

*Uchenna Maximus Emelife*

# ILA'S 30 UNDER 30

**Pioneers driving literacy change around the globe**

By **Morgan Ratner**

**e**ducators are compassionate listeners, master organizers, innovative thinkers and, critically, invaluable advocates. Whether they are providing a voice for students or standing up for themselves—and often, both—this year's International Literacy Association 30 Under 30 cohort includes educators, researchers, nonprofit founders, and policy leaders who are working tirelessly to ensure every person has

access to the education, health resources, and safe environments they deserve.

From improving the readability of medical documents to enhancing media literacy to fighting for educational resources in hostile conflict zones, these ambitious trailblazers are creating a more equitable system for learners of all ages, backgrounds, and abilities—and they are championing a brighter future in the process.

## Tamara Imali Amatah, 13

**Founder, Student Voice Club;  
Student, Muthaiga School  
NAIROBI, KENYA**

At just 13 years old, Tamara Imali Amatah is already a powerful advocate for student leadership and literacy development. As the founder of the Student Voice Club (SVC) at Muthaiga School in Nairobi, Kenya, Amatah has created a platform that empowers students to take ownership of their academic journeys. The club integrates projects such as a school magazine, providing students with opportunities to develop skills in journalism, writing, and public speaking while fostering leadership.

Through diverse initiatives, the SVC serves as an incubator for literacy and leadership, helping students discover and nurture their talents. "I'm grateful for the chance to help raise the voice of my fellow students and to share in this learning journey with them," Amatah says. The club's success is a testament to the dedication of its members, who have made a tangible impact on literacy both within the school and in the broader community by organizing after-school homework assistance programs and addressing local challenges.

Amatah, also part of the Teach For All Student Voice Accelerator, hopes to continue making a difference in her community, with aspirations of becoming an architect or a robotics engineer.



## Erica Braunlinger, 24

**Fourth-Grade Teacher,  
St. Mary Magdalen School  
PENNSYLVANIA, U.S.**

To help her students become confident readers, fourth-grade teacher Erica Braunlinger emphasizes the importance of self-belief. "When I see the light bulb go off in my students' minds when they understand a concept, it makes me feel proud," she says.

As a preservice teacher in a visual impairment classroom, Braunlinger used hands-on, textured objects to aid learning, creating sound associations through songs and teaching letter formation with raised letters. After earning a double major in elementary and special education, Braunlinger worked at AIM Academy, the largest school for students with language-based disabilities in the Delaware Valley. There, Braunlinger developed individualized teaching techniques and pursued a master's degree in special education with a reading interventionist concentration. From here, she became certified in Wilson Reading System.

As president of ILA's Alpha Upsilon Alpha honor society at St. Joseph's University, Braunlinger organized a literacy event where students read to therapy dogs, fostering their love for literature. Now teaching fourth grade at St. Mary Magdalen School, Braunlinger addresses phonemic awareness deficits heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on phonology, orthography, and morphology. Notably, this has translated to a research project on famous Americans that culminated in a wax museum event.

Outside the classroom, Braunlinger serves on the English Language Arts (ELA) Curriculum Team for the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, reviewing assessments and developing curriculum maps.

## Shane Baker, 29

**Third-/Fourth-Grade Teacher,  
Jennings Creek Elementary School  
KENTUCKY, U.S.**

Shane Baker, a third- and fourth-grade teacher at Jennings Creek Elementary in Bowling Green, KY, was recently surprised with the prestigious Milken Educator Award, a \$25,000 award. Known for seamlessly integrating high-level digital tools such as green screens and coding into project-based learning, Baker's approach fosters critical thinking and creativity among his students.

"Literacy is the goal, not the technology," he says, emphasizing that digital tools are used to enhance—not replace—the curriculum. In addition, Baker believes students' ability to analyze both written content and digital content is crucial for critical thinking.

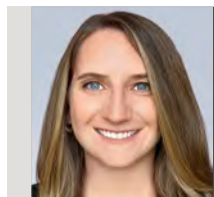
A Google Certified Educator and district EdTech Ambassador, Baker's classroom is a welcoming space for students of all abilities, including English learners and those from low-



Photo courtesy of Kentucky Department of Education

income backgrounds. His use of SMART goals encourages students to take ownership of their learning, helping them track individual progress and develop intrinsic motivation.

Beyond the classroom, Baker is a visible presence in his students' lives, attending block parties, musicals, poetry and literacy nights, and serving on leadership committees. Baker implores educators to connect with their students outside of the classroom. "They have to see you as someone who is willing to go to their turf," he says. "It changes the students' level of respect and their attitude toward education."



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

## Vincent Julius Canindo • Buenavidez, 25

**Professor, Lyceum of Alabang  
MUNTINLUPA CITY, PHILIPPINES**

For Vincent Julius Canindo Buenavidez, the key to a strong educational foundation is community. Known as a pillar in his neighborhood, he is dedicated to leading literacy programs for underprivileged children, including conducting regular weekend reading sessions at local community centers that provide access to books and educational materials. He also collaborates with local nonprofits on mentorship programs and started after-school literacy clubs where students engage in creative writing, storytelling, and book discussions.

