

# Empowering Literacy Through Community Involvement

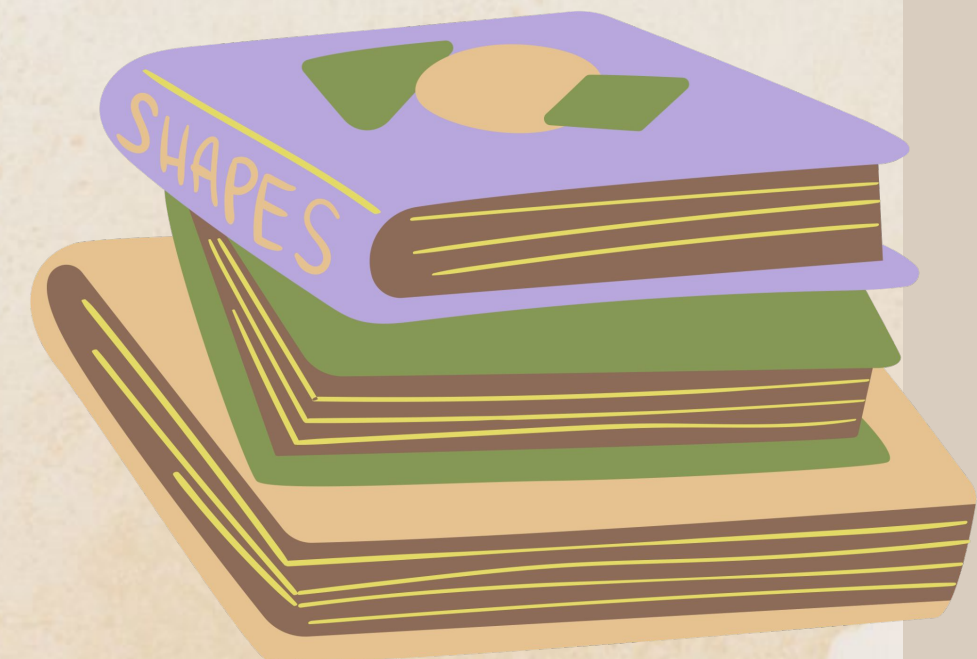
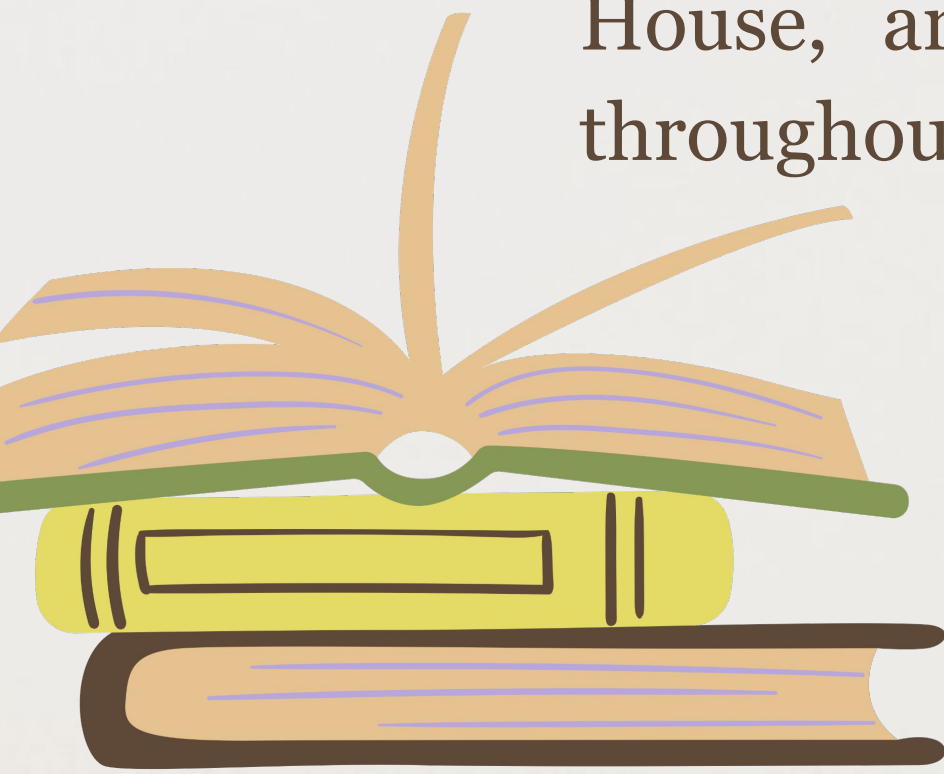
Social Justice Advanced Authentic Research

Armita Fathzadeh



# Welcome & Introduction

Hi, I'm Armita Fathzadeh and I'm part of the Social Justice Pathway at Gunn. For my project, I focused on enhancing literacy among underserved youth in the Bay Area. I want to thank the librarians and staff at local nonprofit libraries and the nonprofits where I tutored—especially the ones supporting low-income children. Their commitment inspired me throughout this project. I'd especially like to thank I'd like to thank the local libraries, nonprofits like Lauren's House, and my amazing teacher Ms.Firenzi for supporting me throughout this project.



