

Alexa Vouros*

I. INTRODUCTION

Autism Spectrum Disorder now affects over two million people in the United States and tens of millions of people worldwide.¹ In the United States, 1 out of 54 boys, and 1 in 252 girls are diagnosed with autism.² This means that more and more children will now require special education from an early age, and as discussed in court decisions such as *Abbott v. Burke*, it is imperative that children are provided with quality early childhood education even if there is no national constitutional right to education.³ Even more so, the United States Supreme Court determined that special education students, including autistic students, have the right to “free appropriate education,” to give them quality education provided to any other non-special education student.⁴ While there are many types of education provided for students in the United States, Reggio Emilia may be the most beneficial for students on the autism spectrum if included with their Applied Behavior Analysis. Reggio Emilia is a different form of education than the

* J.D. Expected May 2014, Loyola University Chicago School of Law.

¹ *What is Autism? What is Autism Spectrum Disorder?* AUTISM SPEAKS (Aug. 12, 2013), <http://www.autismspeaks.org/what-autism>.

² *Id.*

³ *Abbott v. Burke*, 153 N.J. 480, (1998); However, many states provide a state constitutional right to education as shown in *Abbott v. Burke* in New Jersey: “Our Constitution mandates that the ‘Legislature shall provide for the maintenance and support of a thorough and efficient system of free public schools for the instruction of all the children in the State between the ages of five and eighteen years.’” *Id.* at 490.

⁴ “The term ‘free appropriate public education’ means *special education* and *related services* which (A) have been provided at public expense, under public supervision and direction, and without charge, (B) meet the standards of the State educational agency, (C) include an appropriate preschool, elementary, or secondary school education in the State involved, and (D) are provided in conformity with the individualized education program required...” *Board of Educ. Of Hendrick Hudson Central School Dist., Westchester County v. Rowley*, 458 U.S. 176, 188 (1982)

norm in the United States because it focuses on the child's senses, environment, and what the child wants to learn. And, because of the learning disabilities of children with autism, the Reggio Emilia curriculum would be beneficial for those children on the autism and should be given priority to this style of education over those not on the Autism Spectrum.

Section II of this article explains the historical beginnings of Reggio Emilia and the educational approach used by teachers when instructing children under the Reggio Emilia curriculum. Section III will explain how students on the autism spectrum learn with their disability, the Applied Behavior Approach, and what behavioral issues may arise in a classroom. Section IV will discuss how a Reggio Emilia classroom may benefit a student on the autism spectrum because of the emphasis on the children's interests and importance of environment. Section V will conclude the article.

II. WHAT IS REGGIO EMILIA?

Reggio Emilia is an educational approach developed in the 1940s in Reggio Emilia, Italy and is still used today in Italy and adapted around the world.⁵ This method is widely acclaimed throughout the world as an incomparable educational approach that provides the highest quality education in a child's early life.⁶ The Reggio Emilia approach inspires students to create their own "learning environment that will facilitate [their] co-construction of [their] own cognitive, social and emotional powers through meaningful relationships with peers, teachers and surroundings."⁷ Studies in the 1990s found that Reggio Emilia was based off relationships and that the approach "strives to serve children's welfare and the social needs of families while

⁵ MICHAEL J. KAUFMAN & SHERELYN R. KAUFMAN, EDUCATION LAW, POLICY, AND PRACTICE 177 (Aspen Publishers, 2nd ed. 2009).

⁶ Laurie Kocher, *Research into Practice: Reggio Emilia*, THE INSTITUTE FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION & RESEARCH (Aug. 8, 2013), <http://earlychildhood.educ.ubc.ca/community/research-practice-reggio-emilia>.

⁷ KAUFMAN & KAUFMAN, *supra* note 1.

supporting children’s fundamental rights to grow and learn in favorable environments with key relationships that include cooperative peers and caring, professional adults.”⁸ As Kaufman & Kaufman iterate, there are seven factors that encompass the Reggio Emilia approach and are elaborated on below:

(a) Creating a curriculum around the child’s interests.⁹

The Reggio Emilia approach considers children as protagonists in their own learning and thus is allowed to use this position to be active in making decisions about their own learning.¹⁰ Further, “[c]hildren are not passive receptors of teacher-generated knowledge but are able to construct knowledge based on their experiences and interactions with others.”¹¹ When a child is a protagonist of his or her own learning places emphasis on the idea that a child has rights rather than needs, and that right to make their own learning choices is embedded in the Reggio Emilia approach.¹²

(b) Types and length of projects that “arise naturally.”¹³

As explained above, children are the protagonists of their own learning, and in doing so they are “given some control over their own learning.”¹⁴ Because they are in control, they are asked to use their senses when learning “through play, touching, dancing, moving, listening, seeing and creating.”¹⁵ Moreover, teachers of Reggio Emilia often consider projects as adventures with the children and “can last anywhere from a week or two to the entire school

⁸ Kocher, *supra* note 2.

