

# Inspiring the Pinch-Hitters: Job Satisfaction and Dissatisfaction of Substitute Teachers

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## **Introduction**

**B**y the time students complete their K-12 public school education, they have spent an average of one year's worth of school days with substitute teachers (Pardini, 2000). This means that students spend approximately 10% of their school year with substitute teachers (Staffing Industry Report, 1999). On any given day, an average of 274,000 substitutes lead classes around the United States (Elizabeth, 2001). In highly impacted, low-socioeconomic schools, at-risk students spend closer to 13.5% of the school year with a substitute teacher (Adams, 1999). One of the most common reasons that districts rely on substitutes is because teachers need release time to do work in the area of standards and assessment (Greene, 1998; Starr 2001). In California, this release time is often used to develop curricular and instructional materials related to the state's newly adopted academic standards (Frost, 1996; Greene, 1998).

Retention of substitute teachers is an important and timely issue. A decade ago, one way to obtain a teaching position was to become a substitute teacher. Now, new teachers are often hired with little or no classroom experience. The current economy also directs potential candidates away from substitute teaching. Recruiting New Teachers, Inc., a nonprofit organization, has joined with the U.S. Department of Education to provide an online clearinghouse for positions in education. According to David Haselkorn, President of Recruiting New Teachers, Inc., 73% of U.S. school districts have an immediate and urgent need for substitute teachers, and the need will continue through the end of the next decade (Elizabeth, 2001).

High turnover in substitute teachers means that districts are constantly on the lookout for new hires. At the same time, the need for substitute teachers continues to increase (Wisconsin Education Association Council, 2000). The replacement of substitutes requires considerable time and money. It also takes a toll on the school site personnel who have to scramble to cover classes when there are no

substitute teachers available. Insufficient numbers of substitutes often result in the need to have to ask a substitute to cover two classes simultaneously, making it virtually impossible to instruct students effectively. Often, support staff members are reassigned to cover classes instead of working with their small groups of students or completing their regular daily job responsibilities.

Substitute teachers are a vital part of current school improvement efforts as states move toward school reform. Substitutes provide interim classroom leadership and instruction for students, and provide release time for regular education teachers to attend professional development training and curriculum workshops (Greene, 1998). As the need for substitute teachers increases, school administrators have become more concerned about what variables affect their decisions to stay in or leave substitute teaching.

### **The Problem**

Studies about job satisfaction have been conducted numerous times during past decades in nearly every occupational field. A review of the literature shows that between 1975 and 1986, more than one thousand articles were written that relate to teacher job satisfaction and dissatisfaction (Lester, 1986; Short & Rinehart, 1992). Very little of this research focused on substitute teachers.

Over the past two decades, less attention has been paid to teacher satisfaction as the focus has shifted to improved student performance. However, several studies have looked at the relationship between teacher satisfaction and improved student performance (Adams & Bailey, 1989; Ashton & Webb, 1986; Carnegie Task Force on Teaching as a Profession, 1986; Goodman, 1980). A high-quality teaching staff is the foundation of a successful educational system (House, 1988). Yet regular and substitute teachers continue to leave the field of education in numbers that are not characteristic of other professions. Thus, the variables associated with sources of satisfaction and dissatisfaction are important to discover if teachers are to remain in the profession.

Many researchers suggest that job satisfaction is a key sign of attraction to a job. Similarly, occupational and workplace variables affect a teacher's decision to enter, stay in, or leave the profession (Yee, 1990; Bobbitt, Faupel, & Burns 1991; Sclan, 1993). Research also suggests that teachers who are satisfied with their jobs are able to more effectively teach our children (Pelsma, Richard, Harrington, & Burry, 1989). The same can be said for substitute teachers and their

ability to maintain and enhance the learning environment in the classroom when the regular teacher is absent.

