

Marley Dias, page 24

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Honoring ILA's 2019 30 Under 30

By **Amelia Harper**

the newest class of ILA's 30 Under 30 literacy champions are working to affect change, one child at a time.

They are placing books in doctors' offices, laundromats, and mobile libraries. They are researching new methods to improve literacy education for students across the globe. They are striving to inspire a love of lifelong learning while offering new pathways to success.

Literacy is their calling. It is their passion. It is their purpose.

To our 2019 honorees, literacy not only enables the acquisition of knowledge, but also paves the path to social justice.

Whether they are fostering a love of reading or opening new doors to learning, these emerging leaders demonstrate what is possible through the power of literacy.

Patrick Burke, 27

Lecturer in Language and Literacy Education, Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick | LIMERICK, IRELAND

Patrick Burke is emerging as a leading teacher educator and researcher in the field of literacy—largely thanks to Harry Potter.

A teacher introduced him to the books when he was in third class (the Irish equivalent of third grade). “Like many children at the time, this was to have a lifelong effect on my reading habits,” he says.

It also shaped his career path. While pursuing his master's degree, Burke did a yearlong stint at the Children's Literature Centre at Frostburg State University in Maryland.

“The Centre does amazing work on a daily basis to promote a love for reading among young people in the area,” Burke says.

He dubs the experience “the most significant” in drawing him to literacy education.

Currently, this award-winning researcher is working toward a PhD at Dublin City University. His work centers on disciplinary literacy and literacy integration across the curriculum, with an emphasis on the connection between theory, research, and practice.

“I think it is very important that teachers feel comfortable reviewing and taking part in research in literacy education, rather than relying on others to ‘tell’ them what they should be doing,” he says.



Allister Chang, 28

Executive Director, Libraries Without Borders | WASHINGTON, DC, U.S.

Allister Chang is known for finding new ways to connect books with people in resource-limited communities.

In 2015, Chang's leadership of Libraries Without Borders won the organization the Library of Congress's International Literacy Award. The “literacy entrepreneur” has been a driving force behind a number of initiatives. One example: the award-winning Ideas Box, a mobile media center and library that fits on two pallets and can be installed in less than 30 minutes.

“Library tools and services transform people's lives, particularly in communities that have recently suffered from political turmoil or natural disaster,” Chang says. “[They] provide

opportunities for continued learning where formal education opportunities have been interrupted, and they help communities find reliable sources of information where communication channels have been blocked.”

Chang's connection with libraries came at an early age. After his parents immigrated to the United States from Taipei, the family frequented the local library. It was, he says, “one of the places we felt most welcome and comfortable.”

Chang's current focus is the Wash & Learn Initiative, which turns laundromats into pop-up learning spaces complete with free books, computers, and literacy instruction. The program is a collaboration among Libraries Without Borders, Coin Laundry Association, and Too Small to Fail. Successful pilots run in nine states, but Chang's goal is to expand to all 30,000 coin-op laundries in the U.S.

Mu-Tien Chen, 27

Cofounder, Aestheticell Association | TAIPEI, TAIWAN

Mu-Tien Chen's slogan is, “Give me a textbook, and I'll turn it into an art gallery.”

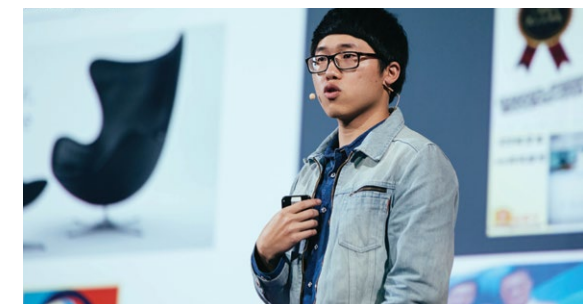
Chen and his team have been working to redesign low-cost, low-quality Taiwanese textbooks into more

aesthetically pleasing alternatives as a way to engage student interest.

“People are naturally attracted to visual stimulation,” Chen says. “According to my experience in making aesthetic textbooks, I also witnessed how visual material can help students to learn and better understand text and the written word.”

In 2013, Chen collaborated with young artists and designers to launch this redesign initiative. A crowdfunding campaign in 2017 yielded \$188,000. Soon, more artists and designers came on board to revamp the look of textbooks teaching Mandarin Chinese, English, math, social studies, and science.

