

Empowering Readers: Student-Centered Strategies for Literacy Success

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ABSTRACT

The Fall 2024 issue of the *Georgia Journal of Literacy*, themed “Empowering Readers: Student-Centered Strategies for Literacy Success,” highlights innovative methods and practical strategies that equip educators to enhance literacy outcomes. The articles here explore methods that blend research with pragmatism and directly address the needs of today’s learners. From fostering critical thinking and decoding skills to boosting reading engagement through diverse text selections, this issue provides actionable insights to help teachers cultivate empowered, motivated readers. Contributors share teaching tips, practitioner reflections, and research-informed articles that are structured to support educators in shaping resilient, skillful readers.

KEYWORDS

literacy strategies; student-centered approaches; reading engagement; phonics; critical literacy

The Fall 2024 issue of the *Georgia Journal of Literacy*, themed “Empowering Readers: Student-Centered Strategies for Literacy Success,” represents a shift toward actionable, research-informed practices that place the learner at the center of effective literacy instruction. Student empowerment through skill-specific instruction and responsive classroom strategies equips teachers to ignite student interest in reading as a lifelong pursuit (Davis, 2010; Tegmark et al., 2022). As literacy/reading educators and professionals, we often must balance time-tested practices with innovative, student-centered approaches. In this issue, our goal is to offer resources that are deeply rooted in research while also being adaptable to meet the varied needs of our students.

Bridging Research and Practice for Student-Centered Literacy

Two research and practitioner articles are at the core of this issue. Leading is Dr. Stephanie Grote-Garcia, Dr. Bethanie Pletcher, and Hannah Patton-Elliott’s introduction of the Phonetic Continuum Matrix—a highly structured tool for decoding instruction that provides a sequenced approach for selecting decodable words. The authors draw on decades of phonemic awareness research to offer teachers a continuum for introducing increasingly complex words for students at different levels of decoding skills. By mapping word selection to phonetic difficulty, this resource helps teachers build word-level fluency that seamlessly feeds into broader literacy skills.

Next, Dr. William Bintz and Abbey Galeza’s article on blended genres introduces an innovative means of promoting intertextuality through pairing picturebooks with poems. Their

genre-blending technique invites students to explore topics across different literary forms that enrich their comprehension and analytical skills. Students are encouraged to draw connections among themes, styles, and perspectives by engaging with paired texts, which fosters critical engagement and deepens appreciation of how diverse texts can inform each other. Bintz and Galeza's strategies provide educators with a practical framework for using blended genres in the classroom, empowering students to interpret and connect texts meaningfully.

Building a Foundation through Direct Strategies

Five teaching tips articles that give educators strategies designed to demystify complex literacy skills come next. Dr. Shannon Tovey presents the SSSLIDE strategy for decoding multisyllabic words—a cleverly crafted approach that aids intermediate readers in breaking down challenging vocabulary. The SSSLIDE method, in just a series of 12 concise lessons, offers students structured support to decode longer words independently. In a post-pandemic context, where gaps in foundational literacy persist, Tovey's timely strategy empowers students to read confidently without over-relying on teachers for word-level support.

Dr. Amy Davis's Brain Drain technique explores the social and cognitive benefits of prior knowledge activation. Davis's strategy, rooted in sociocultural learning theory, invites students to share, visualize, and discuss their understanding of content in small peer groups before diving into new material. Davis's technique is a refreshing reminder of how revisiting students' background knowledge scaffolds new learning and affirms their voices within the classroom (Hattan et al., 2024). Through simple prompts and collaborative engagement, the Brain Drain method encourages active participation and bolsters students' confidence as they see their ideas represented in collective learning.

Dr. Adam Whitaker's "Focus on Vocabulary" complements these strategies by demonstrating explicit methods to teach vocabulary that students can and will use. Whitaker's strategies, tailored to the English Language Arts (ELA) classroom, include methods for selecting tiered vocabulary that supports comprehension and expression (McKeown, 2019). Through structured repetition and contextualized use, Whitaker's work reminds us that vocabulary is more than a memorization task—it is an active tool for communication and engagement with the world. With the strategies Whitaker presents, students are learning to wield language to express themselves confidently and with nuance.

Empowering Critical Thought and Reading Motivation

The remaining two teaching tips focus on critical literacy and student motivation. Dr. Lina Soares and Ali Ameduri provide a framework for authoring counter-narratives by empowering students to assume a critical stance in response to stereotypical portrayals in texts. Through counter-narrative exercises, students learn to challenge biases, reframe narratives, and author alternative perspectives. Soares and Ameduri's critical literacy approach enriches comprehension and gives students a voice—a key element in building empowered readers who recognize their role in interpreting and even reshaping the narratives they encounter. The counter-narrative strategy prompts students to think, question, and articulate, all of which embodies a depth of engagement that extends beyond text analysis into self-advocacy and agency.

Lastly, Dr. Lunetta Williams's piece on motivating boys to read, emphasizes the often-overlooked importance of text selection and representation in elementary reading materials (Ives et al., 2020). With a checklist for evaluating text diversity, Williams provides a roadmap for teachers to ensure classroom libraries include books that resonate with boys' interests, from

adventure and sports to animal stories. Her focus on texts that foster autonomy and interest speaks to the broader aim of this issue: to empower students to see reading as a personal and fulfilling journey, not a prescribed task (Tegmark et al., 2022).

Final Reflections

This issue offers practical, student-focused resources that meet students where they are. From decoding multisyllabic words to building intertextual connections across genres, the strategies here share a common thread: they empower students to be active participants in their learning. By embracing these methods, readers will come away with a repertoire of skills for their “teacher toolbelts,” from selecting culturally responsive texts to implementing scaffolded vocabulary instruction, that encourage a student-centered literacy experience. Each article is crafted to support teachers in teaching reading and motivating their students to read because they are engaged, empowered, and equipped to do so. Let this issue serve as a reminder that every classroom strategy, every thoughtfully selected text, every scaffolded skill is a step toward shaping students who are not only capable but passionate, resilient, and literate.

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