The Roles of the Teacher, Teacher Aide, and Substitute Teacher

Standards Covered:

- 1.01: Describe the code of ethics for the teaching profession and explain how it relates to the role of the substitute teacher.
- 1.02 Define the role and characteristics of an effective teacher, teacher aide, and substitute teacher.

The demand for teacher aides in the classroom has rapidly increased in recent years and indications are that they will be used even more in years to come.

Teacher aides are used in many and varied ways. Generally, they are used to do the things that need to be done but can be done by someone with less professional training than a teacher.

Since the vocation of teacher aide is relatively new, the job description and educational prerequisites have not been agreed upon by all educators. It is, however, agreed by many that it is highly desirable for aides to have in addition to a high school education at least some specialized training. Many post-high school educational institutions offer one- and two-year curriculums in the training of teacher aides.

Teacher aides come from many backgrounds and vary in age, sex, creed, race, and other ways. They should all have a common desire—to help children learn. The aide should be eager to learn about all the phases of the job in order to increase classroom effectiveness. Assistants will need to know the school, its organization, personnel facilities, and equipment and resource materials available. They must learn to work as part of the instructional team. They will have to learn what things are their responsibilities and what those of the teacher are.

Teacher aides should put great emphasis on understanding children. They need to understand that children are different in many ways and alike in many ways, and that these differences and similarities need to be studied seriously. They should remember that children have limited knowledge and experience, and that children's needs exceed physical and material needs. These needs include such things as love, understanding, encouragement, respect, responsibility, and the knowledge of limits.

Teacher aides must have a great deal of patience and perseverance in order to learn what is necessary to be proficient in their jobs. Evaluations can be extremely useful in helping aides to develop and use their strengths effectively, and to recognize and improve their weaker points.
Characteristics of an Effective Teacher Aide

The kind of aide that every teacher hopes for has some very special qualities. One of the most frequently desired is enthusiasm for the job. In working together, the teacher knows the aide enjoys working with the children and likes being with the adults in the classroom situation. The aide transmits the excitement experienced in watching the progress that the children make, and responds positively to the way a professional builds a learning environment.

The aide must adjust to changes whether in daily plans or the moods of the people, and realize that all jobs have their pleasant parts and the not-so-pleasant parts, and takes a fair share of both. The aide is able to see things that need to be done and does not stand around waiting to be told by the teacher what to do next. This is taking initiative. However, at the same time, the aide needs to realize that the teacher is the leader in the classroom and that he/she does not overstep the bounds of the roles separating teacher aide and teacher.

The relationship of teacher aide to children is understood and enjoyed. It is not a role of mother, sister, or buddy. The role is to help the teacher and the children. The aide should work constantly to improve in the position by taking part in workshops, enrolling in teacher aide classes, reading pertinent educational materials and asking for help and advice.

In addition to the above qualities, an effective teacher aide has the following characteristics:

- Honest
- Dependable—has good attendance and can complete necessary tasks efficiently
- Resourceful—skillful at solving problems
- Punctual—reports to work on time
- Cooperative—works well with all school staff members for the benefit of the children
- Good organization skills
- Positive attitude—shows an interest in work, the children, and accepts constructive criticism
- Good communication skills
- Practices confidentiality—does not disseminate private/confidential information about students/teachers/staff/school

Finally, the aide achieves personal fulfillment in knowing the children are helped in their learning through the aide's effort.
Code of Ethics
The role of the teacher aide is further defined in the following excerpt from the Education Standards Commission:

68-1.001, FAC Code of Ethics of the Education Profession in Florida

1. The educator values the worth and dignity of every person, the pursuit of truth, devotion to excellence, acquisition of knowledge, and the nurture of democratic citizenship. Essential to the achievement of these standards are the freedom to learn and to teach and the guarantee of equal opportunity for all.

2. The educator's primary professional concern will always be for the student and for the development of the student's potential. The educator will therefore strive for professional growth and will seek to exercise the best professional judgment and integrity.

Aware of the importance of maintaining the respect and confidence of one's colleagues, of students, of parents, and of other members of the community, the educator strives to achieve and sustain the highest degree of ethical conduct.

Defining the role of the substitute teacher

Literature suggests that the role of substitute teachers is at best ambiguous. Perceptions of substitutes from various educators (i.e., teacher, principal) are discussed. Steps are suggested that could help each school district clarify the role of its substitutes along with some suggestions for individual school campuses. How clarifying the role of substitutes could impact students' attitudes toward substitute teachers is included.

