

THE NEW GENERATION

Celebrating ILA's first 30 Under 30 list

By **Katrina Medoff**

around the world, up-and-coming trailblazers are changing the landscape of literacy and education. Some innovators have created global learning communities through mobile apps. Other young leaders have started grassroots literacy organizations that continue to grow and serve thousands of students across the globe. Teachers are making their mark both in their classrooms and beyond, starting a ripple effect beyond their imaginations.

Here, we honor them with ILA's first-ever 30 Under 30 list—a recognition of the rising leaders, shaped by your nominations, who already have accomplished so much to transform their classrooms, their communities, and the world.

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Oluwaseun "Seun" Aina, 27

Founder/CEO, Magical Books | NIGERIA

"Most Nigerians do not see literacy as something to invest in," says Oluwaseun "Seun" Aina, founder and CEO of Magical Books, which promotes healthy reading habits and lifelong learning for Nigerian children and adults.

Aina clearly disagrees. Her organization collects donated books and, through reading clubs, talks, and seminars, fosters a love of reading in the country's youths. Literacy programs are extended to the families in the reading clubs, and adults are encouraged to read the books and discuss them via social media.

Through Aina's efforts, children in rural areas now have greater access to materials and consistent exposure to reading for pleasure.

"I have continued and will continue to work toward seeing literacy become a top priority in my community," she says.



Jennifer Albro, 29

Founder/President, Pages & Chapters | WASHINGTON, DC

"Growing up, my brother and I would go to our local library every Saturday morning for 'story hour' and to check out as many books as we were allowed," says Jennifer Albro. "Reading was always a big deal in my family."

The love of literacy her family instilled shaped the way Albro approaches education. Her philosophy is simple: Provide a supportive learning environment outside the classroom and boost academic performance inside of it. While in her first teaching position at an inner city charter school in Kansas City, MO, Albro began working closely with three families to see if this would improve the literacy skills of their children. As a result, student proficiency increased significantly.

This led to Albro founding the nonprofit Pages & Chapters, which partners with several K-5 schools in the Kansas City and Washington, DC, areas to engage families in their child's literacy education. These collaborative partnerships pay off in the best way possible: student success.

Louise Baigelman, 28

Executive Director, Story Share | NEW YORK

Louise Baigelman has dedicated herself to literacy and education for the past 10 years.

Her latest venture is Story Share, a collaborative digital literacy hub that provides relevant and readable content for teens and young adults who read below grade level. Baigelman serves as executive director of the nonprofit, engaging with readers, working with writers, and piloting Story Share with educators.

"We often have to refer to literacy in broad conceptual terms, citing performance metrics and the like," Baigelman says. "But the base of it all is the joy of reading, the joy of discovery through words....[We can] never forget the magical side of literacy."



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Nic Borg, 27

Cofounder, Edmodo | CALIFORNIA

Edmodo, the online startup cofounded by Nic Borg, provides a free, privacy-protected platform where teachers, administrators, students, and parents communicate, collaborate, and learn. Think of it like a safe, school-friendly version of Facebook, but with educational applications.

Edmodo's rise has been beyond impressive; the social learning community boasts more than 51 million users in more than 330,000 schools worldwide, and has raised \$87.5 million since it was founded in 2008. Those funds have helped keep the valuable tool free and privacy protected—another reason why the Web- and mobile-based platform has created so many converts.

Says Borg, "I realize how lucky I have been to take part in the grandest of all projects—helping to prepare the next generation to inherit the planet."



Jimmy Borgella, 27

Founder/President, VIE Jeunes | HAITI

Jimmy Borgella founded the social and solidarity organization VIE Jeunes (Volontariat pour l'Intégration et l'Encadrement des Jeunes) in 2011.

The volunteer service organization—not to be confused with the religious association bearing the same name—recruits young people to participate in humanitarian activities.

Borgella has helmed a wide range of projects, including a spelling bee, a theater program, and the Young Haitian

Leaders Academy, which furthered the organization's mission to "promote the emancipation and mentoring of Haitian youth." Last summer alone, Borgella conducted 18 reading camps for students with the help of Haiti's ministry of education.

