

THE NEXT CLASS

Celebrating our 2016 30 Under 30 literacy champions

By Maura Ciccarelli

they come from around the world and range in age from 15 to 29, but the leaders on the 2016 International Literacy Association 30 Under 30 list share a single passion: promoting literacy in all its forms to those who need it most.

The following stories represent some of the most creative and innovative approaches out there. You'll read about a man who has worked in secret to ensure both boys and girls get an education in Afghanistan; an MIT student who is building interactive literacy apps to help children with their language skills; a 23-year-old headmaster of a free school in India; and more fascinating stories of changemakers who saw problems and tackled them.

Let's meet the next generation of champions who are fighting to reach the goal of literacy for all, one person at a time.

Deborah Ahenkorah Osei-Agyekum

Deborah Ahenkorah Osei-Agyekum, 29

Cofounder/Executive Director, Golden Baobab; CEO, African Bureau Stories | ACCRA, GHANA

Although Deborah Ahenkorah Osei-Agyekum fell in love with reading the first time she walked into her community library, she didn't realize what was missing from its pages until years later: a face like her own.

As a student at Bryn Mawr College in Pennsylvania, she cofounded a student-led organization, Project Educate in Africa (PEIA), to provide books to African children. As she was organizing a book shipment, it hit her.

"I saw a book with a black girl on the cover," she recounts. "I realized that out of the thousands of books we had shipped, this was the first I saw that represented the people the books were going to. It dawned on me that apart [from how] many children in Africa lacked access to books, there was another problem, possibly the root problem, which is: There are not enough diverse children's books being produced in Africa, and they are not easily accessible to all children."

She then launched the Golden Baobab Prize (GBP) with the support of her mentor and cofounder, Rama Shagaya. The annual cash prize is designed to inspire the creation of more African stories by Africans for children to boost literacy, develop creativity, and promote African heritage. She then established the nonprofit Golden Baobab, and African Bureau Stories, a publishing and multimedia company that produces funny, contemporary, and high-quality children's stories that reflect African experiences.

"It's absolutely critical that there is balance and representation," she said when she won the 2015 Grinnell College Innovator for Social Justice Prize given by Grinnell College in Iowa. "It's not OK that children in some parts of the world wake up, pick up books, and see themselves and their cultures and their language, their slang, and their food represented in it and children in another part of the world... pick up books and only see other people."



Babar Ali, 23

Founder/Headmaster, Ananda Siksha Niketan | MURSHIDABAD, INDIA

Named the "youngest headmaster in the world" by the BBC in 2009 when

he was just 16, Babar Ali's school, Ananda Siksha Niketan, lives up to its name, which means "Home of Joyful Learning." At 9 years old, he was teaching eight children in his backyard

who couldn't afford to attend school. Now a volunteer-run brick-and-mortar school, it offers a free education for about 300 students, mostly girls, and emphasizes nurturing compassion, morality, and social responsibility.

Ali, who has now taught 3,000 students, is pursuing a master's in English literature in the morning and teaching at his school in the afternoon along with other teachers, including six female former students who are also in college programs.

"The village elders were very skeptical about educating their children as they were not educated themselves and hence did not understand the importance of education in our lives," Ali explains. "When we went from door to door [to persuade] parents to send their kids to this school, the first question I was asked was, 'How can education help people who cannot even afford two square meals a day?' 'Educate girls and they will not find husbands,' others quipped. But people also came forward to help me [because] they were convinced that positive changes are going [to happen] through my school."



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Qasim Aslam, 29

Cofounder, The History Project | PAKISTAN/INDIA

The History Project presents students with competing national historical records to empower them with critical thinking skills, which is essential to both literacy and life.

The organization is dedicated to inspiring tolerance through critical thinking, starting with Pakistan and India, by showing students how the histories told in their textbooks differ from each other and by encouraging students to delve deeper into what they learn and to ask the right questions. The History Project sends its trainers into schools to lead sessions with students. They empower teachers by having them as observers, then co-delivering and then leading the curriculum with students. So far, 913 students in 17 schools have been impacted by the program.

Cofounder Qasim Aslam says he was inspired by his experiences at the Seeds of Peace camp where he met young people from the “other” side and learned about the competing history narratives that shape national identities on both sides of the border.

“We live in an age where information is ubiquitous and it’s a matter of accessing it, questioning

it, and learning to analyze it, and then forming your own conclusions, defining your own identity, and not necessarily inheriting it,” he says.

