

SIUE Elementary Education Teacher Candidates Promote Anti-Bias Reading and Writing Instruction

by Patricia Merritt
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EDWARDSVILLE - With rapt attention and without partiality, these Southern Illinois University Edwardsville elementary education teacher candidates listen and record second and third graders as they read from such books as “Cow Up a Tree” by Joy Cowley and “Pancakes for Supper” by Cheryl Semple and Judy Tuer.

More than 60 elementary education teacher candidates from the SIUE School of Education, Health and Human Behavior’s (SEHHB) Department of Teaching and Learning’s course, Primary Literacy Assessment and Instruction, began working in January with 24 pupils from Ellis Elementary School in Belleville. The textbooks guiding their work are “Anti-Bias Education for Young Children and Ourselves” by Louise Derman-Sparks and “Teaching Reading and Writing: The Developmental Approach” by Kristin M. Gehsmann and Shane Templeton.

“These elementary education teacher candidates are documenting reading and writing abilities that are not measured by standardized achievement tests,” said Brian Johnson, PhD, associate professor of reading and literacy in the Department of Teaching and Learning. “This is important, because elementary students are often judged by their standardized test scores rather than their actual ability to read and to write.”



The literacy project at Ellis Elementary School ties into the department's commitment to anti-bias education. "There is no such thing as a high, low or able reader," said Johnson. "There are only readers who comprehend different texts in different ways."

"I have taught students from preschool to university levels," shared Johnson, "and everyone at every level is learning to read and write. As teachers, we do not work to judge students. We observe and address their present strengths and needs."

By listening to a variety of leaders, elementary education teacher candidates also consider differences in culture, region and more. For example, Johnson points out, "The way I say a word may sound different from a Black vernacular English speaker, but because I have a Midwestern English accent, does it mean I understand phonetic patterns better or worse than someone with a Black vernacular, or a southern or New England dialect? The answer is no, and listening to a child read is a powerful way to remove this type of cultural bias."

"When teacher candidates hear elementary students read and retell a story or information text, they can see their true abilities with word identification, fluency and comprehension, regardless of race, class, or other cultural differences," he added. "In this way, teacher candidates learn that all students can read and write, and this learning

brings hope to education systems that continue to be impacted by inequities exacerbated by our recent worldwide pandemic.”

“It’s important to listen to students read,” said Courtney Meyer, an SIUE third-year elementary education major. “If you’re trying to correct every word they’re saying or mispronounce, you’re going to shut them down and make them lose their confidence. We’re letting them read the way they want to and using their way of reading as a window into their minds and what they are thinking.”

“It’s a wonderful approach,” continued Meyer. “It makes me feel good that I will be able to help students learn instead of memorizing. I grew up in a small town and this program has been eye-opening. I have learned a lot.”

“This practicum is extremely important for our teacher candidates,” said Susan Foster, PhD, assistant professor of elementary education in the Department of Teaching and Learning. “Our candidates are entering the teaching profession amid renewed reading wars, and this experience prepares them to navigate ideological conflict over what is ‘the one right way’ to read. The eternal question is are children learning to read from us, or are they reading to learn for themselves, in their own ways? We are preparing our candidates to avoid this binary and provide robust, individualized reading education.”

Also assisting with the literacy project at Ellis Elementary was Shadrack Msengi, EdD, associate professor in the Department of Teaching and Learning.

“Our teacher candidates experience literacy assessment and instruction in an authentic setting,” said Msengi. “It is extremely inspiring to see them integrate literacy data findings onto their classroom projects and assignments as they strive to enhance their knowledge and ways to help each student, within and across disciplines, become a better reader and writer.”

The SIUE literacy project at Ellis Elementary began as the brainchild of Elementary Education Program Director Barbara Martin, EdD, associate professor of elementary education in the Department of Teaching and Learning. Last year, Martin created the project known as CIED 441 [Morning Math Enrichment](#) for first and second graders at Eastwood Elementary School in East Alton and Ellis Elementary School in Belleville. This year Elementary Education teacher candidates have now completed both math and literacy projects at Ellis.

The [SIUE School of Education, Health and Human Behavior](#) (SEHHB) prepares students in a wide range of fields including public health, exercise science, nutrition, instructional technology, psychology, speech-language pathology and audiology, educational administration, and teaching. Faculty members engage in leading-edge

research, which enhances teaching and enriches the educational experience. The SEHHB supports the community through on-campus clinics, outreach to children and families, and a focused commitment to enhancing individual lives across the region.

[Southern Illinois University Edwardsville](#) provides students with a high-quality education that powerfully transforms the lives of all individuals who seek something greater. A premier metropolitan university, SIUE is creating social and economic mobility for individuals while also powering the workforce of the future. Built on the foundation of a broad-based liberal education, and enhanced by hands-on research and real-world experiences, the academic preparation SIUE students receive equips them to thrive in the global marketplace and make our communities better places to live. Home to a diverse student body, SIUE is situated on 2,660 acres of beautiful woodland atop the bluffs overlooking the natural beauty of the Mississippi River's rich bottomland and only a short drive from downtown St. Louis.?