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Using Poetry in Teaching Reading to Special Education Students

Curriculum Unit 94.02.01
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The goal of this unit is to use poetry to teach reading to special education students. Specifically, it is intended to be used with middle school students in grades six through eight, who are reading between the second and fourth grade levels. The unit may be modified for use with older special education students and in the regular elementary classroom.

Special education is a broad term that encompasses a wide range of mental, emotional and physical conditions. Included in the term are those students identified as gifted and talented, but this unit is not designed for them. In New Haven's special education classrooms there are students diagnosed with specific learning disabilities, social and emotional handicaps, and those labeled EMR, educable mentally retarded. There is often an overlapping of primary and secondary diagnosis. For the purposes of this unit, I am concerned less with special education labels than with the learning characteristics of the special education student.

Generally speaking, full-time special education students in the middle school are students who require a classroom atmosphere that is structured, orderly and free from distraction. Behavioral and academic expectations must be clearly and simply stated. Directions for assignments are best presented one step at a time and a sense of daily routine is necessary to provide students with the structure they need to succeed. While learning styles are as varied as the individual students, there are generalities that may be made. When middle school students are reading at a 2.0-4.0 grade level, it is safe to assume that reading has been a fairly frustrating and unsuccessful experience for them. Usually they have poorly developed word attack skills and weak vocabularies and have not yet mastered basic phonics skills. Reluctant independent readers, they are intimidated and frustrated by lengthy reading selections. Their short attention spans, distractibility, behavior problems and poor study skills make teaching them reading even more difficult.

Finding good materials to use in teaching reading to this population is difficult because of the gap between their reading level and their age. Basal readers teach decoding and word attack skills other along with other skills. They do not provide the necessary review and practice that remedial readers need in these areas. Materials at the correct reading level are often inappropriate or boring to middle school students. Reading selections in which the students may be interested are often too long and difficult for them to read independently.

It is here that we must face the fact that a great many remedial students just do not come to me with the skill

to decode words and understand what they have read. Without being able to break a word into parts and sound it out, these students will not be able to read words. Without mastering the two hundred or so basic sight words, these students will be frustrated readers. Without developing a degree of fluency in their reading, these students will have difficulty comprehending or finding enjoyment in what they read. The challenge to the teacher is to find materials that address the students' deficiencies and at the same time interest and motivate them as potentially interested readers.

Different reading and language programs have their strengths and weaknesses, and poetry may be used as an integral part of any program to improve reading instruction. A phonics approach to teaching reading can be effective with remedial students, but many students have difficulty remembering and applying the many rules of phonics. If taught in isolation, phonics can be quite boring to students. Whole language approaches to reading, which stress writing and integration of different subjects into the teaching of reading, can be successful, but require considerable aptitude when extensive subject matter is involved. These latter approaches to teaching reading may not work well with students who are frequently absent from school, do not have strong home support and lack a general knowledge of the world around them. In my own experience teaching reading to this population, I have found that it is essential to provide relevant and interesting materials. A lot of time is spent gleaning material from newspapers, magazines and other sources and adapting it to an appropriate reading level. But I believe it is also essential to teach the basic skills of reading in an organized and sequential way. Students who have never mastered sound units of beginning, medial and ending blends and digraphs will not be able to sound out words. If students cannot look at a long word such as "misinformation", and see it in parts or sound clusters, they will not be able to decode. If students do not develop an acceptable level of fluency with sight words, they will have difficulty reading and comprehending independently. Drill, repetition, and a logical progression of skills are necessary in teaching this population. Students complain that this is boring and that they have done this before. But I find that success on the part of the students fuels continued growth in reading. Students who have learning deficiencies, come from deprived homes, lack internal motivation, and cannot work independently need to begin reading where they can read. Effective reading instruction must be a blend of the practical and the inspirational.

Supplemental reading programs for special education students usually stress basic reading skills, such as being able to pick out the main idea and recognize the overall point made in a reading selection. Understanding the time order of events and steps in a process is taught in sequencing lessons. Increasing vocabulary and becoming aware of the relationships between words, phrases and sentences is taught through using context in reading. More difficult skills, such as drawing a conclusion that is not expressly stated in the reading selection and making inferences, are also stressed in these programs. These important skills tend to be taught in isolation, in workbook form and usually through short, factual reading selections.

