

DENA SIMMONS is assistant director of the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence and faculty at the Yale Child Study Center, where she supports schools to use the power of emotions to create a more compassionate and just society.

She has been a middle school teacher, teacher educator, diversity facilitator, and curriculum developer, and is a leading voice on social justice, anti-racism, and equitable social and emotional learning in teacher education.

Her writing and speaking have led her to the White House, the inaugural Obama Foundation Summit, the United Nations, TED, and beyond. She is the author of the forthcoming book *White Rules for Black People*.



# SEL AND EQUITY

‘IF WE DON’T ADDRESS THE WOUND,  
WE CANNOT HEAL’

Q&A with DENA SIMMONS

BY SUZANNE BOUFFARD

**Q: How did you get into the work you do with teachers about social justice?**

A: I always wanted to work with young people. I decided to become a teacher because my 7th-grade teacher, Mr. Dillon, pulled me aside at dismissal one day and said, “Promise me you’ll spend at least one year being a teacher.”

Before that, I wanted to be a pediatrician because I reasoned that it would allow me to help children and make money. Growing up in poverty, I knew I did not want to struggle like my mother. But his comment really sparked the idea for me that I could be a teacher.

Education in many ways has opened up the world for me, even though it didn’t always come easy, and I thought that if I became a teacher, I could open up the world for others.

I got into teacher education in grad school out of necessity. I didn’t have any

**“If we don’t apply an anti-racist lens to SEL, it has the risk of being used as a weapon, as something else Black and brown kids don’t know how to do.”**

funding, and I needed to pay rent. Once I went into teacher education, I realized the power of working with educators.

I fell in love with supporting teachers’ growth and practice and pushing them so they don’t commit harm and can create spaces where students can thrive. You are still working for students, in a sense, because you are ensuring that the people who show up in front of the classroom are going to do the best by students.

What drives my work in education is safety. When I was growing up in the Bronx, I didn’t have the privilege of safety, like so many of our young people who grow up in underresourced communities.

Then, as a high schooler, I went to boarding school, where I was one of the few students of color for the first time in my life. Now I had to worry about a different type of safety — emotional safety. I asked myself, “Am I safe to be Black in this environment?”

After getting my education and continuing to be in mostly white spaces, I still end up standing out in my difference, and, as a result, I constantly ask myself, “Am I safe to be my full authentic self in this space?”

When I got my doctorate, I aimed to learn how we can create safe spaces for everyone where people can live and learn in the comfort of their skin. As a former middle school teacher, I was looking at teacher preparedness to

address bullying in the middle school context. I fell into studying SEL [social and emotional learning] from bullying prevention because research shows that SEL programming can help mitigate antisocial behaviors like bullying.

**Q: You write and speak frequently about the need to approach SEL from an equity lens. Why is it important for educators to have professional learning about equitable SEL?**

A: My interest is at the intersection of social and emotional learning and culturally responsive practices so that we can ensure equitable and anti-racist practices. I want to be sure we say anti-racist because I don’t want us to forget to do the work of racial justice.

We are now in a place in society where we see what happens when we let a wound fester. The wound we have is a race problem, and we’ve allowed it to fester for too long, and we’re now experiencing civil unrest, which we have experienced before in cycles.

We have to understand that SEL happens within a context. You can’t teach people how to get along without talking about why we don’t get along. One of the reasons we don’t get along is because of the racial strife in our country, the racial barrier between groups of people. If we don’t address the wound, we cannot heal.

We can leverage SEL for an anti-racist future and for racial justice, but

SEL without deliberate and active anti-racist work is not enough. SEL alone will not solve racism and oppression. We need systemic change, where racial justice is at the core.

Also, we have to recognize that SEL happens within an education system where the curriculum, if we’re being honest, has been and is based on the ways of whiteness. So, if we don’t apply an anti-racist lens to SEL, it has the risk of being used as a weapon, as something else Black and brown kids don’t know how to do.

I’ve done a lot of work with districts across the U.S., and what I have seen is how the narrative about SEL changes according to the group of students. When we talk about white kids and privileged kids, SEL is about college and career readiness and about thriving in those settings. When we’re talking about Black and brown students, people say, “Our students of color need to learn how to control their behavior.” It becomes about compliance and control, and it perpetuates the racial hierarchy.

We have to be careful because how we speak about something becomes how we live and interact, and it impacts our practice. I’ve said before, and I will say again, that, if we don’t apply an anti-racist lens, SEL has the risk of becoming white supremacy with a hug.

