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## GUIDEPOSTS FOR CULTIVATING AWARENESS, AGENCY, AND AUTONOMY

In theory, this sounds simple and rather straightforward. In practice, it is anything but that. It is complex, nuanced, dependent on student and class-room identity. We must be intentional, yet emergent; we must provide structure, yet be flexible and responsive. But most of all, we must allow ourselves to be vulnerable with our practice. Teachers, too, must be willing to take risks and make mistakes. We must model the wholeheartedness, vulnerability, and humility we try to instill in our children, not only to make them compassionate and kind human beings but also to make the process of learning feel all the more *personal* and *human*. Consider these guideposts for cultivating awareness, agency, and autonomy in your learners.

1. Remember that structure is both healing and liberating. Learners cannot manifest their agency and autonomy without clear boundaries and structures.
2. Engineer a mindful culture classroom culture by starting a mindfulness practice and setting weekly intentions.
3. Establish and review clear routines with learners, articulating both positive and negative consequences of decision-making.
4. Build trusting relationships grounded in honesty and genuine respect.
5. Teach students about their minds, hearts, and bodies by explicitly teaching about executive functioning, emotional regulation, and physical awareness.
6. Use think-alouds to build new ways of thinking, being, and interacting. This involves consistent modeling and recognizing that social and emotional learning are embedded in everything we do.
7. Make goal-setting and reflection a part of your daily learning routines.
8. Let go and let kids struggle and fail productively.
9. Incentivize vulnerability by praising the journey, risk-taking, and mistake-making.
10. Teach with vulnerability, reminding yourself that we must practice what we preach. If we want our students to take risks and make mistakes, we must be willing to do this, too.

## GUIDEPOST 1: REMEMBER THAT STRUCTURE IS LIBERATING

It was the first day of school, and the hallway outside my classroom was chaotic. I was greeting parents, meeting children, and otherwise embracing the chaos of the first day of school. As the clock approached 8:15, I said goodbye to families and pulled out my chime. I rang it, and mostly due to novelty, most of my children stopped talking. Most of the parents did, too.

“Excellent,” I said. “I see you all already know what to do. But just for practice, let’s try it again. This is the chime, and it will be the way I get your attention in the classroom. When I ring the chime, I need you to stop talking and put your eyes on me.”

I asked them to turn and pretend to talk to one another. Within seconds, I rang the chime again. The children stopped talking immediately and looked at me. Then we entered the classroom to start our day.

You might be wondering why I’ve chosen to first discuss a rigid routine when this is supposed to be a chapter about learner agency. This is so we can explore the paradox that emerges when we consider autonomy and authority as supports in humanizing personalization. Once your children see that you are an authoritative figure in the classroom, you are able to build a foundation on which your children can work autonomously. The structures and routines put into the classroom become authoritative in and of themselves, creating a space that feels safe for them to explore their own autonomy. In essence, these structures can counterintuitively become liberating.

More often than not, the chaos that accompanies a lack of structure turns on an instinctual fight-or-flight response, inhibiting self-awareness and promoting impulsivity. This chaos threatens equity and inclusion in classrooms. Without clear boundaries or supportive structures, children are limited in getting what they need—and they may inadvertently limit others in reaching their full potential, as well. Alternatively, with clear structures and expectations, children may exercise their autonomy in ways that feel safe and align with your expectations. It also ensures that every child in a diverse classroom full of learners can reach their full potential.

## GUIDEPOST 2: BUILD A MINDFUL CLASSROOM CULTURE

Mindfulness is the art of noticing, and through a mindful classroom culture, we can enhance awareness in learners (Langer, 1989, 1997). It trains them to quiet their bodies and minds, notice the little details, and perhaps even willfully interpret the world around them differently. I introduce mindfulness to

learners by channeling their awareness of how they are sitting and breathing. I focus on this for the first several weeks of school because it is so challenging for them. I teach them to notice their posture, the location of their legs, and how to breathe through their diaphragms.

We practice sitting for about a minute each day, focusing on our breathing. At the end of the minute, I ring our singing bowl three times. When the singing bowl has been rung, the sound very gradually dissipates until it is inaudible. When they no longer hear the sound—when it has “walked away”—they raise their hands to signal they can no longer hear the sound. This practice enhances noticing because they are forced to listen to something that could be imperceptible.

