

THE FUTURE OF LITERACY

Kick the year off with us by celebrating our 2023 30 Under 30 honorees

By **Kelly Bothum**

the late United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan once described literacy as “a bridge from misery to hope.” Some of the honorees in this year’s class of ILA 30 Under 30 honorees weren’t yet born when Annan spoke those words in 1997, but their enthusiasm, innovation, and commitment to the transformative power of literacy certainly espouses the ideals of the Nobel Prize-winning Ghanaian diplomat.

Whether it’s sharing the art of oral storytelling with the next generation of young readers, teaching female students coding and leadership skills to narrow the gender divide in STEM, or maneuvering a mobile library through the Taliban-controlled streets of Kabul, Afghanistan, these ambitious leaders are building that bridge one young mind at a time. We think you will agree that these 30 energetic changemakers from around the globe are creating a brighter, more hopeful future.

Shayan Aqdas, 25

Graduate Student, University of Stavanger
STAVANGER, NORWAY

Shayan Aqdas wants educators in Pakistan to reconsider what a successful classroom looks like. Hint: It's not the always-silent room where the teacher stands in the front and reads from a text while students fill in worksheets. Rather, it's a space where the students lead the discussion and interact with each other, and where teachers serve as guides.

While an undergrad at the National University of Modern Languages in Pakistan, Aqdas worked at Read Pakistan, where she helped organize two national conferences and managed book clubs at several institutions across the country. After working as an English language teacher at the City Postgraduate College for

Women in Punjab—where she developed her research interests of e-learning, innovative practices in English language teaching, and student-centered learning—she is now a graduate student in English Language and Literacy Studies at the University of Stavanger in Norway.

Aqdas has leveraged her skills to help empower marginalized groups and promote education and literacy in Pakistan. She has worked with nonprofits to develop outreach and partnership projects that focus on the arts and expanding opportunities for girls in education.

"I am quite optimistic regarding the future of youth literacy, as the number of organizations, trusts, institutions, and even individuals working for literacy are growing with every day," she says.



Ahmad Siyam Barakati, 25

Deputy Director, Charmaghz
KABUL, AFGHANISTAN

Even before the Taliban returned to power in Afghanistan in 2021, the country's literacy rate was among the lowest in the world: 43%, and only 30% for females. Since then, girls' education has been hit particularly hard, with millions barred from secondary education.

Despite the challenges, Ahmad Siyam Barakati, deputy director of Charmaghz, a nonprofit that operates mobile libraries for children, remains committed to creating a literate society. There have been half a million visits by children since

Charmaghz launched in 2018; more than 2,000 children visit the 16 libraries daily. When the Taliban shuttered libraries, Barakati waited at the gate of the Ministry of Education from morning to night for two months to make his case. Not only did the NGO eventually obtain permission to reopen but also it was the first organization allowed to have its female staffers (who make up 75% percent of the team) return to work.

"We are working in one of the world's most difficult situations to ensure each child gets access to quality basic literacy and numeracy. We believe that in the long term, our work will significantly contribute to peace," Barakati says.

Colin Bloom, 16

Founder, Libraries for Literacy
NEW YORK, U.S. & SOUTH AFRICA

When Colin Bloom was 12, he stood in a South African grocery aisle and noticed that the canned food showed pictures of the contents. Bloom, who has dual U.S.-South African citizenship, was shocked to learn many people in South Africa can't read, so food manufacturers use pictures alongside words.



"This experience snowballed in ways I couldn't have imagined," he says. After finding out 78% of 10-year-olds in South Africa can't read for meaning and only 8% of schools have libraries, Bloom created Libraries for Literacy to establish libraries in underserved South African schools.

"I once read that learning to read without books is like learning to play soccer without a ball—impossible, but relevant to many South African kids who are expected to become literate without access to books. This idea stayed with me," he says.

In 2020, Bloom brought 1,500 books to South Africa to create a school library in Soweto for 160 students and the community. In March 2022, he partnered with Breadline Africa to open a second library at Tshaneni



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School in a remote KwaZulu Natal village. In addition to the 3,000 easy-to-read English books, he also provided children's Zulu books.

Bloom is working on a third school library, serving 700 students, in Mpumalanga. Filled with English, Xitsonga, and Sepedi books, it will open in March 2023. This spring, he will attend the School for Ethics and Global Leadership at the African Leadership Academy in Johannesburg.



Samantha Boateng, 23

**Founder, Read 2 Lead
VIRGINIA, U.S. & GHANA**

Samantha Boateng holds several titles—writer, creator, educator, nonprofit leader, public speaker. But when she looks back at her childhood, one title made all the difference—reader.

“I think reading, most importantly, helped me dream big. I knew that I could make a positive impact on my community and the world around me because I saw the characters in my books doing so,” Boateng says.

Her passion is what propelled her to found Read 2 Lead when she was just 16 to build libraries in Ghana. Since 2016, Read 2 Lead has built and opened two free community libraries that reach more than 10,000 students. The building of a third library, in Kumasi, is underway.

