



A strategy to change the way classrooms negatively respond to and behave towards relief/substitute teachers

By Wilson McCaskill

Everywhere we travel it seems relief teachers are as rare as hen's teeth. Their scarcity is felt at our own workshops where schools wanting more teachers to attend are unable to do so because of an inadequate supply of relief teachers.

They are a much sought after commodity and one might be forgiven for thinking that theirs would be a charmed life in schools. Of course, nothing could be further from the truth.

For too many classrooms, relief teachers are fair game and if I was given a brick for every horror story shared by relief teachers, I'd have built a pretty reasonable two car garage by now.

Some schools have classes whose conduct is so unacceptable that the available relief teachers have blacklisted them. Others have classes that run smoothly when taken by their regular class teacher, but change personality when their routine is altered by the arrival of a relief teacher.

In some schools this loss of student self-control is seen as a deficiency in the relief teacher. After all, isn't it the job of the teacher to have control over his or her class? And besides, the class never mucks around when their class teacher is in charge.

This belief that teachers are the bosses of classrooms leads to authority dependent children who see it as their mission to challenge the authority of anyone who is entrusted to guide them. Should that person fail to wield a stick with sufficient disciplinary intent then respect is lost, self-control is abandoned, guidance rejected and contemptuous belligerent, unproductive behaviour takes over.

Remembering that in schools our aim is to govern by consent and not coercion, it falls on us to find ways for children to be self disciplined and committed to reasoned, responsible and appropriate conduct that keeps everyone in the classroom safe and working productively.

I hope you will consider the following strategy if you have a class that fails to maintain appropriate standards of behaviour when the relief teacher arrives.

It takes effort, but can be very effective.



Step 1. Change perceptions about relief teachers.

- Guests of the school: They attend by invitation.
- Helping the class teacher by stepping in because of illness, professional development, mishaps etc.
- They perform an essential service for teachers, students and parents.
- Are fully trained and of equal status.
- They influence the way a class or school is perceived by other schools.
- It's not an easy job because (lack of routine, changing environments, inadequate knowledge of students etc.)

Step 2. Change perceptions about how to behave with relief teachers.

- As invited guests they are to be welcomed and treated with respect.
- Every student and each class act as representatives/models/examples of their school and the values it stands for.
- The guest teacher is a representative of the class teacher and acts on their behalf and whatever behaviour is shown to one is shown to the other.
- The guest teacher is a respected colleague of the class teacher and the class teacher is grateful for their help.
- The way the class behaves reflects either positively or negatively on the students, class teacher and the school as a whole.

DISCUSS

- What guest teachers currently think of the class.
- Why do they think that and what was done to create this impression.
- Find key words that the guest teacher might use to describe the class. NOTE: Avoid the words “bad” and “good” and other generalised terms.
- Once these words have been discovered list them on a sheet of paper headed **REPUTATION**.



- What needs to be done to either change, improve or maintain the guest teacher's impression of the class?
- What key words would the class like to hear the guest teacher use to describe the class?
- List the words on a second sheet of paper and note similarities and differences.

DISCOVER

- Create a list of words and phrases that will help to guide the behaviour of the class when the guest teacher is in attendance.
- Discover their deeper meaning and the ways in which they can be actioned (look, sound, feel)
 - REPUTATION
 - RESPECT
 - HONOUR
 - TRUST
 - TEMPTATION
 - MATURITY
 - *plus more.*
- Now create a list of some opposites and discuss the sequence of events in class and the feelings that can lead to these being actioned.
 - DISREPUTABLE – Acting without values.
 - DISRESPECT – Disregarding the rights of others.
 - IMMATURE – Acting younger than you are and letting your feelings take charge and not your thinking.

Note: The word HONOUR is worth considerable discussion as it is a synthesis of many other qualities i.e. respect, trust, reputation, honesty, high ideals etc.

We should encourage children to pursue honourable behaviour and to courageously struggle to maintain it. HONOUR is a word of great power and it's meaning is seldom well understood. Ask students to look for and share examples of honourable behaviour both within (student/teacher behaviour) and out of the school (in sport, business, environment, war, medicine, community, police, politics etc.).