Hikmat Baba Dua, 26

Executive Director, League of Young Female Leaders; Regional Coordinator, LitWorld’s HerStory Initiative | TAMALE, GHANA

Hikmat Baba Dua’s father may have told her that “educating a girl is useless,” but his statement set her on a path to demonstrate the importance of educating girls and women in Ghana.

She founded the League of Young Female Leaders in 2013, a mentorship, advocacy, and literacy nonprofit advancing the status of girls and women. Mentors for high school girls include women from higher education and professionals from a range of fields. The group uses social and traditional media to campaign against child marriage and to encourage girls to stay in school.

Baba Dua also serves as the regional coordinator for LitWorld’s



HerStory Initiative and its partner organization Global G.L.O.W., which supports girls ages 10 to 16 through LitClubs where they are offered safe learning environments, given mentors, and empowered to author their own stories.

“I am living proof of the transformation reading and writing can deliver for a girl child and, on that basis, I realized literacy for girls is a silver bullet to giving a voice to every girl to speak up for herself and others,” says Baba Dua.

Humaira Bachal, 28

Founder, Dream Model Street School | MUWACH GOTH, PAKISTAN



Criticized and even abused when she became the first girl in her family to be educated, Humaira Bachal was a brave 12-year-old when she taught her first class to impoverished neighborhood children, sharing the lessons she’d fought so hard for the right to learn.

By 21, she opened the Dream Model Street School to teach some 1,200 students in the slums of her hometown of Muwach Goth on the outskirts of Karachi. With her 18-year-old sister as principal, Bachal developed an interactive teaching style that is the opposite of the passive teaching methods of most Pakistani schools. She also started the Dream Foundation Trust, which funds projects in education, community development, youth development, and social welfare.

Recognized by the Women in the World Foundation as one of five “Bravest Women on Earth,” Bachal was a finalist for the Global Teacher Prize in 2016. She uses conversation to engage community leaders and elders to challenge biases and archaic thinking about women’s education. Her goal is to build schools in neighboring communities in addition to inspiring more children, especially girls, to seek empowerment through education.



Milagros Barsallo, 29

Cofounder, RISE Colorado | COLORADO, U.S.

A former bilingual literacy teacher and community organizer, Milagros Barsallo cofounded RISE Colorado to help close the opportunity gap and promote educational equity for low-income students and students of color. RISE Colorado is an organization that educates and empowers families and encourages them to become involved in their school communities by lending their voices, ideas, and leadership. The organization also promotes at-home literacy and math learning activities for families.

Barsallo immigrated to the United States from Panama as a child, giving her a unique perspective on what can happen when partnerships are formed between

home and school for English learners. She and her cofounder received recognition from the White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanics when they were named a Bright Spot in Hispanic Education; they also won the 2014 Social Innovation Award from Teach For America and Leadership for Educational Equity’s 2015 Venture Fund and Fellowship.

Michelle Brown, 29

Founder/CEO, CommonLit | WASHINGTON, DC, U.S.

Michelle Brown founded CommonLit, a nonprofit edtech organization, to provide free educational resources and digital assessment tools that ensure students graduate with the secondary-level reading, writing, and speaking skills necessary for success in college and career. To date, the organization has impacted hundreds of thousands of students in grades 5–12.

The texts provided by CommonLit are research based, chosen by teachers, and are print-ready with a set of text-dependent questions.

A former reading teacher and Spanish professor, Brown discovered

the gap in educational resources when she was teaching in rural Mississippi. “I walked into an empty classroom with no teaching materials,” she says. “I spent hours online each night searching for free resources and was frustrated by the lack of high-quality materials.

“When I moved to a charter school in Roxbury [Boston], I was handed a full curriculum on day one that had been used by veteran English teachers,” she continues. “I was struck by this huge disparity. It made me angry that this was unavailable to me in Mississippi. That’s why it’s so important to me that CommonLit remains free for teachers.”



Alex Corbitt, 26

Seventh-Grade English Teacher, MS331 | NEW YORK, U.S.

Real world-based projects transform Alex Corbitt’s classroom in The Bronx into a courtroom, an interactive crime scene, and even the platform for social justice campaigns.