# Project Overview

- **The Problem:** I noticed that many children, especially in under-resourced communities, don't have access to consistent, engaging literacy support.
- **My Project:** I organized and led read-aloud sessions at local libraries and provided one-on-one tutoring through a nonprofit for low income students to help boost kids' reading confidence and skills.
- **My Process:** I grounded my work in empathy interviews, educational research, and partnerships with local organizations.
- **The Impact:** I supported dozens of kids, many of whom showed noticeable growth in their reading and focus. Families and staff gave overwhelmingly positive feedback.
- **What I Learned:** Building relationships, being consistent, and tailoring my approach to each child were key to creating real impact.



# The Need – Why Literacy?

**National Issue:** Reading scores have declined, especially post-COVID.

**Stat:** “In the U.S., 61% of low-income children have no books at home (American Academy of Pediatrics).”

**Why It Matters:** Literacy is tied to long-term academic and life success.

**Local Problem:** Many families in our area can’t access one-on-one reading support.

**Research:** Local nonprofits like YCS and libraries are understaffed or overwhelmed.

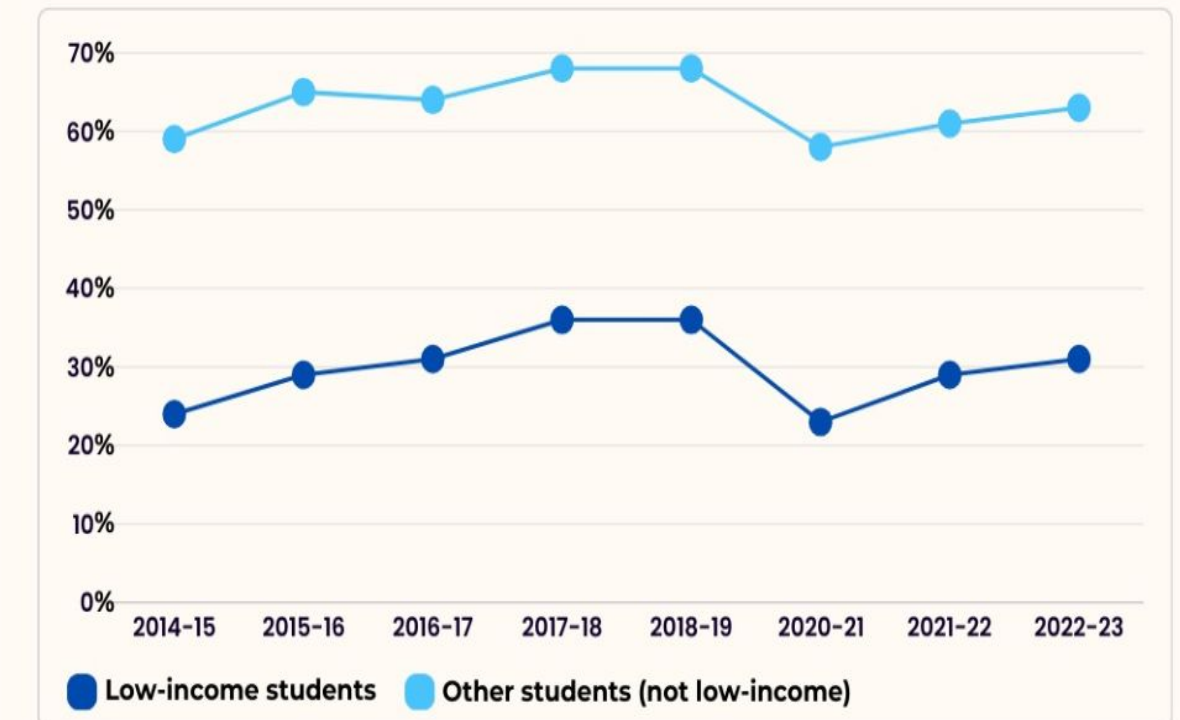
**Empathy Insight:** One librarian said, “We have books—but not always enough readers.”

**Empathy insight:** “I’ve worked with kids in under-resourced communities and saw how the lack of access limits imagination and opportunity.”

**Expert quote:** “Literacy is a foundational right — a doorway to agency.” – From my interview with Librarian, from Mitchell Park Library.

