



## EPISODE 1

# What is SEL and How has it Evolved?

### LUCAS HELD

Welcome to the Wallace SEL podcast series. I'm Lucas Held, director of communications at The Wallace Foundation, and I'm delighted to have you join us today. Today, and for two further episodes, we'll be delving into an important area of our Learning & Enrichment portfolio at Wallace, social and emotional learning or SEL, as it's known. And we're thrilled to have with us two guests today. First is Dr. Stephanie Jones and Dr. Jones is one of the foremost researchers in social and emotional learning in the country. She works at Harvard University's Graduate School of Education, where she is the Gerald S. Lesser Professor of Early Childhood Education. And she also leads the EASEL Laboratory, which stands for ecological approaches to social-emotional learning. And the EASEL lab explores the effects of high quality, social-emotional interventions on the development and achievement of children, youth, teachers, parents and communities, using rigorous quantitative and qualitative methods.

Dr. Jones is a very sought-after speaker and advisor. She was a member of the Council of Distinguished Scientists for the National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development, which was convened by the Aspen Institute and released its final report in 2019. She's a recipient of the Grawemeyer Award in education for her work with Edward Ziegler, who is considered the Father of Head Start, and Walter Gilliam on the book, *A Vision for Universal Preschool Education*, published in 2006. She serves on numerous national advisory boards and expert consultant groups related to social-emotional development and child and family anti-poverty policies, including serving on the national boards of two nonprofit organizations, Parents as Teachers and Engaging Schools. She is a consultant to program developers, including for Sesame Street, and has conducted numerous evaluations of programs in early education efforts.

We're also joined by Thelma Ramirez, who is a co-author of a new publication *Navigating SEL from the Inside Out, Second Edition*. Thelma is a research assistant at the EASEL Lab where she primarily supports the SEL analysis project. And prior to working at the EASEL

Lab, she served as the program director for the Oklahoma Serves AmeriCorps Program, where she partnered with 21 nonprofit agencies throughout the state of Oklahoma to increase academic engagement through in- and out-of-school programming, including arts education, equestrian therapy, academic tutoring and mentoring. Thelma has experience in early education, having served as a program supervisor and parent educator in home visiting programs that support families with prenatal to five-year-old children. And her research interests include culturally relevant education and engagement of families in social-emotional learning.

So with that, let me turn this over to the two of them with a basic question. And that is that we've all read about SEL recently in the wake of, or as we crawl out of perhaps, the COVID-19 pandemic. And Stephanie, I wonder if you could first define SEL for us and maybe you and Thelma could speculate on why you think SEL has become such a focus after a year of online learning and this jump back into in-person teaching.

**STEPHANIE JONES**

Well, first, thank you, Lucas, for such a lovely introduction. It's an honor to be here. It has been an absolute delight to work with The Wallace Foundation on this guide and other projects. It's also an absolute delight to work with Thelma and our whole team at the EASEL Lab on this guide and other projects related to SEL. So, so great to be here. I'm so glad we're talking about this today. And I can go two ways when defining SEL. I could go technical and start with, you know, the skills and competencies are these, and these, and these, or I can go into a place that really evokes what SEL is. I feel like doing that so that's what I'm going to do, if that's okay with you.

**LUCAS HELD**

Let's do it. We can always come back to the technical.

**STEPHANIE JONES**

Always. The technical will always be there. So when I talk about SEL to anybody I typically start by asking my family members, the audience, my class, whomever to cast their head into a classroom. And it could be an early childhood classroom. It could be a high school algebra class. It could be my own class on developmental insights. It could be actually a group sitting around a table talking about a problem or eating dinner together. And so you just imagine that group. And typically there's an adult and there are a number of children or youth or adults. There are other people in the setting. And everyone is engaged in a task. I'm going

to tell you a tale of one particular task but you can imagine all kinds of others. So I'm imagining an elementary school classroom and there is an adult, a teacher and a group of children, and they are sitting together reading a book. And it could be a book that is relevant to their science curriculum. It could be a book that is relevant to any kind of instructional thing that they're doing in the classroom.

And I just imagine, what does it take for that group to engage in that task together successfully? So think about what those children need to do to hear what's happening in the book. To hear the words, to hear the meaning, to feel the experience of the characters or the actors in the book, whoever they might be. And so it takes attention. You have to be able to put your attention inside that activity and maybe shift it from one thing to another, one chapter to the next or one idea to the next. You have to be able to marshal and hold your attention. In a group, typically, you have to be able to manage your behavior. You can't be bumping everybody all the time because that's going to disturb their experience of the reading of the book. You have to be able to understand, experience and manage the emotional world because emotions come up in books. They come up in interactions, they come up in conversations. So you have to be able to sort of have a sense of "What's the emotion that's happening for me right now?" What am I seeing in this character, in the book? And how does that make me feel?" Maybe it makes me feel like jumping up and down but I know I can't do that while we're doing this book thing because I'm supposed to learn about what's in the book. So there's a whole emotional world that is active right at that moment.