“My job as an educator is to empower students to become compassionate, critically engaged citizens,” he says. “Being ‘literate’ is more than having the ability to read and write. Literate citizens are well informed, wary of media bias, and committed to improving their communities. I bring the ‘real world’ into my classroom so that students can engage in literacy practices that define their daily lives and future careers.”

One example was a letter-writing campaign to local and state officials about New York City’s “stop-and-frisk” policy and youth incarceration. “We even visited a local precinct to engage



in a collaborative and constructive dialogue with the community’s law enforcement staff,” Corbitt says.

He also strives to provide students with greater access to quality literature. He’s collected more than 1,500 books for classroom libraries, and he gamifies independent reading instruction by

allowing students to “level up” and earn increasingly prestigious bookmarks and classroom privileges.

Along with teaching students, Corbitt shares his pedagogy with others. In 2016, he was named the No. 1 most influential e-learning Twitter blogger by Analytica.



Tanyella Evans, 29

Cofounder/CEO, Library For All | NEW YORK, U.S.

When Tanyella Evans spent a year as a volunteer teacher in Uganda, she had to write every lesson on the board, and every student had to write down every word, which left no time for fun or creativity. Evans met Rebecca McDonald in 2012, her soon-to-be cofounder, and realized they were looking for the same thing: a scalable solution to the lack of access to books in the developing world.

That's why Library For All was founded. This nonprofit digital library offers e-books to people in developing countries through their cloud-based platform, which works completely offline on any device and can be updated if connections become available. The content is in local and international languages and is culturally relevant.

One organization the program works with is the NGO Restavek Freedom Foundation to educate Haitian children whose families have given them to relatives or strangers to become unpaid domestic

servants and who are typically denied the opportunity to go to school.

"It's incredibly heartwarming to see children logging into their account on our digital library and being so familiar with the books in our Haitian collection," Evans says. "One student told me that she wants every school in Haiti to have access to Library For All, so that keeps me motivated."

Library For All, which aims to reach 5 million children by 2017, also serves children in Cambodia, the Congo, Mongolia, and Rwanda.

Jeff Fonda, 29

Founder/CEO, The Literate Earth Project | PENNSYLVANIA, U.S.

Jeff Fonda, of Philadelphia, founded The Literate Earth Project after a service trip to Uganda in 2009 where he saw students using only hand-copied versions of textbooks and having almost

no outlet to read for enjoyment. The few books owned by the school were locked away, but when he got his hands on a couple world atlases and showed them to his students, he saw how excited the children were to read about and see new cities, trees, and people.

To date, The Literate Earth Project has opened 10 school libraries in Uganda, with four more slated to open this year.

"My favorite part of The Literate Earth Project has been witnessing the arc of community involvement with our libraries," he says. "When we started, schools didn't believe that we were offering to partner with them without a catch. Government officials [had to] call the school administrators to ensure them our work was legitimate. Now, we have a backlog of schools wanting to work with us. As our funding grows, we will be able to make a difference in every community that wants our help."



Gustavo Fuga, 23

Founder, 4You2 | SÃO PAULO, BRAZIL

In Brazil, speaking English can open doors to higher education and can result in up to 64% higher wages—yet only 5% of the population can speak the language because only those with money can afford the expensive classroom-based courses.

Gustavo Fuga, who grew up in an underprivileged area of Rio de Janeiro, didn't have that advantage when he headed off to the economics program at the University of São Paulo, but that's where he discovered an answer.

"I ended up living with many foreigners at university," he says, "and it made me learn the language in less than

one year, without paying anything and [while] having fun with my friends."

That concept formed the basis of 4You2, a self-sustaining social entrepreneurship-focused business that has served more than 5,000 language learners and hosted 180 teachers since it was founded in 2011.

With learning centers based in São Paulo favelas, 4You2 employs fluent English speakers from diverse countries as teachers. They immerse themselves in the community and live with host families to provide a conversation-based approach to language learning for Brazilians who can now afford to learn English and gain the advantages it affords.

Anneli Hershman, 26

PhD Student/Research Assistant, Massachusetts Institute of Technology | MASSACHUSETTS, U.S.

Research about the brain and reading may sound esoteric, but for Anneli Hershman, it's the fascinating framework for building creative, fun, and interactive educational games.

She and colleagues at the MIT Media Lab are developing creative and socially collaborative educational apps for children and families in low-income neighborhoods. One of their apps is SpeechBlocks, which is a child-centered, self-expressive early literacy app that helps children explore alphabetic



principles through manipulating letter blocks to create infinite real or nonsense words. They have successfully piloted SpeechBlocks in Boston-area classrooms and hope to expand their research further into the community.