- Ask the questions that lead to discovering the controlling thoughts that can help to manage feelings and lead to the positive and appropriate behaviours that maintain strength and honour. Using the earlier examples, help students to



speculate on the thoughts that prompted the honourable behaviour of the individuals or groups being discussed.

The following is a ritual that helps to elevate and inspire the behaviour of classrooms that respond poorly to the arrival and presence of a relief teacher. The classroom teacher must first rehearse it several times in the classroom.

It works best with children who can read and understand the words of the ritual. The words can be adjusted so long as the “sense” of the ritual is maintained.

An essential part of the ritual is the HONOUR BOOK. This should be a book of great importance. Decorating it to be so helps to set it apart.

The cover should show the class and year to which it belongs and the name of the class teacher. These details should be very prominent. If possible a class photo with the teacher should be stuck on.

A lever arch file or plastic book/project file can make a good HONOUR BOOK. It must contain a class roll and have pro-forma pages that allow guest teachers to make comments on individual students as well as general comments about the class. Obviously there needs to be the space to note day, date, term etc.

The important thing is to display the book in a prominent place on the day the guest teacher is taking the class. It should sit upright (a display stand helps) and be easily seen by everyone.

The relief teacher should remove the book at various times during the day to write comments.

At the end of the day the guest teacher should hand the HONOUR BOOK to the administrator who has come to lead the DEPARTURE RITUAL.

The HONOUR BOOK will of course be given to the class teacher whose first task upon returning to the class, is to discuss the previous day and the contents of the book.

It is a private book and for the eyes of teachers only, unless the class teacher chooses to share it with the class. When not in use it should be put securely away.

However, it can be of value for the class teacher to be seen reading it at various times and perhaps even sharing a comment or two from it. The idea is to build up the magnitude and importance of the HONOUR BOOK.

Such things as class rules; favourite sayings, awards (not rewards — see *Volume 1, The Language – Undermining Self-Motivation*) etc. can also be placed in the book.



REHEARSING THE RITUAL

The process begins with the students chosen for the start ritual standing at the front of the class. They should be ready in this position at the start of the class on the day the guest teacher has been invited to attend.

After the appropriate introduction by a leading member of staff, each student takes it in turn to read their part of the ritual.

All students should get a chance to rehearse at least one of the roles in the start ritual. To create a greater awareness of the words, their importance and the ritual as a whole, it can be of help to give every student in the class a copy of the ritual to follow.

The class teacher needs to play the roles of guest teacher and administrator. They will help to guide the students in simple things like, shaking hands strongly, looking people in the eye, speaking clearly and not rushing etc. Above all, accept the ritual as important and meaningful.

The departure ritual will need to be rehearsed in the same way. Rehearsals can be spread out over several days or even weeks if there is no anticipation of requiring a guest teacher soon.

Once the class teacher knows the day a guest teacher will be required, a spot rehearsal can be called the day before. After students have been selected and they know their role, the ritual is ready for the arrival of the guest teacher.

Carefully choosing the right students for the job will be important. If Richard always mucks up with relief teachers then he may be the ideal person to include in the welcome party. Making the teacher feel welcome may make Richard more honour bound to act appropriately.

ASSEMBLIES

If favourable and supportive remarks have been written in the HONOUR BOOK these can be read out and acknowledged at the school assembly.

Such remarks should be seen as furthering the reputation of the school and everyone should acknowledge and feel proud of the students who made such an impression on a guest teacher. Treat the occasion as a serious and profound acknowledgement of the behaviour that others can look to and learn from.

It's best to have these remarks read out with the entire class standing to be seen by the general school body. Having remarks read to the school from a classroom's HONOUR BOOK should be viewed as an acknowledgement of high order for all concerned. Remarks can be about individuals and the class as a whole. Of course the



acknowledgements should not be a meaningless use of superlatives but be specific, focussed and informative.

If individuals have earned good remarks but the class as a whole has not, then no public acknowledgement should be offered. Instead individuals should be given private acknowledgement. For remarks about individuals to get public acknowledgement, the whole class must have first earned an honourable remark from the guest teacher.

