

My experience in relief and regular teaching from Grade 3 to adults, in Australia and overseas has provided me with a holistic approach and deep interest in education.

In 1999 I completed my PhD thesis entitled *Relief teaching: Invisible teachers, Visible Problems*. It was based on my lived experience as a relief teacher as well as on interviews with students, relief teachers, regular teachers, school administrators and principals in Tasmania.

A relief teacher is expected to cope while the regular teacher is away. In the 1990's children spent 8-10 percent of time taught by someone who was not their regular teacher. Little was known or written about what occurred in those classes. There was a wide- ranging expectation based on the belief that these teachers were paid to cope and it was the school's responsibility to ensure they did. Relief teachers were seen in terms of finance and not outcomes. Although relief teaching cost the Education Department millions of dollars each year there were few statistics. So it was easy to see why relief teaching statistics were overlooked. A teaching vacancy could represent 2 hours or 20 days depending on the circumstances. Funding also came from various sources. Sometimes a single relief teacher might cover classes for four absent teachers in the course of a day.

While relief teaching was considered a low priority by the Department of Education in Tasmania, my research was welcomed in NSW and Victoria. I gave full- day seminars for senior staff there. They realised that what happens when regular teachers are absent has a lasting impact on students and indeed the schools themselves, for better or worse.

Relief teaching may seem on the margins but it is central to the contexts of teaching and learning.

Having a holistic view of education from different perspectives has prompted me to ask new questions:

- How does teacher absence impact on student learning?
- What induction/ training do relief teachers have/need?
- What can be done to help teachers work out of their area of expertise?
- What skills does a teacher need to gain authority in an unfamiliar situation?
- Do student teachers believe they were adequately prepared for management in the classroom?

Kind regards

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