

Conversations on Economic Inclusion with Matthew Kraft

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.

Tutoring is often thought of as an add-on to classroom learning. A tool to bolster a student who lags in the group instruction that is at the heart of US public education. That's giving it short shrift, according to Matthew Kraft who teaches economics and education at Brown University. He argues that one-on-one or very small group instruction should be professionalized, woven into the school day and made available to a wider range of students. I recently spoke with Professor Kraft about his efforts to promote a larger role for tutoring in public education. 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 Matthew Kraft. You have this large body of work, you're thinking a lot about public education, but you have this article with Grace Falken entitled A Blueprint for Scaling Tutoring and Mentoring Across Public Schools. So I'd really like to talk about that article. And before we get into some of the specifics, I'm just curious, when you think about tutoring and mentoring, what do you think is the issue or the problem that tutoring and mentoring can help solve?

Matthew Kraft:

I think educators face a considerable challenge in showing up every day in front of a group of 20, upwards of 30, even 35 students in a single class. And one only has to have one or two kids to know that wrangling more than one is a major challenge. And so I think the intuition behind tutoring is very simple. When you create a context for adults to work one-on-one or in small groups with kids, it reduces the dimensionality of the problem. And it also I think creates an opportunity to form closer personal connections because you can actually get to know someone. And so tutoring is a vehicle that's really just kind of built on the foundation of what is a long history of mentorship in the community of one-on-one private tutors throughout times of antiquity working with students.

And so the idea is that, well, rather than trying to potentially teach to the kind of middle of the distribution of skills in a class or to differentiate in a way that addresses students' learning needs where they are. Can we come up with more of a spectrum of instruction within public schools where we continue to deliver the group instruction that is kind of the hallmark of how we've designed education today, but we also move the needle on that distribution towards the more personalized end as well, so that it compliments what we could achieve in group instruction.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

I'm going to read a quote from the beginning of your article. So our premise is that the US public education system substantially under invests in individualized instruction and academic mentoring. Individualized instruction is among the most effective education interventions ever subjected to rigorous evaluation. Decades of research on child development demonstrate the central role that positive relationships play in fostering students' motivation, self-regulation, self-identity and psychological wellbeing. I'm wondering if you could just elaborate on that. And I'm thinking about

whether it's a principal or a superintendent, why should they sit up and pay attention to the evidence that you're pointing to?

I mean, I think there's a lot of interventions. If I'm an educator or a part of the education system, why should I pay attention to this and think about this seriously?

Matthew Kraft:

It's incredibly hard to move the needle on things like student performance on standardized tests. And of course there's been really exciting studies that have found that this policy or that intervention or that program really were impressive. But what happens more often than not is we try that approach again and it kind of underwhelms the next time or another context, it doesn't quite deliver the same bang for the buck. And so one of the things that we do in research is we try to ask, well, what is the weight of the evidence across the full body of research that's been conducted? And when we do that in studies like meta-analyses, we start to see the forest for the trees for what rises to the top in terms of consistently delivering and supporting student learning.

And in my decade plus of research, the evidence from meta-analyses of rigorous, randomized controlled trial evaluations of tutoring stand out as one of the most compelling bodies of evidence we have on an education intervention to improve student achievement.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Can you just describe maybe some of the mechanisms at work here? Why do you think tutoring is so effective and why is it maybe more effective than say, reducing class sizes or extending the school day?

Matthew Kraft:

When you think about class size reductions, I think one of the key things we have to ask is what's different about the instruction because of the change in that setting? And a change from say, 25 to 22 students will be very unlikely to meaningfully change the way a teacher delivers their instruction. On the margin maybe a little bit more small group time, a little more one on one check-ins. That's not to say class size isn't important, it's just to say in contrast to that, what one does in a small group, two to one, three to one or even one-on-one setting is a very different type of pedagogy. It is about asking students question, the amount of student talk, the teacher talk can completely flip and it also gives a tremendous amount of at bats for the student.

They can try something, immediate feedback. Try it again, immediate feedback. And so I think that there's a combination of both a major change and pivot in the pedagogical exchange between students and teachers. And this is more of a hypothesis for which there isn't as strong evidence yet, that tutoring is about the relationship between the tutor and the student. And that when that context allows for a caring connection between the two, it can help to motivate the student to want to engage, to be able to live up to the hope and expectations of their tutor. To be able to really have that aha light bulb moment and see the instant gratification of their tutor be like, "We got this. We're making progress."