By the end of 2017, Chen's team had distributed more than 10,000 copies of these “art gallery textbooks.” Teachers who received them reported increased student engagement.



The impact of the Aesthetic Textbook Project has extended to the Taiwanese government; textbook policies now allow for the inclusion of more aesthetic elements. As a result, all Taiwanese students should begin learning from more visually attractive textbooks by September 2019.

Amelia Harper (homescholarbooks.com) is a regular writer for *Education Dive* and serves as an education reporter for a daily newspaper. She has 10 years' experience teaching at multiple age levels, with a primary focus on secondary English education.



Gerald Dessus, 29

Social Justice Teacher, Mastery Charter Schools | PENNSYLVANIA, U.S.

Gerald Dessus is a middle school teacher at Mastery Charter Schools, Shoemaker Campus in West Philadelphia. A former middle school English language arts educator, Dessus now focuses on a social justice course he designed and piloted in 2016. Six other Mastery campuses have since implemented the curriculum, which culminates with students completing community action projects.

Dessus says his experience as an English teacher helped him craft the class.

“Literacy is at the foundation of every impactful history course,” he says. “I explain to my students all the time that anyone can memorize facts from a case study or study the details, but if you cannot effectively communicate your analysis and evaluation of that case study, you’re doing it all wrong.”

Dessus says he aims to “provide my students with a tool kit of transferable skills.”

He also hopes to instill in them a commitment to community service—

and as is the case in many areas of his work, Dessus leads by example.

In 2009, Dessus cofounded the Beta Gamma Chi fraternity, a nonprofit organization for gay, bisexual, and transgender men wanting to serve the LGBTQ community. It has since expanded to 11 states.

Marley Dias, 14

Founder, #1000BlackGirlBooks | NEW JERSEY, U.S.

Discouraged by the lack of books about black girls in her school curriculum, 11-year-old Marley Dias set out to collect 1,000 titles with protagonists who looked like her. Her hashtag—#1000BlackGirlBooks—went viral, and Dias reached her initial goal in less than three months. To date, she’s collected more than 12,000 books.

Over the course of the campaign, Dias has donated a good number of books to a school in the parish of St. Mary, Jamaica, where her mother was raised.

In 2018, Scholastic published Dias’s first book, *Marley Dias Gets It Done: And So Can You!*, described as a “keep-it-real” guide in which Dias “explores activism, social justice, volunteerism,



Photo by Andrea Cipriani Mecchi

equity and inclusion, and using social media for good.”

Dias attributes her love for literacy to her parents.

“My parents would read to me every night and taught me that there is a power in literacy and a power in story,” she says. “I want to make it so that kids realize that reading is fun and learning is enjoyable.”



Katie Duffy, 28

Year 5 Teacher, Mona Vale Public School | SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA

Katie Duffy received the ALEA University Award from the Australian Literacy Educators’ Association (ALEA) for her exemplary work as an undergraduate at the University of Sydney, an award that honors the best and brightest in literacy education and helps foster their leadership capacity within the organization.

Duffy has remained an active ALEA member. She shares her classroom practice by presenting professional learning for members, serves as vice president of the Sydney North Local Council, and recently became involved at the national level by being named associate editor for the ALEA journal *Literacy Learning: The Middle Years*.

One of Duffy’s goals is to research the use of digital storytelling to improve literacy outcomes.

“The best way to promote literacy is through the use of quality literature that captures a child’s imagination,” she says. “Once children are immersed in the magic of literature, their passion for storytelling develops organically.”

Elaysel Germán, 27

Literacy Manager, NIA Community Services Network | NEW YORK, U.S.

Born to hard-working parents from the Dominican Republic, Elaysel Germán grew up in the Bronx. Her family spoke little English, but there were no barriers to their love of reading.

“My father always taught [that] you could learn anything and teach anything with the right book in your hands,” Germán says.



Germán began her career with Teach For America before becoming the literacy coordinator for New York Edge and now literacy manager for NIA Community Services Network in Brooklyn. She was drawn to teaching after learning that students with ethnically similar teachers were more likely to graduate.

Currently, Germán coordinates enrichment programming to help build a culture of literacy inside and outside of school.

