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Abstract

Strategic literacy instruction should accompany attention to individual needs in order to make the greatest impact. This care for the whole person or *cura personalis*, as it is known in Ignatian education, helps literacy educators to more effectively address variances in student learning. To encourage *cura personalis*, Master of Education in Reading students at Regis University are encouraged to apply evidence-based literacy strategies while caring for individual socio-emotional needs in order to make a more lasting, positive impact. This is primarily achieved through three important and somewhat unique aspects of the program: clinical reports, service learning projects, and teacher mentorship. In this manuscript, the author describes how these reflective and service-based program requirements help literacy educators to view instruction through the lens of the whole person.

Socio-Emotional Aspects of Literacy Instruction

Few topics in education receive as much attention as literacy. Rightfully so, since reading and writing are the keys to unlocking most aspects of learning, and are necessary for intellectual growth and occupational success. As a profession, literacy educators are dedicated to acquiring the most recent, research-based strategies to meet the needs of students who may have a variety of learning needs and/or disabilities, to include dyslexia, dysgraphia, ADHD, and autism. However, strategy instruction should accompany knowledge of and care for the individual in order to make a more lasting impact. Specifically, reading instructors not only need to have a wide breadth of intervention strategies that they can tailor to each student, but they should also be able to address the motivational, social, and emotional aspects of learning. This care for the whole person, or *cura personalis*, as it is known in Ignatian education, helps literacy educators to more effectively reach children and address individual learning needs.

Research supports an individualized, well-rounded approach to reading instruction. While many studies center on the cognitive aspects of reading, there is a growing body of evidence that includes social and emotional processes as impactful elements of reading success. For example,

according to Connor et al., students who are better able to control their behavior and emotions acquire literacy skills at a quicker rate than those who enter school with weak socio-emotional skills.[1] Conversely, negative emotions have been found to affect a variety of cognitive skills associated with reading achievement, such as processing speed, working memory, self-monitoring, and attention.[2] It is also important to note that teacher well-being and self-efficacy is linked to greater instructional quality and student motivation.[3] With these findings and other similar research in mind, it is beneficial for graduate education programs in literacy to include service-based and reflective requirements that address the whole person instead of just intellectual needs.

Cura Personalis and Reading Teacher Preparation

In regard to teacher education, Regis University's Master of Education in Reading students are encouraged to braid evidence-based literacy strategies with care for the individual in order to make a more lasting, positive impact. It is important to note that Reading M.Ed. students are already practicing teachers who are working toward achieving additional credentials and expertise in literacy in order to serve as reading interventionists, instructional coaches, and literacy leaders in public and private school settings. Thus, they are able to directly apply the strategies and

principles they learn in the program with the children whom they work with on a daily basis.

This weaving of strategy instruction with care for the whole person is primarily achieved through three important and somewhat unique aspects to Regis' program: clinical reports, service learning projects, and teacher mentorship. These course experiences are meant to help Reading M.Ed. students think constructively and critically about how they can have a positive impact on others, while also meeting specific educational needs. In addition, students are required to reflect on and discuss *cura personalis* and other Ignatian values in relation to the knowledge that they are gleaning as well as the individuals whom they are serving. The hope is that these literacy educators will not only apply these values, but be cognizant that they are doing so, in order to promote a service-based professional foundation from which to build.

Clinical Reports and *Cura Personalis*

Clinical reports are a required element in a course that Regis Master of Education in Reading students take early on in the program sequence. Specifically, students write structured assessment reports that include background knowledge, observations when testing, affect, assessment results, and instructional recommendations. These reports are unique, since the focus is not just on the results, but also on the child's background and affect, to include emotional and motivational reactions during the assessment. These clinical report tasks require Reading M.Ed. students are to meet the following learning outcomes: "interpret quantitative and qualitative information gained from reading assessments to create appropriate remediation goals," "implement appropriate intervention activities to address the needs of struggling readers," and "determine the role that emotional and motivational factors play in reading success for individual students."[4] Creating these clinical reports helps the teacher to focus not only on a child's assessment scores, but on the child as an individual. In a sample clinical report provided to students as an exemplar, the following information is stated about a student's background, "While I was administering the concepts of print assessment, Anna remained friendly and outspoken. However, when we moved on to the phonics and oral reading fluency

tests, she seemed frustrated by her problems with sounding out words. She then stated that she does not think she a good reader."[5] Students quickly learn that this information is just as important as the actual assessment results, since issues with self-perception and confidence need to be addressed in order to maximize the child's progress.