Buenavidez recently published a program module book for the Philippines National Service Training Program, which develops young people's civic consciousness, and he's currently



working on a literacy education book. He also created a school farm to combat food insecurity and teach young children urban gardening. This initiative ensures the community has access to fresh vegetables and also educates students on sustainability practices.

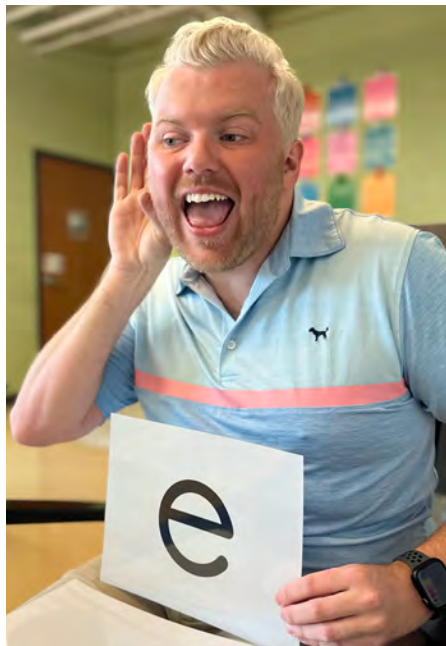
As a professor and literacy advocate at the Lyceum of Alabang, he says: "Literacy is the cornerstone of all other learning. [It] opens doors to a wealth of information and knowledge, empowering students to engage with the world around them."

Buenavidez notes that literacy skills such as reading and writing not only help students communicate but also provide therapeutic opportunities to process emotions. "Literacy is a powerful tool for breaking the cycle of poverty and creating a more equitable society. I have seen how empowering people with the ability to read and write opens doors to opportunities, fosters personal growth, and strengthens communities."

## Chris Dickerson, 29

**Kindergarten Teacher, Norman  
Binkley Elementary School;  
PhD Student, Ball State University  
TENNESSEE, U.S.**

To foster "lifelong literacy citizens," kindergarten teacher Chris Dickerson promotes literacy at every opportunity, extending learning



beyond the classroom. Through extracurricular activities such as the garden club, he uses disciplinary literature to teach students how to interpret seed packets and research planting schedules.

"Literacy instruction should transcend the classroom because the application of literacy skills transcends the classroom," Dickerson says. "I strive to create literate citizens for the totality of their lives."

Dickerson also serves on the Teacher Education Advisory Council at Belmont University and chairs the Educator Advisory Council for the Governor's Early Literacy Foundation. This initiative has delivered 4.4 million books to 740,000 students and educators across Tennessee through the K-3 Home Library Program.

"The quantitative impact is amazing, but the joy of a child receiving a package to start or grow their home library is even more incredible," he says.

Currently pursuing a PhD in elementary education with a focus on literacy, Dickerson is passionate about preparing future educators. He hopes his work equips teacher candidates with the tools they need to inspire and impact their students.

## Pashtana Durrani, 27

**Founder, LEARN Afghanistan  
KANDAHAR, AFGHANISTAN**

Education and activism are at Pashtana Durrani's core. As a child, she attended a school her parents opened in the refugee camp where they lived. Now, as the founder of LEARN Afghanistan, she fights for the right to accessible education despite the Taliban forcing her work underground.

A core tenet of LEARN is enabling students to overcome the challenges of limited internet access in conflict zones. They partner with ed-tech organizations to provide offline resources, use radio partnerships to broadcast educational content, and equip schools with internet through antennas with secure connectivity and minimized risk of



detection. Approximately 10,000 children have benefited from their programs.

“While we may be unable to stop conflicts, we can build systems that endure and continue supporting students in even the most challenging conditions,” she says.

With aims to extend efforts to other countries experiencing and recovering from conflict, it is clear Durrani has a razor-focused vision for how impactful LEARN can be. “I aspire to see flexible and innovative educational models designed to

withstand the disruptions caused by conflict, political instability, or social barriers,” she says. “Education should not be weaponized; it should be a fundamental right that empowers individuals and uplifts communities.”

## Uchenna Maximus Emelife, 25

**Founder/Director, Book O’Clock  
SOKOTO, NIGERIA**

“In a time when people derive equal entertainment from a reel as they would a book,” says Uchenna Maximus Emelife, “convincing them to pick up a book becomes challenging because the odds are against you.”

Despite those odds, Emelife, the founder and director of literacy nonprofit Book O’Clock, aims to do just that. Book O’Clock is a multi-initiative organization that holds book drives, writing contests, and social advocacy events. Emelife also started an online bookstore promoting children’s books by African authors to help fill the gap in the limited circulation of



African literature. He also began the Sokoto Books and Arts Festival in northwest Nigeria with cofounders Yusuf Shehu Ambursa and Abdulbasit Balogun. Now in its fourth year, the

festival has engaged more than 500 children in literary activities such as book quizzes/chats, poetry slams, writing competitions, debates, and drama. The Book O’Clock initiative has an active community of about 1,000 young readers.