And then the child, the youth, the person needs to feel a connection and a sense of trust with that adult, right? I believe and I know that you value that I'm here. That you value my opinion, if I'm going to share it with you. That I trust what you're telling me is something that I need to learn and I feel safe with you. Like managing those relationships or engaging in relationships is something that's embedded in that task as well. So the technical is all of those things. The kind of, the felt experience is like we can imagine any kind of interaction that demands some set of those kinds of skills, those experiences, those attributes, those habits. So that's really what SEL is.

**LUCAS HELD**

Very striking, Stephanie, and it makes me wonder what brought you to SEL? I'm struck by the kind of vividness of your description as if you

were kind of reliving your experience as a child in a classroom. So I'm just curious, how did you come to SEL?

**STEPHANIE JONES**

That's a good question. Let's see, I started my career as a research assistant in a lab with a person who is now at NYU. His name is Larry Aber and he was at Barnard College, which is where I went to undergraduate. He ran a lab that had, he was engaged in a lot of, a lot of different kinds of research. One area in particular was young children's development, in particular toddlers. And there was a lab school at Barnard and I got involved in Larry's research. And at the beginning I spent a lot of time observing toddlers in classrooms and toddlers interacting with their teachers and toddlers interacting with their parents. And there was something so visceral, there was something so intense about these interactions. Toddlers, we know are, can be, you know, crazy in the most wonderful way. But their experiences are intense and they are moving from, you know, domains of safety to the world of exploration. So there's lots of, there's actually a lot of SEL inside those interactions, of course.

And as I pivoted my work, as I went along in my trajectory and began to think about how these kinds of things play out in schools, it became clear to me that conversations were so often about the things that weren't, that I wasn't seeing in schools. Meaning I would see an interaction that demanded all those things I described before but the conversation about what was happening was either about how kids were doing academically and engaging with instructional materials, or about bad behavior. And so it just, I thought, wow, there's this whole world that's so central to what's happening in this setting and where, who's talking about it? It's obviously really critical. So I guess that would be the pathway in. If you could draw a straight line, that would be it.

**LUCAS HELD**

That's a fascinating story. As I'm listening to you, you're describing a kind of disjunction between what you were seeing and the discourse, which sounds like mostly was in the realm of the cognitive, mostly in the realm of academic learning. And you were seeing them somehow fuse together or at least traveling together. I want to come back to the question of sort of how the field emerged but first maybe ask you, Thelma, how did you become interested in social and emotional learning?

**THELMA RAMIREZ**

Right out of college, I actually went into teaching. So I did AmeriCorps for a year to see if it was something that I was interested in doing long-term and decided to stick around. And then taught for a couple more years after that. And I found that a lot of the conversations that I was having with parents outside of the classroom really had to do with these social and emotional and behavioral issues. And I really enjoyed working with parents in general to talk about what they were doing at home that could potentially help us in the classroom. And because of those conversations and the relationships that I developed with families, I decided to look into parent education. And so then in parent education, you end up working with children who are a lot younger, so it's before they get to school. So after doing parent education, I decided to go back to grad school and ended up at the Lab working with Stephanie. So that was, that was my trajectory.

**LUCAS HELD**

That's really interesting. And your comment about parents really fits into this ecological approach that we've spoken about. So, Stephanie, you've sketched out your own fascinating professional journey where you felt there was a kind of missing piece in the, in the conversation. Tell us a little bit about how SEL began as a kind of discipline.

**STEPHANIE JONES**

So I've been thinking about this, this question, a fair amount. And my hunch is that those of us who are working in this field might characterize its origins and its current state and its own trajectory in different ways. We'd probably largely organize around a couple of common themes but my guess is that we would describe it in slightly different ways. And I think what happened in the sixties and the seventies and with the formation of CASEL is that this area has sort of become more explicit. It has emerged as not just a discipline but a set of tools and practices and, you know, direct and explicit work that can happen in the classroom. And in a sense, really be direct about supporting these skills explicitly as opposed to sort of in a way that is maybe covert or embedded in practice.