But perhaps Borgella's crowning achievement has been the Open Books project, which, through hands-on workshops and book clubs, encourages a love of reading and writing.

"We are proud of what we have already achieved," he says. "It's true that there is still a lot to accomplish, but we have dared to take action."



Marique Daugherty, 21

Language and Literacy Specialist | JAMAICA

She's only 21, but Marique Daugherty has already made quite an impact on the Jamaican population she serves. In 2012, the teacher, advocate, and research officer of the Jamaica Reading Association launched the I Can Read



Ana Dodson, 23

Founder, Peruvian Hearts | PERU/ COLORADO

Ana Dodson was born into extreme poverty in Peru and adopted as an infant by American parents. When she returned to Peru, Dodson was struck by the lack of basic necessities at a girls' orphanage. And so the then-11-year-old (that's not a typo) founded Peruvian Hearts, which works to end poverty and gender inequality by educating young women and creating community leaders in Peru—one girl at a time.

Twelve years later, Dodson's nonprofit has provided food, clothes, and medical care to hundreds of girls, and it currently supports 31 women through its signature program, Peruvian Promise, which offers complete scholarships.

"Believe in your ability to change the world by adding positive energy into it," says Dodson. "It is also important to remember what Mother Teresa said: 'If you can't feed a hundred people, then feed just one.'"

Program, and two years later, founded the Five Steps Literacy Program, both of which helped more than 100 children, teens, and adults in an urban community master essential literacy skills.

Daugherty's passion led her to explore the effects of language on the literacy rates of Jamaican high school students. Although the country's official language is English, Jamaican Creole is spoken primarily by the majority of the population. Daugherty conducted a seven-week program highlighting differences between the two languages, using authentic materials such as comic strips, videos, and newspapers to significantly increase students' ability to speak and write English. She recently presented her research at ILA's Annual Conference in St. Louis, MO.

"Literacy is the passport to the world," says Daugherty. "The desperate cry for literacy in Jamaica motivates me to keep going."

Katie Eder, 15

Founder, Kids Tales | WISCONSIN
Katie Eder, a 15-year-old award-winning author, founded the nonprofit Kids Tales in 2014 to share her passion for writing with younger students. The organization holds weeklong writing workshops where children ages 8–12 write and edit their own short stories, which are then published in an anthology made available on Amazon.com. Kids Tales is currently in schools and organizations in the greater Milwaukee area, as well as Chicago and Washington, DC, though Eder hopes to spread the program across the United States.

Recently, Kids Tales won AFS's Vision in Action Award, allowing Eder to travel on a full scholarship to teach writing to children in Colombia.

"Every kid has a story to tell, and every kid deserves to tell it," Eder says. "But not every kid gets the opportunity."



That in itself is a reason to teach writing—to give every kid the gift of storytelling."

Kevin English, 25

English Teacher, Wayne Memorial High School | MICHIGAN

Kevin English was elected to the school board of Van Buren Public Schools in Michigan at the age of 19. As a fourth-year English teacher at nearby Wayne Memorial High School, he was



reelected to the board last fall. English is a proponent of maintaining a close relationship with research. His current research revolves around how to better use and create literacy assessment with a teacher leadership cohort.

In addition, English is a teacher leader for his school's first cohort of Reading Apprenticeship Improving Secondary Education (RAISE) teachers, a member of the building-wide literacy initiative team, and a leader of the staff professional book study group. He also serves as a teacher consultant for the Eastern Michigan Writing Project.

"Growing up in a somewhat unstable household, school became a safe place," English says. "I knew I had to re-create that for students, just like my teachers worked so hard to create that for me."



Jennifer Estrada, 28

Director of the HerStory Initiative,
LitWorld and Global G.L.O.W. |
NEW YORK

Women and girls make up two thirds of the world's illiterate population, but Jennifer Estrada is working to change that. She has established herself as a leader in literacy as director of the HerStory Initiative.