Thus, when documenting observations while assessing, Reading M.Ed. students are encouraged to not only document decoding miscues and comprehension errors, but also the child's affect, or emotional state during testing. In one clinical report, a Regis student described the following in reference to the seven-year-old boy she tested:

> [Student] likes to be silly and to say silly things while reading. He can get off task and is easily distracted. His reading is often slow and stunted. Most of his errors occur in the final consonants of words and he has difficulty with longer multisyllabic decoding. Once he reached frustration level, [student] put his head down, refused eye contact, slid out of his seat, and took off his shoes.[6]

In this case, the instructional recommendations provided at the end of the clinical report addressed the reading deficiencies as indicated by the testing results, but also included interventions for distractibility and self-esteem issues. By including affective information and recommendations, these clinical reports become a far more effective tool for interventionists to meet the needs of the individuals in order to improve reading ability. In addition, they provide Regis students with important insights on the value of educating by caring for the whole person, and not simply looking at scores on paper.

After completing four of these reports, Regis students are required to reflect on these experiences in relation to the principle of *cura personalis*, and to describe how knowing about a child's personality, background information, and response to the assessments has helped them to better meet individual reading needs. While some do mention that this is a time-consuming process, most describe the value of creating such a comprehensive report. Reflective comments

include mention of "seeing a clearer picture of a child's needs," "discovering issues that I had not previously thought of," "provided a way of seeing my students in a different light," and "helped me to see beyond just the scores on a report."[7] Professors grade the clinical reports not only on the quality of the assessment results, interpretations, and recommended interventions, but also on insights gleaned regarding the benefits to a whole-child approach. Clearly, the *cura personalis* aspect of the clinical report requirements is designed to make a lasting impact on these teachers and the children whom they serve.

Service Learning and *Cura Personalis*

In addition to clinical reports, Regis Master of Education in Reading students are also required to complete a service learning project that is focused on meeting a literacy need in their school or community. This project is a requirement while taking a course that is typically mid-way through the program sequence. At its essence, service learning embodies the spirit of *cura personalis*, since such activities challenge students to dig deeper and recognize individual circumstances while apply learning to meet the needs of others. Specifically, Regis literacy students are required to meet the following two learning outcomes: "apply Jesuit values and service learning principles in a self-designed literacy project" and "reflect on the impact of your service learning project in literacy in terms of the balancing site-based learning goals and intended service outcomes."[8] Ideally, these are experiences that help students to not only care for others, but to do so in a way that enacts social change.[9] It is also important to note the many positive outcomes to service learning experiences, to include increasing reflective practice and gaining knowledge from the people whom they serve.[10]

Past students have chosen to apply the principle of service learning to the discipline of literacy in a variety of impactful ways. A few examples of projects include: facilitating after school reading and writing clubs, tutoring disadvantaged students, implementing reading incentive programs, and even planning family literacy nights. As part of the service learning project, Reading M.Ed. students must submit a proposal that outlines how the project will benefit others and align with Jesuit

values. Students also provide a planning timeline, and as a culminating submission, they create a digital story showcasing the experience. The digital stories are shared with the class as a way to celebrate their journey, reflect on their results, and gain feedback regarding future service learning ideas. This feedback is gleaned from both their classmates and the professor, and is meant to help facilitate reflection and guide future professional application. Here is an example of project feedback provided by the professor:

> [Student], every aspect of your service-learning project is a true celebration and example of Jesuit values in action! The development of your study hall has provided tier two intervention for a great number of students at your school site, and I believe the professional development you have offered colleagues will have a lasting impact. I am very happy that you have been able to apply so much of your learning and content from this course to your project. While this service project has clearly had a positive impact on many of the students and teachers at your school site, I think the biggest celebration has been the further development of your strengths and talents as an educator. This project has helped you find a new calling, and assume a new role among your staff. I sincerely hope that you continue to pursue this route, [student]. Congratulations![11]

Reflection is also an important aspect of the digital story. Specifically, students are required to reflect on specific Jesuit values, to include *cura personalis,* in relation to their project's goals, intent, and results. One student reflected on her project by stating, "My service project of developing a family literacy night applied the Jesuit values of *cura personalis* and *contemplatives in action*. I think it provided a service for those in need and embodied a spirt of giving from all involved. It helped build a stronger sense of literacy as a benefit to the family and to the school community."[12] Clearly, these service learning projects challenge Regis students to use their knowledge in a way that serves others, part of which involves looking closer and caring for children not only as learners,

but as people with unique needs, challenges, and dreams.

Teacher Mentoring and *Cura Personalis*

Teacher mentorship activities occur toward the end of the Master of Education in Reading program sequence. Along with being trained for reading interventionist positions, Regis students also receive preparation to become instructional coaches in literacy. An important aspect of this is mentoring other educators through co-teaching, observation with coaching conversations, and instructional modeling. Student outcomes related to mentoring include: "observe a reading lesson with the assistance of a cooperating coach and lead a coaching conversation to guide improvement," "co-plan and co-teach a lesson with a less experienced educator and follow up with a guided reflective conversation," and "create a coaching action plan that describes ways to assist teachers through embedded professional development."[13] Just as students have had to dig deeper in order to meet the needs of the individual child, they must learn to do the same with their fellow teachers, specifically those who may be new to the profession or who may need more guidance. This can be challenging, since adult professionals may be less open to discussing their needs and accepting feedback. Thus, mentorship provides a unique way for Regis students to apply *cura personalis* when working with their colleagues in education.

