The Learning Conditions

A Practitioner Guide

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Cultivate Safety · Honour Agency · Speak with Intention · Design Liberating Structure

What must be true before children learn.

Chapter 1: Introduction

You already know something is missing. You have done the professional development. You have redesigned your classroom. You have read the research, adopted the inquiry model, invested in the workshop approach. And still — some days, the learning feels thin. Children complete the tasks. They follow the routines. But something underneath is not alive.

This is not about your methods. Your methods may be excellent. The problem is that certain things must be true in the room before any method can work — and no one has named them for you.

That is what this guide does. It names the conditions.

What The Learning Conditions Is

The Learning Conditions is a diagnostic framework built from one practitioner's 20 years of classroom observation across India and Canada. It identifies four conditions that must be present — in any classroom, any school, any culture — before genuine learning can happen:

1. **Cultivate Safety** — children feel emotionally and socially safe, free from judgment
2. **Honour Agency** — children are treated as capable people who already have the ability to direct their own learning
3. **Speak with Intention** — adults choose their words, questions, and tone deliberately, understanding that language shapes how children think and feel
4. **Design Liberating Structure** — clear, co-created routines and expectations make genuine freedom possible

These are not strategies to add on top of what you already do. They are the conditions that make what you already do actually work.

Think of it this way. A gardener does not make the plant grow. The gardener creates the conditions — soil, light, water, space — and the plant does the growing. A teacher does not make the child learn. The teacher creates the conditions — safety, agency, intentional language, liberating structure — and the child does the learning.

Adults create conditions. Children do the growing.

The Problem This Framework Solves

You may recognise this pattern. A school adopts a new pedagogical approach — inquiry-based learning, project-based learning, social-emotional learning, writing workshop. Teachers receive training. Resources are allocated. The approach is sound. And yet, in some classrooms it flourishes while in others it falls flat.

The difference is rarely the method. The difference is what is true in the room before the method is applied.

“No matter how good the lesson plan may be, but if the children are not emotionally and socially happy as well as ethically strong, the process of teaching and learning will not be a success.” (SEE Learning, 2021)

This is the framework’s core diagnostic claim: methods fail when conditions are absent. The method may be sound — but the ground was not ready. The Learning Conditions gives you a way to check the ground.

What the Conditions Are For

A reader who has made it this far deserves a question answered. We have spent several pages saying that something is missing in classrooms, that conditions must be true before methods can work, that the four conditions are safety, agency, intentional language, liberating structure. We have not yet said what any of that is for.

The conditions are not their own purpose. They are what must be true in the room for something else to be possible — and that something else has to be named, or the framework is hollow at the centre.

Here it is, in plain words. Every child in your room has a life ahead of them. Some part of how that life will go is being decided right now, in your room, by whether the child is growing into the fullest version of themselves or shrinking into the safest. The conditions exist so the growing is possible. That is the entire point. Nothing else in this book matters if it does not serve that point.

You will not measure this on a Friday quiz. You will not see it in an end-of-year report. You will see it in the smaller, quieter signal that every honest teacher recognises and most school systems ignore: light and fire in the eyes, or its absence. When a child in your room has light and fire in her eyes, she is growing. When she does not, she is shrinking. The conditions are how you make growing more likely than shrinking. That is what they are for.

This is not a goal in the sense that “literacy by Grade 3” is a goal. It is closer to what gardeners mean when they say their job is not to make the plant grow. The conditions are the soil and light and water; the growing is the child’s. But the gardener who never asks is this plant growing or is it shrinking has stopped being a gardener and become a maintainer of pots. Do not become a maintainer of pots.

How to Use This Guide

> **Start Here:** If you are looking for a concrete entry point, turn to the 90-day implementation plan at the end of Chapter 8. It gives you a week-by-week path from observation through practice to integration — and you can begin it tomorrow.

This guide is written for three readers simultaneously:

If you are **a classroom teacher**, you will find specific, observable behaviours you can practise, self-assessment tools to audit your own setting, case studies from real school contexts, grade-level illustrations for K-5, 6-8, and 9-12, 10-week implementation checklists, and PLC discussion questions for collaborative inquiry — so you can diagnose, plan, and act.

If you are **a school leader**, you will find a complete School Leader Implementation Guide (Chapter 10) with a phased school-year plan, non-evaluative observation protocols, and feedback norms. You will also find the Whole-Classroom Diagnostic (Chapter 9) that can support both teacher self-assessment and professional learning conversations.

If you are **a parent or someone who cares about education**, you will find plain-language explanations with no jargon left unexplained. Every concept in this guide can be understood without educational vocabulary — because if we cannot explain what we mean in human terms, we do not truly understand it ourselves.

You do not need to read sequentially. If you already know your classroom is safe but something else is missing, go directly to the condition that speaks to your situation. Each condition chapter (Chapters 3-6) includes case studies, grade-level guidance, implementation checklists, progression pathways, and PLC discussion questions — everything you need to go from understanding a condition to building it in your classroom. But if you are starting fresh, begin here — with the understanding that none of this happens by accident. It requires intentionality.

A Note on How This Framework Was Built

The Learning Conditions did not come from a research laboratory. It came from classrooms — from watching what happens when children feel safe and what happens when they do not, from noticing the precise words that open a child's thinking and the careless ones that close it, from essays written over eight years by one practitioner reflecting honestly on her own practice.

Those essays — spanning 2018 to 2026 — are the foundation of everything in this guide. They cover writing workshop, read-aloud, logical consequences, social-emotional learning, school observation, innovation, inclusivity, adolescent advocacy, humanistic leadership, and more. They were written from classrooms in India and Canada, from homes during lockdown, from schools implementing the IB Primary Years Programme. They reflect one educator's journey from classroom teacher to school leader — always learning, always reflecting, always honest about what went wrong as well as what went right.

Every claim in this guide, every example, every quote traces to a named essay from this corpus. Nothing is invented. Nothing is projected. Where academic research supports what the corpus shows, we name it — but the framework speaks in the practitioner's voice, not the researcher's. This is knowledge built from inside classrooms, not about them.

This is not a new way of building pedagogy. In 1930, an elementary school principal in Japan published a four-volume work of educational theory built entirely from the carefully recorded evidence of his own and other teachers' classrooms — not from a research laboratory, not from a philosophical tradition imposed on practice, but from observation. He wrote that teachers should be "keen observers of the actualities of their day-to-day classroom experience" and that any effective theory of education would have to be "built up" from that evidence. The Learning Conditions belongs to this tradition. It does not come from a study; it comes from a corpus of observations honestly recorded over years.

One thing you will notice: the framework draws from both professional and personal contexts. Mamta applies the same principles at bedtime that she applies in the classroom. She uses the same language practices with her own children that she uses with her students. This is not accidental — it reflects a deeper conviction that pedagogy is not a professional technique you switch on at 8:00 AM and switch off at 3:00 PM. It is a way of being with children. Whether you are a teacher reading this for your classroom or a parent reading this for your home, the conditions apply.

The four conditions are not theoretical. They were observed. They were named because they kept appearing — in a school in Mumbai, in a home in Canada, in a writing workshop, in a bedtime read-aloud. Across contexts, across cultures, across years, the same pattern held: when these conditions were present, children thrived. When they were absent, even the best methods produced thin results.

Framework at a Glance

Condition	Core Question	When Present	When Absent
Cultivate Safety	Do children feel free from judgment?	Children take risks, share feelings, write without inhibitions	Quiet compliance, self-censoring, “safe” answers only
Honour Agency	Are children trusted to make real decisions?	Children choose, initiate, own their learning	Teacher is hardest-working person; children wait for instructions
Speak with Intention	Am I choosing my words consciously?	Children ask genuine questions, find their voice	Silence, compliance, curiosity extinguished
Design Liberating Structure	Does my structure enable freedom?	Children operate independently, adapt routines	Either chaos (under-structured) or compliance (over-controlled)

Chapter 2: Practise with Intentionality

Before we turn to the four conditions, we need to name the thing that holds them all together. It is not a fifth condition. It is the stance that makes all four possible.

What Intentionality Means

Intentionality is the difference between what a school says it believes and what actually happens in its classrooms every day.

A school may write “holistic development” in its mission statement. But if social-emotional learning is squeezed into ten minutes of advisory time — or left out of the timetable entirely — then holistic development is aspirational, not real. A teacher may believe in student agency. But if every decision in the classroom still flows from the teacher’s plan, agency is a value on paper, not a condition in the room.

“A school may have a clearly written vision, an inspiring mission, and a carefully crafted strategic plan — but these documents alone do not create success.” (Humanistic Leadership, 2026)

Intentionality means closing that gap — not with more words, but with structures, schedules, and daily practice.

Why Intentionality Is Not a Fifth Condition

The four conditions describe what must be true in the room. Intentionality describes the adult’s commitment to making it true. Safety, agency, language, and structure are observable states. Intentionality is the sustained effort that creates and maintains those states.

Without intentionality, a teacher may cultivate safety on Monday and undermine it by Wednesday — not from malice, but from inattention. Without intentionality, a school leader may champion agency at the staff meeting and then make every decision unilaterally. The gap between aspiration and practice is not a knowledge gap. It is an intentionality gap.

“SEE Learning needs to become AN INTENTIONAL PIECE OF OUR CURRICULUM.” (SEE Learning, 2021)

The emphasis is Mamta's own. She capitalised those words because she had watched too many schools treat social-emotional learning as something that might happen if there was time left over. Intentionality means timetabling what matters. It means designing your day so that the conditions do not depend on having a good morning.

What Intentional Practice Looks Like

An intentional practitioner does these things — not once, but continuously:

Notices. She watches the room. Are children self-censoring? Has one child gone quiet? Is the energy compliance or engagement? Intentionality begins with paying attention to what is actually happening, not what you planned to happen.

Adjusts. When she notices that safety has slipped — perhaps a child was embarrassed by a question, perhaps the volume rose — she does not wait for a "behaviour incident." She adjusts in the moment. A quieter tone. A different question. A pause.

Designs. He does not leave the conditions to chance. If safety matters, he builds a peace corner. If agency matters, he builds choice into the schedule. If language matters, he practises specific sentence stems until they become reflex. "What do YOU need to be doing right now?" replaces "Hurry up" — not because he read it once, but because he practised it until the old pattern broke.

Holds himself accountable. "Isn't it a teacher's moral duty to groom them as productive citizens?" (Plight of Adolescents, 2018) Intentionality is an ethical stance, not a professional development strategy. The intentional practitioner treats the gap between values and practice as a moral question — not a scheduling problem.

Extends intentionality to every scale. The intentional classroom teacher timetables what matters. The intentional team leader builds shared norms into meeting agendas, not just into mission statements. The intentional school leader designs institutional structures — feedback systems, professional learning, hiring practices — that embody the school's values in daily operations. At every level, intentionality means the same thing: what you believe should be visible in what you do, every day, without exception.

Keeps growing. A teacher who has stopped growing cannot maintain the conditions for children to grow. This is not a slogan; it is a structural fact. The classroom is a relational field, and the field requires both parties to be alive in it. A teacher who reads nothing new, asks no new questions, and risks no new ways of working will, within a few years, find that her presence in the room has gone flat — not because she is doing anything wrong, but because she is no longer offering the children anyone to grow toward.

Intentionality is not only the daily noticing and adjusting. It is also the long, slower question: am I a deeper person this year than I was last year, in any way that the children would notice? The honest answer matters more than the comfortable one.

What the Absence of Intentionality Looks Like

When intentionality is missing, the school may look progressive. It may use the right vocabulary, display student work on the walls, run morning meetings and closing circles. But the conditions are performative rather than real.

The teacher talks about student voice but makes every decision. The school claims it values emotional wellbeing but has no time in the schedule for it. The mission statement uses the word “holistic” but the timetable tells a different story. The school brochure mentions “the whole child” but the budget tells you what it actually prioritises.

The most common sign: the conditions are present on observation days and absent on ordinary days. Intentionality is what makes the conditions durable — not dependent on being watched, not dependent on having energy, not dependent on everything going well. An intentional practitioner builds the conditions into the architecture of the day — so that safety, agency, language, and structure are structural features of the classroom, not things that happen when the teacher remembers.

Think of it this way: if you took a week off and a substitute teacher walked into your classroom, would the conditions still hold? If yes, they are structural. If no, they depend on your personal energy — and that is not sustainable. Intentionality means building the conditions into the room, the schedule, and the culture so that they outlast any single day’s energy.

Self-Reflection Prompts

These are questions you can ask yourself regularly — weekly, or whenever your practice feels like it is drifting:

1. **Am I enacting my stated values today, or just holding them as beliefs?** Name one specific thing you did today that made a condition real — not a value you hold, but an action you took.

2. **Where is the gap between what I say I believe and what my classroom schedule actually shows?** If someone looked only at your timetable and your daily routines — without hearing your philosophy — what would they conclude you believe about learning?

3. **When did I last adjust in the moment?** Intentional practice means noticing when something has shifted and responding — not at the end of the day in your reflection journal, but right then.
4. **Am I designing for the conditions, or hoping they emerge?** Safety, agency, language, and structure do not happen by accident. What have I built into my environment that makes them structural rather than aspirational?
5. **Do I hold myself morally accountable for this gap?** Not as guilt — but as professional responsibility. The children in your room deserve the conditions you describe in your philosophy.
6. **Am I still growing?** Not as a professional development requirement. As a question about whether the children in my room have someone alive to grow toward.

Chapter 3: Cultivate Safety

What This Condition Means

A child who is afraid of being judged will not show you what they really think.

That is the entire condition. When a child feels safe — emotionally, socially, relationally — they take risks. They write what actually matters to them. They say "I don't understand" without embarrassment. They bring their genuine questions into the room. When a child does not feel safe, they produce what they think the teacher wants. They choose the safe topic. They stay quiet. And from the outside, the classroom may look perfectly orderly — but underneath, the learning is thin.

A teacher cultivates safety when they build an environment where children are emotionally and socially happy, free from judgment, and confident that being wrong, confused, or uncertain will not result in ridicule or penalty. Safety is the soil — until it is present, no method, curriculum, or pedagogy will produce genuine learning.

Why This Condition Matters

Every method you have ever been trained in assumes that children feel safe enough to engage. Inquiry-based learning assumes children will ask genuine questions. Writing workshop assumes children will write about what matters to them. Collaborative learning assumes children will share their thinking with peers. None of these assumptions hold in a classroom where children are managing their fear of judgment.

"A child will write without inhibitions if he is not going to be judged. Low stakes writing is the beginning of good high stake writing." (Low Stakes Writing, 2019)

The word "inhibitions" is the key. Remove the judgment, and children write freely. Add judgment — even subtle judgment, even unspoken judgment that the child merely perceives — and the writing becomes careful, guarded, thin. The same principle applies to speaking, questioning, and every other form of learning.

Safety is not an add-on. It is the ground everything else stands on.

The Philosophical Grounding

Safety in this framework is not a single thing. It operates in four dimensions simultaneously — and understanding this matters for practice, because a classroom can have one dimension of safety and lack another.

Emotional safety: Children are free from the fear of being judged for being wrong, confused, or uncertain. This is about creating a space where a child's incomplete thinking is treated as the beginning of learning, not as a failure.

Relational safety: The relationship between adult and child is built on trust and respect. The teacher speaks to the child as a person worthy of dignity — not as a problem to be managed. "The child feels trusted and respected when we keep our volume low, respect them and show faith in him to fix a situation." (Logical Consequences Part 2, 2019)

Physical safety: The environment itself communicates safety. A peace corner is not a punishment space — it is a place the child can choose to go when they need to regulate. The physical design of the room tells the child: your feelings are welcome here.

Structural safety: Norms, routines, and expectations are clear and consistent. Children know what to expect. They know what happens when something goes wrong. Predictability is a form of safety — it allows children to focus their energy on learning rather than on navigating uncertainty about the rules.

By 2026, this framework extends safety beyond children. Educators need the same conditions to thrive. A teacher who feels judged by her administration will teach cautiously. A school leader who feels unsupported by her board will lead defensively. The same logic applies at every scale: safety is the precondition for doing your best work, whether you are eight years old or forty-five.

What Safety Looks Like in Practice

When a teacher cultivates safety, you can observe these specific behaviours:

She creates a space where there are no wrong answers in exploratory work. "A Writing Workshop must be a place that will have no right or wrong answers... The weirdest ideas as well as ideas inspired by other writers should be appreciated." (Every Child is a Writer, 2021) This is a deliberate design choice. The teacher has decided that in this space, the priority is thinking freely. Evaluation comes later. Exploration comes first.

She keeps her volume low and speaks with respect. Volume is not a small thing. A teacher who raises her voice to control the room has communicated — whether she intended to or not — that authority is more important than relationship. The child who hears a low, steady voice hears: I trust you. The child who hears a raised voice hears: I need to control you.

She addresses conflict through repair, not punishment. When something goes wrong — a child hurts another child, a rule is broken, trust is damaged — the teacher does not respond with punishment. She responds with logical consequences that are "related, reasonable, respectful, helpful." "A logical consequence is not an angry response to a behavior. It is a responsible action to help rather than hurt." (Logical Consequences, 2019) The classroom mantra: "You break it, you fix it." The child learns that mistakes are repairable, not catastrophic.

She provides physical spaces for emotional regulation. A peace corner or calming corner — a physical place where a child can go to regulate before re-engaging — appears across classrooms and homes in the corpus. (Innovations, 2021; Logical Consequences, 2019; SEE Learning, 2021) This is safety made tangible. It says to the child: when you are overwhelmed, there is a place for you. You do not have to perform composure. You can feel what you feel and return when you are ready.

Physical safety is not only the peace corner. It is also the room itself. Whose work is on the walls — children's, or commercial posters? At what volume do adults speak when no one is watching? Is this room beautiful enough to deserve this child? A classroom that is loud, cluttered, or aesthetically careless is communicating something the teacher may

not have meant to say. A classroom that is quietly beautiful — with student work treated as worth displaying, with adult voices kept low because raised voices mean someone is not being heard — is also communicating something. Beauty is not a frill. It is a daily teacher act, and it is one of the ways the room tells the child you are welcome here.

She extends safety to the adults in the building. In a school, safety is not only for children. "The school's vision comes alive only when educators feel socially and emotionally supported." (Humanistic Leadership, 2026) A teacher who feels judged by her principal will teach cautiously — just as a child who feels judged by her teacher will learn cautiously. Safety scales. It must be present at every level of the institution.

What the Child Experiences

When safety is present, you can observe it in children's behaviour:

Children write without inhibitions. They choose topics from their own lives — difficult topics, weird topics, topics that matter to them — because they trust the space. (Low Stakes Writing, 2019)

Children share their feelings. Through relational practices like read-aloud, children "get in touch with their own feelings, emotions and [have] the courage to share them." (Read Aloud, 2019) The word "courage" matters. Sharing feelings requires bravery. Safety does not eliminate the bravery — it makes the bravery possible.