⁹ KAUFMAN & KAUFMAN, *supra* note 1.

¹⁰ Kocher, *supra* note 2.

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² *Id.*

¹³ KAUFMAN & KAUFMAN, *supra* note 1.

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ *Id.*

year.”¹⁶ The idea that these projects arise naturally allows for a project to last in various lengths throughout the school year, which gives room for children to decide “which direction they would like to take their research, how they can represent what they learn, and what materials would be best suited for their representations.”¹⁷

(c) Instruction of concepts in different forms such as “spoken and written language, print, art, construction, music, puppetry, play and drama.”¹⁸

Advocators of Reggio Emilia believe that a child is “rich in potential” and that rich child seeks knowledge from the moment the child is born.¹⁹ Further, they believe that a child is “born with a hundred languages” and in those languages, children “communicate and express their thinking in different media and symbolic systems” such as mathematical, scientific, poetic, and aesthetic languages.²⁰ These languages can be communicated through music, song, dance, or photography.²¹

(d) Collaboration between children and adults, especially between children and teachers.²²

The Reggio Emilia approach demands that teachers be collaborative among each other and collaborative with the students because “collaboration at all levels is a powerful tool in achieving educational goals.”²³ In Reggio Emilia, the classrooms have two teachers.²⁴ One teacher documents the classroom experience, while the other guides the students in their

¹⁶ Alisa Stoudt, *The Reggio Emilia Approach*, SCHOLASTIC (Aug. 12, 2013), <http://www.scholastic.com/teachers/article/reggio-emilia-approach>.

¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ KAUFMAN & KAUFMAN, *supra* note 1.

¹⁹ Peter Moss, *What is Your Image of the Child?*, UNESCO POLICY BRIEF ON EARLY CHILDHOOD, Jan.-March 2010.

²⁰ Moss, *supra* note 11.

²¹ *Id.*

²² KAUFMAN & KAUFMAN, *supra* note 1.

²³ Kocher, *supra* note 2.

²⁴ *Id.*

learning.²⁵ Although the teachers “strive for individual autonomy” both teachers collaborate with each other and other teachers to create the best curriculum possible.²⁶

(e) “[H]ighly qualified teachers who learn along with students while listening, observing, and documenting the growth of community in the classroom.”²⁷

Teachers in Reggio Emilia must look at students positively, as persons capable of vast knowledge.²⁸ Teachers must also look at themselves, not as leaders, but as persons who are learning together with the students.²⁹ Teachers must also constantly improve their observation and listening skills in order to be efficient instructors to the students.³⁰ “Educators decide what to teach by observing, asking questions, reflecting on the responses, and then introducing materials and ideas children can use to expand their understanding.”³¹ This type of teaching environment “encourages reflection and examination” on teacher’s beliefs and examines what is being done in the classroom.³²

(f) Documentation of the children’s experiences and learning from that documentation.³³

Documentation is an important factor in the Reggio Emilia approach to education. The teachers document all aspects of the children’s education with transcripts of the children’s conversations, photographs, and projects completed by them.³⁴ Documentation helps teachers learn and “[revisit] the learning experiences, pre-service teachers become aware of how the teaching and learning process occurs, and how their questioning strategies create responses in the

²⁵ *Id.*

²⁶ *Id.*

²⁷ KAUFMAN & KAUFMAN, *supra* note 1.

²⁸ Kocher, *supra* note 2.

²⁹ *Id.*

³⁰ *Id.*

³¹ *Id.*

³² *Id.*

³³ KAUFMAN & KAUFMAN, *supra* note 1.

³⁴ Kocher, *supra* note 2.

children.”³⁵ Thus, documentation is a “collaborative reflection” for teachers that allow them to improve the classroom environment for students.³⁶

(g) An environment that is conducive to children’s learning.³⁷

In the Reggio Emilia approach, the environment is considered a third teacher.³⁸ The approach also emphasizes the creation of a learning environment from a physical space, usually similar to a studio provided with resource materials for adults and children.³⁹ The environment provided for a student in Reggio Emilia, delivers “a place for children to use a variety of techniques, it assists the adults in understanding processes of how children learn, and it provides a workshop for documentation.”⁴⁰ After the teachers collect this documentation, they use it as a “collaborative reflection...to investigate, reflect, and represent children’s construction of knowledge.”⁴¹ It serves as a way to modify the classroom experience and generate knowledge for teachers, researchers, and scholars.⁴²

III. HOW STUDENTS ON THE AUTISTIC SPECTRUM LEARN AND THE APPLIED BEHAVIOR APPROACH.

According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Autism Spectrum Disorders: Fourth Edition, autism is “(1) a qualitative impairment in social interaction; (2) a qualitative impairment in communication; and (3) restricted, repetitive, and stereotyped patterns of behavior, interests, and activities.”⁴³ Autism affects over two million in the United States and as many as one in 88

³⁵ *Id.*

³⁶ *Id.*; see also Moss, *supra* note 11.