Her passion deepened while tutoring a child who would look up in fear whenever the word *read* was mentioned. One day, they talked about what kind of food they each liked. Soon, they were Googling recipes, writing instructions, gathering ingredients, and making a batch of cupcakes.

"I have never seen her so excited to read, because she was able to create and communicate," Hershman recalls. "I saw her motivation that day and vowed that I would work hard to ensure that every child can feel empowered and motivated to explore their own educational potential."



Imani Henry, 15

CEO/Publisher, 100 Men Reading | DELAWARE, U.S.

Imani Henry was struggling to read as a young child because of a medical challenge that affected her vision. While attending the Reading Assist Institute to overcome her challenges, her father and brothers also played a big role in helping her to learn.

That experience was the spark for 100 Men Reading, which she founded at age 10, where men from the community visit with children in preschools, childcare centers, and elementary schools, offer them a free book, and read together. Today, more than 2,000 volunteers have served more than 50,000 children across several states, and the program recently expanded into Puerto Rico thanks to a \$25,000 Peace First Prize fellowship.

"In today's society, there is a very small percentage of male educators, so children are not exposed to positive male role models who can help them better master literacy skills through their strong leadership and presentation," says Henry. "I also think it's important for men to read to children and promote literacy because it sends a positive message to the children, especially in the underserved communities [where most] children do not have a positive male role model in their lives."

Surya Karki, 25

Founder/CEO, Diyalo Foundation; Country Director, United World Schools Nepal; Cofounder, Maya Universe Academy | HELUWABESI, NEPAL/MAINE, U.S.

For Surya Karki, his own access to a quality education inspired him to found organizations that make it possible for other children to have the same advantage.

"If not for the schools I attended and the teachers I had as my guides, I would have been working in the Gulf as a cheap laborer," he explains.

He began by cofounding Maya Universe Academy in 2011, a free private education institution in Nepal that focuses on literacy in many forms, from educational to agricultural. Parents are required to volunteer at the school and help conduct community initiatives. Now, Karki runs the nonprofit Diyalo Foundation, which promotes sustainable development through education, renewable energy access, and community-supported sustainable agriculture, and United World Schools Nepal, which builds free schools for rural children.

Today, Diyalo's and United World Schools Nepal's holistic approaches reject the memorization model so often used in Nepalese primary schools.

Instead, they promote place-based, hands-on experiential learning to help students develop emotionally, socially, academically, and through language proficiency.

Ashlyn Kemp, 22

Student, Longwood University | VIRGINIA, U.S.

The secret to teaching grammar, if you ask Ashlyn Kemp, is to have a positive attitude and use fun, interactive team learning activities that demonstrate the benefits of well-constructed writing.

Kemp was inspired to research how teachers' negative attitudes toward grammar transfer directly to students after seeing how Longwood University's Sean Ruday shared his enthusiasm for the topic with his students. She presented her research findings at the 2015 NCTE Assembly for the Teaching of English Grammar and will again this fall, and her work appeared in the August 2016 issue of *ATEG Journal*, the assembly's peer-reviewed journal. Kemp also applied Ruday's approach in the field while teaching high-need middle schoolers at the tuition-free Breakthrough academic enrichment program during the last two summers.

"When we, as teachers, walk into a room with a bad attitude toward



something, our students will feel the same," she says. "If we show them we don't care about what they are learning, then why should they care?"

She adds, "Showing them I'm excited doesn't change their opinions, but it does change their attitudes."

Tynea Lewis, 28

Site Administrator, LitPick Student Book Reviews | PENNSYLVANIA, U.S.

Tynea Lewis works directly with students, teachers, authors, publishers, and other visitors to the interactive LitPick website, which offers free e-books to students in exchange for their written book reviews (and even gift cards to the most consistent reviewers). As the administrator, Lewis oversees all activities of the site, including editing reviews and offering students feedback on how to improve their writing.

A graduate of Millersville University of Pennsylvania's elementary



education program (with an added certification in K-12 library science), this former teacher helped Maryland-based LitPick create an educator dashboard to help teachers oversee classrooms and book clubs involved in the LitPick program.