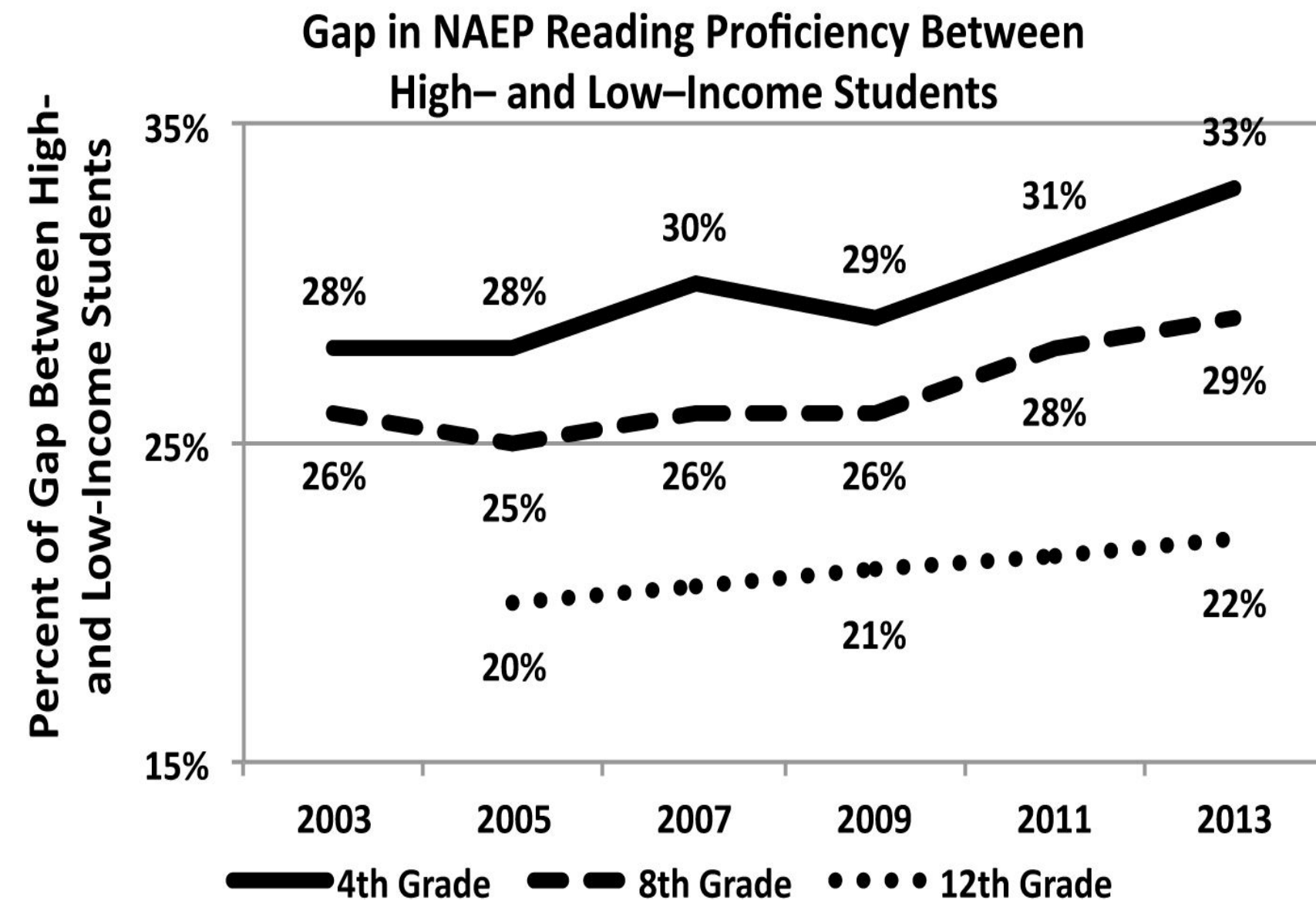
## Percentage of Third Graders Reading on Grade Level in California

*Low-income students’ reading skills have lagged behind for almost a decade.*



# Empathy & Research

- I interviewed local parents, educators, and librarians.
- Empathy interviews revealed:
  - Parents feel guilty about not having time to read with their kids.
  - Some kids lose interest in reading early on.
- Research shows early reading impacts vocabulary development, self-esteem, and future academic success.
- Expert insight: A Palo Alto librarian told me, “Even here, you’d be surprised how many kids need more support outside school.”



