JOURNAL
OF EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH, INNOVATION, AND MULTIDISCIPLINARY STUDIES
An Academic Journal Publication
Website: | https://jerimspublication.com

INTERNATIONAL STANDARD SERIAL NUMBERS
PRINT ISSN 3116-5559
ONLINE ISSN 3116-5567

Volume 1, Issue 8, pp 16-24, October 2026

Research Article

The Lived Experiences of Substitute Teachers in Public Schools

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Article History:

Submission: August, 2026
Revised: September, 2026
Accepted: September, 2026
Published: October, 2026

Originality: 95%
Similarity Index: 3%
Grammarly Score: 97%

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Recommended Citation:

Gaas, F.G. & Calimpong, M., (2026). The Lived Experiences of Substitute Teachers in Public Schools. *Journal of Educational Research, Innovation, and Multidisciplinary Studies, 1(8), 16-24.*

https://doi.org/10.67001/jeri.2026.01.U5R9QM

ABSTRACT

This study explored the lived experiences, professional challenges, and coping mechanisms of substitute teachers in public schools in Sinacaban District and a neighboring district in Misamis Occidental during School Year 2025–2026. Twelve purposively selected substitute teachers participated in interviews guided by validated questions. Interview narratives were transcribed, coded, and organized through thematic analysis, with NVivo reported as an aid to data management. Findings identified nine areas of lived experience, including initial emotional responses, preparation, instruction, classroom management, relationships, additional responsibilities, professional learning, and reflection. Eight categories of professional challenges extended from pre-deployment requirements to classroom demands and post-contract employment uncertainty. Ten coping categories encompassed faith, emotional regulation, adaptability, professional development, collegial support, work organization, supplemental income, goal-setting, social support, and reflective learning. The findings underscore that temporary appointment does not lessen instructional responsibility; rather, substitute teachers navigate classroom continuity alongside uncertain employment conditions. Structured induction, access to instructional resources, mentoring, and more responsive administrative support are recommended.

Keywords: *substitute teachers; lived experiences; phenomenology; professional challenges; coping mechanisms.*

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Introduction

Substitute teachers maintain instructional continuity when regular teachers are temporarily absent. Their assignments require rapid adjustment to unfamiliar learners, classroom routines, lesson expectations, and school cultures. Although the appointment is temporary, responsibility for learning, student engagement, and classroom order is immediate. These conditions make substitute teaching an important setting for understanding professional identity, institutional support, and resilience.

The thesis situates substitute teaching within teacher shortages and unequal access to staffing support, drawing on UNESCO (2024), Duggleby and Badali (2025), and Liaropoulos (2020). It notes that the demands of instruction may be compounded by the uncertainty of appointment and the possibility of professional isolation. The present article retains the study's focus on the teachers' own accounts rather than assuming that every substitute encounters the same conditions.

International and local literature reviewed in the thesis associates substitute teaching with employment precarity, rapid classroom adaptation, and questions of professional belonging. Liaropoulos (2020) discusses the insecurity associated with repeated temporary employment, while Duggleby and Badali (2025) emphasize the practical demands of entering classrooms with limited support. These studies provide context, not direct evidence about the participants in Sinacaban District.

In the Philippine public school setting, substitute teachers may be appointed to cover the absence of regular teachers. The thesis describes the administrative requirements of appointment and the difficulty of maintaining instructional continuity when an incoming teacher must quickly learn school procedures and classroom needs. Beyond immediate teaching demands, teachers may face uncertainty about subsequent contracts and opportunities for permanent appointment.

The study was informed by three perspectives: Goode's Role Strain Theory, Standing's account of precarious work, and Bandura's Self-Efficacy Theory. Role strain provides a lens for competing expectations, precarious work frames the uncertainty of temporary employment, and self-efficacy helps explain how confidence may develop through successful adaptation. These perspectives were used as interpretive lenses rather than tested causal models.

