Episode 2 - Birth of STARI Transcript

Dr. Kala Jones (Host, SERP Literacy Specialist):
Welcome back to SERP Stories, a podcast where we pull back the curtain on research-practice partnerships transforming education. I'm your host, Dr. Kala Jones.

Dr. Suzanne Donovan (SERP Executive Director):
I've always believed that the best innovations in education come not from research alone or from classroom practice alone. They come from researchers and practitioners truly working together.

Kala:
That was Dr. Suzanne Donovan, SERP's founder and executive director. She grew up in Pittsburgh, fifth of 11 children, and went on to earn her PhD in public policy from UC Berkeley.

Today, she takes us back to a time before adolescent literacy was on the nation's radar - when a small group of educators and researchers joined forces to help middle and high school students who were years behind in reading not only catch up, but want to read.

You'll also hear from Dr. Lowry Hemphill, one of STARI's original developers, and SERP's Creative Director, Matt Ellinger.

This is Episode 2 - the origin story of STARI - the Strategic Adolescent Reading Intervention. A Tier II program so compelling that students who once avoided books were suddenly asking for more.

By the end of this episode, you'll hear how researchers, practitioners, and designers transformed early ideas into a streamlined, research-backed literacy program now used in schools across the country. But first, we need to rewind - because this story didn't start as a literacy intervention. And as Suzanne reminds us...

Suzanne:
One of the things that we really have learned through the process of SERP partnerships is where you end up is often completely unpredictable from where you begin.

Kala:
That unpredictability is at the heart of this story - a reminder that big ideas rarely follow a straight path. So, let's begin today's STARI story in 2003. Suzanne, can you take us there?

Suzanne:
Well, I guess I would begin that story at the National Academy of Sciences when I was a project director And I was responsible for a study that followed that work called How People Learn Bridging Research and Practice.

Kala:
The National Academies - a private nonprofit chartered by Congress in 1863 - **provide** independent, evidence-based advice to the federal government.

In the late 1990s, they were asked by the US Department of Education to synthesize research on

human learning, so that the nation could establish a strategic program of education research, designed to strengthen teaching and learning across the country.

The outcome was *How People Learn*, a landmark publication that began to influence thinking nationwide.

That effort sparked a series of follow-up reports - such as *How People Learn, Bridging Research and Practice*, which Suzanne led.

The collection of follow up publications became known as the “SERP reports.” Together, they made the case for a new approach to education research and development, and, they paved the way for the creation of the SERP Institute, as an independent nonprofit organization.

Here’s Suzanne sharing her big takeaway from this early work at the National Academies:

Suzanne:
In the SERP study, we brought together people from other fields like medicine, agriculture, and were asking: why has research so fundamentally changed how we go about those enterprises, but we haven't seen that same kind of impact in education?

And what the experts in those other fields said is, the research that actually has the biggest impact on practice usually begins in practice settings, where you notice in the process of clinical practice the things that are surprising, and they get you to ask new questions and develop new theories.

And you notice the opportunities to use your research knowledge to solve a problem that you are observing. And you can solve it in a way that works in the context where you're observing it.

In agriculture, they said, you really need to hang over the fence with the farmers. If you want to influence how they're going to go about their practice, you need to build trust. You need them open to listening to what you have to offer.

Kala:
And there it is - the word that shaped SERP from the beginning: trust. Not a nice-to-have, but the bedrock for solving the kinds of problems in education that matter. Trust across roles, across perspectives, and across priorities. Trust that the work is worth doing together.

Kala:
Over the last two decades, with Suzanne at the helm, the SERP Institute has built numerous partnerships, collaborated with hundreds of practitioners and researchers, and created dozens of classroom-driven, research-based tools. And while we’ll save the full SERP origin story for another episode, STARI’s story cannot be told, without sharing some of those beginnings.

Let’s fast forward to an education panel at Harvard University: a pivotal turning point in STARI’s story.

