

Reimagining Education: The Case of We Love Reading

Professor Rana Dajani, Founder and Director of We Love Reading

Modernity has developed a system of organizing the world into compartments. Examples abound in every sector. In science organisms are divided into groups according to certain criteria. For example scientists group organisms who have chlorophyll into the plant kingdom and those who don't into the animal Kingdom and so on. This system was developed in the past few centuries according to Maurice S. Lee (1). Another example is education. In the past couple of hundred of years humanity has developed an education system that is based on schools and classrooms and separation from the reality of life (2). However real life is messy and there are no clear distinguishing lines. Therefore any proposal to solve challenges must adopt a holistic approach. Today in science, scientists are discovering that the lines that separate the groups are not clear cut. Pierre-Henri Gouyon curator at the museum of natural history in Paris has shown that scientists are discovering intermediary organisms that don't fit the neat compartments (3). These are testimonials to the reality of the fluidity of the world and biology.

Similarly in education we are coming to realize that there is a lot of learning going on outside the classroom system. For example the sector of Early childhood development was created to cover the years before the child goes to formal schooling. Summer programs have been created so that the child does not lose what he/she gained during the academic year a phenomenon called (4) Recently the concept of life long learning has cropped up to describe learning that goes on beyond the formal school system. What we are observing is that education is no longer confined to a school building and never was. With the internet this becomes more true than ever. Children are questioning the benefit of attending school if all the knowledge they require is a click away. We must not overlook the underprivileged and vulnerable communities such as refugees of war or natural disasters where the education system has been destroyed or is not adequate.

Today with Covid19 and its consequences of social distancing and closure of schools, education has changed for everyone across the board regardless of socioeconomic status. We have been given a chance to reimagine what education can look like.

We need to reimagine education as a holistic continuous process that never ends. We need to reimagine education in new forms looking at how we evolved as humans for clues. One observation is that we evolved in groups not as separate individuals therefore we need to approach education as a group. When solving for poverty we should not address poverty at the level of the individual. There is no one individual in poverty. The individual is part of a family. Therefore we need to address poverty at the level of the family. This is what the poverty spotlight developed by Martin Burt has done to help address poverty in a more holistic manner (5). Similarly education cannot be addressed at the level of the individual. Every person in the community has a role to play in the education process.

All forms of knowledge are relevant and all methods of knowledge sharing are relevant. Recently Munir Fasheh, a Palestinian educator founder of the Arab education forum at Harvard University questioned the benefit of teaching math and the benefit of university education comparing university graduates to his mother who was a seamstress and how she knew math and how to use math more than a college graduate (6).

If we look at the past we can find lessons from premodernity of how learning was acquired. For example during the Islamic civilization the golden age of scientific discovery learning was conducted through apprenticeships (7).

Research has shown that our brains have evolved to have large parts responsible for motor movement. Yet we are moving away at an ever fast pace away from motor movement to more sedentary lifestyles. This is affecting our mental health because we are not using large portions of our brain. Kelly Lambert, a professor at the University of Richmond shared her latest results in a TEDxBermuda talk (8). Similarly Matthew Crawford in his book *Shop class for soul craft* discussed how our education system is no longer offering skills based education such as carpentry plumbing etc. (9).

How can we employ these learnings to design relevant learning experiences?

One example which has been successful is the We Love Reading Programm (10-13).

We Love Reading (WLR) is an example of a new way to reimagine education. WLR adopts an holistic community based grassroots approach. WLR evolved organically in a kind natural selection. WLR is based on human interaction and aims to address motivation to learning and equipping the child with the tools to become a life long learner. There is no set path. Each person is different and will have a different path in learning. We Love Reading changes mindsets of people through reading for fun to create changemakers and life long learners who can reshape their world. WLR promotes a love of reading that goes beyond the sphere of formal education and into the everyday psychology and experience of children. The approach of WLR centers on building capacity in a sustainable fashion. We foster a deep love of reading through the practice of reading aloud to children. We Love Reading aims to foster the love of reading among children so that they become motivated to want to learn to unlock the magic of reading. Therefore overcoming the many barriers that stop them from engaging with learning. This intrinsic motivation will help them seek opportunities for learning despite multiple displacement, and child labor and lack of education systems in place. Allowing them to dream and imagine a different future and carrying them to the future to become life long learners.