A gap identified in the thesis concerns the limited documentation of substitute teachers' day-to-day experiences in the local public-school context, especially across the periods before, during, and after deployment. Existing discussions of staffing and recruitment do not necessarily capture the emotional work of entering a classroom, the adjustments involved in instruction, or the strategies used during intervals without employment.

Accordingly, this study sought to answer three questions: (1) What are the lived experiences of substitute teachers in public schools? (2) What professional challenges do they experience? and (3) What coping mechanisms do they use to address these challenges? The inquiry focused on the accounts of substitute teachers assigned in selected public schools in Sinacaban District and a neighboring district during School Year 2025–2026. By presenting the findings in three connected domains—experiences, challenges, and coping—the article aims to provide a coherent account of substitute teaching as both an instructional responsibility and a period of professional transition. The implications are directed toward substitute teachers, school heads, regular teachers, education administrators, and policymakers.

Methods

The study employed a qualitative phenomenological design informed by Moustakas's approach to understanding lived experience. It was conducted in selected public schools in Sinacaban District and a neighboring district in the Division of Misamis Occidental during School Year 2025–2026. Twelve substitute teachers were purposively selected for their direct experience of temporary teaching assignments; the thesis specified current substitute appointment and approximately ten months to one year of substitution experience as inclusion criteria. Data were collected using a researcher-developed semi-structured interview guide addressing lived experiences, professional challenges, and coping practices. The instrument underwent expert review and revision, with a pilot procedure described in the thesis. Following the documented permission and informed-consent procedures, participants were interviewed and the accounts transcribed; where applicable,

local-language responses were translated into English. The researcher applied Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis—familiarization, initial coding, theme development, review, definition, and reporting—and reported using NVivo to support organization of coded material. The thesis describes member checking, an audit trail, contextual description, and reflexive documentation as measures to strengthen trustworthiness. Confidentiality, voluntary participation, secure handling of records, and removal of identifying information were emphasized in accordance with the Data Privacy Act of 2012 (Republic Act No. 10173). Because the sample was purposive and localized, the findings are intended to illuminate participants' experiences rather than estimate prevalence among all substitute teachers.

Results and Discussions

The thematic analysis was organized around the three research questions. The first domain describes experiences during substitute assignments; the second identifies difficulties across the employment cycle; and the third documents the responses teachers used to manage those difficulties. The tables synthesize the code-and-theme matrices reported in the thesis. They are thematic classifications, not quantitative rankings or frequency estimates.

Lived Experiences During Substitute Assignments

Participants described entering assignments with mixed emotions: excitement about teaching, anxiety about unfamiliar learners, and a sense of being overwhelmed by the speed of transition. This emotional entry was accompanied by practical work: preparing documents, studying lesson plans, organizing instructional materials, and planning approaches to classroom behavior. The narratives suggest that readiness involved both technical preparation and psychological adjustment.

As assignments progressed, substitute teachers adapted instructional approaches to learner differences. They reported differentiated instruction, cooperative activities, games, visual aids, and explicit teaching techniques. Classroom management remained a central concern, particularly when learners tested boundaries or required different levels of support. Establishing expectations and sustaining engagement became daily practices through which teachers-built confidence.

Lived Experiences

The thesis identifies nine themes of lived experience. Table 1 retains their substantive distinctions while condensing the longer original code lists into representative indicators.

Theme	Representative indicators from coded accounts
Emotional and psychological experiences	Excitement, nervousness, anxiety, first-day overwhelm, motivation
Pre-deployment challenges	Requirements, assignment-order delays, paperwork
Instructional preparation experiences	Lesson review, self-study, materials preparation, management planning
Teaching practices and strategies	Differentiation, cooperative learning, games, visual aids, explicit teaching
Classroom management experiences	Managing behavior, discipline, engagement, learner diversity
Social and professional experiences	Welcoming colleagues, mentoring, collaboration
Expanded professional responsibilities	Coaching, events, school tasks beyond teaching
Professional growth and learning	Patience, confidence, communication, problem-solving
Meaning-making and reflection	Fulfillment, renewed commitment, recognition of teaching demands

The first three themes show that the beginning of a substitute assignment is not merely an administrative transition. Teachers must assemble required documentation, learn unfamiliar teaching expectations, and manage their own apprehension. The study's accounts link initial anxiety with enthusiasm and a desire to perform well; these responses should be understood as coexisting experiences rather than contradictory findings.

