The SRI Homeroom – Episode 5

[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, what's the difference between change and improvement?

[Theme music fades in]

Vanessa Coleman:
Let's talk about where we are around these issues and the work. What are our beliefs? What are our mindsets? What are our values that are driving the decisions we're making?

Kori Hamilton Biagas:
Taking a more intentional and more human approach to educational improvement, 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. Today, I'm so excited to be joined by my friend and colleague, Vanessa Coleman.

Vanessa is what you might call an educational changemaker. She works with so many different teams and stakeholders to reimagine learning, guide innovation, improve outcomes, build capacity, scale change, and so much more.

Welcome, Vanessa.

Vanessa Coleman:
Thank you. Thank you, Kori. I'm happy to join you.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

In that very brief bio, it sounds like you do a lot of magic-making in the work that you do. So can you tell me in all of those facets of your work, what is the big challenge that you're trying to solve?

Vanessa Coleman:

Well, it does require a little bit of magic, right? I'm working to address our core needs, which haven't really changed. I've been doing this work for a few decades now, right? The characteristic shift, but the core need is the same. The need is to have and ensure that we have an informed and prepared community, right, to lead us, to make decisions and choices. And at a basic level, it's about people who can think critically, right? Who can use their minds well, as I like to say. But it's also about people who are emotionally intelligent, who can use their heart in their decision-making as well as their minds.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

So you're also a connector of hearts and minds, so that that empathy and that compassion that people hold can carry into the work that they're doing and have an impact on the people who are in front of them.

Vanessa Coleman:

Absolutely. Right? Years ago, if you would've asked me the question about what it is I'm trying to do, I would've said the same thing, right? I'm looking to create opportunities so that we have a future that can use their minds well. But I talked a lot less about that heart part of it, right? And in recent years, we see just how much we need that, right? When we don't have it, when we ignore our own humanity and how much of that guides and informs who we are and how we do what we do, we run into problems, we run into trouble. So yes, I'm looking to match heart and head, but both have to be, I think, supported and nurtured, right, toward these common understandings about where we're headed.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Mm-hmm. Do you spend more of your time working... Who is your primary audience that you're working with, that you're doing these collaborations with? Is it more classroom-level teachers? Is it more the administrative folks at the school or district level? Is it people who are representative of the state education agencies, or is it other organizations that are also supporting the education system? Or is it a combination of all of those things?

Vanessa Coleman:

It is definitely a combination of all of those things. When people ask me what I do, I tell them I work with the adults, right? Because the adults are the ones defining and making it all happen in our education system.

But I do look at the education system in these parts, right? There are people at the heart of the system, and I'm looking to have conversations and engage the thinking and the hearts of those folks at the heart of the education system. And sometimes that's about teachers. Sometimes that's about administrators, right, in schools. Sometimes, often in my work, it's about district-level people. Often it's about state education agency-level administrator folks. But it's also about family and communities that support learners. It's about all of the adults that have a role and play a role in making sure we've got the kind of future community we need.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

So you're describing a really multi-leveled and comprehensive idea of what a community looks like, right? What I'm hearing is all of the different layers and levels in which people enter into the education community space. There are entry points or levers at each one of those places that you're working to help people to navigate through this heart-mind relationship, because what they're doing in their space has a different impact or outcome than what a classroom teacher might be doing compared to a district administrator compared to a state person compared to a family person.

Vanessa Coleman:

Absolutely. We all play a role, and we do well, right? And we probably have higher impact when we acknowledge that we all have a role in where our specific locus of controls are, right, in the kinds of change we're seeking and working toward.

I like to think about more holistic and systems focused change. And when you think about the improvements we need in that kind of a way, we can't imagine doing it on our own from any one individual or from any one position or role, right? Teachers can't do it on their own, right?

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

They didn't make the system.

Vanessa Coleman:

They didn't make the system.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Right.

Vanessa Coleman:

Right? And we can make changes to teacher practices and the mandates about how they do it and the pace at which they are doing what they do, but they still exist within context, right? And those contexts literally include things like policies that are driving them. Sometimes those policies feel like shackles to some teachers, right? It's about the kinds of ways in which decisions are made and people interact, and the agreements that people have. Oftentimes unspoken, right?

So you can have an amazing teacher doing amazing things and figuring out how to get around all of the challenges or hurdles that they have in a context, which is oftentimes their classroom, but then there's so many other considerations that's impacting their ability to do that well to sustain the kinds of practices that they have learned work, and they need new partners and partners from different positions in the work, including families and parents and community members sometimes.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Yeah. Education is not a one-man job, and it doesn't take place on an island.

