

Kate Simonds, senior at Timberline High School, on *I'm Seventeen* at TEDxBoise – Transcript

[Full speaker bio:](#)

MP3 Audio:

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YouTube Video:

Kate Simonds

Hi everyone. My name is Kate Simonds, and I'm 17. Upon hearing me say this or seeing the title of this talk, "I'm 17", I'm sure you're thinking: since she's on the stage, she must have done something incredible that she can teach me about.

Maybe she — I don't know, what did she do to deserve a TED talk? Did she accidentally make millions from investing in a successful startup company at age 15?

Maybe she cured some disease accidentally while interning in a lab or maybe she received a perfect score on her SATs at the age of 7.

Did I do any of those things? No.

I haven't done any of these things unfortunately so here's the reason why I'm talking today: When I took this stage, you all assumed that I'm some child genius or some accredited creator because I'm 17. I must have done something worthy of your attention.

Yet, the only qualification to being a TED speaker is to have an idea. An idea you think is worth spreading. And that's the problem.

Because I'm 17 and I'm on this stage, you're only respecting me because I'm on this stage. Maybe it's because you like my extremely high heels but I don't think that's the reason why I should have your respect. I don't think that I should have to be a high school millionaire or to have cured an epidemic to be worth listening to.

I think that any idea should be respected no matter the age of who it comes from. My voice has been disrespected what seems like hundreds of times. I've been told by adults that I'm not ready to vote even though I keep up with politics, and I'm sure of my beliefs.

I've been told to stop fighting for equality because I have a little voice, and it won't fix anything. The difference is, no one would say those things to an adult. Any adult that fights for a cause like that would be deemed a courageous and dedicated hero but because I'm 17, I'm naïve and ignorant.

And I have years of experience of my voice not mattering and not being respected. I'm even told, according to a Life Science article from 2008, that because I'm a teenager, I can't experience empathy which is defined as the ability to understand and share the feelings of another.

Now, without any quantifiable data or scientific evidence I can prove that article wrong. Here's how.

I did it about a minute ago when I understood the assumptions you made when I took this stage. Now with empathy because I can relate to you, I understand your hesitations to my qualifications because when I was picked for this TED talk, I wondered the same thing.

I'm just a 17 year old, what do I know? What can I teach you about?

But by this time, I hope I've gained your respect. I say "gained" because unlike the other speakers, I didn't have it initially. There was an inherent paradigm of doubt. And this surrounds all students. The reason I'm so passionate about this is because of my work with a local non-profit organization which is called *One Stone*.

One Stone is a student-run, official 501(c) non-profit, and after joining as a sophomore in high school, I learned how to create a budget, how to run an interview, how to speak in front of large groups like this one and most importantly, how to problem solve. Surrounded by high school students, no one ever questioned the validity of my thoughts. And let me tell you, we've got stuff done. But things would change the second I'd leave the building. I'd try talking to an adult about something I'd be working on, my research or a project, and they would ask me, "What do you know?"

And all teens are asked this, "*What do you know? How could you know this? You're only a teenager.*" We are asked this when we talk about politics, or education, even with what we want to do with our lives because we're "*too young to understand.*"

Just because we have vertical driver's licenses and you all have horizontal driver's licenses, apparently, we don't know what love is. We can't know what we should or shouldn't believe, we don't get to talk about education or politics because we don't live in the "real world". We actually do not get to speak for ourselves.

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Now at this point, you may have noticed that I'm not using slides. Part of the reason why is that I don't really need them but to be honest with you, the real reason why is that this is a really unique chance for a student like me to have your attention, so I'm going to strategically direct 100 % of it to myself.

This problem is bigger than it sounds. From my contrasting experiences at One Stone and with the help of the amazing teachers I've had, I've become fully aware of the constant belittling that occurs to student voices. This problem is big.

Look at our education system; as students, we have no say in what we learn or how we learn it, yet we're expected to absorb it all, take it all in, and be able to run the world someday. We're expected to raise our hands to use the restroom, then 3 months later be ready to go to college or have a full time job, support ourselves and live on our own. It's not logical.

My mum is an elementary school teacher. And I always hear her and her colleagues talking about how kindergarteners, when asked a question, are thrilled to be raising their hands, all of them. Yet, as you increase the grade level, fewer and fewer hands are raised each year.

Now, in my senior classes in high school, it's common that, when asked a question, no one raises their hand, and the teacher has to call out names from a roster. I think this is because A) students aren't confident in their own answers, B) students have been made fun of for answering too many questions correctly, or C) the students aren't listening. Maybe they're texting in their lap or most likely, just extremely disinterested.

And these are all three really big problems. Students have lost sight of their education's value and have therefore stopped learning.

Because we're told, *"You don't get it, you're 17. You don't deserve to have the control over what you learn."* And this statement and this mindset are toxic. It's gotten to the point where we've begun to stop listening to ourselves.

