

# Quest for Job Stability of Substitute Teachers

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Substitute teachers are often regarded as the unsung heroes of the school community (Brown, 2022). Despite being an essential part of the teaching workforce, their roles and working conditions remain insufficiently recognized; their position is a marginalized sector within education (Sullivan et al., 2023). Nevertheless, substitute teachers play a critical role in maintaining continuity of instruction whenever regular teachers are absent, ensuring that learning does not come to a halt.

The role of a substitute teacher is inherently demanding and complex. Kbuffett (2017) describes substitute teaching as one of the most challenging roles in education, as it requires individuals to step into unfamiliar classrooms and immediately assume responsibility for managing instruction and student behavior. Substitute teachers are expected to meet the same professional standards as full-time teachers, yet they often do so with minimal preparation time, limited access to instructional resources, and little to no formal training or professional development. These conditions demand a high level of adaptability, resilience, and creativity, as substitutes must quickly adjust to varying classroom environments and diverse student needs.

In addition to instructional responsibilities, substitute teachers face significant challenges related to classroom management and professional integration. Entering a new classroom without established relationships with students can make it difficult to maintain discipline and foster engagement. At the same time, substitute teachers may experience a lack of inclusion within the school community, as their temporary status often limits their participation in decision-making processes and professional support systems. This can contribute to feelings of isolation and reduce opportunities for professional growth.

The temporary nature of substitute teaching further intensifies these challenges. While the role can offer moments of fulfillment, such as successfully guiding a class or building brief yet meaningful connections with students, it is often accompanied by emotional and economic uncertainty. The end of each assignment requires substitute teachers to disengage from a community they may have begun to identify with, making each transition difficult. Moreover, the absence of job security and the unpredictability of assignments can create ongoing financial stress, particularly for those who rely on substitute teaching as a primary source of income.

### **Navigating the Dual Realities of Substitute Teaching**

From notebooks to netbooks, across both print and digital eras, substitute teachers create learning experiences that are engaging and dynamic. Substitute teaching is a demanding yet rewarding profession. Stepping into an unfamiliar classroom, guiding new learners, and witnessing their joy and inspiration can bring a deep sense of fulfillment. Shaw (2024) noted that, as guest teachers, substitutes bring diverse learning materials to life and actively engage students through various forms of educational technology.

Donofrio (2015) emphasized that exposure to a wide range of challenges, many similar to those faced by regular teachers, provides substitute teachers with valuable experience in addressing classroom issues independently. Despite limited preparation time, they carry the responsibility of delivering quality education. By the end of the day, the work can be exhausting, yet it remains deeply rewarding. However, not all experiences are positive. Hellier (2018) reflected on her years as a substitute teacher with appreciation, yet acknowledged the stress associated with the role. The constant transition into new environments, uncertainty about lesson plans, and unpredictability of student behavior contributed to this stress. The difficulty of entering unfamiliar classrooms daily, often unsure whether she would be supported with clear instructions or required to manage situations on her own.

Substitute teachers often hold onto the hope that securing a permanent position in public schools is within reach, especially as they gain experience within the system. However, obtaining a regular teaching post remains highly competitive, often described as “passing through the eye of a needle.” Each year, divisions receive hundreds to thousands of applicants aspiring to join the Department of Education (DepEd) (Sarmiento, 2022). As DepEd Assistant Secretary Jesus Mateo (2022) stated, *“Not all LET passers are qualified for the position; we will hire applicants who are most qualified.”* With the implementation of the K to 12 program, DepEd has strengthened its standards to improve school performance and student outcomes, emphasizing the need for highly qualified teachers.

Despite these justifications, concerns about the fairness of the hiring process persist. Bautista (2023) argued that applicants’ voices are often unheard and overlooked, leaving many uncertain even after undergoing a rigorous and competitive selection process. Similarly, Tolentino (2016) identified the presence of bureaucratic anomalies within DepEd. There are

reported practices, such as the alleged selling of teaching positions, the giving of donations or gifts to facilitate appointment processing, and the use of political connections, to secure permanent roles. Not all officials consistently adhere to established hiring policies, with some selectively complying while disregarding others. Empirical evidence suggests that irregularities in hiring practices are not isolated incidents but reflect deeper systemic issues within the recruitment process.