Girls living in high-need countries, such as Afghanistan, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone, come together in weekly and quarterly programs to build powerful mentor and peer relationships through storytelling, creative expression, and literacy. The initiative has trained more than 300 mentors in 19 countries and has reached 5,000 girls so far this year, working toward a goal of 10,000 by the start of 2016.

“The moments when our global community faces its greatest challenges are the moments when we can most benefit from the power of young people’s stories,” Estrada says. “By hearing these stories, by valuing them, we recognize the importance of girls’ lives and they become a force to change the world.”



Benjamin Freeman, 25

Founder/Executive Director,
Liberia Institute for the Promotion
of Academic Excellence (LIPACE) |
LIBERIA

While in college, Benjamin Freeman started working to address the achievement gap in his native Liberia. By founding the Liberia Institute for the Promotion of Academic Excellence (LIPACE), Freeman uses a data-driven approach to promote literacy and improve academic performance among underperforming students. LIPACE designs school-based programs such as tutoring, debates, essay competitions, and workshops to help underperforming students achieve.

To further help reverse the 84% dropout rate among senior secondary

students caused by failing the national exams, Freeman and the LIPACE team created and published postwar Liberia’s first comprehensive exam study guide.

“My nation’s torturous past of 14 years of civil war, coupled with my childhood experience of starting school as a refugee, inspired my passion for quality education,” Freeman says.

Alejandro Gac-Artigas, 26

Founder/CEO, Springboard
Collaborative | PENNSYLVANIA

As a first-grade teacher in Philadelphia, PA, Alejandro Gac-Artigas saw that the educational system was failing low-income students. In 2011, he founded Springboard Collaborative to close the reading achievement gap for K–3 learners by incentivizing learning and training parents and teachers to work together.

Through school year and summer programs, the organization offers home visits, workshops, and more, and has grown from serving 42 students to 2,000. Last summer, rather than a reported three-month reading loss, its students showed a 3.4-month reading gain, with weekly workshop family attendance averaging 91%.

“My advice to aspiring social entrepreneurs is to fall in love with a problem, not a solution,” Gac-Artigas says. “Commit to understanding the root causes, and let your solution follow.”



Inés Guillorme, 25

English Teacher, Decroly School | SPAIN

Inés Guillorme teaches English at a high school in Madrid, Spain, and knows the importance of international collaboration in the 21st century. She partnered with a school in Florida last year for the Global Happiness Project to empower students to prepare for a world that will prioritize creativity, innovation, and exploration. Together, the students worked on collaborative projects including music videos, short films, and blogs.

“Getting in touch and working with people from different cultures through language and technology has been the most rewarding part of my career to date,” she says.

The two schools have kept the relationship going and have created their own initiative that includes traveling abroad for an intensive assimilation program, providing the Spanish students with lessons in Florida’s history, marine science, and more—all aimed at instilling “cultural competence.”



Sudhanshu “Sudhi” Kaushik, 20

Founder/CEO, Equality Initiative; Editor-in-Chief, *The Maverick* | NEW YORK

Sudhanshu “Sudhi” Kaushik, a native of India and a student at NYU, is addressing the literacy gap around the world from a base in New York City. In 2014, he founded the Equality Initiative, a student-led organization with officers studying in American universities, which sponsors teachers to set up classrooms in rural and impoverished villages and slums to raise literacy rates. Equality Initiative has employed 32 teachers, reaching out to more than 600 students ages 6–67 in India and Sri Lanka.

Kaushik is also the founder and editor-in-chief of the free newspaper *The Maverick*, which provides news to Indian youths who do not have Internet access or a solid grasp of English, in addition to internship experience and résumé-building services for youths in need.

“I’m most proud of the fact that because of the Equality Initiative, an adult can for the first time in his life learn to write and sign his name,” Kaushik says. “People are given another life and outlook with education.”

Amy Merrill, 27

Third-Grade Teacher, East Dale Elementary | WEST VIRGINIA

Amy Merrill understands the importance of cross-curricular connections. During her time as an undergraduate student, she was selected for an internship at NASA’s Educator Resource Center, assisting in the construction of science units that are used statewide. More recently, she has coached a Lego robotics team for the past four years, which won the regional competition and competed nationally last year.