Research has shown that reading aloud helps a child fall in love with reading and therefore learning. Reading aloud with a caregiver adds another element of human human interaction that boosts resilience and reduces stress for both the child and adult. WLR trains local volunteer to read aloud to children ages 0-12 in their native language in a public space in the local neighborhood books that are from the local culture. The children take books home to read with their parents siblings and friends in an exchange fashion. By fostering love of reading through a human experience at an early age, WLR impacts emotional regulation, executive function, literacy skills and psychosocial status (14). WLR empowers refugee adults and youth (95% women) to become social entrepreneurs by leading read aloud sessions in their local community. WLR motivates both children and adults to pursue learning because they “want to” not because they “have to”, fostering ownership and responsibility. WLR’s basic framework based on shared universal values is flexible enough to scale across the globe by adapting to any culture or context. WLR developed a digital solution for training, monitoring and evaluation through a global network on a virtual platform (a mobile app) to connect refugee volunteers around the world. Backed by rigorous academic research, human-centered, design – by mostly women – WLR is an impactful, scalable, and sustainable program. It’s social movement is a prime

example of the butterfly effect that started with the founder in Jordan over 10 years ago and has spread to 55 countries and touched millions of lives.

WLR succeeded because it's a framework that builds upon the invisible strong bonds of communities, the systems that allow solutions to truly become sustainable. WLR is a simple yet effective product that appeals to its market and depends on networks of youth and women who already resemble a movement to bring about social change through reading. In emergency situations eg Covid19 it is difficult to set up education systems because of safety, practicality, cost, sustainability and lack of qualified personnel. Therefore, many children stay out of school for indefinite periods. Refugees are multiply displaced. WLR allows them to carry the program with them wherever they go. WLR is effective because the local people can read aloud to the children in their native tongue, maintaining local culture. Since it is a volunteer driven program and reading is a life-long activity, it is low cost and certain to be sustainable long term. WLR isn't delivering services which need support systems, it's creating capabilities in hundreds of local women enabling them to be creative for themselves. Organizations need hierarchies but movements need causes, shared values, common goals to pull them together and give them a purpose, reading is the means but the cause is to get young children to realize they can and should think for themselves. The model is formulated so that each person can tailor the model to fit their culture and needs while maintaining the essence of the model, aiding in building project ownership and sustainability. Most programs focus on providing books, few on reading aloud. WLR provides a practical solution; a substitute for the parent. We can't train all parents to read aloud and to show passion for reading. But we can train one person per neighborhood to do so. The next generation of children will grow up to love to read, become the parents of the future, and advocates to change the system from within. WLR creates champions everywhere at the grassroots level who have the passion and ability to change mindsets and instill the feeling of "I can" among youth of tomorrow. Through the creation of changemakers and life long learners among adults and children we create system change at the grassroots early to avoid the development of challenges and equip them with the tools to solve the existing challenges and future ones that we cannot imagine. The WLR mechanism is as follows:

1. WLR partners with local CBOs. The CBOs work on local political governance.
2. we train the coaches at the CBOs who in turn train the local volunteers on WLR Program and give them WLR children books to read to the children. We also give access to a digital children book library as a supplement.
3. The volunteer WLR ambassadors start the Program in their neighborhood gathering community support reading to the children locally becoming a leader and discovering her potential to become a changemaker in other areas of her life and that of her community
4. The children fall in love with reading take the books home championing reading at home and are motivated to read more and learn more becoming life long learners regardless of schools systems availability or quality.
5. the WLR ambassador is a role model for the parents who are now responding to their children's demand to read.
6. The WLR ambassador is connected to other WLR ambassadors and the CBO and WLR headquarters all the time through the mobile app for quality, sustainability, feedback and evaluation especially in areas that are hard to reach because of crisis such as Covid 19 or war.
7. WLR and CBO use the Digital platform and mobile app to manage the volunteers and conduct evaluation with tools such as education spotlight, and academic validated measures

8. we monitor projects and solutions that WLR ambassadors create as changemakers in their communities as indicators of long term change in their mindsets.
9. The WLR ambassadors are asked to share their training with others creating a ripple effect (pay it forward) a social movement. This is system level change driven from the grassroots to ensure sustainability.