### **Between Uncertainty and Opportunity: Career Transitions of Substitute Teachers**

While navigating the lengthy and uncertain process of securing permanent positions, many substitute teachers explore alternative career paths. Kolmar (2022) disclosed that a significant number of former substitute teachers remain in the education sector, often transitioning to roles in private schools, colleges, or universities. Others pursue related or entirely different professions, such as customer service representatives, administrative assistants, office managers, tutors, graduate assistants, billing specialists, or medical assistants. Some continue working as substitute teachers while awaiting more stable opportunities. In contrast, others leave the profession altogether, moving into fields such as office work, the cruise industry, technology, or business sectors (Logan, 2023). Even when shifting careers, many continue to apply transferable skills developed through teaching, such as communication, adaptability, and problem-solving (Hansen, 2014).

For some, the pursuit of stability leads them beyond national borders. Smith (2018) noted a growing trend of educators seeking employment abroad, reflecting the evolving dynamics of global education migration. Similarly, Arcilla et al. (2023) highlighted that teachers, including those from the Philippine Department of Education (DepEd), are driven by a combination of

personal and systemic factors. Among these, the prospect of higher earnings and improved financial security plays a significant role, offering educators better opportunities to support themselves and their families.

Substitute teachers aspire to become regular public school teachers primarily to attain the stability that permanent positions offer. This includes job security, consistent roles, and relief from frequent adjustments required by short-term assignments across varying classroom contexts. The absence of uncertainty and the opportunity to establish continuity in teaching make permanence highly desirable. A study by Arcilla et al. (2023) found that educators are motivated to join the Department of Education (DepEd) due to several key factors, including job security and compensation, a passion for teaching and making a meaningful impact, and the pursuit of personal fulfillment and long-term career aspirations.

### **From Temporary Roles to Desired Futures: An Aspiration Theory Perspective**

Aspiration theory examines how the gap between desired goals and one's current situation influences individual well-being. It recognizes that people do not make absolute judgments; instead, they evaluate their circumstances by comparing them with their environment, past experiences, and expectations for the future, thereby shaping their aspirations (Stutzer & Henne, 2014). Aspirations are understood as the selection of goals within a given context (Lewin, 1951), influenced by the perceived value of the goal and the likelihood of achieving it. The stronger the value attached to a goal and the higher the perceived probability of attaining it, the stronger the aspiration becomes. Conversely, when the value or perceived likelihood is low, aspirations tend to weaken.



In this context, substitute teachers often hold strong aspirations to become regular public school teachers. The stability associated with permanent positions, such as job security, consistency, and a clear career path, serves as a powerful motivator. By working as substitute teachers, they gain entry into the public school system, allowing them to experience firsthand the roles and responsibilities of permanent educators. This exposure provides opportunities to demonstrate their skills and competencies while building professional relationships with teachers, school leaders, and other Department of Education personnel who may support their career progression.

Moreover, substitute teaching becomes a pathway for continuous learning and professional growth. It allows individuals to refine their abilities, expand their networks, and move closer to realizing their aspirations. Through these experiences, substitute teachers gradually transform their goals into attainable realities.

## **RESEARCH FOCUS: Stories of Hopes and Aspirations of Substitute Teachers**

This study seeks to shed light on the experiences of substitute teachers and advocate for their recognition within the profession. As temporary replacements for regular classroom teachers, they should be acknowledged as integral members of the educational system. This study aims to explore their lived experiences, including both their moments of fulfillment and the challenges they face. It also seeks to understand their coping mechanisms and to give voice to their aspirations for stability and professional growth as they navigate their path toward becoming regular public school teachers.

The study adopted a qualitative narrative inquiry design to explore the lived experiences, challenges, coping mechanisms, and aspirations of substitute public school teachers. This approach was selected for its strength

in capturing rich, personal stories and giving voice to a marginalized group within the education sector. By focusing on participants' narratives, the study aimed to understand how substitute teachers make meaning of their experiences and pursue job stability. The research was conducted in the District of Nabas, Aklan, Philippines, involving eight substitute teachers who were purposively selected based on their relevant teaching experiences.

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews guided by a validated instrument reviewed by experts. The interviews included open-ended questions that allowed participants to freely share their stories, with follow-up questions used to deepen the discussion. Ethical procedures were strictly followed, including securing institutional permissions, obtaining informed consent, ensuring confidentiality through pseudonyms, and creating a comfortable environment for participants. Interviews were audio-recorded and manually transcribed to ensure accuracy and completeness of the data.

The data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis, which involved familiarization with the data, coding, generating themes, reviewing and refining themes, defining and naming them, and finally reporting the findings. This systematic process enabled the identification of key patterns and themes across participants' narratives. To ensure rigor and credibility, the study employed expert validation of the codes and themes.

