

Dwayne Reed,
Chicago Public Schools

NEXT GEN LITERACY LEADERS

Honoring the
new class of ILA's 30 Under 30

By Morgan Ratner

there's no denying that 2020 was a year for the books, one that challenged our societies in innumerable ways. But the strife of global issues—including a pandemic, social justice reform, and climate concerns, to name a few—didn't deter our accomplished group of leaders from continuing to enact change across their classrooms and the

world. For them, literacy is not only a means to knowledge but also a pathway to a more inspired, equitable, and tolerant society. Perhaps in 2020 that was more important than ever before.

Grab a pair of sunglasses. The future of literacy is bright thanks to the work of this year's class of ILA 30 Under 30 honorees.

Saurabh Anand, 28

**Graduate Student Research Assistantship Fellow,
University of Georgia | Georgia, U.S.**

Saurabh Anand has smartphones to thank for his introduction to literacy education. In India, his birthplace, he had the opportunity to help women from rural backgrounds learn how to use the technology, but he ran into a problem: The smartphones were primarily in English, which many of his learners didn't know. "To first solve linguistic hurdles, I decided to become an English language instructor to help people learn the language."

Anand has since conducted extensive research on multicultural literacy, and his work has been featured in the *ADE Bulletin*, TESOL's Intercultural Communications Interest Section newsletter, and the American Consortium for Equity in Education. Anand, who believes it is a "moral responsibility" of English teachers to expose students

to different versions of the English language, has been invited to speak at various conferences, including the 2021 TESOL International Convention.

"It is a moral responsibility to make immigrant students comfortable," he says. "Every English is equal, whether spoken in 'native' countries or anglophone countries."

Anand recently graduated from Minnesota State University, where he completed a capstone project that developed high-interest reading materials for struggling elementary students. He is currently pursuing his PhD in TESOL and world language education.



Anna Bjork, 28

**English Language Learner Teacher,
Minnetonka Public Schools
Minnesota, U.S.**

Anna Bjork always wanted to be an educator, but while she was taking courses to teach Spanish, her eyes were opened to the needs of English learners (ELs). She changed route and has only grown to love the profession more. "My biggest aspiration as a teacher is to instill in my students a confidence in their own skills and abilities," she says. "When we can all communicate and collaborate, we are much better off."

Before joining the staff at Minnetonka Public Schools, Bjork served as the lead EL teacher at Twin Cities International School where, under her instruction, EL students above an expanding level of language proficiency increased from 55.9%

to 69.1% in four years. Along with planning and implementing culturally sensitive curriculum for Muslim students, she also planned and led PD for staff, mentored new teachers, and led after-school programs such as a girls leadership program, cooking, and tutoring.

"I am constantly impressed by the work ethic students have to improve their skills," she says. "I have confidence that my students will be leading forces in making a brighter future for themselves and the world."

Ryan Brady, 18

Founder, Hippkids | Ohio, U.S.

Growing up, Ryan Brady noticed that her hearing-impaired sister encountered social and educational challenges that her hearing peers did not face. Spurred into action by the realization that many of these challenges, including the risk of illiteracy, could be prevented, Brady created Hippkids—a pen pal program designed to connect children with hearing loss and foster friendship, inclusion, and communication. "If I can motivate just one child to write a letter," Brady says, "then what I am doing is definitely worth it."

Although Hippkids is an excellent resource for kids to become involved with on their own, it can be even more fulfilling in the classroom. Brady currently partners with teachers across the United States. With almost 300 kids in the program, Brady believes it's successful because "writing letters to others gives students a new sense of purpose and excitement."

After graduating high school in 2020, Brady began a gap year to conduct policy research and expand Hippkids's offerings. She plans to get her master's in public policy and continue to advocate for changes surrounding issues such as poverty, discrimination and, of course, literacy development.



Morgan Ratner (mratner3139@gmail.com) is a freelance writer and works full time in the publishing industry. She lives in Brooklyn, NY, with her partner and their many plants.



Candace Chambers, 27

CEO, Educational Writing Services; PhD Student, University of North Carolina at Charlotte | North Carolina, U.S.

Candace Chambers fell in love with writing while working on her high school newspaper, which led her to pursue a career in English education.

“Writing is a complex task that encompasses a person’s identity,” she says. “Just like the uniqueness of a fingerprint, it is essential that students’ writing skills are developed to show the uniqueness of their voice.”