As we become more sophisticated with our mindfulness practice, I invite them to practice gratitude, do body scans, notice the temperature of the room, or keep tabs on their hearts beating in their chests. I may even ask them to think about our class’s weekly *intention*.

I learned about setting intentions in yoga. After witnessing how one of the yoga instructor’s intentions helped me, I thought it might benefit my students, drawing their awareness to a specific virtue each week, building community and collective awareness through a common goal (see Figure 3.4).

To start the year, I choose intentions to discuss in morning meeting, such as authenticity, connection, and compassion, to lay the foundation for agency, autonomy, and community building. As the year progresses, if I notice a different need, such as increased attention to regulation, I choose an intention of *awareness* to help us focus on finding ways to stay aware and regulated throughout the week. Drawing their attention to this consistently throughout the day makes a surprising difference: it creates collective awareness around a common goal, deepening an already mindful classroom culture.

As the year persists, I invite the children to set their own intentions. We discuss these in morning meeting and closing circle, where students “turn and talk” about ways they have realized their intention.

**Figure 3.4: Intentions**

authenticity	gratitude
connection	compassion
courage	resilience
calm	adventure
play	rest
creativity	trust
joy	awareness
hope	love
celebration	freedom
stillness	reflection
forgiveness	letting go
exploration	imagination
focus	change

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## GUIDEPOST 3: ESTABLISH AND REVIEW ROUTINES AND AGREEMENTS WITH LEARNERS

Responsive Classroom (2015) provides an evidence-based approach for building socioemotional competencies that ultimately support academic learning in the classroom, helping students step into their agency and autonomy so they become independent learners. They advocate for clear boundaries, empathetically responding to misbehavior, and setting clear boundaries with students so they may thrive within structure. If you're unfamiliar with them, I recommend going to their website ([www.ResponsiveClassroom.org](http://www.ResponsiveClassroom.org)) to learn about their work. I love their ideas for generating rules, interactive modeling, and helping the children explore their autonomy within boundaries. I use their methods for generating classroom rules and consequences, only with a slight technological twist.

iCardSort is a digital card-sorting application for the iPad, allowing students to sort words, pictures, or anything that you can put on a digital card. Once you've created the sort in iCardSort, you can send it to them wirelessly via Bluetooth. It allows them to manipulate information concretely without all the waste.

We used iCardSort to generate rules as a class. With my iPad projected on the front screen, I asked them to turn and talk to propose expectations for our classrooms. They mentioned a lot of the usual rules, such as "Use walking feet." or "Don't talk while the teacher is talking." After they shared ideas with partners, some students shared with the whole class, and while they did, I added the rules to iCardSort. It wasn't long before we had a ton of rules on the screen (see Figure 3.5). I followed the Responsive Classroom approach and suggested that we pare these down a bit.

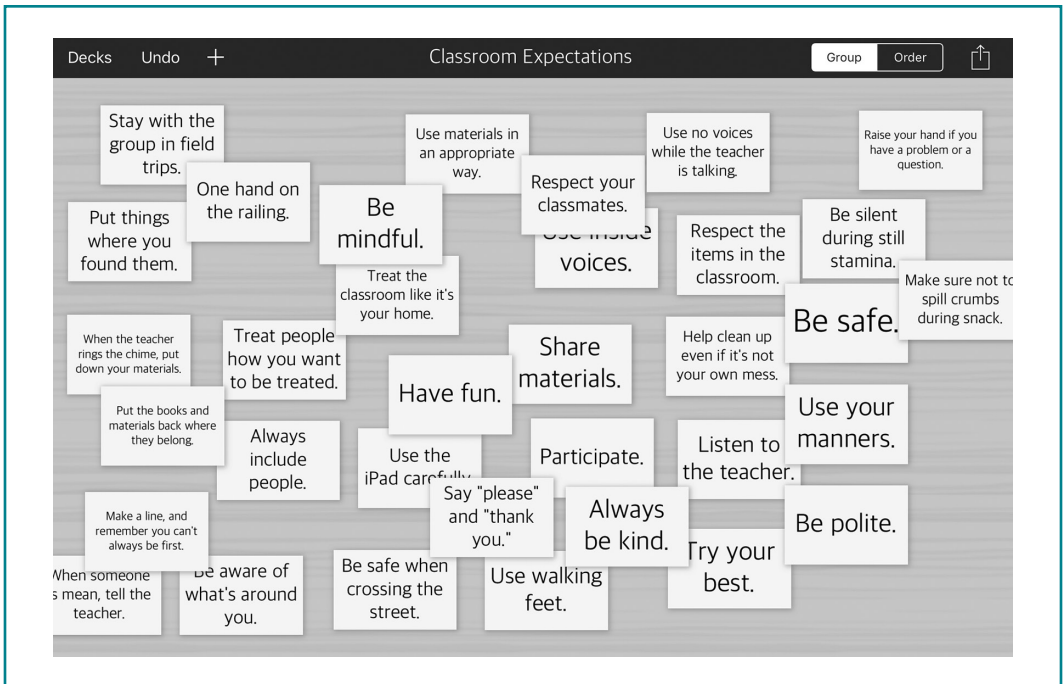
"I don't think I can remember all of these," I said. "Can you?"