“Reading is not a school activity; it’s a life experience,” she says.

Through her community involvement, Germán has also established six school-based multicultural and multilingual libraries as well as an adult book club to increase literacy rates among the adult community.

Sarah Grant, 29

Head of Partnerships & Programmes, LRTT: Limited Resource Teacher Training | CHRISTCHURCH, NEW ZEALAND

Sarah Grant is a Cambridge graduate, a former inner-city teacher, and a member of the Edmund Hilary Fellowship. She currently serves as head of Partnerships & Programmes for LRTT: Limited Resource Teacher Training, an organization that bills



Mahbuba Hammad, 29

Literacy Research Director, Center for Languages, Arts, and Societies of the Silk Road | CALIFORNIA, U.S.

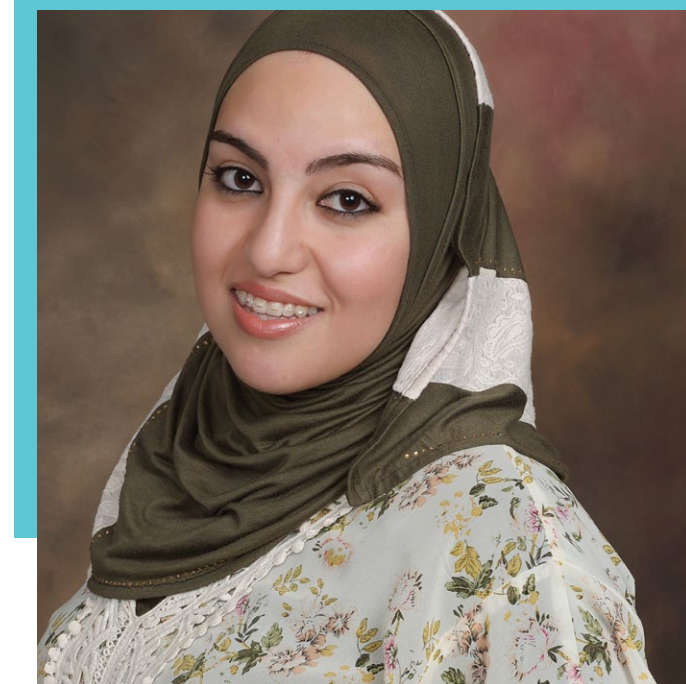
Mahbuba Hammad’s dissertation, “Factors Influencing Attitudes and Motivation Toward Reading Arabic: The Impact of Leveled Reading on The Experiences of Language Learners and Teachers,” set her apart as one of the pioneering and handful of scholars in the United States and the Arab world to do a study on leveled Arabic reading.

Her interest in literacy, however, was spurred at an early age; as an Arab Latina in the United States, Hammad lacked narratives that reflected either of her identities. Her desire to close these gaps continues to guide her work.

Hammad was selected by Qatar Foundation International as a part of a small group of scholars representing the United States and Canada at a roundtable discussion designed to develop Arabic literacy standards for dual immersion programs in North America.

“Creating Arabic dual immersion programs in North America is very valuable on many levels,” she says. “On one hand, it is a form of preserving the identity, heritage, and history of an important community living in the United States.”

On the other, she says, “speaking Arabic allows students in North America, of all backgrounds, to be global citizens and understand the complexities and subtleties of a very rich culture.”





Farhana Hoque, 29

ELA Teacher, Midwood High School | NEW YORK, U.S.

In a family of Bangladeshi immigrants, Hoque is a first-generation college graduate.

“I’m a dual language speaker and started off learning to read and write in Bangla,” Hoque says. “When I learned English, it made my experience that much more enriching.”

Her role as the ELA teacher team lead in a diverse high school included integrating culturally conscious literary texts into the curricula, inviting LGBTQ authors to her classroom for book talks, and facilitating discussions around important global issues prevalent in many developing nations. Under her guidance, her students have created literary text- and research-based websites focusing on the social justice issues of their choice.

“Students should be able to read and view text and media bristling with diversity in all its facets,” she says. “Culturally conscious texts show students that their values, ideals, and traditions are welcome here.”

Hoque also mentors first-year teachers, conducts weekly team meetings, leads professional development sessions on literacy strategies, and has advised clubs such as the South Asian Club, Korean-Japanese-Chinese Club, and TedEd Club.