# My Project – Vision & Goals

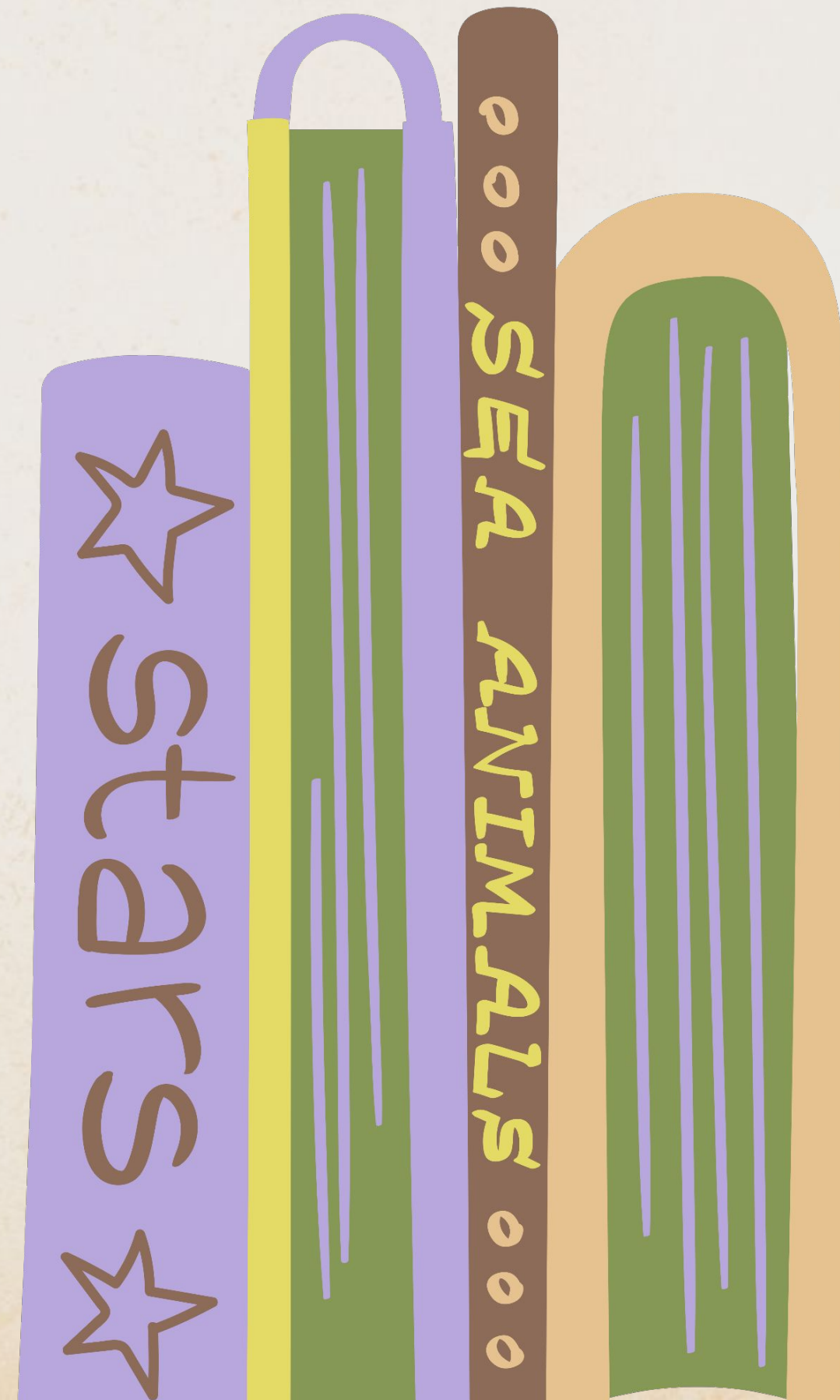
## Vision:

I envisioned a community where every child — regardless of their family's income — has access to literacy support, mentorship, and the transformative power of books.

I believed that by directly engaging with students through consistent tutoring and reading sessions, I could help close the literacy gap, spark a love of learning, and empower children to imagine bigger futures for themselves.

## Goals:

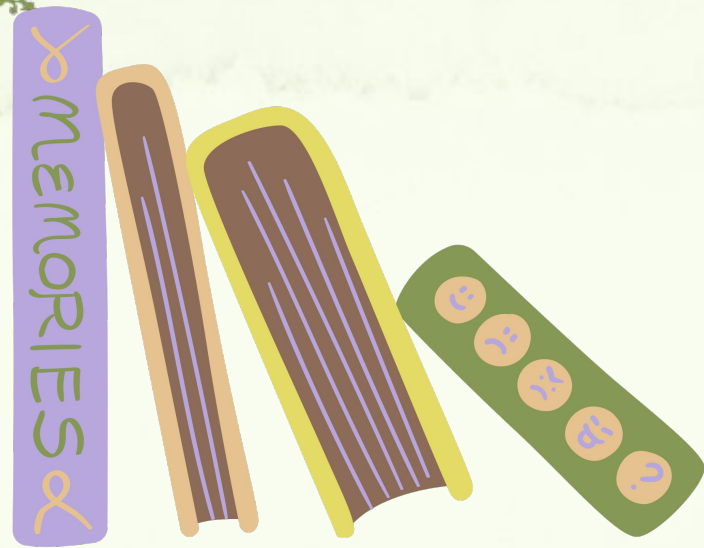
- **Provide Consistent Academic Support:** Tutored low-income children at Bay Area nonprofits for 2 hours almost every day, building their reading and writing skills over time.
- **Foster a Love for Literacy:** Read aloud to children at a low-income nonprofit library twice a week, choosing stories that were culturally relevant, engaging, and age-appropriate.
- **Build Relationships:** Create a safe, supportive space where students felt heard, valued, and capable of success.
- **Address Equity Gaps:** Directly target the literacy inequities affecting underserved communities in my area.
- **Model Sustainable Action:** Design a project that could inspire future volunteers and possibly be expanded beyond my own involvement.