The program is built on scientific research and rigorously evaluated by researchers at leading institutions of higher education, including Brown University, Harvard University, Yale University, New York University, and the University of Chicago. We partner extensively with universities and academic researchers to test our model, share our findings, and fine-tune our approach. It is globally celebrated for its leadership and innovation in children's programming, refugee education, literacy, mental health, empowerment of women and girls, and social entrepreneurship. The program has been awarded: the UN Science, Technology and Innovation Forum Award (2019), World Literacy Council Award (2018), Jacobs Foundation Social Entrepreneurship Award (2018), UNESCO Literacy Prize (2017), UNHCR Innovative Education for Refugees Award (2017), STARS Foundation Impact Award (recognizing organizations that achieve excellence in the provision of services for children, encouraging the replication of effective approaches and practices) (2015), IDEO.org Award for Best Refugee Education Program (2015) and a number of other awards reaching up to 14 awards internationally. WLR's human-centered, evidence-based program model advances the following Sustainable Development Goals:

SDG 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education, and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.

SDG 5: Achieve gender equality and empowerment of women and girls.

SDG 10: Reduce inequality within and among countries.

Numerous international NGOs currently implement the low-cost, highly replicable WLR model within their wider spectrum of services. Our NGO partners include: ACEV (Turkey), Plan International (Ethiopia) where Sudanese refugees in Kule camp were trained on reading aloud to children, NRC (Azraq refugee camp, Jordan), UNHCR (Jordan) training Sudanese, Sumalis, Iraqis and Yemenis refugees in Jordan living in the host communities, IRD (in Zaatri refugee camp, Jordan), UNICEF Makani Centres (Jordan), Save the Children (Jordan), Mercy Corps (Jordan), and USAID (Jordan).

We have reached 55 countries around the world, trained more than 4400 volunteers to read aloud for children and impacted more than 498,000 child around the world. We're at an exciting moment in our organizational trajectory, with multiple research projects under way to continue demonstrating our value across numerous domains, including empowerment of women and girls, resilience among children exposed to trauma, refugee services, and social entrepreneurship (15-21).

WLR has spread to Vietnam.

It all started with a Skype meeting with Dr. Rana Dajani. A group of Vietnamese psychologists and educators in France expressed their excitement in supporting We Love Reading in Vietnam. Huong Dang, a Vietnamese educator in France, was a teacher and a lecturer in Vietnam for many years. Huong said: "Vietnamese children are intelligent and have a thirst for knowledge but nobody shows or guides them how to reach knowledge. I am very interested in developing

