

Substituting in the Special Education Classroom

By Deborah K. Thompson, Ed.S.

In recent years, it has been a challenge to fill the need for substitute teachers in our schools. This need is even more prevalent when a substitute position is required in the special education setting. Federal law requires special education to meet the unique needs of students who have disabilities whether permanent teachers become ill or not. The Fayette County School System in Georgia understands and commits to meeting the needs of these students. Mrs. Candace Krietner, Director of the Sub-Finder System, found a way to be proactive in addressing the problem related to finding substitute teachers for special education classrooms.

Mrs. Krietner surveyed the substitutes to determine their needs in regard to working with students with disabilities. Many of the substitutes expressed a desire to work with these students but felt they lacked the necessary skills to be effective in the special education setting. Fayette County is also heavily involved in Project T.E.A.M., a model of team-teaching where special education students are taught in the regular classroom. Substitute teachers felt unsure of their roles in the cooperative classroom setting.

Since substitutes expressed a desire to learn more about working with students who have disabilities, an inservice training program was developed. All substitutes were offered the training on a volunteer basis, and a stipend for participation in the 1-day training program was offered. Five special education program consultants conducted sessions in areas including Cooperative/Collaborative Instruction, Students With Learning Disabilities, Students With Intellectual Disabilities, Students With Autism Spectrum Disorders, Students With Emotional Behavior Disorders, and Preschool-Aged Students. The sessions were interactive and provided a brief overview of each area as well as the opportunity for the participants to ask questions.

What are the important factors a substitute teacher needs to know when working with students with disabilities?

The most important fact is that these students are still children, and there is no need to fear or pity them. They need firm rules and guidelines as well as nurture and encouragement. Students with disabilities may need different instructional techniques and tools, but they still need teachers who are caring, willing, and flexible. Once the substitute teacher is familiar with some of the basics, s/he will not have any difficulty addressing the needs of these students in the classroom.

How does the substitute teacher address the processing needs of the Specific Learning Disabled Student in the regular classroom?

Learning disabilities are the invisible disabilities, and these students are often portrayed as “lazy” or “unmotivated.” In order to experience what it is like to have processing deficits, substitute teachers participated in simulation activities involving auditory processing, visual processing, visual motor integration, and social perception. Many of the substitutes felt the same frustration and humiliation felt by students who have these difficulties. The substitutes then participated in “common sense” ways of addressing these difficulties. This group of individuals had some excellent ideas and came up with some very practical solutions.

How does the substitute teacher know what modifications are appropriate or permitted?

The challenge often faced by substitute teachers is how they can go into someone else’s classroom and implement necessary accommodations. All students have IEPs that stipulate required classroom modifications. Each regular education teacher is provided with a copy of the necessary modifications, and substitute teachers may review these. Another suggestion is to be sure that special education teachers leave thorough lesson plans with seating charts indicating which students need to be assisted. Substitute teachers need to be given the liberty to consult with special education teachers and administrators regarding these requirements. We found that many substitute teachers have the compassion and common-sense knowledge to make practical modifications to help students be successful in the classroom.

Key points the substitute needs to remember when substituting in a collaborative/cooperative classroom:

- Be involved in the instructional process.
- Assist all students by circulating about the room.
- Be aware of appropriate modifications.
- Follow the general classroom teacher’s lead.
- Be careful of requiring oral reading by students.

Key points the substitute needs to remember when substituting in a resource or self-contained classroom:

- Follow lesson plans closely.
- Prepare for small group and individual instruction.
- Monitor students doing independent work.
- Keep completed assignments organized.
- Provide feedback for the teacher.
- Use paraprofessional’s knowledge of classroom structure and routine.

What does the substitute need to know in order to work efficiently with students who have Autism Spectrum Disorder?

Working with students who have Autism Spectrum Disorder is interesting and challenging. When using the appropriate tools for a specific purpose, these students can be quite successful, even when a substitute teacher is working in the classroom. Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder need visual (written) schedules for the purpose of transition. Often the special education teacher will notify the parents of these students prior to taking a sick day in order for the parent to assist in preparing the student for the change. Social story scripts are also used to help students resolve behavioral concerns or social conflicts. A social story script describes social situations in terms of relevant social cues and often assists the student in defining the appropriate response. Social stories are demonstrated visually and present accurate and specific information to students regarding what may occur in a specific social situation.

Participants in the workshop developed a “mock” social story for having a substitute teacher. This allowed the substitutes to experience the process of writing a social story.

Another necessary tool when working with students who have Autism Spectrum Disorder is in promoting appropriate peer interactions by providing access to classrooms with “typical” models for imitation. Access may be arranged by having typical peers come in the special education classroom, by allowing students to participate in elective subject areas with typical peers, and by exposing students to appropriate activities in the general classroom environment. Participation with typical peers will be outlined in the students’ IEPs and should be listed on the students’ visual schedules.

Sensory diets are a vital component of any program for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder. These diets are addressed in the students’ IEPs and will enable the student to relieve “hyper” or “hypo” sensitivity. Some of the tools used in sensory diets include koosh balls; beanbag chairs; weights; low light; and tactile objects, such as brushes, fabrics, etc. It is important for substitutes to know that sensory diets are quite individual, and what is effective with one student may not be effective with another student. Another important aspect of working with students with Autism Spectrum Disorder is in the area of communication. Many students with Autism Spectrum Disorder are nonverbal and use alternative means of communication. Trainees were exposed to picture communication systems as well as technological devices.