Over the years, Read 2 Lead has given scholarships, offered literacy

workshops, connected individuals with local jobs, and created safe spaces for children and young adults. Boateng says the organization connects her to her lineage. Her grandfather built the first school in Asuadei. About 50 years later, Read 2 Lead built a library for that same community.

“It’s drawn me even closer to Ghana and my roots there, especially as a first-generation American,” Boateng says. “It has taught me so much about service and what it means to work with a community.”

Boateng recently self-published her first children’s book, *If You Give a Girl a Book*, about the endless possibilities that can be found through reading—with the aim of inspiring more young girls to pursue their dreams.

Dean Çelaj, 25

**Founder, Akademi.al
TIRANA, ALBANIA**

In 2019, Dean Çelaj created Akademi.al, an online learning platform offering videos and educational tutorials for students in his home country of Albania. When COVID-19 shut classroom doors across the globe in March 2020, the platform became an educational life preserver—drawing more than 1 million users from 2,000 schools in Albania.

Today, 91% of all students in Albania use the Akademi.al platform, which has drawn comparisons to Khan Academy and Google Classroom. Akademi.al offers 20,000+ prerecorded classes and live lessons on math, science, literature, and more that students can watch for free.



Çelaj believes more educational opportunities will lead to economic advantages for Albania. His success in Albania has prompted Akademi.al to explore expansion to other countries as well.

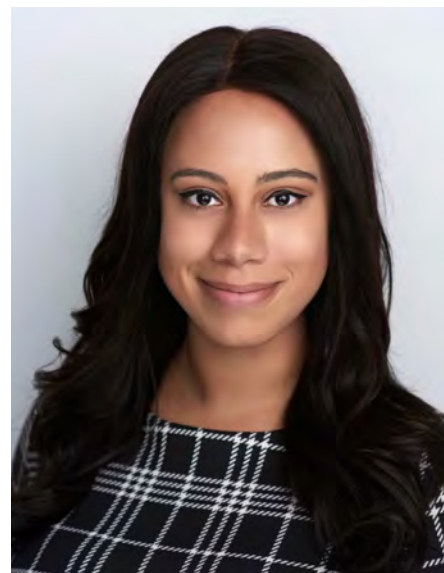
“Not every learner is the same, so the importance of online learning is that you can provide personalized learning paths,” Çelaj said in an online video for the European Union Delegation to Albania. “This is the main challenge that governments overcome to get students to study what they really want, and you can achieve this through technology. By improving education, you bring more opportunities.”

Ashley Clerge, 28

**Fifth-Grade Humanities Teacher,
Hugh Roe O’Donnell
Elementary School
MASSACHUSETTS, U.S.**

Ashley Clerge can tell when a book captivates her class. Their eyes light up and they get excited about their writing assignments. It happens every time they read Julia Alvarez’s *Return to Sender*, about a girl whose family moves to a farm in Vermont so they can work. The book brings up serious topics including immigration, racism, documentation, and bridging home culture with American culture.

“For me, that’s the power of literacy,” says Clerge, who earned a master’s degree in language and literacy in 2022 from the Harvard Graduate School of Education. “It can transform engagement in classwork, and it has the power to transform people.”



Clerge promotes literacy through English language arts and social studies. She uses novels to explore identity and activism, like her One Crazy Summer unit, where students learn about the Black Panthers and find a local cause to champion. In social studies, students grapple with primary sources from art to Enlightenment thinkers to critically understand the development of the United States.

“Fifth grade is an awesome year where, developmentally, children start to become more curious about themselves and their place in society. This is a great opportunity to try to dismantle a lot of power dynamics we see in traditional classrooms,” she says.

Her approaches are working. Her students doubled the projected Response to Intervention growth set by the district, resulting in an average of one year’s worth of reading growth in four months in 2022. Clerge was named a semifinalist for Massachusetts’ Teacher of the Year for 2022.

Katlynn Dahl-Leonard, 28

**Doctoral Student,
University of Virginia
VIRGINIA, U.S.**

As a first-generation college student at Texas Tech University studying psychology, Katlynn Dahl-Leonard was interested in child development and learning. After graduation, she worked on literacy research projects at the Children’s Learning Institute at the University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston.

“I realized that in order for teachers to be able to help students with or at risk for reading difficulties, they need the knowledge and skills to do so,” Dahl-Leonard says. Her research interests focus on



effective literacy instruction for early elementary students at risk for reading difficulties, including teacher understanding and implementation of evidence-based literacy practices.

Now as a doctoral student at the University of Virginia, Dahl-Leonard has helped to conduct three systematic research reviews and is leading a fourth systematic review project focused on examining the effects of family-led literacy instruction in the home. She also is assisting with the development and evaluation of an approach to multimedia instructional coaching using web-based instructional tools to support teachers in delivering evidence-based literacy instruction.