And so I think there's a unique combination of both kind of much more individualized pedagogy and that personal connection that helps to motivate and get those students who may in a larger class setting kind of fade into the background.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

So now I'm curious if you could describe to me the big picture. So in the article you talk about changing how people even kind of conceive of tutoring in schools that in a lot of cases people will think of tutoring

as this kind of add-on temporary intervention, somebody needs help with this specific thing. And you're thinking about this as, I think long-term maybe expansion in public schools that would probably take place over a long period of time. I'm wondering if you could describe that bigger picture and how you are thinking in this article at least and what you would think would be almost an ideal way that this would happen and why?

Matthew Kraft:

Tutoring is something that all of us have heard of many of us may have experienced in some form. And more often than not, we think about it as this kind of afterschool program that is kind of just childcare and there's some college students who are helping out and they may help us get our homework done. And that's kind of the tutoring that we have in our mind's eye. That has a role and a place. But if we're talking about tutoring as a tool to accelerate learning, I think we need to really reframe it as something that we integrate into the school day as another approach to the spectrum of instruction that we deliver inside of public schools. And that's important because this current moment isn't the first time that our country has embarked on an ambitious effort to scale tutoring nationally.

We can look back to the efforts under President Clinton to build America Reads through this kind of huge volunteer army of community members who would go into schools and help students develop their literacy skills. And then we can also look at the efforts under No Child Left Behind to fund supplemental educational services that were largely dollars that families could use to contract with private tutoring companies that schools would help to facilitate. And those happened after school outside of the school day. For various reasons, neither of those two initiatives really were sustained or showed much evidence of moving the needle for students.

And part of what I think the pivot here around tutoring that I'm hoping we can kind of spark during this post pandemic moment is that it's not seen as this add-on, it's not seen as this kind of by the goodwill of the community through volunteers. It's just part of the infrastructure that we are going to integrate into schools. And I think the analogy that's helpful is to remind ourselves that back in the 1960s, kindergarten was not a regular feature of our public school system. We did not do K to 12, we did one to 12.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

And that took decades to roll out to really have the full expansion of public kindergarten. And now we're seeing, I think, early childhood investments similarly. Again, that's taking time, right?

Matthew Kraft:

That's right. And so having that larger perspective helps us to recognize that of course, we didn't stand up nationwide tutoring overnight in the wake of the pandemic, nor would we, I would argue, want to have because it's going to take buy-in at the local level. And so some places are more interested and more kind of ready to take on that challenge and they've been innovating. And I think through that slow and gradual grassroots kind of growth. There'll be communities that look next door and say, "Hey, that seems like a good program." And like kindergarten over time, there may be enough momentum that states start to kind of provide the resources in a more sustained way to formalize that and integrate it into the school day.

So that's my real hope is that we think about this over the long term, decades worth of a evolution of our public school system.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

In your paper, you described some specifics. So you started getting into some of the specifics of how you would think about actually implementing this. And I'm curious if you could talk about some of those. What are the trade-offs you see? What do you think would be the main goals of such an initiative? What would you be trying to achieve?

Matthew Kraft:

The decentralized nature of our public education system in the United States creates real advantages. There's a lot of flexibility in local control for school districts to innovate and try new things. And at the same time, it creates substantial challenges for taking a educational initiative to scale in a consistent way. We need to be very frank about the fact that tutoring is a costly educational intervention. And it's ultimately going to take federal dollars to make this sustainable. Now, the role of the federal government in our public education system is in terms of funding quite small relative to the revenues that we generate at the state and local level.

But I think if we're serious about moving in this direction, the federal government will both have a funding role that will be important as well as a kind of convening role for helping to bring together the different school districts and states and tutoring organizations and researchers who are involved in this work to develop a community of practice for continuous improvement. And so I see that as something that the federal government already has started to see and explore and trying to leverage the different federal aid that has come to schools to encourage this type of work. And there's a lot of potential here. And you can see that in the kind of structures that exist for the different programs such as AmeriCorps or even in the Institute of Education Sciences.

The federal government has found ways to make a difference. And they do fund important things like the National School Lunch Program with multiple billions of dollars annually or its investments in Title I schools. And so this is not without precedent, but it would be a major, I think, move on part of the federal government. And the balance here is how do we make it financially feasible and provide a kind of case study evidence? Because every time I talk to a school leader or a district leader. They say, "Where are they doing this? I want to see what it looks like in practice on the ground. Where are the bright spots?" And that's in part because it's just overwhelming to say I'm going to build this new thing from scratch, kind of in homegrown way.

