

**Principles Essay**  
**By Aliyah Majeed-Hall**

“Did you know Jupiter is a gas giant? And it has a big red spot that’s actually a storm. The storm’s been going on for more than a hundred years!” Mateo says, swinging his legs back and forth excitedly, looking up from the page of the book we are reading together.

“Really?” I ask, raising my eyebrows in surprise. “That’s so cool. Tell me more about Jupiter.” As Mateo proceeds to rattle off facts about Jupiter, I suppress a smile and listen.

I first met eight-year-old Mateo (not his real name) more than a year ago. I was working at Affordable Housing & Communities in Arlington, Virginia, in the afterschool program, helping children who attend the Title I school nearby improve their reading skills.

A few minutes with Mateo and you just know he’s supremely bright and curious. His face lights up when he talks about his favorite things – rocks, black holes, cool bugs. But despite his gifts, Mateo sometimes struggles with reading assignments. After Mateo told me he didn’t have books at home to read (except the Bible), I started bringing in kids’ National Geographic books from my bookshelf for him to take home. To my surprise, Mateo immediately pored over them, absorbing the contents like a sponge. His new-found focus and knowledge blew me away.

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Research shows that having books at home early in life is a strong predictor of literacy, academic success, and long-term achievement, regardless of income-level ([Scholastic 2023](#); [Evans et. al, 2010](#)). Yet many children like Mateo – especially in low-income communities – lack access to books. According to Scholastic, there is only 1 book for every 300 children in some high-poverty neighborhoods, compared to 13 books per child in middle-income areas (Scholastic Access to Books Report). Significantly, 61% of low-income families have *no books at all* for their children at home (Scholastic FACE Research Compendium). This disparity contributes to a persistent achievement gap between higher- and lower-income children ([Stanford CEPA](#); [Reardon, 2021](#)).

At AHC, I saw first-hand that young children like Mateo were not starting from the same starting line. Even in a well-resourced and civic-minded community like Arlington, so many children lack basic resources to thrive in school and beyond.

My motivation for starting One Word Reading was to give children like Mateo some of the same resources wealthier children have to succeed and to help address the learning gaps between low- and high-income children in my community. My motivation is rooted in the natural rights

principles of **justice** and **equality** and a sense of **civic responsibility** to do something to lift up others facing barriers and income inequality.

That is why the mission of One Word Reading is to provide children from low-income communities in particular with good books to help build their own collections. And since the beginning of 2024, One Word Reading has distributed **3,724** high-quality children's books to over **1,400** underserved children/families, mostly in Northern Virginia, but also in **13** other states (AL, AZ, DC, DE, GA, KY, MD, MS, OK, NC, SC, TN, VA, WV).

Every step of One Word Reading's growth was guided by values of **humility** and **respect** for the communities and children we are trying to reach and a commitment to **justice** to address barriers in low-income communities. To reach as many children as possible and lower barriers to accessing books, I go to wherever children and families naturally gather. We distribute books at shelters, after-school programs, affordable housing and transitional housing sites, food pantries and distribution centers, community day events at Title I schools, and youth organizations, among others. And when we can't go in person, we work with organizations that provide direct services to children so that they can host mini-book fairs, build on-site libraries or give books to their young residents. We've also built community partnerships with local organizations and Arlington public schools to amplify our impact and received local, state and national recognition—from Volunteer Arlington service awards, to the George H.W. Bush Points of Light organization, to *The Today Show*.

The virtues of **humility** and **respect**—and the principles of **equality** and **justice**—shape both the books we offer and how we engage with communities. **Respect** and humility in this context means ensuring children have stories they can see themselves in and that are in a language accessible to them and their families. And so a core part of our outreach is offering a generous supply of books with diverse characters and experiences and books in both Spanish and English.

Respect and humility also mean learning from others who know more in order to be responsive to their needs and honor their dignity. During book events, I seek feedback from children and families, observe which books children gravitate toward and take notes. I've learned that sparking a love of reading means offering titles children enjoy and that don't feel like homework (graphic novels are a big hit). It also means providing a generous supply of ALA award-winning and new books, even though they're expensive, because children deserve and benefit most from books with rich stories, compelling characters, vibrant illustrations, and complex themes. I've learned Spanish-language books are especially popular in our community, even among fluent English speakers, because reading can then become a shared family activity. I've learned how to make events exciting and special for children and offer "reading swag" like colorful stickers, bookmarks, pencils, and gift bags so kids can build their own reading kits and feel like they are taking home something special.

Guided by the virtue of **moderation**, we seek primarily in-kind donations and repurpose as many gently used books as possible to conserve resources and reduce waste. So far, we've received over 3,000 gently used books from donors. I personally inspect, repair and set aside books not in excellent condition; out of respect to our readers, we do not want these books to feel like someone's giveaways – we want them to feel like the gifts we intend them to be.

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My hope and long-term vision for One Word Reading is to ensure that children from vulnerable communities in all 50 states have books they treasure at home or wherever they may live.

When children have books at home, they turn to them again and again, deepening their understanding of language, characters and ideas. Through stories, they develop a moral compass, reflect on **justice** and injustice, and learn from characters facing adversity. They absorb lessons in **integrity**, **courage**, and kindness. Repeated exposure to books also fosters critical thinking and empathy – building blocks of strong communities and a healthy **democracy**.

I couldn't have known it when I started One Word Reading, but the link between literacy and **democracy** feels more vital now than ever. We are living in a moment when reactionary forces are threatening fundamental freedoms – banning books in schools, silencing dissent within universities and the press, trampling **minority rights**, and erasing facts and history from our textbooks, museums and public discourse. Our fundamental freedoms — especially **freedom of expression** — and our core democratic principles, like respect **for the rule of law**, depend on an informed and engaged citizenry. And that starts with literacy.