The SRI Homeroom – Episode 8

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Welcome to the SRI Homeroom. Today, how can students help drive educational innovations?

Ela Joshi:

The more that we can have students share their real day-to-day experiences, and students from a range of backgrounds, the real students that are going to be using these products, the more that we can make sure that these tools are actually helping them and meeting them where they're at.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

The value of student voice today on the SRI Homeroom. Welcome in.

Hello and welcome to the SRI Homeroom. My name is Kori Hamilton Biagas, and today I'm so happy to be speaking with Ela Joshi. Ela is a researcher with expertise in scaling, school leadership and policies that impact students from historically marginalized communities.

Ela, welcome in.

Ela Joshi:

Hi, Kori. Thanks for having me.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Oh, it's such a pleasure to have you with us today. I'm excited to talk about your work in scaling in the policies and the research that you're doing that impact students who sometimes get overlooked and need a lot of support. And so I'm wondering, as a policy person, as a leadership person, as somebody who's thinking about ways to scale products, what is the big challenge you would like to solve for students, for teachers, for administrators, or even within the education system more broadly?

Ela Joshi:

Yeah, scaling is something that I've been thinking about for a long time. I've done a couple projects on scaling, starting back in grad school, and it is such an important question. It's near and dear to my heart as someone that started in the classroom. There are so many great products out there, Kori, that do wonderful things for students, but getting them to more students and to more teachers in a way that's efficient, that's sustainable, and that allows schools and teachers to make modifications that meet the needs of their own students is such a difficult challenge. So I think in the course of my career, if that's something that I can help move the needle on, I would feel very proud at the end.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Oh, for sure. That adaptability that you were talking about is one of our trickiest challenges when it comes to scaling, right? I feel like sometimes as researchers and developers, we get really tied to our idea of the solution, and we become a little bit less flexible in thinking about the context that this idea is supposed to actually live in and work in. So when you're thinking about scaling, what are you thinking about as a researcher and a developer type? What are the things that are priorities for you to get these

products into more students' hands into more teacher's hands? What are some of those really important questions to think about?

Ela Joshi:

I mean, scaling is a huge topic. I mean, Cynthia Coburn, who is a preeminent scholar on scaling, wrote a phenomenal foundational piece on four ways of thinking about scaling, or four dimensions of scaling. So I think researchers often think to these definitions. So things like getting to more students and more teachers. That's this baseline, replication idea of scaling, just more people doing the thing. Then you have this idea of sustainability. You're like, okay, they're not just doing the new practice or product. They're also going to be embedding that into their day-to-day routine, that it becomes just something that we do, just part of the day-to-day culture and establishing that as a routine practice. But in order to do that, there needs to be what's called a transfer of ownership. So it can't be led by an external person. It really has to come from someone in the district or folks in the district that are like, "Okay, we're going to be championing this new product or program. We're going to take full responsibility of figuring out how to get it to our teachers, get it to our students." And the last component that Coburn asks researchers to think about is the depth of implementation. So really having not just the superficial level changes, but really changing the way that teachers and school leaders are thinking about education around that new product or program.

So those four components are the baseline questions that I think we as researchers think about when trying to get a product to scale. But this adaptability question is something that has come to the forefront in more recent years as we're understanding that contexts are so unique and so different, and that what works for someone in Wisconsin might not work for someone in New York, and certain changes need to be made. And so I think teachers oftentimes are the ones that really have that deep understanding of their own students and that can make those changes. But as you said earlier, the developers have to really understand what is the core piece of the product or program that has to stay and what can be changed, what has some flexibility based on unique student needs.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Yeah, wow. As you were talking and describing what works in Wisconsin versus what works in New York, it's like it even gets more narrow than that. What works in Washington DC and what works in Baltimore may not be the same thing, and those places are 20 miles from each other.

So when we're saying scaling, bringing something to scale or scaling, what does that mean? Does that mean that we have it in 15 districts out of 50 districts in a state? Does that mean that it's something that is utilized on a national level? Does it mean that 38% of the first grade classrooms across the country are utilizing this tool? Can you give me just an idea of what that means to bring something to scale or scaling something, how might it look?

Ela Joshi:

You're asking all the hard questions, Kori. This is a question that we've been thinking about across multiple product teams, including the LEARN Network team, which is a project that I'm currently on. And I don't think that there's a particular threshold that I've seen identified that you have to reach X, Y, Z component of the market taking on usage of this product, but it's like seeing large numbers of students and schools or districts.

So just to share two completely made of examples that could be representative of actual products, you might have all the big districts in a state take up a given product, and you could say, "Okay, that has scaled to all the major districts within that state, and the goal would be then to scale to maybe similar

districts in other states." You could also say like, "Okay, this product has been used by 100 teachers or 1,000 teachers across the country in a range of settings." That could also be another example of thinking about scale.

