



## EPISODE 2

# High-Quality SEL and the New Navigating SEL Guide

### 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. This is the second of three episodes exploring social and emotional learning with Dr. Stephanie Jones and Thelma Ramirez. Dr. Jones is one of the foremost researchers in social and emotional learning in the country and is based at Harvard University's Graduate School of Education, where she is Gerald S. Lesser Professor of Early Childhood Education and directs the EASEL Lab, which stands for ecological approaches to social-emotional learning. And I'm also pleased that we're joined by Thelma Ramirez, who is a research assistant at the EASEL Lab, and the two of them were authors of a new guide, or I should say a guide in a new second edition, which is titled *Navigating SEL from the Inside Out, Looking Inside and Across 33 Leading SEL Programs: A Practical Resource for Schools and OST Providers; Revised and Expanded Second Edition*, with this time a preschool and elementary focus. The guide is available on Wallace's website at [wallacefoundation.org](http://wallacefoundation.org) under social and emotional learning.

So welcome, Stephanie, and welcome, Thelma, and thank you both for joining me today. So one point that the two of you emphasize in the guide, *Navigating SEL*, is quality. And I'll just read a brief portion of the introduction. You write, quote, "There is a strong body of evidence to suggest that school-based Pre-K and elementary school SEL programs and SEL-related programming in afterschool settings are making a meaningful difference in children's lives. However, even among the highest quality evidence-based approaches to SEL, implementation plays a critical role in program impact and effectiveness. Multiple studies indicate that high-quality implementation is positively associated with better student outcomes." And you added moreover that, "inconsistent, ineffective, or disorganized approaches to SEL may lead to less powerful results or even negatively impact staff morale and student engagement." So with that kind of as a jumping-off point, tell us a bit more, Stephanie, about why quality matters and what it means.

**STEPHANIE JONES**

Thank you for having us. I'm really excited to talk about the guide and the kinds of things that it has in it and distills for those who would like to look through it. You did highlight a key element and just to unpack that a tiny bit. We do have a fair amount of research now that tells us when we implement SEL programs in schools or in preschools or middle schools or high schools, we see a demonstrable difference in SEL outcomes, but also in some cases in academic outcomes. In nearly every study there is clear evidence that when programs are implemented in the way they were designed to be implemented, so with fidelity, and in greater doses, so with more kind of touch points with those in the school, kids and adults, the impacts are greater. This is not new to SEL. This is something that we see in educational reforms and interventions of different types across learning domains.

So, so it leaves us with this question of like, "How do we ensure what we're doing is of high quality and of sufficient dose?" Meaning that we're doing enough. And, and that's a real challenge in the field right now, as it is in many other sectors. And it really means sort of going back to some of what we talked about in our last episode. It means building buy-in among those who are participating. So bringing along those who are really going to be engaged in the work. And building the buy-in of educators and other staff in the school: parents, community members, leadership. So really building everyone's commitment to doing the work. Being clear and honest and real about the time. Like making sure there is the time available for those who are enacting SEL curricula or strategies or support. Giving them the real time to do it, so, and do it well. And then providing different kinds of supports to ensure that those who are implementing really know how to do it. That they have someone they can go to to ask a question of practice or a technical question about a particular lesson or facet of any particular programs. There needs to be real and genuine supports for educators to do the work. I would say a fourth thing is that we need to get a little more innovative about, in how we design SEL practices for schools and other settings. And I think we've followed one kind of model for a long time, which is scope and sequenced curricula. And our guide really goes deep inside many of those wonderful curricula. We need those but we also need other kinds of options that allow educators to, you know, pick and choose what's going to suit their particular needs in their classroom at that time, and really be doable inside the spaces that are available in a classroom.

So in our work in the EASEL Lab, we've been thinking about a kind of kernelized approach to social and emotional learning that we think could help us crack some of the challenges with implementation that are tied to time but also teacher choice and agency. Which is, we really need to ensure we hand over to those who are doing the work the choice about like what to do, when to suit the particular challenges they're facing in their rooms.

**LUCAS HELD**

So, Thelma, I saw you nodding your head when Stephanie talked about we need to be real about the time that this takes. Tell me what you've seen in the way of enabling high-quality implementation in school.