**Q: Where is the starting place for teachers in this work, especially for**

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**Dena Simmons** @DenaSimmons - May 21

Today's [#quaranteaching](#) tip: invite students to leave themselves a message (letter, video, whatever) for their future selves about this moment and their hopes & dreams so they can return two years from now and see how they experienced this [#pandemic](#) & reflect on their aspirations

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**teachers who haven’t reflected on these issues before?**

A: I think the starting place is self. Who am I? How do I show up in this world? What access and power do I have or not have? And then you start to place yourself in your context as a teacher. How do my students see me? What do I want my students to know about me? And then the question that is important to consider is, how do I want people to leave their interaction with me?

Then you ask those questions about the people around you, about your students. What power and privilege do my students have or not have? Who are they and who are they not? What do I not know and what do I need to ask? Too often, we create narratives about people.

I recommend starting to do this work in racial affinity groups with a focus on healing. This is especially important in our current context. We are all experiencing a collective trauma, and as a result, we are all in need of collective healing.

Once people feel a little secure in what they have to offer the world through their affinity groups, then they can start to have conversations across difference. It’s important to be very clear about the purpose of why you’re

coming together. You have to make a commitment to anti-racism and equity and say, “This is all of our work.” Then, together, you ask, “What do we hope to accomplish?” and “What do we hope to learn together?”

It’s always hard to start. There’s a certain level of vulnerability and courage you have to have to engage in these conversations. But you create the space and time to have conversations in affinity groups. You do a lot of expectation and norm setting, and ask, “How do we lean into human goodness as we engage in this very important work?”

Once these conversations become a practice, you’ll see it become part of the culture. But you have to scaffold it. We know it’s not going to feel comfortable, but what we’ve all learned as educators is that you need to be in that space of disequilibrium in order to grow and learn.

**Q: This kind of reflection and connection takes time and ongoing support. What do you see as some of the most promising professional learning approaches to achieve these goals?**

A: Storytelling is an important piece. When I work with school districts, it’s always grounded in narrative. Narrative

humanizes us and others. It gives us a window into another’s life and allows us to open a window for another. It allows people to see what they may have in common — or what their differences are and how to lean into them and learn from someone else.

Storytelling can happen even in a short activity with another person, and during that activity, you could learn something new about someone you’ve worked with for 20 years. We have to really look at the world and our colleagues as people we can always discover something new about. I always say that I walk around and I see the world as art. It allows me to see the beauty in other people, in the world.

**Q: You’ve been doing a lot of writing and speaking lately about self-care for educators. What advice do you give?**

A: First of all, I think it’s important to understand the revolutionary and radical aspects of self-care. Particularly, I think of Audre Lorde’s quotation, “Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.” For me, the act of taking care of one’s self is crucial, especially those of us who are continuously oppressed. That is why I talk about self-care, equity, and healing

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together because care has not been distributed equitably.

It's important for teachers to take care of themselves because, if they don't, they cannot take care of others. They're more likely to report feeling stressed and burnt out, and research has shown that, when teachers are stressed, their interactions with students are less warm, student achievement suffers, and the classroom climate is not as warm, either. That's why I believe that a stressed and burned-out teaching force is an equity issue, and if school systems truly care about equity, then they would do better at taking care of their teachers.

So, first, I want to tell teachers to take care of themselves, to start with whatever's causing their stress. Begin to think about an action plan for, "How am I going to address these barriers to care and the stresses I'm facing?" We

can't just "do self-care" and not address what's causing our burnout.

And we can't only think about self-care. We have to think about collective care. When we talk only about self-care, we're basically telling teachers, "It's your responsibility. It's your life. Get it together." Instead, people need to ask, "What about the system has contributed to my lack of care? And what practices and policies contribute to the health and well-being of my colleagues?" I think school systems could be doing better with taking care of educators.

**Q: In the midst of the collective trauma we're all experiencing, do you see any opportunities for change?**

A: The way I've lived my life, I try to look at the light that's coming through the crack. I think a lot of people

are now feeling the importance of togetherness. We used to sit at a table together looking at our phones. Now we're thinking, "Please get me away from the screen!" We're really striving for authentic connection right now. We can see this as an opportunity to ask, "How can we do better?" As we strive for being together in person again, how do we do better at connecting and at learning? How do we do better at everything?

*This article is based on an interview conducted on Aug. 21, 2020. Dena Simmons' comments are her own and do not represent the views of Yale University or any other entity.*

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