

Permanent Teacher Preparation for Substitute Teachers

By Steve Hardman and Zachary Tippetts

The question of how good a substitute teacher can be is often asked by administrators, permanent teachers, and even substitute teachers themselves. In an interesting study authors Trent and Ghilotti (1972) presented some striking information about the perceptions of substitute teachers and permanent teachers. According to their study, substitute teachers give themselves high marks for their work while permanent teachers and administrators give them significantly lower marks. What is the cause for this disparity and what can be done about it?

In the field of organizational communication, communicating expectations is the first step to achieving one's goals. If what is expected is not communicated, there is bound to be the type of disparity mentioned above. Substitute teachers think they are doing a great job based upon their perception of what is required, while permanent teachers and administrators tend to have different expectations. In order to improve this situation, more and better communication between the permanent and substitute teacher is in order.

The following provides information about what should be communicated to substitute teachers and why it is important.

The Role of the Substitute Teacher

Substitute teachers provide two very important functions: classroom management and instruction. These two items are not mutually exclusive, but the former tends to receive more attention than the latter. Whatever the reason for this focus, poorly prepared materials and lesson plans left for the substitute are usually the result. Leaving a substitute without guidance basically guarantees that the instruction will be lacking, regardless of the substitute's classroom management skills.

What do substitute teachers need? Substitute teaching is not an innate art. Though the required skills can be developed and everyone can succeed in this capacity with the right training, experience, and supplies, much more than excellent management and interpersonal skills is needed. The substitute teacher needs to be provided with certain tools by the permanent teacher to facilitate a successful learning day in the classroom.

Classroom Management Tools

Classroom management is the foundation upon which instruction takes place. If this foundation is not present, there will be no instruction.

“Control of student behavior (is) the overriding difficulty of the substitute teacher” (Nidds & McGerald, 1994). Permanent teachers can help substitute teachers gain management of a classroom environment more quickly by providing them with a few basic items compiled in what this article will refer to as a “Substitute Teacher’s Folder/Kit”:

- the roll
- a seating chart
- a list of teachers in adjacent classrooms
- a list of school/class rules or expectations

While we will only discuss further these few items, other invaluable tools that could be left for the substitute teacher are listed below.

Providing a roll and a seating chart of each class is important for substitute teachers. Seating charts allow substitutes to call students by name, make students accountable, and provide a tool for managing disruptions. When a seating chart is not provided, substitute teachers are forced to create one. While many substitute teachers are prepared to do that, some are not. Finding materials and actually creating a chart take time that should be devoted to learning. It also usually takes place in the critical moments at the beginning of class when control is usually won or lost.

Many substitute teachers feel isolated when they go to their assigned classroom. When the door closes the substitute can be frighteningly alone. By listing teachers in surrounding rooms, the substitute has a support system to use throughout the day. Other teachers can provide information about the curriculum and the needs of individuals or entire classes. When awareness is given of who can help him or her and how, that substitute and those students are much better off.

Rules and expectations make a huge difference in how substitute teachers are received. When a teacher deprives a substitute teacher of the class rules and expectations, that teacher leaves the substitute teacher open to a variety of diversions. Students delight in getting substitute teachers off track. By understanding what behaviors are acceptable, substitute teachers are prepared to deal with aberrant behavior.

Other items that could be included in this Substitute Teacher’s Folder/Kit include:

- materials needed for the day’s lesson
- teacher supplies (chalk, dry erase markers, tape, etc.)
- teacher edition texts
- list of the expectations teacher has given the students concerning substitute teachers
- list of reliable students to be depended on for help
- detailed lesson plan (either skills-based or curriculum-based)
- outline of what information the teacher would like to know about how the class completes their duties
- first aid equipment
- filler activities