“My goal is to help students become participants in a global community who are dedicated to shaping and improving their community,” she says.

Freshta Karim, 26

Founder, Charmaghz | KABUL, AFGHANISTAN

Freshta Karim and her team started a mobile library in Kabul to provide services to about 200 children a day. The collection grants them access to something that was all too rare during her own childhood as a refugee: books.

That’s because when Karim was a child, her world focused on survival as she grew up during the civil war and Taliban government.

Karim spent part of her childhood as a refugee in Pakistan, returning to Afghanistan after the fall of the

Taliban. She completed high school in Kabul and her undergraduate degree in India, and she won a scholarship for a master’s degree in public policy at Oxford University in the United Kingdom.

She then returned to Afghanistan, a country with a 64% illiteracy rate, and started the Charmaghz mobile library from a converted bus and about 500 books.

The project, which Karim hopes will foster critical thinking in the communities it serves, is financed mostly by young Afghan professionals. Karim plans to expand the reach across the country.

“We are proud to say that we have received permission from the government of Afghanistan to provide library services to schools,” Karim says. “This means we will be reaching out to a larger number of children and very soon launching more mobile libraries.”

Alex Lim, 29

Cofounder, MYReaders Resources | KUALA LUMPUR, MALAYSIA

Alex Lim was preparing for a career as a lawyer when he was invited to volunteer at a motivational camp for 17-year-olds from a rural region. Their low level



of literacy motivated him to take two years off to join the Teach For Malaysia program.

In 2016, Lim cofounded MYReaders Resources, which aims to teach English to Malaysian students who have low or no literacy skills through structured, research-based reading programs. The organization provides support to schools and communities as they run their own remedial literacy interventions.

Since its inception, the organization—one of the first to tackle the illiteracy issue in Malaysia—has impacted more than 4,000 students.

Lim attributes the success of the program to the use of reading partners, typically peers who are more proficient at reading or parent volunteers.

“This is an immensely encouraging phenomena, to watch reading partners build strong bonds with the students and constantly encouraging the students to keep pressing on at reading,” Lim says.

His goal is to one day eliminate the need for such programs.

“We dream of one day when every child will be able to read.”



Karlos Marshall, 28

President & Cofounder, The Conscious Connect | OHIO, U.S.

Karlos Marshall’s passion for literacy was ignited by his interest in black history.

“My mother had a book series called the Black Americans of Achievement,” he says. “As a child, I would memorize the names and occupations of those influential leaders—long before I could grasp the magnitude of their impact.”

Marshall cofounded The Conscious Connect with the goal of “ending urban book deserts.” By granting children in less affluent neighborhoods access to reading materials, he hopes that the kinds of books he grew up reading are “influencing the minds of the children

and youth that read them in our partnering barbershops and beauty salons.”

“The consequences of opportunity gaps are well documented, which is why I believe access to books is one of the most critical human rights issues of our time,” Marshall says.

His organization chose barbershops and beauty salons in the beginning because they often are staples of the community—places people frequent not only for grooming, but also for fellowship.

Their “Houses of Knowledge,” as they call them, have since expanded to schools, churches, parks, and a Words on Wheels bicycle library. From the organization’s website: “Each and every book in our participating location is carefully selected and examined so that our children can begin to identify as readers—through stories they experience.”

Yessica Martinez, 25

Poet & Teaching Artist; MFA Student, Cornell University | NEW YORK, U.S.

Yessica Martinez was born in Medellin, Colombia, but her family fled the war-torn country and migrated to Queens, NY, when she was just 10 years old. She grew up undocumented, learning English as a second language.

“Because of my personal experiences, I see literacy as a liberating process and urgent calling,” Martinez says.

As an undergraduate at Princeton, Martinez created a scholarship fund for



undocumented youth. She also planned lobbying visits and coordinated efforts to stop the deportation of a Salvadorian migrant.

Later, Martinez traveled along the Mexico border to collect poetry about violence and migration. The work earned her Princeton’s prestigious Pyne Honor Prize.

“I think poetry is a powerful means of achieving radical change because it allows us to access a deep history and knowledge that might otherwise be lost to us,” Martinez says.

