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Solvie, associate professor of education, examines drivers behind the purpose and content of basic education

Summary: Solvie will identify literacy practices in American and Sudanese contexts.

(August 6, 2010)-Pamela Solvie, University of Minnesota, Morris associate professor of education, received a 2010 Imagine Fund Award to research how locally derived ideas of literacy determine the purpose and content of a basic education. Her project, Local Literacies: Reading and Writing Our Futures, will ascertain how standards-driven instruction fits with authentic purposes for reading and writing that create meaning and meet the needs of individual learners as well as society.

Minnesota's K-12 academic standards and teacher preparation programs are intended to deliver the knowledge and skills needed for college readiness and workplace success in a global economy. Driven both by the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and Minnesota's early childhood initiatives, the English Language Arts (ELA) standards and benchmarks are undergoing a thorough revision for implementation in the 2012-13 school year. In response to the significant changes, Solvie created a new literacy course and revised existing literacy courses for education majors to prepare them in time for the accomplishments that will be expected of them as practicing teachers.

Seeking a global perspective on literacy

To test the efficacy of standards-driven education, a few analogous school districts in various parts of the state and perhaps another dissimilar population for contrast might produce good comparative data. But Solvie, who also coordinates Morris's Teaching Reading Enabling Children (TREC) program and directs the Global Student Teaching (GST) program and English Language Teaching Assistant Program (ELTAP), desires a more universal perspective.

She will indeed research purposes of reading and writing evidenced within local literacies in two rural Minnesota communities, but her quest will also take her to one of the remotest spots on earth. The third community in her study is Yei, Sudan.

The largest state in Africa, Sudan is slightly more than one-quarter the size of the United States. Its almost constant ethnic and rebel militia fighting since the mid-20th century makes it one of the most volatile regions imaginable, hardly the place to envision a bright future. Yet Solvie will travel there later this year to judge her sense that, amidst all the political unrest, poverty, and disease, people are determined to take charge of their own lives, and education is one way to do so.

Under conditions that our society can hardly conceive of, like parents everywhere, the Sudanese parents are deeply involved in their children's education. Yei's parents made the mud bricks for their school with their own hands. Originally planned as a one-room schoolhouse for 100 students, when word of the construction got out, student enrollment grew to 300. Two more rooms were added and eight teachers hired. Given this astonishing level of interest, Solvie wants to discover what is working for them and how they believe education will fulfill their hopes and dreams. Entering the country through Uganda, Solvie will visit the school in Yei twice to gauge progress over time.

Solvie will identify the literacy practices in place in the American and Sudanese contexts and what can be learned about the broader literacy goals from these practices. This experience will help her better analyze how standards are guiding decision making here in the United States and give critical thought to focusing on local purposes for education as well as jobs in the global marketplace.

Solvie is one of seventeen Morris professors who received all-University 2010 Imagine Fund Awards. The program is supported in part by the McKnight Arts and Humanities Endowment. The endowment's mission is to support, sustain, and enliven arts and humanities research and activities on the University campuses.

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