

- SERP Stories - Season 2 Episode 1: The Blueprint

-[teacher and students engaging in a lesson]: Ship. I-P. Ship. Let's write the word ship.

Dr. Kala Jones (Host, SERP Literacy Specialist) (00.:12): Listen to that. That's a group of five-year-olds doing the hardest cognitive work of their life so far, turning shapes on a page into sound, into meaning. Every kindergarten teacher in America is trained to listen for exactly this moment and to worry if it doesn't come easily.

- What's that sh?

- S-H.

- S-H.

- Kala (00:36): Now fast forward eight years. The now 13-year-olds are having the same struggle, but almost nobody is listening for it anymore. This season, I want to know why. I'm Dr. Kala Jones, and this is SERP Stories, where we follow the kids the system calls behind and ask a different question. Behind what? Behind whose timeline? Every episode this season, I go to a different state and follow the decisions, spoken and unspoken, that shape how kids learn to read, all the way down to a kid in a classroom right now living with the consequences. And I introduce you to teachers and researchers who are proving that behind was never the whole story. On this episode, before the states, before the case studies, we're going to talk about the foundation this season builds on, the cost of only looking for warning signs when they're small, yet ignoring the major problem right in front of us.

[bell ring] Kala (01:32): First, let's talk about the numbers. That's the thing I want to sit with this episode because it's the engine of this entire season. Reading difficulty doesn't announce itself once and then go away. It compounds. A gap that's a few months wide in kindergarten can be years wide by eighth grade, not because the kids stopped trying, but because every year that gap goes unaddressed, the texts get harder, the stakes get higher, and the kid gets better at hiding it. And here's the number that should stop everyone in their tracks. On the most recent reading test, a third of the country's eighth graders scored below what researchers call NAEP basic, the largest share since the test began tracking this more than three decades ago. And it's not evenly spread. The students already struggling the most are the ones falling furthest behind. The gap between the highest and lowest performing readers is now roughly 100 points on a 500-point scale. Here's what that widening gap actually looks like on the ground. The modest reading recovery this country has made since the pandemic, has been driven almost entirely by kids who were already doing fine. Meanwhile, scores for the lowest performing

readers, the bottom 10%, kept falling. Between 2022 and 2024 alone, the learning losses for that group grew 70% larger. Scott Marion, a member of NAEP's governing board and the executive director of the National Center for the Improvement of Educational Assessment put it about as bluntly as researchers ever do. He said, "The rich are getting richer and the poor are getting shafted and called it almost criminal." And this isn't a story about a handful of struggling states dragging down the national average. Between 2019 and the most recent test, not a single state saw eighth grade reading scores improve. 38 states saw them get worse. The rest were statistically flat. Whatever's driving this isn't a regional problem. It's a national problem, running underneath nearly the entire country at once.

Andres Henriquez (03:23): This is not happening in blue states. This is not happening in red states. It's happening across the United States of America. And it's not just in the schools that have poverty. This is happening in the very wealthiest districts, not as much as those in poverty, but it's happening there as well.

Kala (03:41): That's Andres Henriquez, director of STEM Education Strategy at the Education Development Center, and one of two researchers whose reporting helped shape this episode. We hear more from him and his colleague Naomi Hupert throughout the season. So why does this keep happening? Why does a country that says it cares about literacy keep losing kids exactly at the moment they need the most support? That's what this season is about, because I don't think this is a mystery. It was a choice and it has an origin story. In 2001, Congress passed No Child Left Behind, and with it, a program called Reading First, over a billion dollars a year at its peak aimed at one specific goal, making sure kids could read at grade level by the end of third grade. This wasn't an arbitrary cutoff. Third grade is when researchers say kids stop learning to read and start reading to learn. When literacy shifts from being the subject itself to being the tool you need for every other subject, it made sense to aim there, but that focus never really left. More than 20 years later, researchers who track this say the literacy initiatives in states and districts across the country are still concentrated almost entirely on grades K through five, and in a lot of places, K through three specifically. To be clear, that focus was not wrong. Early reading instruction matters enormously, but it was incomplete because when a state builds an entire literacy strategy, its funding streams, its coaching pipelines, its teaching training around seven-year-olds, and a 14-year-old walks through the door still needing the same kind of foundational support, there's often nothing built for her at all. No funding stream, no trained coach, no curriculum design for a teenager's brain, her identity, her need to not be embarrassed in front of her peers.