After teaching a college composition course, Chambers began thinking of ways in which she could extend literacy instruction into communities of color. The result: founding her company, Educational Writing Services, and focusing on community-based literacy practices. She says that “access to literacy education that is multicultural can bridge the gap of exposure for students to learn of pathways to reach dreams that they may have not known existed.”

Chambers has conducted community-based workshops for over 500 students in addition to publishing *Write Your Way to a Successful Scholarship Essay*, a guide for students to better understand the process of obtaining a scholarship. By aiding students in the college admissions process, she provides crucial access to resources and empowers students to

confidently continue in the next step in their education.

Chambers is currently pursuing a doctorate in curriculum and instruction with a concentration in urban literacy.

Havana Chapman-Edwards, 10

Activist, Philanthropist, and Founder/Executive Director of Girls Have Rights | Frankfurt, Germany

Havana Chapman-Edwards’s activism began when she started the Rhymers Are Readers book club for members of her church choir to help boost reading confidence and promote literacy representation. During the club’s meetings, she reads aloud a book about Black female role models. When she learned from Scholastic’s 2017 *Kids & Family Reading Report* that Black children, on average, have 37 fewer books in their homes than all children combined, Chapman-Edwards started a campaign with the goal of buying 37 books for each member of the club. The fundraiser ultimately exceeded its goal and raised \$16,443.

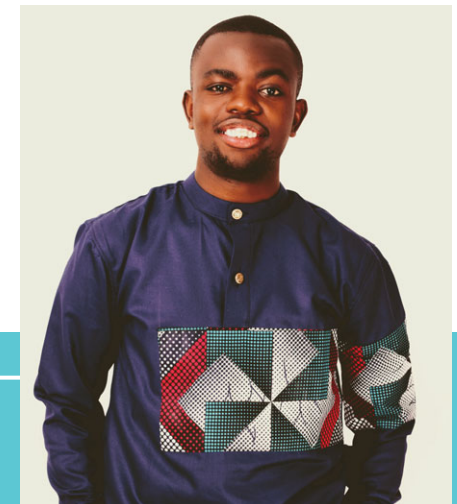
The founder and executive director of Girls Have Rights, a nonprofit working to eliminate barriers to girls’ education, Chapman-Edwards has gone on to raise more than \$40,000 for girls around the globe for items such as books, school supplies, toiletries, and transportation.

In addition to her education advocacy, Chapman-Edwards serves



on the Advisory Council for Girls Who Code and the Youth Executive Board of Dreams for Kids, and she was a member of the Kids Board of Directors for KIDBOX for 2019–2020.

“When people try to silence you because you are ‘just’ a kid,” she says, “you silence them with your actions. I make a difference every time I use my voice to speak up for myself and others.”



Jimmie Chengo, 23

Founder/Executive Director, Afribuk Society | Kajiado, Kenya

As the founder of Afribuk Society, a program dedicated to providing free books and helping children embrace storytelling, Jimmie Chengo helps children discover the strength of their voices. Storytelling has been important to Chengo since he was a child, as he turned to books to expand his worldview. “I wanted a better world, and reading and writing continues to lead me there.”

Chengo emphasizes the vital need for increased literacy in Kenya, noting that the greatest challenge for Afribuk Society is getting resources to reach underserved, largely remote communities. Still, the Society, a nonprofit made up of dedicated college students, has donated hundreds of

storybooks and volunteered at World Read Aloud celebrations in partnership with the ILA affiliate Rift Valley Reading Association.

In response to COVID-19, Chengo plans to use digital storytelling to create Afristory, a new initiative designed to empower teachers and students to share their tales virtually and have their voices reach across the web.

“The future of literacy for me is around stories, to celebrate, uplift, and show love in diversity,” says Chengo, who hopes to get a PhD in education and scale the Afribuk Society throughout Africa.

Cedric Christian Ngnaoussi Elongué, 27

Founder/Executive Director, Muna Kalati | Accra, Ghana

With the goal of building international recognition for African children's books, author and researcher Cedric Christian Ngnaoussi Elongué created Muna Kalati, a nonprofit dedicated to diverse stories. Along with providing training to educators and helping to provide access to students, Muna Kalati publishes a magazine that serves as a reference on African literature.