And so I think that that's the, that's the evolution. It's from kind of maybe assumed and inside to explicit, intentional and direct. There was a period where, where we began thinking about how testing, spending a lot of time on testing is a way to ensure children are on track or that we are aligning our instructional practices toward what they need. And that, that I think crowded out a lot of the momentum toward weaving in more explicit work on children's social and emotional skills as a support for

learning. I think that that took it off track and in a way elevated the need for it and the kinds of opportunities it presents. So, you know, education reform efforts that have taken different forms over time have intersected with this general pattern of going from like, this is something that's inside teaching to something that is now really explicit and part of how we do the work of teaching in classrooms and building experiences in schools.

## **LUCAS HELD**

You've described a kind of movement from a moment where SEL was implicitly incorporated into education to being crowded out a bit through the standards-based accountability movement and now reemerging. Do you see academic learning and social and emotional learning in conflict? Or should we, how should we consider those two? Some might say, "Well, there must be a tradeoff there because there's a limited amount of time in the school day." How do you think about that? And, Thelma, perhaps after, I would love to hear your thoughts on that as well.

## **STEPHANIE JONES**

You know the way I think about it is that all of these parts are inside of a whole child and are interwoven all the time. Like they're a part of every interaction. So, so that's one thing. Like in the child, all of this is happening. When they're in the school and when they're not in the school. In the adult, all of this is happening. When they're teaching or when they're living their life outside of their teaching. So, in practice though, I think that one of the challenges has been that building in an intentional and explicit focus on these skills is something that is taught and practiced and engaged with in schools has presented a challenge about time and when do we do what. And, you know, with a fixed system, if you put something in, something comes out. And that's a real challenge. Like that's a, that has been a conversation that has been around as long as I've been, in my 20 years engaging in this field that has been a big part of the conversation.

I don't think we really need to have that conversation anymore because we know, we know that in the child, all of these components are working actively together. We know from two to three decades of research that if we spend time explicitly, even if it's short periods of time building children's SEL skills, we get a boost to their SEL skills, their wellbeing, their mental health and their academic skills. So the time, even small, is worth it. And there are innovations in SEL practice that push us to think about how do we, how do we make it explicit and woven into the instructional work that we are doing so that it isn't like we're doing SEL on Tuesday, and because we're doing it on Tuesday, we have to take

out art or something like that, which feels silly because we don't have to do that. And we know that learning demands these things from kids and adults. So why not take advantage of that and get intentional about it rather than just sort of leaving it to the side.

**LUCAS HELD**

So, Thelma, what are your thoughts? Is this kind of an imaginary conflict that is being waged between the emotional world of a young person and the ability to learn?

**THELMA RAMIREZ**

You know, I think that's an interesting question. Certainly, I think I absolutely understand when teachers, you know, are presented with this big box of new SEL curricula and they're told now you have to do this. Because it's true that they have, you know, they don't have enough time now to do, to cover the typical academic subjects. So I don't know that it's an imaginary issue but, absolutely, I think, I totally agree with everything Stephanie was saying. I think it's, it's time that's really well spent. And it's typically, you know, whether you do it explicitly and you actually do it intentionally and you're working on an SEL curricula or you're working on these practices. Or whether you do it implicitly, it's happening in the classrooms. There's so many more disruptions that will be happening, you know, during our math time and our science time and all of these other times. So I think that that's something that continues to be an issue in the classroom. I know that when, whenever we go in and do trainings and set this up, a lot of the barriers ended up being time. And so we need additional support for teachers. And I think there has to be buy-in and understanding of what this is, you know, beyond just the teacher. So that means administration really needs to get on board and understand that it's going to be time really well spent.

**LUCAS HELD**

Well I would just note, I think we had a bit of an SEL moment here, if you will. When my kind of dichotomous question of whether this was imaginary or not was kind of exploded. And you said, look, teachers really are under terrific time pressure. And so I think this actually is a nice setup for our conversation next time when we will talk about the importance of high quality implementation of SEL so that the time spent actually makes a difference. So I appreciate the respect that you're giving to teachers who are really in the trenches of the classroom under great pressure to produce academic gains.

Maybe let's turn now to or come back to this question of why, why SEL now? So we've come off this just disruptive and emotionally terrific, terrifically dispiriting year with COVID and going back into in-person learning. Why SEL now, why is it so important and what are the special challenges related to COVID and coming out of COVID?