Children use repair instead of retaliation. When conflict occurs, children have the language and the space to fix what they broke. They do not need an adult to arbitrate every dispute because the culture of repair has been established. (Logical Consequences, 2019)

Children engage with curiosity rather than compliance. The indicator of genuine safety is "light and fire in their eyes" (Innovations, 2021) — children who choose to engage because they feel safe, not because they are told to. This is the difference between a classroom that looks quiet and a classroom that is alive.

When Safety Is Absent

This is what it looks like when safety is missing — and it may not look like what you expect.

When safety is absent, the classroom may appear orderly. Children sit quietly. Work is completed. Behaviour is "good." But underneath, the classroom is intellectually and emotionally dead.

The teacher generalises rather than seeing individual children — "believing that each child is a brat." (Plight of Adolescents, 2018) Children who are "trying hard to stay away from peer pressure and keep up to their good language, manners and values are shown equal disbelief and blamed for things they haven't done." (Plight of Adolescents, 2018)

Read that again. The children who are trying hardest are the ones who are disbelieved. The teacher who has lost safety does not just fail the struggling children — she fails the children who are doing everything right.

The most telling sign of absent safety: children stop asking questions, stop taking risks, and stop sharing what they genuinely feel. They produce what they think the teacher wants. They write the safe essay. They give the expected answer. The classroom runs on compliance, and the teacher mistakes compliance for engagement.

What Is Not Obvious About Safety

There are things about cultivating safety that seem obvious to experienced practitioners but are not obvious at all to someone starting this work. These are the hidden assumptions — the things no one tells you until you get them wrong.

Safety is not the same as comfort. A safe classroom is not a classroom where nothing difficult ever happens. It is a classroom where difficult things can happen — where a child can struggle with a concept, disagree with a peer, face the consequences of a mistake — and still feel that they belong. Comfort avoids difficulty. Safety allows difficulty to be productive.

You cannot declare safety; you can only build it. A poster that says "This is a safe space" is not safety. Safety is built through hundreds of small actions — the teacher's tone when a child gives a wrong answer, the way she handles the first conflict of the year, whether she keeps her promise about the peace corner. Children do not believe what you say about safety. They believe what you do.

Safety requires you to notice what you would rather not see. The quiet child who never speaks is easy to overlook — she is not causing problems. But her silence may be the loudest signal that safety is missing. Cultivating safety means paying attention not just to the children who demand your attention, but to the ones who have learned to disappear.

Your own emotional state is part of the safety equation. When you are stressed, your voice changes. Your patience shortens. Your responses become more reactive. The children notice before you do. A teacher who does not manage her own emotional state cannot maintain safety for the children — because children read adults with extraordinary accuracy.

The Shift You Are Looking For

A teacher knows they have cultivated safety when children begin sharing what they actually feel and think without self-censorship. The shift is specific: a child who once wrote carefully and safely now writes about what genuinely matters to them. A child who once waited to be sure of the “right” answer now says “I don’t understand” without embarrassment. A child who once kept personal questions at home now brings them into the classroom because they trust the space.

When children treat confusion as a starting point rather than a failure, safety is present.

This shift does not happen overnight. Safety is built in layers — through weeks and months of consistent practice. The first sign may be small: a child who has been silent all term raises her hand for the first time. A child writes a sentence about something real instead of something safe. A child brings a problem to you instead of hiding it. These are not dramatic moments. They are the accumulation of hundreds of small signals from you that say: it is safe here. You will not be judged. Your confusion is welcome. Your feelings matter.

And experienced practitioners know but rarely say aloud: you may lose safety and have to rebuild it. A bad day — a moment when your voice was too sharp, when a child was embarrassed in front of peers, when you responded with frustration instead of curiosity — can set the work back. This is the nature of the work. Safety is not a state you achieve and then maintain. It is a practice you return to, every day, with intentionality.

At Every Scale

In a single classroom: The teacher builds the peace corner. She establishes the low-stakes writing practice. She keeps her volume low. She responds to conflict with “You break it, you fix it” rather than with punishment. Safety is built through daily, specific, observable practices.

In a teaching team: Teachers share their own struggles openly. When a colleague says "I'm not sure this lesson worked," the team responds with curiosity, not judgment. The team models for each other what they are asking children to do: take risks, be honest, treat confusion as a starting point.

In a whole school: The school leader creates the conditions for teachers to feel safe — safe to experiment, safe to fail, safe to say "I need help." "The school's vision comes alive only when educators feel socially and emotionally supported." (Humanistic Leadership, 2026) A school where teachers feel judged will produce classrooms where children feel judged. Safety cascades.

In leadership: The head of school designs institutional structures — feedback processes, observation protocols, meeting norms — that embody safety rather than just declaring it. The board evaluates the school not only on academic results but on whether the adults in the building feel supported enough to do their best work.

Self-Assessment: Cultivate Safety

Ask yourself these questions honestly. There are no right answers — only honest ones.

1. **Do I create a space where children can be wrong without consequence?** Think of the last time a child gave an incorrect answer in your classroom. What happened? What did your face do? What did the other children do?

2. **Do I keep my volume low, even when I am frustrated?** Volume is one of the most honest indicators of safety. When you are stressed, what happens to your voice?

3. **When something breaks, do I reach for punishment or repair?** Think of the last behavioural incident. Did your response help the child learn, or did it primarily restore your control?

4. **Is there a physical place in my room where a child can go to regulate?** Not a "time-out" space — a space the child chooses to use, where they can feel what they feel without performing composure.

5. **Would a child in my room say "I don't understand" without hesitation?** Not because they are bold, but because they have learned that not understanding is safe here.

6. **Do the adults around me feel safe?** Do you feel safe with your colleagues, your coordinator, your principal? If you do not, consider: how might that shape what you are able to create for children?

7. **If I watched my own classroom for a day, would I see compliance or engagement?** What would tell me the difference?

In Practice: Case Studies

Case Study 1: Pune — When Silence Looks Like Compliance

Context: Sunita teaches Grade 4 English at a private CBSE school in Pune with thirty-eight students. The school emphasises academic excellence; parents expect regular test scores and clear rankings. Sunita has twelve years of teaching experience and considers herself a caring teacher.

The starting point: Sunita's classroom was quiet and orderly. Students completed assignments on time, scored well on tests, and followed instructions without reminders. By every institutional metric, her classroom was successful. But during a writing assignment where students were asked to write about "a time when something surprised you," thirty-one of thirty-eight students wrote about birthday parties. The remaining seven wrote about school trips. Not a single child wrote about something genuinely surprising — something that confused them, frightened them, or made them see the world differently.

Sunita realised the silence in her room was not peace. It was strategy. Her students had learned that the safest response was the most predictable one. They were managing their fear of judgment so efficiently that it looked like engagement.

Corpus anchor: "A child will write without inhibitions if he is not going to be judged. Low stakes writing is the beginning of good high stake writing." (Low Stakes Writing, 2019)

What she tried first: Sunita told her students that "all ideas are welcome" and "there are no wrong answers." Nothing changed. Words alone cannot undo years of experience that taught children otherwise. She then tried sharing her own writing — a paragraph about feeling lost on her first day at a new school. A few children smiled but no one shifted their approach. The declaration of safety was not the same as the experience of safety.

What she changed: Sunita introduced ten minutes of daily low-stakes writing — ungraded, unjudged, with the child choosing the form (poem, list, story, letter). For the first two weeks, she did not read what children wrote unless they chose to share. She wrote alongside them, in the same notebook format, about her own confusions and memories. She kept her voice deliberately low when responding to any shared writing, treating each piece with the same quiet attention regardless of quality.

Corpus anchor: “The child feels trusted and respected when we keep our volume low, respect them and show faith in him to fix a situation.” (Logical Consequences Part 2, 2019)

In week three, she added a “wonder shelf” — a small basket where children could drop questions they were curious about, anonymously or signed. She seeded it with her own questions: “I wonder why some words sound the same but mean different things” and “I wonder what my grandmother was like at my age.”

What shifted: By week four, the writing began to change. A boy named Arjun wrote about his dog dying — not a dramatic narrative but a quiet, honest paragraph about how “the house feels different when you come home and no one runs to the door.” A girl named Meera wrote a list titled “Things I don’t understand” that included “why adults say ‘don’t worry’ when they are clearly worrying.” When Meera chose to read her list aloud, two other children laughed — not at her, but in recognition. The next day, three more children shared unprompted.

The wonder shelf filled. By week six, Sunita was using student questions as discussion starters. The conversations were messier than her planned lessons — children disagreed, changed their minds mid-sentence, said “I’m not sure but...” The room was noisier than before, but the noise was thinking, not chaos.

Corpus anchor: Children who feel safe show “light and fire in their eyes” — genuine engagement rather than compliance. (Innovations, 2021)

What did not change: The school’s assessment culture. Sunita still submitted weekly grades. Students still faced term-end rankings. Two parents questioned why their children’s writing had become “less structured.” Sunita had to explain the difference between low-stakes exploration and assessed work — a conversation she found herself having more than once. Safety in her classroom existed within, and sometimes in tension with, the institutional culture. One teacher cannot transform a system. But she can transform the thirty-eight square metres she is responsible for.

Corpus anchor: “No matter how good the lesson plan may be, but if the children are not emotionally and socially happy as well as ethically strong, the process of teaching and learning will not be a success.” (SEE Learning, 2021)

Case Study 2: Vancouver — Safety for the Teacher Before Safety for the Child

Context: Leila is a Grade 8 humanities teacher at an IB school in Vancouver. The school's stated values include "student voice," "risk-taking," and "emotional wellbeing." Leila is in her third year of teaching and has completed training in social-emotional learning, restorative practices, and visible thinking routines.

The starting point: Leila's classroom had all the markers of safety. Students sat in collaborative groups. A "feelings check-in" opened each class. A peace corner occupied one corner of the room with cushions, a calm-down jar, and a poster of breathing exercises. Students used sentence stems for conflict resolution: "I feel _ **when** _ and I want ____."

But Leila herself did not feel safe. Her department head observed her classes quarterly and used a rubric that emphasised "student engagement metrics" — how many students participated, how frequently, how visibly. Leila found herself steering discussions toward students she knew would participate enthusiastically. She avoided open-ended questions that might produce silence, because silence looked like disengagement on the observation rubric. She was performing safety for her students while managing her own fear of professional judgment.

Corpus anchor: "The school's vision comes alive only when educators feel socially and emotionally supported." (Humanistic Leadership, 2026)

What she tried first: Leila tried to separate her professional anxiety from her classroom practice. She told herself that her feelings about observation shouldn't affect her teaching. This did not work. Anxiety is not a decision. Her students — particularly the perceptive thirteen-year-olds — picked up on the shift in her energy during observed lessons. One student later told her: "You're different when someone else is in the room." The student was right.

What she changed: Leila did two things. First, she spoke honestly with her department head. She shared her concern that the engagement rubric was incentivising visible participation over genuine thinking, and that some of her quietest students were her deepest thinkers. Her department head — to Leila's surprise — agreed that the rubric had limitations and invited Leila to propose modifications. This single conversation changed Leila's relationship with observation from threat to dialogue.

Second, Leila began modelling vulnerability with her students. Not performed vulnerability — genuine uncertainty. During a unit on historical interpretation, she said: "I've been reading about this event for years and I still find the motivations confusing. I'm going to share my confusion with you, and I want you to help me think through it." She shared her actual confusion, not a pedagogical simulation of it.

Corpus anchor: "Today, I do realise that at that moment, I killed her instinct to know more and took away her opportunity to make connections." (Children's Questions, 2020) — Mamta models the vulnerability of admitting professional mistakes publicly.

What shifted: The impact was immediate and unexpected. When Leila shared genuine confusion, students responded with genuine confusion of their own. A student named Kai, who had used the peace corner almost weekly for emotional regulation but rarely contributed to academic discussions, said during one class: "I think I'm confused about the same thing as you, but from a different angle." His contribution opened a twenty-minute discussion that Leila had not planned and could not have planned.

Over two months, Leila noticed that the peace corner was used less frequently — not because students had fewer emotions, but because the classroom itself had become a space where emotional honesty was normal, not something that required a special corner. Students began saying "I changed my mind" and "I was wrong about that" without prompting. The sentence stems remained available but were used less formulaically — students found their own language for expressing feelings because the room supported it.

Corpus anchor: Through relational practices, children "get in touch with their own feelings, emotions and [have] the courage to share them." (Read Aloud, 2019)

What did not change: Leila's school was already progressive, so the institutional resistance was minimal. But this case study reveals a different limitation: the gap between tools for safety (peace corners, sentence stems, feelings check-ins) and genuine safety (adults and children who are actually vulnerable with each other). Leila had all the tools. What she lacked was her own felt safety within the professional hierarchy. The framework's claim that safety must extend to adults — that "educators feel socially and emotionally supported" — is not an add-on. It is the foundation. A teacher who does not feel safe will build a classroom that performs safety without producing it.

Across Grade Levels

Each condition is illustrated at three developmental bands: **K-5 (Primary)**, **6-8 (Middle)**, and **9-12 (Secondary)**. For each band, you will find: - **Teacher behaviours** — what the teacher does to create this condition - **Student response indicators** — what you will see and hear when the condition is present - **Common mistakes** — the most frequent ways teachers undermine this condition at this level

These bands are approximate. A mature Grade 4 student may respond more like a Grade 6 student; a sheltered Grade 7 class may need approaches from the K-5 column. Read the room, not the table. Cultural context also matters — a Grade 10 classroom in Delhi faces different constraints than one in Toronto. The condition is universal; the expression is contextual.

Cultivate Safety

K-5 (Primary)

Teacher behaviours: - Maintains a calm, low-volume voice as default mode — not just when things go wrong. "The child feels trusted and respected when we keep our volume low." (Logical Consequences Part 2, 2019) - Creates a physical peace or calming corner where a child can go without asking permission. (Innovations, 2021; SEE Learning, 2021) - Establishes that there are "no right or wrong answers" during exploratory activities like writing workshops. "The weirdest ideas as well as ideas inspired by other writers should be appreciated." (Every Child is a Writer, 2021) - Responds to conflict with repair, not punishment — "related, reasonable, respectful, helpful" logical consequences. (Logical Consequences, 2019)

Student response indicators: - Children write without self-censoring. "A child will write without inhibitions if he is not going to be judged." (Low Stakes Writing, 2019) - Children use the calming corner voluntarily and return when ready, without shame or stigma. - Children share personal stories in class ("get in touch with their own feelings, emotions and [have] the courage to share them" — Read Aloud, 2019). - When a child makes an error, other children respond with curiosity, not laughter.

Common mistakes at this level: - **Over-protecting:** Removing all challenge to keep children "safe." Safety means freedom from judgment, not freedom from difficulty. A child who is never challenged is not safe — she is stalled. - **Performing warmth without substance:** Smiling, using sing-song voice, and saying "great job!" while still correcting publicly and grading punitively. Children detect the mismatch. - **Treating safety as a**

one-time setup: Hanging calming-corner posters on Day 1 and never revisiting norms. Safety must be actively maintained — it degrades whenever a teacher raises her voice, a child is mocked, or a conflict goes unrepaired.

6-8 (Middle)

Teacher behaviours: - Establishes explicit social norms: "In this room, we are curious about mistakes, not entertained by them." The norm must be named, modelled, and enforced — middle schoolers test boundaries. - Keeps private matters private. "It is imperative that we talk to the child about his logical consequence in private and not in front of his siblings or peers, so we are RESPECTFUL to the child." (Logical Consequences Part 2, 2019) This is critical at 6-8, where public correction in front of peers is experienced as humiliation. - Models vulnerability: shares a time the teacher was wrong about something, demonstrating that adults learn from mistakes too. Mamta herself models this: "Today, I do realise that at that moment, I killed her instinct to know more." (Children's Questions, 2020) - Addresses peer-to-peer threats to safety directly — the primary threat at this age is not the teacher but other students.

Student response indicators: - Students volunteer wrong answers or half-formed ideas without visible anxiety — because they know the room will treat uncertainty as normal. - Students report bullying or peer conflict to the teacher rather than hiding it — because they trust the teacher to respond without making it worse. - Students disagree with each other respectfully during discussions, engaging with ideas rather than attacking people. - "Light and fire in their eyes" (Innovations, 2021) — students show genuine curiosity rather than performative engagement.

Common mistakes at this level: - **Ignoring peer dynamics:** Focusing on teacher-student safety while peer-to-peer cruelty goes unaddressed. At 6-8, the group is more powerful than the teacher. If the group punishes vulnerability, no amount of teacher warmth will create safety. - **Assuming adolescents don't need emotional support:** "What an age to worry about life!" (Plight of Adolescents, 2018) — middle schoolers need more emotional support, not less, even as they push adults away. The teacher who says "They're old enough to handle it" has misread the developmental moment. - **Over-relying on consequences without relational repair:** Logical consequences work only within relationships built on trust. At this age, the relationship must precede the structure.

9-12 (Secondary)

Teacher behaviours: - Creates intellectual safety: makes it explicit that questioning the teacher, the textbook, or conventional wisdom is welcome and expected. The framework's diagnostic question applies: is the student silent because they have nothing

to say, or because they have learned it is not safe to say it? - Acknowledges identity: adolescents are forming their sense of self. A teacher who dismisses, ridicules, or ignores a student's emerging identity — cultural, personal, intellectual — has destroyed safety. "We ridicule him, look down at him for his rebellious behaviour when all he is trying to do is to make his own choices." (Plight of Adolescents, 2018) - Separates academic feedback from personal worth: ensures that a low grade on an essay is not experienced as a judgment of the student's character or intelligence. - Maintains confidentiality rigorously: at 9-12, a breach of trust is nearly unrecoverable.

Student response indicators: - Students challenge ideas in class — including the teacher's — with evidence and reasoning, not just compliance or defiance. - Students seek feedback voluntarily rather than avoiding it. - Students share personal perspectives in discussions without hedging or performing indifference. - Students who struggle ask for help rather than disengaging — because struggling is normalised, not shameful.

Common mistakes at this level: - **Confusing compliance with safety:** A quiet classroom of compliant teenagers may be the least safe room in the school. Silence at 9-12 is often a sign that students have concluded it is not worth the risk to speak. "Children who are trying hard to stay away from peer pressure and keep up to their good language, manners and values are shown equal disbelief." (Plight of Adolescents, 2018) - **Using grades as control mechanisms:** When grades become threats rather than feedback, intellectual safety collapses. Students write for the rubric, not for meaning. - **Ignoring institutional threats:** Competitive ranking systems, public honour rolls, and high-stakes testing create structural threats to safety that individual teachers cannot fully overcome. Honest acknowledgment: the teacher can create a safe micro-environment, but institutional practices may undermine it. This takes longer to address than individual classroom moves.