“A lack of diversity in children's books could be a threat to international understanding,” says Elongué. “Preparing children for a more just world...means helping them learn to celebrate their identity and be proud of it.”

A lifelong learner, Elongué holds a postgraduate certificate on children's literature and two of his three master's theses were focused on multicultural children's literature and the publishing industry in Africa. His book, *An Introduction to Children's Literature in Cameroon*, sheds light on Cameroonian children's book publishers. Additionally, Elongué has collaborated on children's literature with Takam Tikou and the French National Centre for Children's Literature, worked to develop literacy initiatives to empower children and their access to education in West Africa, and is a founding member of the Cameroonian section of the International Board on Books for Young People.

“Creating lifelong readers and writers doesn't just happen,” Elongué says. “It takes a home and schoolwide culture to help reach that goal.”



Enwongo-Abasi Francis, 24

Ambassador, World Literacy Foundation | Akwa Ibom, Nigeria

As a rising literacy advocate in Nigeria, Enwongo-Abasi Francis has a zeal for creating a sustainable reading culture in his community. He began speaking about literacy promotion as a teenager, and he's implemented various advocacy programs to increase literacy, including a seminar for families and caregivers to engage their children in reading, counseling for students, and programs to eradicate illiteracy in his community. “My day is not complete if I don't take action to advance the cause of sustainable literacy development in society,” he says. “It has been a journey full of impact and purpose.”

In response to COVID-19, Francis implemented a local literacy



development project designed to reduce the impact of the pandemic on children's education by donating books and promoting reading culture. This initiative, which Francis notes is his greatest success, cushioned the effects of school closures by setting up a roving library and on-the-go tutoring.

Francis has enabled countless students and community leaders to see the importance of literacy. His motto, “No literacy, no meaningful development,” drives his desire to set future generations up for success.

Seth French, 29

English Language Arts Teacher, Bentonville High School Arkansas, U.S.

Seth French made a name for himself before he even began his first year of teaching high school. Prior to finishing his PhD, he published numerous articles and book chapters on media literacy, presented at national and international conferences, and had his work—which centers on critical media literacy and digital video remix in the English language arts classroom—cited in *Reading Research Quarterly*, ILA's leading global journal offering multidisciplinary scholarship.

“If critical media literacy is at the foundation of tomorrow's literacy classrooms,” he says, “we will see growing numbers of students fighting against issues of social and environmental justice—and winning.” French believes media literacy skills can help students skillfully analyze the tumultuous range of media at their fingertips. He finds that creating space for students to pursue their passions and drive discussions in the classroom is a powerful way to cultivate their literacy development.

At a time when the media landscape can be particularly challenging, French is ensuring students are prepared to understand media and make informed decisions. “We can help students confront their own biases, grow in empathy toward those who are marginalized, and create media that speak back to much larger status quo discourses.”



Shayla Glass-Thompson, 28

Literacy and Language Equity Specialist, Badger Ridge Middle School Wisconsin, U.S.

Shayla Glass-Thompson advocates for students to have a voice in the classroom by helping them see themselves in books with strong Black and Brown leads and by affirming dialects and home languages such as Spanish and Black English.

In addition to celebrating identities through books (she's also a self-published author of fiction for Black teens), Glass-Thompson teaches literacy through song, literature, and movies that decenter dominant White narratives.

Glass-Thompson has been a part of various initiatives to ensure minority students are receiving the academic resources they need. She cofounded the Black Equity Council at her school to address academic and discipline disparities among Black students. The council has since evolved into a districtwide committee working to implement accountability systems to help staff stay on top of observing and changing how they serve Black children and their families. She also has served as the coach for the African American History Bowl Challenge and led a Circles of Support program for Black teen girls.

Glass-Thompson notes that teachers “have the power to have a direct hand facilitating children in improving the world. We must be the connector that brings the world into the classroom through literacy.”

Patrick Harris, 27

Humanities Teacher, The Roeper School; Founder, Good Trouble Media Michigan, U.S.

“Our students have the answers; we just have to see them,” says Patrick Harris, an English-turned-humanities teacher who believes using students’ lived experiences is vital for better learning.

That has been a focus of Harris’s, whether teaching in Doha, Qatar, in the heart of Washington, DC, or in his hometown of Detroit, MI. In addition, Harris was the founding resident educator for Turner Multifamily Impact Fund in Maryland, which recruits educators to live in high-need communities



and provide education enrichment. Harris managed a team of educators to respond to the community’s educational needs, including summer enrichment programs, EL classes, health clinics, and more. In his most recent role, he collaborated with staff to transform the middle school English department into a humanities program geared toward preparing students to lead in social justice issues.