Some current research studies have been conducted about job satisfaction and classroom teachers. Much of the literature reports sources of job satisfaction but only identifies “satisfiers” and “dissatisfiers” among regular classroom teachers. According to Mark Galvez-Martin in a presentation at the Association of Teacher Educators Conference, thorough studies have not been conducted on substitute teachers (Elizabeth, 2001). The need exists for more current information about the sources of satisfaction and dissatisfaction among substitute teachers. While many of the issues pertinent to the satisfaction and dissatisfaction of regular teachers are also applicable to substitutes, this study focuses only on substitute teachers.

The following three research questions guided and directed the central focus of this study:

1. Do demographic attributes, such as gender, ethnicity, age, number of years in education, number of years as a substitute teacher, and degrees and credentials earned make selected substitute teachers in four small K-8 northern California school districts more likely to leave substitute teaching?
2. To what extent do the following sources of job satisfaction make these same teachers more likely to stay in or leave substitute teaching: opportunities to work with students, delimited job responsibilities, recognition for achievements, and perception that a job in teaching is valuable?
3. To what extent do the following sources of job satisfaction make these same substitute teachers more likely to stay in or leave substitute teaching: opportunities to work with students, delimited job responsibilities, recognition for achievements, and perception that a job in teaching is valuable?

### **Methodology**

The substitute teachers in this sample included those from four small K-8 districts in two northern California counties whose teacher populations are somewhat representative of teachers in California, based on credentials earned and teaching experience. The four school districts in this study range in size from 901 Average Daily Attendance (ADA) to 7,000 ADA. None of the four districts are urban, inner city school districts. The study only included those

substitutes who worked in the sample school districts between October and November of 2001 when the study was conducted. In order to avoid “new” substitutes, only those who worked as substitutes during the 2000–2001 school year were surveyed. A total of 187 out of 228 (82%) substitute teachers returned surveys. Additionally, ten of the substitutes in the sample participated in face-to-face and telephone interviews that concentrated specifically on the way in which selected variables make a substitute more likely to stay in or leave substitute teaching.

Participants responded to a four-part survey. Part I asked the substitutes to provide demographic data needed to: (1) profile the sample and (2) compare these data with other variables in research questions 1, 2, and 3. The demographic data included gender, ethnicity, age, number of years in education, number of years as a substitute teacher, and degrees and credentials earned. Part II of the survey provided the opportunity for substitute teachers to respond to specific sources of job satisfaction and dissatisfaction that might make them more likely to stay in substitute teaching. Part III addressed specific sources of job satisfaction and dissatisfaction that might make them more likely to leave substitute teaching. A six-point Likert scale was used to indicate the relative value of specific variables in Parts II and III. Finally, Part IV of the survey provided the opportunity for respondents to write-in the specific reasons that make them more likely to stay in or leave substitute teaching. The data from the surveys was then compared with responses from interviews with the substitute teachers in the sample. Interviews were used to provide additional support for the purpose and research questions in this study.

The descriptive statistics generated from the demographic information were used to profile the substitute teachers in four small K-8 northern California school districts. Research question 1 focused on demographic variables and the likelihood that a substitute would stay in or leave substitute teaching. Fisher’s Exact Test of Significance was used to determine if a relationship existed at the .05 level of significance between the likelihood that a substitute would stay in or leave substitute teaching and the demographic variables of gender and ethnicity. The demographic variables of age, number of years in education, number of years as a substitute teacher, and degrees and credentials earned were evaluated by Pearson Chi-Square at the .05 level of significance.

The variables in research questions 2 and 3 were evaluated by the Spearman Rho at the .05 level of significance. Spearman Rho was used to determine if a relationship emerged between the likelihood that a substitute would stay in or leave substitute teaching and categories of variables that were associated with job satisfaction or dissatisfaction in the literature. If a variable was found to be significant at the .05 level, the variable was further analyzed to determine how it would affect various demographic groups.

