

On Subbing

The First Four Years



Hello, I'm Dave. I'm a substitute Education Assistant in special education classes.

Special education serves a wide array of students, some with learning disabilities, some with emotional problems, some with physical disabilities, and more. My job varies from class to class, day to day. In most cases, I'm there to give the students extra individual attention. In autism classes I usually repeat the directions a few times and redirect students when they get distracted. In behavior problem rooms I try to keep students from getting frustrated when they don't understand something. I make sure kids with physical disabilities get access to whatever they need. I also break up fights, change diapers, open milk cartons, and monitor lunch rooms and playgrounds.

Really, though, I feel like my biggest job is to teach kids it's ok to be weird, that when you grow up you don't have to become boring or a jerk. And part of my job is trying to figure out how not to become a jerk myself, how to hang on to as many of my ethics as I can. And I guess that's what this book is about: trying to be ethical and be an adult concurrently, not in shifts.

I thought I'd work as a sub for a year or two and move on, but here I am, four years later, working on getting my own classroom. I always dreaded the idea of a career, but I think I've found something I want to do for a while. I love my job and the students with whom I've worked, with a few exceptions. As a sub, every day is something new and it's usually amazing. It's not always pleasant, but it's something I'm grateful I got to experience, something that I like to believe I'm better off for having gone through. This book chronicles my first four years as a sub. I'm not trying to say I'm great at what I do, or that I'm an expert on anything. I'm just doing the best I can and these are my stories. I hope you like them.

Thanks for reading.

Dave

P.S. I think it's best if you read this in intervals, preferably at school or at work, but reading it all at once at home is ok too, if that's what you want to do.

On Subbing: The First Four Years

by Dave Roche

ISBN 978-0-9726967-5-3

This is Microcosm #76021

Distributed in the booktrade by **AK PRESS**

(510)208-1700 / sales@akpress.org

Available through Baker & Taylor, Ingram, and finer bookstores everywhere

Third Edition, 4000 copies - June 1, 2008

Second Edition, 4000 copies - October 21, 2005

First Edition, 4000 copies - June 25, 2004

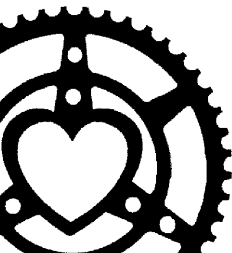
Microcosm Publishing

222 S Rogers St.

Bloomington, IN 47404-4936

(812)323-7395

www.microcosmpublishing.com



We have over 2,300 other books, zines, t-shirts, patches, stickers, videos, and other things available from our catalog and on our website. Send \$1 for a catalog.

At 25 I needed a change. Leaving Los Angeles was a good first step, but I found myself falling into the same rut in my new city. I was being pulled into the quicksand of easy, low-paying jobs again. I switched from a movie theater in West Hollywood to a thrift store on West Burnside, but it was the same thing. No early mornings, no late nights, just a flat line in the middle of the day, just short of frustrating enough to do something about it. It's an easy trap to fall into, one you set for yourself with the bait, "It's only temporary."

So there I was, from noon until 9:00, selling the clothes and knick-knacks of people who had most likely died recently. Things were bad from the start. Not even a week into the job I fished a moist dollar bill from an old man's pocket. A week later a woman walked in with a pint of ice cream, bought a spoon, and started eating on her way out. She didn't even bother to wipe it off on her shirt. Even a raccoon will go through the motions of cleaning. And at least once a week, two people would almost come to blows over fake nacre earrings or a polyester blouse.

The worst part, though, was the dust. Bags of clothes that had been in attics, basements, and backs of closets for months, even years, came in every day. Our shelves were filled with picture frames, salt shakers, dishes, inspirational plaques, and candy bowls disregarded as their owners reached the termini of their lives; objects not important enough to warrant any attention in the chaos of dealing with a loved one's death. And they were all covered in dust. The dust was everywhere, making me itchy and clogging up my nose, forcing me to breathe through my mouth. About a month or so into my job I remembered I had read somewhere that dust is 80% skin cells. I was breathing in dead people. I had to get out.