But Harris’s “great thrill,” he says, was founding Good Trouble Media, a media company that tells compelling stories of the education system, most notably *The Common Sense Podcast*, in which he and his cohort documented their entire school year, showcasing the highs and lows of being Black teachers and fighting for a more just system.

He encourages future educators to “get clear about your *why*. Teaching is human work and your *why* will shape your philosophy. If people want to make changes in education, they have to stay in relationship with our most important stakeholder: our students.”

Tiyana Herring, 23

Fifth-Grade Teacher, Kate Sullivan Elementary School; Graduate Student, Florida State University Florida, U.S.

“If we teach students that literacy is how we communicate with each other,



not necessarily just reading, educators could pull students in, no matter the subject,” says Tiyana Herring.

Herring recently switched from teaching reading/English language arts to math and science, but literacy continues to be her foundation. In her words, reading is “the great equalizer among my students.”

Herring’s career is also founded in research, beginning as an undergraduate, when she was a PURPOSE Educational Research Training Fellow, a role in which she created a literacy research project centered on phonological awareness and motivation. She has presented at numerous conferences, such as the 2018 Black Doctoral Network conference in North Carolina. She was also a Thurgood Marshall College Fund Teacher Quality and Retention Program Fellow, a program designed to assist with developing and demonstrating research-based

educational practices. Last summer, she was a John Smartt Scholar intern with the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Institute for Leadership, Equity, & Justice at Rutgers University in New Jersey. This program provides the opportunity to gain professional experience, network with scholars in higher education, and learn essential research skills related to equity and leadership.

In the future, Herring looks forward to completing graduate studies in school psychology (which she began last fall), becoming a published author, and helping future teachers succeed.



Tori Hill, 27

Executive Director, Writers and Artists Across the Country California, U.S.

If you've ever had an author visit your classroom, you can likely recall the excitement at being able to discuss a book with its creator. For Tori Hill, executive director of Writers and Artists Across the Country—which facilitates author and artist visits for underserved K-12 schools—

hearing that an author visit helped students understand the importance of their voice is what it's all about.

Hill began working with authors in college when she helped organize the wildly popular YALLFEST, one of the largest young adult book festivals in the U.S. South. Bringing together top publishers, authors, illustrators, and book lovers, YALLFEST draws in thousands of attendees each year. As Hill became more involved, she helped found YALLWEST, its West Coast sister festival.

"Reading is one of the most powerful tools we have to gain empathy, deal with difficult feelings, understand the world around us, and feel less alone," she says. "Many students feel like books are irrelevant to their lives. Connecting with authors bridges this gap by showing the student the real-life person [who is] behind the stories."

Mahdi Housaini, 25

Founder, Parande Library Panjshir Valley, Afghanistan

Mahdi Housaini went beyond the role of teacher for the past three years at Mahboba's Promise Orphanage in Afghanistan. Though his official title was English teacher, Housaini always took it upon himself to provide storybooks and materials for his students because funding for schools in Panjshir Valley is so lacking.

"Education comes in many forms," he says, "but the most comprehensive and powerful way through which one is educated is through books."

In fact, Housaini's biggest dream was to build a library for Afghan youth, hoping to provide a reading space



and nourish Afghan writers. Despite fundraising hardships and setbacks caused by COVID-19, he completed the project in October 2020, opening Parande Library in Panjshir Valley—the region's first and only children's library. Plans include providing computer lessons and English language and other educational courses, and holding reading sessions and weekly conferences led by children.

"I believe that books and reading improve the world by improving individuals," he says. "Individuals create and build the world we all live in together. But what builds individuals? The answer is education."

Once the library opened, Housaini moved on from Mahboba's Promise in search of his next literacy and humanitarian challenge—but his impact will live on. In addition to the library, he also wrote and filmed several documentaries about the orphanage to help bring attention, funding, and supplies to the nonprofit.

