

The SRI Homeroom – Episode 3

[Sounds of a students talking in a high school hallway]

[A school bell rings]

[A digital chime rings three times, with progressively higher pitch]

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Welcome to the SRI Homeroom. Today, using a new tool to solve an age-old problem.

Mary Bratsch-Hines:

We realized that the combination of TRI with Flamingo Reading app would enable us to really put that effective reading instruction into a one-stop digital application.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

An evidence-based approach to early learning literacy, today on the SRI Homeroom. Welcome in.

[Theme music fades out]

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Hello, and welcome to the SRI Homeroom. I'm Kori Hamilton Biagas, and today I'm thrilled to be chatting with two incredible researchers. We have Mary Bratsch-Hines of the University of Florida, and Heather Aiken of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. Mary and Heather, thank you for joining us. It's a pleasure to have you today.

Mary Bratsch-Hines:

Hi. Thanks for having us.

Mary Bratsch-Hines:

Thank you.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Let's get into it. So you both are interested in early education, early literacy, early learning. So can you tell me what is the challenge that you two are trying to solve? Heather, can we start with you?

Mary Bratsch-Hines:

Sure. I think there are a couple of challenges that we're looking at. I think there's a long longstanding challenge with early literacy skills in this country. It ebbs and flows, but we're always concerned about the reading crisis, right? And I think the focus on this was exacerbated by the COVID pandemic, when especially our youngest learners were at home and we realized how important that in-person element of schooling really is for those young ones. So that's kind of where we've always been focused on that early reading piece, and now we're just continuing to focus on ways to make that work for all students.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Yes. Mary, did you want to add to what Heather said?

Mary Bratsch-Hines:

Sure. In addition to students really needing that foundational support for learning how to read, we also understand how important it is for teachers to really understand how to provide that foundational reading support, that focus on fluency and comprehension and decoding, a lot of what is now termed as science of reading. And it's difficult to understand how to incorporate science of reading into teaching without some explicit professional learning around that. And so our program is able to provide some of that explicit learning, really help teachers integrate science of reading evidence-based practices as they learn and practice and implement good reading instruction.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

So it has a holistic approach. You're obviously thinking about the young learners first, because those are our clients. That's our audience. We want to make sure that they can engage and grow, and you're thinking about the needs of those providing that instruction so that they can really have the impact that we're hoping to achieve within this learning space.

Mary Bratsch-Hines:

Exactly right.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

So you mentioned a product or project. Can you tell us about what specifically you're working on as a solution, or as one part of the solution for this very massive challenge? Mary, you take a stab at it first?

Mary Bratsch-Hines:

Sure. So we are affiliated with a program called Targeted Reading Instruction, which we'll refer to as TRI. And prior to COVID-19, TRI was already established as an effective program. It is a reading instructional professional development and embedded student intervention program, which really provides a framework for reading instruction for teachers. It includes a scope and sequence, it helps students build foundational skills. And really what we've done for over a decade, almost 15 years now, is we've built up an evidence base about TRI. We have shown impacts on decoding we can impact student fluency, their reading comprehension. We have, as I've mentioned, we're evidence-based. Our program itself has been tested in a number of randomized controlled trials. What Works Clearinghouse has confirmed our efficacy. And so really we're asking teachers to learn how to use TRI's strategies and activities that are research-based, really implementing the science of reading in practice with all of their students.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

That sounds like an amazing opportunity for teachers and students in terms of, A, the comprehensiveness of TRI, and B, just the opportunity of growth that you could see, the potential for growth. Heather, can you tell us a little bit more about how people can get engaged with TRI or who's already participating, and what we mean by effectiveness? Why is it important to use evidence-based practices for things like this?

Mary Bratsch-Hines:

Okay, so why we want to use effective programs is everybody out there now is claiming that their program is science of reading. And there are a couple of ways that that's usually true about these programs. Sometimes that's true about these programs because they've adopted certain strategies or types of instruction that are part of this greater body of research. Sometimes people can claim that they are following the science of reading purely because they are covering the five elements from the national reading panel. And so that would be that they are instructing explicitly on phonological awareness, on phonics, on fluency, on comprehension, and on vocabulary. So yes, they have all those elements, but how they packaged it together or we don't necessarily know that they program as a whole will work.