Emelife says that the catalyst for the book festival was three-fold—“a need to harmonize creative artists in Sokoto and provide a global stage to showcase their talents; to correct a half-truth on the media coverage of Sokoto; and to include Sokoto in contemporary African and global literary discourses.”

## Kiana Foster-Mauro, 26

**Fourth-Grade Teacher,  
Nathan Hale Arts Magnet School  
CONNECTICUT, U.S.**

Kiana Foster-Mauro, a fourth-grade teacher, earned the title of Connecticut’s 2024 Teacher of the Year just three years into her career, a distinction that has given her a platform to advocate for equitable education. Foster-Mauro believes that teaching requires stepping out of comfort zone. “Learn from your students, learn from your community, learn from your colleagues,” she says. “Embrace your mistakes and use them as an opportunity to grow and try something different.”

While pursuing her undergraduate and graduate degrees at the University of Connecticut, Foster-Mauro cocreated two human rights-based curriculums for elementary students, emphasizing intentional book choices, the celebration of joy, and personal narratives on injustice. She views human rights education as a way to empower students to advocate for themselves and



others, saying, “We have the privilege of helping our students better understand the world around them.”

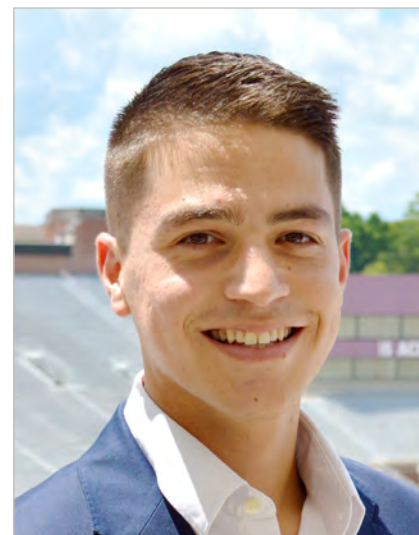
Beyond her classroom, Foster-Mauro is an active member of the National Association for Multicultural Education, presenting and facilitating conversations on current events, identity, and mental health. She was also active in the Leadership in Diversity organization at the University of Connecticut.

For her, literacy is transformative: “Literacy holds space for all of us. Literacy breaks down barriers and builds empathy. Through literacy, we can be both seen and heard—a gift that can be lifesaving.”

## Miguel Garcia-Salas, 29

**PhD Candidate, Florida State  
University; Predoctoral Research  
Fellow, Florida Center for Reading  
Research  
FLORIDA, U.S.**

Miguel Garcia-Salas developed an early interest in speech pathology when his sister, who has hydrocephalus and spina bifida,



began receiving therapeutic services. Observing that the interventions involving their family were most effective, he was drawn to helping other families help their children read and communicate. Coupled with his former experience as a speech-language pathology assistant, the PhD candidate now focuses on researching literacy education through a family-centered approach, one that prioritizes accessible as well as culturally and contextually relevant support for families.

His work has explored the relationship between morphological complexity in writing and reading comprehension, enhancing dialogic reading, and shared book reading, all particularly focused on

underrepresented students. As a Florida Interdisciplinary Research Fellow in Education Sciences, a program in conjunction with the Florida Center for Reading Research, Garcia-Salas has been introduced to diverse methodologies and contributed to interdisciplinary research groups, including the Office of Migrant Education and the Regional Educational Laboratory Southeast, to enhance literacy development.

“This exposure to a variety of disciplinary perspectives has led me to appreciate the importance of a holistic approach in literacy education—one that incorporates insights from educational research, policy implementation, and direct community engagement,” he says.

## Muhammad Jahirul Islam, 25

**Founder/Chair,  
Ignite Global Foundation  
DHAKA, BANGLADESH**

There is no shortage of accomplishments the Ignite Global Foundation (IGF) has achieved: providing free schooling to more than 350 underprivileged children, organizing blood drives during emergency situations, giving out reusable menstrual products, and helping communities access safe drinking water—impacting over 500,000 people total. For Muhammad Jahirul Islam, founder and chair of IGF, the work they do across education and health services is deeply interconnected.

“Providing quality education alone isn’t enough if a child’s health and well-being are compromised,” Islam says. “For children to truly benefit from education, they need to be healthy and feel safe. These areas—education, health, nutrition, and safety—are not separate pillars of our work but are interwoven to create a holistic approach to child development.”

The nonprofit has received prestigious awards for their contribution to the community including The Diana Award and United Nations Best Volunteer Group (they have had upward of 23,000 youth volunteer for the organization). Islam says seeing the young people they serve gain confidence because of the support provided by IGF is one of his biggest sources of pride. He specifically calls out IGF’s program to integrate children with special needs into their inclusive education program.