I'm recently working on a case study about a product that has scaled to students across different states. So that is a product that is also in progress for scale. So I think there's not really one threshold that we're looking at, but we're looking to see that there's more and more users, more and more schools, more and more districts.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

So that it's growing with intentionality into a trajectory that more and more people have access to utilize it if it's appropriate for their contexts.

Ela Joshi:

Absolutely. Absolutely. And I think right there, something that you highlighted is this idea that scaling is not just an outcome. You can say, did something scale or did it not scale? But scaling is also a process, as you just mentioned, right? It's the process of thinking about how do I get this product or program to more people? What are the steps that we take? What are the challenges that we're facing? What are the interpersonal connections and conversations that we have to have to get more people to be aware of and invested in this new product or program? So that's the process piece.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Yeah. You also mentioned a project called the LEARN Network. And so what are the ways that Learn and other projects that you're working on utilizing to support developers and researchers in bringing products to scale or providing some sort of substantive guidance or support in helping developers think about scaling and supporting these historically underserved populations in particular?

Ela Joshi:

Yeah, that is such a great question. I'll speak to LEARN in particular because that's a really exciting project for me. It's very unique in what it's doing. So the COVID-19 pandemic really upended learning and educational experiences for students, for teachers, for communities, for families. And students currently have gaps in their learning, significant gaps in their learning based on where historically students would make certain amounts of progress within a particular grade level. And students just made less progress, very understandably, given the immense challenges that schools and families and the world essentially was facing when COVID-19 was at its peak.

So what the LEARN Network is trying to do is saying, "Okay, one way that we can help bridge that gap for students learning is to make learning a little bit more efficient and more effective for students so that maybe they're able to catch up, essentially to some of the learning that they should've experienced in the past couple of years." And one way to do that would be to use products, programs, and tools that are demonstrated to be effective for students learning, things that we're calling evidence-based products and programs. So things that have a strong evidence base that's coming from rigorous research studies such as maybe randomized control trials or other types of rigorous research.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Why is that important as an evidence-based for our program or practice?

Ela Joshi:

Yeah, evidence-based is super important because it's data that shows that something has worked for a significant proportion of students and teachers that have implemented the program in a certain way. And that last piece is key, understanding what are the challenges that teachers were facing and implementing that program. What all do they need to do? So it shows some evidence that this can work for more students.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Okay. And so returning to our other question, which was the idea of how you're supporting researchers and developers, and particularly ensuring or helping them, guiding them toward addressing the needs of our historically marginalized communities.

Ela Joshi:

So if we want to try and make students learning a little bit more efficient, more effective to address gaps in learning, especially for students from historically underserved, historically marginalized population who experienced greater gaps during the COVID-19 pandemic, the strategy is to try and find evidence-based products that have a demonstrated ability to help students grow in their learning. We want to get these products and programs to more students, more teachers, more communities.

But this gets back to the first question that we were talking about is how do you scale something? It's notoriously difficult. So one idea on how we can help product developers scale their products to help more students is to understand the procurement process within schools and districts. How are they buying things? What is the process of figuring out what all is out there, vetting those products, making a final selection for what new math curriculum or what math intervention they might want to use? And then getting that in the hands of students and teachers.

So we can hopefully understand this process a little bit better. We can provide some strategies and insights to researchers and developers who have these tools to figure out where in that process can we help them target their communication and their outreach with the idea being that hopefully that targeted communication outreach will help that product get into the hands of more students and more teachers.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

So one of the strategies that you're using in supporting developers to bring things to scale is you're a connector. I'm going to connect you with the information that you really need to help you position yourself to get these things into a school. Because I can only imagine, as you were just talking, I worked in one of the largest school districts in the United States when I was teaching. And I am 100%, and I do a lot of work supporting school board members in one of the largest states in the United States, a different state, and the structure of the school district systems is really different, right? And so there's a lot of rural communities, a lot of very small populations where whoever's working in the community there versus the very large school district that I was a part of that had satellite school districts. And so I can only imagine the difference in the procurement processes for one of those really large districts versus a small rural district that has a single superintendent and maybe no assistant superintendent and just principals are leading, and the school board.

And so have you learned anything about the way that procurement is happening? Because I know that when I was teaching, and I wouldn't be surprised if this was your experience also, that I talked to my other teachers and I was a coach. And I would talk to the other coaches who were teachers about like, "Well, what are you guys using in your classroom?" And I was in graduate school, so I would be talking

to my graduate instructors to get insights and input about different kinds of tools or strategies to integrate into my classroom. But I never talked to a researcher or developer.

Ela Joshi:

Yeah, neither did I.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

And so I'm wondering, what are you learning? That's just like an anecdotal story. I was getting things evidence-based products or practices into my coursework by talking to other practitioners and talking to people who were practitioners in my graduate program. But that doesn't seem efficient or sustainable. So from the case study that you're working on, have you found out anything that you'd be able to share?