But what then? I couldn't get another job I didn't care about. I needed something different. Defining myself by what I don't like and what I won't do served me well in my early 20s, but I felt I reached a point where I had to figure out what I do like. And I wanted a job where I felt like I was doing something worthwhile.

I decided to try substitute teaching. It was something I had thought about a little in Los Angeles but never got around to trying out. It sounded challenging and fun, respectable but I could still be punk. And I would be lying if I said Chris Jensen's columns in HeartattaCk and knowing that Martin from Los Crudos and John Denery were teachers didn't have some influence on my decision. I went to the main administrative building to

apply. I found out, unlike California, not just anyone can be a sub in my new state. They have standards here. Without proper teaching credentials, I couldn't be a sub. I was qualified, however, to be a substitute education assistant. I didn't quite know what that was, I just knew it was like being a substitute teacher except less pay, less responsibility, and only in special ed. rooms. I decided to go for it.

I had the easiest interview for any job I've ever applied to in my life. I only remember them asking two questions, the gist being "Are you going to abuse kids?" and "Are you a racist?" I guess my calm demeanor and huge, tolerant heart shone through in the answers I gave; I was hired. A couple days later I had to come back in to get fingerprinted. I remember washing my hands with this gritty rinseless soap. It got the ink off quickly, but left a chemical orange smell. It was strong and unpleasant, but soon proved useful. The body odor on the bus ride to the thrift store was especially bad, even for August. I avoided it by keeping my hand close to my face and sniffing deep of the artificial oranges and thinking about how nice it was going to be to give my boss my two weeks notice.

One of my coworkers showed up drunk on my last day at the thrift store. He got sent home. My boss thought it would be a fitting goodbye to make me cash out his register as well as mine, making me stay 15 minutes late after already punching out. But I gave out so much free stuff that day I figured I was still ahead. Also, I recommend finishing a book on your last day of work. Or you should quit on the same day you read the last page. It's really satisfying. There's not much sense of accomplishment in either separately, but together they make you feel ready for a new beginning.

The week in between jobs was nerve-wracking. I felt maybe I had made a mistake. I had no qualifications for this job. What if I'm terrible at it? What if kids hate me? I tried to psych myself up for my first day, but I didn't even know when that would be. They call me in the morning to give me my assignment. I just had to lie in bed and wonder if tomorrow would be my first day. As it turned out, my first few days working in the education system were a huge let down. I got called in to work in the Talented and Gifted office. I was there 9:00 to 5:00, transcribing names and grades, collating fliers, and stuffing envelopes.

This wasn't what I wanted. This wasn't something I felt strongly about. I mean, it was better than working at the thrift store. The pay was better and I had been in the Talented and Gifted program in school, so I had some appreciation for what I was doing. Knowing that somewhere kids like

me were being given the false hope that intelligence brings prestige made the job bearable, but folding paper for the first five hours and stuffing it into envelopes for last three wasn't what I had anticipated. On the second day they gave me a radio, but that didn't make things any better. They also gave me a whalebone paper folder/crease maker. That made me feel worse. I refused to use it for a while, but I figured even if I threw it back into the ocean, the whale wasn't going to come back to life. By the end of the second day I was ready for a classroom. I didn't care if I was qualified or not. If the kids hated me, well, at least it was better than using a piece of animal to fold papers while listening to static-y conservative talk radio.

A Glossary of Sorts

Here are the definitions of a few terms I use throughout this book. I hope I'm not over explaining before I even begin, but I don't want to assume everyone knows what all these mean.

The types of classes in which I work

Academic Delay Room

This is the most common type of special ed. room. It's mostly made up of kids with learning disabilities. The classes are academics based, but go at a slower pace. In the following entries, if I don't specify what kind of class I'm in, it's usually an Academic Delay Room.