"I want all students to have access to books and resources that help them experience and capture the amazing world in which we live," she says. "I hope my passion for literacy spreads to all the people I encounter, and I hope to make a difference in the lives of others by showing them the power of reading and writing."

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Photo courtesy of Cheng-Yu Li and Cite Publishing Ltd.

Kuan-Wei "Ray" Lu, 28

CEO, Junyi Academy | TAIPEI, TAIWAN

Kuan-Wei "Ray" Lu started experimenting with creative math and science instructional videos while he was interning as a medical doctor. Today, he is CEO of Junyi Academy, the largest online learning platform in Taiwan, which provides more than 8,000 videos and 1,600 sets of interactive exercises for 430,000 users in grades K-12 in Taiwan, throughout Asia, and the United States.

"We can view math as a language to communicate with others," he explains. "With better math literacy, people have a higher opportunity to get a better job, from business to engineering to medicine. The most important part is that with better math literacy, people can understand the world with a macro-view through statistics and economics."

His organization recently worked with the Taiwan Reading Association to help struggling students improve their math skills, while the association focused on Chinese and English language literacy.

"Science literacy is important because it empowers learners to create," Lu adds. "Through experiments, new ideas and even new theories may come up and that's a huge power [for supporting] innovation."

Kathryn Lett, 27

EL Teacher, Kentwood Public Schools | MICHIGAN, U.S.

Kathryn Lett's school community includes refugee families from 20 countries. Teaching some 400 students English over the last three years has inspired her not only to create events that promote family involvement and cultural celebrations, but also to travel the world to understand the challenges her students face when they start a new life in the United States.

This summer, she spent two months teaching in Thailand, where she volunteered at orphanages for refugee children much like her own students. She also plans to visit Nepal and Tanzania. She'll use the lessons learned in her teaching as well as in her work on the board of directors for the West Michigan Refugee Education and Cultural Center, a local nonprofit dedicated to helping refugee families integrate into the community. She has also organized professional development conferences for teachers, both in the United States and Thailand, and workshops for parents to bridge cultural and literacy gaps, and is developing an adult ESL program



for refugee parents so they can learn the language while establishing a relationship with their children's school community.

Lett says, "I dream of a day where students, parents, and peoples of all nations can learn and grow with each other instead of away from each other."





Sean T. Lynch, 29

English Department Head, Commonwealth Academy for Inner City Scholars | MASSACHUSETTS, U.S.

As English Department Head at Commonwealth Academy in Springfield, Lynch has developed a curriculum centered on gaming and great works of literature. Games effectively promote reading skills, he says, because “the mysteries inherent in the exploration of literature invite us to imagine and to play.”

The literature he incorporates includes Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, selections from Chaucer and the Venerable Bede, and Marlowe’s *Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus*, which are referenced in “geek games” like *Magic: the Gathering* and *League of Legends*.

He knew he was successful when a student told him, “This book gave me the pictures in my head.”

“That phrase has stuck with me,” he explains. “My goal is to make sure that none of my students are just reading the words.”

Lynch even helped students form their own league to play *League of Legends* and secured computers so they could compete at the international level.

In addition, he leads after-school readers’ and writers’ clubs and runs a weekly Saturday School to provide a safe place for students to study and receive academic support.

John Maldonado, 25

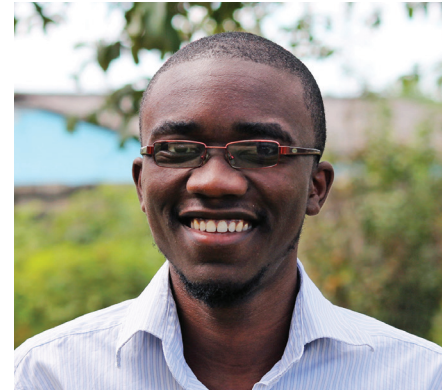
Special Education Teacher, P368K Star Academy | NEW YORK, U.S.
Technology provides powerful tools for helping John Maldonado’s students with autism to communicate and develop literacy skills.

“The concrete, predictable cause-and-effect nature of technology is something that my students easily understand and feel comfortable with,” he says. “Technology allows my students to move past whatever communicative difficulties they may have and express themselves in whatever way is the most effective for them.”

Students in Maldonado’s class participate in discussions through Google Chat, create virtual worlds using interactive apps, and re-create scenes from the texts they read to show comprehension. This past school year, his high school students finished the year knowing how to use nearly the entire Google for Education suite to navigate and create assignments.

