

Dear Fellow Teacher,

This unit, for kindergarten to second grade students with severe and profound disabilities, utilizes real life experiences to help students access academic standards and progress towards their IEP goals. Using a fall theme, the unit includes interactive activities such as story boxes, cooking and science experiments, and an “in-school” field trip to an apple orchard. It is vital that students with special needs have access to the same life and academic experiences as typical students. I hope this unit helps guide you as you create engaging and rigorous activities for your own students.

Unit Planning

As special education teachers we face quite the challenge – planning units that meet students’ IEP objectives, provide access to the academic standards, and engage students. When planning a unit, I start with an overall theme that I know my students will enjoy. Once I have a theme in mind, I brainstorm lessons that include concrete and tactile tasks, as well as create new experiences, such as field trips to an apple orchard. Within these activities, I then incorporate specific academic standards and IEP goals, differentiating for each student within each activity. The more you understand each of your student’s IEP goals, the more you spot opportunities for your students to work on these goals, even when they aren’t planned.

Some activities in this unit require additional resources such as transportation, or an extra activity room. While I am fortunate to work in a district that provides these resources, it is still possible to create experiential activities without these resources. For example, in this unit my students go into the community and practice buying food at a grocery store. For this activity, you could create a store in your classroom, setting up aisles of products and a cash register.

Story Boxes

I start this unit with a story box for the book *A Tree for All Seasons*. Story boxes bring literacy experiences to life for students with special needs! When creating story boxes, I first modify the story – ensuring the content and reading level matches my students’ needs. Then, I think of objects to help my students experience the story. For example, in this unit our story box includes a small tree that my students changed for each season, a squirrel students put in a tree hole, and syrup students tasted. By engaging with these objects, my students immerse themselves in the literature.

Cooking Activities

There are several cooking activities through the unit. I love incorporating cooking activities into my units because my students absolutely adore them, and they address science, math, and other academic skills. Cooking activities can be simple, such as our Autumn Toast activity, and still give students a real-life experience within the classroom.

Apple Orchard Field Trip

Finally, the unit concludes with an apple orchard “field trip.” I try to create big, fun events with a variety of activities and stations to end my units. “Field trips” expose students to real life experiences that are not always easily accessible for students with special needs. For example, in this unit students visit an apple orchard (set up in our activity room), pick apples, go on a hay ride, and bob for apples. In the orchard, students also work on gross and fine motor skills by reaching for apples, practice addition and number identification during apple bowling, and master letter and name identification while bobbing for apples.

Concluding Thoughts

It is critical that we hold students with special needs to high standards – they are able to do so much, and can often do so much more than we typically expect. When we lower our standards, we put these students at a severe disadvantage. In this unit, I hope you see the high expectations I have set for my students and how much they can learn through engaging lessons. I believe in every student, no matter what their abilities or disabilities may be. I believe that each student is capable, each student is valuable, and that each student has something incredible and unique to offer. Creating interactive units takes time, practice, and patience, but our students deserve it.

Working with students with severe and profound disabilities can be a challenge, and every day may not be a good day – but something good happens every day.

Sincerely,

Jamie McFarland
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