Life Skills

This is the room for students who function lower than the Academic Delay Room. Students with Downs Syndrome, mental retardation, autism, or other more severe learning disabilities go here. There are some academics here, but it's tied in with teaching the students how to be safe outside of school or home. In addition to the basics (addition, subtraction, and some simple multiplication and division), math consists of coin recognition and money lessons, how to read clocks, or some other number related subject that ties in directly to their lives. In lower grades there are a lot of field trips to get the kids out in public to teach them how to get around safely (crossing at the crosswalk, with the "walk sign," and so on). Higher grades are taught how to make resumés and how to conduct themselves at job interviews.

Life Skills with Nursing

These are the lowest functioning kids in the district. All the students are confined to wheelchairs, have no gross motor control or communication skills. Talking with them or reading to them rarely elicits any sort of response, although some students react favorably to loud noises or being fanned or other more sensory interactions. As there isn't any sort of academic work, I never know what I'm doing in these classrooms. There are three Life Skills with Nursing classes in the district, I believe, that are divided more by ability than by age. In the higher functioning class there are

exercises to keep kids' minds stimulated, to help them understand basic cause and effect relationships. In the lowest functioning room there are exercises to strengthen the students' bodies, or at least prevent them from atrophying worse.

Behavior Room

As the name would imply, this is for students with behavioral issues. There are subdivisions based on how these behaviors are manifested, but most schools don't have the resources to deal with them separately, so they get lumped into one classroom. Some kids are aggressive, getting into fights all the time, cursing at teachers or students for any perceived slight; others are good at goading other kids to fight, but don't usually fight themselves; some have ADD/ADHD and just can't sit still and be quiet long enough to function in a mainstream classroom; and others are quiet, sitting in the class probably not doing their work but not bothering anyone until someone pushes them too far.

Often these students have delays in their learning due to their behavioral issues. And it usually becomes a cycle: they're too embarrassed to admit they don't know how to read, so they act up when it's time to read and refuse to do the assignment.

Transition Class

By law, students can go to school for free until they are 21-years-old. Whereas the lower functioning students in Life Skills classes will occasionally spend an extra year (and in a few cases an extra two years) in high school, higher functioning students can go to transition classes. Transition classes are the bridge between high school and being out of school for these students. Their main focus is getting students prepared to get jobs and live on their own. In high school, students will be taught how to make a resumé or how to act in a job interview. In the transition class the teacher or the EA will sit with students individually and help them write their resumé, or help them fill out applications. Instead of performing mock interviews they'll help the student get a real interview. It's not all job-related. There are lessons on reading bus schedules, trips out in the community, and helping the higher functioning students go through their DMV manual so they can get their permits.

Resource Room

This is like a study hall for kids with learning disabilities. It's just a little extra help so they can keep up with the other students in their main-stream classes.

I should point out there is a good amount of crossover in these classrooms, particularly in high school. Behavior room students spend a class or two in the academic delay room, and some students spend half the day in the academic delay room and half in the Life Skills room.

A few miscellaneous terms

Autism

Autism is classified as a "pervasive developmental disorder". It was first described by Dr. Leo Kanner in 1943. One of the major features of autism is "an inability to relate to people, or any situation other than being alone." Children with autism seem to be ignoring you, but they don't intend to be rude. They're so withdrawn in themselves that it doesn't seem like they are aware someone is talking to them. They also tend not to flinch or react to loud, sudden noises. This condition is present from birth, although autism is seldom diagnosed before two or three years of age. Because babies with autism don't coo, fret, reach out, or ask for attention they are seen as well behaved. But they avoid social interaction and rapidly fall behind in social development.

Communication deficits are another major feature of autism. Half of all autistic children never learn to speak. Those that do often just echo what they hear, sometimes with a delay of hours or even weeks before they repeat a phrase. Pronoun reversal is another common speech abnormality. Autistic children refer to themselves as "he/she", "you", or by name. This is linked to echolalia.

Even before the period in which language is usually acquired, autistic children show deficits in communication. They don't babble as much as other children, and their babbling conveys less information.

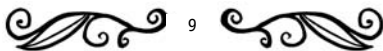
Autistic Children often exhibit abnormal "compulsive and ritualistic" movements. Hand flapping, toe walking, twirling, rocking back and forth, and lip smacking are some of the more common examples.