**THELMA RAMIREZ**

Yes, absolutely. You know, that reminded me a little bit of this project that we just finished this past summer where we really started the conversations before we even signed on to, to work with educators directly, it was with administration. And getting a really good idea of what the week looks like for teachers and what are the expectations for teachers? So we were part of the professional development for teachers for what they would be doing for the entire summer. We wanted to have a good idea of what is already expected of our teachers? How can we make it a little bit easier to incorporate what we're thinking or, you know, some of our ideas around SEL into what's already happening in their school day? And really outlining times. You know, saying, "We'd love to have, you know, 30 minutes on a weekly basis during the staff meeting be dedicated to some of the things, to some of these topics that we're going to be working with teachers on."

And so, we found that in that time that was guarded throughout the week, that is when we saw so much, you know, from our teachers. So after, you know, beyond that 30 minutes that we had on a weekly basis with teachers, it was really hit or miss. Some teachers, you know, found ways to carve out time but other teachers just had a lot going on and that's absolutely understandable. And we were able to present that information and that data back to the school leaders to show, "Thank you, thank you for letting us have those 30 minutes on a weekly basis. This is, this is what came out of it." Obviously we would've loved to have more time. But I think those little nuggets that we're able to show from even just the summer programming made a big difference to administrators and leaders. And, you know, they were able to see how valuable it was to dedicate time on a weekly basis to some of this.

**LUCAS HELD**

Stephanie, do you think that education research has paid enough attention to the quality and feasibility of implementation of programs?

**STEPHANIE JONES**

Yes and no. There's lots of data. We have a whole bunch in our lab. Thelma's chuckling because we do, we have a lot of data and many, many folks who do research in social-emotional learning and in education have these datasets. And there's the part that's about the impact. And then there's the part about what actually happened. And we often spend a lot of time over here on the impact and we haven't really distilled or mined the sort of 'what happened?' kinds of data to a sufficient degree. I think there's a real opportunity, actually, to build a sort of parallel knowledge base about these questions. About how much needs to be implemented? When are the times of day that really are the most effective for adults and for children? And are there components or active ingredients of programs that are consistent across programs that we might leverage and ensure are implemented and then allow other things to be adapted in the moment? So there's like, there's all of this information that we have hypotheses about and we actively work on them. But it's, we don't yet have this kind of deep enriched knowledge base about those things quite yet.

**LUCAS HELD**

Thelma, as you've been in the schools and watching, what are teachers telling you about, in addition to the 30-minute chunks that you spent with them, what are teachers telling you about what makes a program feasible to carry out?

**THELMA RAMIREZ**

Hmm, that's a really great question. So I think one of the things that's really great about a lot of, or all of, the projects that we work on with teachers is we always have focus groups at the end of whatever it is that we, you know, whether it's an intervention or we introduce them to the kernels. We always have focus groups to open up the space and to hear from teachers. And, you know, it's interesting because we don't, a lot of teachers immediately want to get to, "How can I help my students do XYZ?" And they're very student-focused and student-centered, which makes a lot of sense. I mean, that is why, you know, they've dedicated their lives to the education of children. And so, I think whenever there is time and effort put into their own development, whether it's, you know, understanding what social and emotional learning is. I mean, they know the practices, they do them. Maybe they don't know them as the, you know, the term 'social and emotional learning.' Whether it's just understanding more about what social and emotional learning is and the research behind it,

or even developing their own skills. When there's time dedicated to that, it's just so, so powerful.

And it's really lovely to hear from teachers how grateful they are to their administration for even setting aside time during, you know, a PD, a professional development week or whatever it is. It's always so surprising and also at the same time not. I think when I think back on my training, we had plenty of stuff around, you know, how to help with reading and all of these other topics. But I can't think of, you know, one session that was around social and emotional learning or life skills or whatever it is that we want to call it. So, you know, I think just dedicating time, starting somewhere is so important and it means a lot to teachers.

### **LUCAS HELD**

Well it's really interesting and I just want to connect that to another piece of research Wallace has invested in about effective principals. And one of the four behaviors that are linked to effectiveness is creating a culture of learning among the adults in the system, namely the teachers. So this is something that in a way it's counter-intuitive to think that, as teachers, we should leave time for our own learning in addition to focusing on our students. So that feels like a really important lesson and was one of the four markers of quality that you had mentioned, Stephanie. Turning to the guide itself, so where schools, as Thelma said, are, they're under a lot of pressure and under COVID probably that's even greater. How can a guide like this be helpful? And I do want to say that this has been one of Wallace's most popular publications, downloaded tens of thousands of times, more than 50,000, which is basically one for every two schools in the country. So this is, the proof is in the pudding, as they say. So this is useful. Any thoughts on why this is useful? And then I want to ask both of you, what's new about the second edition, what's changed?