Currently, Merrill serves as copresident of the Marion County Reading Council, where she was recently elected to a third term. She’s helped coordinate projects including filling Little Free Libraries, providing nursing homes with large-print books, and giving gift bags to children admitted to the cancer unit at WVU Hospitals.

“The most rewarding part of my career is being able to form a bond with my students,” she says. “I wake up every morning excited to see them.”





Emma and Julia Mogus, 16 and 18

Cofounders, Books With No Bounds | CANADA

Sisters Emma and Julia Mogus cofounded Books With No Bounds in 2012 to provide Aboriginal children and teens with donated books. The initiative has shipped 90,000 books, 100 computers and tablets, and 30,000 school supplies across Canada and around the world.

“We read about a study that said having as few as 20 books in the home will propel a child to a higher level of education,” says Emma. “We knew there were kids out there with little to no access to good books or libraries in our own backyard.”

The Mogus sisters have spoken to audiences of all ages in Ontario and in the United States to raise awareness for Aboriginal children and for their efforts to help improve their literacy skills.

“We were told we were too young or it was useless to send books and other supplies to these communities because of how isolated they were,” says Julia. “They were wrong, because if you truly believe in what you are doing, then there will always be a way to make it happen.”

Amanda Nelms, 29

English Language Development Specialist, Metro Nashville Public Schools | TENNESSEE

As an English language development specialist—in a school district that encompasses one-third of the English learner population in the state of Tennessee—Amanda Nelms works with teachers, parents, and community members to promote literacy for all students, especially English learners. She also collaborates with companies and schools to train teachers in STEM education in her role as a master teacher for SAE International’s A World in Motion. Nelms has volunteered in six countries to provide professional development. She has also served as a teacher mentor with numerous universities and worked as a grade-level chair and as an after-school literacy tutor for low-income students.

“The most rewarding part of my career is that moment when you see a student read independently for the first time,” Nelms says. “It still gives me chills and brings a tear to my eye when a student looks at you and knows he is now a reader.”



Madison Payton, 29

English Teacher, Eagle Academy for Young Men II | NEW YORK

Madison Payton uses high-level texts to teach young men of color about racial identity at his school in Brooklyn, NY. His scholars open the year by exploring black masculinity with texts by bell hooks and Ntozake Shange. Through Socratic Seminars and the writing of their own monologues, the students then investigate what success and “brilliant thinking” mean in their black community.

Payton is developing his school’s first writing center, which will use peer tutors and a writing specialist to aid students with reading and writing. He also established his school’s first AP English language and literature courses. This summer, he escorted 12 rising seniors on a three-week Global Glimpse trip to the Dominican Republic.

Payton was recently accepted to the Stanford Hollyhock Fellowship Program, which supports highly motivated early-career teachers.

“My scholars motivate me every day,” he says, “because they challenge me to not only be a better instructor, but to be a better person as well.”

Christina Richard, 24

Special Education Teacher, New York City Public School 8 | NEW YORK

Christina Richard began her teaching career as a kindergarten special ed teacher. In her first year, she had one student labeled selectively mute who would not speak to anyone. Thinking teaching through song and dance might help, Richard wrote and directed a show for the students to perform and observed as this student started to whisper lines and songs





during rehearsal. Two years later, that student has performed leading roles in other school plays.

Inspired, Richard created an after-school glee club that now serves more than 80 students by incorporating literacy, music, and dance. Richard continues to write and direct shows for her classes, in which she particularly targets students at risk, and their parents, to design sets, costumes, and more.

“Seeing my students’ excitement and joy for learning motivates me each day,” she says. “I am grateful to have a supportive administration that creates a positive environment for all of its students and helps make my work successful.”

Shiza Shahid, 26

Cofounder, Malala Fund | NEW YORK

Shiza Shahid grew up in Pakistan under a military dictatorship and dreamed of working for women’s rights. She started at a young age, volunteering in women’s prisons at 13 and in an earthquake relief camp at 16. During the summer after her sophomore year at Stanford University—where she received a full scholarship—she organized an educational retreat for girls in the capital city of Islamabad, which is where she met education activist Malala Yousafzai.