Ondřej Kania, 28

CEO/Cofounder, JK Education | Czech Republic

As a child, Ondřej Kania struggled to succeed in the Czech educational system but, after having the opportunity to study in the United States, he found that he thrived in an American one. This inspired him to found JK Education in 2012 at 19 years old, which began as a network of advisory agencies for students in Central Europe that assisted with obtaining scholarships and financial aid to attend schools in the U.S. The organization has since grown to include JK Education EXPO, an annual, international traveling education vendor expo, and American Academy, which consists of four schools in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. The schools, serving over 500 students, focus on American concepts like an individualized approach in allowing students to choose their course of study and work at their own pace, and also draw on Finnish values such as project-based learning.

"By individualizing education and putting emphasis on developing the skills of our students through project-based learning, rather than pressuring them on memorizing facts," Kania says, "we can help our countries to grow future leaders who will be able to function in a competitive global market." He hopes to increase the public's interest in educational discussion and says the future of education is "a combination of brick-and-mortar schools and digital technology which can help with individualizing certain parts of an education process."





Jigyasa Labroo, 28

Founder/CEO, Slam Out Loud | Dharamshala, India

In fourth grade, Jigyasa Labroo had a teacher who would change her learning experience and truly make a difference in her own actions as a teacher.

“By the sheer power of her unconditional love,” Labroo says, “she made me feel worthy—that I deserved to be loved just for being.”

Love became the driving force Labroo carried with her through her career, first as a member of Teach for India, where she helped girls from disadvantaged communities improve their literacy skills, and later as the founder of Slam Out Loud, a nonprofit dedicated to helping children find their voice through creative expression. “Supporting children and youth to start voicing their opinions using art forms enables them to challenge established narratives and offer imaginative alternatives,” she says.

Slam Out Loud has trained over 50,000 children in various art forms such as poetry, storytelling, and theater, free of cost. Labroo is also passionate about creating safe spaces for shared vulnerability between educators and students, an ecosystem she believes will allow children to become confident in themselves and their ability to lead.

“Being able to express oneself should not be limited to the privileged class,” she says. “I work toward bridging inequity by creating spaces and experiences that enable creative expression for all children, no matter where they come from.”

In response to COVID-19, Slam Out Loud began Arts for All, a program which leverages the power of art and low-tech platforms. They have created a footprint in 19 countries, reaching 4.7 million children.

to develop their passions, growing their confidence in the process, by providing a space to enjoy reading, play video games, and engage in cosplay.

Lay positions young adult literature at the forefront of his teaching instead of merely focusing on texts that have been deemed classics. “We fail to promote literacy when we implement cookie-cutter programs that are designed for the sole purpose of accountability. Should not reading be encouraged for the sake of reading without ulterior motivation?” he asks.

Lay, who is pursuing an EDD in educational leadership and professionalism, says his greatest reward is seeing students change for the better because of how a book has impacted their lives. “Books are so powerful that they reach into the depths of who we are and pull at the core of what makes us human.”



Roman Lay, 28

English/Drama Teacher, Alcoa High School | Tennessee, U.S.

Driven by a thirst to promote the power of literacy among young people, Roman Lay focuses on creating a learning environment for his students that aligns with their personal values and interests. “I firmly believe that all young people deserve to have a good book in their hands,” he says. “I seek to rekindle a love of reading that many of my students have lost.”

By starting the school’s Gaming Club, Lay has also encouraged students

Andrea Liao, 18

Founder/President, Book the Future Washington, U.S.

As the founder of Book the Future, a student-run organization dedicated to global youth literacy, Andrea Liao aims to provide children with the resources they need to create change. “Book the Future is dedicated not only to youth literacy but also to art as a form of empowerment,” she says.

Liao says she grew up between the pages of her favorite books, using reading as a form of escapism and exploration. “My mission is to make

education more accessible by working toward a future in which every child is able to grow up in an environment with reading resources.” With *Book the Future*, which she began as a high school freshman, she’s donated over 4,000 books to refugee centers, children’s hospitals, underfunded school districts, and more. She’s also implemented initiatives such as “Represent the Future,” which encourages students to share their favorite pieces of diverse literature and spread the message of inclusivity. Liao says, “I rarely encountered characters of my own culture portrayed in books. I launched Represent the Future to emphasize the importance of multicultural texts.”

Liao believes that youth activism is crucial in effecting social change. “Today more than ever, it is important to follow your passions, to take initiative on an issue that warrants action, and to create positive change.”

