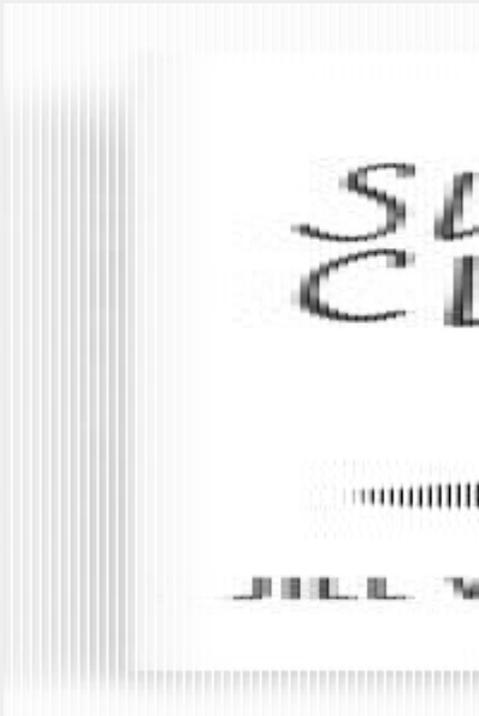


## Substitute Teaching and the Secret to Upending Inequities: A Roundabout Book Review of *Substantial Classrooms*

Categories: Opinion, Thought Leadership



*During a recent meeting with a school partner, the principal and I discovered that we were both reading the new book *Substantial Classrooms: Redesigning the Substitute Teaching Experience* by Jill Vialet and Amanda von Moos.*

*Each of us was struck by what an essential and important read *Substantial Classrooms* is. Substitute teaching has long been an area that desperately needs attention and fresh thinking, and Jill and Amanda have given us a pathway for doing exactly that.*

*In this insightful review of *Substantial Classrooms*, Karen J. Pittman, Co-Founder and Senior Fellow at The Forum for Youth Investment, provides the perfect overview and entry point for understanding the premise of this remarkable book, which, I hope, will inspire you to read it yourself.*

*We are very fortunate to add Karen's voice to this conversation. —Peter Brunn, Vice President for Organizational Learning, Collaborative Classroom*

Bear with me. I am going to tell you why I was so excited about a new book, *Substantial Classrooms: Redesigning the Substitute Teaching Experience*, that I lobbied to write this blog for Collaborative Classroom.

First, however, I must tell you why I didn't become a middle-school math teacher, even though I love teens, math and logic, and teaching. The reason I didn't become a teacher is the same reason the subject line of the email I sent Jill Vialet—co-author of the book and co-founder of the eponymous nonprofit organization alongside Amanda von Moos—was "I LOVE THIS!"

Fifty-plus years ago, as an Oberlin College undergrad, I stumbled into a summer job that gave me a crash course in how to create immersive learning environments that were so empowering that *teens taught me* how to challenge and support them. That job—where I ended up spending my college summers— was counselor at the High Scope Educational Camp for Teens, started by David Weikart, an educational psychologist with the Ypsilanti, Michigan public schools, and his wife Phyllis, a university-based folk dance instructor.

Weikart is best known for the Perry Preschool Study, which demonstrated the lasting impact of high-quality early childhood education that uses an active learning approach. The Weikarts eventually set up the High Scope Educational Research Foundation (which ran the preschool and the camp) to not only design learning settings to research the impact of this approach on child and youth development, but also create scalable ways to help educators describe, assess, and improve the learning environments they create.

It took a few decades for High Scope to produce the research that showed that their approach to training adults to co-create learning environments with preschoolers was equally effective with teens. It only took a few years, however, for me to crystallize my experiences into the two takeaways that undergird every career decision I have made:

- Young people (especially those who have had limited positive learning experiences) will actively embrace their potential when they find themselves in learning environments in which they feel safe, supported, respected, challenged, heard and allowed to use the assets they bring.
- Adults (especially those with limited teaching experience) can be trained to create these environments if they feel safe, supported, respected, challenged, and heard and allowed to use the assets they bring.

These two takeaways explain why I never became a certified teacher. I have spent my life instead creating or getting others to create research, policies, programs, and practice-improvement strategies that promote the power *all* adults have, in *all* settings, to support young people's learning and development.

And I have spent the last decade in particular arguing that this broader approach to workforce development is the only way this country is going to upend the inequities associated with race, class, and zip code.

These takeaways also explain why I was so taken by *Substantial Classrooms*. Four reasons:

#### **Reason #1: Broad application**

Substitute teachers have a lot in common with other adults in the broader learning ecosystem, including non-classroom personnel and community educators (adults in libraries, youth programs, museums, camps, sports leagues).

They enjoy working with young people. They have assets, experiences, and training that make them valuable instructors, coaches, navigators. They often have post-secondary degrees, but not usually in teaching or core academic subjects. This means that their contributions are often seen as less valuable and more interchangeable than those of certified teachers.

By focusing on substitutes, Jill Vialet and Amanda von Moos open the door to more fruitful and respectful discussions of the broader learning ecosystem workforce.