Negative remarks should not be read out publicly. Classrooms that fail to have the remarks in their HONOUR BOOK acknowledged after having a guest teacher can rightfully understand that they have not lived up to the expected code of conduct.

Their classroom teacher will of course have debriefed them on their behaviour based on comments in the HONOUR BOOK and worked on what created the inappropriate behaviours and the failure of strong thoughts to control those behaviours.

WELCOME RITUAL

Relief teacher formally welcomed to the class. 4 selected students are standing at the front of the class with the HONOUR BOOK.

Admin: Year 6B would you please stand up to welcome your guest teacher for today. Miss Jones welcome to Advantage Primary School, it is a pleasure to have you here.

Guest teacher: Thank you, Mr Roberts.

Admin: Mandy, would you like to start your class welcome please.

Mandy: Good morning Miss Jones. My name is Mandy Brown and on behalf of Year 6B I'd like to thank you for accepting Miss Parker's invitation to work with our class today.

Guest teacher: *(Shakes hands with Mandy)* Thank you Mandy.

Richard: We all welcome you to our class Miss Jones and hope that you will find us respectful, well mannered and hard working.

Guest teacher: *(Shakes hands with Richard)* Thank you Richard.

Thomas: Please accept our class HONOUR BOOK. Miss Parker invites you to write any comments about our behaviour beside our names. We hope your comments will make Miss Parker, our school and ourselves proud.

Guest teacher: *(Shakes hands with Thomas)* Thank you Thomas.



Angie: We look forward to sharing our classroom with you and hope you will say positive things about us to other schools that you visit.

Guest teacher: (Shakes hands with Angie) Thank you Angie and all of you in year 6B for your polite and considerate welcome.

Admin: Thank you Mandy, Richard, Thomas and Angie. I look forward to talking to you Miss Jones at recess, lunch and at the end of school to see how well this year 6 class has treated you as a guest of our school. I'm sure they will make us all proud.

(Administrator leaves the classroom and guest teacher proceeds with the day's plan)

NOTE: The text for the WELCOME RITUAL should be fixed onto the inside of the front cover. Those chosen for the start ritual read the text. The text for the departure ritual should be fixed onto the inside of the back cover. Those chosen for the end ritual read the text.

Only fix in the text used by the students. The text of the guest teacher and those of the administrator will vary and as such do not need to be included.

DEPARTURE RITUAL

Administrator arrives just prior to end of school and invites those taking part in the ritual to come to the front of the class.

Admin: Well, that's the day over. Thank you Miss Jones for helping Miss Parker by accepting our invitation to work with the year 6B class. Denise would you like to say something and year 6B will you all stand please.

Denise: On behalf of Miss Parker and every student in our class I would like to thank you for working with us today.

Guest teacher: *(Shakes hands)* Thank you Denise.

Sam: We hope you have enjoyed being a guest of our class and that you have found us to be respectful, well mannered and hard working. Thank you for working with us.

Guest teacher: *(Shakes hands)* Thank you Sam.

Kane: We look forward to sharing with Miss Parker your comments from our HONOUR BOOK. Thank you for working with us.

Guest teacher: *(Shakes hands)* Thank you Kane.



Admin: *(Indicates HONOUR BOOK or picks it up and gives it to guest teacher)* I'm sure you have some final comments to write in the year 6B HONOUR BOOK. I trust that the class has been an excellent example of the behaviour and values we believe in at Advantage Primary School. I look forward to reading their HONOUR BOOK before returning it to Miss Parker. Thank you for your help. *(Shakes hand with guest teacher and leaves)*

Guest teacher: Makes final comments to the class and ends the day.

ALTERNATIVE SCENARIO

The class has failed to behave appropriately at various times during the day and some individuals have repeated well established negative patterns of behaviour.

The guest teacher will have done whatever he/she thought was necessary during each event to get the class working productively.

It's very important that the teacher found time to write in the HONOUR BOOK. Noting accurately what happened is the evidence that allows the class teacher to work through things upon his/her return.

Admin: I trust the class has been an excellent example of the behaviour and values we believe in at Advantage Primary School.

Guest teacher: Sadly no, Mr Roberts. I expected the best of them after their welcome this morning, but some students in particular have let down the reputation and standards your school community believes in.