It seems, however, that poetry is rarely utilized in teaching these skills. In basal readers there is some poetry, but not much. There is a bit in language arts texts, usually to teach a specific aspect of poetry. There seems to be a conspicuous absence of poetry to be read for pure entertainment and enjoyment or to be discussed for its meaning. Yet I believe that poetry offers features that would make all the problems I have been enumerating less formidable.

Using poetry to teach reading to special students provides excellent opportunities to read aloud to students and have them be active listeners. By reading poems aloud themselves, the class has an opportunity to function as a group, both as listeners and participants. Listening is an important step in the process of reading, and adds to the total language experience of the student. Listening to poems read aloud is something that many special education students have not experienced during their early developmental years. Reading

poems aloud offers a distinct advantage over reciting prose, in that there are the elements of rhyme and rhythm in poems that capture the attention of the listener. Poetry anthologies have vast selections of poems of varying lengths to suit the teacher's needs, and there is a wide range of subjects from which the teacher may choose. With the reluctant reader, it is imperative to develop a curiosity and desire to read. Students must also be properly introduced to any listening or reading experience. They must know what they win be listening to or reading and what they will be expected to remember or take away from the experience. Proper preparation and introduction for any reading or listening experience is often the key for success when working with remedial students. By listening to and reading poems, students will enter into the experiences of others. Poetry will bring to these students experiences that are more personal and introspective than those found in basal readers designed for second and third graders. Using poems to teach reading will allow the students to be both participants and spectators in the experience. Poetry has an advantage here over basal or supplemental readers. Remedial students may be poor readers but they are often sophisticated adolescents. listening to and discussing poems will give them the opportunity to articulate their own thoughts and experiences. By telling them what to listen for in a poem, the teacher can focus their listening. Personal and emotional issues, important to students of this age, may better be addressed through poetry than through readers intended for eight and nine year olds. For remedial students, poetry will address both their strengths and deficiencies.

Poetry has certain qualities that make it an excellent vehicle through which to teach reading to slow readers. The rhythm and rhyme of simple poems can provide prompts to the reader. Of course not all poems rhyme. But rhyme and rhythm are an important part of this unit. Students with weak phonics skills need a lot of practice with word parts. Whether you consider syllables or just sound units within a word, these students need to learn how to see a word in parts and read it as a whole. Poems that rhyme offer an excellent opportunity to listen for and find rhyming words. Students can analyze rhyming words to see if they rhyme because they have the same letters at the end or different ones. When they recognize the rhyming component of a word, they can think of other words that rhyme with the same ending, and rhyming words that have different spellings. These are the kinds of activities that remedial students need to increase their awareness of letter and sound relationships. They are the kinds of stimulating activities that made be done in groups or individually. Invention need not be discouraged when students create rhyming words that are not real words, they are still actively working with letters and sounds. This kind of word study using rhyming words from poems provides the opportunity for students to begin to create their own rhyming word notebooks, in which they can record the rhyming words they learn and practice reading them to improve their fluency and mastery of these words. Developing fluency in silent and oral reading requires repeated reading of the same material for many remedial students. Poems lend themselves to repeated reading more than prose. Poems may be read alone, in rounds and chorally.

Students are less apt to become bored where there is rhyme and rhythm. Longer poems and poems that do not rhyme are not to be excluded when using poetry to teach reading, however. Like good stories, longer narrative poems are valuable in developing listening, vocabulary and reading comprehension skills. The special education teacher must be sensitive to the length of reading assigned to students. It is possible to choose poems that are just as long or as short as desired. The body of poems included in some anthologies, such as *The Random House Book of Poetry for Children* allows the teacher to easily individualize students' assignments. The teacher also has a wide range of choice in selecting poems that are simple or complex. Poems may be used as a recurrent diversion from other reading and language arts assignments, or they may be the focus of a more extensive lesson. In either case, poems are a plentiful source of material through which to teach word study skills and appreciation of poetry.

