

Conversations on Economic Inclusion with Charles Cox

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.

I wanted to learn more about how something called toxic stress can affect how young people develop the skills they need to enter the workforce. In a previous conversation, I learned from Dr. Andrew Garner just how vital relational health is for kids dealing with toxic stress. To understand what it means to provide that relational health, I spoke with Charles Cox, a Family Support Specialist at The Ginn Academy for Say Yes to Education Cleveland. He shared with me how his organization provides resources for disadvantaged kids to pursue their educational goals.

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 Charles Cox.

Dionissi Aliprantis

So, in the work that you do, how do you define success? And how do you try to get there?

Charles Cox

Yeah. Well, first of all, let me talk a little bit about Say Yes' mission. Say Yes was founded in 1987. It was businessman and philanthropist George Weiss who founded Say Yes. It was more so founded on the East Coast. Now obviously, they've spread out and now they're in Cleveland and its mission is to work with disadvantaged youth to give them better educational opportunities through the various services that we offer, as well as through paying actual scholarship dollars to help youth expand their educational goals or hopefully have a career.

We want to see kids go for higher education degrees and et cetera, but in Say Yes, we will support a child who wants to just get a skilled trade or go into other sectors. So, we just really want to see kids who are coming from disadvantaged backgrounds, be able to have the opportunities to go out and have success in the workforce.

Dionissi Aliprantis

So, when I think about Say Yes, I know that the college scholarship is one big part of it, but it's not as simple as just putting that money out there for students. It's not just a matter of, we have this big scholarship and that's on its own going to change everything. And so, when you think about all of the other services, can you tell me about those?

Charles Cox

Yeah. So, you led me to a very key thing that we do at Say Yes. You're absolutely right. You can't just throw money at a situation and hopefully that solves everything. You actually have to have the youth be able to graduate and take advantage of scholarships and things of that nature. And that's where a person like myself comes into the picture.

Through Say Yes, in each school building in Cleveland, we have what's called a Family Support Specialist. And that's my role. I am a family support specialist for the Ginn Academy family. Now obviously, each support specialist, because it depends on what grade level, you're in, does a little different things, but for the most part, we all kind of do the same things. And so, we understand when we're dealing with at-risk or disadvantaged families.

One of the main reasons why a lot of those youth do not take advantage of scholarships and higher education is because they lack resources or there are other barriers there in place. And so that's why they put an individual like myself to kind of coordinate those resources and walk and support those families, so that we can all ultimately help this student A, first of all, graduate. And then B, take advantage of hopefully the scholarship dollars, so that they can open up other economic opportunities.

It looks different depending on what school setting you're in. For instance, if you are a family support specialist in an elementary setting, you might not do some of the things that I do, because I think it's doubtful that you'll do career planning with second and third graders. But whether you are in an elementary or a middle school or a high school, we still have families that are in need. We're still going to have the children who have barriers and don't have access to certain things. And that's where we come in, because we help to bridge those gaps and align those parents with the supports and the resources that they need. And again, that's where my role comes and I'm not just working with the student. I'm working with the entire family.

Dionissi Aliprantis

I'm wondering how much you would say that a lot of the obstacles or barriers are very similar and how much there's just a lot of variability across children.

Charles Cox

Well for our population, what unfortunately is very similar with all of our students is the lack of resources. And often times with our student population, certain things Dr. Dionissi, that you or I may take for granted, a lot of our students, it's a struggle. And I'm talking even food, access to healthcare. I'll give you another example. We had a kid who in my building was just very mean, and we really couldn't understand what was going on with this kid, but to make a long story short, his teeth were hurting. What he understood about his family dynamic was, "What, am I going to go to my mother about my teeth? Nobody has money around here, so I just have to deal with it," right. So just to be able to get him aligned with a dentist. I have no idea what they did, but whatever they did, the kid's not as mean as he was. So, I think that was pretty good. And it could be as simple as that.