Sometimes, I'll catch myself on a wild train of thought and stop myself thinking, *"Self, stop thinking about this. You're only 17, you don't know anything about psychology. What are you doing? Stop!"* This is me, someone who totally believes in the validation of everyone's ideas and is doing a TED Talk on the validation of everyone's ideas, is discrediting my own because my thoughts don't come from an adult mind.

Last spring, my friend and I started a club. Both of us are very outspoken, and we saw this as an opportunity to make a difference in our school. Now we anticipated that it might take some work to convince the adults of our mission but we didn't realize that the real challenge would be convincing our classmates that we could make a change as students.

When we tried to stand up for something, they criticized us, they made fun of us for standing up for our beliefs. And that's really, really bad. Students question the validity of their own thoughts because they don't come from adult minds, yet what really separates adults and teenagers intellectually? Is it an age? Do we wake up on our 21st birthdays with everlasting knowledge? Do we turn 18 and suddenly have ideas that are worth listening to? Also, this magical age of adulthood is different in countries all over the world. It hasn't seemed to work so far, so who's right?

Or maybe it's from attaining a level of maturity which can come at any age

but I know a lot of high schoolers and college students that are more mature than some adults I know. So that's not logical either.

So I think that it doesn't come with age or experiential maturity. There's a definite biological difference between the two but it comes instead with brain conformity.

Researchers at Stanford tested this a while back. And they looked at neurosignalling differences in the two ages between adolescence and adults to see how brains were networked. They ended up finding out that adult pathways were much more constant as if mapped than the younger subjects whose pathways were more scattered or spontaneous or, dare I say, creative.

It's no secret that society has a lot of problems that we just can't quite seem to solve. And the adults behind them have conditioned attempts at solving them which is why we haven't made any progress.

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In my government class, my teacher has a really sarcastic poster that says, *"If you think our problems are bad, just wait until you see our solutions"*.

Maybe this problem is that we're not thinking about these solutions creatively. Teens all the time are criticized for having rambunctiously inventive ideas. But instead of making fun of these teenagers, maybe the problem is that we should be harnessing these ideas, we should be tapping into these spontaneous brain pathways and using them to solve these problems.

So this is my idea worth spreading: a world of creative collaboration between adults and students. It's a world where adults listen and respect student ideas, and a world where students respect and listen to their own ideas.

The education system; it will improve dramatically, students will care about learning because they know that their education matters. In the current status quo, once you're educated past a certain point you've learned all about failure. We're teaching our students right now to lose belief in possible change or perfection.

In other words, we're teaching them to stop thinking outside the box and to accept adequacy. We're teaching them to conform to standards and to lose their creativity. But before this happens, students don't think of logistics or limitations, they're fearless. Think of the kindergarteners; if we could harness this excited energy before they lose it and foster it throughout their entire education, think of the creative ideas that could come of it.

Possibly even more so, government could improve. Once students know that their voices matter, they'll feel obligated to participate. They'll feel responsible for where policies are headed. And with improved efficacy comes progress across the board.

Now I'm not suggesting we extend suffrage to 5 year olds. But I do think that we should encourage our 18 year olds to vote, not discourage them, that so happens frequently. Ask us about social security, ask us about environmental destruction, ask us about anything. Let us know that we matter because we do.

It's true that not all of us will understand these policies right away. Just because we're teenagers doesn't mean that we don't understand politics

and similarly, just because you're an adult, doesn't mean that you do.

When you tell us that our votes don't matter, that we're not ready, you lose, too. Fewer and fewer people are voting each year, that's a fact. And with a loss of votes, to be dramatic, is a loss of democracy.

And if you're not old enough, if you're 17 like me, 16, 15, 13, you still matter, too even though you can't legally vote, and you aren't in college yet. You are still valuable to society.

Okay, if anyone has fallen asleep or something or if you have found me completely disinteresting, wake up, and listen to me now.

Students, we've been respectfully asking for student voice for years. We've sat on representative seats at board meetings, and we've protested standardized testing, but it hasn't been enough. Look where we are. We need to stop asking, and we need to start demanding.

More than student councils and board meetings, and clubs, and representative seats. We deserve to be trusted with more than setting up our parents' iPads.

Our ideas matter. But, unfortunately this will only work if it's a collaboration. So adults, I'm asking you to work with us. Give us your respect, hold us accountable. I'm not asking for blind faith, I'm asking for you to let us prove it. You hold me accountable for my education. I can hold you accountable too. Environmental destruction, national debt, unjust policies, social inequalities, the list goes on and on. We need to hold each other accountable for any progress to be made, and I promise you it will.

I'm 17. I haven't won a Nobel Peace Prize, I haven't solved inequality, I haven't solved poverty, I haven't done any of the cool things that I've mentioned earlier. But the difference is, I know that I can.



Teens, you need to believe in your voices, and adults, you need to listen.

Thank you.

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