In this unit I will attempt to show how poems may be grouped around a particular theme to help create lessons and projects that are worthwhile for the students. One of the areas in which remedial students are often weak is in their understanding of time, on both the practical and conceptual levels. Some students have not mastered such basic facts as: how many seconds are in a minute, minutes in an hour, days in a month, and so on. Many students have difficulty understanding the concept of seasons- when they begin, what marks the change of season. An example of this is a student who does not accept that spring has begun because there is still snow on the ground and the temperatures are below freezing. The class may discuss the idea of time marked by natural occurrences and time marked by artificial means such as the calendar and the clock. There might be discussion about how the manifestations of spring occur in different regions at different times. To illustrate these and other issues in the type of lesson remedial students may benefit from, I have selected several poems by different poets about the months of the year. These poems will form the core of a unit on time, specifically the months in the calendar year. In addition to reading these poems, students will discuss them, copy them, apply phonics skills they have learned to them, and relate them to a practical daily living skill, mastery of the calendar.

There are many different approaches to teaching such a skill. The teacher should use whatever approach he or she is most comfortable with. For this unit, I would teach the poems one at a time. The uniqueness of each poem allows for the teacher to use a variety of activities best suited to that particular poem. Some may be read aloud by the teacher, some by the students. Some may be used for memorizing, others for oral reading, singly or in groups. In some there may be similes and metaphors to explore; in others there may be imagery, mood and tone to discuss. In the case of all of the poems, students will be asked to discuss their reactions to them. Specific suggestions for activities to accompany each poem will be discussed in greater detail in the lesson plans of this unit.

It has been my experience in teaching special education students that the best time to teach academic subjects is in the morning. In the afternoon some students have more difficulty attending to tasks and behavior problems tend to increase after lunch. The afternoon is a good time for quiet activities that do not place as many demands on the students. With this in mind, the actual teaching of the poems about the months and any discussion of them would take place in the morning during reading time. I would use the afternoon for copying the poems into student anthologies and making calendars, which would include some or all of the poems. During this individual work time, students would be able to practice reading and memorizing the poems, make a calendar to accompany the particular month they are reading about, and illustrate the poem. The culmination of the unit on poems of the months would be a complete illustrated calendar which students would be able to keep for the upcoming year, present as a gift to family or friends, or display in the classroom.

The poems about the months and seasons are for the most part short poems that rhyme and can be read by the students. Once this has been accomplished, this unit will go on to cover some longer poems that students will need more help reading. Initially, the teacher will read these poems to the class, lead them in discussion of the poems, and then encourage students to read them themselves, with help when necessary. The vocabulary of some of these poems may be more difficult. The teacher will have to explain the meanings of some of the words before reading the poems. But it must be kept in mind that one of the purposes of using poetry to teach reading is to gain the students' interest in the subject and develop a positive interest in reading. Hence absolute mastery of all aspects of a poem need not be necessary.

One such poem is Elizabeth Bishop's "The Fish". I chose this poem because of its simple premise, the catching of a fish. While the subject is uncomplicated, the poem itself is exciting and descriptive. The poem does not

rhyme and the short lines are full of description and emotion. There are many words that the teacher will have to introduce before reading the poem. By telling the students that they are going to hear the story of someone who has caught a fish, the teacher will prepare the students to listen to and enjoy the poem. Students will be asked to listen for details of how the fish looks and what happens to it at the end of the poem. Students will tell at the end of the poem why they think the person who caught the fish let it go. This poem can furnish a good occasion for cooperative reading: the teacher steps in to help with difficult words or passages and the student reads whenever it is possible.

Another poem that could be taught in this same manner is Alfred Noyes's "The Highwayman". Again, a proper introduction of time, place and vocabulary is essential to developing students' interest in this romantic tale. This is a poem that will be listened to by the students for the pure enjoyment of the adventure, and students will be expected to answer questions from the poem after they have listened to it. While the poem is written in a traditional and romantic manner, the theme is universal and students will be able to relate to it. After listening to the poem, students may be asked to retell the story as it might occur in present times.