Cultivate Safety — 10-Week Checklist

Weeks 1-2: Awareness & Observation - [ ] Complete the Whole-Classroom Diagnostic, scoring yourself on all 5 Safety items - [ ] Observe your classroom for one full week without changing anything — note when children self-censor, go silent, or avoid risk - [ ] Count how many times per day you raise your voice or correct a child publicly — be honest - [ ] Identify the three situations where safety breaks down most often in your room (transitions, group work, feedback moments, peer interactions) - [ ] K-5: Note which children avoid the calming corner (if you have one) — avoidance may indicate stigma. 6-8: Note which students never volunteer. 9-12: Note which students produce only "safe" work

Weeks 3-4: First Moves - [ ] Establish or refresh one physical space for emotional regulation (K-5: peace corner; 6-8: quiet zone; 9-12: private check-in protocol) - [ ] Practice lowering your volume by one notch for an entire week — "The child feels trusted and respected when we keep our volume low" (Logical Consequences Part 2, 2019) - [ ] Replace one public correction with a private conversation each day - [ ] Introduce one explicit norm: "In this room, being wrong is how we learn" — name it, model it, enforce it - [ ] Share one personal story of a time you were wrong or confused — model the vulnerability you want to see

Weeks 5-8: Embedding - [ ] Establish a consistent repair process for when safety breaks: "You break it, you fix it" (Logical Consequences, 2019) — teach the language, model the process, practise with real incidents - [ ] Introduce low-stakes writing or thinking tasks where there is explicitly no grade and no judgment — observe whether participation changes - [ ] Address one peer-to-peer threat to safety each week — bullying, social exclusion, ridicule. At 6-8 and 9-12, this is where safety lives or dies - [ ] Ask children: "Do you feel safe to be wrong in this room?" — listen to the answers without defending yourself - [ ] Observe whether the children who never volunteered in Week 1 are volunteering now. If not, investigate privately: "I notice you're quiet in discussions. Can you tell me about that?"

Weeks 9-10: Assessment & Reflection - [ ] Re-take the Safety items on the Whole-Classroom Diagnostic — compare scores - [ ] Identify which first moves stuck and which faded — recommit to the ones that faded - [ ] Note your three "hardest moments" for safety over the past 10 weeks — what triggered the breakdown? What would you do differently? - [ ] Ask a trusted colleague to observe your classroom for 30 minutes and report: "When did students take intellectual risks? When did they self-censor?"

Cultivate Safety — End-of-Term Markers

Observable in the classroom: - Students volunteer wrong answers without visible anxiety — being wrong is treated as normal, not embarrassing - At least one student who was silent in Week 1 is now an active contributor — not because they were pressured, but because they feel safe - The teacher's default volume has dropped noticeably; raised voice is rare and intentional, not habitual - When conflict occurs, students have language for repair ("I need to fix this") rather than language for blame ("She started it") - K-5: The calming corner is used regularly and voluntarily. 6-8: Students report peer conflicts to the teacher rather than hiding them. 9-12: Students seek feedback on drafts voluntarily

Timeline warnings: - **What happens fast (Weeks 1-4):** Teacher behaviours shift quickly — lowering volume, replacing public correction with private conversation, modelling vulnerability. These are within the teacher's control and respond to conscious effort. - **What takes a full term:** Student trust. Children who have experienced unsafe classrooms do not believe a new norm overnight. Especially at 6-8 and 9-12, where years of conditioning may need to be unwound. The first volunteers will be the already-confident students. The quiet ones take longer. Do not mistake the confident students' quick response for classroom-wide safety. - **What requires institutional support:** Competitive ranking systems, public honour rolls, and high-stakes testing undermine safety at a structural level. A single teacher can create a safer micro-environment, but school-wide safety requires leadership commitment. If your institution actively works against safety, be honest with yourself about the limits of your individual influence — and advocate for change.

For Professional Learning Communities

For use in Professional Learning Communities, teacher study groups, and collaborative inquiry teams. Each condition includes individual reflection prompts (for private writing before discussion) and group dialogue questions (designed to surface productive disagreement). We recommend a 45-minute protocol: 5 minutes individual writing, 10 minutes pair sharing, 20 minutes group discussion, 10 minutes action commitment.

Cultivate Safety

Individual Reflection (write before you discuss): 1. Think of a moment this term when a child in your classroom took a genuine intellectual or emotional risk — shared something personal, admitted confusion, or offered an answer they weren't sure of. What made that moment possible? What had you done, specifically, to create that opening? 2. Now think of a moment when a child stayed silent, played it safe, or gave the answer they thought you wanted. What might have prevented them from risking honesty?

Group Dialogue: 3. In your school, what is the default adult response when a child gives a wrong answer in front of peers? Is the response consistent across classrooms? What would a child learn about safety from the inconsistency? 4. Mamta distinguishes between physical safety, emotional safety, relational safety, and structural safety (norms, routines, explicit expectations). Which of these four dimensions is strongest in your school? Which is weakest? 5. How do adults in your school experience safety? Can teachers admit to colleagues that a lesson failed, that they don't understand a new initiative, or that they disagree with a policy? If adults don't feel safe, how does that affect the conditions they create for children?

Between-Session Observation Task: During one lesson this week, keep a tally of how many children volunteer answers, ask questions, or share uncertainty without prompting. Note what you did — or didn't do — in the five minutes before each instance.

Facilitation Note: Question 5 deliberately connects adult safety to child safety. This mirrors the framework's principle that "the school's vision comes alive only when educators feel socially and emotionally supported" (Humanistic Leadership, 2026). Expect this question to generate discomfort — that discomfort is diagnostic.

Research Grounding

This section connects each condition to the researchers and traditions that explain why it works. These are not citations for credibility — they are explanations for deepening your understanding. Written for practitioners, not academics.

Cultivate Safety: Why It Works

Amy Edmondson (Harvard Business School) studied why some hospital teams reported more errors than others — and discovered it wasn't because they made more errors, but because they felt safe enough to admit them. She called this psychological safety: a shared belief that the group is safe for interpersonal risk-taking. Her finding translates directly to classrooms: children who feel safe don't make fewer mistakes — they acknowledge more of them, which is how learning actually happens.

Read this if: you want the foundational research on why safety must come before performance. Edmondson, A. (1999). Psychological safety and learning behavior in work teams. Administrative Science Quarterly, 44(2), 350–383.

John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth showed that children need a "secure base" — an emotionally reliable adult — before they can explore the world. Securely attached children take more risks, show more curiosity, and recover faster from setbacks. In the classroom, the teacher serves as this secure base: not through authority, but through reliability, warmth, and non-judgment.

Read this if: you want to understand why the adult's emotional consistency matters more than their expertise. Bowlby, J. (1969/1982). Attachment and Loss, Vol. 1: Attachment. Basic Books.

Nel Noddings argued that teaching is fundamentally an ethical relationship rooted in care — not a transaction of knowledge. The caring teacher practises "engrossment" (attentive receptivity to what the child is feeling) and "motivational

displacement" (directing energy toward the child's needs). This is the ethical language behind keeping your volume low, talking to the child rather than at the child, and respecting dignity in every interaction.

Read this if: you want the philosophical argument for why care is not soft — it is the foundation of effective teaching. Noddings, N. (1984). *Caring: A Relational Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*. University of California Press.

Chapter 4: Honour Agency

What This Condition Means

The most important thing to understand about agency: children do not need you to give them agency. They already have it. Your job is to stop getting in the way.

This is the foundation of everything in this chapter. Most educational frameworks talk about "giving students voice and choice" — as though agency is something adults possess and children receive. That framing is backwards.

"Learners are agentic and we do not give agency; we only need to provide opportunities." (Innovations, 2021)

Read that sentence carefully. Agency is not the teacher's to give. It is the child's by nature. The teacher's role is not to grant agency but to honour it — to recognise what is already there and remove the obstacles that prevent children from exercising it.

A teacher honours agency when they recognise that learners are inherently agentic — capable, worthy, and entitled to control over their own learning — and deliberately remove the obstacles that prevent children from exercising that agency.

Why This Condition Matters

When a child asks "What should I write about?" — that is a signal. Not a signal that the child lacks creativity, but a signal that somewhere along the way, the child learned that the work belongs to the teacher. The child has been trained — through years of being told what to do, how to do it, and when it is done — to wait for instructions.

This is what happens when agency is absent: the teacher becomes the hardest-working person in the room. Every transition requires explicit direction. Every assignment requires the teacher's approval. Children produce work to satisfy the teacher rather than to express their own thinking. The classroom functions, but the engine is the teacher's energy, not the children's motivation.

"Writing what matters or writing what you own builds self-efficacy in children." (Every Child is a Writer, 2021)

Self-efficacy — the child's belief in their own capability — is not built by giving children more instruction. It is built by giving children real decisions and trusting them to make those decisions well.

The Philosophical Grounding

The distinction here is subtle but it changes everything: agency is not autonomy. A child exercising agency is not a child doing whatever they want. It is a child making meaningful decisions within a context that respects their capacity to decide.

Consider the difference between these two classrooms. In the first, the teacher says: "Today you will write about your favourite animal." Thirty children write about their favourite animal. Some are engaged; most are compliant. In the second, the teacher says: "Today you will write about something that matters to you — something you know about, something you care about, something you want to understand better." Thirty children write thirty different things. Their writing has voice because it has ownership.

The first classroom is not bad. But it has not honoured agency. The decision about what to write belonged to the teacher, and the children performed the teacher's decision. The second classroom has honoured agency — the children decided, and their engagement followed from that decision.

This principle extends beyond writing. When a child co-creates the daily routine, she follows it because it is hers — not because she was told to. (New Normal, 2020) When a child chooses which book to read, he reads with attention because the choice was his. (Read Aloud, 2019) When a child proposes her own solution to a conflict, she owns the resolution because she authored it. (Responsive Attitude, 2019)

Agency is the child's birthright. It appears in nearly every essay in the corpus — more than any other theme. It is the load-bearing pillar of this entire framework.

What Agency Looks Like in Practice

When a teacher honours agency, you can observe these specific behaviours:

She provides opportunities rather than granting permission. "We do not give agency; we only need to provide opportunities." (Innovations, 2021) The teacher designs situations where children can make genuine choices — not pre-selected options designed to feel like choice, but real decisions about what to learn, how to approach it, and how to show what they know. The distinction matters. Choosing between three teacher-selected topics is not agency. Choosing your own topic because you have something to say — that is agency.

She puts the responsibility on the child. "The Responsive Approach puts the responsibility on the child to fix a problem or come out with a solution." (Responsive Attitude, 2019) When a problem arises — social, academic, or practical — the teacher does not solve it for the child. She asks the child what they think should happen. She trusts the child's capacity to figure it out, and she stays present while they do.

She trusts children's capacity to decide well. "Trust that he can decide well." (Responsive Attitude, 2019) This trust is not blind faith. It is a deliberate posture — the teacher's default assumption is that the child is capable, not that the child needs rescuing. This posture changes everything: the questions the teacher asks, the autonomy she allows, the patience she shows when the child's decision is different from what she would have chosen.

She co-creates rather than dictates. "My daughter and I sat down together for a discussion on how our routine should be. We created our schedule. However, we have left it flexible." (New Normal, 2020) Whether it is a classroom schedule, a project plan, or a set of expectations, the adult and child design together. The child is not a recipient of the structure — the child is its co-author.

She offers meaningful choice. "I bring home 3-4 books and ask them to choose." (Read Aloud, 2019) "The children should feel agentic to choose their topic." (Every Child is a Writer, 2021) Choice is offered where it matters — in what the child reads, writes, explores, and creates. "Children love choice and being in control, don't they?" (Read Aloud, 2019) That is an invitation to confirm what you already know about children.

What the Child Experiences

When agency is honoured, you can observe it in children's behaviour:

Children feel in control. “It helps them feel in control of their decisions and actions. It comes across as an accomplishment and a reward.” (New Normal, 2020) The child who co-created the routine follows it not because she is told to, but because it is hers.

Children write what matters to them. “Writing what matters or writing what you own builds self-efficacy in children.” (Every Child is a Writer, 2021) Their writing has voice because it has ownership. They are not writing for the teacher’s approval — they are writing because they have something to say.

Children fix their own problems. When something goes wrong, the child does not wait for the teacher to intervene. The child takes responsibility for repair — because the culture says: you are capable of fixing this. (Logical Consequences, 2019)

Children ask genuine questions. The child who asks “Why is the moon following us?” (Children’s Questions, 2020) is exercising agency — the instinct to understand, to make connections, to pursue their own line of inquiry. The teacher’s job is to protect that instinct, not redirect it.

Children choose their own path. “Children love choice and being in control, don’t they?” (Read Aloud, 2019) When agency is honoured, children make decisions about their reading, their writing, and their learning direction because they experience ownership as natural — not as something granted by an adult and therefore revocable by an adult.

When Agency Is Absent

When agency is absent, the teacher is the hardest-working person in the room. She plans every minute. She directs every transition. She decides every topic. The children wait.

Every assignment begins with “What should I do?” instead of “Here is what I want to say.” Children ask “Is this what you wanted?” because the work belongs to the teacher, not to them. The teacher is exhausted by Friday — because she is carrying the cognitive and motivational load for 25 people.

And here is the harder truth: when agency is suppressed long enough, it surfaces as rebellion. Children who “come across as rebels are treated as hopeless instead of taking out the time and effort to bring out the best in those who are unable to do it themselves.” (Plight of Adolescents, 2018) The child who acts out is often the child whose agency has been denied. The system punishes the symptom — the rebellion — rather than addressing the cause — the suppression.

When you see a child who "won't listen," ask: has this child been listened to? When you see a child who "won't follow instructions," ask: has this child ever been trusted to make a decision?

Refusing to write a child off is not a feeling. It is a practice. It is something the teacher does — repeatedly, on bad days, with the child she is most tempted to give up on — and it is something she can be observed doing or not doing. The practice has a structure: she keeps the child in view (does not let them go invisible at the back of the room), she keeps the child in language (talks about them in staff meetings as a child with a future, not as a problem), and she keeps the child in expectation (says, out loud, "I expect this of you" when the child has done nothing yet to earn it). Every teacher loses children in some weeks. The teachers who lose them less are the teachers who have made refusing-to-write-off into a daily discipline rather than a personal disposition.

What Is Not Obvious About Agency

These are the hidden assumptions that experienced practitioners understand but that are not obvious when you begin this work.

Honouring agency does not mean stepping back entirely. A teacher who says "Do whatever you want" has not honoured agency — she has abandoned the child. Agency operates within structure. The child needs clear frameworks, routines, and expectations within which to exercise meaningful choice. The teacher's role is not to disappear — it is to design the conditions and then trust the child to operate within them.

Honouring agency does not mean the teacher is interchangeable, invisible, or has nothing to offer. The teacher has walked further down the road than the child. That is true and it matters. What honouring agency rules out is not the teacher's experience — it is the teacher's belief that the child should become a smaller version of the teacher. The teacher's experience is offered as accompaniment, not as a destination. Think of it this way: a piece of cloth dipped repeatedly in indigo dye becomes ever more deeply blue — but the cloth never becomes the indigo. The dye does its work; the cloth becomes more fully itself. The teacher who honours agency does the same. She is present, repeatedly, deliberately, across years. She does not pretend to be unimportant. But she also does not expect the child to come out the other end resembling her. The child comes out the other end more fully themselves, deepened by the contact.

Agency feels uncomfortable for the teacher. When you truly honour agency, children will make choices you would not have made. They will choose a writing topic that seems too hard, or too easy, or too personal. They will propose a solution to a conflict that seems less efficient than yours. Honouring agency means letting their choice stand —

even when yours would have been “better.” This is harder than it sounds. The instinct to correct, to redirect, to optimise is strong. And sometimes it is the right instinct. But if you override every decision, you are not honouring agency — you are performing it.

The child who resists your help may be exercising agency. Not all resistance is defiance. Sometimes a child who says “I can do it myself” or “I don’t want to” is doing exactly what you have asked — exercising their capacity to decide. The challenge is distinguishing between a child who needs support and a child who needs space. There is no formula for this. It requires knowing the child.

Agency does not produce equal outcomes. When children make real choices, they produce different work. Some of it will be stronger than what you would have assigned. Some of it will be weaker. The variation is evidence that the work is authentic. Uniform output is a sign of compliance, not engagement.

The Shift You Are Looking For

A teacher knows they have honoured agency when children stop waiting for permission and start making decisions. The shift is specific and observable: a child who once asked “What should I write about?” now chooses a topic and explains why it matters to them. A child who once waited for the teacher’s solution now proposes her own fix. A child who once needed step-by-step instructions now navigates the process independently — not because the instructions were memorised, but because the child has internalised the ownership.

When children act as if the learning belongs to them — because it does — agency is honoured.

You may notice this shift in small moments. During a writing conference, the child no longer asks what you think of their piece — she tells you what she is trying to do and asks for specific help. During a group project, children negotiate roles and responsibilities without waiting for you to assign them. During a class discussion, a child respectfully disagrees with another child’s idea — not because they are argumentative, but because they have something to say and they trust the space enough to say it.

These moments are the evidence. Agency is not a grand philosophical state — it is visible in the specific, daily decisions children make when they believe the work belongs to them.

At Every Scale

In a single classroom: The teacher designs the day so that children make real decisions — about their reading, their writing topics, their approach to problems. She does not control every minute. She trusts that children, given clear structure and genuine choice, will do meaningful work. When a child makes a choice the teacher would not have made, she lets it stand — because the child's agency matters more than the teacher's preference.

In a teaching team: Teachers are given genuine ownership of their practice. The coordinator does not prescribe every lesson plan. Professional learning communities become spaces where teachers design their own professional growth, choose their own inquiry questions, and share their own experiments — not spaces where administrators deliver mandates.

In a whole school: The school leader co-creates the strategic plan with the community — teachers, parents, students. "A living planner is co-created with students; a living leadership plan is co-created with the school community." (Humanistic Leadership, 2026) When a school leader makes every decision unilaterally, teachers lose their agency — and what happens next is predictable: they stop innovating, stop risking, and start waiting for instructions. The pattern mirrors exactly what happens to children when their agency is denied.

In leadership: The head of school asks: do my teachers feel like they own their practice, or do they feel like they are implementing my vision? If the answer is the latter, agency has not been honoured at the institutional level — and no amount of classroom-level work will compensate.

Self-Assessment: Honour Agency

Ask yourself these questions honestly.

1. **Am I the hardest-working person in the room?** If yes — who should be working harder? Not because you should work less, but because the children should be carrying more of the cognitive and motivational load. That is what ownership looks like.

2. **When was the last time a child in my room made a real decision about their own learning?** Not a choice between options I selected — a genuine decision. A topic they chose. An approach they designed. A problem they solved their own way.

3. **When a child asks "What should I do?" — what do I do?** Do I answer the question (maintaining my control)? Or do I ask it back — "What do you think you should do?" — trusting the child to find their own path?
4. **When a child makes a choice I would not have made, do I let it stand?** This is the real test. Agency is easy to honour when the child chooses what you would have chosen. It is only meaningful when the child chooses differently.
5. **Do I treat rebellion as a problem or as a signal?** The child who resists may be the child whose agency has been most thoroughly denied. What would change if you saw their resistance as information rather than defiance?
6. **Do the structures in my classroom belong to the children, or to me?** Did the children help create the routines, the expectations, the schedule? Or did I design it all and present it as theirs?
7. **If I am a school leader: do my teachers feel like owners of their practice, or implementers of my plan?** Ask them. Listen to the answer. The pattern is the same at every scale.