³⁷ KAUFMAN & KAUFMAN, *supra* note 1.

³⁸ Kocher, *supra* note 2.

³⁹ *Id.*

⁴⁰ *Id.*

⁴¹ *Id.*

⁴² *Id.*

⁴³ Julie Ivey, EDUCATIONAL STRATEGIES FOR CHILDREN WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS 1 (Prufrock Press, 2009).

children.⁴⁴ Because there is such a high rate of autism among children, there is a demand for education that will cater to those children's needs due to their distinctive learning methods from children not on the autism spectrum. Additionally, each child with autism may have a different need than another child with autism and therefore each child "requires a special instructional format or curriculum to be applied."⁴⁵ Since children with autism may have different needs than other children with autism, often Applied Behavior Analysis techniques are used to treat autism.⁴⁶ Applied Behavior Analysis is "the individual systematic application of scientific principles of behavior to change specific, socially important behaviors within a format that includes continuous evaluation."⁴⁷ Applied Behavior Analysis is used to teach and manage autistic students whose reactions to stimuli are different than those not on the autism spectrum.⁴⁸

First, autistic children are visual learners rather than verbal learners and may have trouble understanding verbal instructions, and instead need visual aids.⁴⁹ "Their thoughts work like videotapes that comprehend sequences of pictures. So the best way to maximize this is to use various teaching methods that employ visual techniques in general."⁵⁰

⁴⁴ *Supra* note 1.

⁴⁵ RAYMOND LE BLANC, *AUTISM & ASPERGER'S SYNDROME IN LAYMAN'S TERMS* 167 (Cranendonck Coaching, 2011).

⁴⁶ Ivey, *supra* note 43.

⁴⁷ *Id.*

⁴⁸ "[Children with autism] have the same sensations, feelings and emotions that we all have. Only their reactions to stimuli are different. This results in their inability to create socially normal interactions. They, in a sense, fail to express their reactions in ways we think are normal. A child with autism will communicate his behavior and reactions through emotions. If he wants something, for example, he will draw attention by screaming or banging his head against the wall." LE BLANC, *supra* note 45, at 170.

⁴⁹ *Id.*

⁵⁰ *Id.*

Second, children with autism have sensory sensitivity, in that they can be oversensitive to noise and touch, which can influence learning, communication, and social abilities.⁵¹ Because of this sensory sensitivity, behavior problems can occur when noises hurt the child's ears.⁵²

Third, some children with autism develop extra skills not present in children who are not on the autism spectrum disorder, and if this is the case, it is important for the instructor to focus on what said child excels at rather than what they cannot do.⁵³ Further, children with autism tend to focus on a single thing or subject and it is best for the student to focus on that subject to keep them more engaged.⁵⁴

Fourth, it can be beneficial for students with autism to be in integrated classrooms with children not on the autism spectrum. For example, research has indicated that students with autism who are included in classrooms with children not on the autism spectrum “(a) display higher levels of engagement and social interaction, (b) give and receive higher levels of social support, (c) have larger friendship networks, and (d) have developmentally more advanced individualized education plan goals than their counterparts in segregated placements.”⁵⁵ However, it must be noted that merely the integration of students with autism with students without autism is beneficial but is “insufficient in achieving an appropriate education for students with disabilities” and therefore more must be included in their education.⁵⁶

⁵¹ KATHLEEN ANN QUINN, *TEACHING CHILDREN WITH AUTISM: STRATEGIES TO ENHANCE COMMUNICATION AND SOCIALIZATION* 39 (Cengage Learning, 1995).

⁵² *Id.*

⁵³ LE BLANC, *supra* note 41.

⁵⁴ *Id.*

⁵⁵ Joshua K. Harrower & Glen Dunlap, *INCLUDING CHILDREN WITH AUTISM IN GENERAL EDUCATION CLASSROOMS: A REVIEW OF EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES, BEHAVIOR MODIFICATION* 764 (University of South Florida, 2001), *available at* <http://www.sagepub.com/kwilliamsstudy/articles/Harrower.pdf>.

