

Certain They Don't Belong, Determined to Contribute:

Substitute Teachers who Majored in Elementary Education



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Acknowledgment

As KODA, since 2016, we have been working to strengthen teachers and families so that children in villages can receive a quality education. With each program we have implemented, we have gained a deeper understanding of the field, encountered new needs, and developed new solutions together with those who joined our network.

From Muş to Aydın, Bursa to Batman, and Kastamonu to Şanlıurfa, our journey has been filled with diverse experiences from across Turkey. We have witnessed the significance of rural areas, villages, village schools, and every individual within this ecosystem. While working directly in the field with the adults surrounding children, we recognized the need to support our words with data—not only to enhance the impact we create but also to make the needs in this field more visible.

With every crisis, we have seen that rural areas offer countless opportunities to build something better. The motivation to develop rural-specific education policies, ensure fair attention to rural areas, and present the knowledge we've accumulated over the past eight years through data led us to prepare this series of articles. When the idea for this project first emerged, we had just come through the pandemic, but the **February 6 Earthquakes** had not yet occurred. After the earthquakes, our understanding of village schools was tested once again. The initial drafts for this series were erased and rewritten countless times. During this process, we crossed paths with the **STGM team**, and together, we created a video in the villages of Hatay to explain the relevance of this article series.

This series is the product of collective effort. Therefore, we extend our heartfelt thanks to **Demet Taşkan, Gökçen Karaman, Hatice Azın, Muhammed Atalay, Okan Pala** and **Öykü Kocaman**, whose experiences and insights enriched our articles. We also thank the **STGM team members Ezgi Karataş, Hakan Ataman, Murat Özçelebi** and **Özge Azap**, who helped transform our message into a visual and auditory experience.

Lastly, we are deeply grateful to all the teachers, teacher candidates, parents, village heads, academics, and volunteers who, over the past eight years, have opened their villages, schools, and experiences to us.



Certain They Don't Belong, Determined to Contribute: Substitute Teachers who Majored in Elementary Education

Imagine two teachers working at a village school. Both of them majored in elementary education. They wake up at the same time, navigate similar roads, clean the classroom, light the stove before the children arrive, teach the same lessons, and spend equal time preparing activities for the following day after the last bell rings. What distinguishes these two teachers, however, is that one is employed as a “contracted/permanent” teacher, while the other is appointed as a “substitute teacher”. In this article, we will discuss what this distinction means, the various employment models for teachers in Turkey, and the practical outcomes of one such model: paid substitute teaching.

In Turkey, teachers are employed under three different statuses: permanent, contracted, and substitute. All three models are regulated by the Civil Servants Law No. 657¹, yet there are notable differences among them. Permanent teachers hold the status of civil servants and serve in a permanent and official capacity. Contracted teachers have the same rights and responsibilities as permanent teachers but are employed under a different clause of the law, categorized as public service personnel employed via contracts. In practice, the Ministry of National Education (MEB) currently recruits new teachers primarily as “contracted teachers.” Once these teachers complete their probationary period, they become eligible for permanent status.

Substitute teaching, however, is not actually an employment model. It refers to the practice of appointing individuals as teachers on an hourly wage basis by District Directorates of National Education to ensure that lessons are not interrupted in schools facing teacher shortages or when permanent teachers are temporarily unavailable (due to leave, medical reports, etc.). Initially intended as a temporary measure for exceptional circumstances, this practice has, over time, become an entrenched method of teacher employment². Paid teachers, originally assigned to meet immediate needs, often continue working in the same region for years. This practice is particularly utilized to address teacher shortages in rural and village areas.

Applicants for substitute teaching are not required to have graduated from an education faculty. Although graduates of education faculties are prioritized, anyone with a four-year undergraduate degree—or, in some cases, a two-year associate degree—can become a substitute teacher. The appointment of individuals lacking pedagogical training as teachers is an important issue that, although not discussed in this article, deserves significant attention for its potential impact on students.

¹ Resmî Gazete. (1965, July 23). Civil Servants Law (Law No. 657, No. 12056). Official Gazette of the Republic of Türkiye.

² Tunç, B., & Taner, S. G. (2020). Evaluation of the substitute teaching practice in the context of public education and the right to education. *Journal of Advanced Education Studies / İleri Eğitim Çalışmaları Dergisi*, 2(1), 22-44.



Substitute teachers do not have the same benefits as permanent or contracted teachers. The hourly wages they receive amount to only a fraction of a permanent teacher's salary. For instance, they are not paid on public holidays that fall on weekdays since they do not teach on those days. Their social security contributions are also calculated based on teaching hours, making them more limited. Additionally, as they are employed under one-year contracts, it is uncertain whether their contracts will be renewed at the end of the year—or even within the year—if the position is filled by a permanent hire. Similarly, substitute teachers can quickly leave these temporary positions if a more secure job opportunity arises during their contract term.