And so I think we need to make it easier for people and districts to engage in what this would look like in their own context.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

So in your proposal, you described that you really want to compliment classroom instruction with individualized support, and you really want to provide students with sustained relationships with a caring adult or older peer. And you have these 10 design principles. And I'd like to actually go through them and ask you almost one by one. Could you describe why they're important or what is it that they're addressing? Why do you list them as a design principal? So I would start with just tutoring being a school-wide program. Why does that matter to you?

Matthew Kraft:

That's an expensive proposition and most programs that exist right now are not that. And so I'll be clear that that's ambitious, but I think the motivation helps to crystallize the idea. When tutoring is for just a small subset of students in a school, there's less motivation to fundamentally change the architecture of the school day. You think, "Oh, well, we've got a handful of kids, let's pull them out of this class, or let's kind of keep them after that class." And I think we need to pivot to a whole school commitment to

thinking about tutoring as just part of what we do and what we [inaudible]. And so that school-wide commitment is one way to do it.

I think it also matters in just trying to skin the cat of where do we fit this time for tutoring it. I mean, that is when often the rubber hits the road. And if most or all students are getting tutored, then the sports teams are going to be like, "Well, we probably have to adjust our schedule." Instead of, "Oh, there's a handful of kids but that's not enough to adjust our whole afterschool sports extracurricular work." So it's about getting buy-in, frankly. And in some cases, not always, avoiding the potential stigma of, "Oh, you're one of those kids who gets tutored. You must be underperforming."

Dionissi Aliprantis:

It's creating this culture almost, right?

Matthew Kraft:

That's right. It's just what we do. It's not about something special or additive. It's just in this class we learn it this way, in this class, we learn that way.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

You said that you think it would be really important for tutors, well, for the tutoring itself to be with the same tutors or mentors. So it's not just that one week it's one tutor mentor and then the next week or one month one person is coming in to work with a kid, but it's a sustained kind of relationship. I'm wondering if you could describe more about the value in that.

Matthew Kraft:

A lot of the previous types of tutoring that we have seen in schools are these afterschool programs where you kind of have [inaudible], who's the counselor that's there to help out. Or private tutoring programs where they employ tutors that kind of come and go on a monthly basis and there's just no sustained connection. The evidence for those programs are weak suggesting that that may be one of the explanations. But I think as we were talking about earlier, one of the theories of action behind tutoring is this relationship based piece. And that doesn't happen unless you have a sustained opportunity to work one-on-one with the same tutor.

And that's not just about the socio-emotional side of things. We know that teachers get better as they gain experience. We know that in fact, teachers get better from work that I've done with my colleagues and others have done as well. Showing that when a teacher teaches a student over multiple years, they actually are more effective with that student. I think the same principle goes here. You get to know that kid and their strengths and weaknesses and what works best for engaging them.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

How do you think about the training of the people providing the tutoring and the mentoring? Because that would seem to be important.

Matthew Kraft:

My interest in tutoring started when I had the opportunity to be a tutor in college, but my understanding of what the vanguard of high dosage impactful tutoring programs look like was when I had the opportunity to work with Michael Goldstein and the Match Charter School, which helped to pioneer through the Match core, this kind of [inaudible] in the school day tutoring program that was

delivered via AmeriCorps members. They invested tremendous amounts of time and energy and continuously improving the program via observing tutors, giving them feedback and providing them with guidance and kind of pedagogical maps on how to approach a tutoring cycle.

They would have this kind of self building structure where one of the best tutors from their first year would stay on and they'd be the lead tutor and help develop the next cohort. And that type of thing, I think we often rush past. We're like, "Oh, let's just create this tutoring program. We'll get the tutors in here. And boom, they're off and running." It's hard work. It's not glamorous, but it's probably one of the most essential ingredients for taking tutoring programs to scale because the only way they're going to scale is by bringing in a whole bunch of folks, whether they be near peers in high school or college or the community, and they're not going to have a lot of real educational training or experience.

And so we're going to have to provide that intensively on the job. And so that's about high quality structural materials, and that's about an ongoing kind of infrastructure of support to watch [inaudible] they do and give feedback and say, "I love this. Did you think about that?"

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Another question that comes to mind when thinking about this. I mean, is this something that has been tried in any states before? I don't know, just even thinking smaller, like local governments, say a city or a large district. Have any of them tried this because maybe that would offer some guidance going forward? Because I'm just thinking about there's clearly going to be these trade-offs and whoever policymakers are that are deciding between tutoring and mentoring programs and some of the other alternatives. As we said, we think tutoring and mentoring looks like it's very effective, but it's costly.