“Seeing these children flourish alongside their peers, breaking down barriers of discrimination, and proving that disability is not an inability has been incredibly fulfilling,” he says. “It’s a reminder that our efforts to create an inclusive environment are not just changing individual lives but also transforming societal attitudes.”



## JulieAnn Hatala, 28

**Second-Grade Teacher, Mastery Charter School Mann Elementary  
PENNSYLVANIA, U.S.**

When JulieAnn Hatala and her team began Reading as Resistance, an inclusive literacy project funded by the Pulitzer Center 1619 Project Education Network, her hope was to make hard conversations about injustice more accessible to teachers and, in turn, enable students to identify injustice.

“It is my responsibility to tell my students the truth about the history of our country,” she says. “We intentionally chose books that showed different groups of people facing injustice so that students can make connections in their own lives where they see injustice. Focusing on how my students can show resistance helps them know that when they see something that is not right, they can do something about it.”

As a second-grade teacher, Hatala goes beyond her classroom duties, creating open access instructional materials and inclusive adaptations in Mann Elementary’s Autistic Support classes.

She completed her student teaching on the island of Eleuthera in The Bahamas, where she returned to for the next three summers to volunteer with the nonprofit Educators for Eleuthera, which provides free summer camp programs to children.

“My greatest reward has been the joy and empowerment my students show

when they know they have agency in this world to create a better future,” Hatala says. “It gives me deep hope to see [them] talk about how we stand up for what is right.”



## Rabiyatu Jalloh, 28

**English Teacher, West Philadelphia High School  
PENNSYLVANIA, U.S.**

Rabiyatu Jalloh, a first-generation American and 11th-grade English teacher, credits her parents for encouraging her educational journey. “As a Black girl in education,” she says, “our issues are erased, and we face constant invisibility in educational research, interventions, curriculum, and policies.”



Her passion for social justice began during her time as an undergrad in the D.C. Social Justice Fellowship, where she developed and implemented a curriculum at a local high school. Later, her master’s research focused on how literacy interventions designed for Black girls serve as pathways of resistance.

Jalloh, a 2023 NCTE Early Career Educator of Color Award recipient, created a Writing Through Social Justice course that empowers students to explore race, gender, and class issues, and she is currently developing an elective English course centered on Black Girlhood.

The course aims to provide Black girls with a dedicated space to engage in the historical literacy practices of Black women scholars, activists, and thinkers. She also volunteers with the Black Girls Literacy Project, advocating for the recognition of how nationality, ethnicity, trauma, and oppression intersect in the lives of Black girls.

In addition to teaching AP Seminar, Jalloh leads the after-school Sister Circle discussion group. Beyond her classroom work, she runs a summer literacy camp in partnership with the University of Pennsylvania, has contributed to curriculum development for correctional facilities, leads her school’s Equity Team, and serves as a faculty sponsor of the Student Equity Association, while also facilitating an affinity group in Philadelphia to support educators of Color.

## Rachelle M. Johnson, 24

**PhD Candidate, Florida State University; Predoctoral Research Fellow, Florida Center for Reading Research  
FLORIDA, U.S.**

Rachelle M. Johnson, a PhD candidate in developmental psychology at Florida State University and Institute of Educational Sciences predoctoral fellow at the Florida Center for Reading Research, integrates her personal experiences as someone with dyslexia into her research. Using advanced quantitative methods, she examines how children’s reading development is predicted by their emotions and learning environment, with a focus on capturing the lived experiences of those with dyslexia. She sees dyslexia “not just as a condition but an identity.”

Her advocacy began at 14 when she joined the learning disability movement, and she later became the first young adult representative on the National Center for Learning Disabilities Board of Directors. In 2023, Johnson helped facilitate a discussion between learning disabled activists and the National Center for Special Education Research, shaping future directions in education and literacy research. She has also provided education reform recommendations to federal agencies, including the Office of Postsecondary Education.



A strong advocate for disability justice, Johnson stresses the importance of including the voices of those with dyslexia in literacy research and challenges educators to create supportive environments, both practically and emotionally, for students with learning disabilities. “Nothing about disability should be done without the inclusion of disabled people,” she says, emphasizing the need for those with dyslexia to be represented in education reform.



## Gretel Juhansoo, 22

**Cofounder/Coordinator, Media Club Project  
TARTU, ESTONIA**

Gretel Juhansoo, cofounder and coordinator of the Media Club Project, is committed to advancing digital literacy. Her upbringing in rural Estonia, with limited online exposure until her early teenage years, motivated her to address gaps in media education. This led to the creation of the Media Club Project at the University of Tartu, which aims to equip children and teenagers with essential media and digital literacy skills.

Since its launch in March 2024, the project has organized more than 200 workshops across Estonia, reaching over 2,000 students from kindergarten through grade 9. The workshops cover critical topics such as algorithms, TikTok, information disorders, conspiracy theories, and cyberbullying. A key focus is equipping students to critically analyze information.

Juhansoo emphasizes the importance of understanding the complexities of the digital world. She advocates for education that helps young people navigate misinformation and disinformation so they can find trustworthy online resources.

