with your mentor about how I can make some money. I need to set up a GoFundMe. I need to do whatever." And they did. They didn't ask me, but they have learned how to use more resources, and that's what we want to happen.

The mentor set up some kind of fund where we can pay into a fund to help pay for graduate tuition for our Provost Scholars. Now, I had nothing to do with that. I just set it up where a system of trust, a system of communication, a system of I call interpersonal literacy. That's different from health literacy. Interpersonal literacy. Where do you go to get your needs met and how do you make your case? That's what they did. They don't need me to do that. Ms. Kate and I have somehow taught them and they've learned that lesson.

Now, with the social emotional learning, we do that in many different ways. One of the basic ways is we do have a code of ethics that everybody has to follow, including me, Ms. Kate, Dr. Thompson, the provost. Everybody. Everybody. These are the rules of the game. Because we love and respect everybody, this is how we act. This is how we behave at all times. Everybody knows that, including the parents and teachers.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Standards of behavior.

Faye Gary:

Standards of behavior. We have the same standards for everyone. We discuss it with the parents, the teacher's have it, the mentors have it, the tutor's have it, et cetera, et cetera. Now, we don't have to pull a hard one. When we have to, we do, but seldom do we have to do that. But the trick is to be consistent. We try to have our guidelines to the extent that we can consistent with the schools. Now, there's a difference. Because we have 30 some children, we can reinforce them quicker than the schools.

We can be more resolute about it than the schools can. It's very important to us because we know... I was talking with the principal yesterday, and I told them that an old man who probably finished fourth grade would say to me, he used to call all of the girl's daughter and the boy's son. He would say, "Daughter, good manners will get you where a dollar never will." And he was right.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

I'm curious if you can tell us about some success stories. But I do also want to respond, react a little bit to what you're saying based on some of my own work with kids, and that's that I feel like communicating to kids that you care about them is a superpower.

Faye Gary:

It is.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

But you think about it in a lot of different ways where once kids know that you really care about them, I feel like the sky is the limit.

Faye Gary:

Absolutely.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

But to express that fact might be things that we're not used to doing. They might be a little bit different. It might be, like you said, we have to go and, I don't know, play some flag football. You have to just come hang out in my office and hang out and listen to some music together. It could be a million different things. I'm curious, could you talk about some of the success stories that you all have had and maybe some of these... I'm wondering, how do we think about this superpower?

How do you generalize it, or how do you harness it? How do you leverage it? Obviously there's people doing it every single day. There's parents. There's teachers. There's family members, friends. How do you think about whether it's a program or a school or in your case, the Provost Scholars, how do you operationalize this and how do you try to foster those kinds of interactions?

Faye Gary:

Well, I think that's a very interesting question, and it is an essential one. I think you have to have people who care and people have to understand the struggles or something about the nature of the children that they're working with. I'm a psychiatric nurse. If I'm working with a depressed person, I need to know something about depression.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

What do you all tell mentors along these lines? Again, going back to my own experience working with somewhat similar programs, the things that we would always tell people is just be yourself.

Faye Gary:

Yep. Yep.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Just be yourself and be genuine.

Faye Gary:

That's right.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

I feel like that goodwill and that caring for people will get you far and that's the path forward.

Faye Gary:

People know if you care for them. I must make a confession on that. Black people know how to sight phonies in a minute. That's a skill that we've had to learn to survive. I've told you a big secret now, but we know that and we talk among ourselves to get it validated. What do you think? Once it gets validated, that's it kind of thing, unfortunately.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Are you going to come to some meetings with me then, please? You can come help me out.

Faye Gary:

I mean, that's one of the things you have to do to survive. You have to figure out who you can trust, who's on your side, who's not. That happens very, very, very early. That being said, I think consistency is very important. With our mentors now, we do all of the things that other folks do. We have a mentor's manual. But what we say to the mentors, we give them an overview about the struggles of the children. They are volunteers. We get people who gravitate toward our program because they have some propensity for wanting to help.

What we say is that all you need is a little bit of empathy. We could help you with the logistics. I say to them, "Just come if you care enough, to do enough. Ms. Kate can give you the manual. Ms. Kate can teach you about the logistics when you could come to show up. But when you come, bring your true self." We have programs to help with the mentors. In the past, we've shared our experiences. We become a collective body with the mission of helping the children. They enjoy sharing their experiences.

We haven't done this for a while. We'd meet. We call it... We would have lunch. The provost would provide lunch and we would share experiences. We would have this collective union, if you will, among the mentors all through sharing and through, let's say, consensual validation about what we are doing that's helpful and about the program. That's been very reaffirming for the mentors and also for Ms. Kate and Dr. Thompson and me and the provost. It works. We have mentors who've been with us since 2013, and it's no doubt that they care.

We learn different ways and means of working with the students. We believe that one size does not fit all, and so we do it on an individual basis. We try to match the mentee with the mentor around some common attributes or characteristics of hobbies or academic work or recreation, some way. Ms. Kate does an excellent job of matching. Typically, the matching works because when the mentee finds out that the mentee shows up every Tuesday and cares about them, I say it's a slam dunk. They work out the rest of it.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

It's all details from there, right?

Faye Gary:

That's right.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

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