I think we don't really understand how our kids in certain communities really do not have the basics. And I remember when I sat down and I spoke with the kid, already in his mind, he just kind of knew, "Well, this is just what I have to deal with, and that's just the way it is." And I felt so bad about that, right because my daughter knows, if anything's aching, I'm going to get you what you need, and that wasn't that child's reality, right. And so that's where my role, I feel, is very important, to be able to reach out and explain to a family. And you have to understand sometimes, just because a family may be in need, sometimes people don't really always want to talk about, that they don't have, you know?

And so that's where I feel that you really have to have a lot of empathy. You really have to be able to bear yourself to a family and just let them know, "Hey, I'm here to help and I understand." I think,

because of my experience and because of my background and because of the work that I've done in the past, I understand things like being patient, because I think if someone jumped into this role and had never done any of the type of work that I've done, it could be pretty frustrating. They may be disillusioned. They may say, "I've got services for you. Why are you hanging up the phone in my face for it?" Because they may not understand.

But to be honest, oftentimes when I call some of my families, I don't get a warm reception. They oftentimes don't even want to talk to me, because they've probably had experiences with other types of agencies and services and some of those experiences may not have been so positive, right. And that's what I truly really love about my work and my agency. We really, really focus on the people, the individuals and how we can help. And we sit in our meetings and we think of different ways to really break down barriers for our families and how to reach them, because it's really all about just helping these kids, and that's my passion.

Dionissi Aliprantis

Yeah. I'm wondering if you have ideas on what some of those other experiences might have been, because I'm thinking of what you just said, where you said, "It might be frustrating for some people." And I'm thinking also at a societal level, right. It might be frustrating to say, "Wait, wait, I've got resources here." But it's maybe not as simple. Again, like we're talking about the college scholarship, or where we're talking about a lot of these circumstances where there's this human element. Money always helps, right.

Charles Cox

Money always helps, yeah but-

Dionissi Aliprantis

And you're talking about basic resources, but now we're talking about access to those resources. And so, I'm wondering if you can either talk about some of the ways that you think, people might be a little bit disillusioned or even some of the ways that you have found success in reaching out to people.

Charles Cox

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Well, the good thing Dr. Dionissi, you and I have talked before. You used the word disillusioned and I don't think that can be stated well enough. I mean, that's a really big factor. I think one of the conversations that you and I had was, unfortunately, when you're dealing with individuals from a certain community and from a certain background, there's almost this sense of hopelessness. And sometimes the mentality is, "Well, why try? It's never going to happen for us. So why try." Even with the kid with the tooth problem right, he was just cranky with me. I'm just trying to figure out what I can do to kind of assess. In his mind already, "That's not my reality. I got a bad tooth. I got to deal with it. Who is this guy with the long hair? What do you want?"

Well and even going back to the different agencies that these families are working with, and I've worked with some of these agencies and I get it, because when you're an agency and you're trying to help, you're meeting people at their worst. And I think sometimes, when you mentioned the human element, I think sometimes people don't really realize how people feel in that moment and I'm just going to be quite frank with you. I think some of our families have had some negative experiences with some of the social service agencies, because I know even when I was at children and family services, we were starting to change our philosophy, right. Yes, we're meeting families in crisis. Yes, there's some bad

things that have happened to a kid. You still have to treat these people like humans and you still have to have some empathy and you have to meet them where they are, but that wasn't always the case.

So, when you're dealing with the community that I'm dealing with, you're talking about individuals who may have not been treated so well by an agency. They may have had a bad experience. So, in their mind, "Why would I talk to you, Mr. Cox? You're just another guy from an agency." You know? And so, those are some barriers that you have to overcome. And so, you ask, "Well, how did you deal with that?" Well, patience absolutely, but you also have to be persistent. It's almost like a salesman. I think a good salesman knows, "I'm going to have to make 150 calls before I make two sales." And if he stops making the calls, he's not going to get the sales, right.