## Results

### *Demographics of Substitute Teachers in this Study*

Of those who participated in this study, 125 respondents (66.8%) of the substitute teachers were female. The remaining 62 respondents (33.2%) were male (Figure 1). One hundred thirty-five (72.2%) of the respondents were Caucasian (Figure 2). The largest age group of 63 respondents (33.7%) was those between 41 and 50 years of age, and the remaining respondents were fairly evenly distributed within the remaining four age groups (Figure 3). Regarding teaching experience, 91 respondents (48.7%) of the substitutes had five or more years of experience in education (Figure 4), yet 101 respondents (54%) of the substitutes had only two years of experience in substitute teaching (Figure 5). (When the questionnaire was piloted, it was revealed that I needed to distinguish between those with years of experience as a substitute teacher and those with years of general experience in education.)

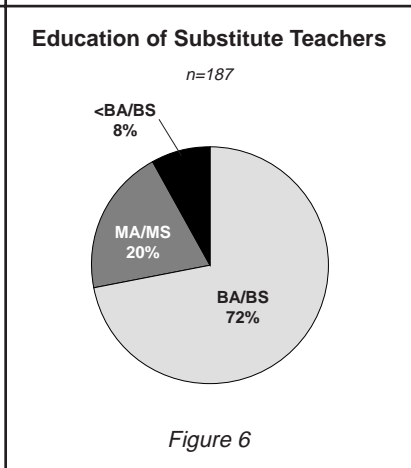
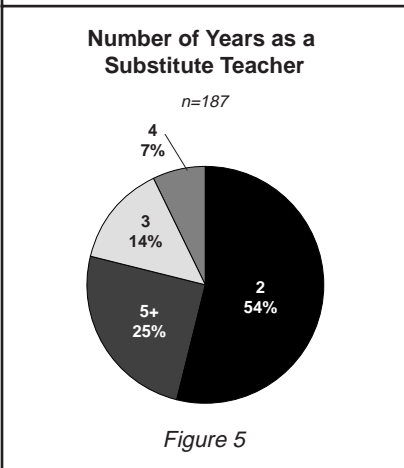
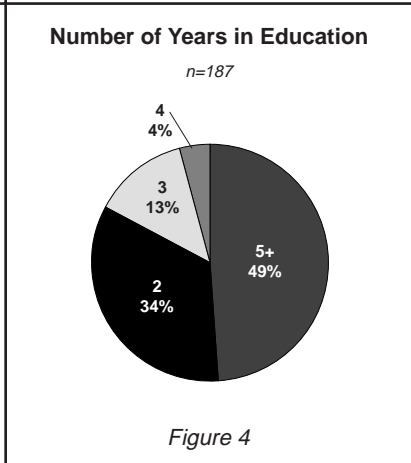
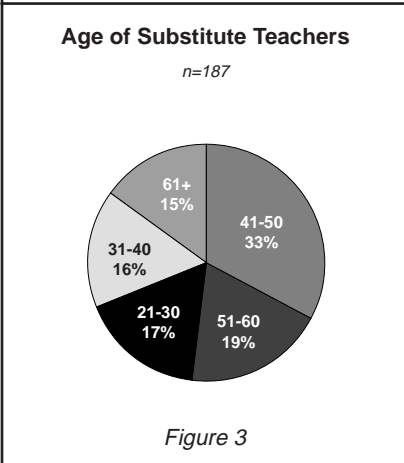
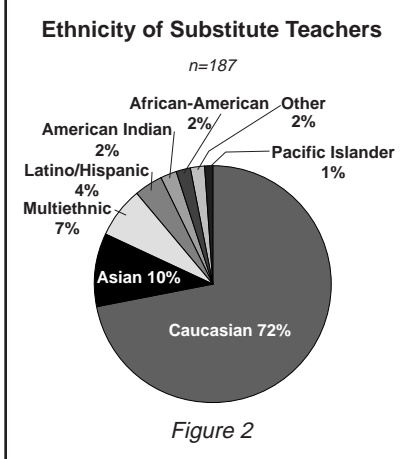
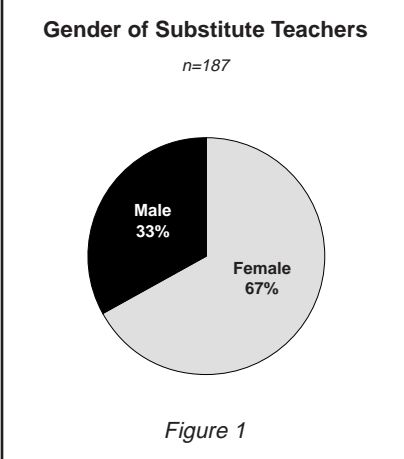
With regard to degrees and credentials earned, 15 respondents (8%) had earned less than a bachelor's degree or had a waiver that allowed them to work as a substitute without a credential. The largest percentage of substitutes, 135 respondents (72.2%), held a bachelor's degree. The remaining 37 respondents (19.8%) had a master's degree (Figure 6).