Santasha Dhoot, 26

**First-Grade Teacher,
Wilburton Elementary School
WASHINGTON, U.S.**

Santasha Dhoot’s first graders won’t officially vote in an election for another 12 years, but they’re already learning about why voting matters and even how some people have had their votes quashed through suppression.

In Dhoot’s classroom, discussions about past and present inequities aren’t avoided; rather, they’re explored at age-appropriate levels with the goal of encouraging children to think critically about social injustice and examine their own role in bringing about change. “I think without student

voices, it really wouldn’t be justice-centered teaching. We teach these tough topics because we want our students to be aware of challenges in our society, and for them to be able to problem solve how they can make it better,” says Dhoot, who keeps a photo of writer James Baldwin on her desk.

Dhoot says teachers play a critical role in demarginalizing students of color and their experiences in the classroom. Although teachers should look critically at how their learning spaces are decorated, particularly the images that hang on the walls, it’s the ways that a teacher chooses to create community, presents and respects other languages, and even manages the classroom that offer the greatest impact and opportunity for students to be their whole selves.

“It makes me so hopeful for the future to have a generation of students that celebrate people’s differences and have a strong sense of pride in their own identity,” says Dhoot. “Our world needs more of it.”

Elizabeth Falzone, 29

**Assistant Professor,
Niagara University
NEW YORK, U.S.**

A classroom is not the only place where students can become readers. Elizabeth Falzone believes experiential learning opportunities outside of school have the power to change the trajectory of students’ lives.



That's why much of Falzone's coursework at Niagara University involves project-based learning (PBL). Falzone teaches undergraduate and graduate literacy and TESOL courses, and through PBL, students plan, implement, and assess literacy outreach programming for youth in the local community.

One such experience is an afterschool program called Linking Literacy to Movement, which integrates sports and literacy as preservice teachers share literacy lessons with elementary students, followed by a recreational activity with university athletes.

During COVID-19, Falzone partnered with city officials to create what's now an annual event—Candy Cane Story Lane, featuring pages of the picture book *Are You Grumpy, Santa?* stationed around a local park.

"Experiential learning allows me to integrate my expertise in teaching with my passion to serve," Falzone says. "I have acquired a sense of responsibility to use my knowledge in teaching, learning, researching, and leading to serve my community for years to come, and I seek to lead by example and model that mind-set for my students."

Falzone also serves as the university's TESOL program coordinator and the club advisor for the Future Teacher Association, and she is an English as a New Language instructional coach for local school districts.

Valente' Gibson, 29

**Fifth-Grade Teacher,
Jackson Creek Elementary School
SOUTH CAROLINA, U.S.**

As a young child, Valente' Gibson saw very few Black male educators. Now, as a fifth-grade teacher, he wants his students to know there is space for them in education.

Gibson calls his students "scholars" in support of their curiosity and determination. His practitioner research focuses on helping teachers develop racial and social education practices that celebrate Black and Brown learners and promote equity in the classroom. He offers ways for educators to support their students through culturally relevant writing practices. Through deeper connections with families, he has learned to assess students in non-traditional ways that play to their individual strengths, such as presenting writing through "talk it out" spoken word and allowing students to write conversations in their home language. He challenges educators to collaborate with families and learn their cultural insights in order to strengthen the community of learning.

Gibson believes educators can adopt culturally relevant and inclusive practices if they critically explore and question cultural biases in their own practices. "The conversations that avoid in-depth discussions about racism and discrimination harm our schools and give students the understanding that everything is OK," he says. "Perpetuating stereotypes to make our schools look inclusive is not the answer."

Gibson is a model teacher for the Center for the Education and Equity of African American Students, housed at the University of South Carolina. In just his fifth year of teaching, he was recently named Teacher of the Year for his district.



Kierstin Giunco, 27

**Doctoral Student, Boston College
MASSACHUSETTS, U.S.**

Kierstin Giunco knows what happens when students explore meaningful questions about current events, their communities, and their lives: They start to see literacy as a tool for social justice. When her sixth graders at Mission Grammar School in Boston read, wrote, and discussed different texts about Black Lives Matter, environmental justice, animal abuse, and other self-selected topics as part of an advocacy unit, they did more than write an essay at the end. They developed their own way to communicate their messages—by creating a website, participating in a podcast, and leading a virtual showcase for more than 100 members of the community.

"The advocacy unit opened space for students to connect and deepen their preexisting dispositions toward social justice and civic engagement in authentic ways that expanded beyond the classroom," says Giunco, now a doctoral candidate at Boston College.

She uses that experience and others when collaborating with teachers to leverage critical literacy practices that advance antiracist teaching in their classrooms.

In addition to her doctoral work, Giunco is on the Practitioner Review Board of ILA's *The Reading Teacher* journal and serves as Mission Grammar's National Elementary Honors Society advisor and director of Curriculum and Professional Development.

"My identity as a teacher-researcher has greatly influenced my passion and sense of urgency for this kind of work that honors and develops teachers' identities as professional knowers," Giunco says. "Through my doctoral work, I want to continually learn from and intentionally elevate teachers' voices."