Martinez is currently pursuing a master’s in creative writing from Cornell University. She previously served as writer-in-residence for the Queens Museum and as an arts and literacy teacher for the Coalition for Hispanic Family Services, a New York City nonprofit servicing Latinx children and families living under the poverty line.

Marina Meić, 27

Vice President, Croatian Reading Association Split Branch | SPLIT, CROATIA

Along with serving as vice president of the Split Branch of the Croatian Reading Association, Marina Meić is an educator at Montessori Children’s House Split and the vice president of the Youth Advisory Board of the City of Split.

She helped found the Split Branch in 2015, which has played a major role in the Croatian Reading Association and Croatian Library Association’s “Read to Me” initiative, during which 1,000 books were collected for pediatric waiting rooms in Split.

“The aim of the campaign is to make some type of free library in every place where children spend time,” Meić says. “But the most important reason is to move children and parents away from mobile phones and devices they turn to when they wait. We encourage parents to read to their children every time they can instead of giving them a device to occupy their attention.”

Meić says reading is the most powerful tool for the development of critical thinking. She is a frequent author and presenter in Croatia on the topics of critical thinking, children’s literature, and teaching students with special needs.

“Reading encourages us to see more perspectives, to understand other people and situations, to be more tolerant and open-minded,” she says.





Henry “Cody” Miller, 29

ELA Teacher, P.K. Yonge Developmental Research School | FLORIDA, U.S.

As a ninth-grade English language arts teacher, Henry “Cody” Miller focuses on the ways young adult literature influences students’ identities and views of the world.

“Young adult literature, especially when paired with justice-oriented pedagogies, can offer a cultural blueprint for young people to disrupt and challenge dominant narratives,” Miller says.

Miller teaches at P.K. Yonge Developmental Research School, the K–12 laboratory school affiliated with the University of Florida’s College of Education. He has led professional development sessions focusing on writing instruction and developing inclusive spaces for LGBTQ students. In 2016, he was awarded the Teaching Tolerance Award for Excellence in Teaching.

“There are all sorts of ways teachers implicitly deem students’ identities unwelcome: calling LGBTQ books ‘controversial,’ avoiding discussing movements like Black Lives Matter, opting for silence instead of speaking out,” Miller says. “All of these pedagogical decisions send messages about what identities are allowed to develop in the classroom.”

Miller served as a moderator for the “Beyond the Bookshelf: The Transformative Power of LGBTQ Children’s Literature” author panel at the ILA 2018 Conference, and he’s currently serving on ILA’s task force on Children’s Rights to Excellent Literacy Instruction.

one,” Morfin says. “There are forms of literacy outside of the ‘traditional’ literacies we see in schools. When parents are invited to the conversation, they can leverage the literacies that exist in the home to help build on the literacy skills students are learning and practicing in school.”

Morfin’s approach works. In 2016, for example, out of all of her fifth graders (who are 100% Latinx), more than 70% scored proficient or advanced on the rigorous Smarter Balanced assessment. Comparatively, only 37% of California’s Latinx fifth graders and 65% of white students achieved the same results.

“The most important strategy for helping to build English literacy skills in Latinx students is understanding their backgrounds, identity, and community, and leveraging this information in instruction,” she says.



Danje Morris, 29

First-Grade Teacher, Indian Valley Elementary School | ALABAMA, U.S.

Danje Morris is known for her dedication to improving literacy skills in her students by working with them after school, on the weekend, and even in the summer.

“I believe it is important for children to be proficient in literacy so that they can do anything and everything that they put their minds to,” she says. “Whether it is becoming the next president or the next J.K. Rowling, it is important that teachers support literacy in the early years.”

Morris participates in a summer literacy program where struggling students are provided with breakfast, lunch, free books, and a full morning of literacy instruction each day.

Morris is also a digital leader, serving on the district’s K–12 Digital by Design team.

“Our students are handed new and different technologies with each generation,” Morris says. “I love that there are opportunities for students to read and learn with different devices and digital programs. I think, with the right balance of technology and digital resources as well as books and paper text, students will continue to thrive in literacy instruction.”

Nangamso Mtsatse, 27

Doctoral Student, Stellenbosch University | STELLENBOSCH, SOUTH AFRICA

Nangamso Mtsatse’s parents, a bus driver and a teacher, did not have much in terms of money when she grew up, but they made sure she had the best education possible.

