

# A Qualitative Analysis of the Coping Strategies of Substitute Teachers

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*This study distinguishes whether substitute teachers enact coping strategies that mitigate the source of work-related stress (problem-centered) or coping strategies that enable them to adapt to stress created by work-related stressors (avoidance-centered). The author gathered data for this analysis by conducting 37 in-depth interviews with substitute teachers and shadowing 14 of them for a total of 122 hours of observation. Through a grounded theory analysis, a trend emerged that showed substitute teachers engaged in both problem-centered and avoidance-centered coping strategies, with a slight numerical advantage given to problem-centered strategies. By understanding how substitute teachers deal with these issues, scholars can prepare future generations of substitute teachers with successful coping strategies.*

*Cette étude évalue dans quelle mesure les suppléants ont recours à des stratégies d'adaptation qui atténuent la source de stress professionnel (axées sur les problèmes) ou à des stratégies d'adaptation leur permettant de s'adapter au stress créé par des stressors liés au travail (axées sur l'évitement). L'auteur a collecté les données pour cette analyse en passant des entretiens en profondeur avec 37 suppléants et en observant 14 de ceux-ci pendant un total de 122 heures. Une analyse fondée sur une théorie à base empirique a révélé que les suppléants ont tendance à adopter tant des stratégies d'adaptation axées sur les problèmes que celles axées sur l'évitement, les premières affichant un léger avantage numérique. Si on comprend les mécanismes d'adaptation des suppléants, les formateurs peuvent fournir des stratégies d'adaptation valables aux générations de suppléants à venir.*

Interviewer: What's a typical day like for you at work?

Ginny: I try to get there [the school] between 30 and 45 minutes early. I look over the classroom. I might walk through the desks looking for the nametags. I definitely look for the class list of kids and I get the attendance sheet ready. Sometimes the regular teacher forgets to tell me something important so I'll talk to some of the other teachers in that grade level for further clarification. I highlight the notes that were left for me by the regular teacher and make notes in the margin so that I have my own understanding of what's going on.

Above is a typical response to a question about a substitute teacher's normal day. Substitute teachers provide schools with an essential service that allows them to meet their day-to-day staffing challenges. Today's students spend a full year in the presence of a substitute teacher (STEDI, n.d.). Despite school districts' reliance on substitute teachers, numerous factors reflect a stigma associated with this position (Boyce, Ryan, Imus, & Morgeson, 2007). Substitute teachers are notoriously underpaid in comparison to other members of a school district, often being paid between \$20 and \$190 a day, with the national average being \$105 (National Substitute Teacher Alliance, 2001).

It is very important to understand how substitute teachers cope with stressors in these teaching positions. First, while past research portrays coping as a psychological process, coping strategies are primarily expressed through interactions with others. It is only through an investigation of these strategies that larger extrapolations toward the internal psychological processes can occur. Similarly, occupying the fringes of individual schools and/or school systems produces stress that substitute teachers endure, that full time school employees do not. Past coping research has linked coping strategies to a singular event or problem (Amiot, Terry, Jimmieson, & Callan, 2006; Armstrong-Stassen, 2006; Rotondo & Kincaid, 2008; Selmer, 2002). However, the stress associated with substitute teaching occurs as long as one actively engages in this line of work. These reasons, coupled with the nascent stage of academic knowledge regarding temporary labor, justify a closer look at this issue. This analysis: (a) provides a detailed illustration of the common stressors associated with substitute teaching, (b) reviews theories related to coping, and (c) outlines the scholarship related to coping strategies. Next, it reports the findings from a qualitative study, involving in-depth interviews and observations. Finally, it draws theoretical and pragmatic conclusions about the coping strategies substitute teachers utilize, reports limitations of the study and offers directions for future research.

## Literature Review

### Stressors Associated with Substitute Teaching

Interviewer: Can you tell me about the last stressful thing that happened to you while substitute teaching?

Becky: I was at Sanborne Elementary School. It has a high-need, high-risk student body. There was one instance where a boy ripped the cover of another boy's notebook. I was moving the students to another classroom when the second boy's mom came up, and aggressively confronted me for what happened to her son's notebook. I just put my hands up and said "I'm a substitute teacher and you need to deal with this with your son's regular teacher."

This example demonstrates one of the many stressors substitute teachers encounter on a day-to-day basis. Substitute teachers typically experience ubiquitous stressors such as constant uncertainty about the duration and location of their work assignments, requirements, and the personalities of their future coworkers and students (Boyce et al., 2007).

Along these same lines, substitute teachers report finding the underutilization of their skills and abilities to be especially depressing (Wright & Bonett, 1993). In particular, substitute teachers indicate high levels of anxiety and dissatisfaction at not feeling perceived by other organizational members as a vital part of the education process. This feeling of "not belonging" reverberates for substitute teachers each time they cannot call a student by name, are asked to teach a course outside their area of expertise, or find out that full-time teachers re-teach material covered during their absences (Clifton & Rambaran, 1987).

Many academic fields (e.g., communication, sociology, psychology, management) seek to explain the causes for these feelings of inequity. Rogers (1995) uses the term "alienation" to describe this process. He goes on to argue that substitute teachers experience "a lack of control, a certain powerlessness felt by the individual derived from the structure of social relations" (p. 142). Their existence on the organizational margins seemingly denies substitute teachers any

means by which to positively influence their work-related experiences. Thus, substitute teachers must find ways to cope with this stress.

