

# Lessons from engaging sports role models and stakeholders in the promotion of literacy among school children in Suva, Fiji

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**Jeremy Dorovolomo**

School of Pacific Arts, Communication and Education,  
University of the South Pacific, Suva, Fiji: [jeremy.dorovolomo@usp.ac.fj](mailto:jeremy.dorovolomo@usp.ac.fj)

**Loriza Zinnie Rafiq**

School of Pacific Arts, Communication and Education,  
University of the South Pacific, Suva, Fiji: [loriza.rafiq@usp.ac.fj](mailto:loriza.rafiq@usp.ac.fj)

*This paper draws lessons from the Read like a Champion (RLAC) program implemented in Suva, Fiji, which engaged elite sporting individuals in literacy activities at schools. A qualitative case-oriented study was utilized, drawing on Esser and Vliegenthart's (2017) practical steps in analyzing comparative data to consider lessons from RLAC in comparison with available literature on lessons from similar programs. The analysis is inductive in nature, and we arrived at four lessons that are presented as analogical representations. The first finding is that literacy development among school children needs creative and innovative ideas. The second is that these innovative ideas are delivered in context and become situated practice. The third lesson is that literacy development among children requires genuine partnerships with stakeholders in society, and, fourth, that literacy skills could be enhanced through involving role models.*

*Keywords: Fiji; RLAC program; Literacy; Sports role models; school-university partnerships; reading promotion*

## INTRODUCTION

Wilkins and Terlitsky (2015) stress that literacy is key to success in education, and generally in modern society. The literacy of a nation's population is generally among the highest aims of any government, teacher, parent, and community. Getting school children to be interested readers and to willingly explore through reading are, therefore, imperative ideals. Thus, if the education system does not deliver literate individuals, it comes under immense criticism from society. However, although schools and teachers are often identified as responsible for children's literacy levels, the reality is that many groups have a stake in and, therefore, a responsibility for the wellbeing and literacy capabilities of children (Wilkins & Terlitsky, 2015).

Schools know that forging partnerships with other stakeholders, including parents, librarians, and the teacher education institution, can create a positive reading culture; however, forging such partnerships is often a daunting task for teachers, who already struggle to deal with the daily loads and demands of encouraging children to learn to

read and to read to learn (Valenza & Scheuer, 2017). Valenzia and Scheuer (2017) also stressed that building a reading culture does not happen by itself but through activities that engage and motivate young readers, such as having book clubs, poetry slams, or hosting author visits: “When we stop to consider the potential for powerful partnerships, we envision possibilities that involve us combining forces—both the art and the sciences of those forces—and leveraging synergies to build powerful cultures of literacy” (p. 16). Leveraging synergies needs to be innovative and with acceptance that partnerships can go beyond the triad of teachers, students, and parents. In the context of this study, the innovation is to include elite sports persons to encourage reading and comprehension.

In Fiji, where the programme that is the subject of this case study is located, English is predominantly a second language. In Australia, where the inspiration for the program was drawn from, there is an increasing number of children in classrooms where English is not the first language. An example from Canada can help emphasize the salience of partnerships in a context in which English is a second language. For the Inuit community, the partnership between the public library, the local childcare society, the literacy council, parents, cultural groups, volunteers, and the local government, saw the establishment and operations of the after-school homework club (Crockatt & Smythe, 2000). This after-school club facilitates activities such as reading stories and doing arts and craft for disadvantaged children. Crockatt and Smythe (2000) found that such after-school club activities made a difference to children and families. Furthermore, by uniting youth with elders and oral tradition and history, the program was able to insert important local knowledge into the club. As Crockatt and Smythe (2000) stressed, “we cannot expect families to value reading stories unless their stories are valued, in whatever form they may come” (p. 10).

