



Building Readers & Writers for the 21st Century: Identity, Knowledge, & Digital Literacy

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ABSTRACT

Educational settings have prioritized research based instructional practices that ensure students become strong decoders of text. Our issue shows that literacy involves more than strong decoders, but also readers and writers who are ready to embrace challenges in our current and future society. Building students' identities through reading motivation and content area literacy skills, as well as ensuring they have digital literacy skills should also be valued areas of focus in literacy instruction.

KEYWORDS

reader identity, knowledge building, content area literacy instruction, digital literacy, artificial intelligence

Our state of Indiana has been celebrating growth in reading assessment scores and third grade students reading proficiency rates, as well we should be. This is indeed a time to recognize the hard work that teachers, instructional coaches, and state support personnel have been investing in refining literacy instruction to be more aligned with the Science of Reading. However, literacy researchers have raised the alarm that Science of Reading mandates can be misapplied or misunderstood in ways that can hinder students' development as readers and writers (Tierney & Pearson, 2024). Our issue helps us consider not just the growth in word recognition that readers must make to become literate individuals, but also the other areas that impact reading and writing growth not mentioned or as easily enforced in curriculums. These include areas that impact language development and knowledge building, as well as motivations of readers and writers through their sense of identity and affiliation with literacy.

Student Identity

Even if students become proficient readers and writers, it has little impact if they do not identify themselves as readers and writers. This begins early in the lives of our students before they enter school, with the read-alouds that families share at home with their children or the encouragement they give them in writing stories to share with others (Trelease & Giorgis, 2019). However, it is often the case that students may enter school with enthusiasm for reading and writing, but lose that over time as they become encased in the structures and skill enforcement of literacy curriculums (Cremin & Scholes, 2024). Structured curriculums often leave little time for teachers to share the joy of reading and writing with students, unless teachers take the time to creatively integrate routines for building student chosen reading and writing into their daily schedules.

We see the importance of teachers sharing their reading lives with students through booktalks in the intermediate classroom in Steven Layne's article, "Can We Talk? Teacher

Booktalks as Influence on Intermediate Readers' Choice Reading Selections.” This article was graciously shared with us by the Illinois Reading Council Journal to reprint in this issue of our *Indiana Literacy Journal*. Here we see that sharing a variety of genres and text selections with students can entice them to broaden their own reading choices and increase their desire to read. We see booktalks as a smaller time investment that can be accomplished in one classroom, during library time, or even morning announcements by different administrators and teachers sharing what they are reading. Of key importance to note is that this practice was done consistently across the school year, making reading a part of their learning community and culture. We hope this article inspires you to incorporate booktalks into your classrooms and schools as a regular practice!

Christina Romero and colleagues help us to look at literacy identity in a broader light through their article “What a Doll: Contextualizing Artifacts of Play through Storytelling & in the Classroom.” They show us that storytelling helps us not only share aspects of our identities with others, but also helps us to better understand ourselves. The article encourages us to use toys as mediums to encourage oral language practices and build girls' identities within STEM areas. We believe this article will challenge you to look at play and artifacts for storytelling in new ways in your interactions with PreK-12 learners.

Knowledge Building

Knowledge building is an area that has received some increased scrutiny by journalists (Wexler, 2019) and researchers (Cabell & Hwang, 2020). Readers must have background knowledge, and large amounts of it, to make inferences and evaluate claims as they read. Furthermore, due to the increased expectations for literacy, teachers are finding they need to often integrate their content area instruction within literacy blocks (Engel et al., 2021). Rather than briefly reading a wide variety of texts in all subjects, doing deep dives into topics of interest in science and social studies can help students expand their background knowledge. Text sets are one way to support students building knowledge by giving them a wide variety of sources around one topic (Duke, 2000).

Jeff Thomas and colleagues once again present us with a list of science trade books that can be used in elementary classrooms in their article: “2025 Indiana Science Trade Book Annual Reading List (IN-STAR): Teaching Science Through Literature.” Across this list, we see a variety of genres and science disciplines. They support teachers integrating these lists into curriculum instruction by showing connections to the different science standards and disciplines. Looking across this list will give you new titles to add to your curriculum, as you find additional titles that can connect with lessons and units you currently teach in your classroom.

Digital Literacy

Students' identities and knowledge are naturally expressed and demonstrated in their writing, both in and out of the classroom, but what happens when artificial intelligence (AI) can do it for them? Do their identities and what they know cease to exist, or are they folded into a database, or will AI just do the work for them, taking away any human connections, critical thinking, and critical thinking skills (Young et al., 2024)? Generative AI platforms are literacy technologies and literacy teachers cannot ignore them (NCTE, 2025). However, we do not want to sacrifice the productive struggle of writing, nor can students look at AI writing without the proper knowledge to be critical creators and consumers. The same goes for us as literacy teachers. It is essential we recognize that engagement with AI is ongoing, and we must continue to engage, critique, and even resist the use of it in our classroom contexts.

Pawlak and Pridemore in “Teaching with AI, Not for AI: Equity, Identity, and Authorship in Literacy” offer up three different stages by which students can use AI as a tool, but not as a replacement for original thought. These stages include helping students see AI as a scaffold that requires human judgement for a finished product, becoming active decision makers in various stages of writing, and reflecting on the overall process of using AI in writing. The authors challenge us to think about the use of AI both authentically and ethically while focusing on protecting and supporting our students.

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