## **Coping**

Initially, coping garnered scholastic attention due to its role in clinical settings. Early investigations uncovered a “common sense” attitude toward the concept among the general public, but later investigations began to challenge this view (Wright & Bonnett, 1993). Lazarus and Folkman (1984) describe coping as a way people consciously choose to reduce stress by altering its causes. Amiot et al. (2006) define coping “as the person’s behavioral and cognitive efforts to manage the internal and external demands of a troubled person-environment transaction” (p. 555). Such conceptualizations highlight the causal role stress plays in the coping process (Armstrong-Stassen, 2006). In the presence of negative stimuli, individuals enact strategies to mitigate or completely alleviate the toll taken on them. These strategies, however, can vary across situations (Srivastava & Sager, 1999).

Livneh and Wilson (2003) indicate that a situationally determined view of coping allows for “fluctuating appraisals of the stressful event . . . [which] result in the adoption of different coping strategies during various phases of adjustment to stress impact, as well as in different levels of stress attention” (p. 196). In light of these definitions, this study defines coping as the process substitute teachers engage in to manage the internal and external stressors that they identify as taxing or exceeding their resources.

## **Coping Strategies**

Among the various perspectives on coping strategies, two key distinctions emerge: (a) coping strategies which directly engage the source of stress (e.g., talking to a disrespectful coworker about his or her behavior), and (b) coping strategies that manage the emotions one experiences because of the stressful situation (e.g., rationalizing that people will not change and thus confronting an irritating coworker would be futile). Scholars have labeled the former process “problem-centered” (Amiot et al, 2006; Rotondo & Kincaid, 2008) and the latter process “avoidance-centered” (Armstrong-Stassen, 2006) to emphasize a proactive handling of the source of stress. While various studies demonstrate that individuals who enact problem-centered coping strategies report more positive personal and work related outcomes, people still employ both strategies (Amiot et al, 2006; Rotondo & Kincaid, 2008; Selmer, 2002). To further clarify, people foreground problem-centered approaches when they believe a problem can actually be changed (Selmer, 2002). Conversely, when someone believes a situation cannot be changed, he or she enacts an avoidance-centered approach and works to change his or her internal appraisal of the stressor (Selmer, 2002).

There is a significant gap in the literature on coping strategies among substitute teachers. Because of the lack of research in this area, this study examines coping strategy research in business environments to gain a sense of their utilization in organized settings (including school districts). Armstrong-Stassen (2006) details the determinants that indicate how managers react to stressful organizational scenarios (e.g., corporate downsizing). It is important to note that workplace environment (e.g., for-profit, nonprofit, schools) does not dictate the use of a specific coping strategy. Wherever individuals encounter stressors perceived outside their ability to control, they engage in strategies to re-establish a sense of normalcy despite the larger work environment.

This scenario matches well with the possibility of the “downsizing” that substitute teachers face on a daily basis. For instance, the majority of assignments substitute teachers receive are one-day arrangements that they usually do not know about until a day or two ahead of the job. Thus, when the school day ends, regardless of how well things went, substitute teachers must live with the uncertainty of their next work assignment until the phone rings again. Armstrong-Stassen (2006) explains several factors that influence which coping strategy organizational managers use when facing termination. This list of determinants include (a) available personal and organizational resources, (b) susceptibility to job loss, (c) perceived organizational support, (d) perceived supervisor support, (e) belief in one’s self efficacy to affect a situation, and (f) alienation from the importance of one’s work. Individuals who report (a) access to available personal and organizational resources, (b) low susceptibility to job loss, (c) high levels of organizational support, (d) high levels of supervisor support, (e) a positive belief in one’s self efficacy to affect a situation, and (f) a belief in the importance of one’s work are more likely to engage in problem-centered coping strategies. Organizational members who report (a) little access to personal and organizational resources, (b) high susceptibility to job loss, (c) low levels of organizational support, (d) low levels of supervisor support, (e) a negative belief in one’s self efficacy to affect a situation, and (f) no connection to the importance of one’s work are likely to engage in avoidance-centered coping strategies (Armstrong-Stassen, 2006).

Holding a substitute teacher up to this list of determinants produces a mixed profile. The nature of a substitute teaching position seems to lend itself to some of the determinants listed by Armstrong-Stassen (2006) but not to others. Gossett (2002) reports employees like substitute teachers do not enjoy access to many organizational resources; however, personal resources vary from individual to individual. Given the unstable nature of their tenure in any assignment, substitute teachers seem to have a high susceptibility to job loss. Organizational support can vary as well. Some substitute teachers establish long-term relationships with certain schools and/or school districts, and as a result, a bond of support may form. However, the dynamic nature of substitute teaching may make these cases the exception rather than the rule. Finally, one’s self-efficacy to affect a given situation and the perceived importance of one’s work again act as variables that change from one individual to another. However, in the case of substitute teachers, the investment (i.e., education, training, purchasing of material) made into the specific discipline of education may reflect a stronger level of importance associated with the job.