Whereas when we talk about being part of that body or we talk about TRI as being an evidence-based program, not only are we using those strategies, but our program as a whole has been tested itself. And so we know that it, as a whole, when you pull the specific strategies and the specific elements that we use in TRI, we know that those do have an impact on student outcomes. And we know that students using those programs and in classrooms with teachers who've used our program outperform students in classrooms of teachers who are doing just their regular reading instruction.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

And how many years of this evidence do you have? Because Mary, you mentioned that this has been going on for 10, almost 15 years. So how many years of evidence do you have and on what communities or what settings have you been testing TRI? Mary or Heather, which one of you wants to take that one?

Mary Bratsch-Hines:

Sure, I can take that.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Okay.

Mary Bratsch-Hines:

So we started our first randomized controlled trial in 2005 to 2010. So this is a time-

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

What is a randomized controlled trial?

Mary Bratsch-Hines:

Okay, sure. A randomized controlled trial is where you have one group who is randomly assigned, totally random, it's like flipping a coin, to receive, in this case, TRI. And then the other group is assigned to not receive TRI. So in this case, starting back in 2005, we've started with a random group of teachers who were implementing TRI, and we primarily have focused all of our efforts. So we've done several randomized controlled trials since then where we've done a similar randomization process and we primarily focused in rural areas because that's a big passion for one of the developers of TRI, Lynne Vernon-Feagans. She has a long history of rural research, and she recognized that when she would go into classrooms in rural communities, these are classrooms where there's not

necessarily a teaching assistant. There may not be a special educator in the building. It's really up to the classroom teacher to be able to provide all of the reading instruction that individual students in their classroom need, from basic core reading instruction all the way to intensive interventions.

And so TRI was developed to meet the needs of rural teachers in part because, from almost the very beginning, we have incorporated a virtual coaching element. So again, this is long before COVID-19. We have been doing virtual coaching for almost two decades now, where we have a coach who supports teachers remotely for about half an hour a week to be able to understand how to use TRI, really implement that reading instruction that's going to be most beneficial to their students, and really build their toolbox for reading. Because that's what TRI is designed to do. It's designed to build teachers' toolboxes, to provide effective reading instruction.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

That's excellent. And I love the focus on an under-resourced undersupported community in the rural community and bringing in interventions that have direct daily impact on the experience of teachers and providing the support so that they're not feeling that a new thing got dropped off in their classroom and they have to now figure that out too.

Mary Bratsch-Hines:

Exactly.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

I definitely-

Mary Bratsch-Hines:

It's so funny that you bring that up because a lot of what we know from teachers, because we've worked with teachers now for a very long time, is they get new reading programs constantly. They get new curriculum every few years. They are constantly having to learn something new. And so part of our mission has always been, you can still use and learn those new things that your school, your district are using. We're going to come in and layer the use of those curricula or the use of those reading programs, and we're going to add this element of really strong professional learning onto that. So you can take TRI and everything you've learned from it, the activities, the strategies, the integrated nature of it, and then be able to turn that into just supplementing and benefiting your everyday reading instruction.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Wow. That's the thoughtfulness of the development of the product. I appreciate as a former teacher who was an English teacher and was doing reading instruction, I appreciate the thoughtfulness around how are we not only going to create something that people can use, but how are we going to support them in implementing it in a way that has the most impact. That's so fantastic. Now I'm wondering, this is the SRI Education Homeroom podcast, what is your relationship with SRI? Heather, I'm going to give that one to you.

Mary Bratsch-Hines:

Thanks. Well, we are currently privileged to be part of a network called the LEARN Network that SRI is facilitating. And so this is all part of a larger IES, Institute of Education Sciences, funded grant. And so we have four different product teams that are working on adapting already established, I'm going to say products again, interventions, tools, instructions-

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Like TRI.

Mary Bratsch-Hines:

Like TRI, that were already established. We're making a tweak to it in order to better respond to the needs of the COVID pandemic. So in TRI's case, our big tweak is that we are adapting our traditional multisensory hands-on interactive intervention, and we are turning that into a digital platform that simplifies implementation for teachers because they no longer have to pull together all of the different materials. It's all built into the lesson. It's also facilitating the potential for, heaven forbid we run into another remote learning situation, this program now can very easily be used in remote learning situations. And we're also working to kind of broaden the base of who can work with TRI. We've always done it as working with classroom teachers and we provide support for an entire year in order to do it effectively. Some of the changes we've made are going to enable a wider variety of users. So we still can work with classroom teachers, we can work with reading interventionists, we've been working with tutors, we've been working with volunteers. We've just really broadened who we can work with.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Wow, that sounds huge. So you said you're part of the LEARN Network, which is leveraging evidence to accelerate recovery nationwide. And part of that acceleration of recovery nationwide is TRI's adaptation, to turn what has

traditionally been a more in-person, hands-on tactile type supportive intervention into something that is digital. How is that going?