Raby Gueye, 27

**Founder/CEO, Teach for Senegal
DAKAR, SENEGAL**

Raby Gueye, founder and CEO of Teach For Senegal, hopes to put an end to inequities and disparities in Senegal's educational and literacy learning environments by hiring some of the country's most promising leaders and providing them with educational training. Gueye says much of her humanitarian inspiration came from her father, a Mauritanian activist, and her passion for tackling educational inequity came from her illiterate mother.

"For us, disrupting the status quo meant allowing our communities—or those experiencing inequity—to lead. We believe that it's those who are experiencing it who have the solution already. They're just waiting to be heard," says Gueye, who grew up in a remote Senegalese village until her family moved to the United States when she was 8.

Attending school in the U.S. exposed her to many opportunities, but as a teacher in Phoenix, AZ, and in India, she also realized the importance of cultural representation in the curriculum. Gueye now spends most of her time in Senegal, where her goal is creating an environment where children are prepared to lead.

"What keeps me hopeful about education is the young people and the communities we work with," says Gueye. "They remind us every day how urgent and meaningful this work is."

Ahmed Imtiaz Jami, 28

**Founder, Obhizatrik Foundation
DHAKA, BANGLADESH**

Ensuring quality education has been a major priority for the Obhizatrik Foundation, which Ahmed Imtiaz Jami established in 2010. When the foundation opened its first school in



2013, the country's literacy rate was just 61%—a whopping 24 points lower than the global rate, which at the time was just shy of 85.

Jami founded Obhizatrik when he was 18, a college student returning home for the summer who encountered a young child selling newspapers on the street. The sight both saddened him and spurred him to action. By September, Obhizatrik was up and running. Its mission: to provide resources and opportunities to Bangladeshis plagued by food insecurity, healthcare inequities, and limited or no access to other vital resources.

This included education. From the beginning, Jami recognized the role it played in addressing the socioeconomic challenges in Bangladesh. Literacy, he knew, was key to breaking that self-perpetuating cycle of poverty.

Through its now three schools, Obhizatrik provides free education and resources to more than 600 Bangladeshi children. Students receive everything from basic supplies to daily snacks, weekly health checks, and even a pair of shoes. The work is carried out largely by a team of 3,500 volunteers—Bangladeshi youth who, like Jami, feel compelled to serve their community.

"My country is facing numerous difficulties, but we should just not complain about them," Jami says. "We must step up and address the issue. I believe we all can change the world when we join together."

Haleigh Klaus-Belka, 28

**Instructional Literacy Coach,
Canadian Valley Technology Center
OKLAHOMA, U.S.**

The students in Haleigh Klaus-Belka's school take classes toward careers in aviation maintenance technology, hospitality, health care, emergency services, and more. They come from seven high schools in different towns. Not all are teenagers; some are adults looking to make a career switch or gain professional development.

Despite the diverse backgrounds, Klaus-Belka has been able to connect students at Canadian Valley Technology Center through a campus book club that meets virtually. (Plans for a community book club are in the works.) She also created the campus's first library as well as a Little Free Library. "It's a way for all the students on my campus to interact and share their love for reading," says Klaus-Belka.

As the school's first instructional literacy coach, Klaus-Belka had to explore the school's classes for herself to develop a reading curriculum from the ground up. The experience helped her develop a community-focused approach to literacy for CV Tech, which aims to develop a trained workforce to meet the needs of the region's employers.

"Working in a technology center, I not only get to watch and assist students in their educational goals but also in their career goals," says Klaus-Belka, who has one master's degree in education and is currently working toward her second in English. "I've been blessed with an administration that puts their trust in me and is excited to allow me to promote literacy in our community."





Monicah Kyalo, 27

**Technology Assistant and Program Mentor, Kenya Connect
WAMUNYU, KENYA**

Monicah Kyalo sees the impact of the read-alouds she does as a literacy mentor in Kenya's rural Wamunyu village when her students retell the stories and remember the names of all the characters. She sees it in their improved writing, drawing, and behavior. She feels it in the joy and confidence they display as they discover the limitless world of reading.

"Enabling them to be more imaginative as they picture themselves in the story is something you get to see happening in the moment," she says. "Conducting read-alouds with my students is always breathtaking."

Kyalo works for Kenya Connect, a nonprofit helping to improve the educational experience of students in rural Kenya through robust literacy programs, technology classes, and educator professional development.

As a mentor, she promotes literacy as something that makes life fun. She hosts a LitClub that puts on LitFest, a festival for her students to showcase what they learn. Each Saturday, you can find her at Kenya Connect's new library, where she reads aloud a story to families. During the pandemic, she and other mentors took turns doing read-alouds on the radio to encourage kids to listen and talk about what they were learning.

As someone who attended a rural school, Kyalo knows the challenges her students face. It's only been 10 years since her community had public facilities, roads, and access to the water supply. "I tell them my story for encouragement, just to show them that if I have come this far, there is hope for them," she says.