“They made it a point that my siblings and I went to a good school—a white school—as quality of education in South Africa was still segregated according to race. My experience of education is what I call a bit of both worlds,” she says.

Although Mtsatse went to a school with rigorous expectations, she returned home to play with children who were exposed to the opposite



environment: no library, no computer labs, few resources, and unmotivated teachers. She knew a proper education for herself wasn’t enough. “At 16, I took the methods used on me at school, borrowed books from my school library, and played ‘teacher’ with my friends.”

Mtsatse now holds a master’s degree in assessment and quality assurance in education and training and is currently a PhD candidate in the Department of Education Policy at Stellenbosch University. Her research envisages improving the teaching and learning of African languages in the foundation phase as well as developing reliable reading assessment tools for African languages.

Jean d’Amour Ndahayo, 29

President, Magirirane Development in Peace | KIGALI, RWANDA

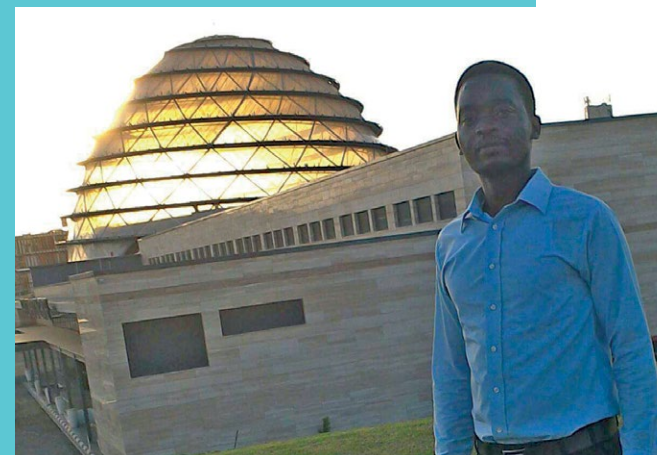
As a survivor of the Rwandan genocide, Jean d’Amour Ndahayo sees the importance of literacy development in preserving his culture and improving the future. He works with underserved children in Kigali, operating two small preschools on a shoestring budget.

“Seeing how literacy contributed in my personal growth and how it contributes to society growth, as a leader I decided to give my contribution in the community by promoting literacy,” Ndahayo says.

Ndahayo works without any government support to send preschoolers off to the neighborhood school with strong early literacy skills in both Kinyarwanda and English. The children in his schools have access to picture books in both languages and practice reading and writing (in addition to singing songs and playing together) in both as well.

Ndahayo recognizes the vital importance of literacy development as a path to peace and prosperity.

“Strong literacy skills help these children read and write effectively and improve the future of children,” Ndahayo says. “Children also gain more knowledge through reading and become wider thinkers.”



Hayley Niad, 29

Education Advisor, Cambridge Education | WASHINGTON, DC, U.S. & MOZAMBIQUE

Hayley Niad is an education advisor with Cambridge Education, working with the USDA-funded literacy program Food for Knowledge for first through third grades in 118 schools in Mozambique. In this role, she has coauthored student workbooks in the Changana and Rhonga languages, along with decodable texts, leveled readers, read-alouds, and teachers’ guides.

“I have always been very passionate about the study of languages, and the ways in which the ability to read can be an enjoyable activity that opens up pathways for further life opportunities,” Niad says. “I take great joy in witnessing young children across Maputo province enthusiastically learning to read using materials I have helped to write, and in training teachers to develop confidence in teaching literacy.”

Niad is now pursuing PhD studies at the University of Minnesota in the Comparative International Development Education program.



Matt Panozzo, 27

Seventh-Grade ELA Teacher, Annunciation Orthodox School | TEXAS, U.S.

Matt Panozzo is on a mission to create a community of readers not just in his classroom, but also across the entire state of Texas.

In his role as the director of the Community Involvement Committee for Texas Association for Literacy Education (TALE), a state affiliate of ILA, Panozzo oversees TALE's participation in the Little Free Library program and is currently working to expand it across the state. He also supervises TALE's Growing Readers program, which is working to ensure quality books are available to every home in Texas.