In Practice: Case Studies

Case Study 3: Mumbai — "I Told Them to Be Independent"

Context: Deepa teaches Grade 6 science at an IB school in Mumbai. She has eight years of teaching experience and is a strong advocate for student-centred learning. Her classroom features inquiry boards, student-led discussions, and a "question of the week" display.

The starting point: During a unit on ecosystems, Deepa designed what she considered a student-led investigation. She provided five pre-selected topics, five pre-approved research methods, and a template for the final presentation. Students "chose" their topic from her list, followed her research protocol, and presented using her template. Deepa was frustrated: "I gave them so much choice, and they still couldn't work independently."

A colleague observed her class and asked a simple question: "Whose investigation is this — yours or theirs?" Deepa realised that she had designed an investigation for students, not with them. The choices she offered were her choices, pre-filtered for safety and manageability. The students were executing her plan with cosmetic autonomy.

Corpus anchor: “Learners are agentic and we do not give agency; we only need to provide opportunities.” (Innovations, 2021)

What she tried first: Deepa removed all her pre-selected options and told students to “investigate anything about ecosystems that interests you.” The result was chaos. Half the class chose impossibly broad topics (“everything about the ocean”). Several chose topics so narrow they could answer them in one Google search. Three students sat paralysed, unable to begin without a framework. Deepa had swung from over-structure to under-structure — and both failed for the same reason: she was either controlling the agency or abandoning the students entirely.

What she changed: Deepa sat down with her class — all thirty of them — and said: “I want us to design this investigation together. What do we need to figure out before we start?” She wrote their ideas on the board. Students generated their own list: they needed a way to choose topics, a way to know if their topic was the right size, a timeline, and a way to show their learning. Over two class periods, Deepa and her students co-created the investigation framework. The students’ framework was messier than Deepa’s original one — it had gaps and required mid-course adjustments — but it was theirs.

Corpus anchor: “My daughter and I sat down together for a discussion on how our routine should be. We created our schedule. However, we have left it flexible.” (New Normal, 2020)

What shifted: The quality of engagement transformed. A student named Rohan, who had been a reliable but passive participant in previous investigations, chose to study how the building of a new highway near his neighbourhood was affecting local bird populations. He designed his own observation protocol, recruited his grandmother (who fed birds daily) as a data source, and produced a presentation that included hand-drawn bird identification charts. When asked why he chose this topic, he said: “Because it’s actually happening to me.”

Other students made similarly personal connections. Two students collaborated without being asked to, because their topics overlapped. A student who struggled academically produced the most creative presentation in the class — a children’s book about soil erosion — because the format was her choice, not the teacher’s.

Corpus anchor: “Writing what matters or writing what you own builds self-efficacy in children.” (Every Child is a Writer, 2021) — The same principle applies across disciplines: ownership of topic builds investment.

What did not change: The co-created framework took two full class periods — time Deepa had previously used for content instruction. Her pace slowed. She covered fewer topics in the term. During a curriculum meeting, she had to explain why her unit was "behind schedule." This is the real cost of honouring agency: it is slower than control. The teacher who honours agency must accept that efficiency and ownership are often in tension — and must be prepared to defend that trade-off to colleagues and administrators.

Deepa also noticed that three students — the ones who had been paralysed when given unlimited choice — needed more scaffolding than their peers within the co-created framework. Agency is not uniform. Some children exercise it immediately; others need gentle support structures before they can take the risk of directing their own learning. The framework says the teacher "removes obstacles" — but the obstacles are different for each child.

Case Study 4: Calgary — Agency in a Classroom of Forty-Two

Context: Arun teaches Grade 10 English at a large public high school in Calgary. His classes average forty-two students. The school follows the Alberta curriculum with provincial diploma exams at the end of Grade 12. Arun has fifteen years of teaching experience and a pragmatic approach: he believes in student agency but is honest about the constraints of large classes and standardised assessments.

The starting point: Arun's English class ran on a familiar pattern: he assigned the texts, designed the essay prompts, set the deadlines, and provided detailed rubrics. Students completed the work competently. But Arun noticed that in fifteen years of teaching, he had never had a student come to him after class to talk about a book they were reading on their own. Reading was something that happened to students in his class, not something students did as people. He was the hardest-working person in the room.

Corpus anchor: When agency is absent, "the teacher is the hardest-working person in the room. Children wait to be told what to do next." (Framework Definition — Honour Agency, absent-state description)

What he tried first: Arun introduced "independent reading Fridays" — students could read any book they chose for the full period. The first Friday, twelve students read. Fifteen students stared at books without turning pages. The remaining fifteen talked

quietly or scrolled on their phones. Arun realised that offering choice without building the capacity for choice produced passivity, not agency. Students who had spent ten years being told what to read did not suddenly know how to choose.

What he changed: Arun restructured his course around a principle he borrowed from writing workshop pedagogy: the student chooses what; the teacher provides how. For the novel study unit, he provided a list of forty titles spanning genres, cultures, and difficulty levels, but allowed students to propose alternatives. Students formed reading groups of three to five based on shared book choice — not assigned by the teacher. Each group set their own reading pace and discussion schedule, with one constraint: they had to meet Arun's checkpoint dates for the analytical essay.

The critical shift was in the essay. Instead of providing a prompt, Arun asked each student to generate their own analytical question about their chosen novel. He modelled the process: "Here's a question that's too simple: 'Is the protagonist good or bad?' Here's one that opens thinking: 'Why does the author make us sympathise with a character who does something we disagree with?'" Students spent a full period writing, discarding, and refining their questions. Arun circulated, asking: "Would this question keep you thinking for a week, or could you answer it tonight?"

Corpus anchor: "The children should feel agentic to choose their topic." (Every Child is a Writer, 2021); "The Responsive Approach puts the responsibility on the child to fix a problem or come out with a solution." (Responsive Attitude, 2019)

What shifted: The reading changed first. Students who had never discussed books voluntarily began arguing about character motivations during breaks. One group of four boys — all of whom had chosen a graphic novel, which Arun had almost excluded from the list — produced the most sophisticated analysis in the class, examining how visual framing shaped reader sympathy. A student named Preet, whose previous essays had been competent but voiceless, wrote an essay about her chosen novel that began: "This book made me angry in a way I didn't expect, and I want to understand why."

The essays were uneven. Some students chose questions that were too narrow. Some produced weaker work than they would have with a teacher-provided prompt. But the range of quality was different: the best work was far better than anything Arun had seen in fifteen years, because it came from genuine intellectual investment.

Corpus anchor: "It helps them feel in control of their decisions and actions. It comes across as an accomplishment and a reward." (New Normal, 2020)

What did not change: Forty-two students. Provincial exams. Arun still had to prepare students for standardised assessments that did not value the kind of personal engagement his reformed unit produced. He ran his new approach for two units per semester and kept traditional teacher-directed units for the rest — a pragmatic compromise. He also acknowledged that the reading group model required a classroom library he had to build himself, spending his own money on used books over three years. Agency in an under-resourced system has a cost that the teacher often bears personally.

Across Grade Levels

Honour Agency

K-5 (Primary)

Teacher behaviours: - Offers genuine choices in meaningful domains — not "Do you want the red worksheet or the blue one?" but "What do you want to write about?" "The children should feel agentic to choose their topic." (Every Child is a Writer, 2021) - Trusts children's capacity to solve problems: "The Responsive Approach puts the responsibility on the child to fix a problem or come out with a solution." (Responsive Attitude, 2019) Even with six-year-olds, the first move is the question, not the solution. - Co-creates classroom routines: "My daughter and I sat down together for a discussion on how our routine should be." (New Normal, 2020) Children who help design the structure treat it as theirs. - Brings home 3-4 books and asks children to choose. (Read Aloud, 2019) Choice in small moments builds the habit of agency.

Student response indicators: - Children choose their own writing topics and explain why the topic matters to them. "Writing what matters or writing what you own builds self-efficacy in children." (Every Child is a Writer, 2021) - Children fix their own problems without waiting for the teacher to intervene. "You break it, you fix it." (Logical Consequences, 2019) - Children ask genuine questions driven by curiosity — "why is the moon following us?" (Children's Questions, 2020) — because they know their questions will be honoured. - "It helps them feel in control of their decisions and actions. It comes across as an accomplishment and a reward." (New Normal, 2020)

Common mistakes at this level: - **Offering fake choices:** Presenting two teacher-approved options and calling it agency. Children recognise fake choice immediately. Agency requires decisions that genuinely matter. - **Rescuing too quickly:** When a child struggles, the instinct is to help. But solving the child's problem for them communicates: "I don't believe you can do this." Trust the child to struggle productively. - **Confusing**

chaos with agency: Removing all structure and calling it freedom. Agency without structure produces confusion, not empowerment. "The program was structured and yet the children felt the freedom." (IB School Visit, 2019)

6-8 (Middle)

Teacher behaviours: - Resists the urge to over-scaffold inquiry projects. Middle schoolers need genuine intellectual challenge, not step-by-step instructions disguised as "guided inquiry." The teacher sets the boundaries; the student navigates within them. - Involves students in designing assessment criteria: "How will we know this work is excellent?" Co-created rubrics are structures that liberate. - Creates space for student-led discussions where the teacher deliberately steps back. The teacher's silence is a form of honouring agency — trusting that the students can sustain intellectual discourse without adult mediation. - Responds to "rebellion" as agency misrecognised: "Children who come across as rebels are treated as hopeless instead of taking out the time and effort to bring out the best in those who are unable to do it themselves." (Plight of Adolescents, 2018) At 6-8, what looks like defiance is often agency searching for a legitimate outlet.

Student response indicators: - Students propose alternative approaches to assignments — and the teacher takes the proposals seriously. - Students self-organise group work without step-by-step teacher direction. - Students make and defend choices about their learning (topic, method, presentation format) with reasoning, not just preference. - Students show initiative: extending a project, pursuing a tangent, bringing outside resources into classroom work.

Common mistakes at this level: - **Reclaiming control when things get messy:** Agency means students will sometimes go in unexpected directions. The teacher who pulls the class back "on track" at the first sign of divergence is honouring compliance, not agency. Assess whether the divergence is productive before redirecting. - **Treating compliance as engagement:** The student who does everything asked, earns high grades, and never causes problems may be the most agency-deprived student in the room. Look for initiative, not obedience. - **Punishing the wrong kind of agency:** When a 12-year-old pushes back on an assignment, the question is not "How do I get them to comply?" but "What legitimate need are they expressing?" Mamta's reframe: the "rebel" is exercising agency that the system has not created a channel for.

9-12 (Secondary)

Teacher behaviours: - Designs authentic assessment tasks where students define the question, not just answer it. At this level, agency means intellectual ownership — the student who frames their own research question is exercising agency at its most mature. - Trusts students to manage their own learning process: “Trust that he can decide well.” (Responsive Attitude, 2019) This applies with greater force at 9-12, where over-management communicates distrust. - Creates structures where students teach each other — not as a time-saving measure, but as a genuine acknowledgment that peers have expertise worth sharing. “One child would first assist the other to complete his work and vice versa. Thus, instilling values from a very young age.” (IB School Visit, 2019) This principle scales upward. - Involves students in course-level decisions where possible: pacing, assessment weighting, project topics. Adolescents who have no voice in their education experience it as something done to them.

Student response indicators: - Students generate their own learning goals and track their progress against them. - Students critique course materials and propose alternatives — and do so constructively because they feel ownership. - Students take intellectual risks: choosing difficult topics, defending unpopular positions, pursuing original research. - Students articulate why they are learning something, connecting it to their own purposes — not just to the grade.

Common mistakes at this level: - **Using grades as the sole motivator:** When grades are the only reason to engage, agency is absent. The student working only for marks has outsourced their learning motivation to the institution. - **Assuming adolescents need more control, not less:** The instinct is to tighten control as content becomes more complex. The framework says the opposite: as children mature, the teacher’s role shifts from providing choices to removing obstacles to the student’s own choices. - **Tokenistic student voice:** Asking for student feedback and ignoring it. Worse: creating “student council” structures that have no real influence. Adolescents detect performative participation instantly.

Honour Agency — 10-Week Checklist

Weeks 1-2: Awareness & Observation - [ ] Complete the Whole-Classroom Diagnostic, scoring yourself on all 5 Agency items - [ ] Observe: who is the hardest-working person in the room? If it is you, agency may be absent - [ ] Count the genuine choices students made today — not “red or blue worksheet” but decisions that affected their learning direction - [ ] Notice how students respond to open-ended prompts: do they ask “What do you want me to do?” (agency absent) or do they start working (agency present)? - [ ]

K-5: Note which children choose their own topics vs. ask for permission. 6-8: Note which students self-organise vs. wait for instructions. 9-12: Note which students take intellectual risks vs. play it safe for the grade

Weeks 3-4: First Moves - [ ] Introduce one genuine choice per day in a meaningful domain: topic, method, or format — not trivial preferences. "The children should feel agentic to choose their topic." (Every Child is a Writer, 2021) - [ ] When a child asks for help, respond with a question before giving the answer: "What have you tried?" or "What do you think you should do?" (Responsive Attitude, 2019) - [ ] Co-create one classroom routine with students — even a small one (how to start the day, how to transition between activities) - [ ] Resist rescuing: when a student struggles, wait 30 seconds longer than feels comfortable before intervening - [ ] 6-8/9-12: Reframe one "rebellious" student's behaviour as agency seeking an outlet — what legitimate need are they expressing?

Weeks 5-8: Embedding - [ ] Expand genuine choice to a larger domain: a project where students define the question, not just answer it - [ ] Co-create assessment criteria for one major task: "How will we know this work is excellent?" — involve students in designing the rubric - [ ] Step back from one discussion: let students sustain intellectual discourse for 10 minutes without teacher intervention. Increase to 15, then 20 minutes over four weeks - [ ] When students propose an alternative approach to an assignment, say "yes" at least once — and see what happens - [ ] Observe: are students starting to fix their own problems? "You break it, you fix it" (Logical Consequences, 2019) applies to academic problems too — the child who identifies and corrects her own errors is exercising agency

Weeks 9-10: Assessment & Reflection - [ ] Re-take the Agency items on the Whole-Classroom Diagnostic — compare scores - [ ] Ask students: "In this class, who decides what you learn and how you learn it?" — the answer reveals whether agency is real or performative - [ ] Identify where you reclaimed control unnecessarily over the past 10 weeks — what would you let go of next time? - [ ] Note: agency in 9-12 contexts with entrenched compliance culture may take a full term or more to develop. If scores have not shifted dramatically, this is expected — look for small signals (one student who started choosing her own topic, one discussion that sustained itself)

Honour Agency — End-of-Term Markers

Observable in the classroom: - Students make genuine choices about their learning without asking for permission — the question "Is this what you want?" has become rare - At least one student has proposed an alternative approach to an assignment that the teacher accepted - The teacher is no longer the hardest-working person in the room —

students carry intellectual responsibility - Students fix their own problems (academic and social) as a first resort, seeking teacher help as a second resort - K-5: Children choose topics and explain why they matter. 6-8: Students self-organise group work. 9-12: Students design their own inquiry questions

Timeline warnings: - **What happens fast (Weeks 1-4):** Offering choices and asking questions before giving answers are teacher behaviours that shift quickly. Students respond to genuine choice almost immediately — especially at K-5, where natural agency has not yet been suppressed. - **What takes a full term:** At 6-8 and 9-12, students who have been trained in compliance for years need sustained evidence that agency is genuinely welcomed. The first student to take a risk is testing whether you mean it. Your response to that student determines whether others follow. Expect one full term minimum for a compliance-trained class to genuinely believe that agency is safe. - **What takes longer than a term:** In institutional cultures where grades are the primary motivator and teacher authority is unquestioned, building agency may take an entire year. This is not failure — it is realistic. Mamta observes that even among educators who profess progressive values, "schools adopt progressive practices widely and implement them poorly" (Humanistic Leadership, 2026). The gap between aspiration and practice is the real battleground.

For Professional Learning Communities

Honour Agency

Individual Reflection: 1. In your classroom, who is the hardest-working person in the room during a typical lesson? If it is you, what would need to change for children to do more of the cognitive and organisational work? 2. Recall a time you offered a child a "choice" that was not a genuine choice — the options were pre-approved, the outcome was predetermined, or the child had no real authority over what happened next. What made it feel necessary to control the outcome?

Group Dialogue: 3. The framework claims that "we do not give agency; we only need to provide opportunities." What is the difference between granting agency and removing obstacles to it? Can your group identify a concrete example of each? 4. In your school, where do children have genuine authority — not just the appearance of choice, but real decision-making power? Where is student voice performative rather than substantive? 5. How does your school respond to children who exercise agency in ways adults find inconvenient — the child who questions a rule, refuses an assignment, or wants to pursue a topic outside the curriculum?

Between-Session Observation Task: During one lesson, notice every moment you make a decision on behalf of children that they could have made themselves. Count them. Bring the count to the next session.

Facilitation Note: Question 5 often reveals a gap between espoused values and enacted practice. Schools that claim to honour agency may punish its exercise when it disrupts adult plans. This is the framework's strongest diagnostic question.

Research Grounding

Honour Agency: Why It Works

Edward Deci and Richard Ryan (Self-Determination Theory) demonstrated across hundreds of studies that when teachers support children's autonomy — providing genuine choice, meaningful rationales, and acknowledgment of their perspective — intrinsic motivation, engagement, and learning all increase. Their core finding: autonomy support (not autonomy itself) is what the teacher controls. You cannot make a child autonomous, but you can remove the obstacles that prevent them from exercising the autonomy they already have.

Read this if: you want the most empirically robust explanation of why choice and agency improve learning outcomes. Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. American Psychologist, 55(1), 68–78.

Lev Vygotsky (Zone of Proximal Development) showed that learning happens in the space between what a child can do alone and what they can do with support. The teacher's role is not to transmit knowledge but to collaborate within this zone — to scaffold, then withdraw. This explains why co-creation works: when a child helps design a schedule or a writing process, they are working within their ZPD with the adult as collaborator, not controller.

Read this if: you want to understand why co-creation is not just nice — it is developmentally optimal. Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). Mind in Society. Harvard University Press.

Chapter 5: Speak with Intention

What This Condition Means

A teacher speaks with intention when they consciously choose the precise words, questions, tone, and framing they use with children — understanding that language is the single most powerful tool available to an educator, more impactful than any curriculum, method, or programme. The way adults speak to children determines whether children feel trusted, respected, and capable — or judged, controlled, and diminished.

Why This Condition Matters

Something that experienced educators know but that no one says clearly enough: the words you use with children become the words children use with themselves.