Vanessa Coleman:

Absolutely.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

So it's not any one person's whole job, it's a piece of everyone's job. That's part of our social responsibility as adults around children.

Vanessa Coleman:

Absolutely.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Yeah, and particularly if you are situated within the system at the state level, the district level, classroom level, it even levels up that sense of responsibility that you're connected to.

Vanessa Coleman:

Yes, it does, right? Because when you're at those kinds of levels, you're responsible for making decisions that impact just about every other level and every other role, right?

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Mm-hmm.

Vanessa Coleman:

We're talking about curriculum choices, and we're talking about other policies, right, that impact and influence how students feel and are seen even in their environments, right?

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Mm-hmm.

Vanessa Coleman:

Whether or not are absentee and other kinds of policies, right, that either see and place students and families as kind of whole people, right, in need of things that go beyond the classroom or not, right? There's so many pieces of the work that those folks, particularly in those higher state education agency positions and seats, they influence so much of the work that happens.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Yeah, and it feels like that wave effect, right? You drop a rock in a bucket or a pebble in a bucket.

Vanessa Coleman:

Ripple.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

So there's that ripple effect of impact where somebody at the state level is making policy that they may not see the impact of in their day-to-day life, but it ripples out to all of these other spheres that are an extension of who they are and their work and their decision-making. So they may not have the experience daily of how those decisions are impacting the children, but somebody does.

Vanessa Coleman:

Absolutely. Somebody does, and somebody is impacted, right? Kids are impacted, teachers are impacted, school-level administrators are impacted.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Mm-hmm. So that really speaks to the necessity for what you were describing earlier about those connections between heart and mind. How do we consider the context and the experience of our teachers and our district staff and our students and our families as we're developing policy, that it will have a direct impact on the way that they can show up in this community?

Vanessa Coleman:

Mm-hmm. We bring our whole selves to the work that we do. And I find that... I don't know how many other professions... I think this may also be true in health, but in education, people have real, real deep kind of philosophies, right, that drive their beliefs about how things should be, right? That very much so undergirds the decisions that they're making on a daily basis. If you believe that families have huge deficits and are problems, you're less likely to conceive of practices and policies that keep in mind the wholeness of people and the humanity of people.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Yeah. So how is your project work? How are the things that you're working on at SRI directly trying to address some of these very large and complex problems that we're talking about?

Vanessa Coleman:

Yeah. SRI is an interesting environment because we've got a strong identity as researchers and evaluators, right, and we are increasingly developing our identity as kind of technical assistance providers and capacity developers. And I think with that comes this notion that we are also kind of increasingly focused on the importance of systems.

My work is to bring that lens, a systems lens, right, to the work that we're doing, even when it's just technically focused on research and evaluation. I'm about creating spaces and practices that support reflection, right?

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Mm-hmm.

Vanessa Coleman:

What do I think is going on here and why do I think it's going on? And using that information and helping my colleagues use the information we have to understand what's going on comprehensively.

And oftentimes that means pausing to say, "Before we get started, let's talk about where we are, right, around these issues and in the work? What are our beliefs? What are our mindsets? What are our values that are driving the decisions we're making?" If we don't believe that lived experience is a valuable form of evidence that we should consider in our work, what does that mean for the kinds of strategies we will use to design methods, right, in our research and evaluation?

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Mm-hmm.

Vanessa Coleman:

That's just one example. But I am interested in bringing a systems lens and a reflective and reflexive practice, right, to the work that we're doing.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

So it sounds like in the earlier long description of collaborators that I described, we left out the colleagues and the peers, the other researchers, the people who you're interacting with on a daily basis. You're also supporting them in capacity building, understanding self, connecting heart and mind as they're thinking about and developing approaches to research and data collection.

Vanessa Coleman:

Yes.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

That's hugely important.

Vanessa Coleman:

Yes. What we're looking to do is do quality work, right? Whether that quality work is research and evaluation, technical assistance, systems capacity building, whatever it is, we're looking to do it in a quality way. I don't think that we can do it if we're siloed in our thinking, both about what changes and the issues we're looking to address. And we often can't fool ourselves into believing that who we are doesn't somehow seep into this very rigorous work that we do because we're

so well-trained. So I like to bring truth-telling and reflection to the work to help us just pause.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

That's so great. It's like the importance of kind of walking the way that we propose other people walk, right? So helping to keep each other accountable to living and walking in the strategies, recommendations, best practices that we are encouraging other people to embody and integrate into their own practice and policy and decision-making.

Vanessa Coleman:

Yeah. We've got to walk the walk, right? And at the end of the day, the reason why we want to embody all of that is because it strengthens the work that we do.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Exactly.