Although she graduated in 2024, Juhansoo continues her work in digital literacy as a media competence specialist for the Baltic Engagement Centre for Combating Information Disorders.

“Being a digital native doesn’t automatically mean being media literate,” she says. “I hope we reach a point where students’ online realities—such as understanding the complex mechanisms of recommendation algorithms, managing exposure to triggering content, and addressing cyberbullying—are integrated into their education even more.”

## Olha Kravchenko, 27

**Head, Filter National Media Literacy Project  
KYIV, UKRAINE**

Olha Kravchenko leads Filter, Ukraine's national media literacy project under the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy. Filter aims to increase Ukrainians' resilience to misinformation by offering creative solutions and fostering media literacy. The initiative collaborates with government, NGO, and media organizations to develop strategies and training programs that counter misinformation.

"In today's digital age, where information is readily accessible and overwhelming, media literacy helps people make informed decisions, participate in democratic processes, and



protect themselves from manipulation and false narratives," she says.

Kravchenko's role focuses on ensuring systematic education on critical thinking, implementing global best practices, and inspiring

empowerment through media literacy. Since its founding, Filter has brought initiatives such as media literacy clubs across the country and a comprehensive online platform for sharing resources and strategies.

Despite the challenges of working amid war—including air raids and power outages—Kravchenko remains motivated by the impact of their efforts. She advises others to improve their critical thinking skills and to remain adaptable in the face of misinformation.

She advises children and adults to write to improve their creativity, critical thinking skills, and articulation, and she implores her fellow citizens to "stay curious, be adaptable, and always prioritize the truth."

## Josh Lee, 20

**Director, EdYouth  
TAIPEI, TAIWAN**

In December 2023, EdYouth emerged as Taiwan's first student-led nongovernmental organization (NGO), advocating for an education system that transcends traditional exam-focused models. Directed by Josh Lee, the organization believes education should foster creativity, critical thinking, and personal growth, asserting that it requires a collaborative effort among students, educators, and policymakers.

"The policymakers are a big part of this construction," he says. "Are they willing to support the teachers' well-

being and innovative ideas? Does the examination system they design allow students to think outside the box and foster critical thinking?"

EdYouth actively promotes inclusive pedagogy by engaging in government policy reviews, organizing workshops, and hosting press conferences to present student perspectives on educational legislation. The team encourages students to discuss educational policies

within their families and share their school experiences.

Lee asserts that effective education policy should support diverse learning paths, address resource inequalities, and nurture every student's potential. "Envisioning an education system that prioritizes both academic and personal development equips future students to thrive in a rapidly changing world," he says.



## Canyon Lohnas, 28

**Program Specialist/PhD Student,  
West Virginia University  
WEST VIRGINIA, U.S.**

Literacy touches on nearly all aspects of everyday life, including one's ability to understand health information. Improving understanding of health documents is one of Canyon Lohnas' research interests as a PhD student at West Virginia University.

"A great deal of health-related information is not written at an appropriate level to ensure patient understanding," he says. "[Patients] risk making adverse decisions because they are not fully informed."

Lohnas' research focuses on the readability of documents associated with opioid prescriptions, particularly in West Virginia where the opioid epidemic is rampant. He facilitates



conversations among stakeholders in medicine, education, and the humanities to bring awareness to the importance of health literacy and advocate for better policies.

Previously, Lohnas worked as an elementary educator and saw firsthand how many students and families struggled with reading and writing. Inspired to create stronger systems to improve their success, he decided to pursue a PhD in education.

"I hope that educators are more cognizant of how literacy may affect a student's health and provide more materials that expose students to health-related information and decisions," he says. "My hope is that health practitioners are more mindful of the literacy levels of their patients and take that into consideration when sharing health information that could influence decision-making."

## Feature



### Zachary Milford, 29

**PhD Student,  
University of Kentucky  
KENTUCKY, U.S.**

As a doctoral student at the University of Kentucky, Zachary Milford's work focuses on preparing educators to navigate the challenges of misinformation and disinformation in online spaces. His research delves into how students can critically evaluate digital content, such as AI-generated media and deepfakes. He believes students must approach the internet with skepticism to thrive in an increasingly digital world.

"Teachers have a responsibility to prepare their students for navigating online spaces where disinformation flourishes," Milford says. "So much of their lives is and will continue to migrate online, so they need to navigate the internet with a posture of skepticism."

In addition to his work on digital literacy, Milford is currently involved in a civics literacy fellowship, collaborating with social studies educators to help Kentucky students better understand how government functions in their communities. His research also critiques "big box" curricula for limiting opportunities to develop critical literacies and examines how the science of reading debates unfold on social media.

A former middle school ELA and social studies teacher, Milford also teaches ELA methods courses to preservice teachers. His dissertation will explore how social media content creators shape debates around reading instruction.