Josephine Lichaha, 28

Teacher, Go Ye Therefore; Mentor, Zambezi Sawmills Community School Livingstone, Zambia

For Josephine Lichaha, a teacher at Go Ye Therefore preschool and a LitWorld-trained literacy mentor at Zambezi Sawmills Community School in Zambia, implementing social-emotional learning (SEL) is fundamental to creating a well-rounded learning experience.

“Social-emotional learning strengthens learners’ management of their emotions. They start respecting one another and others everywhere.” By



implementing SEL, she says her students showed improvement in their academic performance and an enhanced love of reading. She also witnessed reduced bullying and more acts of courage, friendship, and kindness.

Lichaha believes the basis of SEL for young students begins with storytelling as a means to help students openly communicate and better understand the world they live in. She says that the more literate learners are, the better they can interact with their environment and the people within it.

For Lichaha, the most rewarding part of her work is helping children learn in ways that excite them. She also enjoys “knowing that I am helping someone who is going to have an impact in society and the world at large someday.”

Austin Martin, 25

Creator/Director, Rhymes With Reason | California, U.S.

When it comes to getting students interested in their academics, meeting them where they are is key. In Austin Martin’s case, that sweet spot was music. Hip-hop helped him focus on his studies and, finding that 67 of the top 100 SAT words were found in mainstream hip-hop, he started *Rhymes With Reason*, an online vocabulary and literacy-centered learning tool powered by popular music.

“Literacy has historically been a lever that has allowed some people freedom and the absence of literacy has barred many others from achieving freedom,” he says. “Barriers in access to language and literacy perpetuate class stratification in our society. Popular music is the strongest literacy-rich cultural force in the world, and it’s highly accessible and familiar to people of all social classes. *Rhymes With Reason* is all about leveraging music’s position to bridge this gap.”

It’s clear that *Rhymes With Reason*, by presenting vocabulary and English language learning within a context many understand and enjoy, is benefiting students. The program has already been used in more than 150 education programs across the U.S.



Simpson Muhwezi, 29

Founder/Creative Director, Wandika Literacy Initiative | Kampala, Uganda

Simpson Muhwezi draws on his love of stories to inspire Uganda’s future writers. As the creative director of the Wandika Literacy Initiative, he curates the Wandika Children’s Writing Prize, an annual creative writing competition that was borne out of the need to develop children’s creativity skills. Since then, he’s seen a huge shift in attitude of both teachers and students.

“The teachers in the schools we’ve worked with have embraced the prize and allocated more time to reading and writing,” he says. “The courage of the students has also been impressive. Imagine the joy of seeing a child learn to freely express themselves in the written word!”

Muhwezi also speaks to the importance of telling stories children can relate to, saying it “enables them to reflect on their own lives and make better decisions, but most important, desire to tell their own stories.” Through the Wandika Literacy Initiative, which often partners with other literacy programs across Africa, children have the opportunity to share and publish their own stories.

“Every child has a story to tell,” Muhwezi says. “By offering them a platform, I enable them to exercise their minds, to see things beyond their imagination.”





Erin O'Neil, 26

**Founder, Fishtail Publishing
Ohio, U.S.**

Erin O'Neil thanks international travel for awakening the storyteller in her, saying, "I learned more about myself by listening to the experiences of others from unfamiliar cultures. Travel forced me to slow down and truly experience my everyday world."

As an author, business owner, secretary for the National Storytelling Network, and board member of the Storytellers of Central Ohio, O'Neil spends much of her time developing programs to help students and educators use storytelling as a platform for personal growth.

"Storytelling extends beyond the creative measures we take to express ourselves and our experiences to the world," she says. "It enables us to build empathy and understanding, while offering opportunity for reflection and analysis."

She strives to empower others to tell their stories, hoping to use her workshops to create a safe space in which storytellers can be vulnerable and grow.

"Storytelling is the art in which I have found confidence, purpose, love, and connection," she says, adding, "I am honored [to be] witnessing the transformation that occurs when someone realizes the power behind their personal narrative and begins sharing that story with others."

Akash Patel, 28

Spanish Teacher, Ignite Middle School; Founder, Happy World Foundation | Texas, U.S.

"I see literacy as a window to communicate with the world," says Akash Patel. "It's an opportunity to travel through reading, writing, and speaking with people of different cultures."

