



Yulil Alonso-Garza in her 21st year teaching Language Arts in Imperial County. She is currently an ELA 8th grade teacher at Enrique Camarena Jr. High in Calexico, California.



children.

The most memorable read aloud of my elementary school journey was *As A Mother*. I also didn't instill this culture in my home with my own children. As a language arts teacher I also cringed at the thought of picking up a book. I was impacted by Erin Gruwell and her students from the Freedom Writers foundation

after reading *Freedom Writers Diary* and watching the movie. It was an eye-opening experience to see the complete transformation in her students. I was finally able to see my own students go through that type of transformation when I started working at an alternative education school. I received a generous budget to buy books for my reluctant non-readers who needed to connect to content. It is then that I discovered The Bluford Series novels, a collection of contemporary young adult stories based in a fictional high school. The characters depicted and the story plots related to my students' lives. It was the beginning of my love for young adult literature. I witnessed immediate changes in my students' self-esteem, reading interest, and voice. I continued to use this series and asked students to recommend more novels.

As the founder and president of the nonprofit Mothers and Men Against Gangs Coalition, I also created an important component into our youth programs. We created a MAG Teens Book Club and partnered with public libraries to do read alouds for all ages. It continues to be a success and an important community literacy project. It was the beginning of my literary journey as a teacher and book worm.

The real transformation came in 2018 when our district scheduled Pernill Ripp as our welcome back keynote speaker and offered three additional sessions. Her philosophy and lessons were a reminder that



students aren't non-readers or reluctant readers. She reminded me that students just need to find what they like to read and we must provide them with a menu and book tastings in order to find their inspiration to continue reading. But as a teacher who serves students who struggle with reading, I was especially interested in her teaching practices to engage reluctant readers. "If you wouldn't put your strongest readers through a computer program, please don't put your most vulnerable readers through it." This is the lesson I walked away with that completely changed the trajectory of my classroom environment and literary focus in my lessons.

I have learned to give students literary freedom and it has changed their confidence in choosing more titles. I've also been teaching the standards and skills independently and having students use their choice of novels to show their understanding of those standards and skills. It has been a complete change in the literacy culture in my classroom. As a result, I have made serious investments in my classroom library. I started with a small classroom library with a budget that was given to all ELA teachers, and this inspired me to continue to build on it and started to pay for books from my personal money. I'm thankful I have a literary buddy, Mrs. Mendoza, our academic support teacher (AST), who continues to share new book titles and new engaging literary ideas. As a result of my own success in my classroom, I decided to share my experience with my department and with my other colleagues in partnership with our AST. I have been working closely with our administration, AST, and newly formed literacy committee to establish a schoolwide reading culture.

With this Book Love Grant my goal is to enhance the voices of my students by increasing the amount of diverse book titles, authors, cultures, protagonists, and graphic novels. My goal is not only to impact reluctant readers, but to also enhance the knowledge and understanding of my students' cultural backgrounds. With this grant I know that my library will be more engaging for all students. Thank you for your work to make literacy a priority in all classrooms across the country.