One way that Reading M.Ed. students are taught to mentor their fellow teachers is through observation with coaching conversations. After receiving procedural knowledge and video exemplars on the coaching cycle and increasing teacher problem solving and self-reflection, students are then required to observe a fellow teacher present a literacy lesson. After the lesson, they are asked to facilitate and document a coaching conversation with this teacher, the purpose of which is to guide their colleague toward more reflective and efficacious practice. This is accomplished through a variety of strategies and tools, to include active listening and strategic questioning. It is through this conversation that the Regis student in the coaching role can find ways to mentor their colleague and support growth.[14]

Regis literacy students also engage in other teacher mentoring activities as they are nearing the end of the program. These include: co-teaching, lesson modeling, leading professional learning community discussions, and presenting whole group professional development sessions. A common strand throughout these activities is reflection. Specifically, students are required to reflect on perceived educational impact, but they must also address how teacher mentorship results in caring for one another as colleagues and professionals. One student reflected on these experiences by stating, "I really love collaborating with other teachers and I have also enjoyed team teaching. I think that is one of the reasons that I decided to work on this degree, not only do I want to help students, but I love to research and I love helping teachers. Helping teachers helps students."[15] Another student provided this reflective comment: "I totally agree that developing a relationship is first and foremost. Without this we know, as teachers, nothing can be taught."[16] In sum, the purpose of these mentorship activities is to provide support, gently guide growth, and build collegial relationships that not only promote instructional progress, but also care for the individual.[17]

Concluding Remarks

While literacy student objectives are typically focused on strategic knowledge to meet the needs of struggling readers, Regis University's Master of Education in Reading program also emphasizes understanding and application of the Ignatian principle of *cura personalis*. Graduate degrees are certainly about growth, forward movement, and progress, but there is also value in stopping and looking at others and their circumstances in order to be a more effective instructor and agent of change. Through experiences such as clinical reports, service learning projects, and teacher mentorship, Regis literacy students are guided through this valuable lesson. The hope is that this perspective and caring approach will stay with them throughout their professional careers. HJE

Notes

[1] Carol Conner, Claire Cameron Ponitz, Beth M. Phillips, Monet Travis, Stephanie Glasney and Frederick Morrison, "First Grader's Literacy and Self-Regulation Gains: The Effect of Individualizing Student Instruction," *Journal of School Psychology* 48, no. 1 (2010): 433-455.

[2] Judith A. Stein, "Emotional Self-Regulation: A Critical Component of Executive Function" in *Promoting Executive Function in the Classroom,* ed. Lynn Meltzer (New York City: Guilford Publications, 2010), 175-201.

[3] Irena Buric and Lisa E. Kim, "Teacher Self-Efficacy, Instructional Quality, and Student Motivational Beliefs: An Analysis Using Multilevel Structural Equation Modeling," *Learning and Instruction* 66 (2020): Article 101302.

[4] Course Syllabus, EDRG 606: *Reading Assessment and Intervention*, Regis University, 2020.

[5] Clinical report exemplar, EDRG 606: *Reading Assessment and Intervention*, Regis University, 2020.

[6] Student clinical report submission, EDRG 606: *Reading Assessment and Intervention*, Instructed by Jenny Nordman, Regis University, Fall 2019.

[7] Student comments in online forum, EDRG 606: *Reading Assessment and Intervention*, Instructed by Jenny Nordman, Regis University, Spring 2017.

[8] Course Syllabus, EDRG 602: *Reading and Writing Connections*, Regis University, 2020.

[9] Suzanne Carrington and Gita Selva, "Critical Social Theory and Transformative Learning: Evidence from Pre-Service Teachers' Service Learning Reflection Logs," *Higher Education Research and Development* 29, no. 1 (2010): 45-57.

[10] Carrington and Selva, "Critical Social Theory," 45-57.

[11] Feedback on grading rubric, EDRG 602: *Reading and Writing Connections*, Instructed by Kelly Hoover, Regis University, Spring 2018.

[12] Student comments in digital story submission, EDRG 602: *Reading and Writing Connections*, Instructed by Kelly Hoover, Regis University, Spring 2018.

[13] Course Syllabus, EDRG 640: *Organization and Management of School Literacy Programs*, Regis University, 2020.

[14] Diane Sweeney, *Learning Along the Way: Professional Development by and for Teachers* (Portsmouth, NH: Stenhouse, 2003), 87-96.

[15] Student comments in online forum, EDRG 640: *Organization and Management of School Literacy Programs*, Instructed by Jenny Nordman, Regis University, Spring 2019.

[16] Student comments in online forum, EDRG 640: *Organization and Management of School Literacy Programs*, Instructed by Jenny Nordman, Regis University, Spring 2020.

[17] Sweeney, *Learning Along the Way,* 87-96.