Admin: I am very disappointed to hear that as I'm sure the whole school would be. May I, on behalf of our school community, apologise to you for the inappropriate and unacceptable way you have been treated as an invited guest to our school.

Guest teacher: Thank you, Mr Roberts.

Admin: I'm sure you will want to put some final remarks in the Honour Book and I assure you that I will read the book and pass it on to Miss Parker who, I can also assure you, will work through what went wrong and look for ways to make it right.

Thank you for helping us today and I hope we get the opportunity to show you our better selves at another time.

Guest teacher: *(Makes final comments to the class).*



Admin: Year 6B, before leaving for today would you please sit quietly for a few moments and reflect on what Miss Jones has shared with you and remind yourselves that it is the expectation of our school community that everyone is treated with respect and dignity.
(PAUSE)
Boys and girls, the day is over and you may leave. Please return tomorrow ready to reflect on your behaviour with Miss Parker.

(The Class Leaves)

The following day the class teacher needs to work through the evidence, getting students to take ownership of what happened.

Listening to their case is important and encouraging them to help each other by analysing what happened and the processes that led to the inappropriate outcomes is important. Equally, they must look for and find the processes that would have created appropriate outcomes.

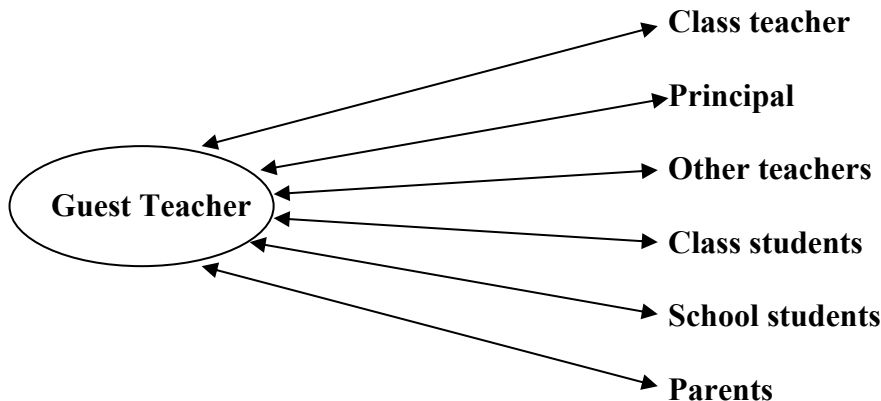
They need to see the role feelings played and the failure to manage those feelings by the power of thinking.

It's important that they see the link between their behaviour and the reputation of your school community. It's important they understand the values that have been transgressed and the rights that have been trampled.

Don't forget to reinforce the role of the relief teacher as a guest of both yourself and the school.

Let them see that relationships and opinions have been adversely affected.

RELATIONSHIPS / OPINIONS





The classroom's relationship with the relief teacher will need to be repaired by every student writing a letter of apology. Some will have to apologise for their own behaviour while others will apologise for the behaviour of others or the class community.

Perpetrators should be as specific as they can be about their actions as well as noting a better way to behave while apologising for the transgression of rights, rules and responsibilities.

Those who feel they had no part in what went wrong should query whether they did enough to keep things on the right track. If nothing else, they should apologise for the failure of class standards of behaviour and empathise with the unfortunate situation the guest teacher was placed in.

Before the letters are sent off to the guest teacher some, if not all, should be read by a higher authority who returns to the class to share their thoughts about what happened, the apologies that have been written and their expectations for the future. This need only be short.

Class teacher: Our Honour Book now carries the evidence of when we behaved in a dishonourable way to a guest of our school. Let us work hard to make us all proud of this book. We need to fill it with words and actions of honour. We need to respect each other, others and ourselves. We must work to build a good reputation and work even harder to keep it.

Finally, trust in the power of rituals. Don't be shy or hesitant in employing them. They add weight to events and issues and children, much as they may giggle or be embarrassed, respond to them. Don't be swayed by the negative or uncomfortable responses of your students. Persist in making this ritual meaningful, important and serious.

Rituals can trigger noble responses and suggest by their design and structure that students need to find the maturity and self-respect to be worthy participants.