Mary Bratsch-Hines:

Sure. So what we were able to do is we were partnering with a product called Flamingo Reading app, which was developed by Paige Pullen at the Lanstinger Center for Learning at the University of Florida. And right when the pandemic hit, I'd say within four to six weeks, Paige quickly realized that teachers needed a tool to teach reading digitally virtually to their students. And so she started very quickly putting together a unique, basically lesson building platform that teachers could use virtually with their students to make sure that even though they're working remotely with students, they could still develop and show and engage students in a high quality lesson. And that's what the Flamingo Reading app was designed to be able to do. Teachers can use it virtually in person one-on-one with students or in small groups. And we provide a lot of training on with teachers on how to use the Flamingo Reading app.

And when we were writing our Learn Network grant submission, we realized that the marriage or the combination of TRI with Flamingo Reading app would enable us to do a lot of what Heather talked about, but really put that effective reading instruction into a one-stop digital application. And again, teachers can use it remotely, but we also, most of our teachers who are using it right now are using it right next to a student. It's not a program that students use independently. It's not an app that the teacher assigns the student to go work on this, and they do it all on their own and maybe advance through that app. But really it's designed, and we don't want to lose sight of the fact that it's designed specifically for teachers to be using directly with students. Because we really do believe that teachers are the skilled technicians and practitioners that help guide student reading.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

It's an instructional tool.

Mary Bratsch-Hines:

It's very much an instructional tool. That's right. And Heather, do you want to talk a little bit about how the actual nuts and bolts of meshing these two products has happened?

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

I'm sure this is going to be fascinating. I'm excited to hear, because when your two brainchilds that weren't kind of conceived together are trying to interconnect, there

are always going to be bumps in the road, but I know you all have a really clear vision of what it should be. So I really want to hear about this journey that you're going on to create this more comprehensive app with TRI and Flamingo.

Mary Bratsch-Hines:

So yeah, we really started from, we had those two pieces that we needed to integrate. We had the elements of the Flamingo Reading app that were already there, and they had a lot of things that matched almost exactly what we already did. They had letter tiles that students could manipulate. They had a way to embed books because we're all about practicing decoding our burgeoning reading skills in connected text. And so we were able to work within a lot of the framework. We knew going in that there were a few things we were going to need to adjust and add to the app. And so we'd written that in. And then in the process of building out our TRI lessons, we discovered a few more things that we hadn't thought about when we wrote the app. And it's been a really great collaboration in terms of the folks at Lanstinger have really supported adding some of these elements that were not there previously that we did not realize as we were going in.

And so what we've done is we started out by building out, kind of drafting, we always had a scope and sequence, but we left it much more up to classroom teachers to kind of pick individual words and things like that. We've really built out a structured sequence of lessons for teachers to use so that they don't have to spend the time building the pieces. They can just jump on into the instruction. And so we've spent a lot of time building out these lessons and adapting things like that. And so it's been a long process. We've really been working on this for about a year now, but we're finally at the point where we're feeling pretty good. We're still finding errors we made as we put things together.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Of course, as you would.

Mary Bratsch-Hines:

Little bugs like that. But I think we've really come out with a very strong product in terms of having a very well-rounded piece of TRI. And I think some of the elements we've been able to add have been beneficial for folks who are also using just the Flamingo Reading app platform, because of the activities we've been able to add.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

So you have been able to kind make adjustments in real time, it sounds like in some ways, to enhance the app for people who are currently engaged as you're building out this more comprehensive aspect of the integration between TRI and Flamingo, but people are already benefiting from your great research and thinking just from the Flamingo app right now, as you guys have been updating pieces in real time. Wow. How do people engage this? Is this app free and available? Who do we encourage to use it? It's an instructional tool, so we're really targeting more of the early elementary, early intervention teacher population. Is that who we're encouraging to engage with the Flamingo app?

Mary Bratsch-Hines:

That's a great question.