Hey Wing Liu, 23

**Graduate Student,
The University of Hong Kong
HONG KONG ISLAND, HONG KONG**

Hey Wing Liu is among the first researchers to use machine learning techniques to identify Chinese children with developmental dyslexia. This promising research work—representing a synergy between artificial intelligence techniques and literacy education—offers the potential to enhance the efficiency and precision of dyslexia assessment.

In his research, Liu's machine-trained models were used to analyze Chinese characters written by more than 1,000 children with and without dyslexia. Using certain indicators, including stroke and character configuration, the models

accurately predicted the status of dyslexia for 80% of children.

But that's not enough for Liu, who double majored in computer science and general linguistics as an undergraduate at The University of Hong Kong. As part of his master's research thesis in philosophy, he is developing a mobile game platform to help children with developmental dyslexia play and learn at the same time. Liu says the app will feature minigames targeting the development of different skills in ways supported by current research. Liu says he hopes that the edutainment approach will increase children's interests and accessibility to these training tools, particularly for families from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who might not otherwise have the resources needed to help improve their literacy skills.

"I believe that these children should have the opportunity to enjoy their childhood and study. Seeing the improvements of the children is one of the greatest satisfactions," Liu says.



Dian Aprilia Manase, 26

**Managing Director, Virtual Education Academy | Project Manager (Education Specialist),
Terra AI – AI4IMPACT | WEST KALIMANTAN & SOUTH SULAWESI, INDONESIA**

Dian Aprilia Manase describes herself as a "volunteer enthusiast." In the midst of her busy studies, she's using her free time to teach Indonesia's educators how to use technology in the classroom.

Thanks in part to her, the Virtual Education Academy, where she serves as managing director, has helped more than 11,000 teachers in Indonesia through free online training in digital literacy. The organization offers educator-focused classes on topics including live streaming in the classroom, digital book writing, chatbot creation, and more. She has also led social initiatives through the Terra AI – AI4IMPACT educational revolution, which focuses on teaching teachers and students to build chatbots as a learning application. Through this initiative, more than 300 educational chatbots with various disciplines have been used by more than 100,000 teachers and students in Indonesia.

Manase, who is also program manager for the Indonesian Literacy Association, an ILA affiliate, says her work can be a challenge because educators have varying degrees of technological understanding, so some digital skills require longer planning time to acquire. She's been able to get around that by developing a "train the trainer" program. Once trained, the trainer passes on the new information about the technology to collectively build digital literacy skills.

"My mission is to equip teachers and lecturers with digital skills, because they are the spearhead and key to educational progress," says Manase. "I believe that technology can change the way we live in the future."



Thanduxolo Mkoyi, 29

**Director, Eyentsatshane for the Little Ones Early Childhood Development Project | Founder, Masifunde-Ilwimi Language and Training Academy | Chair, Literacy Association of South Africa Western Cape Branch
CAPE TOWN, SOUTH AFRICA**

Thanduxolo Mkoyi believes storytelling is the secret to growing the next generation of readers. As a language and literacy trainer, children's book author, and professional storyteller, Mkoyi works to promote storytelling as a way to develop children's vocabularies and imaginations.

"I am inspired by the art of oral storytelling, and I believe it is the affordable tool to help address the current literacy and education crisis in South Africa," he says.

Mkoyi channels his passion through multiple roles, including director of Eyentsatshane for the Little Ones Early Childhood Development Project—an organization that uses the power of play, storytelling, and literacy to improve education through story clubs and playgroups. He is also the founder of Masifunde-Ilwimi Language and Training Academy, which offers virtual Indigenous language learning opportunities for both adults and children.

Mkoyi, the first Black chair for the Western Cape branch of the Literacy Association of South Africa, an ILA affiliate, also writes his own short stories and folktales. He often writes in his home language of IsiXhosa, a Bantu language spoken by more than 8 million people.

In addition, he has worked for PRAESA (Project for Alternative Study for Education in South Africa) and is the provincial coordinator for the International Association of Theatre for Children and Young People in the Western Cape, an organization that brings the arts to children across the country.



Mohit Rauniyar, 28

**Cofounder/Director, Canopy Nepal
KATHMANDU, NEPAL**

Mohit Rauniyar's organization, Canopy Nepal, works to create educational accessibility and promote interactive learning across Nepal and has reached more than 11,000 students. The flagship program, Katha Bunaun, which translates to "weaving stories," promotes storytelling and writing among young students to help them freely express themselves, their creativity, and emotions. The program has resulted in more than 5,500 stories so far.

"Through our programs, students truly understand the power of stories and how much they change their lives," Rauniyar says. "Not only do they get more into reading and writing, but they also get the space to reflect on their own lives and people around them, and express these in stories at a young age."

Rauniyar recently authored a climate education book, *Kalpavriksha: A Climate Warrior's Handbook*, to help students understand climate change and act upon the issue. About 2,000 students have used the book, and it is in the process of being released in more local languages. "We could either scare the young students or give them insights about climate change, which public school-going students do not have, and come up with local solutions," he says.