In order to define the role of substitute teachers, we must first define the meaning of substitute teachers. "Substitute teacher means replacing a teacher with one of equal value"(Purvis & Garvey, 1993, p.370). Do we consider them equal? Are they equal? It might be compared to a meat substitute, filling but not very good. Nobody wants to be thought of as a substitute anything, not even on a professional basis. A substitute, regardless of what we are talking about, is never quite as good as the "real thing" (Shreeve, 1983). If we want substitutes to perform and be treated like the "real thing," maybe we should call them "interim" teacher. "Interim" teacher refers to a person with approximately the same duties and responsibilities as a regular teacher. But do substitute teachers have the same duties and responsibilities as the regular teachers? Should they have the same? Exactly what is the role of substitute teachers?

"There is much ambiguity about the role that substitutes are to play in the schooling process, a fact which further complicates the abilities of substitutes to carry out their responsibilities" (St. Michel, 1995, p. 18). Many substitutes' perception of their role is that
of second-class teachers, low status, isolation, and lack of positive feedback (Rawson). "Who substitute teachers are depends to some extent on who we perceive them to be and how we treat them" (St. Michel, 1995, p. 19). What we expect substitute teachers to be is usually what we get. If we see substitutes as substandard fill-ins, that is probably what we will get. If we see them as emergency personnel with the full responsibilities of the classroom, then we may be surprised to find that is what we will get (Shreeve, 1983).

The role of substitute teachers is largely what administrators and teacher make it. In defining the substitute teachers' role, administrators should ask the following questions:

1. Are substitute teachers forgotten until they are needed?
2. Are there clear expectations of substitutes and do the substitutes have a good chance of achieving these expectations?
3. Are efficient methods used to strengthen their performance (Brace, 1990, p. 73)?

Answers to these questions could help administrators see how important they consider the role of the substitutes.

Forgotten Substitutes
Are substitutes virtually forgotten between their assignments? Do administrators simply pull out their list and start calling, beginning with the first name, until they find an available warm body? Is the quality of substitutes a consideration or is it even known? Are substitutes considered to be a part of the school's agenda at times other than when they are needed in a classroom?

Clear Expectations
Do the different school campuses have certain expectations of their substitutes? If so, do these substitutes know what these expectations are and are they in writing? If the expectations are not in writing, do the campus administrators expect substitutes to automatically know what is expected? How many jobs are there that expect the employees to know exactly what is expected of them their first day on the job with no specific job training? For many substitutes there is rarely any continuity in assignments. One may be assigned to first grade one day, senior English the next, sixth grade the next, and high school calculus the next.

Strengthening Performance
What is being done to help substitutes improve? It is hard for substitutes to improve when they receive very little information telling them what is expected of them or how to achieve it. They need to know where improvement is needed and how this can be accomplished.

"Most often administrators expect the substitute teacher to play the role of babysitter, even though philosophically they consider the substitute to be a colleague" (Rawson, 1981, p.82). If administrators see substitutes as babysitters and law enforcers, students will lose valuable instructional time. One of the things that makes substitutes question their role is the lack of support they receive. This is evident by the lack of information about lesson plans, seating charts, building orientation, and daily operating procedures. In order to define the substitute’s role, Brace (1990) suggests some key elements for administrators.
1. Establish a viable substitute pool.
2. Compile a district manual and building handbook.
3. Include substitutes at staff meetings.
4. Supervise substitutes.
5. Provide for systematic feedback (p. 73).

**Substitute Pool**
Administrators could actively recruit viable candidates to become substitutes, not merely wait for enough warm bodies to walk in off the street. Credentials should be checked and areas of interest, former training, and preferred grade levels identified. Substitutes are role models and should be able to speak and write appropriately and correctly.

**District Manual**
Substitutes need to know school calendars, district policies, appropriate telephone numbers, and administrator names. Each school should have its own handbook with information specifically about its campus. Procedures such as signing in and out, specific routines, bell schedules, and specific responsibilities for substitute teachers could be included.

**Staff Meetings**
Appropriate inservice topics could be presented during staff development time that is directly related to substitute teachers. This could help substitutes feel a part of a professional team as well as enhance their performance in the classroom. Substitutes should not only be willing to go to these meetings, but they should be required to go in order to keep their job.

**Supervising Substitutes**
The administrators in charge of calling substitutes for their building could be the ones to supervise substitutes while they are working there. They could be available to help if problems arise. The administrator should note any potential problem situations (e.g., classes or students) early in the day and attempt to reduce their possibility of occurrence. An administrator should attempt to `touch base' with substitutes periodically throughout the day to briefly discuss any concerns (Brace, 1990).

**Systematic Feedback**
A systematic feedback system will help substitutes know what is expected of them and that their job is important enough for an administrator to be checking in with them during the day. It lets the teachers know that their classrooms will be monitored from time to time by an administrator and that in order to ensure success in their classroom the substitutes must be provided adequate information. It helps the administrators to weed out unproductive substitutes, find help for those substitutes who need it, and know that with this support system in place, some of the problems caused by the presence of substitute teachers will be diminished.