The research questions for this study are the result of this ambiguous profile of how temporary workers engage in coping strategies:

RQ1: Do substitute teachers utilize problem-centered coping strategies or avoidance-centered strategies more?

RQ2: How do substitute teachers enact these coping strategies?

## **Method**

### **Overview of the School District**

Data for this study was gathered from the Green Mountain School District, which is located in the Western United States. Green Mountain School District covers 411 square miles, educates more than 23,000 students, and is among the top 10 largest school districts in its home state. The district has 50 schools, which includes 26 elementary schools, 9 middle schools, 9 high

schools, and 6 charter schools. During the year data was collected for this study, teacher absences reached 16,701, and of these, substitute teachers covered 16, 215.

In order to provide a contextual background through which to better understand the substitute teachers in this study, they are described as a group (It should be mentioned that all schools and participants have been given pseudonyms so as to grant them anonymity). Mary Duggar, the substitute coordinator for the Green Mountain School District informally categorized substitute teachers in three ways:

1. those who were licensed and highly endorsed but were waiting for a full time teaching position;
2. professional substitute teachers (Mary's term for individuals who substitute teach as a long term career); and
3. those who substitute taught as a stepping stone between what they considered their primary careers.

Mary Duggar also relayed that all Green Mountain teachers were licensed with the state Board of Education. Green Mountain's home state Board of Education offered three types of substitute teaching licenses:

1. a one-year license (renewed annually), which only required a high school diploma;
2. a three-year license, which required a 4-year degree in any field of study; and
3. a five-year license for those with a degree in education.

Green Mountain did not require its substitute teachers to be certified to teach in a specific position unless the position is long term (lasting 20 days or more). In this situation, substitute teachers had to be endorsed (having 24 credit hours or more of college courses in the same area as the teacher being replaced). As a final note, Green Mountain allowed its substitute teachers freedom in choosing whatever grade they wished to teach.

## **Participants**

Data for this study was gathered through in-depth interviews and participant observation. In total, 37 substitute teachers (12 men, 25 women) were interviewed for this study for a total of 53 interview hours. Participants were contacted by phone from a master list of substitute teachers in a school district. Initially 136 individuals were contacted with 37 agreeing to participate in the interview. Of these 37 substitute teachers, 14 were shadowed on the job. This group varied widely in its demographics. Participants had from 1 year to 19 years of experience as substitute teachers, with the average being 4 years. Many participants reported being registered with multiple school districts simultaneously. During interviews, some participants revealed greater detail about their lives (such as their former profession). This information was not specifically asked for or tabulated in order to grant the interviewees greater anonymity in responding and in directing the conversation to experiences they deemed as most relevant to substitute teaching.

## Research Design

**Interview protocol.** Interviewing can be conceptualized as a verbal manufacturing of one's sense of self in a dialogic context (Larson & Pepper, 2003). In other words, as people tell others their own story, they come to better understand it themselves. Substitute teachers on the master list provided by the substitute teacher coordinator were contacted by phone. They were informed that Mary Duggar had provided their contact information. Upon hearing about the research procedures and agreeing to participate in the study, participants were met in public locations such as libraries and coffee houses for interviews. These interviews typically lasted 45 minutes each. The interview protocol (See the Appendix) was based on the one developed by Gossett (2002) in her work with temporary workers. All interviews were digitally recorded and then transcribed word for word.

**Observation protocol.** Participant observation was also used in this study. Specifically, the researcher acted as a teacher's assistant, whereby the substitute teacher for the day introduced him to his or her classes as an individual interested in becoming a substitute teacher. In total, 122 hours of observations were conducted (116 hours at schools, 4 hours at orientations, and 2 hours at substitute teacher association meeting). After transcription, these interviews and observations provided over 800 pages of single spaced text. Specifically, the researcher shadowed 14 individual substitute teachers (two on two separate occasions, and one on three separate occasions) at 14 schools (covering nine elementary, three middle, and two high schools) for a total of 116 hours. During this time, substitute teachers were shadowed throughout their day both in and out of the classroom. Similarly, the researcher also attended four 1-hour orientations for new substitute teachers put on weekly by the substitute coordinator, and one 2-hour meeting of the Professional Substitute Teacher Association.

Observations of substitute teachers began when participants indicated they arrived at the school. Green Mountain required its substitute teachers to arrive at their assignments at least half an hour before the morning bell sounded. Many of these individuals actually arrived 45 minutes to a full hour before this time.

## Data Analysis

Data were analysed following grounded theory procedures with triangulation in both participant observation and in-depth interviews to confirm emergent categories. Both data sets were analyzed using a grounded theory approach to answer both research questions. Interview and field notes were combed through multiple times, with the research noting and comparing similarities and differences to derive coping related categories in an iterative fashion. As themes emerged they were operationalized to enable the identification of similar occurrences. As new categories developed, they were constantly compared against the pre-existing categories. When necessary, the operationalization of a specific category was amended to allow for the occurrence of other trends. This process led to the development of larger, associated categories with the aim of achieving theoretical saturation; the same strategy was done with the interview transcripts. Categorical schemas from both data sets were then merged together where appropriate based on the emergence of similar concepts and categorization until data saturation was achieved (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). The final categories were then discussed with a handful of substitute teachers (personal connections) as a means of member checking the data.