Pihl et al. (2017) asserted the need to reconceptualize literacy education and view literacies as social practices rather than merely skills to be acquired. Key to this reconceptualization is, again, partnerships with stakeholders, including schools, libraries, the community, and other entities. Moreover, part of this reconceptualization is to have “teacher professionalism based on inter-professional collaboration” (Pihl et al., 2017, p. 1). In partnerships to promote literacy, a major challenge is to ensure that the reading and writing activities are meaningful and enjoyable. The choices of books should enable positive conversations and take the interests of pupils into account (Janiak, 2003). In a study involving 1,876 pupils, Janiak (2003) found that children who interacted with a stakeholder outside of the classroom in a structured and continuous manner, such as with parents, read more positively, confidently, and proficiently in school than those who do not read frequently with significant others.

Chai, et al. (2020), based at a US university, worked in partnership with a particular district to audit their literacy needs for K-5. The purpose of the authors’ study was to gauge the available resources and how best they could be utilized by stakeholders. They hoped that the input they had on this audit would contribute to a balanced literacy framework (a balanced literacy approach, here, stems from the philosophical belief that reading and writing are developed in multiple environments (Chai et al., 2020)). Chai et al. (2020) stressed the importance of universities creating partnerships with the local school districts with mutual respect and trust. It is through conducting a literacy audit in partnership with local districts that plans can be data-driven to ensure logical and reasoned instructional practices (Chai et al., 2020). They advised that with university-

district partnerships it is pertinent that ongoing professional development opportunities are offered to schools and not the *one-and-done* model, because students are not the only learners (Chai et al., 2020). Moreover, Meyers et al. (2015) highlighted the value of professional partnerships with teachers at primary schools for improving the literacy levels of school children; they found that such partnerships resulted in improvements in children's literacy performances, and teachers felt the collaboration had strengthened their teaching.

In the coaching model, the coach is viewed as an expert working with teachers to help teachers reach required literacy standards for pupils. Meyers et al. (2015) advocated the partnership model rather than a coaching model. The coach is a content expert who uses student data to plan methods to improve the skill set of the teacher (Meyers et al., 2015). However, Meyers et al. (2015) underlined that, in the partnership relationship, there is a "connection between coach, teacher and students. Crucially, the focus is student-centered and aims to provide individualized, long-term professional development that emphasizes appropriate instruction that includes differentiated strategies based on the needs of the students" (p. 149). The focus is ultimately students, but the partnership involves the partner, teacher, and students themselves. Too often, teachers must teach to high stakes exams rather than focus on literacy and literacy skills for their own sake. Thus, Meyers et al. (2015) pointed out that the partnership model can help teachers move away from teaching to high-stakes exams and focus on those identified as underperforming children as well as those with disabilities. Pomerantz and Pierce (2019) noted the importance of the state and government consciously intervening in low-performing schools in literacy. They suggested that this can be done by conducting a needs assessment, providing professional development for teachers, and evaluating the effectiveness and impact of the professional development activities. The authors implemented this idea at a low-performing school in literacy for two years as well as stressing the need to account for contextual factors of the schools. The results were that teachers improved in their practice and students gained increased reading opportunities, which helped their literacy skills.

Ronkainen et al. (2019) studied Finnish students and found that students viewed elite athletes as role models in addition to certain members of the family. The elements of work ethics, commitment, ambition, and achievement are vital elements that make elite sports individuals good role models (Ronkainen et al., 2019). It should be noted that elite sports persons are not always viewed as role models, as shown in research such as that by Vescio et al. (2005), who studied 357 female students at Sydney schools. The authors found the majority of students do not perceive elite sports personalities as role models but do so for family members. Lyle (2009), however, strongly asserted that appropriate elite sports performers are powerful role models in their behaviour and for the success and achievement they convey. Smoll (2015) noted that whether elite sporting individuals see themselves as role models or not, they are role models, good and bad.