[gentle music] Kala (05:21: I talked to Naomi Hupert, director of the Center for Children and Technology at the Education Development Center about what that gap actually looks like from the inside of a

classroom.

Naomi Hupert (Director of the Center for Children and Technology) (05:33): They'll say like, "I realized the kid couldn't even sound out some of the words." And to me, that's like, first of all, horrifying that this kid is now in seventh grade and this teacher, you know like in November is suddenly realizing for the first time that a student in their class cannot even sound out the words and they've been giving homework every day or every week that this child or this youth knows they will never be able to accomplish.

Kala (06:00): That's not a story about a bad teacher. That's a story about a system that never told that teacher what to look for or what to do once they found it. So why is it this hard to teach an older kid to read? Part of the answer is who we're asking to do it. Secondary teachers are trained as content specialists, not literacy instructors.

Andres (06:20): Teachers are trained to be math teachers and science teachers and social studies teachers. And I think the areas that they focus on are in terms of literacy at large are my students understanding the graphic that is being represented here. Are they looking at the charts to see how this chart is actually represented? So there are all kinds of bodies of work and examples of students and teachers being literate within the sciences, being literate within history. There's a great body of literature all around that, but you know, it is really getting at those youngsters who are already reading at pretty high levels, right? And so it's sort of the rich get richer in that sense where those youngsters are going to do even better by that small amount of semi-instruction. There's a whole other group of young people who are not getting that kind of, are beyond even getting to that body of work because they're really struggling readers, really much more struggling than we know.

Kala (07:36): So what can we do to help content area teachers teach literacy? We actually already know the answer to that and Andres describes how unreliable the support already is.

Andres (07:45): In flush years, meaning when there are resources and there's a crisis or there's some generous funding from a philanthropic group or some from the government, they will hire reading coaches. And so reading coaches often go in and try and work in parallel with that content teacher to improve instruction. They sometimes may assign one reading coach for five or six schools or probably more than that. So you can imagine the lack of time the reading coaches have to actually prepare the kinds of instruction for the teacher that might be really useful for the student. It's partially effective, but it's not effective enough for those kids who are three or four grade levels behind. In down times and when there are fiscal issues happening at school districts, those are the first people to go are the reading coaches. They're not going to stick around because they're not

inexpensive, right? I mean, it's one FTE, etc., and they're going to try and push them right back into the classroom.

Kala (08:53): Once again, it comes back to the money. So I'm looking for the actual dollar comparison between secondary literacy and elementary literacy, and it's stark. The K-3 program that came out of No Child Left Behind, Reading First, which began in 2002, was funded at over \$6 billion during its first six years. The federal government's signature attempt to do the same thing for older struggling readers began in 2005 and ran through 2009 with a program called Striving Readers, and it wasn't a billion dollars a year. Grants during the entire period amounted to a total of \$157 million, less than 3% of the amount dedicated to younger students through Reading First. Subsequent programs such as Striving Readers Comprehensive Literacy Grants targeted the entire range of students from birth to grade 12, but there were no dedicated adolescent literacy funds after 2010. Think about those numbers again, \$6 billion versus \$157 million. That's not a rounding error. That's a generation of policy telling you in dollars which readers mattered more. I asked Andres what actually happened on the ground with the Striving Readers money, whether the uneven results were a funding difference or something else. Turns out it wasn't just the funding. It was inconsistent implementation, districts of vastly different sizes trying to run the same program and so much more.

Andres(10:14): The sad part is that we sort of stopped doing it because it was seen as not successful, rather than seeing this as just a down payment on trying to figure out the complexities of all of these issues.

Kala (10:29): Those complexities go deeper than implementation though. Some of it traces back to the research itself, why funding and the measure of success of funding tends to emphasize one kind of reading skill so much more than another. So I talked to Dr. Catherine Snow, a researcher who spent close to five decades studying how kids learn to read.

Dr. Catherine Snow (Researcher) (10:48): The venial sin of the National Reading Panel report was that it used a very narrow criterion for selecting research to meta analyze and failed to take into account many of the contextual factors or information from non-experimental research.