Overall, the majority of the substitute teachers in this survey were Caucasian females between the ages of 41 and 50 years with a bachelor's degree and some type of teaching credential, either a 30-day emergency credential or a regular teaching credential. They also had five or more years of experience in education, of which two years were spent as a substitute teacher.

### *Demographic Findings*

Gender and age emerged as significant demographic variables that make substitutes more likely to leave substitute teaching. The data

**Demographics of Substitute Teachers**



suggests that females in this study are more likely than males to leave substitute teaching.

Substitutes in this study who were in the 31 to 40 and 51 to 60 age groups were more likely to leave substitute teaching. Substitutes in this study age 61 and older were least likely to leave substitute teaching. Of the substitutes in the 61 or older age group, 21 of 28 respondents (75%) reported that they do not want to leave substitute teaching, compared to 21 of 28 respondents (71.4%) in the 31 to 40 age group and 25 of 36 respondents (69.4%) in the 51 to 60 age group that do want to leave substitute teaching (Figure 7).

**Substitutes Most Likely to Leave Substitute Teaching**

*n*=187

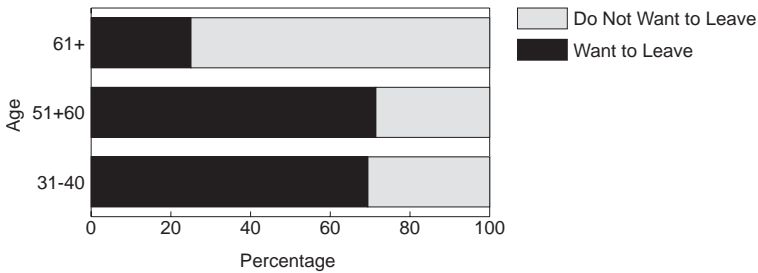


Figure 7

*Findings for Job Satisfaction Variables*

None of the job satisfaction variables were significantly correlated with the likelihood that substitute teachers in this study would stay in substitute teaching. However, qualitative data produced a number of reasons that substitute teachers in this study were more likely to stay.

Six out of the 187 substitutes sent back questionnaires with no write-in responses for reasons to stay in substitute teaching. Of the responding substitutes surveyed, 118 of 181 (65.2%) wrote that they felt the opportunities to work with students were a “reason to stay in substitute teaching.” This was further supported by nine of the ten substitutes interviewed who documented that their role in helping students learn keeps them coming back to substitute teaching.

Of the substitutes who wrote-in comments on the survey, 110 of 181 respondents (58.8%) of the substitutes stated that the delimited responsibilities of substitute teaching are a “reason to stay in

substitute teaching.” Eight of the ten substitutes interviewed concurred that the delimited responsibilities, such as no lessons to plan, work to correct, meetings to attend, or parents to conference with are a “reason to stay in substitute teaching.”

Six of the ten substitutes interviewed reported that their role as a substitute is valuable and a “reason to stay in substitute teaching.” Twenty-seven of 181 respondents (14.4%) of the substitutes who wrote-in comments reported that they feel their role as a substitute is important and is a “reason to stay in substitute teaching.”