This study aimed to elicit lessons from a program that use elite athletes to promote literacy at school. The program, Read Like a Champion (RLAC), was implemented in a school in Suva, Fiji. The RLAC utilized various elite Fiji sports individuals to promote reading and comprehension to class three pupils at a school in Suva (Rafiq & Dorovolomo, 2020). Studies that use elite sports persons as partners to help promote

literacy at schools are not commonplace. RLAC was inspired by the Read Like a Demon (RLAD) initiative, which was implemented in Melbourne, Australia and involved the Melbourne Football Club, commonly known by the nickname of the Demons, to promote literacy activities at schools and libraries (Fulco & Lee, 2010; Kirkby et al., 2018)<sup>1</sup>. A number of examples of using sporting teams to promote reading exist elsewhere, including using the English premier league, which had professional footballers advocate the love of reading among schoolchildren (Premier League, 2015). UK rugby targeted 9- to 11-year-olds at schools to help motivate reluctant readers (National Literacy Trust, 2021a), and the UK Football Association focused on girls aged 5 to 8, encouraging them to learn both soccer and be engaged in storytelling (National Literacy Trust, 2021b). Implemented across Australia and New Zealand, the National Rugby League (NRL) aims to have children have fun reading and it delivers its literacy program to over more than 70 schools (Gabor, 2016). These programs will be analysed in more detail in the discussions later.

## METHODOLOGY

The intention of this study was to arrive at lessons from the RLAC literacy program, elicited, in part, through a comparative analysis of lessons drawn from literature on similar programs. This was done in a similar manner to that employed by Jetton et al. (2008). In this conception, literacy is motivational, literacy is a lifelong pursuit, and literacy is constructive. This study incorporates the ideas that literacy should be taught through innovative ideas, literacy should involve partnerships, literacy needs role models, and literacy should be thought of as a contextual, every day situated practice. Jetton et al. (2008) promoted the notion that teacher educators at university should proactively form partnerships with prospective teachers, district education officers, school leaders, and schoolteachers. Jetton et al. (2008) found that by doing so, they were able to collaboratively create a vision for literacy for the schools they worked with and helped reshape the manner in the way the curriculum is delivered. In this, the students and prospective student teachers were also part of the learning community, and this helped transform the literacy experiences of school students. Jetton et al. (2008, p. 329) asserted that those working together should be equal partners and have a shared vision for literacy. In the partnership, they agreed on the following vision of literacy: first is the idea that *literacy is constructive*, in that readers and writers do have existing knowledge to construct meaning; second, the vision states that *reading is fluent*, which seeks to get readers and writers to be proficient at whatever level they are currently at; third, the vision recognizes that *literacy is strategic* and students are able to access and engage in purposeful reading and writing to construct meaning; fourth, *literacy is motivated* where children are interested, informed, and capable of communicating what they read and write effectively; and fifth, *literacy is a lifelong pursuit* in which children are able to continue to develop, refine and enjoy reading and writing for a lifetime. According to Jetton et al. (2008), the partnership restructured the literacy curriculum in the writing processes, written products, content, and strategies. Everyone learned from

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the partnership including preservice teachers who were able to widen their notions of literacy beyond the school and university classrooms.

This study also drew on Jetton and colleagues' (2008) use of analogical representation (Aubusson, 2002) to help communicate ideas. Jetton et al. (2008) used analogical representations to depict the literacy vision of a school, such as *literacy is strategic, or literacy is a lifelong pursuit*. Moreover, Aubusson (2002) stressed that analogical representations such as these can also provide the conceptual framework for interpreting research data. Analogies are vital thinking tools to understand a phenomenon. In this study, the analogical representations are *literacy as innovative ideas, literacy should involve partnerships, literacy need role models, and literacy as contextual, every day, situated practice*.

This comparative study of lessons from literacy programs using elite sports role models utilizes a qualitative case-oriented design, which generally includes two to four cases (Palmerberger & Gingrich, 2013), where the contexts of each case are examined. This study focuses on a single school, single classroom case of the RLAC program and draws lessons from this case, supporting this with analysis of lessons learned from other similar literacy promotion programs utilizing elite sports role models (for example, Fulco & Lee, 2010; Gabor, 2016; Kirkby et al. 2018; National Literacy Trust, 2021a, 2021b). To identify key lessons from literacy programs, this study relied on the secondary data about RLAC presented in Rafiq and Dorovolomo (2020) and secondary data presented in available, relevant literature. The RLAC project utilized focus groups with the pupils and readers for data collection (Rafiq & Dorovolomo, 2020). RLAC received ethics approval from the Fiji Ministry of Education.