In addition to his work in the classroom, Maldonado serves as a training academy director for NYC Teaching Fellows, where he builds and manages the preservice training experience. As of this fall, he will also be an adjunct lecturer at Hunter College.

Currently a PhD student at Fordham University’s program in Contemporary Learning and Interdisciplinary Research, Maldonado’s work will focus on contemporary literacies and language acquisition in the special education classroom.



Shuko Musemangezhi, 23

Founder, Zambian Association of Literacy | LUSAKA/NDOLA, ZAMBIA
Shuko Musemangezhi founded the Zambian Association of Literacy in 2013 to help address illiteracy among the lower classes, which is perpetuating gross inequalities across his country.

“Literacy helps marginalized groupings to employ rationality, which later works as a bedrock and/or tool for them to have access to the same opportunities as those in higher social classes,” he explains.

The Zambian Association of Literacy promotes community literacy through M4I, an annual educational seminar; National Youth Camps for students; LitClubs, which are offered in schools throughout Zambia as a safe place for students to read and learn; and multiple youth skills and educational workshops throughout the year.

Musemangezhi says that before he was literate, he was a slave to those who were literate. “I had missed out on many

opportunities that people from the other clusters would get. As soon as I started reading, writing, [and] developing my listening and speaking skills, [my] confidence increased and this opened amazing doors and a life full of adventure.”

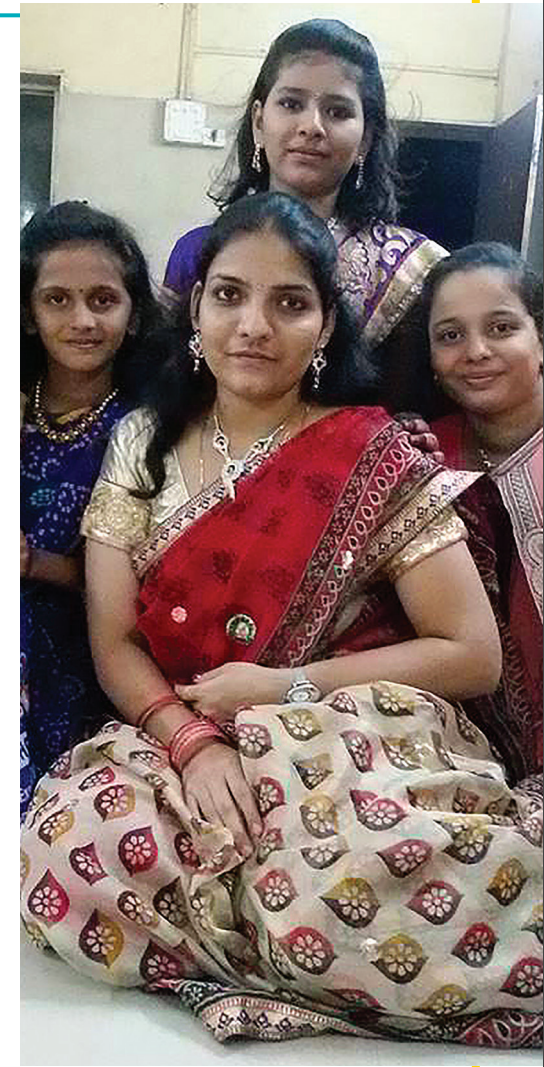
Aarti Naik, 28

Founder, SAKHI for Girls’ Education | MUMBAI, INDIA

In India, the word *Sakhi* means “a female friend who inspires, guides, and supports other girls for a good cause.”

That summarizes the mission of SAKHI for Girls’ Education, an NGO founded in 2008 by Aarti Naik to provide slum-based girls in the Mulund area of Mumbai with a quality education. Naik was inspired by her experience as a dropout and her three-year struggle, unable to earn a living wage, before returning to pass her exams. Focusing on literacy and life skills, Naik has created safe learning spaces serving 400 girls, up from just 5 when she started.

“Eight years ago I was school drop-out girl, but now I feel so happy to see that my SAKHI has become [a] hope for many girls from my slum community,” she says. “My girls are going to school confidently. It is the great achievement of my life.”