## **Results**

The initial processing of the interview transcripts revealed two distinct coping categories: (a) boundary management and (b) knowledge acquisition. The researcher qualified boundary management as the organizing of one's work experience to manage internal and external stressors that were appraised as taxing or exceeding the individual's resources. Knowledge acquisition is operationalized as familiarizing oneself with facets of the organization. The former category contains four subcategories while the latter exists as a stand-alone category.

### **Research Question 1**

The first research question asks, "Do substitute teachers utilize problem-centered coping strategies or avoidance-centered strategies more?" In total, of the four coping strategies, three reflect a problem-centered approach, while only one embraces an avoidance-centered style. In other words, the analysis of the interview transcripts and observations reveal that substitute teachers prefer both problem-centered and avoidance-centered strategies, with the numerical advantage towards the problem-centered approach.

### **Research Question 2**

The second research question asks, "How do substitute teachers enact these coping strategies?" Substitute teachers rely on two distinct overarching categories of coping strategies to manage the stressors associated with their organizational experience: boundary management and knowledge acquisition. Boundary management as an overarching category consists of multiple subcategories (both problem-centered and avoidance-centered) whereas knowledge acquisition exists by itself as a problem-centered strategy.

**Boundary management strategies.** As a macrolevel method of organization, boundary management finds that substitute teachers establish order among their work related experiences so that stressors do not exceed their abilities to function effectively. By definition, boundaries create order from chaos through the imposition of a categorical system by someone upon his or her environment. To best understand the strategies substitute teachers utilize to establish boundaries, this study illustrates the different arenas they seek to demarcate. Substitute teachers establish boundaries between the certain and uncertain aspects of their work related experiences to guide their interactions. As perpetual newcomers to classrooms, schools, and school districts, substitute teachers are continually reminded of their separate status from full-time school members (i.e., students, teachers, administration, etc.). In order to ensure that their "outsider" status does not overtake their ability to deal with the stressors associated with their job, substitute teachers erect boundaries between themselves and potential sources of overwhelming stress (e.g., unruly students, full-time teachers and administrators who view substitute teachers as temporary fixtures, negative perceptions attached to substitute teachers which view them only as babysitters). These boundaries fit under both problem- and avoidance-centered coping strategies and emerge in this study through power structuring and environmental manipulation with the problem-centered approach, and perception construction with the avoidance-centered approach.

**Power structuring.** This problem-centered subcategory imposes systems of rules on oneself and other organizational members in order to regulate relationships in a predictable and

efficient manner. Substitute teachers like Keri indicated that the worst thing about the job “is probably entering a classroom that doesn’t have a set of plans. Entering an unknown classroom is my least favorite because you don’t know where anything is or how things are done.” Sharlene relayed similar sentiments in the worst thing about her experience as a substitute teacher:

Dealing with the behavior problems is definitely the worst thing about the job. It’s common that I walk into a classroom and I don’t know the rules of behavior. You better believe the students know that, and they love to take advantage of it.

Both these accounts revealed a common stressor emanating from the uncertainty associated with having to frequently operate in a new workplace.

Substitute teachers mitigated this uncertainty by developing their own systems of rules that they bring from assignment to assignment. For example, some substitute teachers shared the importance of having set consequences for negative student behavior and rewards for positive student behavior. Bonnie disclosed that the first time a student misbehaved, he or she got a “look”; the second time, he or she got moved away from the rest of the class; and the third misbehavior landed the culprit in detention. To encourage positive behavior, other substitute teachers brought things that students valued, such as candy, in order to reinforce positive behavior. Fred, a retired instructor turned substitute teacher, relied on reinforcements other than candy to encourage students to behave. He mentioned that in the fall, he volunteered at a “Haunted Cornfield.” He brought coupons for admission to the cornfield with him to his different assignments and offered them to students as prizes for desired actions such as answering a question correctly or remaining quiet while other students spoke. Fred utilized another tactic students valued; Fred clasped his hands together, pressed them against his mouth and blew, producing a sound similar to a train whistle. When he felt students deserved encouragement for an action, he said to them, “That deserves a train whistle,” and he made the sound. Bridget, a veteran substitute teacher, demonstrated a combination of consequences and rewards:

At the beginning of the class Bridget begins to explain her rules to the students. She says that if you start misbehaving, I’ll warn you. I will give you a wiggle worm [she wiggles her pointer finger]. She says her wiggle worm is friendly until you go overboard and then it turns into a viper. She changes her wiggling finger into a semi-closed fist with her pointer and middle finger curved over into make shift fangs. You lose one minute of recess.

Bridget offered her students a number of chances to correct their behavior before they incurred consequences, however, and students were able to win back their valued recess minutes.

Another means of power structuring involved demonstrating to students that a substitute teacher knew the plans for the day. Jerry, a retired superintendent turned substitute teacher, clearly announced his awareness of the plans set by the regular teacher by writing them on the chalkboard:

8:20-8:35	Cal-etc.
8:35-9:10	Math B
9:10-9:45	Library
9:45-10	Snack

10-10:35	Go over new Job's etc
10:35-11:10	Read Story
11:13-11:28	Lunch with kids
11:39-12:05	Lunch-Recess for kids
12:05-12:35	Re-read story-draw pict/sequence
12:40-1:25	Handwriting (10-15 minutes)/free read
1:25-1:40	Recess
1:40-2:20	Intro to Digestive [SCIENCE]
2:20-3:05	Art
3:05-3:20	Clean up kids

He added that seeing the plans helped to keep him and the students on track.