The reliance on secondary data is a limitation of this study. Chandola (2021, p.121) noted that “one of the biggest limitations of using secondary data is that you are limited to the data that is already collected”. Second-hand information can, nevertheless, be used to advance further strategies for how to optimize student learning in the future. However, there is an enormous volume of publications, and analysis of secondary data has become a more prevalent and viable options for researchers to add to current knowledge, help make recommendations and influence student learning (Chandola, 2021). Furthermore, Davis-Kean and Jager (2017) stated that secondary data is crucial for understanding how children learn and interact across educational contexts, highlighting that the use of secondary data is an important and “novel idea” (p. 4).

### **Data analysis**

This study incorporated the five practical steps advocated by Esser and Vliegthart (2017) to organize comparative data. Whilst this study is not directly comparing two or more cases, drawing on a comparative approach provides a carefully contextualized analysis that allows for comparison across available literature and with future cases. Esser and Vliegthart's (2017) first step is the *contextual description* of systems, cultures, and phenomenon of interest. The phenomenon of interest in this case study is that the program used elite sports persons to read aloud for school children at school and helped class teachers and schools to organize literacy activities.

The second step involved recognizing *functional equivalents* so that objects with similar roles could be meaningfully compared (Esser & Vliegthart, 2017). In considering the

potential for comparison of RLAC to other similar cases, the phenomenon of interest (as noted above) and the purposes and benefits of the program in relation to promoting reading are likely to be the functional equivalents that can be meaningfully compared.

The third step was to establish *classifications and typologies* so that there were identifiable and shared characteristics; this helped make meaningful differentiations and similarities between systems and objects (Esser & Vliegthart, 2017). Analysis of the secondary data from the RLAC program produced “takeaways” and lessons that were derived in an inductive manner (Gray, 2014), which means they emerged from the study rather than deductively from an established theory or framework.

*Explanation* was the fourth step, where the classifications needed explanations to help reveal relationships and operationalize variables (Esser & Vliegthart, 2017). The third and fourth steps were combined, providing the classification or category as well as explaining them to distinguish each. The following four “takeaways” or lessons emanated from the RLAC project:

1. Literacy through innovative ideas: The use of elite sports persons to read aloud for school children and participate in related activities are not commonly occurring ideas and are innovative and creative programs.
2. Literacy should involve partnerships: Improving children’s literacy levels must involve building rapport and successful partnerships with stakeholders.
3. Literacy needs role models: This acknowledges that children need role models and significant others to provide the inspiration and enjoyment of literacy activities such as reading and writing.
4. Literacy as contextual, every day, situated practice: That literacy is contextual and should manifest itself through meaningfully interacting with others.

The fifth step involves drawing lessons across countries and locations to enable solutions and suggestions (Esser & Vliegthart, 2017). The four lessons outlined above will now be expanded upon in the following discussion, including suggestions, general conversations, and possible solutions.

## DISCUSSIONS

### Literacy through innovative ideas

The first lesson from this study is that involving elite sports athletes in students’ literacy activities is an innovative idea that is not widely utilized. The UK *Premier League Reading Stars* program mentioned above helped motivate struggling readers and stimulated improvements in student achievements in other subjects because being literate is vital to attainment in other subjects (Premier League, 2015). The UK *Rugby Reading Champions*, also mentioned above, was underpinned by rugby values, such as teamwork, respect, enjoyment, discipline, and sportsmanship, were often run over 10 weeks and were aimed at stimulating the motivation to read and greater reading comprehension (National Literacy Trust, 2021a). The UK *Shooting Stars* program, run with the Football Association in the UK, which specifically encouraged girls aged 5 to 8 to learn soccer through movement and storytelling using popular Disney stories and chosen books, not only improved the girls’ physical skills but also their speaking and listening skills (National Literacy Trust, 2021b).