### Shanelle Mitchell, 28

**Literacy Program Manager, Center  
for Success Network  
MICHIGAN, U.S.**

Shanelle Mitchell serves as literacy program manager at the Center for Success Network, where she focuses on exposing students to diverse content that extends learning beyond traditional classrooms. "Our learners explore material that aligns with their interests and reading levels while also diving into areas that may be personally challenging," she explains.

With a master's degree in reading, Mitchell engages students in critical dialogues about diversity, belonging, and equity. She aspires to write and illustrate her own children's book series, inspired by the joy and comfort reading has brought her since childhood.

Founded in 2013, the Center for Success Network impacts nearly 400 students at 12 sites across southeast Michigan. The organization empowers youth through education and community engagement, providing structured after-school programming



and summer interventions tailored to individual literacy needs. With over 200 dedicated mentors, the center focuses on individual support, helping students develop reading skills, confidence, and a love for learning.

"I love witnessing them go from someone who is not confident about their reading ability to someone who embraces the journey," Mitchell shares. "It's important to celebrate each growth milestone."

### Nihira Mugamba, 25

**Founder, Black & Educate  
WASHINGTON, D.C., U.S.**

Nihira Mugamba, founder of Black & Educate, an ed-tech company designing holistic literacy curricula, has many ideas when it comes to improving education. But an idea, she says, is just a small start.

"Transforming an idea into a tangible product involves countless hours of research, development, and testing, as well as adapting along the way."

When asked about the rewards and challenges of forming a startup, she says: "By maintaining a growth mind-set, I have learned to push through the tough moments. The real satisfaction comes when I see the positive impact my work has, knowing that I am contributing to a brighter future for education."

Mugamba, a former Baltimore City Schools educator, has interned with the Parliament of Uganda to influence educational policies, and she was named a 2020 Newman Civic Fellow for her creation of the literacy program Reading to Excel, which aimed to improve the literacy skills of kindergartners in Kampala, Uganda. Currently, Black & Educate is working on a social-emotional

learning platform called Compass, which aims to empower students to thrive as empathetic individuals in their communities.

"I envision our platform being widely recognized for its engaging, culturally relevant content that meets the unique needs of learners and educators," Mugamba says. "I hope Black & Educate will inspire a new generation of students and educators to embrace education as a powerful tool for social change."





## Rafely Palacios, 27

**Second-Grade Spanish Bilingual Teacher,  
John Muir Elementary School  
CALIFORNIA, U.S.**

A year into her career, Rafely Palacios, a second-grade Spanish bilingual teacher at a Title I school, joined the instructional leadership team and identified a critical gap: the lack of an evidence-based Spanish phonics program. She partnered with the developers of *Aprendo Leyendo*, a program from Argentina, who flew to her school to train teachers, making it one of the few U.S. schools—and only the second in California—to implement the program. “This involvement gave me a platform to ensure that our bilingual students received tailored instruction,” Palacios says. As a result, her school adopted the program for its entire Spanish strand, benefiting a significant portion of its bilingual population.

Palacios, driven by her Yucatec Maya ancestry, is passionate about inclusive education for Indigenous and newcomer students. This passion led her to author and secure a \$30,000 grant for a group of teachers to research the science of reading for multilingual learners.

She now leads San Francisco Unified School District’s first K–2 Foundational Skills Lesson Study Team, applying similar principles to English phonics to build strong foundations in both languages.

“Multilingual students should be prioritized in educational initiatives that provide access to high-quality instruction and curriculum supporting their bilingual development,” she says. Through her advocacy for evidence-based practices, Palacios is dedicated to creating outcomes and opportunities that ensure students receive the literacy education they deserve.



## Kezia Asiedua Sanie, 24

**Founder, For The Future Ghana  
ACCRA, GHANA**

In the last eight years, For the Future Ghana, a nonprofit supporting underprivileged children through education and wellness, has impacted the lives of more than 5,000 children and their families. But back when Kezia Asiedua Sanie, then 16, started the organization, she began with just a few groceries and a simple mission to help. For the Future Ghana has expanded to provide digital literacy and public speaking training, advocate for climate action, and partner with groups such as School in a Bag to distribute eco-friendly school supplies and the EmpowerHer Project to reduce period poverty.



“Being healthy is a prerequisite for effective learning,” Sanie says. She notes the Student Training and Education Project, an education sponsorship program, as one of the most impactful projects For the Future Ghana has established. It has provided children with access to science and technology workshops, organized activities and trips for them and their families, and helped them prepare for their high school admission exams.

Sanie’s experience as a lawyer also enables her to analyze education policies and regulation through a legal lens and advocate for students from underprivileged backgrounds. In addition to her nonprofit work, she is a member of the Global Shapers Community of the World Economic Forum. She hopes to take For the Future Ghana global and pursue a master’s degree in international law and diplomacy.



## Anish Shekar, 22

**Founder, Emboldening the Youth;  
Overseas Director,  
Literacy Aid Uganda  
NEW YORK, U.S.**

As a child visiting his parents’ rural village in Bangalore, Anish Shekar realized the difficulty his immigrant parents had with communication outside of India. Shekar was inspired to create *Emboldening the Youth*, a nonprofit that aims to educate children and adults in India and immigrants in the United States to improve their literacy rates by way of volunteer student tutors. Currently, they work out of 10 locations in India and are expanding to eight major cities in the U.S.