Along with reducing stress through the imposition of rewards and consequences on the uncertainty of a new assignment, substitute teachers imposed their own power structure by removing the cover of anonymity students use to misbehave. Carolyn, a substitute teacher, reflected the value of this method when she advised:

Learn their [students'] names as fast as you can. They lose their anonymity that way. When they know that you know their names, they know there's not a whole lot they can get away with because you can report them.

Adele, a veteran substitute teacher, shared that she used aspects of the unknown (similar to those found with anonymity) to her advantage in dealing with a troublesome student.

For instance, I had a kid in sixth grade one day, who was just acting nuts. He was pulling his shirt off, he was carrying on and he went to tell jokes. It turns out that his brother had been killed just a few days before in a hunting accident. I didn't know that so I told him "Out in the hall, out!" So we went out there and I told him what I told all the kids I have to take out in the hall. "You have leadership qualities. Give me a hand with the other students. Be the kind of leader that I know you are. The kids will follow you and we'll have a good day."

Adele's problem student in this situation did not know what would occur in the hallway. By separating him from the other students, Adele removed the student from his power source (the other students) so that her status as an adult superseded his position as an adolescent. Instead of using this moment to verbally reprimand the student, she invoked positive reinforcement to turn someone who had been an obstacle into an ally.

**Environmental manipulation.** This problem-centered strategy structures the work environment itself to better suit the substitute teacher's needs. With every new assignment, substitute teachers encountered a workspace not of their own design that they must learn to use quickly while not changing anything upon their departure. This facet of their work experience posed some unique challenges brought to light through the experiences of Jerome, Angela, and Anna. Jerome's shadowing produced the following excerpt:

Jerome wanders around the room asking out loud where the stapler is. He then looks over to me and says that hardest thing about being a substitute teacher is not knowing where the materials are. He looks around the room. He tries to open a desk, and then he says she [the regular teacher] has them locked up too.

In order to deal with this issue, Jerome shared how he often brings his own supplies like games, props, stickers, chalk, office supplies (stapler, paper clips, note pads, pens), and even his own lanyard clearly stating his name. Jerome relayed that his briefcase is his “portable desk” that allowed him to feel more at ease since he knew how things were organized. Along with office supplies, other interviewees, like Angela, made sure to bring “gimmicks” with them to tailor the work experience as best they could.

Interviewer: When you say gimmick, what do you mean?

Angela: I always have surprises for them [the students] at the end of the day. I have pixie sticks that I give out as treats at the end of the day. I brought a back scratcher with me and if they were taking a test or working quietly on something I’d go around and I’d just scratch their backs or the tops of their heads. When I started going back to the same schools time and again, they [the students] asked me “Did you bring your pixie sticks? Did you bring your cush ball? Did you bring your magic wand? Did you bring your back scratcher?” Even up to fifth grade they loved it. Those are my gimmicks; I have a lot of them.

Thus, Angela introduced gimmicks to her work experience in the hopes that students would react positively, and in turn, her day-to-day work experience would be enhanced.

Anna, another participant, revealed another important aspect of coping with stress through manipulating the environment: “A substitute teacher better leave things as he or she finds them at the regular teacher’s desk.” While shadowing her, the researcher asked where he could sit to be out of the way, and she suggested the teacher’s desk because she never sat there. She went on further to explain that she did not want to risk moving anything by accident since she knew some very particular teachers who made complaints against certain substitute teachers that they could not find anything upon their return.

Like the problem-centered strategies of boundary management, avoidance-centered coping strategies seek to alleviate the stress of a substitute teacher by imposing order on his or her work related experiences. However, instead of dealing with stressors directly, these coping methods reorganize aspects of the individual rather than the larger environment. Substitute teachers engage in the primary avoidance-centered coping strategy of perception construction.

**Perception construction.** Using this avoidance-centered approach allows a substitute teacher to choose which image associated with substitute teaching to which he or she adheres. Becky’s interview revealed the power of perception involving substitute teachers.

Interviewer: How do schools not make you feel welcome?

Becky: I don’t know if you’re familiar with Skyline High School, but it can be a rough school. My first time there, they wanted me to wear a huge neon pink stick-on name tag that said “Sub.” I told them I wasn’t going to do it, and they said you have to. In a high school, that’s like wearing a big target for a sub. I said I wouldn’t wear it, I mean that’s stupid.

Research suggests that substitute teachers endure an occupational dichotomy, whereby on the one hand they are seen as babysitters, and on the other hand as guest teachers (Vorell, 2007). Becky’s experience could be interpreted to indicate that wearing a badge drew unwanted attention to her in multiple ways. Such images and experiences crept up time and again both directly through interviews and indirectly through observations. An interesting observation here was that substitute teachers were placed into these positions through their interactions with

other participants in their organizational experience (i.e., students, administration, full-time teachers, other substitute teachers). Substitute teachers actively chose which perceptions they preferred and by doing so enacted a sense of agency, which mitigated some degree of the stressors they encountered.