Ela Joshi:

Sure. The LEARN Network has a really exciting opportunity right now to do a systematic examination of what does procurement look like across the country. There have been some studies that have been done to understand this, but we don't actually know a whole lot from a systematic perspective. We know pockets of information, but we're trying to really understand, across the country, what does procurement look like and what's the variation? What are the differences based on maybe the urbanicity or maybe the size of the district or the demographics of the district? We can tease out those differences to make meaningful sense of the procurement process because the variation is super important, knowing what something looks like in a small rural and in a large urban district.

So we're doing two things. We are doing a nationally representative survey analysis. So we actually have data in from about 1,000 school principals as well as about 200 district leaders. And we have asked them questions about what does procurement look like in their school or district. What are they buying? What's the process that they're using? What's a challenge that they're experiencing? What tools do they find helpful? What more supports do they need? And we're about to analyze this data.

And we also have been speaking to folks such as parents, students, teachers, principals, superintendents, other staff at the district office, almost like roughly 40 people we've talked to so far in these interviews and focus groups to, again, understand what their personal experiences have been like in a variety of contexts around procurement. And right now, we're in the middle of analyzing both this interview data as well as the survey data to really make sense of what does procurement look like from a big picture perspective, and then pairing that information from the surveys with, okay, what people's actual day-to-day experience is with this process.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Wow.

Ela Joshi:

Yeah.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

That's amazing.

Ela Joshi:

We're so excited.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Yes. And I'm sure once the data are clean and scrubbed and displayed or however it's going to be represented, that this is going to be vital information for developers, researchers, and even practitioners to understand for themselves, this is how we do it, but there are other ways we could be doing this that might be more efficient, that might be more supportive, that might create more opportunities for our educators to explore different tools and resources. The idea of having a more systematic approach or look at it sounds very exciting because it creates so many learning opportunities for people regardless of the space they occupy within the education system.

Ela Joshi:

Yeah, it's super interesting, I think, because some of the things that we're finding may not be a surprise per se, but it's really nice to have that concrete evidence that what we intuitively thought would be true is actually true. So for example, something that we are seeing both in the interview and the survey data is that schools and districts are looking to student data, students' outcome data, other types of data that they're collecting on students to understand when they need to be buying or looking for a different educational product or program. But something else that schools and districts are doing is just routine annual or a couple years... They reevaluate their curriculum. So this twofold process of like, yes, we're going to continue checking in as we always do when we need to buy something new, but we're also being really mindful of where our students are at. That's a theme that's been prevalent in both the survey and the interview data.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Yeah, that's pretty amazing. So if you could just dream a little of what it would be like if you were successful at creating the impact in the education system that you hope for, what would that look like? What would it be for you?

Ela Joshi:

Oh, my gosh. Well, one dream of mine is to have students more involved in their learning. And that's something that I tried to do when I was a teacher, to have student input as much as possible in assignments or activities or even making decisions on what activity they're going to do to be aware of their own learning. But I just want students to have more autonomy. The new generation is so savvy and so aware of what's happening and with technology and what tools are out there that I think that we should really try and find ways to empower them to take ownership over their learning. And that can start as early as elementary school and progress on. And that will, I think, create a generation of people that are independent and confident and just self-aware of what they need and how to get it. I would love to see that.

I think something that we're seeing, again, in the survey data for the LEARN Study is that students are not very involved in the procurement process, which is really interesting because students are the ones that are using these products and programs at the end of the day. So I think if ultimately we care about what students' experiences are, I think we should try and increase their own voice and input into the products that ultimately they're going to be using and that need to work for them.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Yeah. And in integrating the voices of the students, like you said, that are going to be using the product, we have a tendency to... And this is a human thing, we have a tendency to bring the same voices to the table often. We bring our student council members. We bring our student advisory board, and it's the same six to 15 students, but those are not necessarily the students that are the ones that have those gaps in learning that this product is going to try to support. And so I love what you're saying because it's not only students, but it's like which students? Being really intentional about integrating student voice, but the voices of the students who are closest to the problem.

Ela Joshi:

Yeah. Student voice can be integrated not just in the process of buying a new product or program, but they can also be integrated into the actual development and creation of these products and programs. So there's a lot of user testing that happens, and we're starting to see that student focus groups or student input or other types of data are much more integrated. Folks are asking students, "What worked for you? What was confusing about this app? Why didn't you find this button? Did this explanation of how to solve this problem make sense to you? Why or why not?" And the more that we can have students share their real day-to-day experiences, and students from a range of backgrounds, the real students that are going to be using these products, the more that we can make sure that these tools are actually helping them and meeting them where they're at.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

And so what brings you back to this work? Like you said, scaling's been interesting to you for a long time, supporting school leadership. What keeps you engaged in just chipping away at this large system and trying to generate solutions over time? What keeps you returning to this space and not just being like, "You know what? I'm going to go and be a tech person and I'm going to just go make billions and we'll figure it out. They'll figure it out"?

