

How to Survive as a Substitute Teacher

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1. Introduction

Dear teachers, educators, students and guests, I wholeheartedly thank you for attending this wonderful event. Today our focus will be on substitute teachers, stating the challenges they face and giving practical recommendations.

1.1. The Importance of Education and the Degradation of the Profession

It is my firm belief that the profession of a teacher is one of the most important in the world. It is the profession that makes all other professions possible. As of today, it is still a valuable and prestigious profession in the majority of countries, even though it has become difficult to survive a whole academic year without a moral break down or emotional burn-out. When it comes to substitute teachers this risk is twice as high. Something has changed in the society and the coming generations underestimate and undervalue teachers, especially substitute teachers.

1.2. Professional Challenges

A substitute teacher is the one who fills vacant positions or replaces absent teachers in public and private schools. It means, when you enter a school as a substitute teacher, you start without a reputation. In addition, the salary, the schedule, the working hours, paid holidays, are all at the mercy of the school. In the majority of cases not knowing if or when one will get another contract offer, the substitute teacher doesn't really have the choice but to accept. To become a permanent teacher abroad one needs to have acquired a Teaching Degree in the country, or to pass a specific exam to meet the country's educational requirements, permitting to obtain a long-term contract in middle and high schools. All the other specialists, even if they are certified teachers from other countries, can only work as substitute teachers with a short-term contract once they get the equivalence of their Diplomas. Such was my case. I was a certified and experienced teacher, backed with two Masters' Degrees in Teaching English as a Foreign Language

and in Education and International Development, obtained in the Republic of Armenia and the United Kingdom, seeking work abroad. Today I would like to share with you my experience as a substitute teacher and give valuable advice that could potentially prepare future substitute teachers and help to hold out.

1.3. Personal Experience

I am of Armenian origin and I received most of my schooling in Armenia, where education was highly valued. Having a solid education was not only an obligation but also fashion. The respect the society had towards teachers was inestimable. It was a time when teachers were seen as vital elements for a successful society. After completing my second Master's Degree in Education and International Development in IOE, University of London, I moved abroad in 2009 and had to start from scratch. Even though to that point I already had a number of years of experience in teaching English, I still had to learn a lot of new skills and add to my knowledge as a teacher to be able to adapt to the new surrounding. My teaching career abroad started in language schools for adults where I taught specialized English related to their professional needs (doctors, chemists, electricians, public service workers, drivers).

During the Covid pandemic in 2020 most of the training centers closed down or extensively reduced the teaching staff due to lack of demand. In 2021 I contacted the Ministry of Education in France and got my first contract offer. Though I knew that substitute teachers were paid less than the main teachers for the same amount of teaching and scholastic responsibilities, I happily accepted the contract.

1.4. Middle School Experience

My middle school experience started when I got an unexpected offer for a full-time teaching position in a public school. I had only one-week notice to get prepared for a totally new and unfamiliar

teaching assignment. I got two consecutive contracts in different middle schools, both of which were prolonged multiple times. So not only did I change two middle schools in one academic year, but I also had uncertainty for every single coming month whether or not the contracts would be prolonged or if the permanent teacher would be back for real. Finally, the two contracts combined stretched almost for the whole academic year. Here too, I was a full-time teacher with extra working hours due to teacher shortage. Thus, I found myself teaching seven classes of 30 students and having the responsibilities of a main teacher of one class.

The biggest challenge in middle schools is related to the early adolescence crisis, lack of immaturity and sense of responsibility. I regularly found myself spending more time on classroom management and discipline than actual teaching. In middle school you quickly realize the importance of being not only a teacher but also a good listener, a psychologist and an educator. I worked in a public and a private middle school. The level of the students in the private sector was much higher than in the public one. That was explained by the selection of the students based on their previous academic achievements and parents' income willing to pay for guaranteed quality education. The majority of students were extremely responsive to my interactive and project-based methods, and soon were actively engaged in classroom works and activities. No need to say that I loved teaching and was enthusiastic to transmit my knowledge and skills to my students.

Very quickly it became clear that substitute teachers faced also other type of challenges in the private sector. As the schools were funded by the families, a bunch of students and a good number of parents had adopted 'all permitted' attitude, in other words 'my money my rules'. I would find myself in situations like students negotiating their marks only to satisfy the parents' expectation and condition to get them a more expensive car, for instance. There was a kind of a brand competition and prestige reputation to be approved in the establishment. I faced a lot of pressure and moral humiliation related to my wearing of non-branded clothes and carrying inexpensive accessories. Again, some students would talk back, put into question and make premature judgements related to theatrical projects and interactive game-based learning that I suggested. Some parents would unfairly back their children's version of understanding of my teaching techniques. I even found myself on two occasions having to report and justify to two families the way I covered vocabulary and grammar in class.

1.5. High School Experience

The first several months were extremely challenging. In addition to teaching, I was actively involved in familiarizing myself with scholastic requirements, the program, the students' profiles, behavior specificities and scholastic achievement levels, introducing myself and creating bonds with colleagues and hierarchy. I became a full-time teacher teaching six classes of thirty students each. When thinking of schools abroad one needs to take into consideration the racial diversity and the various backgrounds of the students. The schools I used to teach were comprised of a great number of European, Arabic, Jewish, Hindi and African students.