# From Idea to Action

- I read to children at local libraries twice a week from February to April.
- I built a consistent routine that made kids excited about reading.
- I brought books I knew would engage them—diverse stories, funny tales, and read-alongs.
- I partnered with librarians to reach families who might benefit most.
- I also used what I learned from tutoring low-income students to shape the way I interacted with the kids.



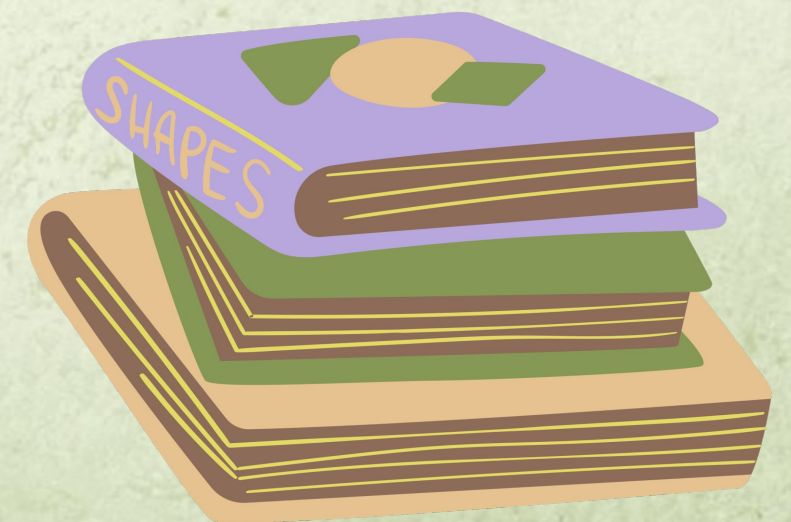


## Project Work – Tutoring & Reading

- For over two hours almost every day, I tutored low-income students at nonprofit education centers throughout the Bay Area. I helped with reading comprehension, writing, and vocabulary building across grade levels.
- In addition, from February to April, I partnered with a nonprofit library and read aloud to young children twice a week. I selected diverse, inclusive books and made story time interactive and fun—incorporating questions, character voices, and connections to the kids' lives.
- These experiences allowed me to build deep bonds and directly contribute to student growth.

## Process, Challenges & Allies

- The prototyping phase included trying different tutoring methods and book selections to find what truly engaged the kids. I tested whether discussion-based sessions or worksheet reinforcement worked better for different learners.
- Obstacles included limited resources, language barriers, and occasional behavioral challenges. I had to stay adaptable and patient.
- Allies: Library staff, nonprofit tutors, and even the kids themselves supported and informed this project with ideas, encouragement, and honest feedback.