Kala (11:14): I'm going to say that name again slowly. The National Reading Panel, it's not a household phrase, but its 2000 report became the scientific backbone for reading first, for the No Child Left Behind's entire reading strategy for two decades of state policy that followed. And according to Dr. Snow, who spent her career studying its blind spots, the panel was extremely good at studying the kind of reading skill you can teach in a few dozen hours and measure cleanly,

phonics, phonological awareness, and much weaker on the kind of reading skills that take a lifetime to build.

Catherine (11:46): But that's a venial sin when it comes to something like phonological awareness training. It's supposed to be a short term experience, 15, 20 hours of it in a lifetime or enough to achieve perfect success. It's what we call a constrained skill. Phonics instruction is to some extent, the same way. It's a little more challenging than phonological awareness, but no kid needs more than a half an hour a day for a few years of explicit instruction and letter-sound correspondence. Comprehension is a completely different domain. It's everything. What you comprehend of a text as a 10-year-old or a 20-year-old or a 70-year-old is a function of every single experience you've had in your life. It's language, it's knowledge, it's other texts that you've read, it's connections you can make, it's emotional reactions you might have. Comprehension is not like phonological awareness. And at the time of the National Reading Panel report, the only experimental studies that had been devoted to the topic of reading comprehension had evaluated the impact of reading strategy instruction. Well, reading strategy instruction is a tiny little aid to some students in the process of comprehending, but it is not, as it has been called, comprehension instruction, right? It's like saying, "Oh, I've got a blue ribbon in culinary arts from the French Academy of Culinary Arts because I learned to make an omelet."

Kala (13:48): So how do we move past making that omelet? How can we teach reading comprehension?

Catherine (13:54): I don't think you can actually teach reading comprehension. I think you can create contexts, exciting texts, authentic questions that make students want to go find answers in those texts that enable students to teach themselves to comprehend by virtue of doing the work of comprehending. And in that sense, it's much more like, I don't know, doing gymnastics than it is than jumping rope. It's a whole array of different skills that the learner has to put together, him or herself. And schools don't treat it that way. They treat it as something like, "Okay, we're going to have a deep reading lesson now," but as if deep reading is the goal rather than a mechanism to get to something else. The goal has got to be learning, knowing, critiquing, thinking more deeply, and deep reading can help with that. Strategies can occasionally help with that, but there are 45 other things that also can help with that. And it's not as if by teaching one of them or any of them one at a time in a list, you can actually support comprehension.

Kala (15:14): So here's the shape of the blind spot as I understand it now. The skills that are the easiest to study, easiest to teach in a short window, and easiest to fund got 20 years of national attention and investment. The skill that actually determines whether a 14-year-old can read a textbook, a ballot, or a job application,

comprehension, built out of years of accumulated knowledge and vocabulary and practice got comparatively little because it doesn't fit neatly into a research study or a grant cycle. And when I asked Andres what it would take to close the gap, he didn't hesitate.

Andres (15:44): We need a Striving Readers 2.0, 3.0 to really begin to engage in a very different level.

[student chatter] Kala (16:02): None of this means the early grade investments was a mistake. It wasn't. Kids who leave third grade unable to decode a sentence are in real trouble, and the country was right to take that seriously, but a policy built entirely around a constrained, easily measured skill was always going to leave something out. And what it left out was everything comprehension actually requires: knowledge, vocabulary, motivation, identity, and a reason to care about what the text says. That's the gap this season lives in, not kids can't read, a much more specific, much more fixable problem, an entire generation of older readers who didn't get the intervention they actually needed. And I don't think that's a coincidence or neglect. I think it's what happens when a research field optimizes for what's measurable over what's true. Phonological awareness is easy to isolate, easy to test, easy to fund in a five-year grant cycle. Comprehension, the accumulation of a kid's entire life of language and knowledge and motivation resist that kind of tidy measurement. So for two decades, the tidy problem got the funding, the political urgency, the headlines, and the messy problem got what was left over. That's not an argument against research. It's an argument for better questions. Every state I'm about to take you into this season made a real defensible choice at some point to focus on early reading, to mandate a curriculum, to raise the stakes on a test. None of those choices were made in bad faith, but each of them in its own way ran into the same wall, a reading problem that doesn't stay the same size or the same shape as the kid carrying it gets older.