This is not a metaphor. It is a developmental mechanism. Children first hear language as external speech — what the adults around them say. Then they internalise it as private speech — talking to themselves aloud while they work. And then it becomes inner speech — the silent thinking voice inside their heads. What this means, practically, is that when you say "Hurry up" to a child every morning, the child learns to say "Hurry up" to herself. When you say "What do YOU need to be doing right now?" — a question that requires the child to pause, assess her own state, and make a decision — the child learns to ask herself that question. Your words do not just communicate. They construct.

"It is imperative that adults make the right choice of words when they speak to the children." (Logical Consequences Part 2, 2019)

The word "imperative" is not casual. Mamta uses it because she has watched what happens when adults are careless with language — and she has been honest about doing it herself. "Today, I do realise that at that moment, I killed her instinct to know more and took away her opportunity to make connections." (Children's Questions, 2020) A single careless response to a child's genuine question — dismissing it, redirecting it, answering it too quickly — can extinguish the curiosity that drove the question. And once that instinct is killed, it does not simply come back on its own.

Every method you use in your classroom — inquiry-based learning, writing workshop, collaborative projects — assumes that children will bring their genuine thinking into the room. But children who have been spoken at rather than spoken with learn to keep their

genuine thinking hidden. They produce what the teacher seems to want. They give the expected answer. They write the safe essay. The classroom runs on compliance, and the teacher mistakes compliance for engagement.

Language is the mechanism through which all four conditions are either built or destroyed. Safety is built or broken by the teacher's tone. Agency is honoured or undermined by whether the teacher asks or tells. Structure is experienced as liberating or constraining based on how it is communicated. Language is not one tool among many. It is the primary lever.

The Philosophical Grounding

Why does language hold this power? Because thought itself is social in origin. A child does not first think and then speak. A child first hears others speak, then learns to speak, and then learns to think — in that order. The language environment a child inhabits literally shapes the cognitive architecture the child builds.

This insight — drawn from Vygotsky's theory of inner speech — explains why the specific words matter so much. When a teacher consistently uses question frames ("What do you think should happen next?"), the child develops a self-questioning inner voice. When a teacher consistently uses directive frames ("Do this now"), the child develops an inner voice that waits for instructions. The teacher is not just managing the classroom in the moment. She is building the child's capacity for self-regulation, self-reflection, and self-direction — or she is preventing that capacity from developing.

There is a further dimension. Language is not just about what is said but about the quality of the exchange. A directive — "Sit down" — closes the conversation. A question — "What do you need right now so you can focus?" — opens it. The directive is what linguists call authoritative discourse: it demands acceptance. The question is internally persuasive discourse: it invites the child to think alongside the adult. Over time, classrooms run on directives produce children who wait to be told. Classrooms run on questions produce children who think for themselves.

This is why Mamta calls it a "paradigm shift" — not a technique to add, but a fundamental change in the relationship between adult speech and child thinking.

What Intentional Language Looks Like in Practice

When a teacher speaks with intention, you can observe these specific behaviours:

She asks questions instead of giving directives. "What do YOU need to be doing right now?" replaces "Hurry up." "What will you need to do so you can be ready for...?" replaces "You are already late." (Responsive Attitude, 2019) The shift is from the teacher doing the thinking for the child to the child doing the thinking for herself. It determines who carries the cognitive load — the teacher or the learner.

A note on the transition: if you have been using directives for years and you suddenly switch to questions, your children may not know how to respond. A child trained on "Hurry up" has never been asked to assess her own pace. She may stare at you. She may say "I don't know." This is not failure — it is evidence that the child has never been asked to self-regulate in this way. Stay with the question. Over days and weeks, the child will learn to answer it — and eventually, to ask it of herself without your prompt.

She uses reinforcing, reminding, and redirecting language. "Reinforce, remind and redirect" (Responsive Attitude, 2019) — this is the teacher's language cycle. Reinforcing language notices and names what is working: "I notice you started your writing without being asked." Reminding language cues the shared agreement: "What did we agree about how we start our mornings?" Redirecting language provides a clear boundary without shame: "Stop. That's not safe." Each type serves a different purpose — but all three maintain the child's dignity while guiding behaviour. This is fundamentally different from the correction-instruction-penalty cycle that runs most classrooms.

She talks to the child, not at the child. There is a difference between speaking to someone — as a person worthy of respect and capable of understanding — and speaking at them — as a problem to be managed. When a teacher keeps her volume low and shows faith in the child's capacity to repair, the child experiences trust built through tone and posture, not through grand declarations. Volume is one of the most honest indicators of a teacher's intentionality. When a teacher raises her voice, she has communicated — whether she intended to or not — that authority matters more than relationship.

She keeps private matters private. "It is also imperative that we talk to the child about his logical consequence in private and not in front of his siblings or peers, so we are RESPECTFUL to the child." (Logical Consequences Part 2, 2019) Public correction sacrifices the child's dignity for classroom efficiency. The child who is corrected in front of peers does not just receive feedback — she receives social humiliation. And humiliation destroys safety. Speaking with intention means choosing not just the right words but the right context.

She models honest self-reflection about her own language. Mamta does not present herself as a master of intentional language. She presents herself as someone who failed and learned. "Today, I do realise that at that moment, I killed her instinct to know more and took away her opportunity to make connections." (Children's Questions, 2020) When an adult names her own errors honestly — "I should not have said that; let me try again" — the child learns something more important than any sentence stem: that growth matters more than performance, and that adults are learners too.

Calling Capacity Forth

Some moments are not about correcting behaviour. They are about naming what a child could be, out loud, before the child has earned it. Three moves, in this order:

1. **Recognise what is.** "I noticed you stayed with that problem even when it got hard." Specific. Observed. Not "good job." A noticing.
2. **Stay through what is hard.** "This is hard. I'm here. Try it again." You are not solving it. You are not encouraging from the sidelines. You are present in the difficulty.
3. **Name what could be.** "I expect this of you because I know you can do it." Spoken plainly. By name. The expectation is the gift.

These are not separate techniques. They are one move in three parts. The child learns: someone is watching, someone is staying, someone believes.

What the Child Experiences

When intentional language is present, you can observe it in children's behaviour:

Children find and use their own voice. "To Write is to use your Voice. To Write is to Share yourself and your life." (Every Child is a Writer, 2021) When children have experienced language that respects their thinking, they discover what they want to say — and they say it. Their writing has voice because the classroom has made voice safe.

Children ask genuine questions. The child who asks "Why is the moon following us?" (Children's Questions, 2020) is exercising the instinct to know more — the fire of inquiry that every child is born with. When adults respond to curiosity with curiosity — "What an interesting question. What do you think might be happening?" — the fire stays alive. When adults respond with dismissal or a quick answer, the fire dies.

Children feel trusted and respected. The child's experience of trust is not built through grand gestures. It is built through the teacher's tone — sentence by sentence, interaction by interaction, day after day. A low volume, a genuine question, faith shown in the child's capacity to work through difficulty — these are the actions that accumulate into trust.

Children correct their own work. When the language environment is non-judgmental, self-correction "reduces the pressure on the children to be corrected" (Error Correction, 2018). The child who has been spoken to with intention does not need the teacher to find every error. She finds them herself — because the classroom has taught her that errors are information, not failures.

When Intentional Language Is Absent

When intentional language is absent, the classroom runs on directives, corrections, and compliance-seeking. "Hurry up." "Sit down." "Pay attention." "That's wrong." Volume is used as a control mechanism. Speed is valued over understanding. The teacher's language communicates urgency, authority, and judgment — and the children internalise exactly that.

Children who are confused stay silent because questions are met with impatience. Children who misbehave are corrected publicly, their dignity sacrificed for classroom order. "We ridicule him, look down at him for his rebellious behaviour when all he is trying to do is to make his own choices." (Plight of Adolescents, 2018)

The most devastating absence is invisible: the child who stops asking questions. She has not become less curious. She has learned that curiosity is unwelcome. "I killed her instinct to know more." (Children's Questions, 2020) The instinct was there. The adult's careless language extinguished it.

What makes this condition urgent: unlike a peace corner you can build in an afternoon, language patterns take time to change. The teacher who has spent ten years saying "Hurry up" cannot switch to questions overnight. The old patterns are deep. Changing them requires the same intentionality this entire framework demands — conscious, daily practice until the new pattern replaces the old one.

What Is Not Obvious About Speaking with Intention

Changing your language feels awkward before it feels natural. The first time you replace “Hurry up” with “What do you need to be doing right now?” it will feel scripted. That is normal. Every new practice feels unnatural before it becomes habitual. The discomfort is not a sign that this is wrong. It is a sign that you are changing a pattern that has been automatic for years.

Intentional language is not soft language. Speaking with intention does not mean speaking gently at all times. It means choosing your words consciously. Sometimes the intentional choice is direct and firm: “Stop. That is not safe.” (Responsive Attitude, 2019) The difference between intentional firmness and reactive anger is that the first serves the child and the second serves the teacher’s frustration.

Children hear what you do not say. A teacher who praises only finished work teaches children that process does not matter. A teacher who only asks questions she already knows the answer to teaches children that genuine inquiry is not valued. Intentional language includes the questions you choose not to ask, the corrections you choose not to make, and the silences you choose to hold.

Your language with adults shapes your language with children. A teacher who speaks to colleagues with impatience will find that impatience leaking into her classroom. A school leader who speaks to teachers with judgment will find that judgment cascading to children. Language is a whole-person practice — you cannot speak with intention to children and without intention to adults. The two registers bleed into each other.

The Shift You Are Looking For

A teacher knows they are speaking with intention when children’s natural curiosity stays alive and their writing finds genuine voice. The shift is specific: children who once stayed silent now ask real questions — like Mamta’s daughter asking “why is the moon following us?” (Children’s Questions, 2020). Children who once wrote safely now “share themselves and their lives” through writing (Every Child is a Writer, 2021).

The deeper shift: you will notice the change in yourself before you see it in the children. One day you will catch yourself mid-sentence — about to say “Hurry up” — and you will pause and ask the question instead. That pause is intentionality in action. It is the moment where the old pattern meets the new one, and you choose.

At Every Scale

In a single classroom: The teacher practises specific sentence stems until they become reflex. “What do YOU need to be doing right now?” replaces “Hurry up.” “I notice you…” replaces “Good job.” “What did we agree about…?” replaces “You were supposed to…” She keeps her volume low. She addresses behaviour privately. She responds to genuine questions with genuine curiosity. Language changes one sentence at a time.

In a teaching team: Teachers practise intentional language with each other — in meetings, in feedback, in corridor conversations. A coordinator who says “I noticed you tried something new in that lesson — tell me about it” models the same reinforcing language she expects in classrooms. When intentional language becomes the team’s default register, it cascades naturally into classrooms.

In a whole school: The school leader uses intentional language in assemblies, in parent communication, in board presentations. “Relationships are not an extra task — they are the infrastructure of a thriving school.” (Humanistic Leadership, 2026) When the school’s institutional voice — its newsletters, its policies, its evaluation language — speaks with intention, it signals to every member of the community that language matters.

In leadership: The head of school audits the school’s institutional language. Do evaluation forms use deficit language (“areas of weakness”) or growth language (“areas for development”)? Do policies speak to teachers as professionals or as employees? Does the school’s communication with parents speak to them or at them? Institutional language shapes institutional culture with the same mechanism that classroom language shapes classroom culture.

Self-Assessment: Speak with Intention

Ask yourself these questions honestly. There are no right answers — only honest ones.

1. **What is my default mode — questions or directives?** Listen to yourself for one morning. Count how many times you tell a child what to do versus how many times you ask the child to assess what they need to do. The ratio tells you where you are.

2. **When was the last time I caught myself mid-sentence and chose different words?** This is the most direct indicator of intentionality in practice. If you cannot remember, your language may be running on autopilot.

3. **What happens to my volume when I am stressed?** Volume is honest. When the room is loud, when you are tired, when a child pushes your patience — what happens to your voice? The children notice before you do.

4. **Do I correct in public or in private?** Think of the last time you addressed a child's behaviour. Were peers watching? Did the child have the dignity of a private conversation? Public correction may be efficient, but it sacrifices safety for speed.

5. **When a child asks a genuine question, what is my first instinct?** Do you answer it quickly to move on? Do you redirect it to stay on topic? Or do you pause — and wonder alongside the child? That pause is where curiosity lives or dies.

6. **What language do I use with my colleagues?** If you speak to peers with impatience, frustration, or judgment, those patterns will enter your classroom. Intentional language is not a professional technique — it is a way of being with people.

7. **Would a child in my room say that I speak to them or at them?** Ask them. You may be surprised by the answer.

In Practice: Case Studies

Case Study 5: Bangalore — The Teacher Who Stopped Saying "Good Job"

Context: Rekha teaches Grade 2 at a progressive international school in Bangalore. She completed a workshop on positive reinforcement during her teacher training and has built her classroom practice around frequent praise: "Good job!" "Excellent!" "You're so smart!" "I love your work!" Her classroom is warm and her students clearly like her.

The starting point: During a writing conference with a seven-year-old named Ananya, Rekha said, "Good job, Ananya! I love your story!" Ananya beamed, closed her notebook, and said, "I'm done." Rekha asked if she wanted to add more details. Ananya shook her head: "You said it was good." Rekha noticed the same pattern across her class: children treated her praise as an endpoint, not an encouragement. Once she approved, they stopped working. Her positive language was functioning as judgment — pleasant judgment, but judgment nonetheless. Children were writing for her approval, not for their own expression.

Corpus anchor: "A Writing Workshop must be a place that will have no right or wrong answers... The weirdest ideas as well as ideas inspired by other writers should be appreciated." (Every Child is a Writer, 2021) — Appreciation is different from evaluation.

What she tried first: Rekha tried to stop praising entirely. She said nothing when children showed her work. This was worse — children looked confused, then anxious. Several asked, "Is it bad?" The absence of praise read as disapproval. Rekha realised the problem was not the presence or absence of praise. It was the kind of language she used. She needed to shift from evaluative language ("Good job") to descriptive language ("I notice you used three different colours in your drawing") and inquiry language ("Tell me about this part").

What she changed: Rekha practised three language shifts, deliberately, over six weeks:

1. She replaced "Good job!" with "Tell me about this." This single replacement changed the dynamic from evaluation to conversation. When Ananya next showed her a story, Rekha said, "Tell me about this character." Ananya talked for four minutes — explaining details that weren't on the page yet but existed in her imagination. Rekha said, "Would you like to add that to your story?" Ananya opened her notebook again.

2. She replaced "You're so smart!" with "I noticed you tried something new here." This shifted the focus from the child's identity (smart) to the child's action (trying). Children began talking about what they did rather than what they were.

3. She replaced "Hurry up" with "What do you need to be doing right now?" This put the responsibility for time management on the child, signalling trust.

Corpus anchor: "What do YOU need to be doing right now?" (Responsive Attitude, 2019); "Reinforce, remind and redirect." (Responsive Attitude, 2019)

What shifted: The classroom conversation changed within two weeks. Children stopped seeking Rekha's evaluation and started sharing their process. A boy named Vivaan, who previously wrote the minimum required and immediately sought approval, began revising on his own. When Rekha asked why, he said: "I want to tell you more about it." He wasn't writing for her approval anymore — he was writing to have something worth talking about.

The most unexpected shift was in peer interaction. When Rekha stopped evaluating, children stopped evaluating each other. "That's good" disappeared from peer feedback and was replaced with "What's happening in this part?" and "I like the bit about the dog — is that your dog?" Children were mirroring Rekha's descriptive and inquiry language because they heard it all day.

Corpus anchor: "To Write is to use your Voice. To Write is to Share yourself and your life." (Every Child is a Writer, 2021)

What did not change: Rekha's instinct. Six weeks in, she still caught herself saying "Good job!" at least twice a day. The old pattern was deeply embedded — it was how she had been trained, how she had been praised as a child, and how every other teacher in her school spoke. Intentional language is not a switch you flip. It is a practice you sustain, and it requires catching yourself, correcting yourself, and forgiving yourself for slipping. Rekha kept a tally on a sticky note on her desk: one mark for each "Good job!" that escaped. By month three, the tallies had decreased but never reached zero.

Case Study 6: Toronto — When a Question Killed Curiosity

Context: Daniel teaches Grade 5 in a public school in Toronto. He is in his first year of teaching and considers himself student-centred. He asks a lot of questions — during whole-class discussions, during small-group work, during individual check-ins. He believes that questions are better than directives.

The starting point: During a science unit on weather systems, a student named Lina raised her hand and said: "Why does the sky change colour before a storm?" Daniel, pressed for time and two activities behind his lesson plan, responded: "That's a great question, Lina! We'll cover that in next week's unit. Can you hold that thought?" Lina nodded and did not raise her hand again for the rest of the week. The following Monday, when Daniel introduced the unit on atmospheric phenomena — which would have answered her question — Lina did not mention it. The question had died.

Daniel did not notice this at first. He noticed it three weeks later when he reviewed his class discussion notes and realised that Lina, who had been one of his most curious students in September, had stopped asking questions entirely. She participated when called on. She completed her work. But the questions — the genuine, unprompted, "I wonder why" questions — had stopped.

Corpus anchor: "I killed her instinct to know more and took away her opportunity to make connections." (Children's Questions, 2020)

What he tried first: Daniel tried inviting Lina's questions directly: "Lina, do you have any questions about this?" Lina shook her head. Direct invitation does not restore a sense of safety that has been damaged. The child had learned — from a single interaction that Daniel considered minor — that her timing was wrong, her curiosity was an interruption, and questions were welcome only when they fit the schedule.

What he changed: Daniel made three changes to his practice, informed by a colleague who shared Mamta's essay on children's questions:

First, he created a "Question Book" — a shared notebook where any student could write a question at any time, about anything. He seeded it with his own questions: "Why do we dream?" and "I've always wondered why some ice cream melts faster than others." He read from the Question Book every morning, choosing one question to discuss for five minutes. The questions were never graded, never corrected, never deferred.

Corpus anchor: "MY BOOK OF PERSONAL INQUIRIES" — Mamta's daughter writes questions in a notebook; they look for answers together. (Children's Questions, 2020)

Second, he changed his response to questions that came at inconvenient times. Instead of "Can you hold that thought?", he said: "That's a real question. Let me write it down right now so we don't lose it." He wrote the question on the board, visibly, in the student's words. Even when he could not discuss it immediately, the act of writing it down told the child: your question matters enough to be preserved.

Third, he began modelling his own curiosity aloud: "I don't know the answer to that. Let me wonder about it with you." He shared moments of genuine not-knowing — not performed ignorance, but actual uncertainty about topics he found genuinely confusing.

Corpus anchor: "I now show enthusiasm to her questions. I invite her questions with admiration for her thoughts and astonishment for her imagination." (Children's Questions, 2020)

What shifted: Lina wrote in the Question Book before she spoke in class again. Her first entry: "Why do puddles disappear faster on some days?" Daniel read it aloud and spent seven minutes exploring it with the class. Lina watched. The next week, she wrote two more questions. By the end of the month, she was raising her hand again — not frequently, but genuinely. The questions were tentative: "I'm not sure about this, but I wonder..."