They agreed, so I asked them to go back to their seats to synthesize the agreements into just a few all-encompassing rules that accounted for more specific rules, such as walking in the classroom.

"Synthesizing is when we take lots of little things and turn them into a big idea," I told the class, also drawing their awareness to metacognition. "I want you to come up with a big rule for the groups that you made so they're easier for us to remember."

They followed suit, sorting the rules into groups and creating three or four "big" rules that we'd potentially be able to use as our classroom agreements. When they finished, we listed all the rules on the board, checking for

Figure 3.5: iCardSort Rule Generation



Source: iCardSort App, <https://icardsort.com>. Cards created by Paul Emerich France.

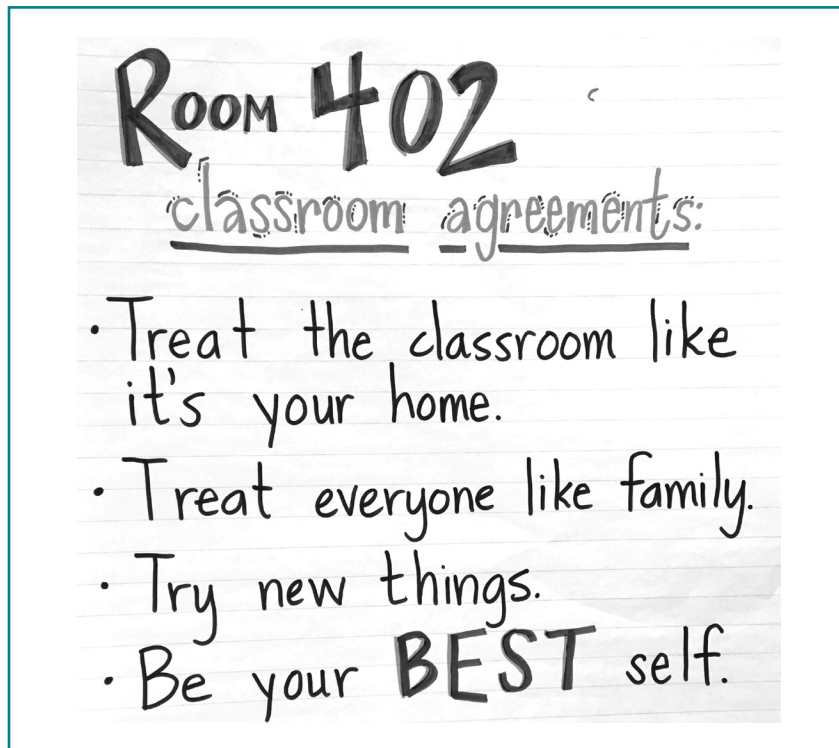
duplicates. We then pared these down into four general classroom expectations by which we all could abide (see Figure 3.6).

This simple step in building classroom culture is often overlooked, despite the fact that it pays off in large dividends. By taking this approach to creating classroom agreements—and allowing learners to have active conversations around expectations—children are more likely to internalize and apply these expectations, supporting autonomy later on.

Naturally, kids become comfortable and complacent, in which case, they may violate classroom agreements. When this happens, we review and practice routines. While inconvenient, reestablishing and reviewing routines is critical: It's important for all learners to be held accountable to classroom expectations.

Reviewing routines and agreements also supports mindfulness. Generally, when kids forget routines or expectations, it's because they are operating without intention.

