

THE ART OF BEING A

★ BRILLIANT
CLASSROOM
ASSISTANT



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AND ANDY COPE

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Lesson 6

OUTSTANDING

Thinking inside the box ↘

Don't seek happiness. Happiness is like an orgasm: if you think about it too much, it goes away.

Tim Minchin

At the beginning of the book we made a serious pitch for the role of classroom assistant being considered a career, not just a job. We also put our hearts on our sleeves to proclaim that an awesome classroom assistant is priceless. We have seen the results on a daily basis, and there are some tricks of the trade that we have noticed from the very best



← our hearts on
our sleeves

practitioners which we think are worth passing on.

First up, we want you to fit in, but only just. You need to pitch in at the upper end of whatever is acceptable in your school. Have a look around and be determined to be up there with the best. That means you're the smartest, the smiliest and the most upbeat. Not so smiley that you terrify people, but enough to stand out for the right reasons!



Like all those who work with young people in schools, classroom assistants are constant role models. This has implications for the way they personally present themselves. There is therefore a requirement to adopt a professional dress code. This will vary from school to school with some insisting on a formal professional image, while others are a bit more relaxed. The trick is to make sure that you are in tune with the expectations of your establishment.

There is a qualification here because of the practical nature of the role. Some classroom assistants - for example, in special schools - will often work on a soft floor mat helping children to explore and learn, while classroom assistants in certain practical subjects will want to wear clothing which is appropriate for what could be a messy activity. Common sense should prevail, but the young classroom assistant in a quite formal secondary who did not arrive at school in a shirt and tie was missing a trick. The kids immediately knew he wasn't a teacher and, in turn, accorded him less respect. Many schools work on the principle of 'look smart, think smart', so make sure you are on the same wavelength.

On a similar tack, find out what the school rules are and go with them. One school we visited recently had a very firm line on mobile phones in school, and we saw no evidence of their use

in school by students. We are not naive enough to believe that the kids didn't have them in their bags, but we were unsettled to see a classroom assistant, new to the school, in the playground clearly making a phone call. It wasn't a great example or a great start.

In a different school there was a clear expectation that children did not take food out of the dining room to minimise problems with litter. It was surprising therefore to see an adult taking food outside and we noticed a group of likely lads seizing on the opportunity to point this out to the supervisory staff. The message is clear: classroom assistants are bound by the rules of the establishment just as much as teachers.

Allow us to expand briefly on this for a moment. A school we know undertook a review of its behaviour policy recently and took advice from well-known gurus on the subject at a London based workshop. One of the messages which came over loud and clear was that there is a massive correlation between the behaviour of the adults and the behaviour of the children. The message went out to every member of staff: behave as you want the kids to behave. We have witnessed many an occasion when a member of staff has been telling a child off for lack of respect and poor manners, when frankly the manner in which the adult was talking

showed absolutely no respect to the young person at all. Not surprising then if the child comes back at them.

It is also worth thinking about how you and the teacher will address each other. For reasons which we have never quite been able to fathom, it is always a source of endless fascination for kids to know the first names of their teachers. It may be that it's the culture of your school for students to use first names, but where the norm is for adults to be addressed as Mrs, Miss, Mr or Sir, remember not to slip into Michelle or Deirdre (especially if their names are Keith and Bob) in front of the kids.

Classroom assistant: yes, it's a tricky term. Who exactly are they assisting? Is it the kids, or is it the teacher? We could take a tangent here and explore the relative merits of each but that would be to miss the point. The function is actually dual and complementary. A classroom assistant assists the teacher in helping the kids to learn. This has implications for the classroom assistant - and we have witnessed some of our colleagues get this wrong and come unstuck.

You are at all times a member of staff. We have seen classroom assistants who have got too close to the kids and have ended up getting involved in gossip and inappropriate conversations. When you are working alongside a child for an extended period of time, it is natural that

you form a close bond. But remember that it's a professional bond with clear limits. We heard of a young female classroom assistant who had been working alongside some Year 9 boys. The conversation turned to cars and she happened to have a soft top Mini which had been noticed by the lads. After school the assistant head found her sitting in the car with the boys so they could admire its specifications. No harm was intended but it was not appropriate.

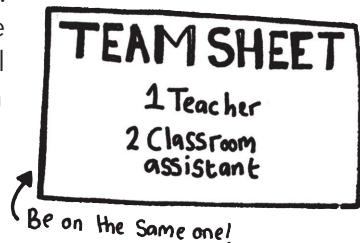
Similarly, if you live locally and know certain families, or have a child or relative in the school, you have to make sure that you and they know how to behave in school. It isn't appropriate for a child to call you 'Uncle John' or for your son to see you every breaktime for a bit of reassurance. That's what the school pastoral system is for.