The Question Book transformed the class beyond Lina. Students began writing questions from outside school — "Why does my cat's purr sound different when she's sleeping?" — that had nothing to do with the curriculum but everything to do with curiosity. Daniel used these as entry points to connect students' natural wondering to the science they were studying. The question about the cat led to a discussion about sound waves. The question about puddles led to a discussion about evaporation rates and surface area.

What did not change: Daniel still catches himself deferring questions when he feels time pressure. The instinct to manage the schedule is powerful, and first-year teachers face genuine pressure to "cover the curriculum." He has not eliminated the tension between honouring every question and meeting curriculum expectations. What has changed is his awareness: he now notices when a child's curiosity goes quiet, and he treats that silence

as an alarm, not a convenience. The hardest lesson for Daniel was accepting that a single careless response — "Can you hold that thought?" — can do real damage, and that repairing that damage takes weeks of consistent, intentional practice.

Across Grade Levels

Speak with Intention

K-5 (Primary)

Teacher behaviours: - Replaces directives with questions as default mode: "What do YOU need to be doing right now?" instead of "Hurry up." (Responsive Attitude, 2019) - Uses the remind-reinforce-redirect cycle: "Reinforce, remind and redirect." (Responsive Attitude, 2019) — affirmation before correction, always. - Keeps volume low consistently, not only during conflict. "The child feels trusted and respected when we keep our volume low." (Logical Consequences Part 2, 2019) - Responds to children's questions with curiosity, not dismissal. "It is my responsibility to keep her fire of inquiry going." (Children's Questions, 2020) - Prioritises self-correction over teacher correction in academic work: "Self-correction reduces the pressure on the children to be corrected." (Error Correction, 2018)

Student response indicators: - Children ask genuine questions — the "why is the moon following us?" kind (Children's Questions, 2020) — because they have learned that questions are valued, not inconvenient. - Children's writing has voice: "To Write is to use your Voice. To Write is to Share yourself and your life." (Every Child is a Writer, 2021) Intentional teacher language creates conditions where children find their own. - Children correct their own errors when given the opportunity and the time, rather than waiting for the teacher to mark them wrong. - Children mirror the teacher's language patterns: they ask each other questions, they use "I notice..." and "I wonder..." — because they have heard these patterns modelled.

Common mistakes at this level: - **Over-praising:** "Great job!" said indiscriminately teaches children that praise is meaningless. Intentional language means specific, honest feedback: "I notice you chose a topic from your own life — that gives your writing voice." - **Answering children's questions instead of honouring them:** When a child asks "Why is the sky blue?" and the teacher gives the science answer, she has satisfied the question and killed the inquiry. The intentional response preserves the fire: "What do you think might be happening?" - **Using volume as a management tool:** Raising your voice "works" in the short term and destroys safety and trust in the long term. Every time the teacher shouts, she communicates that power, not respect, governs the room.

6-8 (Middle)

Teacher behaviours: - Speaks to the student, not at them: "It is imperative that adults make the right choice of words when they speak to the children." (Logical Consequences Part 2, 2019) Middle schoolers are acutely sensitive to being talked down to. - Uses private conversation for behavioural feedback — never public correction. The twelve-year-old corrected in front of peers loses face, and face is everything at this age. - Asks open-ended questions that invite genuine thought: not "What is the answer to question 3?" but "What surprised you in this text?" The question signals what the teacher values. - Names thinking moves explicitly: "You're making a connection between..." or "That's an inference — you went beyond what the text says." Naming what students do intellectually validates their thinking process.

Student response indicators: - Students engage in extended discussion without teacher prompting — they have internalised the conversational norms the teacher modelled. - Students give each other feedback that mirrors the teacher's intentional language: specific, kind, and focused on the work, not the person. - Students disagree productively — "I see it differently because..." rather than "That's wrong" — because they have heard the teacher model respectful disagreement. - Students self-advocate: they articulate what they need ("I need more time" or "Can I try a different approach?") because the teacher's language has taught them that their needs are legitimate.

Common mistakes at this level: - **Sarcasm:** The single most destructive language pattern at 6-8. Sarcasm communicates: "I am smarter than you and I want you to know it." It is incompatible with safety, agency, and intentional language simultaneously. - **Talking too much:** At 6-8, teacher silence is a form of intentional language. The teacher who fills every pause is denying students processing time and communicating that the teacher's voice matters more than theirs. - **Using peer pressure as a tool:** "Everyone else has finished" or "Your group is waiting for you" — these leverage the middle schooler's deepest vulnerability (social belonging) as a compliance mechanism. Intentional language never weaponises social pressure.

9-12 (Secondary)

Teacher behaviours: - Uses language that respects intellectual maturity: treats adolescents as emerging adults whose ideas deserve serious engagement, not as children who need simplified explanations. - Provides written feedback that is specific, formative, and identity-affirming: "Your argument structure is strong here — the evidence in paragraph three is doing real analytical work" rather than "Good essay" or "Needs improvement." - Models intellectual honesty: "I'm not sure about this. Let me think about it." or "I was wrong about that last week." Adults who admit uncertainty give

adolescents permission to not-know. - Asks questions that invite genuine inquiry: "What assumptions is this author making?" or "What would change if this weren't true?" — questions that have no single right answer and that the teacher does not already know the answer to.

Student response indicators: - Students produce original arguments rather than restating the teacher's position. - Students seek feedback to improve, not to confirm — they bring drafts, ask specific questions, and revise based on input. - Students use precise, discipline-specific language because the teacher has modelled it and they have internalised it. - Students challenge sources, methods, and conclusions — including the teacher's — with evidence, because they have been taught that critical thinking is valued, not punished.

Common mistakes at this level: - **Lecturing as default mode:** The teacher who talks for 40 of 45 minutes is not speaking with intention — she is performing knowledge. Intentional language at 9-12 means strategic, well-timed input that opens thinking space, not fills it. - **Giving feedback only on product, not process:** "This essay is a B+" tells the student nothing about how to improve. Intentional language at this level means naming what the student did well as a thinker and what their next intellectual move should be. - **Assuming adolescents understand teacher intentions:** "They should know I respect them" — no. At 9-12, respect must be communicated explicitly, repeatedly, through language that demonstrates it. Adolescents who have been dismissed by adults for years do not assume good intent.

Speak with Intention — 10-Week Checklist

Weeks 1-2: Awareness & Observation - [ ] Complete the Whole-Classroom Diagnostic, scoring yourself on all 5 Language items - [ ] Record yourself (audio only) for one full lesson. Listen for: directives vs. questions, volume changes, sarcasm, filler praise ("Good job!"), and how you respond to wrong answers - [ ] Count directives vs. questions over one day — Mamta's standard: the question should be the default mode, not the directive (Responsive Attitude, 2019) - [ ] Notice: when a child gives a wrong answer, what is your first response? What is the class's first response? These reveal the language culture of the room - [ ] K-5: Listen for whether children echo your language patterns. 6-8: Listen for sarcasm (yours and students'). 9-12: Listen for whether students use precise, discipline-specific language

Weeks 3-4: First Moves - [ ] Replace one directive per day with a question: "What do YOU need to be doing right now?" instead of "Hurry up." (Responsive Attitude, 2019) - [ ] Practise the remind-reinforce-redirect cycle: affirm what is working before naming what needs to change (Responsive Attitude, 2019) - [ ] Eliminate one filler-praise phrase (e.g.,

“Great job!”) and replace it with specific feedback: “I notice you revised your opening paragraph — it’s much clearer now” - [ ] When a child asks a question, respond with a question at least once per day: “What do you think?” or “What made you wonder about that?” — keep the fire of inquiry going (Children’s Questions, 2020) - [ ] 6-8/9-12: Commit to zero sarcasm for two weeks. Notice what you replace it with

Weeks 5-8: Embedding - [ ] Introduce self-correction protocols: give students time to identify and fix their own errors before teacher feedback. “Self-correction reduces the pressure on the children to be corrected.” (Error Correction, 2018) - [ ] Name thinking moves explicitly: “You made a connection,” “That is an inference,” “You are questioning the source” — teach students to see their own thinking - [ ] Practise strategic teacher silence: after asking a question, wait 7-10 seconds before speaking. At 6-8 and 9-12, this is transformative — most teachers wait 1-2 seconds - [ ] Give one piece of written feedback this week that names what the student did well as a thinker, not just as a product-maker - [ ] Ask a trusted colleague to observe your language for 20 minutes and count: questions vs. directives, specific vs. generic praise, student vs. teacher talk time

Weeks 9-10: Assessment & Reflection - [ ] Re-take the Language items on the Whole-Classroom Diagnostic — compare scores - [ ] Record yourself again (same conditions as Week 1) and compare: has your directive-to-question ratio shifted? Has your volume changed? Has the student talk time increased? - [ ] Ask students: “When I give you feedback, does it help you improve?” — their answers reveal whether your language is formative or evaluative - [ ] Identify your one most persistent language habit (the one that keeps coming back) — this is your focus for the next term

Speak with Intention — End-of-Term Markers

Observable in the classroom: - The teacher’s directive-to-question ratio has shifted measurably — questions are the default, directives are the exception - Students echo the teacher’s language patterns: they ask each other questions, give specific feedback, and use thinking vocabulary (“I notice,” “I wonder,” “I disagree because…”) - The teacher’s feedback is specific and formative — students can articulate what they do well as thinkers and what their next learning step is - Students correct their own errors when given opportunity and time, rather than waiting for teacher correction - K-5: Children’s questions have increased in frequency and depth. 6-8: Sarcasm has decreased (teacher and student). 9-12: Student writing and discussion show original thinking, not teacher-echoing

Timeline warnings: - **What happens fast (Weeks 1-4):** Replacing specific phrases (directives with questions, generic praise with specific feedback) responds to conscious effort. Mamta’s phrase substitutions — “What do YOU need to be doing right now?” —

can become habitual within weeks. - **What takes a full term:** Changing the culture of language in the room. Even after the teacher shifts her language, students may take months to follow. At 6-8, sarcasm and put-downs are deeply embedded peer norms. At 9-12, students may initially distrust the change ("Why is the teacher suddenly asking my opinion?"). Persistence through the distrust phase is essential. - **What takes longer than expected:** Eliminating habitual patterns under stress. The teacher who has mastered questions-not-directives during calm moments may revert to directives during transitions, emergencies, or frustrating moments. The last 10% of language change is the hardest. Self-recording at Weeks 9-10 will reveal these stress patterns.

For Professional Learning Communities

Speak with Intention

Individual Reflection: 1. Record yourself for fifteen minutes during a lesson (audio only is sufficient). Listen back and note: How many of your utterances are directives ("Sit down," "Hurry up," "Pay attention") versus questions ("What do you need to be doing right now?")? What surprised you? 2. Think of a phrase you use reflexively — something you say without thinking. Where did you learn it? Does it communicate what you actually intend?

Group Dialogue: 3. The framework positions teacher language as "the single most powerful tool available to an educator." Do you agree? What are the competing claims — curriculum, assessment, relationships? What does your practice actually treat as the primary lever? 4. Mamta describes "killing her daughter's curiosity" with a single careless response to a question about the moon. Can your group share similar moments — times when your language shut something down that you wish you had kept open? What patterns do you notice? 5. How does your school's institutional language — report card comments, behaviour policies, staff meeting vocabulary — support or undermine intentional communication with children?

Between-Session Observation Task: Choose one directive you use frequently ("Hurry up," "Sit down," "Listen") and replace it with a question for one full week. Note what changes in children's responses.

Facilitation Note: The audio recording task (Question 1) is the most powerful individual exercise in this guide. Most teachers significantly underestimate their ratio of directives to questions. The data is humbling and catalytic.

Research Grounding

Speak with Intention: Why It Works

Lev Vygotsky (Inner Speech) made the case that thought itself is internalised social speech. Children first hear language from adults, then speak it aloud to themselves, then think it silently. This means the words you use with a child literally become the words they use to think. “What do YOU need to be doing right now?” becomes the child’s self-regulation question. “Hurry up” becomes their inner critic. Your language choices shape their cognitive architecture.

Read this if: you want the single most important theoretical insight behind intentional language. Vygotsky, L. S. (1934/1986). *Thought and Language*. MIT Press.

John Hattie (Visible Learning) found that feedback is among the most powerful influences on student achievement. But not all feedback is equal: process-level and self-regulation feedback are more effective than task-level correction. This is precisely what “reinforce, remind and redirect” achieves — it operates at the process level (“I notice you’re…”) rather than the task level (“That’s wrong”).

Read this if: you want evidence that intentional language isn’t just kind — it measurably improves learning. Hattie, J., & Timperley, H. (2007). The power of feedback. *Review of Educational Research*, 77(1), 81–112.

Chapter 6: Design Liberating Structure

What This Condition Means

A teacher designs liberating structure when they create routines, frameworks, expectations, and systems that make genuine freedom possible — understanding that structure and freedom are not in tension, but that clear, co-created structure is what enables children to exercise real choice, take genuine risks, and own their learning.

Why This Condition Matters

There is a persistent belief in education that structure and freedom are opposites — that more rules mean less creativity, and that loosening control means releasing potential. This belief is wrong. It is wrong in both directions.

A classroom with no structure is not a free classroom. It is an anxious one. Children in an unstructured environment do not blossom into self-directed learners. They flounder. They seek direction. They choose the easiest path — because they lack a framework within which to exercise ambition. "Freedom" without structure is abandonment.

A classroom with rigid structure is not an orderly classroom. It is a compliant one. Children follow instructions because they have no choice. The teacher carries the entire cognitive and motivational load. Transitions require explicit direction. Every minute is planned. The classroom runs — but the engine is the teacher's energy, not the children's ownership.

"The program was structured and yet the children felt the freedom." (IB School Visit, 2019)

Read that sentence carefully. "Structured and yet the children felt the freedom." The word "yet" reveals what Mamta observed and what most people miss: the structure was not in tension with the freedom. The structure was what made the freedom possible. Children "were free to choose their friends but encouraged to befriend everyone... free to sit where and how they like and yet encouraged to follow basic guidelines." (IB School Visit, 2019) Within clear expectations, genuine choice flourished.

This is the condition's core insight: structure is not the enemy of freedom. It is its prerequisite. A child who knows the routine — who can predict what happens next, who understands the expectations, who helped design the framework — is a child who can direct her energy toward the work rather than toward navigating uncertainty. The structure handles the logistics. The child handles the learning.

The Philosophical Grounding

Think of it this way. A river without banks is a flood. It goes everywhere and nowhere. A river with banks — with structure that channels its energy — is powerful, directed, alive. The banks do not restrict the river. They give it force.

The same principle operates in classrooms. In complex systems — and a classroom is a complex system — outcomes cannot be controlled through top-down prescription. But they can be enabled through what complexity theorists call “enabling constraints” — clear boundaries within which people are free to self-organise. The teacher who designs liberating structure is not controlling outcomes. She is creating the conditions from which productive outcomes emerge.

This resolves the apparent paradox. More structure of the right kind — enabling constraints, not prescriptive rules — produces more freedom. Less structure produces not freedom but chaos. And rigid, prescribed structure produces not order but compliance.

Mamta’s formulation identifies two specific failure modes:

Failure Mode A — Over-control: The teacher designs every minute. Children follow instructions but exercise no judgment. The classroom runs efficiently but produces no agency. The structure exists but does not liberate — it constrains. This is the traditional classroom problem.

Failure Mode B — Under-structure: The teacher offers “freedom” without frameworks. Children flounder, seeking direction. “Student-led inquiry” becomes performative — children choose safe, easy paths because no structure guides them toward productive challenge. This is the progressive classroom problem.

The Learning Conditions sits between these poles — not as a compromise, but as a different understanding of what structure is for. Structure is not a cage and not an absence. It is a scaffold that the child can climb.

What Liberating Structure Looks Like in Practice

When a teacher designs liberating structure, you can observe these specific behaviours:

She co-creates structures with children. “My daughter and I sat down together for a discussion on how our routine should be. We created our schedule.” (New Normal, 2020) Whether it is a daily routine, a writing process, or a set of classroom expectations, the teacher designs with children, not for them. The child who helped create the schedule follows it because it is hers — not because she was told to.

A note on co-creation: co-creating does not mean children decide everything. It means children contribute meaningfully within constraints that the adult has honestly stated. A teacher who says “Let’s create our schedule together” and then vetoes every suggestion

that doesn't match her plan is not co-creating — she is performing inclusion. Genuine co-creation requires that the adult be transparent about the constraints ("We need to have math and reading every day — but you can help decide when and how") and genuine about the choices ("Within those constraints, your preferences matter and will shape what we do"). The child's trust depends on this honesty.

She maintains clear expectations alongside genuine freedom. "They were free to choose their friends but encouraged to befriend everyone... free to sit where and how they like and yet encouraged to follow basic guidelines." (IB School Visit, 2019) The expectations are clear. Within them, children have real choices — not pre-selected options designed to feel like choice, but genuine decisions about how they work, where they sit, and who they work with.

She designs living, flexible systems. "A living planner is co-created with students; a living leadership plan is co-created with the school community." (Humanistic Leadership, 2026) The structures are not rigid. They breathe. They adjust. They evolve. A routine that worked in September may need revision by November — and the revision process itself is a learning opportunity. "We created our schedule. However, we have left it flexible." (New Normal, 2020) The word "however" is deliberate. The schedule exists — but it is designed to adapt.

She builds predictable processes that enable creativity. The writer's workshop has a named sequence — pre-writing, drafting, revision, editing, publishing. (Every Child is a Writer, 2021) The read-aloud has a time boundary. (Read Aloud, 2019) The logical consequence has a clear structure — "related, reasonable, respectful, helpful." (Logical Consequences, 2019) These predictable processes free children to focus their energy on the creative and intellectual work within them. A child who knows the process does not need to ask "What do I do next?" She knows — and she can direct her attention to what she wants to say, not to the mechanics of how to say it.

She schedules what matters. "SEE Learning needs to become AN INTENTIONAL PIECE OF OUR CURRICULUM." (SEE Learning, 2021) If something matters, it gets timetabled, structured, and resourced — not left to chance, not squeezed into leftover time, not dependent on having a good morning. Liberating structure means designing the day so that the conditions do not depend on the teacher's energy level.

Some classrooms begin every day with a phrase. Not a slogan on the wall — a phrase the children say together, or that the teacher says first and the children answer, or a question the teacher asks the room. A daily orienting frame is a small structural choice with a large effect: it tells the children we are starting; we are starting together; this is the

work we are about to do. The specific words matter less than the consistency. Courage, compassion, wisdom. What did you notice yesterday? Today we are here to think. The phrase becomes the room's heartbeat.

What the Child Experiences

When liberating structure is present, you can observe it in children's behaviour:

Children feel both structured and free. "The program was structured and yet the children felt the freedom." (IB School Visit, 2019) They can articulate both the structure and the choices they are making within it. If you ask them "What are you doing and why?", they can tell you — because the routine is clear and the choice within it is theirs.