Figure 3.6: Classroom Rules



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“This happens to me, too,” I’ll say. “I get really good at something, and then I start to think that I don’t have to worry about that goal anymore. But then I make a mistake and realize I need to practice again. I realize I need to be a bit more mindful.”

This type of think-aloud allows us to move away from “You should have known better.” to “I know what I’m supposed to do, but next time I need to be more aware and make the *choice* to do that.”

Cultivating awareness around routines also entails partnering with students to identify logical consequences. Usually, the word *consequence* implies an undesired by-product of a behavior, and children bring this connotation into the classroom. But consequences can be by-products of *any* behavior—positive, negative, or neutral. So before we begin generating consequences for unexpected behaviors, I reframe the conversation, defining *consequence* neutrally. We define *consequence* as “the result of a behavior.” We then



discuss the causes and effects of all types of behaviors in the classroom, both expected and unexpected.

I use the terms *expected* and *unexpected* from *Thinking About You Thinking About Me* by Michelle Garcia Winner (2002), founder of Social Thinking. *Good* and *bad* are loaded words; they often carry a shaming and dehumanizing tone, causing students to label themselves as “good” or “bad.” This is not only detrimental to their senses of self but also detrimental to the classroom culture. By labeling *behaviors* as “expected” and “unexpected,” we help children separate themselves from their behaviors, seeing unexpected behaviors as social mistakes that make an impact on others. In some ways, this makes social learning a bit less personal, but only in the sense that it divorces behaviors from their identities, helping children remember that all people make social mistakes. What becomes most important, I tell them, is what you learn from your mistakes and how you make amends.

To show these causes and effects, I use the Multi-Flow Thinking Map in Figure 3.7 (Hyerle, 1995). This map is especially helpful because it shows that causes and effects aren’t necessarily dichotomous. An unexpected behavior is, after all, both a cause and an effect. It can be the effect of a lack of awareness, a desire to rebel, dysregulated emotions, or even just part of the human condition. Likewise, unexpected behaviors cause others to feel uncomfortable, the class to function ineffectively, a lack of productivity, or a number of other effects that limit the individual from contributing to the classroom or learning on their own.

Expected behaviors also have causes and effects. They can be the result of compassion, awareness, or motivation to be part of a group; expected behaviors can bring us praise and recognition, as well as more privileges, choices, and independence. They can also build relationships with the people around us by earning trust, making others feel good, and otherwise helping us be seen as good role models and citizens.

In these situations, I am consciously trying to appeal to our students’ innate desire for human connection. As Brené Brown (2010) would say, we are “hard-wired” for connection. Human connection is one of the most naturally motivating factors in a classroom that values humanized personalization. By helping children understand the impact of their behaviors, they see that their behaviors can either bring them closer to their peers or isolate them. By reframing the conversation around consequences and linking it directly to human connection, we create an authentic context for cultivating awareness around the logical social consequences for exhibiting unexpected behaviors, meanwhile strengthening our relationships with learners.



Figure 3.7: Multi-Flow Maps for Logical Consequences

Figure A: Here, we explore the causes and effects of unexpected behaviors, which we used to generate our natural consequences. The term *group plan* comes from Michelle Garcia Winner's (2008) *Think Social! A Social Thinking Curriculum for School-Age Students*.