Mary Bratsch-Hines:

Yeah, that's a great question. So we have been, that's what we thought we were building it for. We really did think, okay, the space that we are most familiar with and the way that TRI was developed really, okay, K-2, we can extend to K-3. What we learned and what we've been learning, what we've been adapting is we still focus on K-3, but we've also been working in schools where they see a huge need for their fourth and fifth graders. Some of that may be because these were students who were in that first second grade during COVID when they were receiving remote instruction. And so these students maybe missed some of those foundational reading skills that they could have been building if they had been learning in person. And so what we've been doing is we've actually been adapting for older students and their teachers.

And that's an adaptation that we're continuing to do and we'll probably continue to do because children, ideally, you hit their window of building foundational reading skills early, but just because they don't have those, say, by third grade, doesn't mean that we give up on that. It just means that we provide it for older students and we've been adapting our books to make them appropriate for older students. Some of our activities need to be more appropriate for older students. A lesson for a kindergartner that's going to take them a full 15 minutes to do very few activities isn't going to work for a fourth or fifth grader. They can do a lot more in 15 minutes, which is the length of a TRI lesson. And so we've been really, Heather and our other coach, Theresa, have been instrumental in building an effective program that can be used K-5 now, which is not something we had before. So this project has been really exciting for us to be able to do that and to offer something

to schools that really can hit their whole student body, serve their whole student body.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

And what immense progress. Congratulations. I hope that you all, I know that you're still in the trenches doing this work, but I hope that you've celebrated that really significant milestone, being able to grow and learn and maneuver and navigate shifts to going from a very specific population to really responding to the needs that your audience has told you exist. Traditionally, we think about you go from learning to read to reading to learn, in that third grade to fourth grade transition. And what we know from our NAEP scores over the last couple of years and just what we're seeing in classrooms is that's not always the case. That's not really the case. So what you all are doing is really supporting and standing in that gap so that children who make it to fourth grade without those strong foundational skills still have support.

Because we know that all of our kids know how to use tablets and apps, so why not integrate these really strong evidence-based skills into applications that are then supported by teacher instruction? Wow. So Heather, I'm going to ask you a big question. If we're dreaming, if we're thinking big, if we're thinking our ideal about how TRI works, what would your ideal for TRI look like? What would that, "We have arrived, we did it job, well done," what would that look like? And then Mary, you're going to have to answer the same question. Okay?

Mary Bratsch-Hines:

I think my ideal for TRI would be to have it widely available and used across elementary schools across the country. I think we've been very privileged to work within this grant funded space for a long period of time now. And this is our opportunity, and I think where our goal is to move out of the grant funded space and to be more widely available. And so while we're doing all of this great TRI work, we're also benefiting from being part of the LEARN Network in terms of learning more about what does it look like to scale this program and to share it widely. And I'm really excited to see if we can effectively make a mark kind of in that K-5 continuum instead of sitting in our K-3 world. I know I've been really excited with some of the changes that we've been able to make and some of those adjustments targeted at those older students. And so I'm looking forward to really testing that out this year. So I think that's kind of where I'd like to see it go.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

That sounds exciting. And I'm sitting here thinking, look at you all over there, just growing up with the needs of the students. You're just following your kiddos, in a sense, to the next space where they still need your support. And I think that that's cool.

Mary Bratsch-Hines:

And I think we've been so lucky to work with such a wide range of educators already as part of this transition, who've been so generous with that constructive feedback that's really let us see some of these things that when they proposed us working with fourth and fifth grade students, were like, "Well, if they need the skills, they can just use the lessons we already have," without having really spent the time to figure out what does that need to look like for these kiddos.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Right, yeah. Mary, what about you? What is your ideal?

Mary Bratsch-Hines:

I think along with Heather, that we're using TRI Flamingo Reading app as a digital platform, in-person or remotely as the need comes up. Yes, that we're still in that K-5 space, but that we can also get creative about what that looks like. Maybe it's being used in an afterschool setting, because of the way that the lessons have been built into Flamingo Reading app. Educators, and we're talking widely here. By educator, I mean, it could be a classroom teacher, could be an interventionist who's working with students. It could be a parent volunteer, it could be an afterschool volunteer, it could be a tutor. Any of these groups can effectively use TRI Flamingo Reading app to build the skills of students. And it doesn't have to be in a traditional school day. It can be before school. It can be after school, it could be during summer school.