Substitutes need to know what they do well and where they need improvement. Administrators need to know the same things about the substitutes, so needed help can be provided and so substitutes who do not work to improve are not invited back. Teachers
could provide input on the substitutes’ performance in their classroom. Teachers could report on the extent to which the substitutes carried out plans left for them and the general condition of things in the room when they returned to their classroom. The substitute could report on what they did in the classroom, any problems they found, the quality of lesson plans left, and whether or not up-to-date seating charts were available.

Some substitutes work exceptionally well with elementary students, some with high school students, and some with all ages. A feedback and support system could identify which substitutes work best in particular situations, and have them selected to substitute in their optimum area most of the time. In order to have a successful substitute program, what substitutes are expected to do and what they actually accomplish should be very similar. If it isn’t, then extra training should be available to help close the gap, and expectations should be reviewed.

**What Should the Substitute be Expected to Do?**

Classroom teachers often expect the substitute teachers to follow inadequate lesson plans and maintain control without giving large quantities of busy-work. There may be a hidden expectation of not doing a better job than the classroom teachers. If substitutes do a better job, the regular teachers may feel threatened (Rawson, 1981).

The substitute should be able to instruct to some extent in most subject areas. This means they should be aware of the kinds of subjects in every grade level and be acquainted with them. Substitutes should be aware of the differences in attitude and behavior at various grade levels so they will have an idea of what to expect. They should be able to maintain control of the classroom from quiet work to active learning. Substitutes should be familiar with school district and campus policies and procedures and should be expected to behave in a professional and ethical manner. They should arrive on time and stay until their work is completed (Pronin).

"Substitutes should be expected to maintain class continuity and move the curriculum forward. But they should not be expected to walk in, pick up a room key from the secretary, and then feel prepared to make a significant contribution to academic learning" (Brace, 1990, p. 73). If educators are unable to clearly identify the role of the substitute teachers in their district, it comes as no surprise that students may then regard them as fill-ins, deserving little or no respect.

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**Activity: The Role of the Teacher, Teacher Aide, & Substitute Teacher**

Directions: After reading *The Role of the Teacher/Teacher Aide/Substitute Teacher*, choose the BEST answer to each of the following questions.

1. Confidential means
   a. having confidence in yourself as a teacher aide.
   b. having confidence that your students are learning effectively.
   c. private information about students and personnel should not be disseminated.
   d. both a and b

2. Which trait shows initiative as a teacher aide?
   a. Never being late to work.
   b. Doesn't show nervousness when trying something new.
   c. Having to be reminded of duties.
   d. Grading students' spelling tests without having to be told.

3. Accepting constructive criticism from the classroom teacher is an example of
   a. keeping a positive attitude
   b. practicing confidentiality
   c. being resourceful
   d. honesty

4. What is the most frequently desired characteristic of a teacher aide?
   a. dependable
   b. enthusiastic
   c. punctual
   d. organized

5. A teacher aide who is good at solving problems is considered
   a. dependable
   b. cooperative
   c. resourceful
   d. organized

6. Children have the following intrinsic needs
   a. love, responsibility, understanding, knowledge of resources
   b. respect, encouragement, strict discipline, responsibility
   c. understanding, love, responsibility, encouragement
   d. all of the above

7. Teacher aides need to know
   a. the school and facilities
   b. school personnel
   c. equipment and resource materials available
   d. all of the above
Answer TRUE or FALSE to the following statements; if FALSE, correct the statement.

8. Teacher aides are used in limited ways.
9. The job description for teacher aides has not been agreed upon by all educators.
10. Teacher aides are generally used to do the things that need to be done but can be done by someone with more professional training than a teacher.
11. A teacher aide may supply needs of the children that may not be supplied by the teacher.
12. All educators should value the worth and dignity of every person, the pursuit of truth, devotion to excellence, acquisition of knowledge, and the nurture of an undemocratic citizenship.
13. A teacher aide should never handle discipline problems on his/her own.
14. An educator’s primary professional concern will always be for the student.
15. Many post-high school educational institutions offer two- and four-year curriculums in the training of teacher aides.
16. Educational prerequisites for teacher aides have not been agreed upon by all educators.

Short Answer

17. What tool is used to help teacher aides develop and use their strengths effectively and help them to recognize their strengths and weaknesses?
18. What is the job outlook for teacher aides?
19. What insight did you get into the role of substitute teacher from reading this article?
20. List 3 things a substitute teacher should be expected to do and 3 things he/she should not be expected to do?