In Cambridge, Suzanne joined Harvard Professor Catherine Snow and Boston Superintendent Tom Payzant—both members of the SERP committee—on a panel to discuss the release of the

new SERP report. Suzanne recalls:

Suzanne:
Tom Payzant, Catherine Snow, and I were together. Somebody asked him, so you're a superintendent, so what would you do with this SERP idea? What kind of partnership would you want to have? And what problem would you want to work on? And Tom said, well, that's pretty easy for me. I would like help solving the middle school reading problem.

Kala:
That moment turned out to be more than a panel discussion - It was the spark that ignited the first SERP partnership, and with it, the beginning of STARI's journey.

A bold vision to build a national model for education research and development, was about to get its first real test, not in theory, but in middle school classrooms in Boston Public Schools.

A central aspect of this new model of research and development was convening a core group - a collaborative group of decision makers who would steer the work going forward. In Boston, the core group included leaders from Boston Public Schools - like Dr. Sonja Brookins Santelises and Dr. Irvin Scott; community partners like Ellen Guiney of the Boston Plan for Excellence, and researchers including Dr. Catherine Snow, Dr. Richard Elmore, Dr. Jimmy Kim, Michelle Forman, and Dr. Lowry Hemphill.

Lowry, who you may remember from episode one, had been a reading specialist in Boston. With a team of teachers, she created a highly-engaging reading program that showed promising results and drew the attention of Boston College researchers.

That collaboration gave her what she calls the "research bug," ultimately leading her to graduate school and a career as a researcher in her own right.

By 2005, as the SERP partnership with Boston was developing, Lowry joined the team to conduct classroom observations. What she saw was striking:

Dr. Lowry Hemphill (Wheelock College, Boston University):
We weren't working with any sort of preconceived notions. The district had told us middle school literacy is a challenge. We wanted to see what was going on. So one thing that I saw, including in really good teachers' classrooms, was the teachers would actually read a lot of the books out loud to the kids because the kids couldn't access the books independently. I would see one or two kids engaging in conversation with the teacher about the book.

But in general, I saw a lot of teachers explaining to the kids what the book was about. So effectively, the teachers were doing all the work, right? They would read the book out loud, and then they would tell the kids what to think about the book.

In general, what we saw was large numbers of kids just plain checked out. And these weren't necessarily classrooms exclusively for struggling readers. These were just general middle school classrooms. Another thing we saw was kids reading books very slowly.

So I remember observing in a ninth grade English class and they were reading Of Mice and Men

in September. I went back in October and November and I went back in January and I was like, they're still reading Of Mice and Men!

Kala:
Through observations, follow-up conversations, and data collection, the specific, actionable problem of practice was coming into focus.

Middle school students were checked out. Secondary teachers were frustrated. And Boston Public Schools Superintendent Tom Payzant knew something was wrong - but not exactly why.

To dig deeper, the team needed sharper data. So, they turned to another member of the core group: John Sabatini, then at ETS, the Educational Testing Service.

Suzanne, can you tell us this part of the STARI origin story?

Suzanne:
John said, I can help you solve this problem. I have no shortage of items to test students' reading capabilities, competencies, along a number of dimensions.

But I need to know answers to a whole bunch of questions. Like, who's going to administer this? Is it a reading specialist? Is it a regular teacher? Is it one-on-one? Is it small group? Is it whole class? Is it computer? Is it pencil and paper? How quickly do you need the results? And what are you going to do with the results? And all of those things will help me shape an assessment that will fit your needs.

So BPS answered those questions for John, and he went about putting together what at that point we called the RISE assessment

Kala:
That assessment - now known as ReadBasix - confirmed what Lowry had been noticing: many middle schoolers were several grades behind in reading.

For most teachers, this was eye-opening. They had assumed the issue was stamina or vocabulary, not basic reading skills.

For district leaders, the shock was the sheer scale of the problem.

At the time, Boston had invested in READ 180 licenses to support struggling readers. Before launching something new, the team asked: could READ 180 fill the gap? Dr. Jimmy Kim studied its implementation. He found that principals resisted using it because many students fell below its eligibility cutoff, scheduling was complex, and licenses were expensive.

Suzanne:
That's when we understood we needed something new that would target students who were actually further behind in reading than Read 180 was designed for.