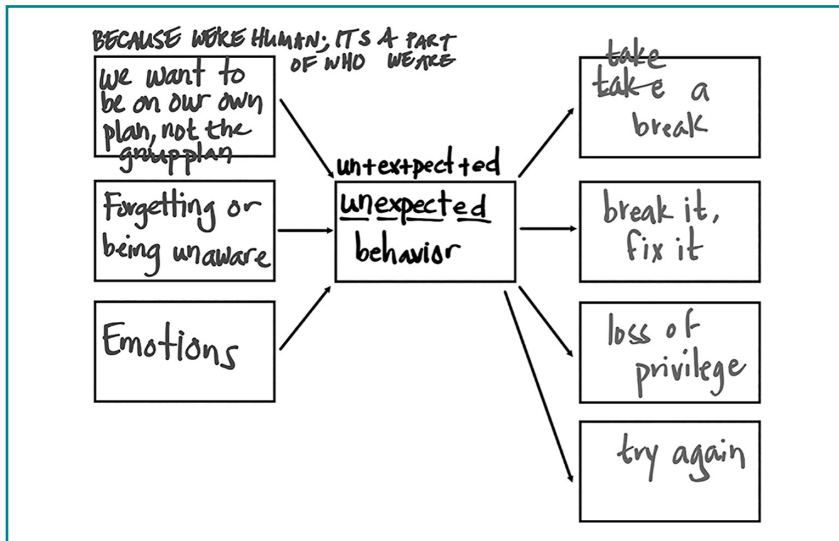
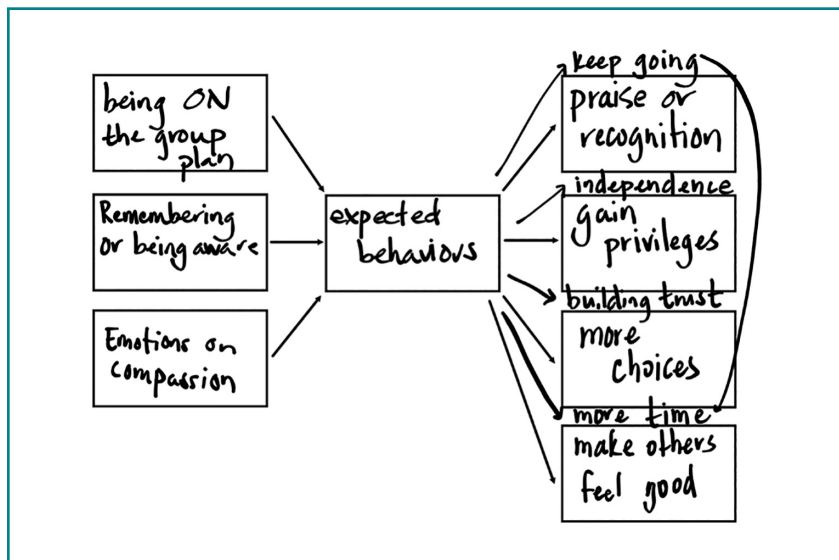


Figure B: Here, we explore the causes and effects of expected behaviors, appealing to the universal human desire for connection with others.



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## GUIDEPOST 4: BUILD TRUSTING AND GENUINE RELATIONSHIPS

"I'm feeling really frustrated right now," I said to Jemma. Jemma struggled with focus, attention, and processing speed. I was mindful of this when giving her assignments. I frequently gave her extended time, large pieces of paper on which she could organize her thinking, and extra supports for organizing ideas.

But one day, I began to notice an emerging pattern. She was consistently late to circle, usually talking to friends instead of doing her routines. I finally saw she wasn't making much progress on her writing. She had lost an entire paragraph of her work, and when I pressed the undo button to retrieve it, I saw that she had been playing with the keyboard, typing emojis and other nonsense words instead of editing her spelling. I knew it was time for an intervention.

"Jemma," I said with a kind sternness in my voice, "I know that you sometimes need extra time for things, and I am very happy to give you that time. But when you use your time to play and not to work, it makes me feel frustrated. I'm trying to help you, but you're not helping yourself. I need you to notice when you're getting off task or distracted, and I need you to ask for help if you are."

I could see tears welling up in her eyes. My instinct was to hug her and tell her she didn't need to feel sad—that I understood it was challenging for her. But then, I thought to myself, part of building agency and autonomy is setting high expectations and challenging learners to meet them. Asking Jemma to hold herself accountable for reaching out when she was distracted was not asking too much—and the messy emotions that resulted from this conversation could, in fact, be educative.

"It's okay to feel sad," I said. "And I'm glad you feel sad, because it shows me that you care. Remember that making mistakes is a part of learning, and what's more important is what we do after we make the mistake. What are you going to do next time?"

"Not get distracted," she said.

"Well," I replied, "I don't know if that's something you can do. I can't even do that. We all get distracted. What could we do if you *notice* you get distracted?"

"Find a more successful spot?" she queried.

"Exactly," I replied.

Later that day, Jemma came up to me during reading workshop.

"I need to sit up at the white table," she said, referring to my kidney table for guided reading.

"Oh, okay," I replied. "How come?"

“I noticed I was playing with my keyboard again,” she confessed with a half-smile.

It appeared that by modeling my feelings and drawing boundaries with her, Jemma sensed her agency and felt empowered to make a change on her own.

*That is personalized learning. That is what we want for our kids: to make choices for themselves so they may continue learning independently.*

Personalizing learning means empowering students to make changes on their own.