The National Rugby League (NRL) of Australia collaborated with the Australian Library and Information Association in *National Simultaneous Storytime* program, which advocates for reading and literacy among school children (Gabor, 2016). Gabor (2016) reported that the program was rolled out in 70 schools in Australia and New Zealand with the message that children should not just learn to read but also enjoy and have fun reading. Delivered via face-to-face visitations, online, and digital platforms, NRL produced resources for students and teachers to make the lessons interactive. The program received positive feedback from schools and the community (Gabor, 2016).

The RLAD program (Kirkby et al., 2018) collaborates with the Melbourne Football Club to help instill a love for reading among primary school children in the Casey region. The program is comprehensive, with lessons, student activities, videos, book reviews, and writing activities (Monash University, 2015). The RLAC program (Rafiq & Dorovolomo, 2020) engaged elite Fiji sports persons to read aloud to class three students at a primary school in Suva, Fiji. While there is another program besides the RLAD in Australia using sport to encourage literacy development at school (Gabor, 2016), there has not been in Fiji.

Using sports people to engage school children meaningfully in literacy activities is innovative. Goatley and Johnston (2013) defined innovation in children's literacy as the "process through which new ideas are generated and put into productive practice—"new meaning new to this situation or this location or this community" (p. 94). The RLAC is an innovative program that adds to the literacy activities of the schools in the local context of Suva, Fiji. Goatley and Johnston (2013) stressed that whether it is inviting children to create a book themselves or be a character in a book, it is important to be innovative. Innovation involves innovative ideas or events. In the RLAC program, the class three children participated in the library week and an end-of-term party with various activities that show children that reading and being literate is important (Rafiq & Dorovolomo, 2020).

### **Literacy should involve partnerships**

The second lesson stresses that improving children's literacy levels must involve building rapport and valuable partnerships with stakeholders. Abodeeb-Gentile et al. (2016) cautioned that not all university-school partnerships have been successful but those that have been have characteristics of good planning, proper resourcing, and mutual respect among partners. As a result of a successful two-year partnership between their university, school administrators, and students, Abodeeb-Gentile et al. (2016) found markedly improved performances by pupils in their literacy-related high-stakes exams as well as content-driven professional development of teachers.

The RLAC program involved a partnership between the University of the South Pacific (USP) and participating schools and teachers. The USP funded the project, which made the RLAC program possible. The program also required partnership with the Fiji Olympic Committee and their Voice of the Athletes (VOA) initiative, which consists of elite Fiji personalities who take part in various activities in communities. Crockatt and Smythe (2000) emphasized that in order for long-term impacts of literacy initiatives to occur, establishing partnerships and local networks are crucial. Moreover, building community partnerships are particularly critical in places where there is a scarcity of resources, funds, support, and expertise. The after-school club ensures the books

children are read carry messages such as health and wellness, and other important values. Parents and guardians are also encouraged to share their experiences and possibly keep a journal of their experiences (Crockatt & Smythe, 2000). Peters et al. (2018) saw the value of a partnership between schools, parents, and universities when they organized successful literacy summer programs for children. Those who have an interest in children's literacy should work together rather than rely on normal school hours. The collaboration can also involve creating a shared literacy vision to help reshape the way literacy is implemented and experienced at the school (Jetton et al., 2008). Furthermore, Jetton and colleagues (2008) emphasized the salience of all stakeholders learning from their collaborative experiences, helping to pool valuable resources and draw on the expertise and knowledge of significant others.