Official statistics on the number of substitute teachers in Turkey are not shared. However, according to data collected by the Turkish Education Union (Türk Eğitim-Sen) from 71 provinces for the 2023–2024 academic year, there are approximately 67,000 paid teachers working in Turkey, with about 28,000 of them being education faculty graduates³. Additionally, according to the same data, “the need for teachers in the standard staffing quota,” defined as the number of administrators and teachers required for educational institutions affiliated with the Ministry of National Education, exceeds 91,000⁴. It is also worth noting, albeit unofficially, that according to education unions, the number of teachers awaiting appointment exceeds 700,000⁵. Hundreds of teacher candidates who take the Education Sciences test as part of the Public Personnel Selection Examination (KPSS) are added to this pool each year. This paints a picture where there is a significant teacher shortage on one hand, a large number of unappointed teacher candidates on the other, and a group of substitute teachers—most of whom are unappointed education faculty graduates—continuing their work under insecure conditions.

At this point, it is worth taking a moment to explain when the practice of substitute teaching emerged and how it has evolved over the years. Historical records show that educational policies implemented during the early years of the Republic aimed to create “free and responsible citizens of the nation.”⁶ During this period, teacher training was carried out in institutions such as Village Teacher Schools, Village Instructor Courses, Village Institutes, and Primary Teacher Courses. Between 1950 and 1980, teacher training was conducted in teacher schools and teacher high schools. Starting in 1982, all teacher training institutions were transferred to existing or newly established universities⁷. Trained teachers were employed permanently or through flexible models such as acting, contract-based, or temporary arrangements. The “acting teacher” model, initially developed to address teacher shortages or allow specialists in specific fields to teach, was replaced by the substitute teaching system in 2005⁸.

³ Türk Eğitim Sen. (2023, December). Emergency alarm in education: Substitute teaching should be abolished. 66,780 substitute teachers are employed in 71 provinces. Türk Eğitim Sen Website.

⁴ Resmî Gazete. (2014, June 18). Regulation on the norm staff of administrators and teachers in educational institutions affiliated with the Ministry of National Education (Council of Ministers Decision: 16/6/2014, No. 2014/6459, No. 29034). Official Gazette of the Republic of Türkiye.

⁵ Eğitim İş Sen. (2021, September 10). The appointment of 15,000 teachers is merely symbolic. Eğitim İş Sendikası Website.

⁶ Hesaççoğlu, M. (2009). Educational policy and philosophy in Türkiye during the Republican period. Marmara Üniversitesi Atatürk Eğitim Fakültesi Eğitim Bilimleri Dergisi, 29, 121-138.

⁷ Resmî Gazete. (1982, July 20). Decree-Law on the Organization of Higher Education Institutions (No. 17760). Official Gazette of the Republic of Türkiye.

⁸ Doğan, S., Demir, S. B., & Turan, N. (2013). Evaluation of the substitute teaching practice. Turkish Studies - International Periodical for the Languages, Literature and History of Turkish or Turkic, 8(12), 371-390.



Studies in the literature point to several reasons for this transition, including the failure to establish sufficient staff despite the teacher shortage, cost-cutting measures in public personnel expenses, the increasing prevalence of flexible employment models, and the lack of better alternatives to address teacher shortages in rural areas⁹. In this system, substitute teachers are also employed temporarily, but they are at a greater disadvantage compared to acting teachers in terms of benefits. Moreover, since 2016, there has been a significant increase in the appointment of substitute teachers, and this practice has become a standard method of addressing teacher shortages¹⁰. While the challenges faced by paid teachers are similar to those of their contract-based and permanent counterparts, they also experience feelings of alienation and a lack of acceptance from parents, students, and colleagues.

“I still cannot shake off that state of loneliness, nor can I ask anyone for anything even now.”

A Graduate of Primary Education Teaching, Substitute Teacher

What Exactly Does a Substitute Teacher Substitute?

In the research we conducted and the fieldwork we carried out with teachers as the Rural Schools Transformation Network (KODA), we frequently encountered the widespread presence of substitute teachers in rural areas. The starting point for this article was the fact that many young individuals who completed the First Step Towards Village Schools Program¹¹ (which we have been implementing since 2019 for elementary education majors) began working as substitute teachers in primary schools in nearby villages after graduating and returning to their family homes while awaiting permanent appointments. During the initial weeks of their substitute teaching experience, we listened extensively to the personal accounts of our program graduates. Following the February 6 Kahramanmaraş Earthquakes, we observed a sharp increase in the number of substitute teachers¹², particularly in rural areas, which underscored the necessity of examining this issue in greater depth. Through experience-sharing meetings, focus group discussions, and in-depth interviews, we aimed to address the most prevalent challenge faced by new teachers—loneliness—by fostering solidarity.