Children manage themselves within clear boundaries. The child engages in "reading, writing, fitness, coding, science experiments" — all within a routine she helped design. (New Normal, 2020) She does not need to be managed because the structure is hers. The adult's energy is freed from logistics to focus on learning.

Children use processes independently. In writing workshop, children follow the process without step-by-step guidance because the process has been internalised. (Every Child is a Writer, 2021) The structure has become invisible — the child no longer sees it as a rule but as a way of working.

Children adapt structures to their needs. "We created our schedule. However, we have left it flexible." (New Normal, 2020) Children learn that structures can be adjusted — they are tools for living, not rules for obeying. A child who modifies the routine to better suit her needs is not breaking the structure. She is using it as it was designed to be used.

When Liberating Structure Is Absent

When liberating structure is absent, one of two things happens — and both feel like failure.

In the over-controlled classroom, the teacher designs every minute. Children follow instructions precisely. The room is quiet. Work is completed. But no child is making decisions. No child is adapting. No child is developing the self-regulatory capacity that will serve them when the teacher is not there. The teacher is exhausted — because she is the engine of everything. And the children have learned a dangerous lesson: someone else will always tell you what to do next.

In the under-structured classroom, the teacher has offered “freedom” without frameworks. Monday feels different from Tuesday. Expectations shift. “Student-led inquiry” sounds progressive, but children choose the easiest path because no structure guides them toward productive challenge. The room feels chaotic — the children have no framework within which to exercise judgment. Freedom without structure is abandonment.

And there is a subtler failure mode that appears in well-intentioned classrooms: structures that work for most children but not all. A routine co-created by the majority may not serve the child who processes differently, who needs a different transition time, who requires a different sensory environment. Liberating structure must accommodate variation — not as an exception, but as a design principle. A structure that liberates twenty-four children and constrains one has not yet been designed well enough.

What Is Not Obvious About Liberating Structure

Co-creation is not the same as co-ownership. A child who participates in creating a schedule does not automatically own it. If the teacher’s framing made agreement seem required — if the “discussion” was really a presentation with a vote at the end — the child has been included in the process but not in the power. Genuine co-creation requires that the child’s contributions visibly change the outcome. If the final schedule would have been the same regardless of the children’s input, the co-creation was performative.

Structure does not mean sameness. Within a shared classroom routine, different children may need different structures. One child may need a visual schedule. Another may need a movement break between transitions. Another may need a quieter space during independent work. Liberating structure is not one structure that liberates everyone identically — it is a framework flexible enough to accommodate different needs while maintaining shared expectations.

The best structures become invisible. When a routine is working well, no one notices it. The children move through transitions without being told. The writing process flows without instructions. The day has rhythm and predictability. This invisibility is the goal — the structure serves the work without calling attention to itself. If you can see the structure, it is still being learned. When it disappears from view, it has been internalised.

Children test structures — and that is healthy. A child who pushes against a boundary is not necessarily defiant. She may be checking whether the structure is real — whether it will hold. A structure that holds builds trust. A structure that bends when pushed teaches

children that boundaries are negotiable through pressure rather than through dialogue. Hold the structure. Explain why it exists. And then — when the child proposes a genuine modification through the proper channel — show that the structure can evolve.

The Shift You Are Looking For

A teacher knows they have designed liberating structure when children operate independently within the structure and begin adapting it to their own needs. The shift: children no longer ask "What should I do next?" because the routine makes it clear. And then they go further — they modify the routine, suggest improvements, or extend it beyond its original scope.

When the structure has been internalised and children treat it as their own tool — not the teacher's rule — the design has liberated.

You will recognise this moment. It is quiet. It is ordinary. It looks like a classroom running well. But underneath, something significant has happened: the children are managing themselves. The teacher is free to teach. And the structure — the routine, the process, the expectation — has become the invisible architecture of a room where children can do their best work.

At Every Scale

In a single classroom: The teacher co-creates the daily schedule with children. She establishes clear routines — for transitions, for independent work, for collaboration, for conflict resolution. She designs the writer's workshop as a predictable process with genuine choice within it. She builds a peace corner. She schedules what matters. And she revisits the structures regularly — not because they are broken, but because living structures need tending.

In a teaching team: The team establishes shared norms — for meetings, for feedback, for planning time. These norms are co-created, not imposed by a coordinator. The team agrees on what consistency looks like across classrooms (shared values, shared language, shared expectations) while allowing variation in how each teacher implements those values. Structure at the team level means shared principles with individual expression.

In a whole school: The school leader designs institutional structures — feedback systems, professional learning, meeting rhythms, evaluation processes — that embody the school's values rather than just stating them. "A living planner is co-created with

students; a living leadership plan is co-created with the school community." (Humanistic Leadership, 2026) A school where the strategic plan was written by three administrators in a retreat is not a school with liberating structure. A school where the community — teachers, parents, students — contributed to the plan and can see their contributions in it, is.

In leadership: The head of school asks: are our institutional structures enabling our community, or are they constraining it? Do our policies free teachers to do their best work, or do they create compliance without commitment? Is our accountability system designed to support growth, or to catch failure? The same principle applies at every scale: structure should liberate. If it does not, it needs redesign.

Structure Across Years, Not Only Across Days

Most of what this chapter has discussed is structure inside a single classroom over a single year — the routines, the expectations, the co-created norms that make a day predictable enough for children to take risks inside it. There is a longer structural question that schools rarely ask: which adult in this building knows this child for more than ten months? When a child moves from one grade to the next, the relational continuity is usually severed. The new teacher meets the child as a stranger; the old teacher loses the thread of a relationship that took a year to build. Intentional structure includes the longer time horizon. A school that wants to honour agency designs transitions so that some adult — a homeroom teacher across two years, a learning support specialist across the whole school, a head of section who actually knows each child by name and by growing edge — holds each child in mind across grade boundaries. This is structural too. It is not warmer than the daily routine; it is the daily routine extended across the years a child is in the building.

Self-Assessment: Design Liberating Structure

Ask yourself these questions honestly.

1. **Is the structure in my classroom co-created or imposed?** Did the children help design the routines, expectations, and schedules? Or did I create them and present them as "ours"?

2. **Can children in my room articulate both the structure and their choices within it?** If you asked a child "What are you doing and why?" — would she be able to explain both the routine and the decision she made within it?

3. **Do I have both failure modes under control?** Am I over-controlling (every minute planned, no decisions for children) or under-structuring (freedom without framework, children floundering)? Most practitioners lean toward one. Which is yours?

4. **Is my structure flexible enough to accommodate different needs?** Does the routine work for the child who processes quickly and the child who needs more time? For the child who thrives in groups and the child who needs quiet? If the structure works for most but constrains some, it is not yet well-designed.

5. **When was the last time I revised a structure because a child suggested it?** Living structures evolve. If your routines have not changed since September, they may have become rigid without your noticing.

6. **Have I scheduled what matters, or left it to chance?** Look at your timetable. Does it reflect what you say you value? If social-emotional learning matters but has no scheduled time, the structure is telling a different story than your philosophy.

7. **If I am a school leader: are institutional structures enabling or constraining the people in this building?** Ask your teachers. Ask them honestly. The structures you designed may feel liberating to you and constraining to them.

In Practice: Case Studies

Case Study 7: Delhi — Structure That Controlled Instead of Liberated

Context: Nisha teaches Grade 3 at a well-regarded private school in Delhi. She is organised, systematic, and proud of her classroom management. Her daily schedule is planned in fifteen-minute blocks. Transitions between activities take less than two minutes. Parents praise her for running “a tight ship.”

The starting point: Nisha’s classroom ran like clockwork. Children moved between activities smoothly. Supplies were organised. The day’s schedule was posted on the wall with times, activities, and expected behaviours for each block. Every minute was accounted for. But during a writing period, Nisha noticed that when the timer went off at the end of the fifteen-minute block, every child stopped writing — even children who were mid-sentence, mid-thought, mid-discovery. One girl named Diya was visibly frustrated: she had just begun a story about her grandmother and was pulled out of it by the schedule.

Nisha realised her structure was controlling, not liberating. Children had internalised the schedule so thoroughly that they had stopped exercising judgment about their own work. They did not ask for more time. They did not advocate for their own learning needs. They followed the clock because the clock was the authority in the room — not the learning, and not the child.

Corpus anchor: When structure over-controls: “The teacher designs every minute. Children follow instructions but exercise no judgment. The classroom runs efficiently but produces no agency.” (Framework Definition — Design Liberating Structure, Failure Mode A)

What she tried first: Nisha removed the timers and told students they could take as long as they needed. Within two days, transitions dissolved. Children wandered between activities. Some spent forty-five minutes on drawing and never opened their writing notebooks. Others asked repeatedly, “What should I do now?” The freedom without framework produced anxiety, not liberation.

Corpus anchor: “Freedom without structure is not freedom — it is abandonment.” (Framework Definition — Design Liberating Structure, Failure Mode B)

What she changed: Nisha sat with her students — eight-year-olds — and asked: “What does our day need to have in it?” She wrote their answers on chart paper. Children said: reading, writing, maths, “fun time,” snack, “time to finish things,” and “time to talk to friends.” Nisha added the non-negotiables from the school timetable. Together, they built a new schedule — not in fifteen-minute blocks but in larger activity periods with a visual sequence (what comes first, second, third) and a “flex zone” at the end of the morning where children could return to any unfinished work.

The schedule was posted on the wall, but now it was their schedule. Nisha kept one structural constraint: she rang a gentle chime five minutes before each transition, not as a timer but as a signal — “start thinking about wrapping up.” The chime was the child’s cue to make a decision about their work: finish the sentence, find a stopping point, or ask for more time during the flex zone.

Corpus anchor: “My daughter and I sat down together for a discussion on how our routine should be. We created our schedule. However, we have left it flexible.” (New Normal, 2020)

What shifted: Diya — the girl who had been interrupted mid-story — became the most vocal advocate for the flex zone. She used it every day for the first two weeks, returning to writing she had started earlier. Her stories grew longer and more detailed, not because Nisha assigned more writing time, but because Diya was managing her own

writing process. Other children used the flex zone differently: some returned to maths problems, some read, some drew. The variety confirmed that children, when given structural freedom, make different choices based on their own needs.

The most telling shift: children began suggesting modifications to the schedule. A boy named Aarav said, “Can we move silent reading to after lunch? I’m too awake to sit still in the morning.” Nisha and the class discussed it and agreed to try it for a week. It worked. The children were not just following the structure — they were treating it as a living tool they could adjust.

Corpus anchor: “The program was structured and yet the children felt the freedom.” (IB School Visit, 2019); A “living planner is co-created with students.” (Humanistic Leadership, 2026)

What did not change: Nisha’s school required her to submit weekly lesson plans with detailed time allocations. She continued to submit them in the expected format while running her classroom on the co-created schedule. This is a common reality: institutional structures demand compliance with formats that may not match classroom practice. Nisha did not fight the system — she worked within it while creating a different experience for her students. She also found that co-creating the schedule took two full periods at the start of the term — time she previously used for content. The investment paid off in reduced transition friction and increased student self-management, but the initial time cost was real.

Case Study 8: Toronto — When “Student-Led” Meant No One Was Leading

Context: Marcus teaches Grade 9 humanities at an IB school in Toronto. He is passionate about student-centred learning and has built his classroom around student choice, flexible seating, and minimal teacher direction. He describes his role as “guide on the side, not sage on the stage.”

The starting point: During an inquiry unit on social justice, Marcus gave his students full autonomy: choose your topic, choose your method, choose your timeline, choose your presentation format. He provided no template, no checkpoint dates, and no interim feedback unless students requested it. He wanted students to own their learning entirely.

The result was stratified. Five students — already confident, already self-directed — produced excellent work. They chose meaningful topics, managed their time, and sought feedback proactively. Twelve students produced mediocre work: they chose safe topics,

procrastinated, and assembled their projects the night before the due date. The remaining thirteen students floundered. Several changed topics multiple times. Two students submitted nothing. One student told Marcus: "I don't know what you want."

Marcus was confused: "I don't want anything — this is your inquiry." But the student's response revealed the problem. The absence of structure was not liberation. It was a void. Students were not making choices — they were searching for the hidden expectations they assumed must exist.

Corpus anchor: "'Student-led inquiry' becomes performative — children choose safe, easy paths because no structure guides them toward productive challenge. Freedom without structure is not freedom — it is abandonment." (Framework Definition — Design Liberating Structure, Failure Mode B)

What he tried first: Marcus added a single deadline — a "topic lock" date by which students had to commit to their topic. This helped with the topic-switching problem but did nothing for the students who didn't know how to manage a multi-week project. The problem was not deadlines. It was the absence of a process.

What he changed: Marcus designed a project framework with his students. He began by asking: "Those of you who did well on the last project — what did you actually do, step by step?" The confident students described their processes: brainstorming, narrowing, researching, outlining, drafting, revising. Marcus wrote these on the board. Then he asked the struggling students: "Where did you get stuck?" Their answers were illuminating: "I didn't know how to narrow my topic," "I didn't know when I'd done enough research," "I didn't know how to start writing."

Together, the class built a project roadmap with five checkpoints: topic proposal (with a "why this matters to me" statement), research summary, outline, draft, and final product. Each checkpoint had a due date — but students could adjust their dates by requesting a schedule modification in writing. The framework was clear; within it, choice remained genuine.

Corpus anchor: The writing workshop has a named sequence — generating, planning, drafting, revising, editing, publishing. (Every Child is a Writer, 2021) Structure does not eliminate creativity; it enables it.

What shifted: The next inquiry unit — on environmental sustainability — ran on the co-created framework. The stratification flattened. Students who had previously floundered used the checkpoints as scaffolding. A student named Amira, who had submitted nothing in the previous unit, produced a documentary-style video about water access in

her parents' home country — work that was personal, rigorous, and technically ambitious. When Marcus asked what was different, she said: "Last time I didn't know where to start. This time the checkpoints showed me where I was."

The confident students, who might have resisted the added structure, found that the checkpoints actually gave them more freedom — they moved through the stages quickly and used the extra time for more ambitious final products. One student requested a schedule modification to spend two extra days on research; Marcus approved it. The student was not fighting the structure — she was using it as a tool.

Corpus anchor: "They were free to choose their friends but encouraged to befriend everyone... free to sit where and how they like and yet encouraged to follow basic guidelines." (IB School Visit, 2019)

What did not change: Marcus still struggles with the philosophical tension between his "guide on the side" identity and the reality that some students need — and deserve — more scaffolding than others. He has come to understand that providing structure is not the same as controlling learning. But in his IB school, the discourse around student-led learning sometimes equates structure with teacher control, making it difficult for Marcus to articulate what he now believes: that the most liberating thing a teacher can do is design a structure clear enough that every student can find their way through it. Structure and freedom are not opposing values. Structure, when co-created and flexible, is what makes freedom possible.

Two students still submitted late. One student still told Marcus: "I wish you would just tell us what to do." Not every student will embrace agency within one term. The transition from teacher-directed to student-owned learning is not a single unit — it is a culture shift that may take an entire school year, or longer.

Across Grade Levels

Design Liberating Structure

K-5 (Primary)

Teacher behaviours: - Co-creates daily routines with children: "My daughter and I sat down together for a discussion on how our routine should be." (New Normal, 2020) Even six-year-olds can contribute to designing the day's rhythm. - Builds predictable processes that free children to focus on creative work: the writing workshop sequence, the read-aloud ritual, the morning meeting pattern. "The program was structured and yet the children felt the freedom." (IB School Visit, 2019) - Provides clear boundaries with

genuine choice within them: "They were free to choose their friends but encouraged to befriend everyone... free to sit where and how they like and yet encouraged to follow basic guidelines." (IB School Visit, 2019) - Makes structures visible: posted schedules, visual routines, named processes. Young children need to see the structure to feel safe within it.

Student response indicators: - Children follow routines independently without step-by-step reminders — because the routines are internalised, not imposed. - Children suggest modifications to routines: "Can we change the order today?" — because they experience the structure as theirs to adjust. - Children use processes (writing workshop, conflict resolution, self-assessment) without constant teacher guidance. - "It helps them feel in control of their decisions and actions." (New Normal, 2020)

Common mistakes at this level: - **Over-structuring:** Scheduling every minute, scripting every transition. Structure should liberate, not constrain. If children never deviate from the plan, the structure is too tight. - **Under-structuring:** Offering "free choice" without frameworks. Young children need more structure than older children, not less — but the structure should include genuine choice within it. Freedom without framework produces anxiety, not creativity. - **Imposing rather than co-creating:** Designing all routines before the children arrive. Even K-5 children should participate in building the structures they live in. This is what makes the structure "liberating" — it belongs to the community, not just the teacher.

6-8 (Middle)

Teacher behaviours: - Creates "living" structures that evolve: "A living planner is co-created with students." (Humanistic Leadership, 2026) Middle schoolers need to see that structures are adaptable, not fixed — because they are developing the cognitive capacity to critique and improve systems. - Designs project structures with clear milestones and genuine student control over process: the teacher sets the destination; students choose the route. - Builds explicit discussion protocols (think-pair-share, Socratic seminar, fishbowl) that create safe containers for intellectual risk. At 6-8, unstructured discussion devolves into dominant voices and silent watchers. Structure enables participation. - Schedules what matters: "SEE Learning needs to become AN INTENTIONAL PIECE OF OUR CURRICULUM." (SEE Learning, 2021) At this age, if something is not timetabled, it does not happen.

Student response indicators: - Students can articulate both the structure and the freedom within it: "We have to submit by Friday, but we can choose our own format." - Students propose improvements to classroom systems — and the teacher implements them, demonstrating that co-creation is real. - Students manage group projects with

increasing independence — negotiating roles, resolving conflicts, adjusting timelines — because the project structure supports self-management. - Students use structures flexibly: adapting a discussion protocol, modifying a note-taking system, creating their own organisational tools.

Common mistakes at this level: - **Abandoning structure in the name of "student-centred learning":** The middle school teacher who says "I let them figure it out" without providing frameworks is not honouring agency — she is abdicating responsibility. At 6-8, liberating structure means more design, not less. - **Rigid structures that cannot evolve:** A structure that worked in September may not work in January. The teacher who refuses to adapt routines in response to student feedback has confused consistency with rigidity. - **Structures that exclude:** Group project protocols that always disadvantage introverted students. Discussion formats that reward speed of speech over depth of thought. Liberating structures must liberate all students, not just the confident ones.

9-12 (Secondary)

Teacher behaviours: - Designs course-level structures that students have genuine influence over: pacing, assessment weighting, project topics, even classroom norms. At this level, co-creation extends to the syllabus itself. - Creates structures for independent learning: research protocols, self-assessment rubrics, peer review systems. The teacher builds the infrastructure; students operate within it increasingly independently. - Balances institutional requirements (exams, standards, reporting) with liberating design: structures that meet mandated outcomes while preserving student agency. This is the hardest design challenge — and the most necessary. - Makes the "why" of every structure explicit. Adolescents who understand why a structure exists are more likely to invest in it than those who experience it as arbitrary authority.