Kala:
It had to be more flexible, less costly, and usable with a wider range of students.

Suzanne:
Many of the teachers thought students could read perfectly well when they couldn't. But there were teachers who knew there was a problem for some of their students. And they said they needed help solving the problem because they knew these students were capable and the materials that they could find to help them build their reading skills were designed for second and third graders.

And I remember clearly the teacher who said, I am not gonna humiliate my students by putting texts about ducks in front of them so they can learn how to decode words. I need materials that respect the developmental level of my kids and I just can't find them.

Kala:
That's when the team began to imagine, what if we built something entirely new - something that addressed not only the skills, but also the motivation of adolescent readers?

To build the first prototype, funding was essential. Thanks to the inclusive design of the original core group, seed money came through. Ellen Guiney, from the Boston Plan for Excellence, redirected unused grant funds to support the partnership's work. And with those funds, Dr. Lowry Hemphill began shaping what would become STARI. Here's Suzanne on why Lowry was uniquely suited.

Suzanne:
Lowry Hemphill was not only an excellent researcher, she had taught students who struggled with reading. So she knew what it was like to be in the classroom as the teacher. She knew what it was like to work with these students. And she knew the kind of support teachers needed in order to be able to solve this problem.

Kala:
Lowry pulled together a small design team rooted in real classrooms. She recruited 10 teachers from five Boston Public Schools, and every Thursday afternoon they gathered at Wheelock College. Week after week, they wrote, tested, revised, and retested materials with their own students. Here's how Lowry remembers this time:

Lowry:
I would bring draft fluency passages... and the teachers would be like thumbs up on that; that one's great or this other one I think you ... and the writing team have to do some more work on this.

Kala:
Sounds like true collaboration.

Each cycle brought the team closer to something new - an intervention built not just *for* teachers and students, but ***with*** them.

And one of the first texts they chose was *Game* by Walter D. Myers: a story with a captivating theme, a vivid setting, morally complex characters, and a narrative arc strong enough to keep kids turning the pages.

Lowry:
From the beginning, we worked with this idea that what was going to engage kids was cognitively challenging text. We felt that there were all these kinds of little fires that you could light inside kids that would motivate their skill development. If the skill development was in the service of engaging with really complex and really intriguing ideas.

Kala:
And Suzanne put it this way:

Suzanne:
When kids are in middle grades and they haven't yet learned to read, they need a very well-structured experience in order to master those skills. So the curriculum had to be designed in a very structured way that allowed teachers to know step by step what they needed to do with students.

On the other hand, because we were dealing with middle grade students. We didn't want them to feel like they were being walked through a set of exercises, especially because they're middle grade students who were behind in reading.

So they will have had experiences in earlier grades of being told that they're inadequate or they're failing. So we needed to give them positive experiences.

So a major design challenge is how do you create the structure that's needed for teachers to get these students step by step through the process of becoming more fluent readers who can comprehend the text and at the same time give students an emotional experience of being part of a group, a community that's working collaboratively to develop more perspective on the world, to be able to express their voices and develop their critical thinking.

So it was that challenge that I think was particularly poignant that those extremes of being very open and welcoming to student voice and very structured that was, I think, the biggest design challenge.

Kala:
Out of those Thursday afternoons, the DNA of STARI began to take shape. Not in a single breakthrough moment, but in the steady rhythm of teachers and researchers circling back - always anchored in the realities of real classrooms.

What emerged wasn’t another program to drill students on basic reading skills. It was something different: an approach that treated struggling adolescent readers not as remedial cases to be fixed, but as capable thinkers ready to wrestle with complex ideas.

Still, a pilot with a handful of dedicated teachers could only go so far. To grow, the team needed more than seed funding. That chance arrived when the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) launched its unprecedented Reading for Understanding initiative. The SERP-led partnership applied - and in 2010, was awarded a substantial IES grant to further develop STARI (as well as several other curricular programs and assessments.)

By 2013, it was time for the big test. The IES grant funded not only development of STARI, but also provided for an efficacy trial to answer a central question: Did STARI actually work?