...By modeling my feelings and drawing boundaries with her, Jemma sensed her agency and felt empowered to make a change on her own. That is personalized learning. That is what we want for our kids: to make choices for themselves so they may continue learning independently.

I like to think that Jemma also trusted me. She knew that what I was saying came from a place of love and care—and she knew ultimately that my feedback was sound. Building agency and autonomy in this way cannot happen without a mutual trust between learner and teacher. They must know that autonomy is not a right in the classroom; it is, instead, a skill that can be learned through risk-taking, mistake-making, and proper scaffolding. Hammond (2014) tells us that we must build trust, grounded in affirmation and a strong rapport, to build quality partnerships with students.

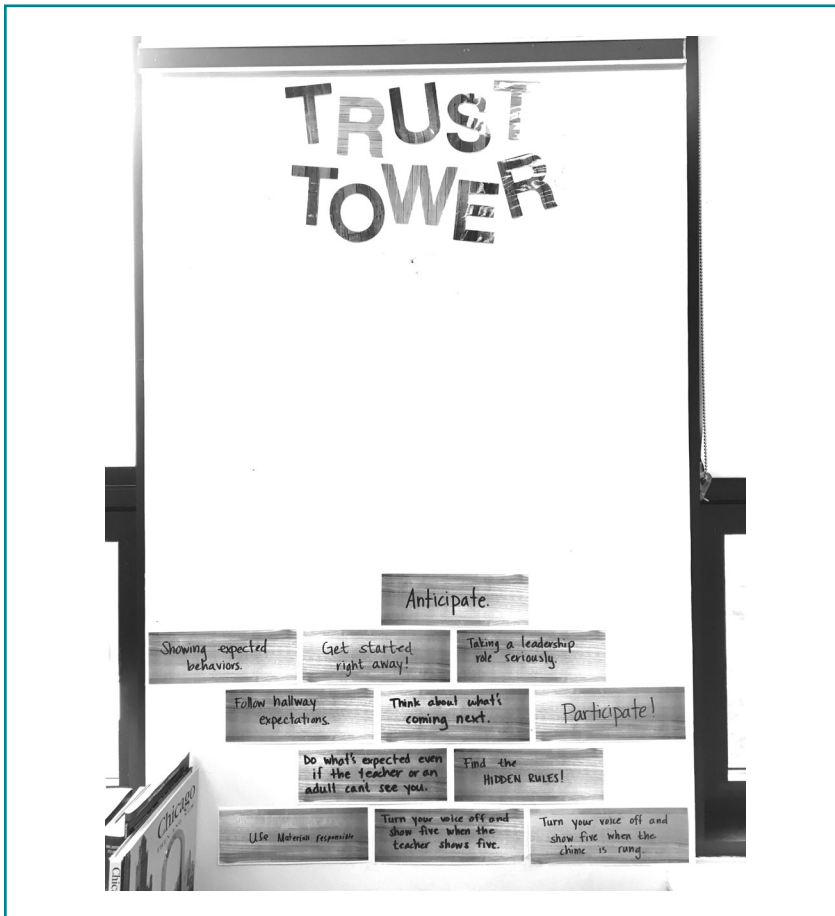
A tower is an excellent analogy for building trust, especially for our youngest ones. I learned this analogy of the Trust Tower from a colleague in San Francisco. She was explaining to one of our five-year-old students that trust is built slowly over time, much like a tower is built one block at a time. I took the analogy with me, and I’ve found that children of all ages connect with it.

“Trust is like building a tower,” I’ll say to my students. “We build trust block by block over time, and the more we build the trust tower, the more choices you will be able to make on your own.”

I’ve even gone so far as to build a trust tower in my classroom to name specific behaviors that build trust, behaviors like “doing what you’re supposed to even when the teacher is not looking” or “cleaning up materials I didn’t use” (see Figure 3.8). This tool serves as a concrete reminder that trust is built through observable behaviors and that autonomy is learned by demonstrating awareness of what’s happening around you.

Autonomous decision-making is a skill that children must develop, not a divine right.

Figure 3.8: The Trust Tower



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What's more, it sends a very clear message that the individuals in the classroom do not exist in isolation. Even in an era when we strive for learning to be as personalized as possible—when we are aiming to actualize a vision for agency and autonomy in the classroom—students must still be held accountable to the collective classroom community.