children's reading skills and I strongly believe that We Love Reading will bring significant changes for Vietnamese children". As a former member of the Union Executive of the Faculty of Education at Vietnam National University, Dang has rich experiences in working on projects concerning children and educational volunteering. Dang had heard of WLR when it received the Best Literacy Prize by UNESCO in 2017. Dang reached out to Dr. Rana Dajani and several months later had an agreement from We Love Reading to implement the We Love Reading program in Vietnam. Inspired by this global social movement, Reading Vietnam was set up in late 2017. The low-cost program model was researched by Vietnamese education experts and adapted to the cultural and social conditions of Vietnam. After the pilot phase, Reading Vietnam (RVN) was officially launched in Hanoi, Vietnam. The reading ambassadors, trained by qualified educators and experts, organize read-aloud sessions for groups of young children in their neighborhood. They committed to reading once per week and offering to lend a book to a child to read at home, and a week later to exchange books with other children. To date WLR in Vietnam has trained 600 people, 180 WLR ambassadors who have read to 5000 children in 38 provinces in Vietnam. Giving out 2000 books (22). Vietnam is an example of many other countries who have adopted the WLR Program. The WLR program developed a strategy to spread and scale not directly but indirectly through partners ie disproportionately. We don't want to have an office in every country we piggy back on existing organizations for them to implement the Program that way we can reach more individuals. Ultimately we will be out of work because the Program is spreading as a social movement. We have developed a business model where we partner with international NGOS and companies to implement our program for a fee for financial sustainability and so that we can keep giving the Program for free to individuals and local ngos around the world. The Program is sustainable because it is community owned. The WLR ambassadors are volunteers. There is no cost incurred. The model uses and leverages local resources, based on volunteers who are incentivized to read by the credit they receive from the community. The mobile app ensures quality and sustainability through a virtual community of comradeship. The online training and digital books ensure accessibility. Within a few months, We Love Reading becomes embedded within the community because of the ownership of the local volunteers as well as enthusiasm from the children and their parents. WLR is an example in action of the chaos theory when a butterfly flutters its wings in china there is a hurricane in the Atlantic. WLR started in Jordan and has spread throughout the world. Each person who starts it is a butterfly as well. Together we can change mind sets through reading to create changemakers.

References

1. Maurice S. Lee. Overwhelmed: Literature, Aesthetics, and the Nineteenth-Century Information Revolution, 2019
2. <https://redheadmom8.wordpress.com/tag/education-designed-to-create-obedient-citizens-and-workers/>
3. <https://evokeproject.org/pierre-henri-gouyon/>
4. <https://www.brookings.edu/research/summer-learning-loss-what-is-it-and-what-can-we-do-about-it/>

5. Who owns poverty by Martin Burt
6. Mayssoun Sukarieh (2019): Decolonizing education, a view from Palestine: an interview with Munir Fasheh, *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, DOI:10.1080/09620214.2019.1601584
7. Cook, Bradley, and Fathi Malkawi, eds. *Classical Foundations of Islamic Education Thought: A Compendium of English-Arabic Texts*. Brigham Young University, 2011.
8. Professor Kelly Lambert TEDxBermuda
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gOJL3gjc8ak>
9. Shop class as soul craft by Matthew Crawford
10. WLR: an introduction by Rana Dajani
11. <https://www.leesmonitor.nu/en/reading-aloud>
12. <https://www.leesmonitor.nu/en/free-time-reading>
13. Leadbeater, C. (2012). *Innovation in Education: Lessons from Pioneers around the World*. Bloomsbury: Qatar.
14. Dajani, R. (2017). We Love Reading. Chapter in, *Integral Innovation: New Worldviews*. Routledge.
15. The New York Times, “For Refugee Children, Reading Helps Heal Trauma,” by Rachel Cernansky, April 17, 2019. <https://nyti.ms/2Uoy6xT>
16. Improvement in children’s executive function and emotional regulation through the We Love Reading Programm (2018), Rana Dajani, Alya Al-Sager and Dima Amso.
17. We Love Reading—A women’s literacy program in the Arab world. Published in *Ohio ASCD Journal* (Winter/Spring 2017), Rana Dajani, Hashemite University, Abdullah Awad, University of Cambridge.
18. A. Asgar R Dajani, D Amso (2019). Cognitive development mechanisms underlying socioemotional learning
19. Chapter 14 in Smart et al. (2019). *NISSEM Global Briefs: Educating for the social, the emotional and the sustainable*. Pp 688-702. Retrieved from: <https://nissem.org/node/269>.
20. Dajani, Rana (2019). What is the secret sauce? The story of the We Love Reading program. Chapter 34 in Smart et al. (2019). *NISSEM Global Briefs: Educating for the social, the emotional and the sustainable*. Pp 688-702. Retrieved from: <https://nissem.org/node/269>
21. WLR Annual Report 2019
22. Reading Vietnam Annual Report