
The Substitute Teacher

Essential Partner in Christian Education

By Horace Alexander

Substitute teaching is perhaps the most difficult of all teaching tasks. The substitute must provide instruction planned by someone else, to an unknown and often uncooperative group of pupils, in an unfamiliar environment—on sometimes unexpectedly short notice. These working conditions make it difficult to maintain quality instruction. *Educa-*

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tion Week cites a Columbia University study indicating that substitute teachers ranked below teacher aides and student teachers in instructional effectiveness. The educational cost of substitute teaching for an extended period is significantly high.¹

And students do spend significant periods of time under the tutelage of substitutes: between 7 and 10 days each year.² If not wisely employed, this time can represent a significant loss for each pupil. The full toll on student attitudes toward school,

learning, and the teaching profession, in addition to the loss of learning time, while difficult to assess, is potentially alarming.

Significant improvement in this dismal scenario will not occur without planned intervention. Unfortunately, state requirements combined with current and anticipated teacher shortages do not suggest that much optimism is warranted. Only eight states in the U.S. require the same certification standards for substitutes as for regular teachers.³ Indeed, the teacher shortage has

prompted a relaxation of standards for substitute teachers in many states. Consequently, the situation may shortly become even worse.

Seventh-day Adventist schools have little reason to be complacent in this matter. On the contrary, it is time for Christian educators to critically examine substitute teaching programs in our schools.

The Reserve Strength of the Team

The success of a team is often determined by the strength of its reserves, who should be trained as carefully as the regular players and integrated as vital contributors to the team. The substitute teacher, however, has long been treated not as a team member but as a last-minute pinch-hitter hired to keep reasonable order and prevent litigation arising from unsupervised classrooms. Substitutes are often hastily called upon and then promptly forgotten until the next emergency summons them again. Overall, substitute teachers have been a most neglected, underappreciated, and inadequately trained human resource.

Substitutes' foremost concerns may be coping with the unfamiliar and the unexpected. However, just

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as important are the management of materials, time, activities, and student behavior. If principals and classroom teachers give some attention to these areas of concern, they can guarantee a winning team.

As the instructional leader in the school, the principal should take

responsibility for developing a substitute teaching program that makes the best use of available human resources. This program should include recruitment, orientation, supervision, and evaluation.

Recruitment

Since no substitute teaching program can be better than its participants, the principal should endeavor to acquire the best qualified personnel available. Potential substitute teachers should be carefully screened to eliminate incompetents

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and those who are only interested in the money. Interviews should stress personal qualities such as enthusiasm for teaching, sense of humor, resourcefulness, versatility, flexibility, and responsibility.

The substitute's special areas of expertise, major and minor teaching areas, and special interests ought to be noted, possibly in a card file. In this way, the substitute can be called upon to teach within the scope of his or her competence. The skills of persons in the local church community such as retired teachers and part-time workers can be a real asset to the program. Some of these individuals need to be needed, and would welcome the opportunity to contribute to Christian education.

Orientation

When persons are added to the substitute list, they should be provided with a substitute teaching hand-

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book developed for the school where they will serve.

Information in such a guide could include a community map showing the school's location, a school plant map, and an outline of the school's policies relating to discipline, attendance, class schedules, lunch and playground duties, fire drill procedures, and other relevant concerns. Information indicating where substitutes may go for assistance in various contingencies would also be helpful. The guide might also include facts about remuneration, insurance, whether substitutes can respond to calls directly from teachers, and how to change their availability schedules.

Simply handing the substitute a teaching handbook, however, will not make him or her feel a part of the school team. The more familiar the substitute can become with the teachers, parents, and students to be served, the greater the likelihood of success. The principal must therefore endeavor to involve the substitute teacher in school-related activities such as in-service sessions conducted for regular teachers, faculty meetings, and parent-teacher conferences. Substitutes should be made to feel that they are an important and effective part of the school program.

Strangely, while the value of in-service training for regular teachers has long been recognized, similar training for substitutes has been almost completely ignored. A recent *Tips for Principals* published by the National Association of Secondary School Principals⁴ suggests that an

orientation seminar for substitutes be conducted prior to the start of the school year. This would allow for an on-site tour of the school, audio-visual demonstrations, basic training in classroom management and instruction, and a more complete explanation of school policies than could be obtained from merely reading a booklet.

Supervision

It is the principal's responsibility to ensure that the substitute teacher is adequately prepared. The availability of easily administered lesson plans must be assured. The principal should warn teachers to avoid planning activities that require the substitute to administer major examinations, conduct field trips, and introduce complex new material.

