

Teacher Education Professor Jake Downs Recipient of the National 2024 Reading Hall of Fame Emerging Scholars Fellowship

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Dr. Jake Downs, recipient of the Reading Hall of Fame Emerging Scholars Fellowship

Jake Downs, assistant professor in the School of Teacher Education and Leadership (TEAL) in the Emma Eccles Jones College of Education and Human Services, was recently awarded the 2024 Reading Hall of Fame Emerging Scholars Fellowship, a program sponsored by the Literacy Research Association's Reading Hall of Fame.

The fellowship is awarded annually to two applicants nationwide to provide support and mentorship specifically to faculty who are early in their academic careers as literacy researchers. The two-year fellowship matches the awardee with two mentors who will provide ongoing support through web meetings, academic conferences, and other professional events.

"This impressive fellowship recognizes Dr. Downs's work in the science of reading," says Steven Camicia, department head of TEAL. "We are fortunate to have him as a TEAL and CEHS colleague. This fellowship indicates the high regard leaders in his field have for the potential impact of his work. He is very deserving of this honor."

Downs earned his bachelor's degree in elementary education, his master's degree in learning technology and instructional design, and his doctoral degree in education

all from Utah State University, completing his doctorate in May 2021. He also has nearly a decade of experience in the Cache County School District as an elementary school teacher, instructional coach, and literacy coordinator in the district office. He started his second year as an assistant professor in TEAL this fall.

Downs's primary focus has been on researching and teaching elementary literacy instruction. As a professor of science of reading education in TEAL, he has been instrumental in preparing the department's elementary education students for the classroom. "We're helping support our undergraduates and preparing them to become effective reading instructors right out of the gate. I feel our students are being very, very well prepared for classroom instruction." Downs is also a fellow in the Center for the School of the Future, a state-funded research and outreach program housed within CEHS.

When it comes to research, Downs is interested in answering broad academic questions in a pragmatic way so he can reach teachers in the classroom. "I want to understand—out of the broad evidence base—how we teach kids to read really well in a system where there's one teacher and 25 students or one interventionist and five or six students," he says. "What do the mechanics and logistics of that look like?"

Downs also hosts and produces the Teaching Literacy podcast for academic and professional audiences. Literacy researchers are invited to present their published work or current research findings on the podcast. He then prioritizes a large part of the 60-minute show to discussing ways to adapt their research to classroom instruction.

"The idea behind the podcast," he explains, "is to give researchers the opportunity to communicate directly with the practitioner. Rather than the teacher having to go to the conference, we bring the conference to the teacher." Since it began in 2019, Downs has produced some 50 shows, approximately one per month for five years.

As part of the fellowship, Downs will be mentored by two members of the Reading Hall of Fame, Steve Graham and Elfrieda (Freddie) Hiebert, two long-time and widely respected researchers in the areas of writing and reading research and instruction. And, incidentally, both mentors have been featured guests on Downs's podcast.

Already familiar with the work of Graham and Hiebert, Downs was thrilled when he learned he would be paired with them. "If I had a top three, both of them would be in that pool," he says. About Graham, Downs says, "When it comes to the research on how to teach kids to write

effectively, Graham is the name at the top. Researchers as well as teachers know his work.”

Similarly, Downs has been inspired by the work of Hiebert, “When I was teaching, I read a lot of her research, and it just clicked with me—the notion that the words we’re teaching should align with the complexity of the text that we expect students to read.”

Downs looks forward to the guidance he will receive as a mentee of Graham and Hiebert. “Generally, they are meant to be mentors in the reading-writing world,” he says. “One of the big areas is in giving feedback. If I have an idea for a study, we might look at ways I can design the study to answer the types of questions I’m interested in. Then, how can I be strategic in grant writing so that it will catch a reviewer’s eye a bit more? They may also help me navigate academia, tenure, and career-track stuff. What does it mean to be a scholar when you’re also expected to produce research, teach every week, and sit on committees?”

It is easy for Downs to envision what he wants to accomplish in his career following the next two years of mentoring. “I want to do rigorous research that’s answering broad academic questions, but I also want to do it in a way that’s addressing the needs of teachers. Both of these mentors have done that for 40 years now. They are scholars who have been able to have their cake and eat it too. It’s hard to straddle both worlds, but I want to do that.”

Downs was formally awarded the fellowship in early December 2024 at the Reading Hall of Fame breakfast, which is part of the Literacy Research Conference that will be held in Atlanta, Georgia. Learn more about the Reading Hall of Fame and its Emerging Scholars Fellowship [here](#).