Ekaterina Popova, 28

Board Member/Secretary, Reading Association of Russia; Sociology of Education Lecturer, State Academic University for the Humanities; Researcher, Institute of Sociology of the Russian Academy of Sciences | MOSCOW, RUSSIA

Ekaterina Popova plays a vital role with the Reading Association of Russia, which she joined while pursuing her doctorate in sociology of education in 2010. Popova’s outreach as primary manager of the association’s website has been critical in attracting new members and in raising the functional literacy level of her students and association members alike.

Regarding the link between the sociology of education and literacy, Popova notes that, despite the processes of globalization and expansion of higher education, “researchers still observe a high level of inequity in education.”

Popova’s research focuses on youth in education, particularly motivation, attitudes, and future educational choices, and aspects of functional literacy and lifelong learning.

She adds, “Lifelong learning—including informal, online learning—helps to overcome this inequity. Literacy and motivation to education are the key elements in discovering new opportunities. The problems of how different types of motivation to education affect educational strategies [and] how the level of functional literacy influences youths’ engagement in lifelong learning are analyzed in my study.”

Swetha Prabakaran, 16

Founder, Everybody Code Now! | VIRGINIA, U.S.

Swetha Prabakaran caught the programming bug when she took a ninth-grade computer programming class, inspiring her to found a nonprofit that introduces underserved students of all ages to her new passion: coding.

Today, Everybody Code Now! offers computer science camps, workshops, and mentorship opportunities in 12 states to teach students—especially girls—that determination and hard work could create their future in the science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) disciplines. Plans are in the works to expand internationally.

Inspired by her computer engineer mother and her high school computer science teacher, Prabakaran says, “I really wanted other girls to have strong mentors and exposure to tech the way I did. The realization that most



schools don't offer any sort of computer science course for any students further strengthened my resolve to create a program to introduce more kids to computer science.”

Kellyn Sirach, 23

ELA Teacher, Booth Elementary School | ILLINOIS, U.S.

Kellyn Sirach saw many barriers to literacy in her rural community: no public library, a closet-sized school library (literally), and middle school students who were reading far below their grade level.

“As a child, I was fortunate enough to grow up in a literacy-rich environment with parents who held education and reading to the utmost importance,” she says.

To make literacy a priority at her school, Sirach started by making independent reading front-and-center in her fifth- through eighth-grade classes. She then formed a sixth-through eighth-grade book club called The Booth Bookies, established a student newspaper dedicated to promoting literacy awareness throughout the community, and created



the Million Word Club competition to see which grade could read 1 million words first.

This past spring, the Bookies held a grand opening for The Little Free Library in Enfield, which was chartered with \$500 raised by the club members.

“Our goal for the library is to consistently house a variety of diverse books for children, teens, and adults,” she says. “The Bookies are now stewards of the library, which means we are responsible for switching out books and [maintaining] the library. The superintendent said that there were more people at the Little Free Library grand opening than at a normal basketball game.”

Kelly Taylor, 23

Language Development Teacher, Peel Language Development School | PERTH, AUSTRALIA

The creative arts can have a positive impact on oral language development for young children with specific language impairment, says Kelly Taylor.

Taylor works within a team of educators at Peel Language Development School to provide an early intervention service for students with a language impairment. With the support of the school, her current work and research explores the impact that

the arts can have on students with a learning disability. She focuses on providing more opportunities to engage students creatively. She recalls using drama and the visual arts to engage one young boy.

“He went from speaking in two-word sentences to retelling a whole story with coherence,” she says. “This might not seem like much, but for a student who has struggled to communicate his whole life, the success he experienced and the pure joy on his face when he told this story was one of those amazing moments teachers experience.”

Taylor also has had an impact on her fellow educators. She founded the Australian Literacy Educators' Association's Early Career Teachers' Network to help bridge the gap between university and classroom teaching. The group now has more than 300 members and holds an annual conference to celebrate the successes of new teachers.



Sonesouliat Vongsouline, 26

Education Director, Big Brother Mouse | LUANG PRABANG, LAOS

For the last 10 years, Sonesouliat Vongsouline has been getting kids excited about reading in a country where few books are published and where society doesn't typically think reading can be fun.

He was just 16 years old when he started working for Big Brother Mouse, which publishes children's books in Lao and English and goes directly into schools to help promote a love of reading among both students and teachers. Vongsouline started by organizing book parties at rural schools where books are scarce and setting up reading rooms (in volunteers' homes) in rural villages. He now holds 500 book parties a year. The parties have given 250,000 children in 900 schools their first books.