To assure an adequate support system, the principal should make sure each teacher has prepared an information folder for his or her surrogate (more on this later), and establish a buddy arrangement in which a fellow teacher, perhaps in an adjacent room, assists the substitute in his buddy's absence. In addition, the principal should require

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that teachers request a substitute at least the night before the expected absence. This allows the principal to select the best candidate and alert the substitute to the need for his or her assistance, thereby assuring more preparation time and better quality instruction.

When the substitute teacher arrives at school, he or she should be greeted by the principal, introduced to the other teachers, and accompanied to the classroom.

The surrogate teacher should not be left to "paddle his own canoe." The principal should offer assistance at the beginning of the school day, and visit the classroom at various times to provide reinforcement and indicate interest in the substitute's work. Even in small schools where the principal is a head teacher who also conducts a class, it is possible to offer supportive supervision. During lunch breaks, recess, and combined physical education classes the principal can inquire about the substitute's progress, offering help and advice as needed.

The Teacher's Role

A special relationship should exist between the regular teacher and the substitute. To assure quality instruction, the teacher and the substitute need to develop a reciprocal relationship, even though their contacts may be spasmodic and their communication often indirect.

Sharing procedures and concerns can relieve uncertainty and assure quality teaching. Questions as to the extent, if any, that a substitute teacher may deviate from a lesson plan, whether skills that could complement the regular teacher's may be employed in special lessons conducted by the substitute—these questions and others may be resolved through adequate communication. Such reciprocity enhances classroom management, discipline, and teaching quality; it also encourages creativity and individuality.⁵

Classroom Management

A critical element in the effectiveness of any teacher is time-on-task. Often poor classroom management and discipline reduce the time devoted to study and interfere with

optimal learning during the time students are under the tutelage of a substitute teacher.

To maximize time-on-task, the substitute must be provided with easily understandable information about classroom procedures and pol-

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icies. Raymond Palvoni⁶ suggests that the regular teacher compile a substitute teacher's folder, which should include the following information:

1. Names of several students who can be depended on for information about routines and procedures
2. The class roll and seating chart
3. Keys to cabinets and the teacher's desk if needed
4. The daily schedule
5. An outline of the lunch procedure
6. Schedule for special groups (if any)
7. Fire drill procedures
8. Special privilege procedures.

If a buddy system has been established, the name of the teacher assigned to assist the substitute should be included in the folder. An outline of disciplinary procedures should also be included in the packet.

Student Attitudes

Pupils need to be prepared to work with rather than against the substitute teacher. Early in the school year, teachers should describe the way they expect their students to relate to substitute teachers. They should stress that each child

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will be held responsible for the material covered by the the substitute, and that scores derived from assignments and examinations given by substitutes will count in final course evaluations. The implication must be clear: A class taught by a substitute is not a "free period."

Students should be taught to treat the substitute teacher as any other guest who might come into the classroom. They share in the responsibility for making the experience a pleasant and profitable one both for themselves and for the guest. An appeal to students' pride, both personally and as an expression of school spirit, may yield positive results.

Teaching Responsibilities

The regular teacher has an obligation to plan lessons carefully and make them available to the substitute teacher. This axiom should be self-evident, but one study revealed that in 80 percent of the cases surveyed, substitutes were left no plans at all, or the plans left were so carelessly prepared as to be useless.⁷ In this area, as in many other pedagogical endeavors, failing to plan means planning to fail.

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Patricia Lucas George says that "the lesson plans should not suggest busy work. The substitute teacher is there to teach, not to listen to a student read aloud from a textbook or allow the students to do their home-

work from another class. . . . Classroom learning should proceed as usual." If the teacher's absence is predictable and lengthy, George recommends that lesson plans be provided for "each and every day."

Preparation for contingencies such as an unplanned absence should be part of the teacher's planning activities early in the school year. A file of lesson plans should be periodically updated. Enrichment activities such as case studies, discussion topics, and review sheets that have year-round relevance and applicability should be included for emergency situations.

After returning to the classroom, the teacher should initiate follow-up activities. These can have a significant impact on the future effectiveness of the substitute teaching program. In conducting a review the teacher must remember that pupils' attitudes are shaped by their perception of the regular teacher's opinion of the substitute's work. A supportive, affirming attitude toward the substitute's accomplishments helps enhance the latter's professional status in the eyes of students.

To ascertain whether material was adequately covered by the substitute, the teacher can review the main ideas of the unit with the class. Unnecessary reteaching wastes time and money and conveys to students the notion that the work of the substitute doesn't count. Kenneth Hoover suggests that an appropriate review lesson could include student recall of major concepts and possible application to life-related problems.⁹ If the review indicates a lack of understanding, then reteaching may be necessary.¹⁰

Allowing for Individuality

"Teacher proof" lesson plans should set the stage so well that any average substitute teacher can successfully conduct the class. In pre-

paring such lesson plans, however, the teacher should allow for the individuality of the substitute, whose personal experiences, illustrations, anecdotes, and analogies can help facilitate learning and enrich the students' learning experience.

