

EPISODE 3  
The Intersection of  
SEL and Equity

**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 third of three episodes exploring social and emotional learning with Dr. Stephanie Jones, who 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 director of the EASEL Lab. And EASEL stands for ecological approaches to social and emotional learning. And we're also very pleased to be joined by Thelma Ramirez who is co-author of an important, new publication *Navigating SEL from the Inside Out, Second Edition*, which we discussed in our last episode. And Thelma is a research assistant at the EASEL Lab where she primarily supports the SEL analysis project.

So in this episode, we'll be discussing the cutting edge of SEL, culturally relevant SEL and the intersection of SEL and equity. And with that, welcome, Stephanie and Thelma, and thank you again for joining me today. So let's dive right in. In the U.S., the need to address ethnic and racial disparities within the educational system, and I should say really as part of a broader effort to help every child in America learn and have the way kind of readied for a productive and rewarding life, has become a primary focus of conversations in the area of educational equity. So help us think about the relationship between educational equity and SEL, which might not to everyone, at least at first blush, seem connected. So, Thelma, do you want to kick us off?

**THELMA RAMIREZ**

Sure. So first off, I think it's important to think about what educational equity means for the United States context in 2021. So the past two years, the Black Lives Matter movement and nationwide uprisings against police brutality led to the significant shift in conversations about how to address racial inequality and structural inequity in our school systems, in our classrooms. And as these conversations began, I think educators and staff really began to more closely examine their own practice. And we saw these, you know, conversations extend to social and emotional learning

that was happening in the classroom. And so this is kind of where social and emotional learning really enters that conversation.

And you asked specifically about the relationship between educational equity and SEL. In our work, and you'll see in the guide, is that we find that there's a lot of alignment between educational equity and social and emotional learning. And in fact, you know, high-quality SEL programs use and rely on many of the same practices that contribute to more equitable and inclusive learning environments. So practices like creating environments that are equitable and that are, you know, inclusive, building student voice and agency, cultivating respect for cultural differences, and celebrating cultural differences in the classroom. These are all practices that are part of high-quality SEL programming already and also contribute to more equitable learning environments.

### **LUCAS HELD**

Thank you, Thelma. And so let's turn to Stephanie because, Stephanie, in our first episode you discussed and Thelma discussed SEL as a kind of a, shall we say, a booster rocket to or extra propellant or pick your automotive metaphor, turbocharging academic performance. So how do you think about the relationship between educational equity and SEL?

### **STEPHANIE JONES**

So somewhat similar to the exercise we engaged with in the first episode, when I think about these two areas, educational equity and social-emotional learning together, I try and cast my head into the sort of the feeling and the meaning for the child. And, you know, for a child, when I think about what SEL experiences or supports might mean for a child, I think about a child who feels safe, as if they belong, and that they are noticed and seen. So in the classroom, ideally what we want is for every child to feel that they belong in that place, that they are safe in that place, and that those around them notice them and see them, see them for who they are and what they bring. And that's, you know, that's a core part of social and emotional learning. The supports that come along with social-emotional learning are intended to build that experience, to enable that for all the children and all the adults, I would add, who are in that setting working and learning together. In a way, educational equity, when we think about what that means for a child, is something similar. Which is that I am seen and heard here, my needs will be noticed and met, and I belong. Who I am, where I come from, I'm part of this group.

And those two, so the, part of the reason that we put this chapter together is that there's been a lot of conversation. One of the frontiers of SEL is to really talk about how these worlds come together. Where are they similar and where are they different? And what are the kinds of practices that we might find in existing SEL programs, or that we could identify and add that support this idea that is common to the both of them? Which is ideas that are central to educational equity. Of course, it's not everything, like I haven't described everything about each of these, but a part of it that is overlapping and ideas that are core to social and emotional learning. And so, that's kind of what we tried to do with this, with this chapter.

