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Top Tips for Cover Lessons

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The challenge of the cover teacher is to establish a safe, positive learning environment as quickly as possible where boundaries and expectations are made clear, and students feel confident in you and the situation they find themselves in. For some students the smallest changes during the day can set off adverse reactions in the classroom, and the sight of seeing someone who isn't their class teacher is enough to trigger this reaction. Others will see the chance of their subject teacher's absence as an opportunity to have some fun with this new teacher - to see how quickly they can find the cover teacher's emotional buttons, press them, sit back and enjoy the spectacle as yet another cover teacher hurtles into orbit.

To combat all of the above the skilled cover teacher recognises that the fundamental basis of good behaviour management is to establish positive relationships with the students as quickly as possible – no mean feat if you are meeting class for the first time and you only have 50 minutes to not only establish these positive relationships but to encourage the class to get on with the learning that needs to take place.

The following tips should help achieve this.

1. Make sure that you are at the door to meet and greet. Smile at the students as they enter the room, deflect questions such as 'Who are you?' 'Where's our teacher?' by saying you'll answer their questions as soon as everyone is settled.
2. For the boys who hurtle into the room like a tornado or the group of girls who settle down to the three M's (makeup/mirror/mascara) go up quietly to these groups and start with a positive – 'thank you for finding your seats so quickly – that's excellent ' and then make a request for the behaviour you expect to see – 'now pop the makeup away for me – thank you'
3. Scan the group as they come in and see who you think might be your more challenging students. These are the ones to befriend straight away – hone in on them, introduce yourself and give them a responsibility 'You look as if you know what's what – can I ask if you could find where your teacher keeps their/books/paper/pens/text books/equipment etc and help me give them out?' Once they have done so make sure you thank and praise them.
4. As soon as you have settled the class down, introduce yourself, write your name on the board and let them know that you appreciate that they must be disappointed that their teacher isn't there (sometimes they are and sometime's they're not – ignore any derisory comments) but that's its your intention that you are going to make sure that they have a good lesson.
5. If you are a cover teacher from outside the school – make sure you have familiarised yourself with the school's praise and reward and sanction policies. If the students know that you are aware of the systems they are likely to have more confidence in you and less likely to play you up. Let them know that your intention is to use the praise and reward policy straight away and let them know exactly what they need to do to get merits/stamps/commendations/positive texts home etc.
6. To supplement this go in armed with a book of stickers to use as instant rewards. Don't underestimate the power of stickers. I've yet to come across a student who doesn't enjoy receiving one (although they may not let you know that!) Use them liberally throughout the lesson whenever you catch someone doing the right thing. Use these opportunities to give praise rather than just

focussing in on the negative behaviour which may well be more prominent at the start of the lesson. Not only does it allow you to state your expectations through reward it sets up a far more positive and engaging atmosphere which will encourage the students to settle down to the learning.

7. At the start of the lesson give students scrap paper to fold into three and make a quick name card. You could use this as a starter activity. This way you'll get to know the student's names much more quickly, and the difference when a child is called by their name, rather than 'Oi you' is a subtle but nevertheless important one. If you suspect that a student has put their wrong name on their card either tactically ignore this, even when the students laugh when you call the student by the wrong name, or go with the joke. Don't show your irritation or insist on them telling you their real name – you're onto a no win situation which the students may capitalise on, thus drawing you away from your objective of getting on with the lesson.
8. Ask those who are on report to hand in their report cards at the start of the lesson. When you have a moment scan how their day is going. If they have had a challenging day, or its P1 and there is little evidence, ask them the question 'Tell me what I need to be looking for in you today so that I can give you a good report' If they've had a good day congratulate them and again give the message that you want to add to the bank of good comments that they've already received.
9. Establish any particular rules that you may have - particularly those for establishing quiet. What is your routine? Teach this to the students before anything else.
10. At the end of the lesson, make sure you praise the students who've worked well, thank the group for trying to respond positively under a difficult situation (even if they have been challenging), that you'll leave a message to their subject teacher about those who have worked well in the lesson and tell them that you hope to see them again. Be at the door to say goodbye to the class as they leave again with a smile on your face. You never know if or when you might meet them again, so make sure their last impression of you is a positive one because it will make your next cover lesson with them so much easier.