Vanessa Coleman:

It provides our clients with a more... I don't know, a kind of accurate, fair-

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Complete.

Vanessa Coleman:

... starting place. Yeah, complete starting place, right? And they're more likely to get what they need out of it.

Oftentimes when we approach the work in the same old ways, we miss so much over and over. And then when we get the same kinds of outcomes, we wonder why we're getting the same kind of outcomes. And/or the outcomes we're getting, whether they're the same old ones or they're new ones, we tend to globalize them, right? They have such significance for us, but we've not really taken a broader approach that helps us better understand what's really going on, right? We are just focused on these narrow slices of this big pie, and then we say that the outcomes that we see or that are yielded are complete, but they're not. And there's so much more that could even help us understand those outcomes that we're seeing, even if they are, in fact, true. Then how do we better understand them?

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

That makes me think about the disconnect that has persisted between the research that we do and what we find out and what we know, and how it then shows up or does not show up in practice. Can you talk a little bit more about the way in which you are trying to navigate that component specifically, helping researchers to zoom out and be reflective and think about a more significant portion of the pie so that it can connect more distinctly to the experiences and the reality of the people they're trying to support?

Vanessa Coleman:

Yeah. There are a lot of... I like frameworks, right? I see them as core to my work and helping me to build opportunities to engage with clients in powerful ways, right? And sometimes they're a wonderful starter to help us to design more focus and personalized frameworks.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Frameworks. Yes, frameworks can serve as a really nice tool to level set, give something to hang on, to personalize, to build things on, and to support this transition of research into something more accessible.

So you like frameworks. How do you leverage those frameworks in doing that part?

Vanessa Coleman:

Yeah, I leverage the frameworks to... Maybe level setting is a good way to describe it. Level setting is important because if we all are clear, right, that there are important components of the work or important considerations in the work, we can figure out and determine how we want to design our own indicators of success or indicators of reflection to common thoughts and ideas, right?

So frameworks can give us that level setting opportunity, but frameworks can also help us then better understand, right? In research and evaluation, we're always looking for ways to capture our data and what we're getting out of it. Oftentimes, if we're using strong frameworks that we start with, we can finish with those frameworks. We can later refine them, right, when we get through the process, but we can use those frameworks to help us capture the data, help us capture information, help us capture reflections in a way that will guide next steps, looking toward design. Which is the other part of what I love to do is getting from a place of self-reflection level setting, figuring out then our understanding of what an issue is, then moving toward creating a theory of what it means to make it better, and then moving into that design. That's where I get super excited.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

So when you're talking about utilizing frameworks as a mechanism for level setting that then can transition you into design, you're talking about this from the perspective of a researcher; is that correct? Or-

Vanessa Coleman:

Actually, yeah, I think that from a perspective of a researcher, from the perspective of a technical assistance provider, I think that the frameworks can be powerful tools, right, to help focus groups, right?

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Mm-hmm.

Vanessa Coleman:

And if a group has come together and has the identity of an improvement group or a change group, right, everyone thinks differently. Everyone thinks about the work differently to the points that we were just discussing. It means that there's common language and there's some... Whether there's agreement or not, right? But there's some shared understanding about what is important to capture and understand at least the big buckets they fall in.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

So then in having that shared understanding and carrying that into the design process, how does that then create opportunities for improved or increased accessibility for practitioners moving this research, data collection, all of that into something that practitioners can then take, utilize, integrate into their policymaking, integrate into their classroom practice, et cetera?

Vanessa Coleman:

Yeah, that gets kind of back to the magic we were talking about at the start of this, right? Once we've designed, we start pushing and pulling on those levers that we've named. Oftentimes, those levers are a part of the framework. They're named in the framework. They're the big buckets that are helping us capture all of the learning and our vision for what improvement looks like, right?

In this work, I see my role primarily to facilitate to the possibilities from there. I can't let the complexities of the work distract groups, teams, right, from their vision and plan. I've got to hold onto some truth-telling and some supportive collaboration to help move people, right, from those reflections about the design into what implementation looks like.

So that's what I typically do is I hold people both in process and in kind of heart to what they committed to. It's not always easy, particularly when we are taking and using an approach to improvement and change that is systems focused, which means that we have to ask tough questions. And oftentimes the levers we have to push on, again, are about our individual ways of thinking, but they're also about the ways in which the system itself, or the organization, the culture kind of gets its work done, right? You've got to feed the machine, so to speak. What is the machine and how do we feed it?

