

What is the secret sauce?

The story of the We Love Reading program

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ABSTRACT

We Love Reading (WLR) is a grassroots community program based on human-centered design, with three outputs:

- It fosters the love of reading among children so they can reap the benefits of reading;
- It empowers adults and youth mostly women to become changemakers;
- It creates a community with the mindset of ‘I can.’

Research has shown that reading aloud is the key to fostering the love of reading, from as young as when the mother is pregnant. However, not all parents read aloud to their children for various reasons. WLR trains local volunteers (ambassadors) aged 16–100 from all walks of life to hold read-aloud sessions for children aged 0–10 in public spaces of their neighborhoods. The books are in the native language and from the culture, on themes selected to change children’s behavior regarding the environment, health, gender disabilities etc. By taking books home, children engage their parents and family in an environment of reading. Rigorous academic research has shown that WLR impacts neuronal development, emotional regulation and executive function, resulting in children doing better at school. WLR has also become a mental health preventive program, building resilience through reading among children and adults. WLR ambassadors become leaders in their community, sometimes going beyond the program

to create their own business and projects. WLR has developed a total management virtual platform for training, monitoring and evaluation through all WLR ambassadors around the world. That is why WLR is a scalable, efficient, sustainable program that started in Jordan and has spread to 52 countries and counting WLR is a social movement it is the butterfly effect.

KEYWORDS

reading, empowerment, sustainability, motivation, ownership, changemakers

To develop programs that contribute to achieving SDG target 4.7 is no easy feat. The fundamental tenet for such programs is that they must be inherently grassroots. If not, they put the whole objective at risk. The majority of programs developed for low and middle income countries (LMICs) and/or humanitarian situations have originated in the West, far removed from their intended context. There is therefore a risk that such programs can at best achieve only a temporary success towards such an ambitious goal.

We Love Reading (WLR) is based on the proposition that in order to achieve SDG Target 4.7, successful programs need to meet the following criteria:

- 1 The people experiencing the challenge should be the ones to design the solution.
- 2 Experts can help, by supporting, not imposing from without.
- 3 Through trial and error, solutions can arrive at the design that best fulfills the goal and is sustainable. This is what is sometimes called human-centered design or, as I prefer to call it, evolution. Both are fancy names for an ancient process—that of creative adaptation, which has been instrumental to human survival and progress.

In these ways, not only can the intended goals be achieved but they can have much greater impact because the programs are organic and have holistic approaches. As a grassroots community program

based on human-centered design, WLR is an example of such an organic program.

Beginning in 2006, with weekly reading sessions by Dr Rana Dajani in a local mosque in Amman, Jordan, WLR has grown into a global, independent, nonprofit organization that aims to create changemakers by adopting a practical, cost-efficient, sustainable, grassroots approach involving women, men, youth and the community. The program trains local women, men and youth to hold regular read-aloud sessions for children aged 2–10 in public spaces in their neighborhoods. The books are age-appropriate, attractive, neutral in content and written in the children's mother tongue. In addition to promoting the experience of reading, WLR empowers women, men and youth readers to become leaders in their communities. It builds ownership among children and community members and serves as a platform for raising awareness on issues such as health and the environment, through the themes of the books.

The WLR model can be replicated anywhere. It uses public spaces such as mosques or community centers. It does not need bookshelves, since the books are all given out. It simply requires a collection of books to be read again and again. The women who read aloud do not have to be highly educated and trained. After training, each individual is required to 'pay it forward' by sharing his or her newly acquired knowledge and training with another person, thereby creating a domino effect. The newly-trained reader is welcomed because she or he is from the neighborhood. In particular, the community starts to respect women and support their roles as leaders and future change agents. The community starts to invest in the book collection, building ownership and responsibility for the library.

The WLR model has now evolved into a framework that nurtures social entrepreneurship. Young men and women are discovering the potential inside themselves to become changemakers in their own communities through the library they have established in their neighborhood. They have started

their own initiatives, serving their communities by identifying problems that trouble them and coming up with grassroots solutions. WLR has tangible outcomes, transforming, in a short period of time, a whole generation of children into readers who love, enjoy, and respect books through the establishment of a library in every neighborhood, with immeasurable impact on the development of society.

The WLR movement

In Jordan alone, WLR has trained around 7000 volunteer women, men and youth, created 4000 libraries, directly impacted 140,000 children (60% of whom are girls) and indirectly impacted 400,000 individuals, working across various sectors—local and private business, government and civil society—to forge multi-stakeholder relationships to advance the WLR model. The program has now spread to 52 countries in the Middle East, Far East, Europe, North America, South America and Africa. It has been contacted to implement WLR in marginalized neighborhoods in New York City.