Instructional preparation emerged as an active process of self-study and adaptation. Reviewing lesson plans and classroom materials helped participants orient themselves to their new roles. The use of differentiated and interactive strategies indicates efforts to respond to variation among learners, although the study did not measure the comparative effectiveness of these strategies on achievement.

Professional Belonging and Growth

The social dimensions of substitution were important in participants' accounts. Supportive colleagues, guidance from experienced teachers, and a welcoming school environment helped teachers navigate unfamiliar routines. Conversely, the temporary nature of appointments could make professional inclusion uncertain. The thesis thus depicts collegial relationships as a practical resource for both instructional problem-solving and emotional reassurance.

Participants also described responsibilities beyond regular classroom instruction, including coaching, school events, and related activities. Such work expanded opportunities to contribute to the school community but also added demands to an already compressed adjustment period. The distinction matters: additional duties may foster belonging and learning when accompanied by support, yet can intensify strain when responsibilities are unclear.

The accounts of professional growth included greater patience, stronger classroom management, improved communication, and increased confidence. These were perceived gains reported by participants rather than independently measured changes in competence. Teachers also reflected on the profession as demanding but fulfilling. Their narratives connected short-term assignments with longer-term aspirations to remain in teaching. Taken together, the first research question suggests a developmental trajectory: teachers entered with uncertainty, relied on preparation and relationships, adapted classroom practices, and interpreted their experiences as opportunities for learning. This trajectory was not necessarily uniform across all participants. It highlights the interaction between individual initiative and the quality of school-level support.

These findings are supported by Kelchtermans (2009), who emphasized that teachers' professional experiences involve emotional vulnerability, identity formation, and continuous adjustment to workplace expectations. Similarly, Ingersoll and Strong (2011) highlighted that mentoring, collegial support, and structured induction programs contribute to teachers' professional adjustment, instructional development, and retention. Feiman-Nemser (2001) further explained that early teaching experiences provide opportunities for developing pedagogical knowledge, classroom management skills, and professional confidence through practice and reflection. Moreover, Day and Gu (2010) emphasized that teachers' professional growth and resilience are shaped by the interaction of personal commitment, workplace relationships, and institutional support. These perspectives reinforce the findings that substitute teachers' lived experiences encompass emotional adjustment, instructional adaptation, professional socialization, and reflective growth, suggesting that supportive school environments and meaningful professional relationships are essential in helping substitute teachers navigate temporary assignments while strengthening their professional identity and commitment to teaching.

Professional Challenges Across the Contract Cycle

The second research question concerned difficulties before deployment, during teaching, and after the contract. The thesis reports that requirements such as licenses and clearances, delayed assignment orders, and application costs could create stress even before classroom duties began. During deployment, challenges shifted toward learner behavior, instructional preparation, workload, time pressure, and classroom conditions. After a contract ended, career uncertainty and the wait for a permanent teaching item became prominent.

Professional Challenges

Theme	Representative indicators from coded accounts
Pre-deployment challenges	Document processing, assignment delays, application expenses, uncertainty
Classroom management challenges	Unfamiliar learners, discipline, rapport, tested authority
Instructional challenges	Diverse learning needs, limited planning time, materials shortages

Workload and time constraints	Paperwork, reporting, events, competing teaching tasks
Classroom environment constraints	Large classes, limited attention, interruptions, unsuitable conditions
Emotional and psychological challenges	Stress, fatigue, pressure, feeling unprepared
Post-contract career challenges	Competition for permanent posts, qualifications, unstable income
Waiting period challenges	Job insecurity, anxiety, delayed income, perceived stagnation

Pre-deployment concerns were characterized by administrative demands that required time and financial resources. Preparing employment documents and waiting for assignment decisions placed teachers in a position of uncertainty before they could begin instruction. These experiences indicate that professional challenges are not confined to the classroom; they begin with the appointment process.