What tools does a substitute teacher need to have in order to work successfully with students who have moderate to severe intellectual disabilities?

It is vitally important to remember those students with moderate and severe disabilities are still children. The temptation to feel sorry

for these children because of their disabilities may cause substitute teachers to “baby” them. These students will “test” the substitute just as a regular education student may challenge an unfamiliar adult in the classroom. It is most important to use positive encouragement and follow the daily classroom routine.

Many students with moderate and severe intellectual disabilities use nonverbal communication. Sign language and picture communication systems are often implemented in these classrooms. Substitute teachers who participated in the training were provided with an overview of the many signs used by these students. They also had the opportunity to practice using these signs with one another in order to gain a level of comfort with using sign language. It is vital for the substitute teachers to be able to communicate with these students.

Children with moderate and severe intellectual disabilities often have physical needs in addition to their cognitive needs. Trainees participated in practicing techniques to properly lift and position students. The most important aspect to consider when lifting/positioning a child is safety. Three simple rules are recommended when transferring a student with physical disabilities:

- Use two or three people to help transfer.
- Use the paraprofessional who is experienced with the student when performing difficult transfers.
- Always support the student’s head during transfer.

When the substitute teacher remembers these three basic points, the transfer will be performed efficiently and safely.

Students with moderate to severe intellectual disabilities experience frustration when learning new tasks. It is important to consider that sometimes learning takes a lot of effort. Compassionate individuals are often tempted to help students by completing the tasks for them. It is most important to encourage and support without compromising the students’ independence. Substitute teachers were also introduced to the **WASSD** strategy. This is a strategy to use when encouraging a student to complete a requested task. It follows:

- **Wait** 5 seconds for child to complete action.
- **Ask**, “What do you need to do?” (Wait 5 seconds for student to comply.)
- **Say** what the child needs to do (i.e., “Jim, you need to put both feet on the floor.”). (Wait 5 seconds for compliance.)
- **Show** the child what s/he needs to do (i.e., tap floor, tap feet, and point, “Jim, feet belong on the floor.”).
- **Do** the action for the child, hand over hand.

By using this technique, substitutes will be able to assist students in learning independence by modeling simple tasks for students to perform.

It is most important to remember that students with moderate to severe intellectual disabilities can be messy. Substitute teachers should

wear comfortable clothes and shoes. Clothes should also be washable. It is also suggested to wear the hair pulled back or out of student's reach. Try to be calm and flexible when accidents occur, as these can also be an important part of the learning experience. Substitutes who have worked successfully in classrooms with students with moderate and severe disabilities share many positive experiences.

What do substitute teachers need to be successful in working with students with emotional/behavioral concerns?

Students with emotional/behavioral concerns can often be challenging for the substitute teacher. Trainees participated in restraint training in order to become familiar with techniques for dealing with students who are in emotional crisis and are out of control. Although this activity is a lot of fun, it also addresses the seriousness of situations when students become violent. It is important to practice these techniques so that they will be automatic when faced with a crisis situation. These particular restraint techniques ensure the safety of the student, his/her peers, and the adults in the classroom.

Another important element of working with students who have emotional and behavioral disorders is in understanding and implementing the behavior management plan. Each student has a behavior intervention plan as part of the IEP. This plan outlines the target behavior, its frequency, and the antecedents that may precipitate the behavior. Positive behavioral interventions are clearly outlined. There are also specific steps for the teacher to take when dealing with discipline issues. Substitute teachers should become aware of the contents of the behavior plans, as they provide valuable information the substitute can use in the classroom.

Important points to consider for addressing the needs of students with emotional/behavioral concerns include:

- Remain calm and in control.
- Choose your battles and avoid power struggles.

Substitute teachers can also use effective practices used by classroom teachers. Some of the characteristics of expert teachers in academically diverse classrooms include:

- Evaluate your methods with continual assessment.
- Implement appropriate learning activities based on the student's level of functioning.
- Vary the amount of instruction and practice.
- Use a wide range of instructional strategies.
- Embrace student differences.
- Employ effective management techniques.

The substitute teachers who participated in the training session for the Fayette County School System provided positive feedback related to their experience. The participants said they would be more likely to substitute in a special education classroom as a result of the training.

They felt that all substitutes should be trained by special education staff and would like additional follow-up training during the 2000-2001 school year.

There were also some important recommendations for classroom teachers and administrators as a result of the training. Many substitute teachers are left without lesson plans, copies of IEP modifications, and behavior intervention plans. Administrators must make teachers accountable for the activities in their classrooms when they are out of school. It is suggested that teachers develop a Substitute Teacher Notebook that holds all the vital information needed to work most effectively in the classroom. This folder should include lesson plans, filler activities, behavior plans, IEP modifications, and seating charts. Seating charts are especially important in the cooperative/collaborative setting where special education students are in the general population. Substitute teachers need to know where each identified special education student sits and what modifications are needed for that student. The notebook should also include copies of visual schedules, picture systems, and signs. Substitute teachers are more than willing to implement activities and accommodations when provided with the correct information.

It appears that training and preparation are essential elements to a successful substitute teacher program. The Fayette County School System has addressed its shortage by providing substitute teachers with the necessary tools to feel successful in a special education setting. Training will continue throughout the 2000-2001 school year and beyond.

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