WLR has also developed 32 books for children, which focus on energy and water conservation and littering as well as social inclusion, refugees, non-violence, gender and disability. In Jordan, men from neighboring refugee camps encourage women to become library leaders. Mosque clerics proudly open their doors to women to administer read-aloud sessions and donate funds to buy books. Children have developed a culture of literacy, discussing and recommending books and authors to their friends. Older children continue to be readers. Parents inform us that children exhibit greater self-confidence and make progress academically, and are also more likely to buy and read books rather than toys.

In addition, WLR has developed a manual on how to write children's books in Arabic to encourage other WLR hubs in other cultures to create their own books.

WLR is a non-profit organization, funded through grants from international donors such as UNICEF, USAID and private foundations. It has recently developed a financially sustainable business model through licensing the program to international NGOs and donors. The licensed program is used by organizations that can afford to pay to implement the program within their own activities, while the income generated is used to train groups that are underserved and cannot afford the program themselves. WLR also sells the books that it develops, earning revenue to open more libraries.

WLR partners

International NGOs: NRC, UNHCR, IRC, IRD, Save the children, Mercy corps, ACEV (Turkey),

Government entities: Ministry of culture, Ministry of social development, Ministry of education, local municipalities

In Jordan, WLR works with the Ministry of Social Development to target early childhood development and parents, the Ministry of Youth and Culture to target youth to change mindsets through reading, and the Ministry of Education to target schoolchildren to make reading fun.

In this way, WLR is a scalable, efficient, sustainable program that has become a social movement. It is the butterfly effect.

The WLR ambassador network

WLR volunteers are known as ambassadors and have become leaders in their communities, discovering their voices literally and figuratively. They have ownership of the program and a genuine sense of agency, going beyond the program to create their own businesses and projects. For example, a young man created his own NGO in a small town in the north of Jordan; Nabela from eastern Amman started a compost business; another young woman in the south of the country was able to get a better job; and Asma—a

Syrian refugee who never finished school—was offered a job in a school by Save the Children.

The program has also developed a total management digital solution for training, monitoring and evaluation through a global ambassador network on a virtual platform, connecting all WLR ambassadors around the world.

The Global Ambassadors Automated Network manages the volunteers to ensure quality and sustainability. The network is used by the ambassadors to report the reading session time and the number of children attending and to send requests and success stories. It allows communication among all ambassadors, more easily tracking performance improvement, sustainability, and monitoring and evaluation, and providing targeted information to the ambassadors to ensure a well-established and functioning virtual community of practice amongst all them.

This virtual community allows for capacity-building, data collection, and documentation in addition to sharing and exchange of best practices of read-aloud sessions, creating a global social movement. The virtual community works to inspire the WLR ambassadors to get to know each other and learn from each other. As WLR ambassador Asma said, 'I can talk to a WLR ambassador in Argentina!'

The WLR theory of change

Research and observation show that reading for pleasure is important, not just for education. Reading is entertaining—if children love it they will become lifelong learners. So, how can we motivate them? Human nature demands entertainment. It would be prohibitively expensive to train every parent to read aloud. In each neighborhood, WLR identifies one adult aged 16 to 100 to read aloud to children—weekly or more often, in an engaging way in a public space, in their mother tongue, using stories that echo the child's understanding and viewpoint. Building on this is an exchange system in which children share at home with parents and read aloud to their siblings. The

philosophy is to turn the child into a champion of reading and then through the school unlock the magic of reading. WLR primes the community for a culture of reading.

In many countries, reading has traditionally been considered boring or a waste of time outside of academic or religious contexts. WLR is changing attitudes and letting people know that reading is fun. It achieves impact at scale because it is a simple, effective product that appeals to its market of mothers and children. It depends on networks of women, men and youth who already resemble a movement, to bring about social change through reading. It aims to develop long-term cultural change, not by delivering services that need support systems, but by creating capabilities among thousands of local women and men. Organizations need hierarchies but movements need causes, shared values and common goals to bind them together and give them a purpose. Reading is the means but the cause is to get young children to realize that they can and should think for themselves. The model is formulated in such a way that each person can tailor it to fit their culture and their needs while maintaining the essence of the model, helping to building ownership of the movement and create sustainability.

WLR has three outputs:

- 1 It fosters the love of reading among children so that they can reap the benefits of reading.
- 2 It empowers adults and youth, mostly women, to become changemakers.
- 3 It creates a community with the mindset of 'I can'.

The secret sauce

We Love Reading is innovative at three levels:

- 1 It has the secret sauce to motivate both children and adults to pursue learning because they want to, not because they have to. Based on research, we know that the basis of human nature

is to follow what gives you pleasure. It is like addiction. The same thing that makes a child play video games will inspire an adult to want to read if she finds satisfaction in it. This is basic marketing. With the right stimulus, children will want to go to school of their own accord and agency, not because their parents make them. The child has a reason to go, which is linked to his or her desire. Also, the teacher wants to enjoy her or his work. She reads aloud because she chooses to, not because it is a duty or to report to a higher authority. This agency is the fundamental principle that has enabled We Love Reading to succeed even in the direst of circumstances.