A number of substitute teachers were asked what they thought goes through a student's mind when he or she heard, "A substitute teacher will be in the class today." With a few exceptions (to be discussed later) many interviewees echoed Nora's answer to the question: "I'm not sure, all the time, but when I go to the high school I know I'm a babysitter." Following up, Nora added:

Students will try and test me a little bit. They will ask questions to see how much I know. If I'm teaching a subject I don't know well I will just cut them off at the beginning. For example, I'll just say to them, "I'm not a chemistry teacher, I don't know anything about chemistry, but I do know how [you] have to do work on this project, so get started."

From Nora's response, and with an intentional refusal of information from students, or more so the testing of the substitute teacher's knowledge of relevant materials, a substitute teacher is denied recognition as an accepted member of the school community and relegated to an outsider status. Many substitute teachers, in order to avoid the consternation that such a rejection can cause, embraced the babysitter perception instead. Nan, a first year substitute teacher shared:

My husband is appalled when I call myself a babysitter instead of a substitute teacher. But I figure that on the majority of the jobs, that instead of getting frustrated from the lack of respect from the students, I might as well just see the job for what it is, a glorified babysitting gig. I basically hold down the fort until the regular teacher returns.

Substitute teachers like Nan established a clear boundary regarding their work-related duties. In essence, they envisioned and act upon a clear distinction between the education related and day-to-day functioning aspects of their position. "Babysitter" substitute teachers realized the ephemeral nature of their job and embraced their marginalized status. Instead of fighting this fringe position, they accepted it as inevitable and it became part of their work reality. Ken, a first year substitute teacher, shared his perspective on this matter:

If you go into the teacher's lounge, they [regular teachers] don't have much time to talk. You just don't have a chance to become a friend because you're there one day and gone the next. And instead of asking you "Who are you?" They say "Who are you today?" And so I just am a babysitter.

At the same time, other interviewees held a different perception of their work. In order to deal with the stressors of their work, they viewed their role not negatively, but rather as an integral piece in the noble profession of education. This idea, encapsulated in the image of substitute teacher as a "guest teacher" repeatedly emerged. Cheryl elaborated:

Well the whole idea is that "substitute" is kind of a derogatory term that gives students a derogatory impression of you. But when you're called a guest teacher, it's more like you are a guest, and you're filling in for another teacher. The whole idea is to get the teacher more respect.

This term took the perception of the substitute teacher in the opposite direction of the prior conception. Instead of visualizing a substitute teacher as a replaceable temporary worker, he or she instead became an irreplaceable piece in the mission of the school district.

Just as some organizational members advanced the role of the babysitter on the substitute teachers, other organizational members enabled them to be guest teachers. Oscar, a former instructor turned substitute teacher explained his role as a substitute teacher.

As a “guest teacher,” if the lesson plans are as they should be when I come in, I should be able to pick it up where the regular teacher left off. A good substitute teacher will go in there and just fill in the shoes and do the role as it is by taking attendance, scolding bad behavior, and rewarding and acknowledging good behavior.

Oscar’s words demonstrated that the guest teacher personae could be facilitated through actions of the full-time teacher, particularly through adequate communication. Providing such vital information like the subject schedule engaged the substitute teacher as a valued colleague worthy of respect. Megan, another substitute teacher shared how the guest teacher image has been supported on a macrolevel.

Interviewer: What do you think of the term substitute teacher?

Megan: I feel indifferent towards it. Some schools don’t use the words "substitute teacher," they use the words "guest teacher."

Some schools within Green Mountain adopted the term to show their support for substitute teachers. Tiffany, a first year substitute teacher, supplemented Megan’s experience through her own observation: “I like the term ‘guest teacher’ more [than substitute teacher]. They write ‘guest teacher’ at Erie on the ID badges, guest teacher and I like that better because it looks more like you’re special.” Tiffany went on to explain what spurred this show of organizational support.

Tiffany: Some schools realize the impact behind calling someone a substitute, it’s like you’re not as good as a regular teacher. When you’re called a guest teacher, you know you are special. You know they want you there. You’re a guest.

Thus, through simple practices like these, schools reduced the stigma associated with substitute teachers.

As with the babysitter perception, substitute teachers demonstrated agency by actively endorsing the “guest teacher” perception for themselves. Leroy, a veteran substitute teacher demonstrated how.

Interviewer: How do you like the term "guest teacher"?

Leroy: I like the term; I have it on my nametag.

Interviewer: Interesting.

Leroy: You see I have "Sub" here, but I couldn’t get the other part of it on "Subteacher" or "Guest Teacher" because it would have been too big on my nametag.

Leroy’s example showed that a substitute teacher could actively choose to be a guest teacher

not only in his or her frame of mind but also through an active posting of his or her preferred role. While not everyone went as far as Leroy to put the term “guest teacher” on his or her nametag, other individuals liked encountering a new classroom. Aside from separating areas of their work experience to prevent being overwhelmed by stressors, substitute teachers demonstrated another technique: knowledge acquisition.