And so when you think about the actual decision that policymakers are going to have to make. Are there any examples of these larger scale, maybe adoptions of this or something along these lines that you could point to that might offer some evidence of how things might play out?

Matthew Kraft:

Right now, we are currently undergoing that type of scaling experiment, and there's really only a handful of studies that exist that evaluate tutoring programs that are larger than a thousand students. So we just don't have a lot of evidence. That said, Texas has passed laws mandating that students scoring below proficient receive tutoring and places like Houston and Dallas and Hector County are kind of innovating around how they approach that work. And now that law did not come with a substantial amount of financial resources to make that happen. So there's challenges.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Nuances there.

Matthew Kraft:

Tennessee has also invested heavily at the state level to support tutoring. Michigan has also attempted to support districts to scale tutoring. So there's movement in that direction, but I think we're at a critical point where districts are facing this weird perverse incentive where they've got money but the money isn't going to last. And so they're like, "How do I spend money to grow tutoring in a way that I don't have to pay these incredible costs of restructuring my whole education system and then if the money goes out, tear that all down and go back to what we started with?"

And so I think there's not quite the infrastructure to support this kind of fundamental change to how we deliver education as much as there is money to support tutoring as kind of a scaffold that we build up

around the unchanged core of public education. And my worry is that if and when that money runs out, we just take down that scaffold and go back to the status quo.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

You talked about high schoolers, and I would even think maybe the middle schoolers depending on who the target mentees would be, but I actually think that it really helps the mentors as well. I'm curious if you could speak to that maybe from your own experience. And I think that to me, it almost feels there's a couple of things that it does for kids. One is I think it instills this sense of civic pride and civic service I think is just a good thing. And the other thing is I think it gives kids a sense of agency and this consciousness that their example matters for other kids, that they're able to teach other kids, that their effort in their own education matters.

And so I'm curious if you could speak about that because I think that's something where it might be perceived as maybe a cost saving measure, but I actually would think of it as maybe something that could even kind of increase the benefits of the program.

Matthew Kraft:

[inaudible] a clear theory of action here for how being a tutor would benefit a high schooler, a middle schooler, a college student. We have some evidence from the psychology literature about one's own sense of self and the self-actualization of being a mentor and a role model that you kind of embody that when you're set up to act in that way. We've got less evaluation based evidence of the impact of that on students' life outcomes or career trajectories or academic achievement. But there's a real hope here that we could develop a core of tutors that are from local communities that would serve to potentially create a pipeline of future educators that are more diverse than our current workforce in K to 12 public schools.

And that have a much better understanding of the local community and background and culture of the students that they work with because they are from that same community and went to school there. And so I think there's a real potential there. I think there are programs such as the Read Alliance in New York City that pay high schoolers to tutor, and it's a job and it's real work experience. And you not only make money, but you can put an important line on your CV. And so I think there's real kind of workforce benefit potential as well. And so I hope that this kind of peer element of taking tutoring to scale grows as a key feature.

I think it's one of the least developed ones because it takes a lot of work to build that infrastructure. You can't just kind of take someone out of the community and hire them and off and running, but I'm excited about it.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

So you said that there are some examples of taking tutoring to scale, and I was wondering, are those the cases of the investments that you were talking about earlier with Texas, Houston, Tennessee, Michigan? Or are there other more specific kind of scaling experiments or pilots that we should know about that are ongoing and are there any early results? What is there to know about that?

Matthew Kraft:

So there's been some randomized controlled trials evaluating programs like the Minnesota Reads and Minnesota Math Core programs, other programs like Reading Partners. And evidence based on what was the kind of program that grew out of the charter school that I mentioned earlier, Match Charter School, a program called Saga Education that delivers this high dosage tutoring. Randomized controlled

trial evaluations of those programs which are serving thousands of students have shown that it can be effective at that scale. And I think that's really encouraging. What's different about those settings and what's happening now is we are looking to develop tutoring in a way that is frankly financially sustainable.

And what often happens is districts for all the right reasons are motivated to serve as many kids as they can and extend tutoring to them. And so then you start to kind of modify programs. Well, we could do one-on-one, but three-on-one is more kids as is six on one and well...

Dionissi Aliprantis:

10 on one.

Matthew Kraft:

Exactly. Or we could do tutoring for every kid four times a week or for twice as many if we just did it two times a week. And so you can see the kind of slippage there between the kind of core model where the efficacy and evidence lies and what starts to be delivered. And so it's less that it's impossible to take the programs that have been shown to be effective to scale as much as it is there are intense pressures to modify programs as you scale given a budget constraint.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

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