In both "The Fish" and "The Highwayman", it is my intention to expose students to settings with which they may be unfamiliar and to broaden their understanding of the world around them. Students will listen for details and be able to note comparisons and sequence in these two poems.

Two poems that will provide students with a glimpse of life in another time and place are "The Shooting of Dan McGrew" and "The Cremation of Sam McGee", by Robert W. Service. They are humorous and exciting tales that depict the lives of hunters, trappers and gold prospectors in the frozen north. Before reading these poems to the class, the teacher will provide a brief account of the poet. Robert W. Service was born in England in 1874 and raised in Scotland. In 1888, he emigrated to western Canada and for ten years traveled up and down the Pacific coast from British Columbia to Los Angeles, working and writing poetry. In 1907 his poems appeared in a collection called *Songs of a Sourdough*, a book that brought him fame. With this introduction of the poet, students will locate the above mentioned places on the map, and understand that during the Alaska gold rush, many people sought their fortunes in the harsh climate of the north. These poems will be read for their humor and adventure. After listening to these poems, (the term "cremation" having been explained), students will be able to answer the following literal comprehension questions: From what state did Sam McGee come? Why was it important for Cap to keep his promise to McGee? They will explain in their own words the meaning of the lines "Now a promise made is a debt unpaid,/ And the trail has its own stem code." Finally, students will define and recognize the element of the tall tale present in the poem, when Cap discovers Sam McGee alive and warm in the boiler of a derelict ship on Lake Lemarge.

I have selected approximately forty poems to be included in this unit. Eleven are grouped around an extended lesson on months, seasons and the calendar. The rest of the poems suggested in this unit were chosen to provide a variety of objectives and activities for the teacher of a unit on poetry for remedial readers. In some poems students will be asked to find rhyming words and note whether or not the words that rhyme have the same ending letters. In other poems students will be asked to listen for the rhythm of the poem, to be able to identify its "beat". Some poems will be used for oral and choral reading or memorization. Identifying the theme, moral or meaning will be the objective of some readings. A few poems, such as Bishop's "The Fish", were chosen for their rich descriptions and use of simile and metaphor. Finally, several were selected for their humor and silliness. A list of these poems is included in this unit. This list of poems is by no means a complete or definitive list of poems for special education students, but it offers the teacher a solid selection on which to base reading and poetry lessons.

Each poem selected for study will present an opportunity for students to listen, read, react and recite. Poems will be the vehicle for detailed phonics and word attack lessons. The poems selected for special education students should be considered both as lessons in appreciation and enjoyment of the poem, and as a reading lesson. The poems, to be appreciated by the students, must be given a meaningful context. The stage must be set in terms of geography, time and character. Vocabulary must be presented before reading the poem so students will be able to understand the poem. This new vocabulary may then be used in phonics lessons after reading the poem. The teacher will consider each poem on its own terms in order to find what it particularly has to offer as both an experience in poetry and as a way to improve reading skills.

The following is a list of poems I have selected to include in a unit on using poetry to teach reading to special education students at the middle school level. To reiterate, the selection was based on interest, reading level and vocabulary, application of phonics and word study skills, and the desire to expose students to good poetry.

“Mr. Nobody” (anonymous)

“Thirty Days” (anonymous)

“The Guinea Pig” (anonymous)

“I’m Glad the Sky is Painted Blue” (anonymous)

“Poor Old Lady” (anonymous)

“The Ant and the Cricket” (adapted from Aesop)

“George, Who Played with a Dangerous Toy and Suffered a Catastrophe of Considerable Dimension” (Hilaire Belloc)

“Western Wagons” (Stephen Vincent Benet)

“The Fish” (Elizabeth Bishop)

“Humpty Dumpty’s Recitation” (Lewis Carroll)

“The Lesson for Tonight” (John Ciardi)

“November” (Elizabeth Coatsworth)

“I’m Nobody! Who Are You?” (Emily Dickinson)

“March” (Emily Dickinson)

“May” (Ivo O. Eastwick)

“September” (Edwina Falls)

“December” (Aileen Fisher)

“Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening” (Robert Frost)