Choosing

Choosing means free time. Kids get to choose what they want to do, hence choosing.

Shaving cream table

The shaving cream table is, as you would guess, a table covered with shaving cream. No surprise there. It's used in autism/communication behaviors rooms. It's a tactile thing for the students and they generally respond to it well. Beans, sand, and shredded paper are some of the materials used on tables in other autism rooms.



My First Year

September 2000
to
June 2001

Cope-Grey Middle School

September 8

I've seen teachers flinch upon hearing the name of this school, treating me with a mixture of respect and sympathy usually reserved for returning soldiers when I tell them my first assignment was in the Behavior Room here.

Within the first half hour a kid asked me if I was a hippie. I thought that was a little odd, but it was a question that followed me to four or five other schools. Within the next half hour a kid asked me if I wanted to fight. He wasn't particularly threatening, but he wasn't joking either. When I declined he asked why not. I said, "I don't want to lose my job." He was satisfied with that.

I helped kids with their grammar worksheets the first half of the day. Basically, I begged the kids to pay attention to me, then gave them the answers. The second half of the day was spent breaking up fights. I should have got a lunch break in between but the teacher I was working with screwed me over. I had planned on using that half hour to run home, put on deodorant (which I forgot to put on that morning, making me really self-conscious) and drop a sweet number two I'd been brewing all day. (I refuse to poop at work, even in the teachers' bathroom.) Instead, I had to walk around the cafeteria and make sure kids didn't throw carrots at each other.

By the end of the day the kids were cool with me. I think it was because I played basketball with them. And probably because I didn't get them in trouble for cursing. They asked if I was coming back on Monday. "I don't know. Should I?" I love making kids, especially middle schoolers who think they're bad-asses, admit they like me, no matter how quietly they say it.

Transition Class

September 15

I worked in a transition class on the university campus. I conducted one-on-one goal meetings with students. We chose one of the goals from their individualized folder (every student in special ed. has a file that explains what the student is capable of and what his or her academic, social, and behavioral goals are) and discussed how to achieve it. This was only my second classroom assignment and I felt grossly underqualified to be working unsupervised, one-on-one with students. After one 45-minute

meeting with a student, all we figured out was that she liked Disney movies.

Bernard Elementary School

September 20, 21

This was a behavior class for first and second graders. The kids tried to act tough but were too young to pull it off. They were aloof and had tons of attitude, but when things didn't go their way they'd cry.

The biggest problem in this class was kids running away. To compound the problem, this was a portable classroom; once kids got out the door they were outside. One kid ran and wasn't found for an hour. He was 30 blocks away. Most of the time, though, kids would just run out and stand by the door or hang out by the dumpster. It was my job to follow them out. I was told to try to coax them in, but don't yell or demand anything. One kid decided to take his anger out on me. When I tried to talk he yelled, "Shut up, bitch... Shut up, butthead." I wanted to explain to him that the key to insulting is escalation. "Shut up, bitch" is more offensive than "Shut up, butthead" and should therefore come after. I decided that was probably a fourth grade concept.

Lakeside Middle School

September 27-29

Middle schools are generally the worst places in the world, both for students and for subs. I went to this behavior problem class fully expecting to leave a broken man. I was pleasantly surprised.

I won the kids' trust early. A girl ran out of the room and I followed her. At first she didn't want me around, but she opened up to me and told me what she didn't like about school. She made a lot of sense and I ended up agreeing with her. Then I told her what I didn't like about schools.

The nice thing about being a sub is that I get to go in and joke around with the kids. I rarely have to be the bad guy that gives detentions or referrals or even time-outs. I bet the kids I could get the answers to their math problems as fast as their calculators and I did my stupid "stab myself in the eye with my glasses" trick. The kids told me they wished I was their new teacher. It was flattering, but I knew they liked me like this just because I was a sub. On the second day a kid actually gave me an apple. I didn't think this ever happened outside of black and white movies. I wished he had a slingshot in his back pocket or a frog under his hat. That would have made the picture complete.