Some of the groups were in active conflict with each other and would often bring the disputes in class, thus making classroom management extremely difficult. Each side would always find reasons to blame the teacher for not giving enough reasons to them, for not being fair enough, for not taking their side.

In public high schools I distinguished two types of students, those who had chosen English as their specialty who were extremely enthusiastic, active and respectful, and those who were in class by mere obligation, which they clearly expressed by their indifference and absenteeism. They would do nothing else but chat, sleep, put on make-up or settle scores in class. All efforts of trying to give them a chance to learn something, by enticing them to participate or trigger their curiosity were not only in vain, but backfired against me as a substitute teacher declaring that I would do that deliberately to humiliate them in front of classmates and that their permanent teacher would never do such a thing. Some of them would go further by accusing me of being a racist every time I happened to ask a specific student to read or talk in English, menacing to tell their elder brothers and uncles. Their statement was clear, they already come to my classes, so I need to leave them in peace.

How to deal with such out of line behavior, you never learn at the University, it takes you by surprise. How are you supposed to counter permanent talking back, verbal aggression and disrespect in addition to ungrounded accusations? Some students would simply leave the classroom to add more drama to the situation without even listening to your point of view. A lot of students wouldn't even realize that perhaps it was their only opportunity not only to learn English, but also learn about the culture, history, and literature of English-speaking countries, which could have opened new horizons in their future careers. Since my collaboration with the Ministry of Education abroad, I was hired to work in four public and private high schools in various districts, some of which were extremely challenging also due to high violence, drug addiction and poverty rates. The only common thing that I had already assimilated was the program requirements.

1.6. Relationships with Colleagues

I was too shy and often short of time to talk about the challenges I had to endure to my new colleagues, who were unaware about my professional background and achievements. They would simply look at me with a kind of a compassion as if I was freshly out of the University trying to survive in the jungle. A few colleagues were extremely supportive, though the majority didn't care about putting in extra efforts or time to interact with me, to involve in school projects and to integrate in the team.

1.7. Recommendations; Lessons Learnt

This academic year was a matter of survival, nothing less, but I shall never regret to have accepted all those contracts. Every time I worked, I learnt valuable lessons. Every new contract helped me become a better teacher, a better educator and a better psychologist. With time, I learnt that in order to survive as a substitute teacher I need to be more self-conscious and therefore stay patient, calm

and fair. I learnt to manage my emotions to show an adamant behavior, thus earning myself credibility as a teacher in front of my students. My experiences have taught me to be patient and avoid immediate response to provocative behaviour. Not all the problems need immediate actions. Just keep in mind that every problem has a solution. Give yourself time. If you happen to face a similar difficulty, don't shout back or mirror an aggressive attitude, because if you do so, you enter into their game. Do not personalize any aggression, as students' negativity is very often a product of their own accumulation of frustration in life. Instead, manage to establish and impose your own rules.

I overcame the fear to talk about the difficulties I faced as a substitute teacher. It changed everything. Please, do follow my example. Don't be shy to share your doubts, problems, and disconcerting experiences. Believe me you will realize that you are not the only one. Your colleagues' advice and reflection from personal experience can become a valuable asset that would save you time, energy and health. Never think that your efforts are lost. There will always be a mature student, a grateful parent, an experienced colleague, and an appreciating hierarchy who will value the work you do. Even the most challenging student will finish by understanding your investment in his/her life with years and experience. Of course, some of them will never appreciate but leave that to them just make sure that you yourself are proud of what you have been able to achieve as a teacher. It is never easy and who knows what I will face next year but at least I know that I am not alone and that I want other substitute teachers to know that they are not alone. When it is getting hard just remember the challenges you have already overcome to be able to stand there in front of your students trying to affect 210 lives every single year. Know your value and never underestimate your strength and tenacity.

2. Conclusion

Though the challenges teachers face in the 21st century are numerous, comprising moral, civic and teaching responsibilities, program completion, exam requirements, degrading work conditions, incoherent salary, classroom management, together with the degrading and unthankful attitude, it is still one of the most profound pillars to successful and prosperous societies. We as teachers need to feel protected by the educational system and backed by parents. Dear teachers, continue your vocation of shaping the coming generations and spreading life changing effects through education no matter the circumstances. Dear parents, cooperate with the teachers as they are probably among the rare people, who together with you, are co-parenting your offsprings by passing valuable knowledge and skills to them for their well-being and future success and prosperity.

To students I would say: instead of struggling against your teachers, struggle with them for better opportunities, to save time and get the best from life by becoming educated, intelligent and responsible citizens. Dear teachers and educators, never give up on your professional projects, methods and experience. All difficulties are temporary. Continue to work on yourselves on a personal and academic level and aim for more. I would like to proudly share with you that this year I successfully accomplished the specific exam finally obtaining a permanent teacher status, giving me access to a permanent contract [1-4].

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