“October” (Robert Fyleman)
“City” (Langston Hughes)
“Dreams” (Langston Hughes)
“Old Mother Hubbard” (Sarah Catherine Martin)
“Every Time I Climb a Tree” David McCord)
“Afternoon on a Hill” (Edna St. Vincent Millay)
“The Highwayman” (Alfred Noyes)
“The Wind” (James Reeves)
“Flint” (Christina Rossetti)
“Something Missing” (Shel Silverstein)
“Ladies First” (Shel Silverstein)
“Fancy Dive” (Shel Silverstein)
“Clarence” (Shel Silverstein)
“The Wind” (Robert Louis Stevenson)
“Rain” (Robert Louis Stevenson)
“A Night with a Wolf” (Bayard Taylor)
“February” (Sara Teasdale)
“April” (Sarah Teasdale)
“August” (John Updike)
“January” (John Updike)

Lesson Plan 1

Objectives:

Students will listen to the poem “Humpty Dumpty’s Recitation” read by the teacher. Students will read the poem aloud individually or as a group. Students will identify the twenty pairs of rhyming words in the poem. Students will classify these pairs of words as rhyming with the same ending letters or with different ending letters. Students will include these words in a rhyming notebook, practice them and be able to read them aloud correctly.

Materials:

Copies of Lewis Carroll's "Humpty Dumpty's Recitation" Student rhyming notebooks

Procedure:

Introduce the Lewis Carroll poem as a nonsense poem and tell students to listen to the first reading and tell what they think the poem is about. Read the poem twice and ask the class what they think the poems mean. Students may mention that the poem is about capturing fish. Refer to the lines in the poem "I took a kettle large and new,/ Fit for the deed I had to do", and ask the class what they think the deed was. After discussing the poem, distribute copies of the poem and have volunteers take turns reading it. As a group, read the poem and locate the pair of rhyming words in each stanza. Students will take turns reading the rhyming words and noting whether they rhyme with the same or different ending letters. Students will record the words in rhyming pairs. They will divide a page of their rhyming notebooks in half and record on one side words that rhyme with the same endings and on the other, words that rhyme but have different spellings at the end of the word. After discussion, the class will decide in which group the rhyming words "if" and "stiff" belong. After recording the rhyming words from the poem, the students will practice the words and be able to read them correctly at the next class.

Rhyming Words-Same Ending:

long brown fish grin twice thump plain clear
song down wish in advice pump again ear
loud stiff shelf locked shut
proud if myself knocked but

Rhyming Words-Different Endings:

white sea green obey was new said
delight me mean say because do bed

Extension:

This lesson may be extended by using a pair of rhyming words that students have recorded in their notebooks and using them for further word study. For example, take the word "ear" and introduce the letters e-a-r as a sound unit that makes the sound and word it ear". Use this sound unit to then "build" words that have within them the sound unit "ear". Have the students decode the words as they are built, and discuss the definitions of words that are built. Build the words in a column where the e-a-r will be in the same position to help students see how to look within a long word for a Part they can decode. Begin by listing as many words with the rhyming e-a-r sound and then select some words to build. Some rhyming words would include: ear, dear, fear, gear, hear, near, rear, tear, clear, dreary, and weary. An example of a word that might be built would be:

ear

fear

fearful

fearfully

The words used for study and analysis come from the poem and students are actively involved in thinking of new and rhyming words. Inevitably students will suggest rhyming words that are not real words or do not fit the sound unit being studied. The teacher may explain why the word does not belong and actually use such nonwords as a point of introduction to nonsense words in poems such as Lewis Carroll's "Jabber-wocky".

Lesson Plan 2

Objectives:

Students will listen to the poem "Western Wagons" and answer comprehension questions about the poem. Students will describe in their own words the tone of the poem and the attitude of the pioneers. Students will identify, record and study rhyming words. Students will locate the states of Nebraska, Iowa, Wyoming and California and be able to identify them on a map.