Once deployed, substitutes encountered classrooms with established routines and relationships that they had not helped develop. Participants described learners testing their authority, varied learning needs, and difficulties sustaining engagement. These challenges required teachers to establish rapport while delivering lessons, often with little time to prepare. The accounts align with the study's role-strain perspective, in which responsibilities can exceed the support available to fulfill them.

Instructional difficulties included limited preparation time and teaching resources. The participants' accounts suggest that successful substitution depends partly on access to prior lesson plans, information about learners, and materials suited to the class. Without these resources, teachers must improvise while maintaining instructional continuity.

These findings are supported by Ingersoll and Strong (2011), who emphasized that teachers entering unfamiliar school environments often experience instructional, organizational, and classroom management challenges that can be alleviated through structured induction and mentoring. Similarly, Kelchtermans (2009) explained that professional vulnerability and uncertainty are closely associated with teachers' working conditions, professional identities, and institutional expectations. Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2017) further highlighted that excessive workloads, time pressures, and challenging classroom conditions contribute to teacher stress and emotional exhaustion. Moreover, De Cuyper et al. (2008) identified job insecurity as an important concern among temporary employees, with potential consequences for psychological well-being and job-related attitudes. These perspectives reinforce the findings that substitute teachers' professional challenges extend across the entire contract cycle, from administrative and financial difficulties before deployment to instructional and emotional demands during teaching and employment uncertainty after contract completion. The findings underscore the importance of streamlined deployment procedures, adequate instructional support, manageable workloads, and transparent employment processes in promoting substitute teachers' professional stability and well-being.

Challenges Before, During, and After Service

Workload and time constraints appeared in the form of documentation, reporting, school events, and competing responsibilities. Participants described balancing instructional tasks with administrative expectations. The findings do not establish that all schools imposed the same workload; rather, they reveal that additional duties can become especially demanding when a teacher is still learning school systems and routines.

The classroom environment also shaped participants' experiences. Large classes, limited opportunities for individual attention, and interruptions to instruction were identified in the thesis. These conditions can complicate classroom management and differentiated teaching, particularly for teachers whose assignment is temporary. The study did not quantify class sizes or compare schools, so these accounts are best treated as contextual experiences.

Emotional and psychological challenges overlapped with these practical constraints. Teachers reported fatigue, stress, and pressure to perform despite limited familiarity with the setting. The emotional cost of substitute teaching therefore cannot be separated neatly from instructional conditions or employment arrangements.

Institutional support may influence how manageable these pressures become.

Post-contract uncertainty emerged as a distinct stage of professional challenge. Participants faced competition for permanent positions, concerns about qualifications and documentation, and financial instability between appointments. The waiting period could be associated with anxiety and fears of stalled professional progress. This pattern resonates with the precarious-work perspective used in the thesis: temporary work may provide meaningful professional experience while leaving continuity of income and employment unresolved.

The second research question thus shows a shifting configuration of pressures. Before employment, documentation and deployment dominate; during employment, classroom and workload demands intensify; afterward, uncertainty about income and career progression becomes central. Support systems that address only classroom instruction would therefore leave important portions of the substitute teacher's experience unattended.