Schools in Boston, and three other Massachusetts districts, joined the study. In each school, students who were scoring below grade level in reading were randomly assigned either to STARI or their school's usual classes — the "business as usual" control condition. (In research, that just means students kept doing what they normally would, so you can measure the difference a new program makes.)

After a year of STARI implementation, Dr. Jimmy Kim and colleagues analyzed the results. The answer was clear: yes, STARI worked. Even though all but one of the students in the control group received some form of support, those in STARI gained a full year of reading growth beyond their peers. And it wasn't just test scores that were changing – teachers noticed something else. Lowry, explains:

Lowry:
When Jimmy Kim and I did the clinical trial of STARI, half the control group kids had disappeared. So these were kids who were struggling readers who were not assigned to STARI. And they just stopped coming to school by May. And the reason they stopped coming to school is because they failed all their major subjects for two or three marking periods. And they knew there was no way they could pass.

And the reason kids are coming to school who are in the STARI program was because they could see themselves getting better. They were conscious that their reading skills were improving. They were experiencing more success in their other classes. A lot of the teachers would say, the STARI kids are the ones who are prepared. The STARI kids are the ones who do the reading. The STARI kids are the ones with their hands up for class discussion. And they say, and I see the skills getting transferred. And that's a really important part of what we're trying to get with the program, it's not just about improving your reading scores. It's about all these other attributes that make you a successful student.

Kala:
At that point, the team knew they had developed something special - an intervention grounded in research, and proven in practice!

From those early cycles, several design principles took root. STARI was anchored in the Science of Reading and included multi-syllabic decoding, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension. It was also informed by the science of learning, drawing on explicit instruction, cognitive load strategies, and background knowledge development.

But it wasn't theory alone that shaped STARI. It was forged in classrooms - piloted, refined, and stress-tested by middle school teachers. Unlike many interventions built on short passages, STARI worked with whole novels. And it drew on what we know about adolescent psychology: that students engage more deeply when texts are motivating, age-appropriate, and open the door to rich discussions and debate, as a linchpin for comprehension.

STARI was never *just* about improving reading skills. It was about reigniting students' curiosity

and confidence. And what set it apart wasn't just about the content -It was the design. I sat down with SERP's Creative Director, Matt Elinger to learn more:

Matt Ellinger (SERP Creative Director):
Design is a broad term, ... And I grimace sometimes when people say, you're so good at making things pretty. Well, that's nice, but design is really about usability. You have to both present material in a way that's digestible but accurate so teachers can do a very difficult job with limited amount of time.

Kala:
And in education, that usability challenge is particularly nuanced.

Matt:
You can't sort of wing it. You have to be very careful to support the content aim of the actual content developer. The designer is really supposed to support the broad learning goal in education. If presented correctly to a content developer or a researcher, it's about getting them closer to what they really want to do. And once they understand that it's not about convincing them to change, you know, the font, it's about getting the kids to really be in the place where they're really eager for them to be.

Kala:
Like any prototype, early versions of STARI had rough edges - too many materials, lesson plans ran long, and pieces that didn't quite click. Teachers pushed back. With Matt's support, every round of teacher critique became a round of redesign and the program was streamlined. And because designers were at the table early, those **changes** weren't patchwork - they were built in.

Using teacher feedback, classroom observations and student work, every detail of the program was iterated - lesson pacing, page layout, supports. The goal wasn't just stronger content, but a better teaching and learning experience.

And as Matt pointed out, other **research and development** organizations often treat design as an afterthought. For STARI, it was core from the beginning.

Matt:
What's special about SERP is the design is treated as part of the general ethos of the organization. Teachers aren't thought of as recipients. They're co-developers and designers as well, along with the other people who are doing the data analysis and content development. Other organizations would hire freelancers or send something out to design when it's considered content complete. But we think it's really important to consider design during, instead of after, even early prototypes have design elements to them and designs are modified along the way to support implementation and make the greatest possible impact.

Kala:
And it worked. STARI's early impact came from that rich, trusting partnership.

Teachers even influenced the name. Originally called the S-A-R-I program - for Strategic Adolescent Reading Intervention - teachers quickly pointed out they couldn't send students to "sorry" class. Overnight, it became STARI - a small but telling example of how teacher voices

shaped every layer.