Where Does Teaching Begin?

In the meetings and interviews we conducted to understand the experiences, challenges, and opportunities of new primary school teachers engaged in substitute teaching in rural areas, the first point that caught our attention was the difficulty of isolating findings specific to substitute teaching, saying, “Let’s separate those unique to substitute teaching.”

⁹ Türk Eğitim Sen. (2018, December 28). The number of substitute teachers nationwide has risen to 76,605 in 64 provinces. Türk Eğitim Sen Website.

¹⁰ Doğan, S., Demir, S. B., & Turan, N. (2013). Evaluation of the substitute teaching practice. Turkish Studies - International Periodical for the Languages, Literature and History of Turkish or Turkic, 8(12), 371-390.

¹¹ KODA’s 13-week training program on rural education experiences, designed for prospective primary school teachers, has been implemented in various universities since the Spring semester of 2019.

¹² Rural Schools Transformation Network (KODA). (2023, February). Kahramanmaraş earthquakes: What is the situation in villages? KODA’s website.



The concerns, obstacles, and hopes of teachers who began their profession through appointment were quite parallel to those of those who started as substitute teachers. Another point was the resilience of substitute teachers in clinging to their profession, regardless of their motivation for starting teaching.

“Environmental engineers or those whose specialization isn’t classroom teaching... For example, there’s a literature teacher at our school who teaches preschool. They say, ‘The kids can’t write the letter A, I’m losing my mind.’ I say, in preschool, that’s not part of our job; if you really want them to write, have them write with sticks in the garden, write on the soil. Look for things resembling an A around, do activities like that. We, as elementary school teachers, don’t expect a five-year-old child to hold a pen and write perfect letters. But being in a system where teaching certification for non-teachers is deemed sufficient frustrates me.”

Elementary Education Graduate Substitute Teacher

Why do young teachers, despite the known difficulties of the process, prefer substitute teaching? While reasons like earning pocket money or not wanting to remain idle are, of course, cited, it is evident from the shared accounts that the main motivation source is entirely different: stepping into the profession. Finding the internship period insufficient, young teachers embark on substitute teaching with the effort to get into the field as quickly as possible. On the other hand, the lack of an orientation or training program for substitute teachers challenges young teachers in adapting to the school.

“During my internship, I had 15 students once a week. And the teacher was there to help, I wasn’t alone. Suddenly, seeing 40 people in front of me was overwhelming. Perhaps even an contract-based teacher would feel overwhelmed, but at least they would know what to expect, having received orientation. For us, there’s no initial training.”

Elementary Education Graduate Substitute Teacher

It can be said that the relationships built and experiences accumulated during university years—such as participating in a civil society activity—serve as a guide in the profession. The connections formed personally and professionally by the participants of KODA’s First Step towards Village Schools Program with other teachers from different regions with varied experiences appear to be a factor that improves the process.

“My stroke of luck was KODA. I am a mentee¹³. It was like going to therapy. [The mentor teacher] gave advice on classroom management and handling behavior problems. I was about to quit the profession for a term; I was crushed in three months... Thanks to the teacher, I continued. I never felt lonely because of them.”

Elementary Education Graduate Substitute Teacher

¹³ Within the Village Teachers Hand in Hand Program run by KODA, early-career teachers receive mentorship support from experienced colleagues. These teachers are referred to as "mentees."



“When I started as a substitute teacher, there was a KODA teacher at the school. He helped me a lot. I asked him directly about everything. The teacher answered everything wholeheartedly.”

Elementary Education Graduate Substitute Teacher

It is understood from the shared accounts that substitute teachers receive the support they need throughout the process from their families and other substitute teacher friends they communicate with through social networks. Although they often stay with their families, the primary reason is that they lack the financial means to deal with troubles like rent, food, and bills. Earnings of substitute teachers depend on the number of lessons they teach. As there is a limit to the number of lessons they can teach, their ability to increase their already low salaries is restricted. Additionally, since no lessons are held during holidays, they also face pay deductions there. Therefore, starting their profession in the villages and rural neighborhoods they were born and raised in, in a familiar culture, provides a significant advantage. However, substitute teachers do not let this situation lead to complacency. They continue to work and prepare for the Public Personnel Selection Examination (PPSE) to pursue their professions in a permanent position.