None of the variables related to job satisfaction were significantly correlated with the likelihood that substitute teachers in this study would leave substitute teaching. However, qualitative data about delimited job responsibilities were reported by substitute teachers as a “reason to leave substitute teaching.” Fifty-four of 133 substitutes (40.6%) who wrote-in comments reported that the lack of delimited responsibilities and their desire to want to take on more responsibility were a “reason to leave substitute teaching.” One-third of the substitutes who wrote in reasons to leave specifically cited their desire to obtain full-time teaching positions as a “reason to leave substitute teaching.”

#### *Findings for Job Dissatisfaction Variables*

There were no key findings that linked job dissatisfaction to reasons to stay in substitute teaching.

Four variables that measure job dissatisfaction were reported by the substitutes in this study as reasons to leave substitute teaching. There was a significant correlation between a lack of medical, dental, and vacation benefits and the likelihood that substitutes would leave substitute teaching. This was particularly true for females, Caucasians, those in the 41 to 50 age group, those with five or more years of experience in education, those with two years teaching experience, those with five or more years as a substitute teacher, and those with a bachelor’s degree.

There was a significant correlation between job-related stress, specifically the concerns about personal safety at work, and the likelihood that substitute teachers would leave substitute teaching. This was particularly true for those with three to four years of experience in education.

In this study, 26 of 133 respondents (19.5%) commented in write-in comments that a lack of job-related support made them want to leave substitute teaching. The lack of complete lesson plans was



noted by 20 of 133 respondents (15%) as a “reason to leave substitute teaching.”

Finally, inappropriate student behavior was cited by 33 of 133 respondents (24%) in write-in comments as a “reason to leave substitute teaching.” Eight of ten substitutes interviewed also commented that the lack of respect and unruly behavior exhibited by students in the classroom contributed to their desire to leave substitute teaching.

### **Implications for Action**

Although this study was limited to substitute teachers in four small K-8 school districts in northern California, the following implications for action are recommended:

1. Site/district administrators provide training for substitute teachers about how to successfully deal with student behavior in the classroom.
2. Site administrators require regular classroom teachers to design a week of lesson plans. These “emergency lesson plans” could be used in case a substitute arrived at the last minute to substitute for a teacher who did not write lesson plans or the lesson plans that were written were inadequate.
3. Site administrators assign a staff person to supervise substitute teachers and provide needed assistance. The assistant could identify helpful students, location of school supplies, procedures for student discipline, process for getting lunch, location of staff bathrooms, and any other school procedures that might make a substitute feel more comfortable and welcome.
4. Site administrators visit the classrooms of substitute teachers. This would reinforce administrative support for substitutes at the school site.
5. District/county administrators consider options that would provide benefits for substitute teachers.
6. District administrators target the recruitment of men and those 61 years of age and older to work as substitute teachers.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The nation’s rapidly changing demographics, economics, and politics have increased the public’s expectations of public schools and their teachers. These expectations impose additional pressures

on districts and their schools to raise student achievement levels, even during times of economic uncertainty. With ever-increasing public demands and additional state mandates, educational leaders will be under duress to balance budgets, negotiate teacher contracts, and attempt to ensure that each classroom has a fully credentialed teacher. During these trying times, it will also be important to ensure that competent substitute teachers can continue day-to-day instruction in the absence of the regular classroom teachers.

Substitute teachers play an essential role in student learning, but often work in different classrooms every day. They seldom receive the appreciation bestowed upon regular classroom teachers and are often not included in school events. It is increasingly important that school leaders take an interest in substitute teachers. Even small gestures, such as stopping by the classroom to say hello and answer any questions the substitute might have, are important.

In summary, this study revealed that substitutes love their work with students. They teach because they enjoy helping students learn. However, this study provides documentation that student behavior, negligible benefits, and concerns about personal safety can drive substitutes from our classrooms. Understanding the reasons that substitutes leave substitute teaching may provide educational leaders with ideas about interventions that might slow their departure. In fact, one positive strategy would be to try to encourage substitutes who perform well in the classroom to become regular, credentialed teachers. The future of public education depends on a fully credentialed and qualified teacher in every classroom. A very practical place to start is with our current substitute teachers.

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