To disrupt all of that is tough work. And people have great vision in design work. Great vision. Great enthusiasm. But when it comes down to the rubber hitting the road, so to speak, people start to, "Well, do we have to go that far? Do we have to push on those levers? Or maybe that's too much. Or maybe we can't bring everyone along with us. Or maybe that's..." There are all these compromises we start to make that are often inconsistent with all that-

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

With the original.

Vanessa Coleman:

... exciting ideation and vision for the future that we came up with before.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

So that makes me wonder, how do you scale these kinds of things then? Or how do you think about the possibility of scaling it?

Vanessa Coleman:

Yeah. Well, I always tell people that when you're thinking about scaling, scaling starts with the original design. It starts at the very beginning, because ultimately, if it's not relevant, if it's not considering the needs of those that it seeks to address, then it won't scale at all. That's from student needs to teacher practitioner needs. Just won't scale at all. So it starts at the beginning.

And then on the other side, when you are at a place where you feel like you've moved from the level setting to the understanding of thing to imagining the possibilities and designing to a future that matters, right? Once you get to the other side when it's all about implementation, that implementation of change is an intentional process, right? Oftentimes when it comes to educational improvements, we lean into big wholesale, boom, changes. Here, this year, we're going to do boom, this big thing. And then we wait and see at the end of the year or the

beginning of the next year what the summative data tells us about whether or not it worked.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Right. Did it work?

Vanessa Coleman:

Did it work? And boy, do we miss opportunities to learn along the way. And oftentimes the summative data doesn't even ask all of the right questions that we want answered.

So it's got to be intentional, it's got to be iterative, and it does take a little bit of extra time, but that's what we help people do, is design processes for learning that are based on self-reflection and contextualized growth, right?

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Mm-hmm.

Vanessa Coleman:

So it's not about us, right? It's not about me as a facilitator, right? All that magic dust that I or we might sprinkle on the work and their capacity building is literally to get them to a place where they can begin to do what they need to do on a regular basis, asking the right kinds of questions, trying new things, and testing them out and reflecting about whether or not they're working and whether or not they need to make some changes, adapt some things, or whether they need to let some things go.

So when it comes to scaling, you've got to keep doing all of that, right? It's not an event, right? It's an iterative process. And what I might scale in my classroom as a practice might not work in another classroom. But even if it does work in multiple classrooms, what are the implications for policy changes to support that? What are the implications for other ways in which decisions and relationships are built and maintained or sustained, right, that impact that? So scaling is again about taking a holistic view, and it's about iterative changes, and it's about active participation in learning.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

You sound like a trainer, right? I mean a trainer in the kind of fitness athletic way, that you're helping organizations and individuals within those organizations at various levels develop muscle memory around the types of questions and

considerations they need to make so that they can internalize those things and own them, and then supporting them in putting those things outward.

So if that means as a practitioner, it's a lesson plan, or as a board member or a state person, it's a policy that they're doing or how they're reviewing and revising things, right? But one of the roles you have as a researcher, TA provider, capacity builder, designer is to help them to, A, see the muscle groups they're trying to target, right, and all the different ways that they need to target that, and then say, "But we can't just have leg day," right? Because this is a holistic approach. So we need to ensure that we are servicing the whole body. We have arm day and back day, and we're working on our core and we're working... That idea is that just as people show up as whole people, we can't parse out how we are looking at this work. If we really are talking about systems change, we have to think about targeting specific areas, but looking at it in the whole.

Vanessa Coleman:

Within context.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Within context.

Vanessa Coleman:

Within context. I think that is often the most consistent issue in educational improvement, right? One, we don't do much within context. It's all about kind of one-offs. And two, we expect things to happen quickly, and they just don't.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Right. As they didn't get created quickly, right?

Vanessa Coleman:

Absolutely not.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Yeah. And that desire to change things, the will to push up against the barriers that are going to be tossed in front of you in that effort to change things, and connecting deeply to why you're doing it in the first place, so you don't lose hope or heart as you consistently encounter the challenges, because people like to be comfortable. So what you're describing sounds like disruption, and that requires a lot of training to help people be able to navigate through, around, under, over, next to within that disruption and that discomfort.

Vanessa Coleman:

Yeah. I like the way you've put it. It is training, right? And it's a skill. It's skill building and it's about forming new habits, right?

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Yes, exactly.

Vanessa Coleman:

Habits of mind is what keep us where we are. Habits of mind. How we think about things and how we naturally go about our day-to-day. So it takes some intentional work to disrupt and do something different.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Yeah. It's like if you haven't been stretching, you're not going to be nimble just because you decided that you want to be nimble. There are things that you have to do to create that opportunity for yourself, and that requires work on your part. And then once you have that nimbleness, you are able to integrate it into all of the things. And you have that... Because you had to work for it, you have that reflection. It's very present. It's something that you consistently consider. But that takes time. Changing habits takes time.