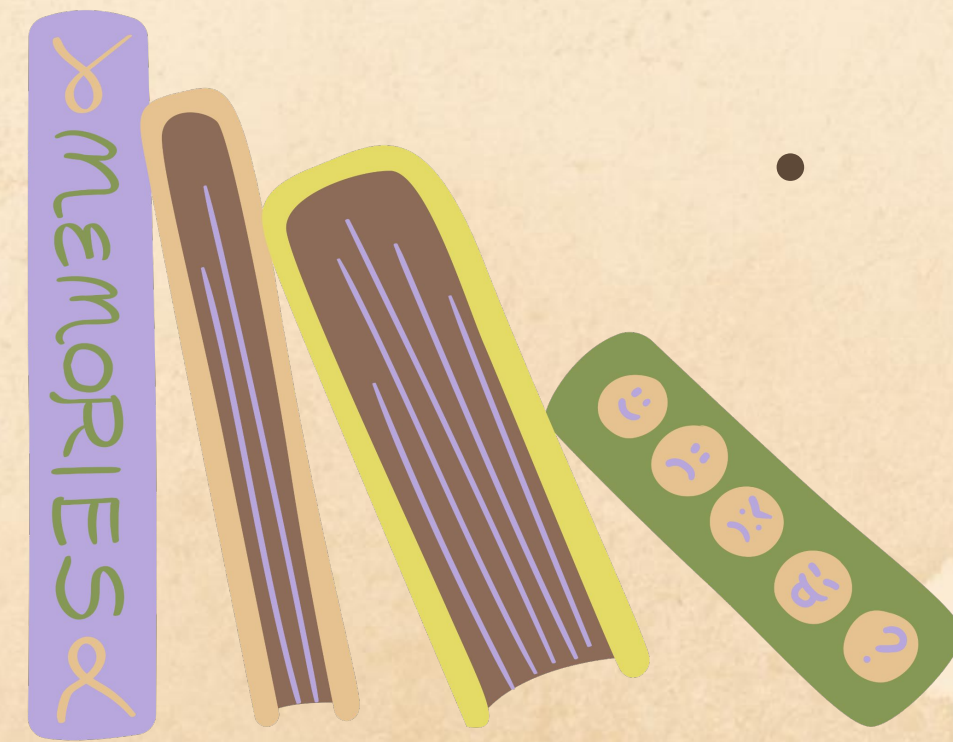
# Challenges I Faced & How I Grew

## Challenges:

- **Limited Resources:** Some nonprofit sites had very few books, supplies, or quiet spaces, requiring creativity in lesson planning.
- **Language Barriers:** Several students were English Language Learners, which pushed me to adapt my tutoring strategies with visuals, gestures, and bilingual materials.
- **Emotional Barriers:** Some kids had faced hardships that made trusting a new tutor difficult. Building relationships took consistent patience, encouragement, and care.
- **Time Management:** Balancing daily two-hour tutoring sessions with school, sports, and other commitments challenged me to prioritize and plan carefully.

## How I Grew:

- Became a more flexible, adaptive educator who could think on my feet.
- Developed deeper empathy and stronger communication skills across cultures and ages.
- Built resilience and learned how small, steady efforts can create major change over time.
- Learned to lead with heart as well as strategy, seeing every student's growth as a victory.



# Results & Impact

## Tangible Results:

- Over the course of my project, I provided more than **100 hours** of tutoring to low-income children at Bay Area nonprofits, focusing on reading comprehension, vocabulary development, and writing confidence.
- Through my twice-weekly read-aloud sessions at a nonprofit library, I reached over **50 different children**, helping foster early literacy skills and a positive association with books.
- Students I tutored showed measurable improvement: several moved up **one or more reading levels**, and many demonstrated stronger writing and speaking skills by the end of the program.