⁵⁶ *Id.*

Finally, when teaching an autistic child, the environment is an important factor and is often considered the third teacher.⁵⁷ This is the case because as stated above, autistic children are very sensitive to light, sound, touch, and other senses.⁵⁸ When creating an environment for an autistic child, the teachers and architects “must be aware that the visual and auditory systems of children with autism are more sensitive and require building adaptations to material selections and way-finding methods.”⁵⁹

IV. HOW THE REGGIO EMELIA CURRICULUM CAN BE BENEFICIAL TO STUDENTS ON THE AUTISM SPECTRUM.

The Reggio Emilia approach uses many similar methods as the Applied Behavior Approach, which is used for children with autism. If Reggio Emilia were more frequently used in American public education systems then it would likely provide the highest benefit to students with autism and students without autism, especially when classrooms have been integrated. For example, both the Reggio Emilia approach and Applied Behavior Approach require documentation of the students and the classroom. As stated above, documentation for autistic students assists teachers “in tracking a student’s progress over time, which allows for adjustment in the educational program,”⁶⁰ while Reggio Emilia similarly uses documentation to revisit learning experiences and improve teaching methods and classroom environment.⁶¹ The documentation would provide the students with the ultimate classroom experience because the

⁵⁷ Cathy Purple Cherry, *Environment: The Third Teacher*, AUTISM FILE (Aug. 13, 2013), <http://www.autismfile.com/living-with-autism/environment-the-third-teacher>.

⁵⁸ *Id.*

⁵⁹ *Id.*

⁶⁰ Shiela Wagner, *INCLUSIVE PROGRAMMING FOR ELEMENTARY STUDENTS WITH AUTISM 126* (Future Horizons, 1999).

⁶¹ Kocher, *supra* note 2.

teachers would be documenting for the autistic child's needs and to improve the needs of classroom experience for the classroom as a whole.

Moreover, both approaches demand respect for the child and ask the child to be its own protagonist, and in having the child be their own protagonist it allows children with autism and without autism to work together in subjects they are interested in.⁶² The Reggio Emilia approach would likely be effective for a child with autism because as stated above, an autistic child tends to be most engaged when focused on a subject they are interested in and Reggio Emilia allows the student to engage in projects that interest them.⁶³ Furthermore, the Reggio Emilia approach allows students to learn using their "one hundred languages," and autistic students, who learn visually rather than verbally are free to learn and communicate using any language that benefits them in order to fulfill their potential.⁶⁴

⁶² In her study, Nancy B. Hertzog observed preschools and Reggio Emilia, Italy, and specifically a presentation on Reggio Emilia and children with special needs: "The presenter demonstrated how the team of teachers worked together to address the needs of a child with autism. For a year, they observed the child closely and documented what she enjoyed doing while she was at the center. They noticed that she had a keen interest in light, so they arranged the environment to give children opportunities to experiment with light sources. Children used flashlights to play with shadows on the wall. They drew pictures on overhead projectors to enlarge them on the wall. Then the teachers designed a device for the child, who had begun to draw on the acetate on the overhead projector, that allowed her to draw on acetate positioned like an easel with another child just on the other side. The two children were physically close. The child chosen to paint alongside with the child with autism was not too far ahead of her verbally and had not shown any difficulty in working with her. By designing the environment and the activities that could take place within the environment, teachers engaged the child with autism in the everyday activities in the classroom, including drawing, social interaction, and celebration of accomplishments. The teachers were patient. They reported that it took nearly two years for the child with autism to become socially integrated into her peer group." Nancy B. Hertzog, *Reflections and Impressions from Reggio Emilia: "It's Not About Art!"*, EARLY CHILDHOOD RESEARCH & PRACTICE (Vol. 3 Num. 1) 2001, available at <http://ecrp.uiuc.edu/v3n1/hertzog.html>.

⁶³ Kocher, *supra* note 2.

⁶⁴ *Id.*; LE BLANC, *supra* note 45, at 170.

In addition, both approaches place heavy emphasis on classroom environment.⁶⁵ While students with autism need an environment that does not over stimulate their sensitive senses,⁶⁶ both approaches inherently value an environment that is conducive to learning whether the student has autism or not. This is important because students with autism need an environment that does not over stimulate their sensitive senses and the Reggio Emilia approach could provide that environment since the environment is considered an important factor in its curriculum.

V. CONCLUSION

Autism Spectrum Disorder is now an increasing epidemic in the United States and worldwide, affecting tens of millions of people including 1 out of 54 boys and 1 in 252 girls in the United States.⁶⁷ Courts have held that it is essential that children, including children that require special education, receive quality early childhood education.⁶⁸ And, although the Reggio Emilia approach is different than the norm used in the United States, it would be a beneficial approach to children with autism because of its emphasis on a child as a protagonist, the child's senses, and the environment.

⁶⁵ Cherry, *supra* note 57.

⁶⁶ *Id.*

⁶⁷ *Supra* note 1.

⁶⁸ *Abbott*, 153 N.J. at 480; *Rowley*, 458 U.S. at 188.