Well, it's the same deal and this is what I mean by, you'll find out what a person's really about, because I'm the guy trying to help you. I'm trying to give you these services, but I have to keep calling you. And I think humans, sometimes the human nature or that part where, "I'm not going to keep calling this family. If they don't want the help, it's ..." Well, you cannot have that mentality, right. I have to keep in the back of my mind, I'm dealing with the population that's pretty much been beat down. I'm dealing with the population, for instance, and it broke my heart. One student that I see every day and I had no idea, the prior two months, they had no lights in the house. I didn't know that, right. And this kid comes in, smiles at me every day. The empathy part, it's very, very important. You just have to remind yourself, "It's not about me. It's not about, how dare they not take my ... I'm Mr. Cox man. I'm great."

But yeah, I say that the main thing that you have to remind yourself is "if I were in their shoes." And I don't think most professionals think about it that way, because I mean, you get your master's in this, and then I got a certificate in this. And yeah, you can get all that type of training, but you have to just remind yourself, if I was in that individual's shoes, how would I feel? Would I be so nice right now? When you keep that mentality, people pick up on that.

Dionissi Aliprantis

So, we want to talk about toxic stress. There's this emerging science and evidence about how our bodies react to stress. And so, I'm curious if you could speak about some of the forms that takes with the students you work with, and then thinking about also this broader question of our social service agencies, how they respond to that.

Charles Cox

Sure. So, I'm glad that we are now speaking about and doing the research on and really looking at toxic stress because I think as far as the African American community is concerned, that's been a key factor in our early mortality rates, if you will, because now we do totally understand if the body is under a lot of stress, often and for years, that has a toll on your health. So, when I look at even our school population or other schools in our, obviously, inner city settings and the high incidence of depression, anxiety.

I think you and I were talking and I was letting you know that we had lost in our school five kids to gun violence, right? And then I shared with you, how I was going on a home visit because this particular child had not been in school. So, I was just going to try to reach out to the family to kind of see what I could do to assist the family, and I ended up driving right in the middle of a shootout and this was broad daylight and these were real bullets. It wasn't a movie set; this was a real shootout. But what it made me do when I finally got to a safe area and I reflected on what the heck just happened, you have to remember these students, they deal with this type of stuff every day. This kid, the kid I was looking for, thank goodness his house was further down the street. So, I will go back and try, but that's that kid's street, right? And these were assault weapons that these kids were shooting. And so, whether you were the guy next door, that's still on your street. That kid understands, "This is my environment." And you

have to say, "Well, what do I do about this?" I don't think people understand when you're living under that type of stress.

So, you have to look at all these factors. If I'm a kid and I'm a situation like, I'm living under these conditions. There's this violence all around me and Lord knows what's going on within the house, right, because when you know that you have to deal with stuff like that, we as humans tend to take things out on the people closest to us.

So, there is a lot of widespread anxiety and depression. I was talking to a kid and I asked him, had he ever talked to someone about possibly being depressed? And he snapped at me, "What do you talk about, et cetera, et cetera?" I said I'm angry. I don't want to kill myself." I says, "Yes but did you know, that anger could be a big sign if you're ..." And he had no idea. So, what am I saying? Our kids deal with more, sometimes within a seven-day week, as far as stress and trauma, then you and I may deal with in six months, right.

Dionissi Aliprantis

Or six years, right?

Charles Cox

Or six years, right. I mean, I know where my next paycheck is coming from. I know that just as I've left one agency and I've been able to go, I know that I have a certain skill set that's pretty marketable. I mean, there's certain things I'm not so concerned about. Whereas in my kids' households, not so much.

Dionissi Aliprantis

The other question I had is just this question of, when you think about supporting kids dealing with this kind of toxic stress, what are the levers we can pull individually, as groups, as organizations, as an entire society? I'm thinking of the kid on that street. What can we do? What can we as a society? What can you and I do for that kid?

Charles Cox

Well, that's why I got love for your doc, because first of all, I appreciate what you're trying to do. And I think that those of us who have attained at least a certain level of education, a certain level of success for ourselves, we have to understand that- you mentioned nurturing. Your definition of nurture, and maybe one of my student's definition of nurture, that's two totally different things, right. And I think we all need to have a baseline.