These findings are supported by Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2017), who emphasized that excessive workloads, time pressures, and demanding teaching conditions contribute to teachers' stress and emotional exhaustion. Similarly, Bakker and Demerouti (2007) explained through the Job Demands–Resources Model that high job demands, when accompanied by insufficient organizational resources, increase the risk of occupational strain and burnout. Kelchtermans (2009) further highlighted that teachers' professional vulnerability is influenced by institutional expectations, working conditions, and uncertainty surrounding their professional roles. Moreover, De Cuyper et al. (2008) emphasized that temporary employment and job insecurity can negatively affect employees' psychological well-being and perceptions of career stability. These perspectives reinforce the findings that substitute teachers experience interconnected instructional, administrative, emotional, and employment-related challenges before, during, and after their teaching assignments. The findings suggest that comprehensive institutional support, manageable workloads, effective mentoring, and transparent employment procedures are essential in reducing professional strain and promoting the well-being and career development of substitute teachers.

Coping Mechanisms

The third research question examined how substitute teachers responded to professional challenges. The thesis identified ten categories of coping. These encompass internal resources such as faith, optimism, and adaptability; professional strategies such as preparation and training; and external resources such as colleagues, family, and supplemental employment.

Theme	Representative indicators from coded accounts
Spiritual and faith-based coping	Prayer, trust in God, patience, hope
Emotional and psychological coping	Optimism, acceptance, perseverance, positive mindset
Personal resilience and adaptability	Flexibility, situational adjustment, problem-solving
Professional growth strategies	Training, workshops, graduate study, skills development
Collaborative support systems	Advice from colleagues, mentoring, communication
Work management strategies	Advance lesson planning, organization, task tracking
Financial and practical coping	Tutoring, online teaching, part-time work, budgeting
Motivation and goal-oriented coping	Career goals, permanent appointment aspirations, purposeful waiting
Social and emotional support	Encouragement from family, friends, colleagues
Experiential learning and growth	Reflection, learning from mistakes, applying lessons

Faith and emotional coping were prominent in the reported narratives. Prayer and trust in God provided a source of hope for some participants, while patience and positive reframing helped them tolerate uncertain timelines.

These practices reflect the participants' stated resources; the study does not compare their relative effectiveness or imply that a single coping method fits every teacher.

Individual and Collective Coping

Personal adaptability was evident in the willingness to adjust instruction and respond to unexpected classroom situations. Participants reported modifying strategies to fit learner needs, reflecting on difficulties, and learning from mistakes. Such practices suggest that the capacity to adapt was built through repeated exposure to unfamiliar settings rather than through preparation alone.

Professional development also served as a coping response. Teachers described attending training, pursuing additional qualifications, and improving instructional knowledge while awaiting new opportunities. The study frames this effort as a way of preserving professional direction amid temporary employment, although access to training and its long-term effects were not independently assessed.

Collaborative support systems complemented individual initiative. Seeking advice from experienced teachers and communicating with school colleagues offered practical guidance about classroom routines and learner behavior. Family and friends provided encouragement outside the workplace. The two forms of support address different needs: professional networks help teachers solve immediate work problems, while personal relationships may sustain motivation and emotional well-being.

Work management strategies included planning lessons ahead, preparing materials, and tracking responsibilities. These practices helped participants respond to time pressure and the unpredictability of assignments. Financial coping involved budgeting and pursuing other work, including tutoring or online teaching, during periods of uncertain employment. The latter finding shows that coping extends beyond emotional regulation to practical livelihood decisions.

Motivation and goal-oriented coping centered on aspirations for permanent employment and continued service in education. Participants interpreted waiting time as an opportunity for self-improvement and remained committed to teaching despite employment insecurity. Reflective learning linked the three research questions: experiences generated challenges, and challenges in turn prompted adjustments that teachers viewed as professional growth.

Integrated Discussion and Implications

Across the three thematic domains, the findings portray substitute teaching as a cycle of transition, performance, and uncertainty. At entry, teachers prepare documents and manage anxiety. During assignments, they deliver lessons, establish classroom authority, build collegial relationships, and take on additional responsibilities. After an assignment, they may need to secure another source of income or compete for permanent employment. The coping practices described in the thesis respond to these changing circumstances.