After Malala was shot, Shahid encouraged her family to keep the mission going. So began the Malala Fund, which advocates for policy

change at a global level to drive more resources toward universal education.

Shahid continues to serve as a global ambassador for the organization—which committed more than \$3.5 million to 11 projects promoting education for girls in six countries last year—while she turns her attention to creating a social impact fund to search out others who need a platform like Malala’s.

“Literacy is about so much more than knowing how to read and write,” Shahid says. “It’s about being equipped with the tools that empower you to think critically, to create a better life for yourself, and to improve your community.”





Bhawana Shrestha, 25

English Teacher, Jyotidaya Cooperative School | NEPAL

Bhawana Shrestha, a Teach for Nepal fellow, teaches 6th- through 10th-grade at Jyotidaya Cooperative School in Chapagaun, Lalitpur. English is a second language for most students, but Shrestha is known for working tirelessly to improve their reading and writing skills—and their confidence at the same time.

After the April 2015 earthquake in Nepal, 70% of Sindhupalchowk school buildings were devastated. There were no temporary plans to get local children back in classes, so Shrestha launched an #UpForSchool petition through A World at School, demanding leaders take action. It is her belief that rebuilding schools will rebuild students' dreams.

Shrestha has long advocated for education through initiatives such as Paint for Education—a social event/art exhibit she started that uses student art to raise awareness.

“The smile I can see every day on the faces of the children I teach motivates me,” she says.



Meagan Stass, 28

Seventh-Grade Math Teacher and Team Leader, Barrington Middle School-Prairie | ILLINOIS

Stass was hired at Barrington Middle School-Prairie to increase math scores of underperforming students. At her previous school, she helped 89% of her

students increase their scores—and 95% of her low-performing students made more than 1.5 years' worth of growth. At Barrington, staff quickly realized integrating literacy was key to her success.

In her interactive classroom, Stass uses visual literacy, reading strategies, and verbal literacy to help students not only learn algebraic concepts, but also increase their reading comprehension. Stass created a blog, minimathstass.blogspot.com, where she shares how she teaches math with literacy, technology, and hands-on activities for educators around the world.

“I've been lucky enough to have many...published authors and colleagues who have allowed me to reflect and collaborate with them,” Stass says. “It is so important to find people who aren't afraid to share stories of failures and successes.”

Andrew Sutherland, 24

Founder/CTO, Quizlet | CALIFORNIA
Andrew Sutherland created the free study tool Quizlet at age 15 to help him study high school French vocabulary.

He shared it with his friends, and it grew from there. Quizlet now offers flash cards, tests, and study games, and it allows students to create their own sets, track their progress, and compete against one another. Today, the website has more than 35 million unique visitors each month and serves students in grade school through grad programs with more than 80 million user-generated study sets on a wide variety of subjects.

Sutherland currently leads the engineering team at Quizlet, which is ranked as a top-five free education app in the iTunes App Store.

Selassie Tay, 29

Founder/Executive Director, Tongu Youth Agenda for Development | GHANA

Selassie Tay founded Tongu Youth Agenda for Development (TYAD) in 2013 to empower Ghanaian youths. His self-funded skills development programs aim to promote literacy in marginalized communities. TYAD has provided career and academic counseling for more than 500 high school seniors and





has enabled them to interact through learning opportunities with Spanish students at the Complutense University of Madrid.

Tay has taught students using performing arts and created a library on wheels to encourage reading. In 2014, TYAD partnered with A Million Faces-Renaissance to implement the Youth Leadership and Entrepreneurship Development Program to prepare selected refugee youths for future employment.

“I experienced firsthand the disparity between education in the village and education in the city after my dad neglected me at age 7 and I had to leave the city to the village with my mom to continue my education,” Tay says. “I knew I had to do something about it.”

Dylan Teut, 26

Director, Plum Creek Children’s Literacy Festival | NEBRASKA

Dylan Teut taught first-grade students for three years and was named the Outstanding Reading Educator of the Year in 2014 by the Illinois Reading Council—but his educational efforts have reached far beyond his classroom.

