Reggio Emilia Teaching Techniques and Documentation within Chicago Public School Special Education

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Not every student learns in the same manner. Rather, students learn in a variety of settings, speeds, as well as styles and techniques. Despite the vast opportunities at teaching children, Chicago Public Schools, or CPS, continually enforce teaching in a monotonous and authoritative manner. The school system’s assessment structure mandates teachers to use standardized testing to measure students’ knowledge and progress. Chicago Public Schools assess teachers and students, whether special or regular education, on standardized test scores. Even though this is not the optimal way of assessing special education students, whom may be diagnosed with a variety of conditions such as autism, physical handicaps, or behavior disorders, these students are still assessed through standardized testing. In this paper I will show how students, teachers and society as a whole will better understand special needs students’ progress by implementing Reggio Emilia formative documentation assessment into Chicago Public Schools.

Who Are Special Education Students?

Special education students come in all shapes and sizes. One aspect these students have in common is a catalyst to conventional learning and standard progress. These catalysts rarely have the same effect on each student; therefore, each student should be assessed individually to truly observe progress.
Pursuant to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act\textsuperscript{1}, children with disabilities have either intellectual disabilities, hearing impairments, speech or language impairments, visual impairments, serious emotional disturbance, orthopedic impairments, autism, traumatic brain injury, other health impairments, or specific learning disabilities.\textsuperscript{2} Also, children between the ages of three and nine are considered disabled if they experience developmental delays in either physical, cognitive, communicative, social, emotional or adaptive development.\textsuperscript{3}

Altogether, special education students have disorders which impair conventional. As such, schools are to provide adequate learning institutions and environments for these students. It is important to note that the law is silent as to what specifically qualifies as adequate assessment.

**What is Chicago Public School’s Present Teacher and Student Assessment System?**

Assessment has been defined as “a procedure used to determine the degree to which an individual child possesses a certain attribute. . . [Assessment] can be used interchangeably with measurement.”\textsuperscript{4} CPS recently implemented a new program governing teacher and student assessment in the classroom. As a result, CPS intertwines teacher and student assessment wherein teacher evaluations are contingent upon student progress. This recent innovation is called REACH Students, an acronym for Recognizing Educators Advancing Chicago Students.\textsuperscript{5} According to CPS, REACH assesses teachers through three major components: 1) Teacher practice; 2) Student

\textsuperscript{1} 20 U.S.C. § 1400
\textsuperscript{2} 20 U.S.C. § 1401(3)(A)(i)
\textsuperscript{3} 20 U.S.C. § 1401 (3)(B)(i)
\textsuperscript{5} www.cps.edu/pages/reachstudents/aspx
growth; and 3) Student feedback. CPS does not advise as to any other method or avenue upon which teachers are assessed.

First, teachers are assessed through their teaching practices. CPS provides a framework for teachers, which includes four domains: 1) Planning and preparation; 2) The classroom environment (including respect and rapport, managing classroom procedures, and managing student behaviors); 3) Professional responsibilities (including reaching and learning reflection as well as communicating with families); and 4) Instruction (including questioning an discussion techniques). Teacher practice is assessed through formal and informal observations. During observations, teachers are evaluated on their planning, preparation, classroom environment, and instruction. It is important to note that during observation, teachers are not assessed on their roles outside of the classroom, including professional growth, contributions made to the school, district and the profession as a whole. Rather, these components are assessed through interactions between other teachers and students' families through evidence collected by the teacher himself and/or his evaluator.

Next, teachers are assessed by their students’ academic growth, which is measured through standardized tests and performance tasks. Students are administered one standardized test per year to measure their academic growth in literacy and math. In other words, students of all grade levels are assessed through summative exams at the conclusion of each school year. These tests are unaccompanied

\[6 \text{ Id.} \]
\[7 \text{ http://www.cps.edu/SiteCollectionDocuments/REACH\%20Students\%20Teacher\%20Practice\%20(2).pdf} \]
\[8 \text{ Id.} \]
\[9 \text{ Id.} \]
with special instructions or help to special education students. Rather, they are administered in the same fashion for both regular and special education classes.

Next, students’ growth is measured through performance tasks. These are two separate tests given at the beginning and ending of each school year to assess student achievement of specific content, course and grade level.\(^\text{10}\) Again, students are assessed through summative tests. While not specifically mentioned, performance tasks are embedded with standardized testing logic that requires students to achieve targeted goals in order to display progress.

Finally, teachers are assessed on student feedback. These are open ended survey questions allowing each student to freely express their thoughts and opinions towards their teachers.