In the same way, there will be topics of conversation which are unsuitable. A young Spanish classroom assistant found the discussion running away with him as his teenage audience started to make hay on the subject of swear words in Spanish. It's also worth noting that politics and personal viewpoints are best left at the school gate. However, we did enjoy the Year 11 child who came to us during a recent election and said that one of the classroom assistants had voted for a party which wasn't exactly, shall we say, mainstream. He went on to clarify: 'She

will remain nameless ... because I don't actually know her name.' Classic. Of course, this does not mean that politics cannot be discussed. Far from it; it simply means that you are well advised not to share your own point of view while you probe their understanding of the issues.

An area where classroom assistants can get inadvertently drawn in is discussion about teachers or colleagues. Kids are sometimes very ready to give their opinions about members of staff, but this is where clear lines of confidentiality, professionalism and neutrality must prevail. Brilliant classroom assistants do not allow themselves to be drawn in, or take any action, unless they feel it is a safeguarding issue or something unprofessional. In which case they would refer it on.

In some senses classroom assistants are in a very privileged position. You have a grandstand view of various teachers, especially in a secondary school, and you may see lessons where the teacher has found the going tough. It is absolutely essential for the relationship between teachers and classroom assistants that they do not gossip or chit-chat about the performance of individual teachers. They should be on the same team sheet at all times and owe each other total loyalty.



In terms of discretion and the observance of confidentiality, the same goes for the SEND records of individual children. We discussed earlier the education, health and care plans which are kept about kids who are formally on the SEND register, but there will be a welter of other personal information about young people in circulation. This should remain strictly confidential in all circumstances.

We are not foolish enough to think that every school day is hunky-dory. We know that in a very high pressure environment, people's nerves get frayed and they want to sound off or make a point. There is an accepted place, time and way of doing this. One of the hallmarks of brilliant classroom assistants is they are an absolute pleasure to work with; however, it is not always the case. We can all think of colleagues who like the sound of their own voice, the barrack room lawyers who can whip up a storm of negativity in a trice, taking others with them. Even worse are those who write shouty emails - you know, the ones written in capital letters. This is not professional behaviour and brilliant classroom assistants do not do it. There is a time and a manner in which to air grievances, and having a public chunter is not one of them. Pause, breathe, think and then deal with the matter in a measured and calm way.

There is a rider to all of this. We mentioned that classroom assistants are often local to the school, whereas teachers often choose, for obvious reasons, to live a little removed from the school. This means that classroom assistants can be a vital organ of communication about the word on the street. Many a time we have discovered that the reason a child may be behaving erratically in school is because they are being allowed to run fast and loose in their social time. When talking to the parents of a child who is in danger of becoming wayward it can be very instructive to ask how things are at home, although often the answer is that things are fine. This can be thrown into sharper relief when your classroom assistant tells you that the child in question is frequently seen in the local park at the dead of night. Herein lies another way in which classroom assistants are invaluable to school life.

Finally, let's talk about the use of social media. If there is one thing we would choose to spirit away from our day-to-day lives, it would be the prevalence of social media that gets in the way of learning in schools. Time and again we have found ourselves in the middle of a frenzy of bile being exchanged between children, parents and their wider families. There are lessons to be learned for everyone who works in a school as

well. There will almost certainly be a policy for this in your school, so make sure you read it and take on board what it says.

Let us take things one by one. First phones. We find ourselves wondering what life was like before mobile phones, much as the Victorians presumably wondered what life was like before electricity. Astonishingly we survived. Now, if we leave the house without our phones we are bereft. The problem, of course, is that a phone is not just a phone. It will contain contacts, messages and probably photos, so make sure yours is safe at all times. We felt for the young female classroom assistant who left her phone on her desk with her keys, only to find that the nerdy kid in the front row had worked out her password and was looking with great relish at the pictures of her sunbathing topless on a sun-kissed beach in Malta. He then shared them on social media. She never returned to the school. She couldn't face the children again.



Second, social media sites. Ensure yours are locked down and that only friends can see your posts (all the different applications have this facility). What was a huge wheeze at the rugby club or the wedding reception in Mexico does not always look so clever if your kids, your colleagues or your head teacher get to see what you've been up to.

Still on social media sites, think carefully about what you are posting. The rule of thumb here is that what happens in school should remain in school. You will be well advised not to post photos of anything in school or discuss what happens in school. There needs to be a clear line delineating what is professional, and therefore confidential, from your personal life. We've had to deal with the consequences of colleagues tittle-tattling online when genuine upset has been caused, bemoaning all the time that it could so easily have been avoided.

