



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1985 Volume III: Twentieth Century American Fiction, Biography, and Autobiography

Literature and the Special Education Student: A Multi-Media

Guide for Curriculum Unit 85.03.02
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Our unit has grown out of the need to address several factors that make high school special education students unique. The special education student often sees himself or herself as being retarded, slow, odd, “out of it,” and so on. The classroom setting is even further complicated by the variations in type and degree of disabilities. Some students manage to read on a third-grade level; the independent reading level would be even lower. Some students cannot read at all. The only shared characteristic is the inability to function successfully in the regular classroom. Additionally, their handicaps go beyond academic problems. Their judgment, social awareness, social interactions, and general information may be impaired. They may be unable to see how events or data are connected, and need direct instruction on how things in their world relate.

Our students are nearing adulthood and independence. They are surrounded by all the social pressures of adolescence. One of our goals is to provide as sophisticated and age-appropriate a curriculum as possible. As teachers who wish to use literature—for its own value, experience, exposure, and as a vehicle to explore human growth and behavior—we needed to find a way to teach fiction (short stories, plays, poetry, novels) that will neither frustrate nor intimidate our students.

The teacher’s love and interest in the material being taught has a tremendous effect on the degree of motivation shown by the students. This unit is an outgrowth of our own love of Twentieth Century American authors, taken in tandem with the complex and varied problems of our students.

Theories for teaching any subject matter to special education students usually encompass multi-sensory stimulation. Often such techniques are referred to as VAK, meaning the use of visual, auditory, and kinesthetic modalities. We find that the showing of films is highly received by our students.

The Public Broadcasting System has produced a series entitled “The American Short Story,” and includes brief biographies of the authors it includes. We have created a unit around three of the films: “Almos’ A Man,” by Richard Wright, “The Sky is Grey,” by Ernest Gaines, and “Soldiers Story,” by Ernest Hemingway. These films can be borrowed from the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute for classroom use. The films serve as the foundation of the unit, around which other films, readings, and special activities are interwoven.

(Recommended for Remedial English and Remedial Science/Family Life and Human Sexuality classes, grades 9-12)

Key Words

Don Quixote Spanish Latin American Literature Teaching Special Education Literature

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