- 2 WLR is a basic framework based on shared universal human values such as caring for the young, integrity, and wanting for others what you want for yourself. This allows it to scale all over the world while at the same time being flexible enough to adapt to any culture or context. Even where people are not literate, all they need to do is 'read' from an illustrated book and make up the story.

Of course, this may seem contradictory: how can a home-grown solution be adapted to different cultures? The WLR is innovative and unique in that it provides a simple, universal framework. Within this framework, the person takes ownership and makes it personal, shaping it to his/her own culture and needs.

- 3 WLR harnesses technology to serve rather than being controlled by technology. It resisted adapting the stories digitally in the WLR libraries, so that children interact with the books in real life and have a break from technology. The adults use technology to connect with each other through a digital platform while the children engage with adult readers because human interaction is essential for our survival as a species. We are social animals and our brains need human interactive stimulation in order to develop.

Adding WLR to other programs

We have discovered that any program already being implemented by international NGOs can incorporate WLR to ensure sustainability, regardless of the main program focus. When refugee programs implement WLR, the beneficiaries become changemakers and take their other programs further. Plan International (PI) had set up reading aloud sessions in their safe places, but no girls and few boys were attending. The safe spaces closed at 4:00 PM and the social workers went home. When PI implemented the WLR program, refugees read in the evening or weekends regardless of the social workers' schedule or the safe space hours, because they were reading in their tents and under trees. The trained refugees knew when and where the girls and boys could attend and even with multiple displacement they took the program with them.

When Mercy Corps adopted WLR as an add-on program for raising reproductive health awareness among teenage girls, the girls were initially not very interested. After taking the WLR training they acquired agency, ownership and confidence and started to implement the program with enthusiasm.

WLR is the secret sauce that makes a program sustainable. Our new slogan is: Keep your program and add WLR: it will become better. WLR will ensure sustainability—psychologically and logistically. It is not only about the reading; the reading is the medium, the objective is empowerment. When Plan International and Mercy Corps implemented WLR, their other programs improved. WLR is a core humanitarian program because beneficiaries want to be involved; they are not involved simply out of respect for the INGOs, or for reward; they do not go back to what they were doing anyway as soon as the project ends.

How WLR can be adopted in vulnerable communities

Ein Al-Helweh camp / Lebanon

Dina Al Mawed / Thursday 5/16/2019, 3:46 PM

'Actually, it all happened by coincidence! I was looking at the website of the Harvard Graduate School of Education and saw the interview with Dr Rana Dajani talking about this initiative. I was really impressed and I opened your website and found that I could be a volunteer in this especially since I live in an area where children are suffering on many aspects. I started reading on Sat 3/2/2019 in the refugee camp in Lebanon. What makes me really satisfied is the feeling I have every time we get together! I know I'm doing a great initiative to the disadvantaged children in my camp! They suffer a lot. Some of them have faced traumas and experienced bad events and situations (due to the clashes). I knew that from their behavior the very first time I met them. The first session was the hardest. The children didn't know me yet and they were laughing about the idea of reading them a story. When I started reading, I noticed children bringing chairs to come and listen. I reread the story that time twice!

After I'd finished, they asked me eagerly about when the next session would be. This initiative is one of a kind in our camp and I feel like a leader in my community. This gives me greater responsibility to pick up a good story for children that has a good moral to learn in every session. In addition to that, I am an organized person but also the sessions have given me the commitment to get the children together every week. I am really grateful to be a part of this community :) Thank you to We Love Reading initiative!

Translation of email sent to Dr Rana Dajani

Measuring impact

Of course, innovative programs such as WLR challenge the status quo about how to measure such programs. To measure the instilling and fostering of agency one has to be creative. Agency is not directly measurable and can only be inferred through qualitative research and indirectly through stories and anecdotes.

WLR has therefore adopted a novel measurement approach that consists of:

- 1 Collecting very basic data, such as the number of reading aloud sessions, the number of boys and girls, the frequency of reading aloud, and the locations that do not impose a burden on volunteers;
- 2 Gathering anecdotal evidence from volunteers, who offer to share it as leaders of the program;
- 3 In-depth, rigorous academic research to understand impact, in collaboration with well-known academics such as Professor Dima Amso at Brown University.

Research has shown that reading aloud to children—from as early as pregnancy—is key to fostering the love of reading: ‘The single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children’ (Anderson et al., 1985). However, for various reasons, not all parents read aloud to their children.