Materials:

copies of Stephen Vincent Benet's poem "Western Wagons" United States political map

Procedure:

"Western Wagons" is an example of a poem that students will respond positively to if the background is properly presented and the poem is read with feeling and excitement. This narrative poem of westward expansion is emotional and full of optimism. It may be used as part of a larger unit in history or geography, or it may be presented in isolation, as a glimpse into the minds of people who wanted to improve their lot by moving on to new lands. It presents great possibilities for discussion of human nature and the willingness to take risks. The poem is not complicated, but the teacher should be sure that students have a basic understanding that in the nineteenth century many Americans were part of the western expansion of the United States. Use a United States map to locate the four states mentioned in the poem: Iowa, Nebraska, Wyoming and California. Establish from east to west the order of these states. Discuss in basic terms what moving to the West at that time might have involved. Students need to have enough information to have their curiosity aroused. Introduce and define the vocabulary words "continent" and "prairie schooner". Read the poem through and then reread and discuss it stanza by stanza. Distribute copies of the poem to the class and have volunteers read it aloud. Students should be able to answer the following literal and inferential questions:

What are four things mentioned in the first stanza that the pioneers took with them?

What place had gold?

What place had "black earth"?

Why is black earth a good thing?

Why do you think Benet spelled Iowa I-o-w-a-y?

Why did people still move on after they had "broken land and cleared it"?

How are people today like the pioneers who moved westward for a better life?

Have students locate and analyze the rhyming words in the poem. They should note how and why the words rhyme, as discussed in the previous lesson plan and record them in their rhyming notebooks. Use the vocabulary words introduced earlier, (continent and prairie schooner) for word study, use the sound unit “in” as the focus of a word building lesson. If students can recognize and read this sound unit they will be able to decode and build larger words:

in

tin

contin

continent

continental

Because this particular sound unit is so common, the teacher may want to expand this word study lesson to build more and longer words that contain this sound unit.

Lesson Plan 3

Objectives:

Students will listen to the Christina Rossetti poem “Precious Stones” and identify the rhyming words in the poem. Students will classify emerald, ruby, sapphire, diamond, opal and flint as stones. Students will define “precious” as highly prized or priced; valuable. Students will be able to cite the three similes in the first stanza of the poem and explain that in each simile, a stone’s color is being compared to another thing. Students will be able to explain that flint is a stone that, when struck against steel, produces a spark. Students will be able to explain in their own words how the flint is both the same as and different from the other precious stones described in the poem.

Materials:

Copies of Christina Georgina Rossetti’s poem “Precious Stones” Photographs or illustrated book on stones and gems

Procedure:

This poem is a good example of why poetry is a good vehicle through which to teach reading to special education students. It is short, it rhymes, has few difficult vocabulary words, is uncomplicated and contains similes which require the students to see the relationship between two different objects. After studying this poem, students should be able to read and perhaps memorize it.

“Precious Stones” contains a moral, or lesson on which the class can base a discussion. This allows the students to go beyond the poem itself and relate the moral of the poem to their own lives.

The teacher will begin by leading a discussion of what precious stones are and possibly show the class photos of the gems mentioned in the poem. Before reading the poem, the teacher would be sure that the class understood that flint is used to create a spark. The teacher would read the poem through twice and then have

students volunteer to read it aloud. Students would identify the rhyming words in the poem, blood/mud and desire/fire. The teacher would elicit from the students that the poet is comparing the color of the gems with other things and have the students identify the similes. Students might suggest their own similes to describe the colors of the gems. Students would be able to answer the following questions when the class discussed the poem: How is the flint different from the other “precious” stones? How is the flint the same as the others? Why does the poet describe the flint as lying in the mud? In the last two lines of the second stanza, “An opal holds a fiery spark/ But a flint holds fire”, what is the poet saying about these two stones? Can you think of an instance where you would rather have a flint than any of the other stones mentioned in the poem?

To include phonics in this reading lesson, the teacher may take the word “spark” from the poem and have the class examine the sound unit “ark” as pronounced in “spark”. The class may list as many rhyming words as they can think of, including bark, dark lark, Clark and stark. Then the teacher will build longer words using the a-r-k spelling. For example, beginning with:

ark

park

spark

sparkle

sparkled

Extension:

The reading and discussion of this poem may be extended by elaborating on the lesson of the poem. Students may discuss the differences between the appearance of something and its function. They may give examples of how something may be useful, precious, even vital and not be attractive.

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