**LUCAS HELD**

Thelma, Stephanie mentioned children and youth wanting to be noticed, wanting to be seen and recognized for their assets and their needs, and also feel a sense of belonging. And as we think about equity, one of the central notions of equity is that everyone deserves to succeed and some groups for historical reasons might need different kinds of, or more support. So as we think about SEL in terms of equity, do we have any data on whether some groups are less likely to feel noticed, seen or feel like they belong in some dimensions of school?

**THELMA RAMIREZ**

I think that that field is still growing. So there's not a ton of research studies but we do have some information. So in general, the, you know, academic benefits and educational gains confirmed by SEL certainly extend to all students. And that includes students from minority groups and students of color. But what we also know is that culturally responsive, being culturally responsive in SEL programming is important and it's effective. So there is some information out there about that. And there's a lot more research on the effectiveness of culturally relevant pedagogy and culturally responsive teaching as a whole, and the benefits that that has on students from minority groups, students of color, and, quite honestly, on all students that are a part of that classroom.

**LUCAS HELD**

Got it. Is there some feeling that, you mentioned this is kind of a new frontier, was there some feeling that some students were kind of being left behind, as it were, in the area of SEL in prior years, maybe in prior decades?

**STEPHANIE JONES**

I think that there has been a perception and a reality, in truth, that on implementation that some of the expectations, strategies and structures that are embedded in SEL programs might overly or unintentionally marginalized students who struggle with things like behavior or who have

been like exposed to adversity and trauma. And that some of the expectations that I think are not actually consistent with what SEL is about or is intended to do, can be implemented in ways that increase the likelihood that certain children are going to struggle. So, so for example, expectations for lots of self-control. So, so sometimes the work of SEL can be understood as a set of strategies that are intended to control children's own behavior or give them the tools to help themselves control their own behavior. And then they can be overly and misapplied to children who might struggle with behavior. And that's lots of different kinds of kids. It can some, in some cases, be overly applied to boys and children of color.

And I think that that's where we begin to see SEL as something that can largely unintentionally marginalize certain kids in the classroom. And I say this very carefully because I think when we look at sort of the expectations and intentions of high-quality, developmentally oriented SEL programming, it's, that's not the goal. But sometimes, on implementation, that is the consequence. And so, you know, every time we design a strategy or a practice or some sort of support or prevention program, we have to think about how things play out in real settings and what are potential unintended consequences and how we can like walk those back and ensure they don't happen. So I think that that's where you were going with your question.

**LUCAS HELD**

Right. Exactly. Thelma, thoughts?

**THELMA RAMIREZ**

No, I think that, that that makes a lot of sense. And I think that the framing around, the framing that, you know, high-quality SEL programming, as it's specifically like asset-based that aligns also with, you know, equity-oriented practices in the classroom, is exactly that, right? So there's absolutely ways to, you know, start off an SEL program and have it be deficit-based. And, you know, I've had conversations with some teachers who will say, "Oh, this is, this is going to be really helpful for XYZ student." And we go back to how it's helpful for all of our students and the purpose of, you know, SEL strategies and skill building. So again, the emphasis on asset-based skill development is so, so important.

**LUCAS HELD**

Would you say, Stephanie, that in a sense equity has become kind of well incorporated into thinking about SEL and the kinds of approaches that are being developed?

**STEPHANIE JONES**

I think not yet. What actually Thelma and her team in our group did in developing that chapter and the related components in the guide was really

look closely. So, first, sort of what might equitable SEL look like, what's a good definition of it? And given the fields that are intersecting that help us understand it, define it. And then what are the kinds of practices that we would imagine would be embedded in an idea of equitable SEL? And do we see those in current SEL programs? And the answer is like sometimes, not all the time, so, and I might even say, sometimes, not very much of the time. So, which is probably a little bit more accurate to the state of things, but that, but that in our mind says opportunity is knocking. Like there are practices that can be woven back into SEL programs that do the things that Thelma was talking about, which are, you know, deeply asset-based, that affirm the experiences and the lives of the children in the room. Like bring their experiences into the room that are about, in the same way, adults own experiences and their backgrounds, bring those into the room. So, so lots of things that can be enacted that build that feeling of I belong, I'm safe here, the needs that I have will be noticed and met. Like those are, those are things that I don't think any of us would disagree with, right? There are things that we want, like we want them at work, we want them at home, certainly. And we want them for our children in the places where they are.