The regular teacher should indicate whether the substitute may deviate from a particular lesson plan or if

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this would disrupt the scope and sequence of the curriculum. In the case of a planned absence, the regular teacher may plan special days when the substitute is encouraged to utilize any special abilities or skills that he or she has to offer. In this way the substitute's unique contributions can complement those of the regular teacher. Special optional lessons may also be offered to the substitute, who may elect to use them or simply follow the original plans left by the teacher.

Evaluation

Substitute teaching evaluation ought to be a joint effort by the principal and the regular teacher, with communication to and from the substitute teacher. Substitutes frequently complain of a lack of feedback about their teaching performance. The regular teacher should provide specific suggestions with more general feedback being offered by the principal.

George recommends that after school dismisses, the principal

should ask the substitute teacher how the day has gone.¹¹ This contact helps the principal evaluate the substitute teacher personally and offers insights into the effectiveness of the entire substitute teaching program.

Often even minimal feedback has a profound impact on substitute teaching performance. A note from the regular teacher commending the substitute on student satisfaction, on having papers marked and recorded, and on students' grasp of the material presented, can raise the morale of the substitute teacher and encourage even greater professionalism in the future. The teacher could also send a copy of such a note to the principal. Having the principal know of his or her good performance provides an added incentive for the surrogate teacher to do even better next time.

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Hoover suggests that negative feedback should be given to the principal and should be specific.¹² If the substitute teacher merely babysat the students, the principal ought to know. This will help the principal select future substitutes and plan in-service for those who need it. Substitutes who receive consistently poor evaluations from both the principal and the regular teacher should be removed from the roster of surrogate teachers.

A Final Word

The Seventh-day Adventist school is uniquely qualified to develop and maintain a strong substitute teaching program. The degree of uniformity afforded by our system of

education helps guarantee that most teachers are already familiar with the textbooks, cultural atmosphere, and philosophy of our schools.

A further advantage enjoyed by Adventist schools is the relative ease with which the regular teacher and the substitute, both enjoying the commonalities of the Adventist subculture, can develop the positive relationship so essential to a successful substitute teaching program.

Finally, the potentially disruptive effects of a teacher's absence are compensated for by the presence of the Holy Spirit as a member of the instructional team. His presence assures continuity in the training of the whole person—head, hand, and heart. □

In a future issue, tips for "subs," including guidelines the principal can share with substitute teachers.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ *Education Week*, IV:28 (April 3, 1985).
- ² Patricia Lucas George, "How to Improve Your Substitute Teaching Program," *NASSP Tips for Principals* (Reston, Va.: September, 1984).
- ³ *Education Week*.
- ⁴ George, p. 2.
- ⁵ C. M. Charles, *Elementary Classroom Management* (New York: Longman, 1983), p. 218.
- ⁶ Raymond J. Palvoni, *A Handbook for Substitute Teachers*. Unpublished thesis, Arizona State University, 1977, p. 25.
- ⁷ David J. Reynolds and Learita Garfield, "Retraining Substitute Teachers for the Urban High Schools," *NASSP Bulletin*, 55 (April, 1971), pp. 80-88.
- ⁸ George, p. 2.
- ⁹ Kenneth H. Hoover, *The Professional Teacher's Handbook* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1976), p. 602.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*
- ¹¹ George, p. 2.
- ¹² Hoover.

Coping With Death

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news by television, their parents were the first adults with whom they talked. The next day they talked with one another and their teachers.

Many asked to talk with me, and they also wanted the comfort of talking with one of our youth pastors. The same was true of people across the country when the shuttle exploded. Children and adults alike wanted to talk about it.

The catharsis needed in the situation described by Dr. Kent Ravenscroft, associate clinical professor of psychiatry at Georgetown University Medical School, is almost beyond understanding:

"I had one boy who said he was riding right up in the rocket with her [Christa McAuliffe] and then he felt himself explode. . . . It was so intolerable that he finally denied it."⁸

In allowing time for students to talk, adults learn what they are thinking and are better able to correct their misunderstandings. Children

*Unfortunately, coping
skills are frequently
left untaught except as a
crisis forces us to
address them.*

should be encouraged to share their feelings about the person or the event and to formulate their memories. By doing this, they learn to place value upon what has happened.

Teachers need to do more than just allow their students to talk about the event, as important as that is. They must also teach them *how* to talk about what has happened. It is especially important for children to learn ways to frame feeling statements and to feel free to express them. Bottled-up feelings of fear or rage can prove devastating later on. The grieving process must include opportunities to bring emotions to the surface both in words and in tears.