

Good morning. My name is Jessica O'Brien and I represent the students graduating today in the elementary education program.

I believe that one of the most important questions that we must be prepared to answer when we graduate is not "how do we teach?" but "whom do we teach?"

Knowing and understanding each individual student we teach is the key to creating a classroom full of successful kids. We need to be prepared to teach students of every color, ethnicity, religion, ability, and gender. The College of Education recognizes and values the diversity that exists in our American schools and creates opportunities for each of us to experience a wide variety of children.

On the first day of my kindergarten practicum I sat down across from a little girl and said, "Hi! My name is Miss O'Brien. How are you today?" The little girl gave me a hint of a smile and then looked down into her lap. I tried again by saying, "Hola! Me llamo Miss O'Brien. Como estas hoy?" The little girl bolted upright and grinning from ear to ear responded, "Bien! Bien! Bien!" I learned that the little girl had just arrived to the United States and hardly spoke any English. The majority of students in the class were Hispanic and I eagerly studied throughout the semester all of the different ways that the students' primary language of Spanish was validated and encouraged with out hindering their progress in developing their English language skills.

I had another practicum that was just thirty minutes away from the first school and yet the students were all white, English was their primary language, and most all of the students lived on a small farm in the mountains. On my first day in that classroom, an eight-year-old boy showed me his picture in the newspaper for having shot the largest buck on the opening day of hunting season. I quickly realized that hunting was the most popular sport when half of my class was dressed in camo and one little girl wore a homemade dress with a John Deere pattern stitched in it. My friend, Gabbie, was teaching in the fourth grade and came to the same conclusion when she asked one little boy what his favorite book was and he replied, "Cabella's." For those of you who are like Gabbie and me and are unfamiliar with "Cabella's," it is a hunting and outdoor gear catalog. These students opened my eyes to a completely different lifestyle and I learned how to appreciate their interests in hunting and apply it to reading and math lessons.

While my examples may be from elementary classrooms, I am sure the rest of you have had similar experiences in your classrooms and job experiences.

The College of Education is offering experiences abroad this summer, which expand our understanding of diversity within the world. Some of us will be encountering diversity in Rome, others in South Africa, or in my case, South Korea. These intercultural practica are additional opportunities for us to teach children from different backgrounds and really appreciate the individual beauty of every child and their culture. Regardless of whether you can experience these global opportunities, I think we all can agree upon the fact that JMU's College of Education does a wonderful job of preparing us for the world we are about to enter.

Congratulations class of 2010! I look forward to our school experiences in the fall and discovering even more about whom we are going to teach.

And now it is my great honor to present the students graduating today from the elementary education program.