Panozzo played a major role in collecting school supplies for Refugee Services of Texas during the ILA 2018 Conference in Austin. At that same conference, Panozzo co-organized a book drive for the San Antonio Salvation Army, which collected six pallets of books.

"During troubling times, books can provide comfort, offer advice, and entertain," Panozzo says. "In my classroom, I have a poster I created which says READ: Relax, Explore, Acquire, Dream. I tell my students that when we have independent reading time, we are doing all of these things."

Eugene Pringle Jr., 29

Assistant Principal, Odyssey Middle School | FLORIDA, U.S.

As a former English teacher, reading teacher, literacy instructional coach, and College Board SpringBoard trainer, Eugene Pringle Jr. has used innovative strategies to ensure students and adults gain a true understanding of literacy.

One approach was the implementation of literacy boot camps in the areas of reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Students engage in six-hour, rigorous, small-group lessons to remediate and enrich standards and promote a love for literacy across the content areas and in society.

"It is important to recognize that... students in the urban school setting may not have certain opportunities if there is no true attainment of comprehensible literacy skills," Pringle says.

His work as assistant principal allowed him to develop a cross-curricular approach to literacy that aids teachers in thinking critically about bridging the gap between standards-based instruction and content that is relevant for all students.



"Students should first understand that literacy is all around them—from the time they wake up in the morning to the time they fall asleep," says Pringle, who is now transitioning to the role of assistant professor at Bethune-Cookman University.



Daniel Reichard, 29

Fifth-Grade Teacher, Kate Waller Barrett Elementary School | VIRGINIA, U.S.

It was no surprise to staff when Daniel Reichard was named *Washington Post's* 2018 Teacher of the Year. He is known as a dynamic educator and an expert at cultivating a love of reading among students.

"It is so important to create a love of reading in every student who walks into our classrooms because, for the short time that we have them, we are helping them to craft their very own reading identity," Reichard says.

In addition to his classroom teaching, Reichard regularly hosts family nights, weekend field trips, camping trips, and innovation nights, and he makes home visits.

"The best ways to create a love of reading in our students would be to first

let kids read what they want to read with no strings attached," he says. "In addition, as teachers, we have to model what it means to be a reader."

Jacob Olaoluwa Sule, 28

Founder, iRead To Live Initiative | ABUJA, NIGERIA

Jacob Olaoluwa Sule is a law student in Nigeria, the founder of the iRead To Live Initiative, and an ambassador for Teach SDGs, a grassroots organization working to achieve the UN's Sustainable Development Goals.

His interest in literacy was sparked in 2012 when he was involved in a one-year national youth service project that involved teaching in an under-resourced school. "I discovered quite a number of [the students] could not write properly and also lacked simple comprehension skills."

Kirsten Musetti Tivaringe, 29

Instructor & Doctoral Student, University of Colorado Boulder | COLORADO, U.S.

Kirsten Musetti Tivaringe's desire to promote social justice led her to a career in education.

"As an activist intent on making change, I dipped my toes in politics before heading toward a career in civil rights law," Tivaringe says. "After noticing deep-rooted, cyclical patterns of injustice, I turned my career to be a proactive agent of change."



After serving as an elementary school teacher, grade level chair, and after-school reading tutor in Chicago, Tivaringe is now a children's literature instructor at the University of Colorado Boulder and a research assistant on the Tactile Picture Book Project, a National Science Foundation-funded project that engages adolescents in the design of picture books for children with visual impairments. A PhD candidate in literacy curriculum and instruction, she is also the cofounder of the international service-learning teacher preparation program Buffs Teach Abroad.

"The human right of literacy enables individual and social transformation, as people are empowered to advocate for themselves and for others, and to organize and create a more equitable and just society," she says.

He began a campaign that later evolved into his nonprofit, the iRead To Live Initiative, which focuses on supporting educators in understaffed classrooms.

Each year since 2015, Sule has led teams of law students to volunteer in rural community schools to support classrooms that have severe teacher shortages, though his team recently expanded to include other professions as well.

"I felt it is important for everyone, not just law school students, to volunteer in schools," he says.

In addition, Sule has established several reading clubs and organized events such as spelling bees and a soccer tournament that awarded reading and writing materials as prizes. Most recently, he hosted the first Edcamp event in Nigeria, where the professional development focused on 21st-century teaching tools.