### **STEPHANIE JONES**

There are guides to social-emotional learning curricula and programs out there. CASEL has a guide as well. This guide is slightly different in that we take a very deep and close look at what each program that's included actually focuses on. So what kinds of skills are addressed through the activities, the lesson plans, the units. And then what are the different kinds of instructional modes that are used. And in kind of getting really detailed about that for each program, and then looking across the programs, what we're offering is information to decision-makers, to education leaders, to educators, to those who are running community-based programs or out-of-school time programs, information that allows them to align what they choose with the current challenges and needs that they face. So the

information is, is detailed in a manner that is intended to enable a user to make really careful and informed decisions about what to do.

And it may be that a particular place or setting is really focused in one domain of SEL and really wants to work there. And so, they might choose an approach that really emphasizes that domain. It could be that the other kinds of instructional work that are happening in that setting line up with the instructional approach of another particular program and that they want to choose that one for that reason. So it's really about offering detailed information that allows those using this guide and making decisions about SEL to make really careful and informed decisions. And so, I think that kind of information, coupled with the supplementary supports, the chapter on kind of distilling what SEL is, chapters on different kind of topics that are hyper-relevant to SEL work in schools, and then worksheets that are service kind of scaffolds for making those decisions. Like if you're thinking this in your setting, look here and compare across this column or that column. If you're thinking about this in your setting, look here to make your decisions. So I think that it's the combination of things in this particular guide that people find useful.

**LUCAS HELD**

Thelma any thoughts about that you might've heard about what is it that makes this guide so useful? I think Stephanie pointed to this idea about matching programs to needs and capacity, which is another way of thinking about fit and feasibility and avoiding the sort of one-size-fits-all-here-is-what-you-must-do kind of, kind of an approach.

**THELMA RAMIREZ**

Yeah, no, I think Stephanie covered it really well. And I think one other thing that I wanted to add is that even for those educators or administrators who are already set, you know, on a program, it provides them with, you know, more information about the program. So sometimes it's just nice to see what research has been done. And there's an evidence kind of section there. We have program components. So, you know, just kind of a quick overview of what is it that, you know, my students, the school we're in or my district are actually focusing on? What are the skills that, you know, they're developing? So I think it has many, many uses.

**LUCAS HELD**

Got it. Well let's turn now to what's new. And as I understand it, they're really in a sense three new features, which might be great to cover separately. So one is Pre-K programs are now covered. Second is out-of-school time programs. And the third difference is a new section on trauma

informed SEL. So we'd like to talk about that particularly in the wake of COVID. So maybe if we could start about, start on Pre-K.

**STEPHANIE JONES**

This guide does two things. It adds a few more elementary school-focused programs, and then it adds, as you noted, a focus on preschool programs. And consistent with this notion of developmental continuity, so I'm a developmental psychologist, I can't help but bring in something developmental in every conversation. So children, you know, develop year to year and, in our view, just focusing on one slice or another doesn't honor the notion of developmental continuity and change and the whole child. So, so for us, ensuring that we're providing information to those who are using the guide that allows them to think, not only about a particular moment in time, like what is really important for a Pre-K, you know, a four-year-old, and what's really important for an eight-year-old, and what's really important for a 10-year-old and so on? Like that's, the benefit of having information about programs that span those age periods or focus in particular on one or the other, is important for those who are working with kids in the field.

So adding Pre-K was important for a developmental continuity reason, but also because so much social and emotional learning work happens in Pre-K. It is the setting where social and emotional skills, competencies, strategies and practices are truly interwoven throughout the work of the day. It is, in a sense, a funny thing because we should be in high schools looking to how Pre-K structures its social-emotional learning work in order to think about this idea of how do we integrate these two parts: the academic-focused work and the social emotional work together? So there's lots of really useful strategies, ideas, examples in Pre-K.

**LUCAS HELD**

I know we've heard about the power of early childhood education. Are young people in a sense more, I don't want to use the phrase malleable, but are they more effected by the kinds of settings that they're growing up in?

**STEPHANIE JONES**

So that early childhood period, the sort of three to five, two to six, I mean, people boundary it in different ways, is described as a sensitive period. Meaning the child's brain is growing at a rapid clip, lots of connections are being formed. And many of the kind of salient tasks of early childhood are inside the social and emotional domain. So the brain is really primed to, for a whole set of experiences during that period that are social and emotional. It's important to remember, though, that that doesn't mean that that's the

only period where all of this important learning happens. Absolutely not the case. And there's a second kind of a burst in brain growth and development in the transition to adolescence and young adulthood, which is another big opportunity to do social and emotional work because, again, the brain is really primed for it during those times as well.