Rauniyar, who will attend the Harvard Graduate School of Education in the fall of 2023, is also a guide at The Resolution Project, where he mentors two young women from Ghana to help them establish mobile libraries in their community to foster reading and writing skills.



Elisa Rodriguez, 29

Academic Intervention Specialist in Reading, Newfield Elementary School President, Seven Valley Reading Council | NEW YORK, U.S.

Elisa Rodriguez has heard plenty of excuses from her students about why they don't read. Then she asks them if they play video games, check social media, or watch TV with the subtitles on.

"Surprise," she tells them. "You're reading."

"Students don't realize how much reading they actually do on a daily basis," says Rodriguez, a K-5 literacy intervention specialist and president of the Seven Valley Reading Council (SVRC), a local ILA affiliate. "There are many ways to get exposed to texts in a low-stakes way. I try to celebrate the fact that students do this all the time and use that as a way to foster confidence in themselves as young readers."

As part of her role in the SVRC, Rodriguez organizes literacy-centered professional opportunities for practicing and preservice educators, including virtual sessions focused on diversifying text sets and how the pandemic changed the teaching and learning of literacy skills across all grade levels.

Prior to her current role, Rodriguez cotaught a global literature class that combined English and history. Technology such as interactive maps played a big role in the class as a way to help students make connections between the two subjects. For example, students closely studied Egypt and analyzed the different ways geography shaped their folklore and religion.

"I love the feeling I get when I learn something new or figure something out that I've been struggling with for a while," she says, "so I want to make sure my students get the same opportunity to feel that as they navigate their lives as readers and writers."

Lalaine Santiago, 29

Teacher, Francisco F. Illescas Elementary School BULACAN, PHILIPPINES

While many countries pivoted to online instruction during COVID-19, few remained as reliant on distance learning as the Philippines, which kept its schools closed for more than 70 weeks. But not all families had access to the technology needed to participate, and those who did still struggled to keep their students engaged. As a result, the number of Filipino schoolchildren who can read a simple text plummeted to about three in every 20, according to a report by the United Nations Children's Fund. This equates to a learning poverty, defined by the World Bank as the amount of 10-year-olds who cannot read or understand a simple story, of more than 85%. Prior to the pandemic, it was 69.5%.

For Lalaine Santiago, a public school teacher, these setbacks prompted her to create an intervention project based on one of her favorite television shows from her childhood. She describes "Batibot" as "the Filipino version of *Sesame Street*." In her updated version—known as Project Batibot—a combination of online instructional materials, storybooks, video lessons, and songs are available to learners to show them that learning can be fun.

"I remember one of my pupils who, despite the lockdown, the modular learning, and the lack of resources to attend my online class, still chose to continue to study. When I asked why, a short but meaningful answer came to him: 'I want to lift my family from poverty,'" Santiago says. "In the eyes of a child, I gave them hope just by merely teaching them the basics."



Georgina Siaba, 29

President/Founder, The N'Takou ASNIÈRES-SUR-SEINE, FRANCE & CÔTE D'IVOIRE

On its website, The N'Takou describes itself as "a bit of love, a bit of international solidarity and a lot of Africa." In Yacouba, the language of Côte d'Ivoire, N'Takou translates to "help and solidarity." For Georgina Siaba, who founded The N'Takou in 2015 to increase access to education for West African countries, it means, "giving back what I have received."

Siaba, the daughter of an Ivorian diplomat father and a French-Ivorian mother, grew up in several countries—South Korea, England, France, Cameroon, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Ghana—and was educated in France. After noticing a gap in equipment and education compared with local schools in Africa, she was motivated to create The N'Takou, which has now built six school libraries in Côte d'Ivoire, Cameroon, and the Congo, providing books, digital resources, coloring books, and toys to more than 1,600 children.

Siaba says the success of her own father, who grew up in a village that even today lacks electricity and clean water, sparked her interest in ensuring African children have access to achieve their potential.

"The volunteers of The N'Takou represent a rainbow of people from all walks of life. Indeed, they are Ivorian, French, Korean, housewives, bankers, diplomats, or students, and their common point is to believe in the power of education to change the destiny of the children who benefit from our programs," Siaba says. "Solidarity is a universal value that is sought in every corner of the world, so that's why The N'Takou has resonated with so many other people."

Hannah Simino, 25

**Seventh-Grade Teacher, Douglas MacArthur Junior High School
ARKANSAS, U.S.**

English teacher Hannah Simino is teaching her seventh graders that being kind to yourself and to others is another way to be cool. That can be a tricky lesson for adolescents, so Simino begins each class period with positive affirmations expressed in sign language. No matter what has happened earlier in the day, students take the time to express positive sentiments about themselves and others, such as “I am loved” and “I am appreciated.” Simino says incorporating movements like sign language into instruction also aids in storing content into long-term memory.