#### **LUCAS HELD**

As we think about equity in SEL and equity in education, more generally, it's hard to avoid the political conversation, which is around critical race theory and, in some fashions, critical race theory has been linked to notions of equity. How do you think about SEL in the context of these political controversies? And I'm wondering, how do we, how should we think about incorporating SEL given the kind of fraught national conversation? Let's start with Stephanie.

#### **STEPHANIE JONES**

I have a complicated relationship with this question because I still find myself not really understanding, this sounds ridiculous, but like not really understanding what's going on. So and the state of confusion rests, I think, in this idea that, that perhaps there's either of complete and fundamental misunderstanding of what SEL is intended to be and do. And we've talked in two episodes a lot about what that is, and I hope that that's helpful to folks who listen. The other part of it is that maybe ideas that are embedded in SEL programs that are about these key and important things that I think we all agree on – safety, belonging, having one's needs met – have been distorted to serve other purposes and sort of carrying SEL along with that. I think that those two things could be happening.

And I know that there is certainly a lot of talk about how these things go together, whether they, do they actually happen in schools? And what I've

noticed as I've, as I've encountered these conversations is that very often those who are working in schools, those who are making decisions on school boards, those who are making decisions in schools who are the leaders and decision-makers, are often understanding what SEL is and is intended to do, and trying to continue the work despite what I think is maybe a co-opted agenda of some sort. So I'll turn it to Thelma.

### **THELMA RAMIREZ**

Yeah, no, I think I've heard a lot of these conversations. And I think if, you know, parents are basing, in particular, I'm thinking about parents because I've worked with, you know, we've been working with teachers in schools and I haven't heard as much, or I haven't heard anything really from teachers in particular. And I think that's because that's exactly right, Stephanie, I think teachers have a more nuanced understanding of what social and emotional learning is. And even the fact that, you know, critical race theory is not something that would be happening in elementary schools and it's a totally different field as is like ethnic studies, which is another topic that I think has been brought into the conversation. So I haven't heard it from teachers in particular, but I think if I were a parent, and if my understanding and view of social and emotional learning was based on headlines, absolutely, you know, these fears are totally legitimate.

But again it's really, you know, I think, you know, based on my limited understanding of where this information is coming from, it's based on a misconception of what SEL is and does. And it's so important to, you know, to provide the information for parents to then make decisions. Because I think the topic of parents' rights has also come into the conversation and their role and say in what their children are taught. And I think that's, I think it's important to listen to parents, I think it's important to listen to their concerns. And I think it's important that we respond and provide the information to them so that they have a genuine, a genuine understanding of what it is that actually would be happening in the classroom.

### **LUCAS HELD**

And just to build on that, it probably does make sense to use ordinary language. You've been using language of safety, belonging, being seen, needs. These are, oftentimes when we're confronted with jargon, we can kind of fix our own, our own meaning to it. And I think it was, and it becomes very hard to define, and I think it was Nietzsche actually who said, "Only that which has never existed can be defined." So we're sort of plunged into this maelstrom. Well this has been a terrific discussion with Stephanie Jones and Thelma Ramirez of the Harvard Graduate School of

Education and the EASEL Lab. We invite all of you to explore the great insights of Stephanie and Thelma and other members of their team in the report *Navigating SEL from the Inside Out, Second Edition*. It's on the website, [wallacefoundation.org](http://wallacefoundation.org), and available free of charge. Thank you to both of you and we look forward to a conversation sometime in the future. Thank you.

**STEPHANIE JONES**

Thank you very much for having us. It was really delightful to chat with you.

**THELMA RAMIREZ**

Thank you for having us.