### **Literacy needs role models**

The third lesson acknowledges that children need role models and significant others to provide the inspiration and enjoyment of literacy activities, such as reading and writing. For example, when the Melbourne Demons went to Alice Springs in 2014 and conducted the RLAD program, the Manager of the local library noted that it was “great for children to have role models who encourage them to read” (Davison & Bergen, 2014, p. 1). In one of their visits to Casey-Cardinia libraries in 2013, about 500 pupils attended, all drawn to the football ambassadors who were spending time to celebrate the association that children have to literacy and a love of reading (Strachan, 2013). In the RLAC program, class three students' attendance was good when champion readers were due to come visit the school (Rafiq & Dorovolomo, 2020). The VOA program with the Fiji Association of Sports and National Olympic Committee (FASANOC), with whom the RLAC initiative partnered, designed it to be a platform for elite athletes, former and current, to be role models to the community (FASANOC, 2020). Elite athletes have incredible opportunities to positively encourage the next generation of young people and crusade for worthwhile societal change (Smoll, 2015). Smoll (2015) also reminded elite sports athletes to conduct themselves in a manner that does not destroy their personal integrity and devote themselves to altruistic missions by inspiring others and be selfless in benefiting others. Improved literacy levels are not void of role modeling from significant others whom the child want to emulate. Children's literacy levels will not improve unless they have higher benchmarks to strive for.

### **Literacy as contextual, everyday, situated practice**

The fourth lesson is that literacy is contextual and should manifest itself through meaningfully interacting with others. While the RLAC initiative was inspired by the RLAD program, adaptations were necessary given that Melbourne and Suva are very different cities in size and context. Literacy activities must be contextually relevant so that they become meaningful and authentic. In addition, Shelton (2014) supports multi-literacies pedagogy in which the instructor recognize that literacy comprises situated practice in which meaning making occurs in context. It is necessary for a multiplicity of representational modes and resources be designed into the curriculum (Shelton, 2015). In the RLAD program, Kirkby and colleagues (2018) noted that prospective and practicing teachers view literacy through a “multi-literacy” lens, which is imperative for recognizing cultural and linguistic diversity and being competent in multi-literacies pedagogy. This concept was applied in the Suva RLAC program. For example, when it

was fathers' day, the schoolteacher and researchers brought in books related to fathers. Books relevant to the Fiji context are also bought and used in the RLAC program. Books are chosen carefully so that they do not carry racist, sexist, and religious prejudice, all issues that are especially important for a multi-racial, multi-ethnic, and multi-religious country such as Fiji.

It is crucial to value the varying meaning-making that will ensue from reading, writing, listening, speaking, representing, and viewing. Kirkby (2018) emphasize the need for viewing literacy through both creative and critical lenses. Dharamshi (2018) supports this need by noting that critical literacy should view every day through a new lens and respect multiple perspectives. It should also promote social justice agendas and pay attention to the socio-cultural environment of the students. Getting teachers to problematize literacy materials ensures that pupils are exposed to critical literacy rather than simply accepting materials passively. This will require teacher education to take a critical stance. Educators need to implement critical and multi-literacies, not merely as topics but as critical stances (Dharamshi, 2018).

## CONCLUSION

The authors of this article recommend that schools be willing to collaborate with others who have an interest in improved literacy among school children and believe that it is valuable to have a network of organizations that can contribute to the school's literacy programs. Many schools do have existing literacy programs and so new agencies coming in should not see themselves as coaches and experts to change things radically, but as partners who can help to contribute to activities of the school. Sporting organizations may not necessarily be seen as partners in children's literacy, but the RLAC and other programs have begun to see this potential and are proving that they have value in promoting improved literacy levels.

The RLAC program is an innovative approach to the promotion of children's literacy development. The program utilized sporting role models that school children look up to and who have the potential to make worthwhile contributions to sparking imaginations of school children, in this case, for the love for reading and engagement with literacy materials. Children do not just learn in a void, they learn through interaction with others in society, such as parents, teachers, through other institutions, and through significant figures such as sporting role models. Students can learn from role-modeling the desired behaviours. While contexts are different and require strategies that work in particular locations, literacy programs such as those explored in this article can be adapted and are agile enough to encompass different contexts.

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