Realizing most of his students had never been out of the United States, Patel—who speaks six languages and has traveled to more than 50 countries—sought to bring the outside world to his students by turning to technology. He tapped into his global network, eventually mobilizing more than 1,000 volunteers from 150 countries to participate in "mystery hangouts" and enable students to learn from speakers across the world. This Global Connect database has been used by more than 40,000 teachers.

This turned into the Happy World Foundation, a global citizenship nonprofit that connects educators around the world. Happy World has also dedicated more than \$50,000 to communities worldwide and made service learning trips abroad possible for numerous students. "We have the extraordinary chance to use the internet to connect our scholars with new friends around the world," says Patel, who was recently elected to the United Nations Association of the United States' National Council. "These live connections are a powerful way to promote understanding in the hearts and minds of our next generation."



Rebecca Quiñones, 28

Second-Grade Spanish Dual-Language Teacher, P.S. 139 | New York, U.S.

Rebecca Quiñones teaches at one of the most linguistically diverse schools in Brooklyn, NY. Instead of "culturally shocking" them and pushing them to learn English, she says, she uses translanguaging strategies to leverage their home language as a tool for learning English. The goal of her classroom is not academic success of the English language but biliteracy and sociocultural competence.

"Bilingual programs add value to the population's culture," she says. "Schools are institutions of power and influence, and if the school adopts a dual language program, it is telling the community: 'Your language matters, it is important, and it is an asset for all of us.'"

Quiñones has immersed herself in action research, most recently a project titled "Developing Bilingual Readers: A Bilingual Vision for Mentor Texts." Prior to this, she conducted a yearlong study on guided reading in bilingual classrooms, the findings of which were presented at conferences and recently



Dwayne Reed, 29

Fourth-/Fifth-Grade English Language Arts Teacher, Chicago Public Schools; CEO, Teach Mr. Reed | Illinois, U.S.

Dwayne Reed's love of reading began with a different medium: TV. As a child, he struggled to sleep and would pass the nights reading closed captions (with the volume turned down, so as not to wake his sleeping family). From there, his love of reading grew, leading him to become a teacher and author (his debut book, *Simon B. Rhymen*, publishes this year from Little, Brown Books for Young Readers).



Known as America's Favorite Rapping Teacher, Reed has amassed thousands of YouTube followers who enjoy his engaging read-alouds and music videos. He began rapping about his life to build trust with his students and raise their confidence, saying, "A lot of students like positive music, music that reaches their heart." Since he began rapping—his first video in 2016, "Welcome to the 4th Grade," has 1.7 million views—he's been featured on major media outlets such as *Good Morning America* and *The Jimmy Kimmel Live Show*.

Reed is also dedicated to ensuring that students see themselves in the books they read. "Representation matters," he says. "It's not just a buzzword; it's a must and a reality. As much as kids can turn on the radio and hear their stories across the airwaves, I want them to see themselves mirrored on the page."

published in ILA's journal *The Reading Teacher*.

"Students whose dominant language is not English are quickly taught English with disregard to their native tongue," she says. "They are evaluated on their English acquisition. While that is important, we have to be careful that we are not saying 'Your native language does not have value here.' What we want to say is, 'We are here to help you learn English, but I recognize the beauty in what you come with. Let's learn from each other.'"

Zachery Ramos, 21

President/Founder, Traveling Library California, U.S.

Zachery Ramos has big plans to bring literacy to the forefront of government funding. He says the main goal of his work with the Traveling Library, which administers free books to underprivileged youth, is to advocate for library funding, providing underserved communities with valued, safe spaces for future leaders to cultivate a love of reading.

He rejects the idea that younger generations are entitled or lazy, noting his motto: Are you going to support

age or are you going to support action? "We prove every time that it doesn't matter how old or young you are," he says. "You can accomplish anything as long as you put the work in."

In addition to starting the Traveling Library, which has distributed over 20,000 free books across California, he's helped to raise over \$20,000 for numerous charities and provide resources to those in need during the COVID-19 crisis. The organization has distributed more than 10,000 boxes and bags of food and worked with the Gustine Business Association to get free Wi-Fi for students.

"I hope my work inspires other young people to join in the fight to help spread the importance of literacy," says Ramos. "When it comes to future success and reading, the two go hand in hand."





Kelsey Reynolds, 25

**Literacy and Education Advocate
California, U.S.**

Kelsey Reynolds is a strong believer in the power of using writing as a tool to help youth—especially youth of color—discover their voice.