Altogether, teacher and student assessments are summative in nature and greatly based on measurable progress through standardized tests. Teachers are also assessed on their communication with parents and staff members, however, it is evident that CPS focuses its assessments on the standardized scores. Teachers must demonstrate appropriate norms in the classroom, prove a measureable difference in their students standardized test scores, as well as achieve positive reviews from their student surveys to receive affirmative marks from their superiors.

**What are the Drawbacks of Chicago Public School’s REACH Assessment?**

All teachers and students are evaluated through CPS’s summative assessment REACH program. Even though summative assessments are cost and time efficient, REACH fails to adequately evaluate special education students. These students’

\(^{10}\) *Id.*
progress is difficult to measure because each child embodies unique needs which impair learning at different rates.

In addition to the innate difficulty in assessing special education students, REACH makes no exception for their assessments. For example, performance tasks may not be read aloud to students. This means dyslexic students, who struggle with reading comprehension, are greatly disadvantaged at demonstrating progress in their learning capacities; however, they may excel with verbal comprehension. Because teacher evaluations are based on student progress, this, in turn, damages both the child’s and teacher’s assessment score.

Furthermore, CPS’s REACH comprehension assessment analyzes student’s inferential skills. It requires students to infer information that is not explicitly stated. These are skills that many autistic students lack. While they may excel in other areas, their assessment will not demonstrate their progression. Again, students with special needs are greatly disadvantaged in their standardized assessment tests due to their impairments.

Children with special needs require a variety of assessments, beyond traditional and standardized forms, to gain an accurate understanding of their unique and individual abilities.11 While an autistic student may not have mastered his inferential skills, he may have learned numerous other factors that are not tested in a performance task. Throughout the course of the school year, the student may have sharpened his social skills or learned new ways of accomplishing basic tasks; however, these accomplishments are not assessed in CPS.

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In turn, the present method of evaluating special education students leads to an unfair and inadequate assessment of their teachers. Because a student’s academic performance is not truly assessed, their teachers suffer as a result. Unfair assessment leads to ample frustration for teachers because they are left without measures or tools to truly gage the success of their students. It is more likely than not that this effect leads to animosity in schools, both inside the classroom and with administration.

The fundamental problem in REACH is it fails to individually evaluate special needs children. In turn, it fails to adequately assess the special education teachers. Teachers are forced to drill comprehensive and mathematical skills that are being tested in performance tasks, rather than focus on other skills that the student may lack. Should a teacher focus on social skills for their special needs student, they are at risk of being reprimanded, demoted, or losing their position because social skills are not assessed in CPS. What good are adequate comprehension and mathematical skills in life without the social skills to join the workforce and put those skills to use? Even though special needs students should be assessed on some level, a large portion lack basic skills that regular education students innately possess, such as socialization, communication and concentration. These basic skills need to be included in the curriculum for special education students and evaluated through formative assessment. Overall, CPS should implement Reggio Emilia school techniques and assessment in their curriculum for special education students.

**A History of Reggio Emilia Documentation for Special Needs Students**

After World War II, a dilapidated Italy gained the opportunity to rebuild its educational system. Loris Malaguzzi and the people of Reggio Emilia created a new school system for their next generation of students. Malaguzzi directed the energies of
parents and teachers in the development of an education based on relationships. ¹² 

Fundamental to the Reggio approach is the relationship between the child, the teacher and the knowledge to be learned.¹³ Here, all children are viewed as having the ability to construct knowledge and as having rights. As a result, children in Reggio schools have “special rights”, not “special needs.”¹⁴

In contrast to CPS’s Individual Education Plans (IEPs), which lay out students’ current comprehensive levels and upcoming goals, Reggio students have a “Declaration of Intent” which includes ideas and materials to be used for learning as well as suggestions for how the work is to be carried out.¹⁵ These targets are set without reference to normative standards, whereas in CPS, the IEP has been seen as necessary only for special education students.¹⁶

A major component embedded in the Reggio Emilia approach is documentation. This entails observation, research and assessment of students in the classroom. Teachers document, typically through visual depictions, students’ various means of expression and understanding. As students begin in long-term curriculum projects, teachers are able to capture a student’s initial inquiry and progress through meaning making.¹⁷ Documentation allows for teachers, students and their families to reflect and revisit the learning process of each student. Students who look back at their own progress are more apt to formulate and own their opinions, as well as gain confidence in their ideas. Students’ families are more connected to their understanding and progress

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¹³ Id.

¹⁴ Id.

¹⁵ Id.

¹⁶ Id.

because they can visually see progress through visualizations. As such, families essentially relive the progress alongside of their student.