Teut raised \$10,000 two years in a row to create a literacy festival for his community.

Teut was recently named director of the Plum Creek Children’s Literacy Festival at Concordia University in Nebraska, which connects 10,000 students annually with internationally known authors and illustrators.

“Children only have the chance to be children once,” he says. “Make it the best book-filled experience you can for them.”



Ryan Traynor, 16

Founder, Redwood City Public Library Youth Literacy Council | CALIFORNIA

Ryan Traynor began reading to children at a local preschool at age 11. When he discovered the children lacked reading materials at home, he organized a drive that collected more than 25,000 books. Traynor created a website to teach others how to run a successful book drive, and he founded the Redwood City Public Library’s Youth Literacy Council—which has raised more than \$52,000 to fund numerous programs he created including STEM classes for children, financial literacy classes for teens, and family board game days.

“I have been very fortunate to have a network of youths that has helped me implement my successful campaigns,”

he says. “Young people want to help if given the opportunity, and I find them to be extremely creative and insightful, which promotes the development of new ways to tackle literacy challenges.”

Traynor is also the editor-in-chief of *Amazing Kids! Magazine* and he has been recognized with numerous awards including the Jefferson Award and four Gold President’s Volunteer Service Awards.

Jon M. Wargo, 29

PhD Candidate, Michigan State University | MICHIGAN

Jon M. Wargo is currently working on a dissertation, "Connective Compositions and Sitings of Selves," that details how LGBTQ youths of color write and (re)-author identities over time, across both online and offline contexts.



"As a first-generation college student, I know the narrative that others wrote for me early on in school," he says. "My work is motivated by those youths who, like me, worked together to design a more just and possible future for themselves and their communities."

In 2015, Wargo received the Conference on College Composition and Communication Gloria Anzaldúa Rhetorician Award for his research exploring language and literacy practice of the LGBTQ community in Michigan.

Wargo, a former Teach for America teacher, director, and advisor, has presented at numerous national conferences and has taught both preservice and inservice teacher education courses at Michigan State University, along with working with local and statewide nonprofits that serve LGBTQ youths.



Sandy Wood, 24

English Teacher, Jhamtse Gatsal Children's Community | INDIA

Sandy Wood started spending her summers at Jhamtse Gatsal Children's Community, a school in the Indian Himalayas, at 17. She tutored children in English and spent her free time learning Monpa, the local oral language with no written component. In 2014, she left her native Massachusetts to permanently reside in India.

As Jhamtse Gatsal's only English teacher, Wood promotes reading, writing, and thinking skills for children with no, or very little, understanding of written language. She personally transported five duffle bags of books from the United States to start a library for the 85 children at Jhamtse Gatsal. The library's focus is on locally relevant Tibetan stories and tales with diverse cultural and gender representation. For Wood, literacy is a tool to create a cultural identity and confidence.

"Sometimes in class we're interpreting some text, and the kids not only confidently and open-mindedly venture contradicting ideas, but follow up each other's comments, asking why they think that and how they know," she says. "I become totally obsolete. That's when I'm most proud." ■

James Whelton, 23

Cofounder, CoderDojo; Founder, CoderDojo Foundation | IRELAND

James Whelton believes software coding languages will, one day, be more universal and useful than spoken ones. In 2011, he cofounded CoderDojo, a global movement of free community-based programming clubs, in response to a dearth of technology education in Irish schools.

CoderDojo helps students ages 7–17 explore technology, learn to code, and develop websites, apps, programs, and games. Today, CoderDojo has more than 600 Dojos across 50 countries, with more than 30,000 students learning to code for free each week.

Whelton also founded the CoderDojo Foundation, which aims to ensure people everywhere have the tools needed to start and run a Dojo.

"Network efficiently and surround yourself with good people," Whelton says. "People you meet and network with could hold key learnings, know or be a future partner, mentor, or funder, or be important in some unimaginable way."



Know someone who should make the list?

Nominations for 2016 will open in March.