Francis Jim Tuscano, 29

Head EdTech Coach, Xavier School | MANILA, PHILIPPINES

Francis Jim Tuscano believes in empowering minds through critical and creative thinking. In addition to serving as the head edtech coach for Xavier School, a K–12 school for boys, he founded Kids Can! Innovation Camp, which focuses on the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals, integration of design thinking, and project-based learning in solving real-world problems.

Tuscano says, as a teacher who guides students and teachers in integrating technology tools, design thinking, and makerspace activities, he understands the critical importance of literacy in applying complex skills across the curriculum.

“Literacy skills and critical thinking are essential aspects of learning that cannot be separated from each other. In fact, they are interwoven,” Tuscano says.

The camp model is being integrated into Xavier’s curriculum to strengthen literacy and problem-solving skills. Because Tuscano believes students learn best in their mother tongue, the resources have been translated into Polish, Vietnamese, Serbian, Bahasa Melayu, Chinese Mandarin, Hindi, and Korean, with more to come.

In 2018, Tuscano’s camp expanded with the launch of the Online Global Innovation Camp, in which more than 90 schools from 20 countries participated.

Michelle Valerio, 28

Assistant Principal, Randallstown Elementary School | MARYLAND, U.S.

Michelle Valerio was one of seven children when her family emigrated from the Dominican Republic to the United States.

“Times were challenging and my parents worked multiple jobs in order to provide for our family,” she says. “As a result, I often became lost in books. They represented hope for me and, most important, helped me grasp the English language.”

That experience shaped who she is as an educator, as she demonstrated a talent for supporting language acquisition, reading development, and a love of books with EL students in her partial bilingual classrooms at Padonia International Elementary School.

“Students need to love reading in order to access opportunities they might not have available to them. Literacy is something that no one can take away from them,” says Valerio, who became assistant principal at nearby Randallstown Elementary this school year. “Literacy is independent of social standing, it does not require citizenship, and is not only for a specific group of people. This alone makes literacy a crucial and essential tool to eliminating barriers.”

At Padonia, Valerio also established the first student council and a jump rope club focused on self-confidence, and she sponsored the Mighty Girls and Good Guys Book Club, which engages students in reading culturally diverse texts with strong female protagonists.



Nandini Varma, 26

Cofounder, Airplane Poetry Movement | PUNE, INDIA

Nandini Varma is a poet, educator, and cofounder of Airplane Poetry Movement (APM). APM aims to educate poets across India through workshops on poetry and performance, and provide opportunities for them to perform at various stages across the country.



Varma and her cofounder have hosted more than 100 poetry events, presented more than 75 workshops, and organized India’s first National Youth Poetry Slam.

In her essay, “Slam Poetry: History As It’s Being Created,” Varma said: “Slam poetry came to India at a time when what slam poetry is, was a far less important question than what slam poetry does and did. The poets at Cocoberry, or Shahpur Jat, or Lady Shri Ram College were writing fearless poetry which was meant to be performed, and the audience continued to save their spots on the floor and in the front rows, filling up spaces wherever they could find one quickly. Speech did not take away the relationship of the abstract and the concrete from poetry, but allowed for the audience to participate in the experience that the poet on stage went through, with him or her.”

Varma is currently working on *Ultimate APM Anthology*, the organization’s first book.

Shontoria Walker, 28

Instructional Coach, Empowerment High School | TEXAS, U.S.

Shontoria Walker is a Teach Plus Texas Senior Teaching Policy Fellow, a role in which she advocates for policy at the state level while empowering teacher voices.

Walker recently became the instructional coach at Empowerment High School in Houston, TX, after serving as an eighth-grade ELA teacher at KIPP Polaris Academy for Boys. She’s currently pursuing her doctorate in professional leadership and literacy at the University of Houston, where her research focuses on using culturally relevant pedagogy to influence literacy education for black male students.

“Young men of color require a unique approach to literacy education



that encompasses their cultural backgrounds, dispels the societal markers that are placed against them, and builds on the strength and richness of community inside and outside of the classroom,” Walker says.

Walker hopes her work will help change mind-sets about this

population of students, who often have the highest percentage of dropout rates, suspensions, and special education services.

“If I am able to be a part of the change that provides a quality and equitable education for all of our students, my work will be done,” she says. ■

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