**Knowledge acquisition.** Those individuals that utilized this problem-centered coping category to reduce stressors related to uncertainty of differing organizational environments. In this approach substitute teachers interacted with the cause of stress by reducing uncertainty associated with a particular site by actively seeking information about it. Many of the substitute teachers who were interviewed and observed actively sought out information related to their work experience. These points included (a) the physical layout of the school, (b) location of materials, (c) school policy and culture, (d) other organizational members, and (e) other duties expected of substitute teachers.

Substitute teachers searched for this information from a number of sources such as (a) self-exploration, (b) other organizational members, (c) official and unofficial communication from the regular teacher, (d) official material created by the school, (e) other substitute teachers, and (f) the school district itself. Green Mountain required its substitute teachers to arrive 30 minutes before the official start of the morning. Numerous interviewees reported arriving 45 minutes or earlier before the start of the day to allow them more opportunity to survey the school to learn the location of their classroom, the bathroom, the teacher’s lounge, and so forth. Similarly, many substitute teachers indicated a preference for asking other teachers at the school when they needed to know something quickly.

As discussed earlier, teachers typically communicated with substitute teachers by leaving lesson plans for them to follow. In rare instances, the full-time teacher contacted his or her replacement ahead of the scheduled job to convey important information. Michelle's observations added to the understanding of this experience.

I've gotten to know the teachers well enough that they'll call me at home the night before. They'll explain their lesson plans to me. If I have questions I can call them at home later. Some of them will send the lesson plans home with my other children and say look it over a couple of days in advance if you have questions, call me.

Michelle's example was the exception to the rule but it demonstrated the bond that can develop between substitute teachers and full-time teachers.

It became apparent that some schools took the extra step of preparing folders for substitute teachers full of helpful information and materials. These “subfolders” included such things as plans for emergency evacuation, a school map, and occasionally a ticket for a free hot lunch. Veteran substitute teachers who taught for years in Green Mountain also developed and distributed materials based on their experiences for the first year substitute teachers. Not to be outdone, Green Mountain itself held multiple orientations each year for new recruits. At these orientations, Mary Duggar, the substitute coordinator for the district, answered fundamental questions about things such as the pay structure, telephone scheduling system, how to handle cancellations, and minimum classroom management techniques.

## Discussion

This study shows that substitute teachers have many things to share about their unique experience when it comes to coping strategies. The results of this study reveal that substitute teachers utilized both problem-centered and avoidance-centered strategies simultaneously, with a higher numerical frequency given toward problem-centered approaches. This mixed approach towards coping strategies supports Livneh and Wilson's (2003) assertion that situational factors influence coping style along with one's predisposition. However, the results of this study demonstrate a sense of empowerment available to substitute teachers. Participants in this study clearly show an ability to choose one coping strategy over another. For example, in the perception construction coping strategy, certain substitute teachers adhere to and enact the babysitter role, while others find greater attraction to the guest teacher role.

This study also attempts to explain how substitute teachers enact problem-centered and avoidance-centered coping strategies. Through in-depth interviews and observations, it became apparent that substitute teachers use a variety of coping strategies. Specifically, substitute teachers undertake boundary management and knowledge acquisition to cope with their organizational reality. Substitute teachers have little to any direct control over their work experience. Thus, it makes sense that they would strive to impose control over their main domain of influence in relation to work: themselves. Problem-centered strategies embrace the stressful situations by working to directly mitigate stressors. Substitute teachers use these coping methods to literally and figuratively create their own workspace on assignment, whether that means one's own rule system or one's preferred type of office supply.

While past research indicates more positive effects through the use of problem-centered coping strategies, this same research does show the use of avoidance-centered coping strategies among substitute teachers. The tendency for some substitute teachers to shy away from engaging a stressor directly, potentially represents a feeling of learned helplessness acquired through their socialization within the classroom. During interviews, interviewees were asked to speculate on the general public's impression of substitute teachers. Many individuals laughed when asked this and recalled their own experiences as students and how they treated a day with a substitute teacher as a "mini vacation," and a time to engage in trickery at the substitute teacher's expense. Thus, the development of a defeatist attitude reflected in avoidance-centered coping strategies makes sense for substitute teachers who use this type of imagery as a foundation to approach the job. In other words, when a substitute teacher believes he or she cannot directly affect his or her work experience, it seems reasonable to create boundaries that prevent the undesirable perceptions from seeping into preferred areas of the self.

This study presents practical guidance as well as expands the theoretical understanding of coping among substitute teachers. The presence of positive problem-centered coping strategies indicates an opportunity for administrators at both the individual schools and the school district level to establish protocols that result in the proliferation of such strategies among substitute teachers. Many schools in the Green Mountain school district make the acquisition of work-related knowledge much easier by amassing it for substitute teachers in the subfolders and handing it to them as they arrive in the morning. The centralization of safety procedures, phone numbers, documents, and so forth represents a relatively inexpensive yet highly effective method by which to encourage substitute teachers to engage in problem-centered coping strategies instead of avoidance-centered strategies.

## Limitations

As with any investigation, this study leaves unanswered questions for future research to examine. A lone researcher analyzed and developed the categories of coping strategies. While he engaged in a rigorous method of constant comparison as demanded by the grounded theory approach, the presence of another researcher with which to negotiate the aforementioned results would have lent an extra (though not essential) level of stringent review.