The results of this study are summed up in themes generated from the interviews of eight participants using thematic analysis. These eight themes were classified according to the information sought for.

The narratives of substitute teachers are shaped by a blend of satisfaction, struggle, and strategic adaptation. These experiences revolve around three central themes: "It's my happiness to be with the learners again," "I don't know how I will start," and "I should prepare myself for bigger

responsibilities.” Together, these themes reflect heartwarming moments, challenging situations, and thoughtful responses that contribute to both personal growth and the enrichment of the teaching–learning community.

### ***It’s My Happiness to be with the Learners Again***

Learners are at the heart of why substitute teachers choose this path. Being surrounded by students and having the opportunity to nurture them holistically brings deep fulfillment. While substitute teachers exist to ensure student welfare, they also receive immeasurable joy in return. Teacher Ann, who served as a substitute teacher for five months, expressed her happiness: *“My happiness is to be with the kids. I can teach the kids again. That’s the beauty because you got to practice what you learned in college.”* Similarly, Teachers Cath and Farrah shared how meaningful it is to connect with their pupils.

Substitute teachers feel even more fulfilled when they experience enthusiasm and acceptance from their learners. Teacher Bia recalled a moment when she felt acknowledged by her students, while Teacher Emma, who left her job as a university clerk, shared that nothing compares to the joy of being liked as a teacher. For Teacher Hannah, simple gestures during a Teacher’s Day celebration made her feel deeply appreciated. She emphasized that nothing surpasses the fulfillment of helping students learn.

Moments of learning further deepen this sense of purpose. Teacher Dan, who previously worked in a Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) company, shared his decision to leave his job and pursue teaching. He spoke with pride about choosing his learners and the joy he experienced in guiding them. These experiences affirm that meaningful teaching extends beyond academics. The most meaningful aspects of teaching involve student

engagement, a sense of contributing to something greater, and the formation of lasting connections that fuel educators' passion.

### ***I Don't Know How I Will Start***

Despite the joy, substitute teaching comes with significant challenges. Entering a classroom at any point in the school year, often without prior training, creates uncertainty and pressure. Teacher Bia shared her struggle: *“If you entered in the middle of the school year, you wouldn't know how you'll going to start.”* She also noted the difficulty of managing student behavior, particularly among frequently absent learners.

Teacher Cath experienced similar challenges, including a lack of guidance from colleagues, which sometimes led to ineffective teaching sessions. She also struggled to address the needs of intellectually challenged students. Likewise, Teacher Farrah found the transition from teaching college students to kindergarten particularly demanding, as younger learners required more emotional support and guidance. She also faced challenges in dealing with parents, especially in situations involving conflicts among children.

Classroom management emerged as a common difficulty. Teacher Hannah admitted that while teaching content was manageable, asserting authority and maintaining discipline was far more challenging. Teacher Emma, on the other hand, struggled with teaching students in the lowest section, requiring her to adopt new strategies for learners who were non-readers and had limited foundational skills. Teacher Dan highlighted absenteeism and lack of motivation among students, prompting him to develop strategies to encourage participation.

Some experiences were particularly distressing. Teacher Ann recalled handling a learner with severe tantrums that escalated into physical aggression, situations that even school authorities and parents struggled to manage. These

experiences reflect the unpredictable nature of substitute teaching. As Ong (2024) described, stepping into a new classroom feels like “walking into the unknown,” where teachers must quickly adapt and take charge despite unfamiliarity.

### ***I Should Prepare Myself for Bigger Responsibilities***

Through the experiences, substitute teachers develop valuable insights and strategies for growth. They recognize the importance of being fully prepared, not only in lesson planning but also in managing diverse classroom scenarios and student behaviors. Teachers Ann, Bia, Cath, Dan, and Farrah emphasized the need for flexibility, patience, and readiness.

Teacher Farrah expressed her aspiration to complete her master’s degree and attend training and seminars to enhance her teaching competence. Meanwhile, Teachers Gail and Hannah highlighted the importance of building confidence and strengthening their ability to face challenges in the classroom. These experiences serve as preparation for greater responsibilities in the future. Substitute teachers continuously seek to improve their skills, decision-making, and leadership abilities. As Donofrio (2015) noted, while teaching can be exhausting, it is also deeply rewarding. Practical classroom experience bridges the gap between theory and practice, allowing teachers to apply what they have learned and prepare for the day they will lead their own classrooms.