**LUCAS HELD**

That's, that's terrific perspective. So let me turn to OST, which is a new section. So what are unique challenges and opportunities associated with thinking about SEL in this out-of-school time space?

**STEPHANIE JONES**

So in-school and out-of-school time settings have, have often sought alignment in their kind of practices and strategies. And there's a lot of work that happens in out-of-school time that is specific to young people's deep held interests. So in out-of-school time, there's often lots of opportunities for music, art, sports and all of these other kinds of things that engage children and youth. And there's also been an interest in seeing how social and emotional learning and supports can be found inside of those settings and aligned with the work that's happening in schools. And, you know, I might add that The Wallace Foundation has been a leader in really thinking about how to build that alignment between the work that's happening in schools and the opportunities and experiences kids are having in out-of-school time. One kind of pretty consistent finding in the world of research on programs and strategies in educational settings is that when you experience the same things, even if you experienced them in different ways, in different settings of development, in the classroom and on the sports field, you tend to do, you tend to have better outcomes than if you're only experiencing that thing in one setting. And so, there's a real opportunity to build bridges for kids between their in-school experiences and their out-of-school experiences. The kid is the same, the setting is different, but we can align their experiences across the two.

**LUCAS HELD**

So some real opportunities for bridge-building but some challenges as well. And we know the OST sector is underfunded. Well let's close by the other element that's new here, which is a focus on trauma-informed practice. What tell us a little bit about what you recommend in that domain?

**STEPHANIE JONES**

So we included a chapter in this new guide on the intersections between work in social-emotional learning and trauma-informed practice in schools. And the reason we did that is that there is, you know, underneath it all, a fair amount of similarity between those approaches. And social-emotional learning is often recommended as part of a suite of supports that are

intended to support children who have, and adults who have, been exposed to trauma. And so, we basically kind of distilled the intersections between these fields and highlighted where there are overlaps and where there are differences. And really the bottom line, you know, when you look at the two together, is helping educators be ready for, or be open to the signals that children might be expressing when they have been exposed to adversity or trauma, and they're coming out in their behavior or in their interactions in the classroom. And part of that is about being ready to see what's happening. And the other part is being ready for what can be quite intense for children and adults in the classroom.

And then, so that's a sort of set of ideas that came out in this chapter, which is support adults and help them get ready. And then the other part is support adults, like really support them in their own wellbeing. So, so adults in schools, as Thelma has so articulately said throughout our episode, this episode and the last one, adults in schools, the work is hard and there's lots happening. And in particular, in the last two years, much has happened to all of us. And educators in schools are carrying a lot of that. They're carrying it from their own life. They're carrying it in some ways for the children. And they need support to manage. It's hard work and it can be distressing and traumatizing for them. And so, part of the work of integrating SEL and trauma informed practice is drawing on what's really great about SEL, which is, in many ways, a focus on adults and linking it to this idea that adults need supports.

**LUCAS HELD**

So, Thelma, speaking of signals, it sounds like teachers might want to be ready to listen to signals from students, but also signals that they're sending themselves about the pain that they've been through as well.

**THELMA RAMIREZ**

Yes, absolutely. And I think as this work continues, especially with supporting adult mental health and wellbeing, I think there's opportunities for teachers to build communities of support and work on collective regulation and collective healing, and really thinking about ways to support each other in community and schools. I think we're certainly, you know, trying to find ways to open spaces for this in our own work with teachers. And I think there's a lot of potential for that to be something that's sustainable in schools.

**LUCAS HELD**

And interestingly, as we close this second episode of the Wallace SEL podcast series, we returned to the ecological view that so powerfully is carried out by the EASEL Lab. Today we've heard about the importance of

quality implementation the with its four elements of buy-in, honesty about time, supports for the adults, and the need for some innovations about, to match practices to the demands of the school day. And we've also heard about how the guide is not a one-size-fits-all device but really is intended to give agency and enable thoughtful choices about programs that make sense for an individual school's own particular context. So terrific conversation with Dr. Stephanie Jones and Thelma Ramirez of the Harvard Graduate School of Education and the EASEL Lab. The three of us look forward to our next conversation. Thank you.