I think if we really think about what this digital platform can do is it can be used in scaled widely to a variety of settings and audiences. And I think we are only beginning to understand the depth of that capability. And so in my best case scenario is that it's being used creatively by districts to meet the needs of their students in a lot of different ways. One thing that we haven't talked about is the TRI Flamingo Reading app comes with what we call a diagnostic map, which is kind of education jargon for it is a map. It allows any educator who's implementing TRI Flamingo reading app to see the journey that the students are going on, and it kind of maps it out. And it really helps us building this level of communication between someone who's using TI Flamingo Reading app, maybe

with their classroom teacher, maybe with a parent, because this is a tool that could also be used to communicate where children are, how children are learning to read to families.

Part of it is, at this level and kind of the stage where we are, the possibilities are almost endless. And I just want other folks to be excited about where this could go, because we really are. We really think that it could be used in a number of different ways.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

I really appreciate all of the different groups of people that you named who have the potential to access and leverage the evidence base of this Flamingo TRI Learning app. Because it's not limited to classroom teachers. I see opportunities of even community meetings where there's somebody helping parents learn how to utilize the app so that they then can go home and provide that additional support. I know so many parents are often just at a loss for how they can support their students in their growth and development. And this seems like a really practical, easy, accessible way to support all of the people in a community that are helping with educating our kiddos. And that is exciting and really promising. And I'm wondering, when might this emerge into the market a little bit farther so that some of those people can start using it, or is that already happening?

Mary Bratsch-Hines:

So the Flamingo Reading app without the embedded TRI component, it already is in the market. School districts throughout Florida who are working with Lanstinger Center for Learning do have access to it. So we're really excited that it's in the hands of educators right now. The TRI Flamingo Reading app kind of joined product, we're still in the process of evaluating it this year. As Heather said, we have the privilege to work with a range of educators in several different states where we're just still working out some bugs, still working on tweaking the content and the coaching and training support that we provide. And I would say after this fall, after this spring, we're definitely ready for it to go big, go live, and figuring out ways to work with districts and state departments of education, volunteer organizations to really embrace it and make it part of their reading instruction toolbox.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Heather, did you want to add anything?

Mary Bratsch-Hines:

The only thing I would add is that whatever group it is that wants to focus on early reading that, like Mary said earlier, we are ready and eager to work with moving forward.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

So can they reach out to you? Can people reach out to you to connect? What's the best way for people to, one, learn more about the product, and two, engage with you all in terms of getting on a list or however to connect and actually utilize it?

Mary Bratsch-Hines:

Yeah, you can just email me.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Okay.

Mary Bratsch-Hines:

If we can provide our contact information.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Of course, it'll be in the show notes.

Mary Bratsch-Hines:

Okay. That's great. Yeah, we just are so ready to interact with folks. Heather, did you want to add to that?

Mary Bratsch-Hines:

I was just going to add that if you want to keep up with all things TRI, we have a TRI website, which is...

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

We can put in the show notes, yeah.

Mary Bratsch-Hines:

We can share that in the notes. And there is a quarterly newsletter that we send out that you could register for as on the website. And that would just put you, we send it out, like I said, four times a year. It's not a big lift, but we generally try to keep

our TRI family apprised of everything that's going on with what we're doing with TRI. So if there's a big announcement, it's going to show up there, definitely.

Mary Bratsch-Hines:

And the Flamingo Reading app is also on the Lanstinger Center for Learning website. So all of those links are provided.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Excellent. And I am going to go ahead and assume that the LEARN Network would also make a big splash about this once the product is available. Well, ladies, this has been a really wonderful discussion. I appreciate your time, your insight and expertise today. And mostly I appreciate your enthusiasm around solving, coming up with really practical solutions to a complex problem, that meets teachers and students and families where they are. That's really how we should be conducting research and bringing it to practice.

[Theme music fades in]

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

So I appreciate the model that you guys are laying out in how research can be so deeply tied to the experience of actual educators, so that what is being provided is something that really benefits them today. So thank you for joining us on the Homeroom.

Mary Bratsch-Hines:

Thank you for having us.

Mary Bratsch-Hines:

Thank you so much.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Thank you for joining us on the SRI Homeroom, produced by SRI Education, a division of SRI.

Our guests today were Mary Bratsch-Hines, the senior manager for research and evaluation at the University of Florida, Lanstinger Center for Learning, and Heather Aiken, the intervention director for targeted reading instruction and a research investigator for the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute at UNC Chapel Hill. Learn more about them and their work in today's show notes.

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