After school, she leads The Kindness Club, where students look for ways to give back to their community. Last year, they created more than 100 personalized Valentine’s Day cards for local seniors in assisted living facilities. They also snuck notes of encouragement inside the school’s library books as a surprise for their fellow readers. Some also entered the Arkansas Peace Week essay contest, an activity that helped bolster their confidence as they wrote about a topic of great importance to them.

“At middle school age, it’s not always ‘cool’ to be kind, but making this an expectation in my class allows them the space to feel welcome and comfortable being kind not only to others but also to themselves,” says Simino, who was recently named her school’s 2022 Teacher of the Year.



Ankita Sundar, 17

**Cofounder, Digital Educate
CALIFORNIA, U.S.**

Ankita Sundar is a senior in high school who enjoys binge-watching *Gilmore Girls* on a Friday night. She’s also a social entrepreneur, nonprofit CEO, computer programmer, and an international advocate for equitable education for girls.

Sundar is cofounder of Digital Educate, a nonprofit that aims to close the gender gap and leadership disparities in the STEM field by creating opportunities for girls to take leadership and computer classes. She hosts coding contests organized through local libraries and has taught free programming workshops for more than 500 girls worldwide.

While volunteering at a community nonprofit in middle school, Sundar was exposed to the reality of the digital divide. The family of a young girl she tutored had no access to the internet, and it prompted her to use her own programming and outreach skills to help increase educational opportunities for others. Along the way, she has learned the power of partnerships, connecting with the San Jose Public Library to host programming classes, leadership workshops, and contests for girls. She also secured a sponsorship with a tech company, Pyxeda.AI, to host an online Scratch programming contest for more than 80 middle school girls from 10 states and three countries in 2021.

“Gender equality in STEM can impact literacy on a larger scale because it can help bridge the gender gap and digital divide in STEM education and bring innovative skills, critical thinking, and creativity to this area where future generations can help create solutions to solve global issues,” Sundar says.



Jhaneil Oshokie Thompson, 23

Third-Grade Teacher, Crossroads Academy Charter School of Business | FLORIDA, U.S.

When Jhaneil Oshokie Thompson was an undergrad at Florida A&M University, she served as a fellow and a

mentor with Partners United for Research Pathways Oriented to Social Justice in Education, a research program through Florida State and Florida A&M universities. It was during that experience the idea for S.T.R.I.K.E. at Night was born.

To help combat the effects of the summer slide and increase children's access to literacy-rich experiences, Thompson co-created the bedtime read-aloud story camp along with her mentor, Cheron Davis.

S.T.R.I.K.E. at Night (which stands for Sustaining Technology- and Reading-Infused Kid-Friendly Education) is held virtually on Facebook and YouTube during the summer. The first one in July 2021 featured celebrity guest readers including New York Giants wide receiver Darius Slayton and *Time* magazine's 2021 Kid of the Year Orion Jean. The camp drew viewers from 34 U.S. states as well as Canada, Ireland, and Haiti.

Thompson's first manuscript, "READ & STRIKE & Have a Good Night: STRIKE at Night Virtual Literacy Camp," was published recently in the *Journal of Literacy Innovation*. Thompson, now in her second year of teaching, plans to pursue a graduate degree, where she'll be able to further explore her research interests of the improvement of literacy pedagogies, reflective practices and self-efficacy of preservice teachers, and teacher preparation at historically Black colleges and universities.

"Scholars have the potential to unlock levels of themselves they've never seen before. With guidance and structure, they're able to gear their potential toward a greater good and become future leaders of the world," says Thompson.

Saraí Tijerina, 26

Fifth-Grade Teacher, J. Robert Hendricks Elementary School ARIZONA, U.S.

As a student, Saraí Tijerina sometimes struggled as an English learner. When her father was diagnosed with cancer and her mother was often at the hospital with him, Tijerina balanced school with caregiving. Through it all, her teachers remained a calming, supportive presence.

That helped Tijerina understand how the challenges her students face at home can impact their learning. Now in her fourth year of teaching, Tijerina is a teacher rooted in her school community. In her free time, she helps struggling students and assists Spanish-speaking families with interpreting. Despite the challenges and setbacks of COVID-19, Tijerina's fifth-grade students outperformed their district peers on assessments in 2021, scoring 31% higher on English and 53% higher on math.

"I know there are students who need me to be that one teacher for them and that is why I am a teacher," says Tijerina, who received the 2022 Esperanza Latino Teacher Award—which recognizes the impact Latino teachers in Arizona have on their students. When students were learning remotely during the pandemic, Tijerina often dropped off schoolwork at their homes and followed up on assignments by phone or email. In taking extra steps to connect with her Spanish-speaking students, Tijerina hopes they recognize the importance of challenging themselves, staying resilient, and finding ways to accomplish their goals.

"Knowing that it will take time for a student to develop these skills in their life, I know that at least I have planted the seed in them so the next teacher can continue to nourish it."