The bottom line in all of this is that we rate classroom assistants very highly and we think you deserve the highest professional respect. Many classroom assistants come into the job without any formal training, so we think it's worthwhile to rehearse the prerequisites of working in a school so that you may enjoy the professional status you deserve. We want you to immerse

yourself in the school culture and create positive working relationships with the children, but be careful out there - it can be a minefield.

TOP TIPS

- ◆ Remember: in the children's eyes, teachers and classroom assistants have equal status so please make sure you look and sound the part.
- ◆ Lead by example on school rules.
- ◆ Know the boundaries of your relationships with the kids.
- ◆ Stick up for the teacher no matter what.
- ◆ Think carefully about your use of social media.
- ◆ Think twice before you sound off. Even better, don't sound off.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Chris and Gary come from completely different backgrounds but both have developed a similar passion for teaching, and between them they have over seventy years' experience in the classroom. Both fizz with energy and crackle with creative ideas for engaging kids.

Chris trained as a French teacher in London secondary schools before taking up his first post in an 11-18 comprehensive in Tamworth, and then moving on to Leicestershire. He moved to a middle school to take on more responsibility as a head of modern foreign languages, eventually becoming deputy head of an 11-16 academy. Between those last two posts, the true luvvie in Chris came to the fore and he led the school's specialist status as an arts college, a key aspect of the school gaining an Ofsted grade of outstanding. This also involved teaching in partner primary schools. Unsurprisingly, he has turned his hand very successfully to teaching drama too and has written and directed school productions with casts of up to 170 students.

Gary started in the north of England and yo-yoed around the country from Milton Keynes to Norwich, to Sunderland and back down to Leicestershire. He is a design technologist by trade but eighteen years ago, after plugging various gaps in science and humanities, he became a permanent fixture in the English department, teaching at top primary and secondary level. He continued to teach English as a head teacher. He was head of the same secondary school for fifteen years but

also led two others, the latter being a pupil referral unit which he (alongside colleagues) took out of special measures.

Chris and Gary are highly experienced teachers with success both in the classroom and in leading teaching and learning. Their company, Decisive Element, is one of the country's most popular for workshops, keynote speeches and inspiration.

Outside of education, Chris is a keen cricketer, walker and amateur thespian, while Gary plays football, skis and climbs mountains.

Andy describes himself as a qualified teacher, author and learning junkie. He has spent most of his adult life exploring the science of positive psychology, happiness and flourishing, culminating in a PhD from the University of Loughborough. Andy delivers his flagship Art of Being Brilliant workshops and keynotes all over the world, and is fortunate enough to count DHL, Toyota, Microsoft, IKEA and Hewlett Packard among his customers. Andy also delivers workshops for children and teachers (basically, to anyone who will listen!). He has written a series of self-help and personal development books around the themes of happiness and well-being. Bizarrely, Andy also leads a double life as a children's author. He has penned the bestselling Spy Dog series for Puffin and is a co-author of *The Art of Being a Brilliant Teenager* (Capstone, 2014). He lives in Derbyshire with his wife, teenagers and pet pigs.

Andy's website is www.artofbrilliance.co.uk and he can be contacted at andy@artofbrilliance.co.uk, or you can follow his very happy tweets at @beingbrilliant.

IF YOU WANT TO KNOW THE SECRETS OF BEING A BRILLIANT CLASSROOM ASSISTANT, READ ON ...

There are many different names for folk who support and create learning in and beyond the classroom: teaching assistants, learning support assistants, cover supervisors, mentors, learning partners - the list goes on. The title doesn't matter but the quality of support, interaction and learning does. Based on the authors' combined 70 plus years of experience, *The Art of Being a Brilliant Classroom Assistant* is packed full of creative tips, techniques and strategies for anyone who has the crucial role of supporting kids' learning.

It doesn't matter whether it's inspiration or new ideas you want - this book has a plethora of both. It may challenge your thinking, it may persuade you to do something different, but above all it will put you in serious danger of being brilliant at what you do.

A BRILLIANT BOOK FOR CLASSROOM ASSISTANTS

"In *The Art of Being a Brilliant Classroom Assistant* Andy and his gang have identified the priceless treasures that are the classroom assistants in our schools. Full of nuggets and gems this book will make a proper difference and make their brilliance sparkle! Awesome."

**Liz Miles, Principal, Silverdale Primary Academy,
The Hastings Academies Trust**

"I absolutely love this book: it is a must for all teaching assistants to have! It's full of brilliance, with lots of tips and knowledge. There are fantastic tips and pick-me-ups for a quick pat on the back or boost of confidence."

Julie Westbury, Teaching Assistant, Maun Infant and Nursery School



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