In the end, it was this marriage of research, practice and design that made STARI different. Not just a curriculum, but a new kind of intervention that fused adolescent motivation with the Science of Reading, making students want to show up, engage and see themselves as readers.

And in 2014, just 10 years after that pivotal conversation with BPS Superintendent Payzant, STARI was released to the public as an Open Educational Resource.

Teachers everywhere could download all the SERP-developed STARI curriculum materials free of charge.

Word spread slowly at first, then picked up momentum. Teachers found STARI, used it, shared it, and in some districts, they advocated to adopt it system-wide.

So what sets STARI apart? It went beyond addressing repeated academic failure. It taught older students basic reading skills through engaging, culturally relevant themes. It also provided authentic experiences students valued like peer collaboration, rich classroom discourse and student-led debate. Above all, it treated adolescents with respect - as thinkers whose voices and ideas mattered.

From a National Academy's report to Boston classrooms, from messy prototypes to a proven program, STARI's origin story shows what's possible when research and practice truly work together. It's a reminder that design and trust aren’t extras, they're essentials.

The Boston Public Schools partnership modeled a new way of doing research and development in education: start with the problem schools identify, recruit researchers, integrate design from the outset, and keep teachers at the table as co-creators. And that's the SERP way.

And as we face today's adolescent literacy challenges, STARI shows that collaboration can fuel innovation in education for decades to come. It proves we don't have to hand older struggling readers materials that are boring, disconnected, or far beyond reach. Instead, we can invite them into texts that challenge, inspire and affirm their capacity as readers.

If you missed episode one, go back and hear why middle school reading matters so deeply. And if this story resonates, share it with a colleague or a friend who cares about the future of our schools. Because every student deserves to feel like a reader, not just in first grade, but in sixth, seventh, and eighth grade too.

And proving a program works in one city? That’s only the beginning. Stay tuned. In our next episode, we'll follow STARI beyond Massachusetts, exploring what it takes to bring a promising program to scale - and how it continues to evolve with input from teachers, students and districts nationwide.

Before we sign off, I asked every guest this season one question. How did you learn to read? With Dr. Lowry Hemphill being one of the superheroes of this episode, it's only fitting we close with her story:

Lowry:
in elementary school in the late 50s and early 60s when the approach to teaching kids to read was called look-say. And we read these little readers called the Dick and Jane stories. And the idea behind this was no phonics at all. You would just see repeated the same roughly 50 or 60 words over and over and over again in the first year of school and first grade. and you would memorize those words and you'd be able to read them again in the stories. So I remember really struggling in the early months of first grade. I think the first page of the Dick and Jane books is Run, Spot, Run. And then a few pages later, there's something like Spot, Ran or something. And I had the worst time with Ran and Run. And even the Rs in the Ns they used to kind of like flip or dance around the page for me.

So I think for me what really helped with getting going with reading was that the first grade teacher I had had us write every day. You know, draw a picture and write. And I wasn't totally thrilled with the writing part of it, but I loved to draw and we always had to write something to go with our drawings. And for me, that was how I figured out letter sound rules was by trying to sound out the words that I was trying to write. And that really

created over time. I mean, by the end of first grade, I had sort of figured out some of the, you know, principles which you could use to read more challenging words than we were seeing in the Dick and Jane books. So when I became a teacher and met kids who were struggling readers, met a lot of kids who were struggling readers, everybody's story and how they ended up there was a little bit different, but I could sort of relate to kids who had, you know, not had amazing reading instruction and were struggling.

Kala:
Thanks for listening to this episode of SERP Stories. If you want to learn more about STARI, visit serpinstitute.org / STARI. There you'll find the research, curriculum previews, and a professional learning series to help you get started.

And if you believe, like we do, that middle school readers deserve better, share this episode, leave us a review, and follow along as we bring more research with purpose to the mic.

I'm Kala Jones. See you next time.

SERP Stories is produced by the SERP Institute, where educators, researchers, and designers come together to tackle schools' most pressing challenges.

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