



“Your naivety will be rewarded with a series of puncture wounds inflicted from an expertly wielded compass...”

WE EXPECT AMAZING THINGS FROM SUPPLY TEACHERS, SAYS **TOM STARKEY** – SO IT’S PROBABLY NOT TOO MUCH TO ASK THAT WE OCCASIONALLY SAY ‘HELLO’ TO THEM WHILE THEY’RE AROUND...



Have you ever seen Quantum Leap? Shut up, I don’t care how old you are; get it watched. That’s what supply teaching is like. You magically jump into someone’s place for a limited period of time, try not to screw up too bad, maybe even do a bit of good and leap out again. Only difference is that Sam Beckett didn’t have a sign round his neck that reads: ‘He’s new – destroy him.’

Supply teachers get a pretty bad rap. I should know; I was one for nine months and I’ve got ears. It’s the strangest thing but if you’re not a permanent fixture in an educational establishment you become a translucent, ghostly figure ignored by a good many in the staffroom. It can lead to somewhat of an existential crisis as people have conversations about the low-quality of the supply staff whilst the low-quality supply staff sit opposite, looking at their

arms to check that they haven’t dematerialised.

In fact, the only people that really notice your presence are the kids. And god help you when they do. The arrival of supply staff invariably signals a special strain of chaos reserved only for those precious moments when they realise that they’re going to get to play with someone who is not their normal teacher:

‘What’s your name sir?’  
 ‘No, your first name sir.’  
 ‘Fine sir. Be like that then sir.’  
 ‘Where’s Miss [insert name here] sir?’  
 ‘Is she dead sir?’  
 ‘Did you kill her sir?’  
 ‘Are you sure sir? You certainly look the type sir.’

Et cetera. Et cetera. Ad infinitum.

And that’s just the schools that

have got it together. Go into the rougher ones expecting anything less than total, all-out carnage and your naivety will be rewarded with a series of puncture wounds inflicted from an expertly wielded compass. And you’d deserve every one of them, rookie.

But it isn’t all bad. Despite criticism and/or indifference from permanent staff, the kids doing their best to re-enact last year’s Super Bowl (minus the time-outs, protective clothing, and the listening to those in authority) there are some real benefits.

If nothing more, it prepares you for dealing with uncertainty (and in these strange times, I think we could all do with brushing up on that particular soft-skill). A phone call in the morning means you get paid. No phone call means you don’t. Some days I used to pray for that phone call because there were bills that needed paying but if I’m being completely honest, some days I didn’t. Sometimes I ignored the phone completely for a leisurely breakfast with my gorgeous wife. That’s another benefit. I love breakfast.

You have no reputation but at the same time you are a wild card. You have to adapt to something new every day whether that be the subject you teach or the actions of a student or how exactly it is that you’re supposed to get their for 8.30am and believe you me when I tell you there is nothing, absolutely nothing, better for brushing up on your behaviour management strategies. This stuff is important no matter what kind of teaching

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you’re doing.

Sure, you give up security, you worry about making rent payments or being able to afford the shopping and, if you join an agency, you have to deal with people whose descriptions of schools may be about as honest as the most desperate of estate agents. However, on the plus side (to an extent) you give up the shackles of expectation. No-one got hurt? Good job! They stayed in the room? Come over here and marry my sister!

I had a hell of a time as a supply teacher. It was like being a hired gun in the old west but nobody needed you to clear up the town. Every teacher should do it for a bit at some point in their career. It’s like a tour of duty; it hardens you, but it also opens your eyes.

Basically what I’m saying is, be kind to your supply teachers. Yes, they may not get through all the cover work. Yes, they may repeatedly ask you what’s the best way to get to the same bloody room three times in a morning and no, they may not be as good as the person they’re temporarily replacing... but at least they’re in there, doing the job.

(That is until they’ve put right what once went wrong and leap out.)

Thanks for reading.