Naomi (17:39): Maybe it's a surprise that it's actually hard to teach kids to read, but we've been in the surprise state for how many years? 50, 100 years, we're still surprised. There's a point at which you're like, oh, surprise is over, it's hard, and we need a whole lot of different approaches that we can test and that we can refine. But I think also what you lose when you have a community that has 30% or more of its population unable to read some basic medical information and things related to their civic role in the community, what you lose is huge. You lose engagement and involvement and you also financially, you lose because you lose in terms of what individuals contribute to your community, both as individuals and also in terms of financially as a tax base, the long-term costs of continuing to allow for people to be not literate is huge. And I don't think as a country we recognize that.

Kala (18:47): This season, I'm going to go state by state and follow

that gap all the way down to the ground into real classrooms with real teachers, real kids, and real numbers. Not to point fingers, but to ask, what would it take to build a system that doesn't give up on a reader just because she's gotten older and because her problem doesn't fit as neatly into a research setting? Next episode, I start in Mississippi, the state known for its reading miracle. I sit down with Dr. Carey Wright, one of the architects behind it, to ask what happens to that miracle once those kids turn 12? Before I sign off, I ask every guest a season question. This season is all about how education can differ based on the state and even the zip code you grew up in. Where did you grow up and how do you think that place shaped your educational trajectory? Here's how Andres and Naomi answered.

Andres (19:32): So grew up in New York City, went to New York City public schools all the way through. It was fortunate I was to have really good instruction when I went to school. I was an early reader, so that was really great. I think the first time I sort of experienced personally, my struggle with content reading in a sense was when I entered my AP biology class in high school and it was like running into a brick wall and reading the words but not really understanding the multi-syllabic words and the concepts, etc. etc. And it was a real push for me to get through the class, but experienced that again when going off to college and hitting that roadblock, I figured it all out and of course, you get better the more you practice, but it was a realization during a summer... I did have a summer school once in my high school years. I remember that I was being tutored for the woman was helping me sort of really break down text. This was a private school and I was there for a summer camp, but on the side, she tutored me and it was really just getting through the New York Times op-ed pieces, you know what I mean, which is written about at the 10th grade level and trying to figure out some of the meanings of the words and really trying to comprehend that. It was the real first time that I got any kind of instruction, but it was a real awakening in terms of learning, knowing how to read, but then you really need to read for content.

Naomi (21:23): I grew up in Brooklyn, New York. My parents sent me to a Montessori school for my early years, and this is probably not the story you were expecting, but it turned out that the teacher was hitting the children and eventually broke someone's arm. He was only hitting the boys, not the girls. He was throwing them into bookshelves and things. And when it all came out, the school was shut down, but in a, I think a sort of like a reflexive reaction, my parents put me into a Quaker school, nonviolent. And so many of the kids from that school that was shut down ended up at my school, Brooklyn Friends School, and there were several of us who were not readers. I was not a reader. I was in third grade. I was an excellent memorizer of text, and I literally memorized "See Spot Run," "Dick and Jane," whatever the early texts were. And I think part of the environment of fear and the potential of some violent incident has real ramifications for

learning, which I think later in life informed my thinking about what it means for kids growing up in situations that are not inviting of space, mental space to learn and how that can impact learning overall. Anyway, I'm also from a family of now labeled dyslexics, and so it took me until fifth grade to start becoming a reader. That's when I really figured it out with the help of a reading tutor, not the school who had no idea what to do with me. And so that's my early experience in education. I did go off to college, I did graduate, and then I did decide to become a reading teacher, which is what my later graduate work was in. And then I never ended up there. I ended up doing research, but that's how I got to where I am now. And I have a son who has a much more significant disability. He has cerebral palsy, he has epilepsy. I was told as a parent that he will never be a reader, and my expectations were way too high, and I needed to scale them back to make his life easier. He is an excellent reader, slightly obsessive about reading now, but I also got to witness the school system completely discounting after a certain point. If it hadn't happened literally by third grade, teachers were just basically giving up. There wasn't any structure or support to have a different perspective.

Kala (24:03): Thanks for listening to this episode of SERP Stories. If you want to learn more about STARI, visit serpinstitute.org/STARI. 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 Dr. Kala Jones. See you next time. SERP Stories is produced by the SERP Institute, where educators, researchers, and designers come together to tackle school's most pressing challenges. Explore our work at serpinstitute.org.