Let's all agree that we're not the experts on things we don't know anything about. We don't live in their shoes. So, one thing I try to not do, is to act like I'm the expert on their life. I have to understand their life experience. So, meeting people where they are, because we could go and try to push some things on them, "Oh no, look, I want to give you this nurture. I want to give you this and that." And the kids will be, "Man, that's corny. I don't need. What? What are you talking about?"

So anytime you're writing a program or anything of that, you really do need to have people who can assist you, who know how to meet people where they are. And if you don't get that, I don't care how much money you put into a program. I don't care how many shiny glossy brochures and how cute it looks. If you're not meeting people right where they are, and if you do not know how to communicate with the people that you're working with, you're going to be frustrated, wondering, what are we doing wrong?

Dionissi Aliprantis

You're talking to that kid, and now I can think about you personally, but also, I'm thinking about a school. What would make your pitch to that person, your appeal to that person, what would make it more effective and make that person more likely to kind of come back to thinking more about their career and their long-term employment, rather than in these negative terms. What would make that pitch more effective? How do you try to make that pitch? What would you need?

Charles Cox

Well, clearly the transition housing piece. I obviously wish I had more resources there. But what I try to do, Dr. Dionissi is that a lot of kids think that it's college or bust. And one of the main things, thank goodness, we have found four new programs for just skilled trades. And one of the things that I really ... You're going to need more skilled tradesmen than you're going to need people with four-year degrees. That's just the bottom line, right. And sometimes our kids don't make that connection. A lot of them, believe it or not, don't even see that a skilled trade as a viable career move. So, there's that level of just not knowing within the community. They just don't know. They don't know what's out there for them, right.

So, the pitch that I try to use with my kids is, first things first, you have a right to look at, what are you interested in? And do you know, I get the blankest looks sometimes because, just to show you, like my daughter knew, because I was saying it to her, she was three years old, "What do you want to become?" So, she knows she had to think about something. Do you know, I sit across from 16-, 17-year-olds and I go, "Well, what do you want to do?" And they'll give me this blank look, "I don't know." "So well, have you ever thought about it?" "No." And they're not lying. This is the honest to goodness- "Yeah, I have no idea."

So, one thing I try to sell them on is, even if you weren't the best student in school, you still have the right. You still should look at what is important to you and what would you like to learn more about? What would you like to do? Do you know so many of our kids have not even had an adult sit down with them and have that discussion, "Hey, what would you ..."? Again, this is one of those things' doc, where I'm saying, certain things you and I would do just naturally and we take for granted, "Oh, that's probably happening in that household as well." It's not. Certain things we take for granted; certain conversations are not happening in our kids' homes. It's just not. So, my pitch to a lot of them is, "Do something that you feel you can do in your heart. You have a talent, you have a skill, let's tap into that," right. And there's almost like, I see the light bulb go off.

And then what I say to them, Dr. Dionissi, I say, "All right, I'm going to give you a small homework assignment. It's not major." Because at the end of the day, the good thing about their generation, from their phones and laptops and even from their watches now, you can Google anything. And I make a kid, I say, "Pick five things that you think you're good at or if there's five things you think you might be interested in and I want you to report back to me. And don't report back to me with just the names of the careers. I want you to give me a little bit about each one."

"Well, how would I do that?" "You're going to Google it. I want you to know more about it." And the reason I'm doing that, I'm doing some career planning with them. I tell them, "And as you read about this career or job that you may be interested in, think about, can you see yourself doing it?" I say, "You may be thinking, I think I'm interested in this and then you do some research on it, you go, "Well no, I don't think I like that." And I told them, "That's fine." But I tell them to pick five things and then we report back and we go over it.

So that's where I start with a lot of our kids, because a large percentage of my youth have never thought about the future. When I'm walking out the door and there's people shooting outside and this dude, I know this dude sell drugs. I mean, you're not thinking about the future, unfortunately.

Dionissi Aliprantis

What I'm hearing a lot from what you're saying is— a little bit of time with the right person, at some of these critical junctures can really change people's career or educational trajectories.

Charles Cox

That is correct.

Dionissi Aliprantis

So, I'm glad you're there.

Dionissi Aliprantis

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