- emergency procedures
- schedules regarding students who receive special education instruction outside the classroom
- assembly schedules
- list of parents, volunteers, and paraprofessionals, their scheduled times, and a description of their duties
- description of attention-getting procedures used by the teacher
- instructional techniques used and described in detail for the lesson plans
- descriptions of procedures (including lining up, going to recess/lunch, releasing students, walking in the halls, etc.)
- expectations/responsibilities of monitoring students in the halls during breaks
- procedures for bus/recess duty
- any after school activities pertaining to the students in the class that the substitute would need to be aware of
- list of expectations of what is required and what is helpful (whether to grade and score papers or assignments, how room should be left, etc.)
- any special or unique preferences of the teacher

Curriculum Management

No doubt the classroom management as mentioned above is valuable, but it is merely the foundation upon which the real function of schooling is based. Schools should provide students with experiences that help them achieve learning goals. When a student spends time on items not related to the topic at hand or on skills that aren't important to the teacher or the school, time is wasted. Therein lies the big difference between the views of success between substitutes, teachers, and administrators. The good classroom management many substitutes pride themselves on isn't the same as the good instruction teachers and administrators wish to see. The question is whether or not the substitute should have to try to accomplish learning objectives on her/his own. The answer is, "of course not."

Since it is impossible for substitute teachers to know everything about every topic taught in schools, it is unreasonable to expect that every substitute coming into a classroom will be well versed in the current learning objective. Providing the substitute with materials and activities they can use immediately that support the permanent teacher's goals seems only reasonable if the expectation is that curriculum time not be lost when a substitute takes the place of the teacher.

When a teacher knows that she or he is going to be absent, preparation of lesson plans is a possibility. For those unplanned absences that inevitably occur, focusing not on topics, but on skills is the best way to go. Activities that focus on skills can be adapted to any topic. An example would be writing skills. If the class has been working on their

ability to communicate ideas through writing throughout the year, the students could be assigned to create an essay on the current topic of discussion. Guidelines for the essay structure could be included in the Substitute Teacher's Folder/Kit. All that is necessary is for the substitute to restate the criteria for the essay, restate the topic that is being discussed in the class, and allow the students to work.

Another example of skill development is problem solving in a math class. Based on the current topic, students could be asked to write story problems illustrating the math concepts currently being discussed and then have their peers solve the problems. By doing this students can learn that skills are not topic-bound. Teachers benefit because the students are actively engaged in the topic at hand, even though the activity might be different than one the teacher would have carried out had he or she been present.

Curriculum aside, if students are engaged immediately in a learning activity when the class period starts, they are more likely to stay on task throughout the class. If the teacher has defined a five-minute activity that is used every day in class to start things off, that same activity, if given to the substitute teacher, can be used to help start the class off right.

Preparing Students for the Substitute Teacher

One of the most difficult aspects of substitute teaching is that having a substitute teacher means that class that day may or may not be with previous or future classes. Permanent teachers can create bridges through expectations that will help to minimize the sense of separation students feel when they have a substitute. This will help to keep the behaviors associated with 'being free from the teacher' from getting out of hand.

Student behavior expectations include consequences for improper behavior, assurance that the teacher has bestowed the teaching 'mantle' on the substitute, and methods for receiving reports about the class from the substitute teacher.

One teacher in the Greece School District (NY), in a *Teacher 2 Teacher* email, explained the following expectations he sets for his students prior to his absence:

- You should behave for the substitute teacher better than you behave for me.
- Obey whatever the substitute teacher tells you to do...even if it's not the way I would have you do things. For that day, the substitute is in charge.
- Whatever "stories" the substitute leaves me about you I will believe him or her completely.
- If for some reason the substitute teachers leaves me your name for misbehaving, I guarantee there will be a consequence when I return (personal communication, 2000).

A Final Note

Good communication is the key to every working relationship. By communicating well, teachers can assure that the learning momentum of a class isn't diverted by the presence of a substitute teacher. This will improve both substitute performance in the eyes of substitutes as well as teachers and administrators.

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More ideas for contents of a Substitute Teacher's Folder/Kit can be found in: *Classy Tips*. (1998, December).

References

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