Finally, teachers who document the students’ experience can see and hear the progression of learning. Documentation is a tool for “visible listening” that employs concrete traces of teaching and learning that are revisited and interpreted to make a child’s learning path and process.\textsuperscript{18} It also allows teachers to use higher order questioning to facilitate student creation meaning, thereby developing comprehensive thinking skills. Altogether, documentation is particularly successful in revealing layers of skills that may otherwise go unnoticed: It makes clear that progress is indeed being made, even if it is slow, and thus most importantly allows teachers to adjust and customize their daily instruction and expectations.\textsuperscript{19}

Altogether, documentation offers a narrative about a special needs child who may have difficulty in telling his own story.\textsuperscript{20} This narrative enables teachers, or administration, to see a child and his learning needs in new ways – as the child interacts outside the classroom setting, as the child interacts with other adult, and just as importantly, as the child interacts with his own peers.\textsuperscript{21}

\textbf{The Benefits of Implementing Reggio Emilia Inspired Documentation as Assessment within Special Education Students in the Chicago Public School System}

Documentation can overcome the difficulty of capturing evidence of special needs students’ skills by telling a story of a student’s incremental progress over time and


\textsuperscript{21} Id.
providing an enriched view of the student’s response to interventions.\textsuperscript{22} As such, documentation is the means that should measure both CPS students’ and teachers’ progress. There are a variety of benefits for all teachers and students that derive from the implementation of Reggio Emilia techniques in school systems. Furthermore, these techniques have greater benefits for special needs students, as these students have infinite ways of interpreting meaning and demonstrating progress.

\textit{A. Better Preparation for Special Needs Students Outside the Classroom.}

By focusing on a student’s overall progress, rather than merely comprehensive and mathematical skills, special needs students become more prepared for a life outside of the classroom. Reggio schools use higher order exercises to teach students to think more independently. These techniques ask the student “why” he formulates a response and allow the student to hone in on his observations. Moreover, it allows for students to fully think through scenarios and use their creativity to analyze issues.

Furthermore, documentation provides students with the opportunity to re-experience their learning process. Because it is visible learning, documentation sparks the act of reflection, creating a community based on inquiry.\textsuperscript{23} It has an important function of leaving observable traces and testimonies, which leads to the important achievement of social memory and preservation.\textsuperscript{24} In turn, it offers children the opportunity to give greater value to their own ideas.\textsuperscript{25} It allows students to continuously


\textsuperscript{23} Id.


\textsuperscript{25} Id.
return to an experience and look for new pathways of inquiry. Altogether, documentation allows for students to visibly see their reasoning process. This process is where students solidify the learned materials through revisiting and re-thinking their journey from inquiry to answer. Upon mastering reasoning, students are more apt to apply the same or similar reasoning to other areas and problems. Similar to the notion “practice makes perfect”, revisiting inquiries and progress sharpens their reasoning and comprehensive skills.

Documentation also allows for students the opportunity to actively learn from their peers. It creates an open and visual environment for students. They may learn from one another through the expression of thought and ideas. Through documentation, students will become actively engaged in higher order thinking exercises and visually see their peers’ avenues to solutions. Again, this gives students the chance to revisit learning, but now with another student. Both students can rely on others and formulate ideas together. This, in turn, jumpstarts students' comfort levels of working with others. As a result, students become better at evaluating the exercises both inside and outside the classroom.

Evaluating problems is how students succeed in life both inside and outside of the classroom. Students, and people of all ages, evaluate situations throughout their lives everyday. It is inevitable that all students will encounter problems in which they must reason their way to a solution. Documentation better prepares students for this difficult stage through self-reflection and group analysis. In the end, students will become well versed in problem solving, whether it is individually or in a group.

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26 Id.

Authoritative teaching roles are the norm in CPS classrooms. Teachers lecture to the class and facilitate a passive learning environment. There is rarely an opportunity for students’ parents to become actively involved in their learning. This leads to disengage families whom lack encouragement for continual learning outside the classroom.

Embedded in the Emilia Reggio practice is the principle of collaboration. This is expressed through the insistence by teachers that they are not parent substitutes, but rather, share with parents the challenge of educating children. These practices create a window that allows parents to share and gain insight into how the child has developed understanding and how he has carried out his work.

Documentation facilitates collaboration by allowing parents to actively participate in their children’s learning. When parents feel it is possible to share events and stories with others, their desire to become involved with the child increases, thereby enriching the relationship with the child. Through documentation, they will better understand how their child is progressing at school each day. This welcomes the parent into the child’s education and gives them an active role. Parents may inquire into their student’s day and revisit their progression as well as learn and inquire alongside of the child.

28 “Including the Child With Special Needs: Learning from Reggio Emilia”
In addition, the quality of the parent-student enriches due to parents’ ability to see what their special needs student is capable of, rather than their limitation. As a result, documentation gives families the possibility of constructing a new image of their student. It gives hope and encourages families to imagine the possibilities for the student’s future accomplishments.