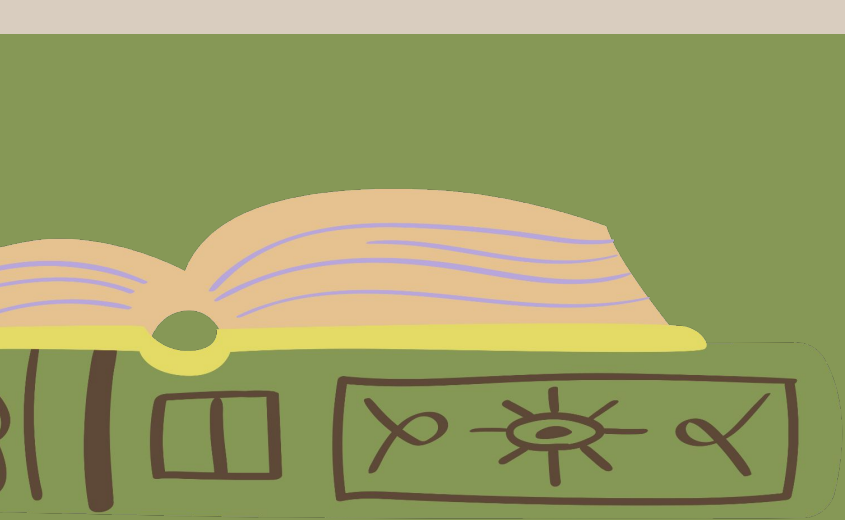


## Broader Impact:

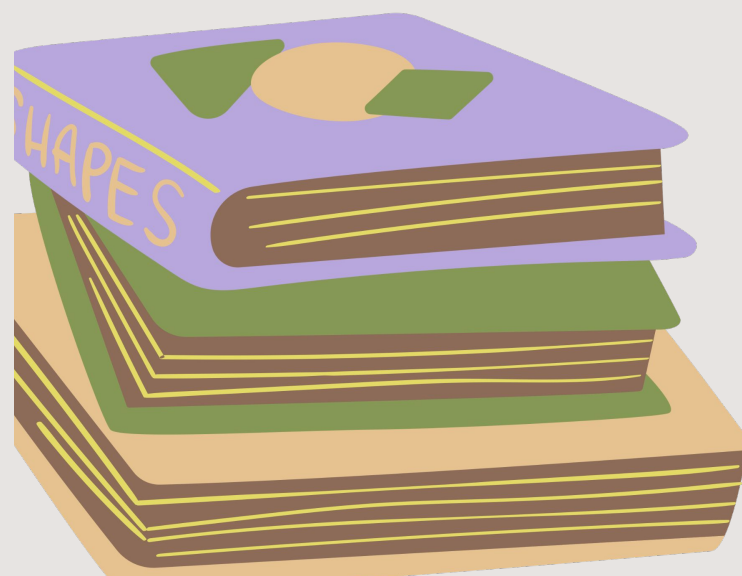
- Built lasting relationships with students who expressed greater confidence in their academic abilities.
- Helped alleviate some of the educational inequities that exist in underserved communities.
- Inspired nonprofit staff to explore expanding their volunteer literacy programs based on the success of my consistent engagement.

## Personal Growth:

- Witnessed the powerful effect of individualized attention on young learners.
- Strengthened my belief that sustainable social justice work begins with small, consistent actions that meet real community needs.



# Key Evidence



## Tutoring Hours:

I tutored low-income students at Bay Area nonprofits for **2 hours almost every day** over several months, providing consistent academic support in reading, writing, and comprehension.

## Storytime Program:

I read aloud to young children twice a week at a low-income nonprofit library, helping improve early literacy exposure and sparking a love for books.

## Expert Quotes:

- Alejandra García (Librarian): *"When children have someone who shows up regularly to read with them, it changes how they see reading — it becomes joyful, not a chore."*
- Maria Lopez (Children's Program Coordinator): *"Access alone isn't enough. Kids need personal encouragement to truly believe that reading matters."*

## Community Need Data:

- **In our region**, children from low-income households are **40% less likely** to meet reading proficiency benchmarks by third grade compared to their higher-income peers (California Department of Education, 2024).
- **Research shows** that reading aloud to young children **increases vocabulary growth by 37%** (Reach Out and Read, 2023).

## Measured Impact:

- Over the course of my project, **children I worked with reported feeling more confident** in their reading skills, based on informal interviews and observations.
- The nonprofit library reported **increased attendance** during my reading sessions by **15%** over two months.

# What I Learned

## About Activism and Service:

- Sustainable change requires consistency, humility, and patience.
- Small, everyday actions — like showing up to tutor for two hours almost every day — build trust and have real, lasting impact.


## About Myself:

- I discovered that I am capable of creating meaningful change through commitment and empathy.
- I learned that leadership often looks like listening first, acting second, and staying dedicated even when progress feels slow.

## About Literacy Inequities:

- I gained a deeper understanding of how systemic barriers — such as lack of access to books, limited parental literacy, and underfunded schools — directly impact children's academic success in low-income communities.
- I learned that literacy is foundational not just to education, but to long-term empowerment, civic engagement, and economic mobility.





**“I’ve learned that real change doesn’t always look dramatic—it’s often in the small, consistent moments. I learned how to listen, lead, and advocate.”**

I also learned that activism isn’t always loud. Sometimes it’s just sitting beside someone, helping them sound out a word.

**Next Steps:**

- Continue tutoring and expand to summer literacy workshops
- Help nonprofits improve access to diverse children’s books
- Encourage peers to volunteer—one hour can make a difference”