So we're getting close to the end of our time here together, and I have enjoyed our conversation very much. So I want to know from you, Vanessa, what does the future look like. If you could solve these complex challenges that we're working on, or even pieces of it, what would that look like in terms of completion, impact, experience for the people who we support most? Just give me a little glimpse into what that dream might be for you.

Vanessa Coleman:

I can't tell if my vision of the future is optimistic or just realistic or what. Or maybe some might think it's pessimistic. I think that my vision for the future is bright as long as we can shift how we respond and how we prepare, right?

So I think that the human kinds of issues that we're dealing with and facing will likely be there in some way, right? So our community that we're looking to build, our community... They're currently communities of learners, right? They're young learners, and we're hoping that they're communities of leaders in the future. I think that those folks will continue to see things in many different kinds of ways, meaning they're not always going to agree, right? Now or later.

But what would be cool, right? The future I'm hopeful for is that how they engage around their visions, their respective visions for change and improvement is both with heart and mind, right, kind of driving them. And that there are ways in which they can address and consider big and tough questions and issues and big essential questions, right, that we're all facing, whether it's about getting to climate change or whether it's about getting to ethnic racial kind of engagement and harmony. No matter what it is, how the world spins, right? That the ways in which our future community leaders engage is about not necessarily getting to agreement, but about caring for the process that we use to get there.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Wow. The care. That's the priority. Yeah.

Vanessa Coleman:

The care.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

The care. So I feel like that is a perfect kind of takeaway. It's the idea that we centralize and focus much more on the humanity. That every single one of the student IDs, the staff IDs, the whatever ID, the badge number, whatever, they're all people who have full lives that exist outside of this role or context. And those lives need to be considered, not just the number, this discrete number that's associated with a particular role. And that requires care.

Vanessa Coleman:

Yes. It requires care, right? When there are others, the little people now, right? They are the children in our communities today that are in the classrooms. When they're sitting in these chairs in 30 years or 20 years, I don't know, how are they sitting in these chairs and what are their mindsets? What do they believe about the possibilities of change and how we can engage together around it?

Not, again, that we have to agree, but what do they think about that? How do they think about power and relationship-building? How do they think about it?

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

And are reflection and reflexivity part of the core of their being, or is that something that they also are going to have to build capacity around from someone like you in 20 or 30 years, right?

Vanessa Coleman:

Or their teachers.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Or are they developing that now?

Vanessa Coleman:

They're developing it... That's my goal, right?

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Mm-hmm.

Vanessa Coleman:

That's my hope is that the way in which the adults today are engaging, particularly those in close proximity to kids and those in close proximity to the kids, right, to the ones... That they are able to do the work that's required to rethink and stretch what they believe and how it can happen.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Yeah. So my final question to you today is, what keeps you coming back to doing this work? It's complex, it's big, it's multifaceted. You're dealing with real people and their stuff, systems. What keeps you coming back?

Vanessa Coleman:

The possibilities. I think that's the simplest way to put it. The possibilities keep me coming back, right? I have been in now a number of roles over time. The different relationships to change and movement, and none of it is ever the same, and none of it is ever easy. It's never easy. It's just not ever easy. So that struggle feels real. It feels like we're still getting somewhere in the struggle when there's struggle. And the possibilities, I think, are great, right? And the stakes are high. Young people, our young learning communities, some are really struggling, right?

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Mm-hmm.

Vanessa Coleman:

They're the ones that have the most... There are some that are very clear to all of us they're in great need.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Yes.

Vanessa Coleman:

There are other learning communities right now, maybe their test scores are high in their schools and in their districts. They're also in great need too.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Yes.

Vanessa Coleman:

Right.

[Theme music fades in]

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Yes. Wow, Vanessa, this has been such a lovely conversation. I very much appreciate your time and your expertise on the Homeroom today. Thank you for joining us.

Vanessa Coleman:

Thank you for having me, Kori.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

It's been an absolute pleasure.

Thank you all for listening to The SRI Homeroom, brought to you by SRI Education, a division of SRI. See you next time.

Vanessa Coleman:

Bye-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 Vanessa Coleman, the co-director of SRI's

Center for Education Research and Innovation. Learn more about Vanessa and her work in today's show notes.

You can find a transcript of today's show or browse our entire archive of episodes by visiting srieducationnews.org. You can also connect with us on social media with the links in today's show notes.

[Theme music fades out]