**STEPHANIE JONES**

I think that SEL has become sort of very visible in everyone's minds this year in part because of all of the disruption. And that disruption has taken different forms for different people. But I'm thinking about in particular two types of adults: educators and parents. So educators who build close and connected and important relationships with children, the children in their classrooms over what is really quite a long period of time, saw that relationship completely transformed and disconnected. And in that disconnection is revealed the absence of the thing, right? So we suddenly, this thing that was kind of woven into how we do our work was broken and it became so apparent how important it was all along. And so I think that that got a lot of people thinking about, wow, this is a key to how the instructional work happens in my room or with my children, and it's gone and I need that thing in order to do the academic work of the classroom. And so I think it became very present. I think for parents something similar, which is that many parents most are, were suddenly at home with their children, engaging in their work and becoming a kind of a proxy teacher of their children, or at least a facilitator of their academic learning while at home. And just that dynamic surfaces all kinds of social and emotional demands and tensions. And so I think it became very visible for parents as well.

The other thing about this kind of whole body of skills is that they're quite susceptible to experiences of stress and disruption. And so, so for young people and for adults who are experiencing stress, this kind of stuff becomes ever present and is challenged. And so I think that that's another way that we've all been experiencing our social-emotional life slightly differently since this happened. On the other hand, social-emotional strategies and supports are a key way to disrupt the, kind of, the relationship between stress and experiences of anxiety, depression, frustration and so on. And so, as we, as we have been, I guess, heading back into school, children and adults are bringing those experiences with them and social and emotional supports and strategies are one really central way to support everyone as they kind of navigate the coming back together and all of the complexities of what that is now. There's lots of rules in place, there's lots of procedures, there's lots of things that are

happening and there's lots of ongoing anxiety. So, so I think it's just been like elevated in its importance and in the opportunity it presents to help us all kind of continue to get through this.

**LUCAS HELD**

And that's fascinating to point to both the absence of the kind of connections that are naturally in a classroom and also the emotional impact of the pandemic. Thelma, are you seeing increased interest from the schools that you're working with in SEL?

**THELMA RAMIREZ**

Yes, absolutely everything that, that Stephanie was saying really holds true with the teachers that we have been working with more recently. So we just finished a project with some teachers who had been working remotely with their students for the past year. And they came in, they decided to do a summer program that was in person. And a lot of the conversations were really centered around trauma, loss, anxiety from being away from the home for the first time, for a lot of the children, and the ways to deal with that. So, you know, they had these, these big plans around working on, you know, academic kind of retention and all of these topics and quickly realized that they really just needed to spend time with each other and developing those relationships with the students. So, absolutely, I think we were hearing time and time again as we're, as teachers are going back into the classroom, that that is absolutely an area of focus and a priority.

**LUCAS HELD**

So attention to both the minds and hearts of the students. Let me close by, this podcast session with Stephanie Jones and Thelma Ramirez by asking about what your thoughts are about some suspicion, in some cases maybe even hostility, toward social and emotional learning by those who oppose it on the grounds that it really goes beyond what should be taught in schools and should be more the purview of parents, families, churches. Interestingly the Thomas B. Fordham Institute released a survey of 2,000 parents showing that the vast majority are interested in their children learning the skills. But they weren't crazy about the term, at least many of them, weren't crazy about the term 'social and emotional learning' and preferred the term 'life skills,' which was identified by a Learning Heroes survey as something that resonated with parents. So what are your thoughts about this idea that really leave this to the to the home, to the church and other settings?

**STEPHANIE JONES**

I hate to say this. I'm going to say what I said before, again, which is that this is in the classroom. So the "this" that we're talking about is part of

learning in the classroom. It's part of interactions with peers, it's part of relationships with teachers. And so, and so just in the same way, it is part of relationships with parents. It's part of relationships with those in your church, those in your community group, those in your neighborhood. Like it is, it is inside relationships and interactions. And so it's hard. I just have a hard time seeing how it, how it can't be in every place. It can't only be in one place because it is part of our humanness and our human interactions. And so, so I think that if we, if we shifted our frame a bit to think about how this is a set of skills and competencies that enable and support learning and interactions and relationships, then we can all see how it sits inside all the settings where people interact and learn and grow. And so I don't see how it becomes the purview of one person or another because it's part of every interaction that we have with anybody.

## **LUCAS HELD**

So if you want children to learn and grow in all the settings, it's worth thinking about both their learning and their emotional life in all those settings as well. Well this has been a terrific conversation with Stephanie Jones of the Harvard Graduate School of Education and director of the EASEL Lab, and Thelma Ramirez, who is a research assistant at the EASEL Lab. Thank you for joining us for this first episode of the Wallace SEL podcast series, and Stephanie and Thelma and I are looking forward to our next conversation, which will be focused on what high-quality SEL actually looks like in practice, in practice in schools, afterschool programs and beyond. Thank you for joining us and we'll hear you and see you next time.