Rigorous academic research in collaboration with Brown, Harvard, Yale, Chicago and other local universities has shown that WLR impacts neuronal development, emotional regulation and executive function, with the result that children do better at school. This research enables us to continuously improve our approach, helping us better serve our beneficiaries.

To date, a majority of international educational research has focused on the cognitive domain of learning whereas the affective domain, such as values and attitudes toward learning, has largely been neglected. However, students’ values and attitudes influence how they approach and organize learning on a day-to-day basis. The Brown University study (Dajani et al, 2019) developed and tested a short self-report measure of school interest in Jordan. A regression analysis, controlling for family background variables, showed a significant association with age, confirming the hypothesis that older children report lower levels of school interest. In addition, gender was significantly associated with school interest, indicating

that boys had lower levels of school interest. The study showed over a six-month period that the number of books in the home and the number of children who considered reading as a hobby had increased. Changes in reading in the home from baseline to post-WLR also predicted larger improvements in executive functions, particularly for younger children and for families who reported lower family income.

In a further independent study on the impact of WLR, 80% of children felt more positively towards reading and were more willing to go back to school, 75% of readers reported less aggression and fearfulness in their child listeners, and 100% of surveyed parents felt the program had positively impacted their child (Dajani, 2017). Research has also shown that three months of 15 reading sessions is enough to make the child into a lifelong reader which correlates with habit-changing studies in terms of frequency of adopting a new habit.

A study by Hashemite University (Mahasneh & Dajani, 2018) found that WLR significantly increased the reading practices of children aged 4–12 years by an average of 34%. This increase was regardless of gender or geographical location.

In an as yet unpublished study by Professor Isabelle Mareschal from Queen Mary University, London, refugee children were assessed for abnormalities in emotional processing compared to Jordanian controls of matched ages, to assess whether trauma and psychopathology are associated with emotion recognition bias. Both refugee and non-refugee children showed a bias towards sad facial expressions. When these children were enrolled in the WLR program their bias toward sad facial expression improved by 30%. Another study by the University of Chicago showed that integrating the values of empathy into children's stories increased children's generosity by 100% and increased children's interest in and concern for others. Importantly, the intervention did not affect what is called 'affective empathy' or pain sensitivity. These changes were not observed in children who were not read to and who did not participate in the reading sessions. Finally, in another

study on children's awareness and attitudes towards environmental issues (Mahasneh et al, 2017), it was indicated that through reading aloud, children's knowledge about environmental issues increased significantly: children who attended reading sessions became more aware of issues and a positive behavior change was noted in relation to electricity and water consumption and littering, as reported by parents. The study found that the WLR model was more effective and sustainable than traditional methods such as television and billboards, and works to improve environmental problems at the grassroots level.

Finally, a psycho-social study designed by Yale University (Yazji, 2014) was conducted to assess the social and mental state of both the reading ambassadors and the children. The results in the test of resilience showed that the children who were read to had a greater ability to recover and return to a normal state after undergoing difficulties. A large number of children in the enormous Zaatari camp are not enrolled in school for various reasons. Reading aloud to these children encouraged them to go back to school. In addition, they learned to love reading and to think and make decisions for themselves.

Compared with the cost of programs that offer similar results, WLR is significantly less, with much larger and diverse positive effects. When the program starts in neighborhoods there is only an initial cost before it runs on its own, with support from the community.

In emergency situations—where it is difficult to set up education systems because of security concerns, as well as practicality, cost, sustainability and lack of qualified personnel—many children remain out of school for indefinite periods. Even where there is a school, it is not sustainable and girls do not attend because of culture, work, safety or ignorance. Refugees are multiply displaced. WLR allows them to carry the program with them wherever they go. It is effective even in areas where only local people can enter. It is also effective where there is no formal education system and/or lack of trained educators, where local people can read aloud to children

in their native tongue, thereby maintaining the local culture. There is no requirement to pay people and the program is sustainable even after the project ends. In Ethiopia, for example, WLR libraries continued to run even after PI stopped working there.

At its best, WLR complements what takes place in school or in emergency contexts where there is no school system. It becomes a placeholder, keeping children engaged in learning so that they can respond to learning opportunities that arise. WLR has also become a mental health preventive program, building resilience through reading among children and adults who share a common purpose and experience.

Conclusion

Much can be learned from grassroots initiatives from around the world. People and organizations who want to help must listen to and trust people, as well as being open to innovation and creativity that may not at first seem familiar. People come with unique experiences. We all are equal in this world. Each of us has a unique DNA and experiences to share. If we really want to achieve SDG Target 4.7 we need to allow everyone at the table to have equal power dynamics so as to create a better world for future generations. The secret sauce is in how to motivate individuals to take ownership and become changemakers.

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