Furthermore, the Reggio Emilia approach will better facilitate relationships between students. Currently, CPS’s teaching technique prohibits students from interacting with each other during classroom time. Authoritative teaching styles do not promote communication of problem solving between students. Rather, Reggio techniques encourage communication between students. They will build social skills through the communication of ideas and learn the importance of groupthink and working in a cohesive group.

Social skills are major handicaps for students with special needs. Whether it be a behavior disorder or the mere knowledge of segregation from the majority of the student body, there is a disconnect between special needs students and others. This is especially true for autistic students, who typically have difficulty socializing and adequately communicating with others. In contrast to CPS, Reggio schools highly encourage peer relationships, it can better assess and build special need student’s social skills. As such, should CPS implement Reggio techniques and documentation, students will progress at interacting with others both inside and outside the classroom.

Overall, the Reggio Emilia approach will strengthen relationships between parents, teachers and students. Documentation keeps parents actively engaged in their

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30 Id.
31 Id.
student’s education, thereby keeping the student focused and determined. In addition to strengthening these relationships, students will learn to sharpen their social skills. Reggio Emilia techniques encourage group activity, which plays a large part outside the classroom and in the workforce. Therefore, these special education students will have an easier time communicating and working with others.

C. Sparking Excitement in Education and Learning

As discussed above, CPS routinely relies on standardized testing to evaluate a child’s progress and understanding of material. Standardized testing measures how well a child has conformed to a prescribed norm on the map we use. These maps, and the classifications and ready-made categories that come along with them, replace the richness of a child’s imagination and life experiences. The Reggio Emilia techniques uses meaning making and embodies the idea that the meaning of pedagogical work is always open to different interpretation. There is a de-emphasis on the individual meaning making of the student in relation to the materials being taught. As a result, it allows students to use creativity and life experiences to formulate meaning in their education. Because students use personal experience, they create ownership of their ideas. Overall, students are more apt to courageously stand up and own their interpretation of an issue.

This courage and ownership of ideas creates excitement in education. Students will learn the importance of their opinions and interpretations. In turn, this facilitates

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33 Id.
34 Id.
35 Id.
the classroom’s overall education. In contrast, CPS’s passive learning environment expects students to memorize and regurgitate facts during testing. In this style of teaching, a disconnect exists between the student and the materials learned. The student does not have personal connections, observations, or experiences with teaching concepts.

Excitement in education is a key to engaging students. Excited students are more apt to participate, listen, and engage their own creativity. Overall, this creates a better functionality in the classroom. Excitement connects to each and every aspect of a child’s education. More excitement leads to increased communication of learned subjects outside of the classroom, thereby actively engaging families; it also leads to a great sense of community between students through the discussion of ideas.

Should students become more engaged in their education and participate more often with confidence, teachers will better document their progress. As a result, students’ and teachers’ progress will be more accurately assessed in the classroom.

Overall, documentation and Reggio Emilia teaching techniques better engage students compared to CPS’s REACH assessment. Active learning solidifies knowledge and allows students to interpret meaning and solutions. By allowing students to express their ideas fused with personal experience, students will have an emotional and enriched connection to the material. They will comprehend and remember lessons that relate to their own personal experiences. In turn, students will be more engaged and exponentially grow in their education.

**Conclusion**

Chicago Public Schools, like many other American schools, teach in a traditional and authoritarian manner. Similarly, CPS assesses all students and teachers in a
traditional standardized approach. This is inadequate for special education students and does not fully depict a student’s progress; therefore it doesn’t adequately assess a teacher’s performance as well. Despite CPS's new REACH initiative in schools, this problem still exists when assessing special education students. These students require various types of assessment to evaluate their progress within social, mental, and conceptual skills.

CPS should adopt Reggio Emilia’s teaching techniques and assessment style. CPS would greatly benefit from Reggio Emilia methods, namely documentation, for it’s assessment program. It would more accurately assess students’ progress. Further, there are major benefits to implementing Reggio Emilia practices. First, students could be better prepared for a life outside of the classroom because documentation allows them to revisit their evaluation and reasoning within analytical issues. Documentation also teaches higher order processing and critical thinking skills. As such, students will become more apt at solving problems on their own, rather than search for answers from others. Reggio Emilia methods will also strengthen and build relationships between teachers, students and parents. Parents will become actively engaged in their child’s education, thereby bolstering their students learning. Moreover, these techniques would strengthen students’ relationships with family members and peers. Finally, Reggio Emilia methods will spark excitement back into education. Students will feel empowered in their unique interpretations, thereby encouraging students to express their ideas to others and facilitating learning for all. These benefits allow teachers to better evaluate their students because they gain the intimate knowledge needed to accurately assess special education students. Overall, Reggio Emilia approaches are
better suited for CPS and the assessment of their special education students and teachers alike.