Ela Joshi:

I think I'm never going to forget my time as a fifth grade teacher. It was a transformative experience for me. And I think a lot of teachers say this, I learn more from my students and my colleagues than I taught them. And I often think about my students to this very day and just all the lessons that I learned. And something that I learned from them is that spark and that change when you learn something new or you feel like, oh my gosh, this student just had that light bulb moment, or they feel empowered or they feel like, oh, my voice matters, or what I have to say matters, that change in students is what drives me because I'm hoping that the research findings that we're putting out there and that the teams that we work with and the products and programs that we're supporting, I'm hoping that they have those moments for students and that they can help future generations really feel like, I matter, my voice matters, my learning matters. And I think ultimately that's what drives me.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Wow. That's a pretty powerful purpose you have there, Dr. Joshi. I had to get that in.

Ela Joshi:

Who's that? Oh, it's me.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Who is that?

Well, we're going to wrap up. And so I want to know if you could leave our listeners with one critical key takeaway, and let's just go back to scaling. Let's focus on scaling.

Ela Joshi:

Sure.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

What is one really critical thing you would just want them to constantly have floating in their head? And let's do two things. Let's say if you're a researcher or a developer, and then let's say if you're a school person, what would you want our researchers and developers who are trying to create solutions for practitioners, what would you want them to just leave with when they're thinking about scaling their very innovative product that works really well in a particular context?

Ela Joshi:

Yeah, it's a really, really great question, and I'm going to put my researcher hat on. I'm not a developer, but we've talked to lots of folks that have developed products and heard from them. But I think what's really, really important is to bring in users early to make sure that what you are making is actually meeting real needs. I think sometimes products can be amazing in and of themselves, but it's not what people need right now. So to bring in voices early to make sure that your product is addressing day-to-day needs, and to continue to develop that product and being a little bit flexible and meeting people where they're at, and understanding that there has to be flexibility in the product, there has to be some room for change to adapt is super, super important. So I think one way that researchers and developers can do that is to maintain ongoing feedback processes that are just built into the development process. Always have research check-ins, like short little data collection points that you can continue to use to tweak and update things.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

And for a school or district level person, what would you want to leave them with? One of the things I think about is the value of evidence-based and what that means, and having a clear and shared understanding of what evidence means so that as you're making your procurement decisions, your people who are in the decision space are making it from a similar standpoint. In terms of their understanding of what evidence is, like the five of us who are deciding on this, all have the same shared understanding of what good evidence looks like or means. That's one of the things that I have taken away from our discussion.

Ela Joshi:

Yeah. Having that evidence base is super, super important. I think something that we've definitely heard from folks that we've spoken with as well as in our survey data, is that evidence matters to people, 100%. There's no dispute about that, but I think the type of evidence that matters is evidence that reflects the populations of students within, say, my district, right? We're hearing that over and over, "I want to see research and evidence that's representing students in my district so that I know that this product is going to work for my kids."

And so I think, actually, this is actually more advice for researchers and developers, is to get data, get evidence from a range of contexts so that you can say, yes, this works in place A, B, C, D in all of these ranges of contexts. But for school leaders that are interested in finding products that work for them, I think their teachers really know their students the best. The district down the road is going to know students just like yours. And I think those are excellent sources of information to tap into and that they already are tapping into. So I think just being aware of what's out there and sourcing from your own community is a great place to start.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Awesome. Thank you. I have had a wonderful time talking with you because you are simply delightful and wicked smart, and I appreciate all of your insights around scaling and leadership and engaging student voice. And I just want to thank you for joining us on the SRI homeroom today.

Ela Joshi:

Thanks so much for having me, Kori, and giving me the space to just nerd out and have this conversation with you. It's so fun. You're amazing and delightful and just brilliant, so I love having this talk with you.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Of course. It's been a pleasure. So maybe we'll have you back again. We'll have more data. We'll be able to talk more as your roles are expanding and your research is expanding, we can bring you back and we can do a round two, maybe that.

Ela Joshi:

I would love that. Love to do a follow-up.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Awesome. That sounds great. Thank you all for listening to the SRI Homeroom, produced by SRI, and we'll see you next time. Take care.

Ela Joshi:

Bye

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Bye.

Thank you for joining us on the SRI Homeroom, produced by SRI Education, a division of SRI. Our guest today was Ela Joshi, senior education researcher with SRI Education. Learn more about Ela and her work in today's show notes. Find all of our episodes, transcripts, and links to other resources by visiting sri.com/education. You can also connect with us on social media with the links in today's show notes. The views expressed in today's podcast belong solely to the participants and do not represent the views of SRI or any organizational funder or partner.