Shekar, who graduated from New York University in 2024 and aspires to go to medical school, feels strongly about inclusive education and urges those looking to improve their literacy skills to speak with as many native English speakers as possible and embrace their skill level. Shekar is also the overseas director of *Literacy Aid Uganda*, an organization serving 25,000 Ugandans that focuses on elevating literacy skills and providing necessary physical and mental healthcare to vulnerable communities, especially women, children, and the elderly.

“Without good mental health, one lacks motivation and drive to learn,” he says. “Lack of education can lead to poor job outcomes, which can also lead to poorer mental health. With educational opportunities, I get to see [the children and adult groups we serve] happier and more fulfilled.”



## Akarsh Shroff, 24

**Founder, YuvaSpark  
BANGALORE, INDIA**

Motivated by injustices he saw while president of his school's social welfare

committee, Akarsh Shroff founded YuvaSpark when he was just 17 with the goal of improving literacy and numeracy among low-income students across India. Since then, the youth-led NGO has impacted more than 340,000 people across various initiatives, focusing on education, health, and social welfare.

"While many students are aware of social issues, there is a need to activate them as changemakers and help them realize the power they have to create real, tangible change," he says. "Their potential to solve challenges, especially in literacy and education, is limitless."

YuvaSpark has run library enrichment projects in government schools, initiated programs to

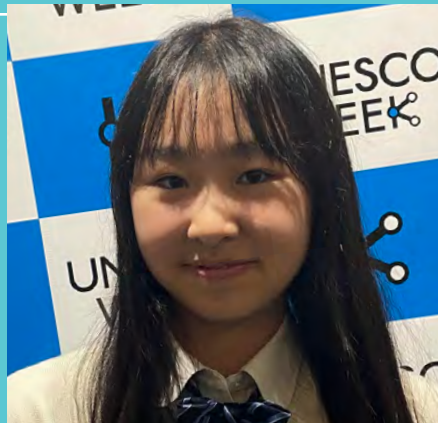
develop linguistic skills among students, and provided essential support during the COVID-19 pandemic. Shroff, who also works with Thinkerbell Labs to improve the quality of literacy tools for Indian children with visual impairments, feels strongly about educational institutions providing support plans to meet all learning needs. Inclusivity and empathy, he says, nourish a culture where everyone feels capable of making a change.

"By encouraging young people to harness their empathy and take initiative, we can build a society where each person actively contributes to positive change, driving innovation and inclusivity in addressing pressing issues."

## Anna Takai, 18

**Founder, For Every Child an Education; Student, MITA International School  
TOKYO, JAPAN**

"Leave no one behind" is the motto of For Every Child an Education, an organization founded by Anna Takai that aims to increase accessibility to quality education. Takai was first inspired by the cause when she was just 12 after being selected to teach English to children in Cambodia. With For Every Child an Education, Takai and her team of over 60 volunteers across the globe have developed textbooks and interactive exercises that have been donated to more than 500 teacher trainers and 700 children through



their partnerships with the Cambodian Community Dream Organization. They have also increased accessibility to digital platforms through donating unused technology, and they are

working to expand their programs to other countries including Tanzania, Malaysia, Afghanistan, and India.

"Providing quality education to those in developing nations empowers children to share their ideas," says Takai, who hopes to one day work with UNESCO to develop policies that impact underlying social problems, particularly the systemic issue of student dropouts. Hoping to major in economics, she has already completed a creative journalism pre-college program at Columbia University, an experience that furthered her desire to raise awareness of social issues.

"I believe it's all about grit, passion, and taking risks," she says when asked for her advice for others looking to create change. "[Not letting] rejection stop you [is] critical to showcasing your passion."

## Jason Westra-Hall, 29

**English/Journalism Teacher,  
Grand Ledge High School  
MICHIGAN, U.S.**

One of the most crucial aspects of Jason Westra-Hall's classroom is authenticity, for himself and his students. The English and journalism teacher, who is the only teacher in Michigan with a class dedicated to LGBTQIA+ literature and history, emphasizes the value of bringing his full self to the classroom and encourages his students to do the same.

"The more I present myself as queer unapologetically," he says, "the more that students feel they can be themselves around me. When we allow students to be

their full selves in a classroom, they will achieve great things."

Westra-Hall, who has a master's degree focused on queer curriculum, also serves as the advisor to the Gender and Sexuality Alliance and Model UN, is the high school staff's leader for its Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Professional Learning Community, and runs the yearbook. He aims to create a learning environment where all people can thrive, regardless of their background. Noting James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* as his favorite piece of queer literature to teach, he urges other educators to consider diverse texts and foster conversations around which characters have power, whose voices are missing, and what other perspectives might reveal.