Goode's Role Strain Theory provides one way to understand the tension between full classroom responsibility and limited time to establish authority or gain support. The Theory of Precarious Work helps interpret the uncertainty of temporary appointments and the employment gaps that follow. Self-Efficacy Theory offers a lens for teachers' reports of increasing confidence through practice, adaptation, and successful classroom experiences. These frameworks illuminate the accounts but should not be read as empirically tested explanatory relationships.

The findings point to several school-level considerations. A structured orientation could provide information about class routines, learner needs, reporting expectations, and available resources before instruction begins. A designated mentor or contact teacher could help substitutes resolve questions without waiting for problems to escalate. Clear communication between the regular teacher, school head, and substitute could also support continuity in lesson delivery and classroom management.

At the administrative level, participants' experiences suggest the value of clear deployment information, accessible guidance about required documents, and opportunities for professional learning that include temporary teachers. The thesis also raises concerns about payment regularity and employment stability. These

are policy and administrative issues that warrant further examination; the qualitative findings alone cannot establish the feasibility or effect of a particular compensation reform.

The study has limits. It involved twelve purposively selected teachers in a localized setting and relied on self-reported narratives. The original thesis describes participants from Sinacaban and a neighboring district, so the findings should not be represented as exclusively drawn from a single district. The analysis identifies themes, not rates of occurrence or measured effects on student outcomes. These limits do not diminish the value of the accounts but shape how the findings should be interpreted and applied.

These findings are supported by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), who emphasized that individuals manage stressful situations through problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies, reflecting the substitute teachers' use of planning, adaptability, optimism, and emotional regulation. Similarly, Pargament (1997) highlighted the role of religious coping in providing meaning, hope, and psychological support during challenging circumstances. Bandura (1997) further explained that self-efficacy develops through successful experiences, perseverance, and the belief in one's ability to overcome professional difficulties. Moreover, Ingersoll and Strong (2011) emphasized the importance of mentoring and professional support in strengthening teachers' instructional competence and adjustment, while Bakker and Demerouti (2007) explained that organizational and personal resources can help individuals manage occupational demands. These perspectives reinforce the findings that substitute teachers employ multidimensional coping mechanisms encompassing spiritual beliefs, emotional resilience, professional development, collaborative relationships, financial adjustments, and goal-oriented behaviors. Overall, the findings suggest that effective coping is influenced not only by individual determination but also by access to supportive professional environments, meaningful relationships, and opportunities for continuous professional growth**.**

Conclusions

The study concludes that substitute teaching in public schools involves substantial instructional, emotional, and professional responsibilities despite the temporary nature of appointments. Participants' lived experiences ranged from anxiety and preparation at the start of assignments to classroom adaptation, collaboration, professional growth, and reflection. Their challenges extended beyond classroom management to administrative requirements, workload, limited resources, and uncertainty about employment after contracts ended. To manage these demands, teachers drew on faith, perseverance, adaptability, professional learning, collegial and family support, careful work organization, supplemental income, and goal-oriented reflection. The findings indicate that individual resilience is important but cannot substitute for accessible institutional guidance and practical support. Substitute teaching should therefore be understood not simply as temporary classroom coverage but as a meaningful professional role situated within wider employment and organizational conditions.

Recommendations

School heads and administrators should establish a clear induction process for incoming substitute teachers, including orientation on school procedures, classroom expectations, lesson materials, learner needs, and reporting duties, and should designate an experienced colleague who can provide timely mentoring. Regular teachers, when circumstances permit, should prepare accessible instructional plans and information needed to sustain learning continuity. Substitute teachers are encouraged to maintain organized teaching records, seek collegial guidance, reflect on classroom experiences, and pursue appropriate professional development opportunities. Division-level offices and relevant policymakers may review the clarity of deployment processes, access to training, timeliness of compensation, and available employment support for temporary teachers, while ensuring that any proposed reform is assessed within applicable rules and resources. Future researchers should examine substitute teaching across more districts and employment arrangements, including longitudinal experiences after contracts end, to assess whether the themes identified here are transferable to other settings.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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