For the past two years, Reynolds served as program manager for the youth writing nonprofit 826 New Orleans in Louisiana, where she impacted the lives of countless youth by helping them foster a love for writing, publish their own books, and connect literacy to real-world issues. She also guided older students through the Good Troublemakers Project, a yearly publication dedicated to a social justice issue.

In addition to her work at 826 New Orleans, Reynolds served for six years as an art educator and tutor for 7th Ward Boys and Girls Garden.

She also worked as the coordinator of Tulane University's Upward Bound program, where she mentored high school students, facilitated classroom discussions on college readiness and issue-based topics, including race and identity, and created a college-readiness curriculum for high school juniors.

Reynolds recently relocated to her hometown of Los Angeles, but although her zip code may have changed, her passion for teaching children reading and writing skills has not.

Reading, she says, “gives me the language and tools to understand the many injustices caused by white supremacy and capitalism, and writing gives me the power to create the world I want to see, a world where Black and Brown children are safe and have all of their needs met.”

Olivia Van Ledtje, 12

Founder, LivBits | New Hampshire, U.S.

Olivia Van Ledtje has a lot on her plate: She's the creator of the LivBits video series, the author of *Spark Change: Making Your Mark in a Digital World* (ISTE), host of *The KidLit Show* podcast, and founder of Long LIV Books, a nonprofit that advocates for access to books and technology for kids across the globe.



Van Ledtje created her first “LivBit” selfie video at 8 years old as a way to grow her confidence by talking about something she loved: reading. Since then, Van Ledtje has used technology to



Mari Sawa, 29

Literacy Specialist, Earth8ight School | Okayama, Japan

When Mari Sawa began teaching at Earth8ight School, she was given the opportunity to create a literacy program focused on developing critical thinking skills and widening her students' and their families' worldviews.

One of her greatest successes is the implementation of a study abroad trip that enables kindergartners and their families to travel to the United States for a week. Sawa, who attended college in the U.S., believes the opportunity to attend an American school for a week allows students to experience English as a living language. For many family members, it is their first opportunity to travel abroad. “The parents are able to experience globalism and see the possibility of their children living in a bigger world in the future.”

Along with serving as a literacy specialist, Sawa is also a kindergarten teacher, after-school program director, parent education director, and staff education director for Earth8ight.

Sawa's ultimate goal is to revitalize the entire family in literacy education. “With the parents becoming readers, the children will also have great models to become lifelong readers.”

Last fall, Sawa was accepted into the Harvard Graduate School of Education, where she will earn a master's degree through the Human Development and Psychology program.

connect learners and inspire empathy and equity. “Being a connected learner means more opportunities to think globally and take action,” she says. “To me, books and tech walk together. Technology will never replace the power of a good book you hold in your hands, but that book experience can grow to something much larger when you show students how to share their thinking using tech tools.”

Having amassed thousands of social media followers (nearly 45,000), Van Ledtje is also a seasoned keynote speaker and spreads her positive messages around digital media throughout schools and education conferences. She inspires students and educators alike to embrace literacy and take action, proving that age is but a number when it comes to inciting positive change.

Tien-Hao Yen, 29

**Founder, LIS Education
New Taipei City, Taiwan**

Literacy isn’t only about our reading and writing capabilities; it’s also about our capacity to understand and think critically. For Tien-Hao Yen, that means bringing attention to literacy through science. “Literacy is not only knowledge,” he says, “but [also] the ability to understand information, to create new things, and to solve problems that haven’t been solved in the past.”

As the founder of the nonprofit LIS Education, he works to redesign science teaching materials to make them more engaging and offer them to educators and students free of charge.



His work has allowed more than 100,000 students in Taiwan to gain a deeper understanding of scientific literacy and foster their passion for science learning. His work has also reached students in Hong Kong, Macau, Shanghai, and Malaysia. Motivated by seeing students’ lives changed, he hopes LIS Education can continue to grow and provide

more learners with the resources they need to improve their science and literacy education.

Yen strives to create an education system dedicated to enthusiastic, continuous learning rather than learning that is a result of exam-based pressure. “In this fast-changing world,” he says, “education should give everyone the ability to achieve their dreams.” ■

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Have a question for one of our honorees, or want to keep up with what they do next? The following #ILA30Under30 honorees can be found on Twitter:

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