Vongsouline also has written several books on using games in the classroom and the importance of read-aloud, and he has helped set up SSR programs in schools—which Big Brother Mouse received an IBBY Reading Promotion Award for this year.

“Often I see parents go to work on the farm and they take their children,” Vongsouline says. “After we set up some village libraries in the countryside, sometimes I saw children taking a book and reading it while their parents worked. That never happened before and that made me very happy.”



Matt Presser, 28

Teacher and Instructional Coach, King-Robinson Inter-District Magnet School; Classroom Fellow for the U.S. Department of Education | CONNECTICUT, U.S.

Matt Presser has taught reading across all grade levels from elementary to high

school. Most recently, he was the only male reading specialist at any of the 32 city elementary and middle schools in New Haven, a role that allowed him to “advocate for thinking differently about how to engage boys with literacy.”

A large part of Presser's work involved mentoring students working

on passion projects, including a young men's leadership club whose work earned national recognition from the Entertainment Industry Foundation; a group of fourth graders developing a neighborhood museum to counter the public's negative perception of where they live; and a group of eighth graders frustrated by the lack of male teachers in public schools who presented their research and recommendations at a college lecture course to try to recruit university students to go into teaching.

Last school year, he served as a Teaching Ambassador Fellow with the U.S. Department of Education, making him one of nine teachers across the country advising the U.S. Secretary of Education. In this role, he traveled to seven states to hold roundtables with teachers and share information regarding federal policy, and he wrote a weekly teachers' newsletter with some 90,000 subscribers. Presser recently enrolled in Harvard Graduate School of Education's educational leadership doctoral program.



Melissa Wells, 29

Literacy Coach, Arcadia Elementary School | SOUTH CAROLINA, U.S.

When Melissa Wells introduced the first day of independent reading to her third graders—all but one of whom were African American or Latino/a—they did anything they could to hide from her: ducking behind furniture, building folder forts on their desks, or changing their books every few minutes. None of them believed they were readers.

By the end of the year, students' attitudes had changed completely. As a literacy consultant and contributor for Mary Pope Osborne's Classroom Adventures Project, which develops cross-curricular units based on the Magic Tree House series, Wells branched off the standard skill-and-drill reading instruction by incorporating more engaging books into her lessons.

On the last day of school, "my kids begged to stay back from a field trip to read instead."

Wells is now a literacy coach in a school with a thriving population of ELs, where one of her main objectives is to establish a digital dialogue with families—who she believes are the most untapped resource in education. In addition to running literacy activities such as Family Literacy Nights, Wells and the school media specialist created book bundles with award-winning multicultural literature on e-readers for families to check out



(flipped instructional videos will soon be included), and she blogs about creating equitable learning spaces for minoritized students.

"Even though it was my job that year to help students grow as readers, they actually taught me much more about the importance of critical questioning of policy and practices as a means of advocating for the needs of all learners," Wells says.

Matiullah Wesa, 23

Founder, Pen Path Civil Society | KABUL, AFGHANISTAN

For Matiullah Wesa, educating the next generation in southern Afghanistan is a passion that traces back to the day he was in fourth grade when the Taliban set his school on fire.

Although some parents could afford to send their children to school in Kabul, children of those who could not went without an education. Wesa worked secretly with his village community to educate the poor children, including a number of girls, and from that experience, the Pen Path Civil Society was born.

Wesa, a social worker who recently graduated from Savitribai Phule Pune University in India, says his organization, founded in 2009, believes that educating girls, in particular, is central to changing the future of villages for good. Some 31 schools have been reopened thanks to Pen Path's efforts.

In addition to revitalizing Afghan education, Pen Path has encouraged literacy in villages by stocking seven volunteer-run libraries with some 40,000 books collected through social media campaigns. A story about one of the libraries was featured in a March edition of *The New York Times*.

Pen Path has expanded to many provinces including Kandahar, Helmand, Uruzgan, Ghazni, Nangarhar,



Laghman, Zabul, Wardak, Farah, Paktika, Badghis, and Nimruz. It has also distributed books and school materials to more than 300,000 children in the worst-affected conflict areas, and awarded 120 scholarships to universities in Afghanistan and abroad.

"I believe that putting an end to war is only possible by educating people, especially girls, and that is the reason I enforce the path of education," Wesa says. ■

Know someone who should make the list?

Nominations for 2017 will open in March.