Arpitha Vasudevamurthy, 29

**Doctoral Student, The University of Hong Kong
HONG KONG ISLAND, HONG KONG**

Arpitha Vasudevamurthy has been helping children with reading and writing problems since she was a teenager growing up in India. When she was 16, Vasudevamurthy organized summer camps for preschool children with activities that blended art and music to improve their literacy skills. She wanted participants to learn different strategies to compensate for their learning challenges—something she had learned to do herself as a student with dyslexia.

As a trained speech-language pathologist, her extensive understanding of language and literacy challenges has given her access to study and evaluate training methods and conduct screening activities to improve reading abilities in children. While in graduate school at the All India Institute of Speech and Hearing, she collaborated in a researcher project and investigated implicit versus explicit learning skills in strong and struggling readers and demonstrated that learning and retention skills in poor readers are influenced by sleep-dependent memory consolidation.

“My education has motivated me to engage with communities and served as a foundation for me to take initiative and identify solutions to problems with literacy development,” Vasudevamurthy says.

Vasudevamurthy is currently a doctoral student at The University of Hong Kong, where she is researching implicit learning abilities and difficulties among Hong Kong-based Indian children.



Alvian Wardhana, 21

**Founder, Literasi Anak Banua
SOUTH KALIMANTAN, INDONESIA**

Alvian Wardhana realized there were big gaps in the quality of education in remote areas of South Borneo, Indonesia, when he was visiting there and students in third grade would come to him and ask him how to read. When he investigated, he realized low-quality education had led to more social fragmentation in areas such as poverty, conflict, and health. That experience led him and his friend to start a literacy initiative focusing on helping students from remote villages of South Borneo.

Since its founding in 2018, Literasi Anak Banua has provided free tutoring for elementary-age children in 17 villages and 20+ schools, using a curriculum Wardhana developed himself that includes a visual-, movement-, and audio-based learning system. In addition to the tutoring, the organization built a minilibrary and offers a changemaker mentoring program. More than 2,000 students have benefited from Literasi Anak Banua, including some students who cross rivers, hike through mountains, and carry small canoes between islands to access their education.

Now a student at the University of Brawijaya, Wardhana hopes to capture the passion and enthusiasm of today's youth and harness it in both academic and non-academic contexts.

“Young people like me are an investment in today and tomorrow to make change because of their passion, innovation, and thinking,” he says.





Kendall J. Wilson, 25

**Seventh-Grade Teacher, Monroe Demonstration Academy
OKLAHOMA, U.S.**

If a student comes to school with a broken arm, teachers know how to

make accommodations so the child can still learn. Tulsa educator Kendall J. Wilson wants to be sure educators have the same knowledge when it comes to working with students who have internal trauma.

With an undergraduate degree in psychology and a passion for social-emotional learning, Wilson is serving as the trauma-informed coordinator at Monroe Demonstration Academy in addition to teaching seventh-grade English and math. Her school is the first in the 33,000-student district to implement the Oklahoma Trauma-Informed Framework, which recognizes the prevalence of adverse and traumatic childhood experiences and equips educators with strategies to support students with these experiences. She works with the Oklahoma State Department of Education to integrate

trauma-informed principles into the school with the goal of creating an educational environment that supports the whole child academically, behaviorally, and social emotionally.

Wilson first started at Monroe as a City Year AmeriCorps member. She served as a student success coach to help students improve their academic, behavioral, and coursework skills. These days, Wilson's students engage in writing activities that incorporate social-emotional learning, such as mood meter responses, journaling prompts, and creative storytelling.

"I became a teacher to continue helping students build resilience and hope on a larger scale. I strive to help students deeply value their education and use it as a tool to overcome their adversities," Wilson says.



Jacqueline Winsch, 27

**Doctoral Student, University of Pennsylvania
PENNSYLVANIA, U.S.**

Jacqueline Winsch discovered as a child that drama allowed her to unapologetically be herself and exercise her creativity. While at the University of Notre Dame, where she earned her undergraduate and master's degrees, she spent a year shadowing an educator who brought drama education to local schools. Winsch realized the transformative opportunities drama offered during the school day.

After teaching theater at an independent school in New York City, Winsch decided to investigate how to prepare more teachers to use drama in their classrooms. Now as a doctoral student at the University of Pennsylvania, Winsch is conducting practitioner research to investigate the impact of dramatic inquiry in elementary literacy classrooms.

"Dramatic inquiry transforms classroom spaces," Winsch says. "In my experience, through drama, I have not only seen students gain a greater understanding of literacy texts but also watched classrooms grow closer as a community, witnessed emerging bilingual students express themselves and their ideas through embodied activities, and seen students develop a deep love of theater."

In addition to her personal research, Winsch is an advisee of Gerald Campano. On his research team, she supports the Communities Advancing Research in Education project, where university-based researchers and community members involved with a multiethnic parish and an immigrant rights coalition investigate and take action on a range of educational issues. She primarily collaborates with the youth of the project, while working to reimagine Philadelphia schools.

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