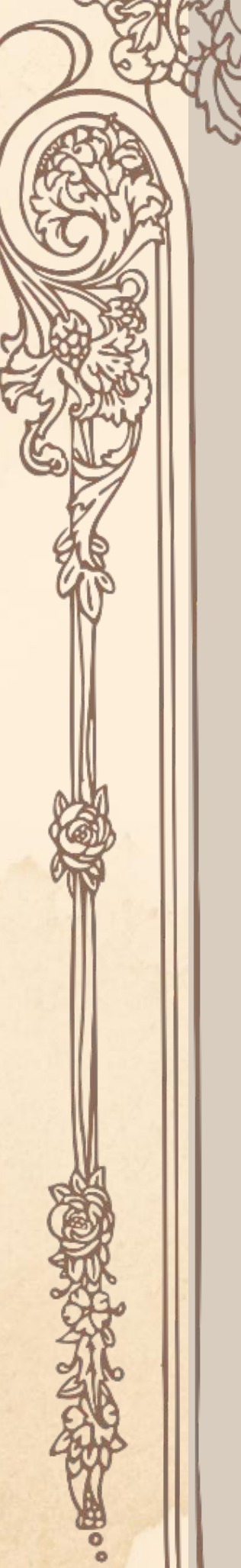
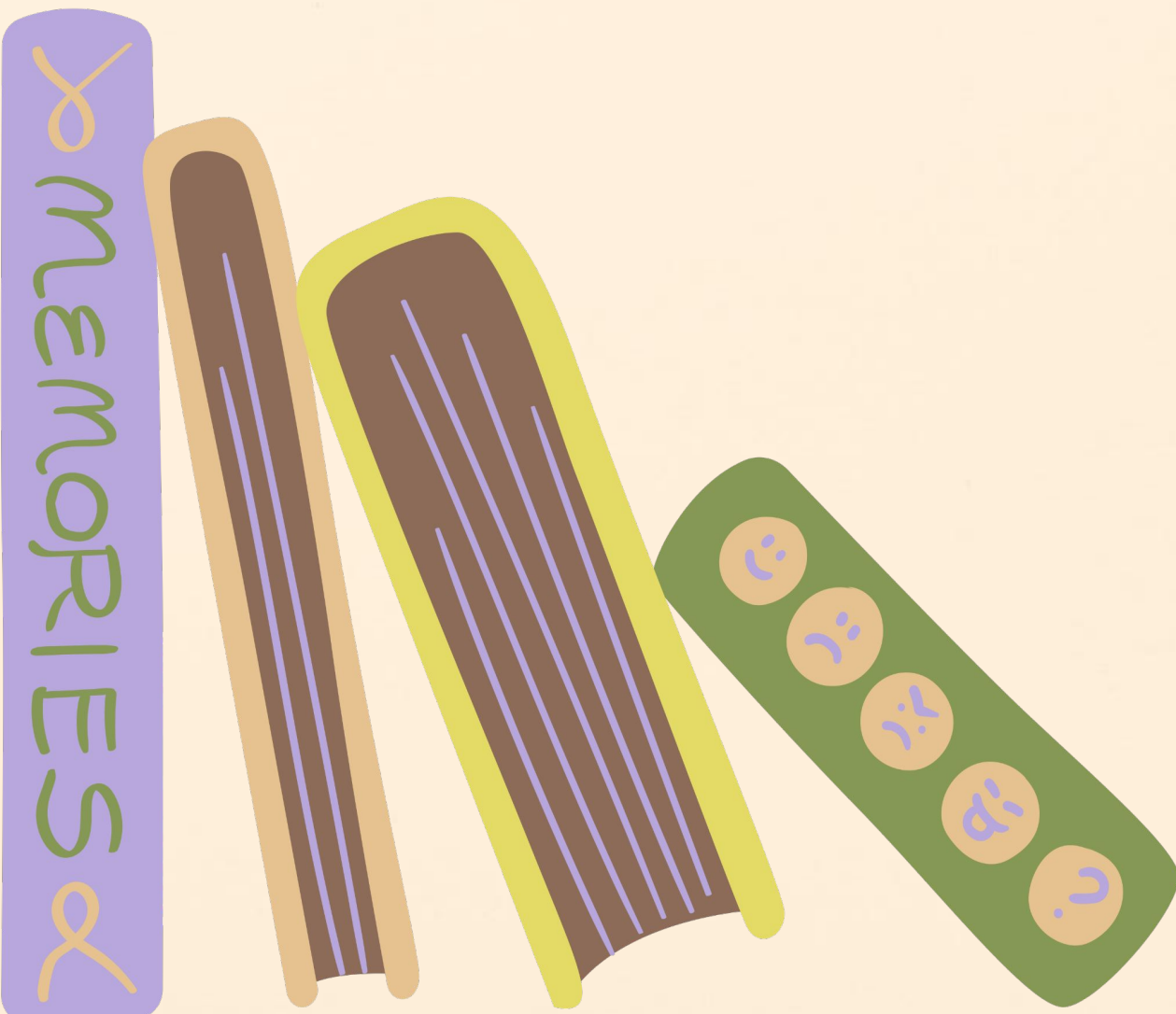


# Thank You!

I would like to sincerely thank all the individuals and organizations who made this project possible:

- **My Social Justice Pathway teachers** for guiding me throughout the research and project development process, and for encouraging me to pursue a project I was truly passionate about.
- **Ms. Tara Firenzi**, my advisor, for her continuous support, valuable feedback, and for helping me stay organized and focused on making a meaningful impact.
- **The nonprofit organizations in the Bay Area** who welcomed me into their communities and allowed me to tutor and read to low-income children nearly every day. Your trust and openness made this project real and impactful.
- **Librarians** for taking the time to speak with me about literacy programs, sharing insightful quotes, and inspiring me with your commitment to serving underserved youth.
- **The children and families I worked with** — your enthusiasm, resilience, and eagerness to learn motivated me every single day and reminded me why literacy access is so important.
- **My family and friends** for encouraging me, helping me stay committed through challenges, and supporting my passion for social justice work.

Finally, thank you to **everyone in the audience today** for listening and for caring about bridging literacy gaps in our communities. Together, we can continue to make a difference.



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