“At night, I can whine to my mom, saying, ‘Mom, I’m hungry, I’m very tired, I got hit by a ball during gym class,’ for example [laughs]. When I get home, I don’t think about anything else. My only concern is PPSE or planning and organizing the next day’s activities.”

Elementary Education Graduate Substitute Teacher

Phrases like “You’ll leave anyway,” “These kids are like this anyway,” or “There isn’t even a proper curtain in the school anyway” metaphorically place a bar of soap under the feet of substitute teachers trying to stay within the school, with one foot already outside due to the temporary nature of their position. The negative perception of substitute teaching by village residents and colleagues makes the footing of young teachers even more precarious.

“I waited, thinking they’d introduce me to the children. Even some teachers didn’t meet me. At least the ones who did said, ‘Okay, you’re an elementary education graduate, don’t tell the parents you’re a substitute teacher,’ and sent me directly to the classroom. I entered the class; parents were there asking questions, and I didn’t know anything about the questions they were asking. I didn’t know what today’s parents expected. I still can’t get over that state of loneliness; I still cannot ask anyone for anything.”

Elementary Education Graduate Substitute Teacher

The shared accounts reveal that substitute teaching inherently involves a constant struggle between staying and leaving. Moreover, this struggle has multiple fronts: with assigned teachers, administrators, parents, and children... Substitute teachers are approached by each group with different concerns. Substitute teaching can be left at any time with a simple resignation letter without any time restrictions. Since there’s no penalty for this, teachers can leave their jobs whenever they find it too difficult. The assignment of waiting teachers also ends substitute teaching. Thus, a system implemented to address the teacher shortage in rural areas, due to the intense teacher turnover it creates, weakens trust in education and teachers in rural areas.



"I'm their third teacher in a single term. At the end of every homework, they write, 'Please don't leave; teach us in the fourth grade too.' And I can't give them a clear answer because in the second term I might be appointed by the state to another school as a contracted-teacher. This is a bit sad. It harms the children more than us..."

Elementary Education Graduate Substitute Teacher

It is not hard to say that all difficulties and opportunities are tied to a single knot. In the accounts we listened to and read repeatedly, we understand that the umbrella concept is belonging.

"When we look at the definition of a substitute teacher, we already come there as short-term teachers who take the place of an existing permanent teacher. Looking at the definition, it seems like we shouldn't feel a strong sense of belonging there anyway. Because I'm a teacher in place of another teacher there. We need to know that we are short-term. It seems like we shouldn't belong too much anyway."

Elementary Education Graduate Substitute Teacher

This account serves as a parenthesis to our starting point of understanding the experiences of newly graduated classroom teachers engaged in substitute teaching in rural areas. It notes the tendency of substitute teachers to consciously avoid forming bonds with children and parents, to refrain from taking risks in activity and event selection, and to create temporary solutions to physical inadequacies. It also leaves readers with a pause for reflection: "How and where do you find the motivation to contribute to a place where you know you do not belong?"

Permanent or substitute, in unofficial areas, a very thin line separates the two. We understand this even better when we ask, "If you were working at your current school not as a substitute but as a permanent teacher, what would you do differently?"

"Right now, the physical condition of our school is very bad, but honestly, I'm not doing anything about it. For example, there's no light in the principal's office, so it gets extremely dark in the mornings. I say to myself, 'I can manage for now.' Or, we don't have a school bell, so I set an alarm on my phone. I say, 'Alright, everyone inside,' or 'Alright, everyone outside.' If I were a permanent teacher, I would try to address these issues."

Elementary Education Graduate Substitute Teacher

When we consider past and recent research and conducted interviews, it becomes evident that the practice of substitute teaching is not a healthy solution, and there is a need for a fundamental policy change in this area. The fact that individuals who are not experts can have a say in the future of children, the turnover of teachers making an efficient education process impossible, and the erosion of student, parent, and teacher relationships due to distrust are the most significant indicators leading us to this conclusion.



So, under the current circumstances, while the substitute teaching practice is still in effect, what should the system do differently? Various suggestions can be made to ensure that substitute teachers perform their profession in a more motivated manner throughout the process. However, while the gap in official areas is so deep, suggestions such as holding meetings to break prejudices against substitute teachers, making the experiences and achievements of substitute teachers visible, and sharing research results with relevant individuals and institutions remain insufficient. Questions aimed at improving the process need to be directed not only to teachers or students but also to policymakers.

Because expecting a teacher to provide the qualified education rural children deserve when they do not have the same rights as the “permanent” teacher in the same school, when they cannot access professional development training, when they cannot receive support from colleagues or parents because they are seen as temporary, and when they themselves do not know how long their position will last, does not seem very realistic.