The journey toward securing a permanent teaching position is far from easy. Substitute teachers encounter numerous obstacles that test their determination. These challenges are reflected in two themes: “There are lacking on my personal and professional aspect” and “There are inconsistencies in the system.”



### ***There Are Gaps in My Personal and Professional Aspects***

On a personal level, many substitute teachers identified shyness as a barrier to achieving their goals. Teachers Ann, Bia, Farrah, and Hannah shared that their reserved nature often prevented them from fully demonstrating their capabilities. Professionally, the lack of a master's degree emerged as a major limitation. Teachers Ann, Bia, Cath, Dan, Emma, Farrah, and Gail noted that without graduate-level qualifications, they were unable to gain sufficient ranking points for permanent positions. Financial constraints further delayed their pursuit of advanced studies. As Tolentino (2016) emphasized, teacher applicants are expected to have master's degree units aligned with their specialization, indicating that licensure alone is insufficient.

### ***There Are Inconsistencies in The System***

Systemic issues also hinder teachers' progress. All participants reported concerns regarding the lack of transparency and fairness in the hiring process. Teachers Ann and Hannah pointed out the absence of clear information about available positions, while Teachers Bia, Emma, Gail, and Hannah highlighted favoritism and the influence of "backer systems." Nepotism was also observed by Teachers Emma and Farrah.

Teacher Cath cited the lack of available teaching positions in her preferred school as a key barrier. These inconsistencies undermine trust in the system and discourage aspiring teachers. Tolentino (2016) similarly identified bureaucratic anomalies within the Department of Education, noting that some officials fail to consistently follow established hiring guidelines.

Given the temporary nature of their contracts, substitute teachers adopt various strategies to sustain themselves. This is reflected in the theme: ***"I need to have a source of income since I'm unemployed as of the moment."***



After completing their contracts, some teachers continue teaching in alternative roles, such as Municipal School Board teachers or tutors, as seen with Teachers Ann, Cath, and Farrah. Others engage in small businesses, while some explore different careers, such as administrative or financial roles. Despite these shifts, many remain committed to teaching. As Kolmar (2022) reported, former substitute teachers often continue in education, whether in private institutions or other teaching roles. This highlights their enduring passion for the profession, even in the face of uncertainty.

Substitute teachers hold strong aspirations for stability, professional fulfillment, and fairness in the system. These are reflected in the themes: “I’m aspiring to have a permanent teaching job, not just a temporary contract” and “I hope that the Department of Education will follow the rules since everyone is at thirst to enter permanence.”

### ***I’m Aspiring to Have a Permanent Teaching Job, Not Just a Temporary Contract***

All participants expressed a strong desire for permanent positions, driven by the need for stability and the fulfillment of their vocation. Many have waited for years, Teacher Ann for seven years, Teacher Cath and Emma for eight years, and others for four to six years, holding onto hope that their efforts will eventually be rewarded. These aspirations are fueled not only by the promise of job security but also by a deep commitment to teaching. As highlighted by Arcilla et al. (2023), educators are motivated by a combination of personal fulfillment, community service, and financial stability.

### ***I Hope the Department of Education Adheres to The Rules, As Many Are Eager to Achieve Permanence***

Substitute teachers strongly advocate for transparency, fairness, and accountability in the hiring process. They call for strict adherence to DepEd

Order No. 019, s. 2022, emphasizing merit, competence, equal opportunity, and transparency.

Participants expressed concerns about unclear selection criteria, favoritism, and the lack of verification of credentials. They emphasized that hiring should be based on ranking and qualifications rather than personal connections. Their collective voice reflects a desire for a just system where effort and merit are genuinely recognized.

## **Conclusion**

Substitute teachers stand at the crossroads of fulfillment and hardship, carrying both the joy of shaping young minds and the weight of uncertainty. Their journeys reveal not only the challenges of transition, limited preparation, and systemic barriers, but also their unwavering commitment to growth. In every classroom they enter, they learn to adapt, to reflect, and to rise, turning struggles into lessons and experiences into strength. What sustains them most is the irreplaceable moment when learning happens, when a child understands, and when their presence truly makes a difference.

Despite personal limitations and institutional challenges, these educators continue to strive for excellence. They seek to improve themselves holistically while navigating a system that often tests their patience and resilience. Their dedication reflects not only a profession but a calling that persists beyond temporary roles. Above all, they are driven by hope, the hope for stability, fairness, and the chance to fully live out their vocation. Their aspiration to become permanent public school teachers is not merely about job security, but about purpose, impact, and belonging.

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