"I encourage teachers to reflect on how students feel when they are continuously not represented in their curriculum. You may not be comfortable with teaching the material, but when our identities are absent from the curriculum, we feel like we do not belong."

Photo courtesy of Milken Family Foundation



## Ashley Wilkins, 28

**Eighth-Grade ELA Teacher,  
Petersburg High School  
WEST VIRGINIA, U.S.**

As a first-generation college graduate, eighth-grade English language arts teacher Ashley Wilkins attributes her success to childhood teachers who inspired her love of rhetoric and motivated her to positively impact students. Recognized as an Outstanding Middle School Teacher for the past three years—a student-voted honor—she is dedicated to helping her students set personal goals. “As educators, we set goals for students, but often they either don’t know about these goals or they are in lingo they don’t understand,” she explains. “By having students set their own goals, the effort put forth into accomplishing them is measurable.”

Wilkins facilitates Socratic seminars, encouraging respectful discussions on literature. A recent Milken Educator Award winner—a \$25,000 award—she also teaches a dual-credit college English class, engages in fundraising initiatives, serves as the junior class sponsor, and is a member of the Local School Improvement Council. “All of the outside factors that students come to us with daily often impact their ability and openness to learn,” she notes. “But inside our classrooms, we can make students feel welcome, safe, and loved, and that makes all the difference.”

## Breyana Wilson, 22

**Pathway Coach,  
Kalamazoo Promise  
MICHIGAN, U.S.**

As a Kalamazoo native, Breyana Wilson is dedicated to advocating for accessible education and youth empowerment in her own backyard as a pathway coach with Kalamazoo Promise, a nonprofit that provides scholarships, assistance with credential completion, and education-to-career resources for local students. Wilson, driven by a belief that everyone deserves the opportunity to reach their full potential, began working with the youth in her community in 2018. In her role as mentor, she guides high school seniors in their academic journey and has developed an interest in working with older youth populations outside of the traditional classroom environment.

Recognized as one of the Michigan Reading Association’s 30 Under 30, Wilson recently graduated from Western Michigan University with a degree in education and human development. Her desire to connect with



other students flourished during her college experience as a leader in various student organizations including the Black Student Union, Future Teachers of Color, and Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, experiences that she says have allowed her to create a foundation for her professional life.

## Lexi Woodward, 28

**Graduate Assistant/PhD Student,  
University of Arkansas  
ARKANSAS, U.S.**

Lexi Woodward, a former second-grade teacher, taught in a semi-rural Arkansas school where over 75% of the student population is multilingual. Drawing from her own experiences, Woodward was determined to create educational environments that foster growth and understanding. “In school, I became resistant to teacher stances that exuded savior mentalities,” she reflected. “I wanted teachers to facilitate experiences that meant something.”

To address the needs of her diverse students, she reimagined monolingual literacy curricula through translanguaging pedagogies, creating a Multilingual Literature Partners program where students could discuss books in their shared languages. Her commitment to innovative teaching led her to serve as the writing lead for her grade level, developing multilingual curricula tailored to her students’ needs.

Woodward recently completed a two-year ethnographic study of her pedagogical methods, presenting her findings at national literacy conferences and coauthoring several journal manuscripts. Beyond the classroom, Woodward built community ties through a literacy outreach program for immigrant families. Now a PhD student at the University of Arkansas, she continues to advocate for students and families often overlooked in education, empowering them to use their own voices.

“[Students from underserved backgrounds] deserve to experience literacy’s mirrors, windows, and glass doors as celebrations of the human condition.”



## Mai W. Zaru, 28

**Postdoctoral Researcher,  
Southern Methodist University  
TEXAS, U.S.**

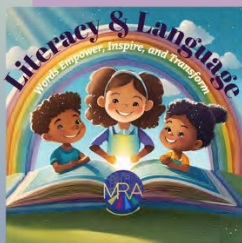
At 28, Mai W. Zaru has already been awarded ILA's 2023 Jeanne S. Chall Research Fellowship for her research on peer-assisted learning strategies with immigrant families, published in multiple journals including *Research Reading Quarterly*, and presented at over a dozen conferences.

A Palestinian postdoctoral scholar and poet, Zaru advocates for literacy as a human right, amplifying marginalized voices within the Arab diaspora. She integrates liberatory education and decolonial theory into her work, advancing critical literacies through storytelling and advocacy.

Before earning her PhD, Zaru taught special education in underserved Palestinian villages and volunteered with U.S. refugee centers, reinforcing her commitment to literacy and social justice. Her research provides guidance on selecting culturally responsive books and integrating immigrant and refugee narratives into education.

Zaru also uses poetry to enhance literacy, helping students express complex emotions and understand cultural contexts. She believes in the power of culturally responsive teaching, urging educators to reflect students' experiences in literature to empower them.

"Those who can't tolerate inequality and injustice, teach," Zaru says. "Those who can't withhold censorship of education, teach. I believe that the hopes of humanity rest within our classrooms, because I am one of those who can't stand injustice; therefore, I teach." ■



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