At the same time, some have criticized the development of categories using the grounded theory method. Qualitative analysis relies on the researcher's interpretation of data to make sense of the observed phenomena. There is no guarantee, however, that the developed categories accurately reflect what the observed individual(s) intended. For instance, because something was labeled as a problem-centered coping strategy does not guarantee that the substitute teacher observed intended it as such. Post-observation interviews could be conducted, but they would still be open to challenge. Nonetheless, qualitative researchers seek to generate reliable and valid data. As Lindlof and Taylor (2002) note:

They [qualitative researchers] want to inspire confidence in readers (and themselves) that they have achieved a right interpretation. Notice that we did not *say*, the *right* interpretation. An indefinite number of interpretations can be constructed from any research experience, but usually the ones that researchers choose to develop are those that they find most plausible, insightful, and/or useful. Researchers stand a better chance of making good choices if they employ procedures for evaluating the trustworthiness and credibility of these interpretations (p. 240).

Thus, while the handling of the data reflects the author's interpretation of the data, his system of rigorous evaluation methods involving constant comparison of the generated categories and membership checks with substitute teachers (post-observation checks with the original substitute teachers observed for this study were not possible; the coping strategies were not developed until months after data collection terminated) creates the "credible data" for which Lindlof and Taylor (2002) called. Finally, one might argue the author could not accurately reflect how an individual substitute teacher intended for a particular coping strategy to be categorized. The findings of this study, however, are not based on the interpretations of the actions of a single individual. The coping categories in this study were developed through observation and interviews with nearly 40 substitute teachers. Thus, while one individual substitute teacher may not have intended for a certain action to be placed in a particular category, it stands to reason that others in the observed sample did.

Similarly, this investigation draws from a specific sample within the overall population of temporary workers: substitute teachers. This group differs from the mainstream population of temporary workers on a number of levels. Substitute teachers are engaging in a specific profession, whereas other temporary workers are placed in positions regardless of profession. The professional field of education requires substitute teachers to have certain qualifications (such as college degree, special skills, or special licensure) not placed on traditional temporary workers. The absence of these factors may indeed limit the coping strategies available to the larger population of temporary workforce. Other factors distinguish substitute teachers from temporary workers. For instance, the duration of employment for other temporary workers typically surpasses that of substitute teachers. Similarly, substitute teachers replace regular teachers due to illness, a need to attend a conference, or maternity leave. Temporary workers, on

the other hand are contracted to meet the short-term demands placed on a specific business. All of these differences may confound the generalization of the trends in this study to other areas of temporary work.

### **Direction for Future Study**

This study demonstrates that some individuals actively choose to substitute teach, and do not have the choice thrust upon them. As seen in the case of the guest teacher, there is a segment of the substitute teacher population that views their part in the education process as central and dignified. For these individuals who want to substitute teach, coping might be easier. An extension of this study for future investigations would seek to understand the relationship between an individual's reason for engaging in substitute teaching and what coping strategies he or she chooses to enact to face the stressors related to these positions.

This study looks at a vastly understudied, yet valuable population in the education field: substitute teachers. As long as teachers become ill, attend conferences for professional development, go on maternity leave, and so forth, schools and school districts will need a strong pool of substitute teachers to fill their vacancies. Education research has intensely studied areas such as student learning, teaching pedagogy, and school administration; however, school systems cannot neglect the important contribution that substitute teachers make to the classroom.

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## Appendix

### Interview Protocol for Substitute Teachers

1. Tell me how you got into substitute teaching as a line of work?  
Probes -Could you tell me about other lines of work you might be pursuing as well?  
-Does being a substitute teacher fall in line with your primary career goal?
2. What is the best thing about being a substitute teacher?
3. What is the worst thing about being a substitute teacher?  
Probes -Would you suggest others to partake in this line of work? Why or why not?
4. Explain your role as a substitute teacher.  
Probes -What is a typical day like for you at work?  
-What rules does a substitute have to follow:
  - At the state level
  - At the district level
  - At the individual schools-Who enforces the rules?  
-What are the rewards for following these rules?  
-What are the consequences for not following these rules?
5. Could you describe for me what an ideal substitute teacher would be like in your mind?  
Probes -In what ways do you feel you fit with that model?
6. How would you distinguish between the identities of educator and substitute teacher?  
Probes -How are they the same? How are they opposing?  
-Which identity comes first for you?
7. What is special or unique about being a substitute teacher versus a full time teacher?  
Probes -Could you tell me more about that?
8. With whom or what do you feel that you relate to the most regarding your work life?
9. With whom do you associate as a substitute teacher?  
Probes -Who do you have the most contact with?  
-With whom do you have the least?

10. Do people at the schools where you substitute encourage you to feel welcome and like you belong?

Probes -How?

-If they do not how do they discourage this?

-Could you give me an example of something that happened in a particular school that helped you to feel more comfortable there?

-Could you give me an example of something that happened in [a] particular school that made you feel that you did not belong there?

11. What avenues for feedback on your performance do you have?

Probes -How could these be improved?

12. What do students seem to think of your line of work?

13. What do full time teachers seem to think of your line of work?

14. What do school administrators seem to think about your line of work?

15. What does the general public seem to think about your line of work?

16. Is there anything else that I should know that I have not already asked you?