#### **Reason #2: 360° stories**

As the authors point out, many teachers and some principals have long, trusted relationships with specific substitutes that they rely on. But the gig-economy nature of the work means that teachers and schools often scramble to get any coverage and sometimes fail.

This uncertainty, coupled with the usually short amounts of time substitutes spend with any one class or school, means that members of this critical workforce often feel interchangeable and invisible.

The gig-economy nature of the work [of substitute teaching] means that teachers and schools often scramble to get any coverage and sometimes fail. This uncertainty, coupled with the usually short amounts of time substitutes spend with

any one class or school, means that members of this critical workforce often feel interchangeable and invisible.

*Substantial Classrooms* tackles this problem head on. Rather than starting with statistics and trends, the authors start with stories. And they make it very clear why: “Design begins with empathy ... .”

They start by telling the story of a single day of substitute teaching through the lens of the different people connected to it. They invite us to “see the people who make up this system, to get curious about their experience, and to begin to think about how to make it better. That spark is what drives the design process.”

### Reason #3: Feasible strategies

Vialet and von Moos do go through the facts and statistics on how substitute teaching works today. These include who subs are, what the requirements are, how the system works, why coverage is so uneven, what actually happens when subs walk into a school and classroom—and why addressing these multiple challenges doesn’t seem to be a priority, even though estimates are that the average student will spend a school year’s worth of days with subs before they graduate.

Rather than write a simple list of recommendations, the authors offer up a wonderfully respectful, logical, and useful menu of advice bundled under the reassuring heading “Start Where You Are.”

After quickly naming what matters—getting substitutes to come back—they introduce short sections that zoom in on things that are surprisingly easy to overlook (e.g., language matters, small things make a difference, building relationships at the school and district levels). Then they use a blend of research and stories to affirm why taking time on these tasks is important.

Vialet and von Moos don’t stop here though. They include a crash course on design thinking that’s worth reading even if you think you know what design thinking is.

### Reason #4: Scalable solutions

My smile widened to a full grin when I got to the last section: Opportunities. With no fanfare, they name the big opportunity: harnessing underutilized student time. Then they present a series of real hacks that innovators with different roles in the sector put in place that have worked at some level of scale.

All of these opportunities start by naming a well-known but seldomly stated fact: *student time is underutilized when we assume that the substitute’s job is to step in to do what the teacher would have done.*

All of these opportunities start by naming a well-known but seldomly stated fact:

*student time is underutilized when we assume that the substitute’s job is to step in to do what the teacher would have done.*

Vialet and von Moos suggest that we blow up the whole idea of substitute *teaching* and ask a different question: What could you do with 10 percent of student time and \$60–\$250 a day?

The case stories they share come from entrepreneurs who have found creative ways to use the need for substitutes to solve other workforce problems. Each vignette has a short introduction to orient you to the solution and a helpful list of tips for experimenting with the idea should it appeal to you:

- Reimagining substitute teaching as a full-time fellowship
- Part-time jobs for college students
- Teacher pre-service

- After-school staff
- Community talent

If the titles of these opportunity segments don't make you order the book immediately, I have two more observations to offer: The book is wonderfully well written—engaging, funny, humble, and thoroughly practical—and it has great scribbled illustrations.

I'm already lobbying for a sequel.

\*\*\*

Learn more about *Substantial Classrooms: Redesigning the Substitute Teaching Experience*.

#### About Karen J. Pittman



Karen J. Pittman is the Co-Founder, former CEO, and now Senior Fellow at the Forum for Youth Investment, a national nonprofit, nonpartisan “action tank” that combines thought leadership on youth development, youth policy, cross-system/cross-sector partnerships and developmental youth practice with on-the-ground training, technical assistance and supports. The Forum is the home of many named centers and initiatives, including the David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality, Big Picture Approach Training & Consulting, and SparkAction, to name a few. The Forum also serves alongside the American Institutes for Research and the National Urban League as a coordinating partner of The Readiness Projects.

Karen is a respected sociologist and leader in youth development. Prior to co-founding the Forum in 1998, she launched adolescent pregnancy prevention initiatives at the Children's Defense Fund, started the Center for Youth Development and Policy Research, and served as Senior Vice President at the International Youth Foundation.

Karen was involved in the founding of America's Promise and directed the President's Crime Prevention Council during the William Clinton administration. She currently sits on the Turnaround for Children board. Karen also served on The Aspen Institute's National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development, a national effort to unite leaders to re-envision what constitutes success in our schools.

Karen has been honored with the National Commission for African American Education Augustus F. Hawkins Service Award (2002), the American Youth Policy Forum Decade of Service Award for Sustained Visionary Leadership in Advancing Youth Policy (2003), the Healthy Teen Network Spirit of Service Award (2007), The NonProfit Times' Power & Influence Top 50 (2009) and was named one of the 25 most influential leaders in Afterschool by the National Afterschool Association. She also received the Lifetime Achievement Award from Partners for Livable Cities, joining previous awardees such as President William Clinton and Lady Bird Johnson. Follow Karen on Twitter: @KarenPittman.