Student response indicators: - Students manage their own learning timelines with decreasing teacher oversight. - Students create their own structures: study groups, revision systems, peer accountability partnerships — because they have internalised the principle that structure enables freedom. - Students critique institutional structures constructively — "This assessment doesn't measure what we actually learned" — because they have experienced what good structure looks like and can recognise its absence. - Students adapt to new structures quickly because they understand the principle of liberating structure, not just specific routines.

Common mistakes at this level: - **Treating secondary students as fully autonomous:** They are not. Adolescents still need structure — but they need structure they helped design and can see the purpose of. The teacher who provides no framework and calls it "university preparation" has confused abandonment with independence. - **Letting**

institutional structures override classroom design: The exam timetable, the reporting cycle, the standardised test — these are real constraints. But the teacher who allows these structures to determine every classroom decision has surrendered the design space. The question is always: within the constraints I cannot change, how do I design structures that liberate? - **Ignoring the cost of structural change:** Adolescents who have spent years in rigid systems need time to trust liberating structures. The first week of co-created norms may feel chaotic. The teacher who panics and re-imposes control has not given the transition enough time. This takes longer than expected — often an entire term.

Design Liberating Structure — 10-Week Checklist

Weeks 1-2: Awareness & Observation - [ ] Complete the Whole-Classroom Diagnostic, scoring yourself on all 5 Structure items - [ ] Map your current classroom structures: daily routines, transition processes, discussion protocols, assessment systems. For each one, ask: did students help design this? Can students modify this? - [ ] Observe: do students follow routines because they understand them, or because they fear consequences? The first is liberating structure; the second is control - [ ] Identify one routine that feels rigid — where you sense students endure it rather than use it - [ ] K-5: Note whether routines are visible (posted, illustrated). 6-8: Note whether students adapt routines when the teacher isn't looking (a sign the structure doesn't fit). 9-12: Note whether students create their own parallel structures (study groups, revision systems) — this indicates either that your structures don't serve them, or that they have internalised the principle and are designing their own

Weeks 3-4: First Moves - [ ] Co-create or redesign one routine with students: "My daughter and I sat down together for a discussion on how our routine should be." (New Normal, 2020) Start small — a morning check-in, a transition protocol, a feedback process - [ ] Make one existing structure flexible: add a "choose your own" element. "We created our schedule. However, we have left it flexible." (New Normal, 2020) - [ ] Introduce one discussion protocol (think-pair-share, silent writing before speaking, fishbowl) that provides structure for intellectual risk-taking - [ ] Schedule something that matters: if social-emotional work or reflection has been squeezed into leftover time, give it a fixed place in the timetable. "SEE Learning needs to become AN INTENTIONAL PIECE OF OUR CURRICULUM." (SEE Learning, 2021) - [ ] 9-12: Explain the why behind one structure that students experience as arbitrary. If you cannot explain the why, the structure may not be necessary

Weeks 5-8: Embedding - [ ] Expand co-creation: involve students in designing a major project structure (milestones, checkpoints, assessment criteria, presentation format) - [ ] Observe whether the structures you co-created are holding: are students using them

independently? Are they modifying them? Both are success indicators - [ ] Add one "living" element: a structure that explicitly evolves mid-term based on student feedback. Review it together and adjust - [ ] Test the balance: is there enough structure for students to feel secure AND enough freedom for them to make genuine choices? "The program was structured and yet the children felt the freedom." (IB School Visit, 2019) - [ ] Address one structural inequity: a routine that advantages some students and disadvantages others (e.g., timed discussions that reward fast processors, group protocols that silence introverts)

Weeks 9-10: Assessment & Reflection - [ ] Re-take the Structure items on the Whole-Classroom Diagnostic — compare scores - [ ] Ask students: "Which classroom routines help your learning? Which ones get in the way?" — take their answers seriously - [ ] Identify which co-created structures survived and which fell apart — what made the difference? - [ ] Note: structural change is the slowest condition to develop. If scores have shifted only slightly, this is normal — especially at 9-12, where students may need a full term to trust that co-creation is real and not performative. Look for small signals: one student suggesting a routine change, one group self-managing a project milestone

Design Liberating Structure — End-of-Term Markers

Observable in the classroom: - At least one classroom routine is student-co-created and still functioning — students follow it because they helped build it, not because they are told to - Students can articulate both the structure and the freedom: "We have to submit by Friday, but we can choose our format" - The teacher has modified at least one structure mid-term in response to student feedback — demonstrating that structures are living, not fixed - Students use classroom processes (discussion protocols, revision routines, conflict resolution) with decreasing teacher guidance - K-5: Routines are visible, and children refer to them independently. 6-8: Students propose modifications to structures. 9-12: Students create their own parallel structures (study groups, revision plans) — evidence they have internalised the principle

Timeline warnings: - **What happens fast (Weeks 1-4):** Co-creating a small routine and making one structure flexible. These are design decisions the teacher can implement immediately. Student response to co-creation is usually positive — children at all ages are energised by having a voice in how their classroom works. - **What takes a full term:** Trusting the co-created structures to hold. There will be a period (usually Weeks 3-6) where co-created routines feel messier than teacher-imposed ones. This is normal. The temptation to re-impose control is strongest here. Resist it — the messiness is the transition cost, and it passes. - **What requires institutional support:** Course-level structural change (pacing, assessment design, timetabling) often requires department or

school-level agreement. A single teacher can redesign her classroom's internal structures, but cannot unilaterally change the exam schedule, the reporting cycle, or the period length. At 9-12, the most liberating structural changes may require advocacy beyond the classroom. Name this honestly — the teacher's design space has real boundaries, and pretending otherwise sets up frustration.

For Professional Learning Communities

Design Liberating Structure

Individual Reflection: 1. Map one routine in your classroom (morning meeting, writing workshop, transition between subjects). Who designed it? How much of it was co-created with children? How much of it could be co-created without losing its effectiveness? 2. Consider the framework's two failure modes: over-control (structure without freedom) and under-structure (freedom without frameworks). Which failure mode are you more prone to? What pulls you in that direction?

Group Dialogue: 3. The framework claims that "structure and freedom are not in tension — clear, co-created structure is what enables children to exercise real choice." Can your group identify a structure in your school that genuinely liberates? A structure that constrains? 4. What happens in your school when a co-created plan needs to change? Do children have a role in revising the structure, or does the adult unilaterally adjust? How does this affect children's sense of ownership? 5. Mamta describes "living planners" — schedules and plans that breathe, adjust, and evolve. How rigid are the structures in your school? What would need to change institutionally for structures to become living documents?

Between-Session Observation Task: Choose one structure you currently impose and redesign it with your students this week. Document the process and the result.

Facilitation Note: Question 2 asks teachers to identify their personal failure mode. In our experience, early-career teachers tend toward under-structure (giving freedom without frameworks), while experienced teachers tend toward over-control (designing every minute). Naming the tendency is the first step toward correcting it.

Research Grounding

Design Liberating Structure: Why It Works

Paulo Freire argued that education either domesticates people into accepting existing structures or becomes a practice of freedom. His rejection of the "banking model" — treating students as empty vessels — and his insistence on dialogue, co-creation, and critical consciousness provide the philosophical foundation for designing structures that liberate rather than constrain.

Read this if: you want the moral argument for why structure should serve children, not the other way around. Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Continuum.

Dave Snowden (Cynefin Framework) and complexity theory explain why the paradox of "structured and yet free" is not a contradiction. In complex systems, the right kind of constraints — enabling constraints, not prescriptive rules — produce more freedom, not less. A well-designed classroom routine is an enabling constraint: it gives children the predictability they need to take genuine creative risks.

Read this if: you want to understand why more structure (of the right kind) produces more freedom. Snowden, D. J., & Boone, M. E. (2007). A leader's framework for decision making. *Harvard Business Review*, 85(11), 68–76.

A lesson architecture that fits the conditions. One way to think about what a conditions-aligned lesson looks like is a three-step pattern observed in grounded-theory pedagogy across traditions: *observe* (the student encounters the real thing — a plant, a text, a problem), *learn* (the student processes, discusses, makes sense of what was observed), *apply* (the student uses what was learned in a new context). This is not the only structure that works. But it is a structure that, by design, honours agency (the student encounters first, before the teacher explains), cultivates safety (observation has no wrong answer), speaks with intention (the discussion phase is where language does its work), and designs liberating structure (the three steps are predictable enough that the student can focus on the content, not the format).

Chapter 7: How the Four Conditions Work Together

The Conditions as a System

The four conditions — Cultivate Safety, Honour Agency, Speak with Intention, Design Liberating Structure — are not a checklist. You cannot implement them one at a time and then move on. They operate as a system, each condition reinforcing and depending on the others.

Here is how they connect:

Safety enables agency. A child who does not feel safe will not risk exercising agency. She will wait for instructions. She will write the safe essay. She will give the expected answer. Safety is the ground on which agency stands — without it, the child's inherent capacity to decide, to choose, to own her learning remains dormant. Not absent — dormant. The agency is there. The safety to exercise it is not.

Agency requires structure. This seems paradoxical until you understand what structure does. A child told "You can do anything you want" is not experiencing agency — she is experiencing abandonment. Genuine agency operates within clear frameworks. The child who co-created the routine makes meaningful decisions within it. The child who was given no routine has no framework within which to decide. Agency without structure produces anxiety, not ownership.

Structure depends on intentional language. The same routine can feel liberating or oppressive depending on how it is communicated. "It's time for writing workshop" — said with warmth, as an invitation — creates a different experience than "Get your writing journals out. Now." — said with impatience, as a command. The structure is identical. The language determines how the child experiences it. A teacher who designs beautiful routines but communicates them through directives has undermined her own design.

Language creates safety. The teacher's tone, word choice, and framing are the primary mechanism through which safety is built or destroyed. A single sharp word can undo weeks of safety-building. A consistently low volume, a genuinely curious response to a child's question, a private rather than public correction — these are the actions that make safety real. Safety is not a feeling the teacher declares. It is an environment the teacher's language creates.

This creates a reinforcing cycle:

Safety → Agency → children make genuine decisions → Structure provides a framework for those decisions → Language communicates the structure with respect → Safety is maintained → deeper agency becomes possible.

And the reverse is equally true. A breakdown in any one condition weakens all four. A teacher who speaks with intention but offers no structure leaves children without a framework for their agency. A school with beautiful routines but no safety produces compliance, not learning. An institution that honours children's agency but does not attend to its own language creates a gap between values and practice.

What Happens When One Condition Is Present but Another Is Absent

Condition Present	Condition Absent	What You See	The Underlying Problem
Safety	Agency	The classroom is warm. Children feel cared for. But the teacher makes every decision. Children are comfortable — and passive. They do not take risks because they have not been trusted to.	A safe cage. Warmth without ownership.
Agency	Safety	The teacher offers genuine choices, but the classroom culture does not protect children from judgment. A child who makes an unusual choice is mocked by peers. Children quickly learn to make only safe choices — which is not agency at all.	Real choices in an unsafe space. Agency is offered but cannot be exercised.
Structure	Intentional Language	The routines are well-designed. The schedule is clear. But the teacher communicates through directives and corrections. Children follow the structure but experience it as imposed, not as their own.	The structure constrains rather than liberates because the language has not honoured the child's role in it.
Intentional Language	Structure	The teacher speaks beautifully. Her questions are open. Her tone is warm. But the classroom has no predictable routines, no clear expectations, no framework for directing energy. Children feel respected — and lost.	Kindness without architecture. Beautiful language in an unstructured environment.

The Intentionality Meta-Layer as Binding Force

What holds all four conditions in active practice? Intentionality. The adult's continuous, deliberate commitment to noticing, adjusting, and sustaining the conditions in every interaction.

Without intentionality, a teacher may cultivate safety on Monday and undermine it by Wednesday — not from malice, but from inattention. Without intentionality, a school leader may champion agency at the staff meeting and make every decision unilaterally by lunch. The gap between aspiration and practice is not a knowledge gap. It is an intentionality gap.

"A school may have a clearly written vision, an inspiring mission, and a carefully crafted strategic plan — but these documents alone do not create success." (Humanistic Leadership, 2026)

Intentionality is what makes the conditions durable. It is the difference between a classroom where the conditions appear on observation days and one where they are structural features of every day. It is the practice of designing your day so that safety, agency, language, and structure do not depend on having a good morning.

Is There a Natural Order for Implementation?

Practitioners often ask: where should I start? The honest answer is that the conditions do not have a fixed sequence — they are parallel, not hierarchical. But in practice, most practitioners find a natural entry point:

Start with safety. If children do not feel safe, nothing else takes root. You cannot honour agency in an unsafe classroom. You cannot speak with intention when children are managing their fear. Safety is not technically "first" — but it is often the most urgent.

Then attend to language. Your language is the tool through which all other conditions are communicated. Changing your language — from directives to questions, from correction to repair, from volume to calm — creates immediate, observable shifts.

Then build structure. With safety and intentional language in place, co-created routines become possible. Children who feel safe and respected will co-create in good faith.

Agency emerges. As safety deepens, language shifts, and structure becomes co-owned, children naturally begin exercising the agency they always had. You do not implement agency — you remove the obstacles to it.

This is a typical path, not the only path. Some practitioners begin with structure because it is the most concrete. Others begin with language because it is the most immediately changeable. The order matters less than the commitment to all four.

Common Failure Patterns

The hero teacher. One teacher creates all four conditions in her classroom — but the school around her does not support it. Her children experience the conditions for one year and then move to a classroom where none of them are present. The conditions must scale beyond individual classrooms to be durable.

The initiative fatigue pattern. A school adopts the framework as a "new initiative" — alongside five other initiatives launched the same year. Teachers experience it as another demand on their time rather than as a way of being. The framework is not an initiative. It is a diagnostic. It describes what must be true — not what must be added.

The language-only fix. A teacher changes her words but not her beliefs. She says "What do YOU need to be doing?" but her tone communicates impatience. Children read tone more accurately than they read words. Language without belief is performance, and children see through performance immediately.

The structure trap. A school invests heavily in routines and systems but does not attend to safety or language. The structures are efficient but cold. Children follow them — and feel nothing. Structure without the other three conditions is bureaucracy, not liberation.

What Actively Destroys Each Condition

These are not failures of individual teachers. They are systemic practices — institutional habits, policies, and cultural norms — that work against the conditions. Naming them is not blame. It is diagnosis.

What Destroys Cultivate Safety

When a school **publicly ranks students** by academic performance — displaying test scores on walls, reading grades aloud, or sorting children into visible ability groups — it communicates that worth is conditional on achievement. Children who score poorly learn that the institution sees them as deficient. When a school **uses volume and authority as primary control mechanisms** — shouting across hallways, using punishment rather than logical consequence, treating silence as the goal of discipline — it teaches children that

adults are unpredictable and that compliance is the price of peace. When a school **generalises behaviour** — "these children are always difficult," "this class is the worst" — it erases individuals and tells children they are seen as categories, not people.

What Destroys Honour Agency

When a school **requires uniform compliance regardless of context** — identical assignments, identical pacing, identical assessment formats for every child — it communicates that efficiency matters more than the child. When a school **treats student voice as decoration** — student councils with no authority, "choice boards" with pre-approved options, inquiry projects with predetermined conclusions — it teaches children that their agency is performative. The most damaging form: when a school **punishes the exercise of agency** — the child who questions a rule is labelled defiant, the child who refuses a pointless assignment is labelled lazy, the child who wants to pursue an interest outside the curriculum is told to focus.

What Destroys Speak with Intention

When a school **normalises careless language** — sarcasm as humour, public correction as discipline, comparison as motivation ("Why can't you be more like...?") — it teaches children that words are weapons and that adults cannot be trusted with vulnerability. When a school **rewards performance over process** — "Well done, you got 100%" rather than "I notice you tried three different approaches before you found one that worked" — it trains children to value outcomes over learning. When institutional language — report cards, behaviour logs, parent communications — **describes children in deficit terms** ("struggles with," "fails to," "needs to improve"), it encodes a view of the child as a problem to be fixed rather than a person who is growing.

What Destroys Design Liberating Structure

When a school **confuses rigidity with rigour** — mandating identical lesson structures, requiring minute-by-minute lesson plans, eliminating teacher professional judgment in the name of consistency — it produces compliance, not quality. When a school **offers "freedom" without frameworks** — open-ended inquiry with no scaffolding, "student-led" projects with no structure, "flexible learning" with no routines — it abandons children to flounder. Both failure modes destroy the condition: over-control produces structure that constrains; under-structure produces chaos that masquerades as freedom. When a school's **timetable leaves no room for what matters** — social-emotional learning squeezed into leftover time, creative subjects cut for test preparation, recess shortened for curriculum coverage — it communicates that only measurable outcomes count.

Chapter 8: The Learning Conditions at Every Scale

Classroom Level — The Teacher as Practitioner

At the classroom level, the teacher is the primary designer and sustainer of the conditions. Everything in Chapters 3 through 6 of this guide describes classroom practice — the specific, daily, observable behaviours that make each condition real.

The classroom practitioner's core commitments:

- **Build a space where confusion is welcome.** The peace corner, the low-stakes writing practice, the "no wrong answers" norm — these are the physical and cultural architecture of safety.
- **Design with children, not for them.** The co-created schedule, the flexible routine, the living planner — these are the structures that enable children to own their day.
- **Choose your words.** The question instead of the directive, the reinforcement instead of the correction, the private conversation instead of the public rebuke — these are the language practices that sustain every other condition.
- **Trust what is already there.** The child's agency, the child's curiosity, the child's capacity to decide — these are not things you create. They are things you stop obstructing.

For a teacher starting this work: begin with one condition. Audit your classroom against the self-assessment questions in the relevant chapter. Choose one specific behaviour to change. Practise it until it becomes reflex. Then move to the next. The conditions are not an overnight transformation. They are a direction of travel.

School Level — The School Leader as Practitioner

At the school level, the same four conditions apply — but to adults. A school leader who wants the conditions to flourish in classrooms must first create them for teachers.

Safety for educators. "The school's vision comes alive only when educators feel socially and emotionally supported." (Humanistic Leadership, 2026) A teacher who feels judged by her administration will teach cautiously. A teacher who feels safe to experiment, to fail, to say "I need help" — that teacher will create the conditions for children.

Agency for educators. A teacher told exactly what to teach and how to teach it is not an agentic professional — she is an implementer. A school leader who honours teacher agency gives teachers genuine ownership of their practice, their professional learning, and their classroom design. The same principle applies: agency is not granted to teachers. Teachers are already professionals. The leader's role is to remove the institutional obstacles that prevent them from exercising professional judgment.

Intentional language in institutional life. The language of evaluation, of staff meetings, of policy documents — this is the institutional equivalent of classroom language. Does the school speak to teachers as professionals or as employees? Does the feedback system use growth language or deficit language? Does the school's communication respect teachers' dignity, or does it perform hierarchy?

Liberating structure for the institution. "A living planner is co-created with students; a living leadership plan is co-created with the school community." (Humanistic Leadership, 2026) A strategic plan written by three administrators is not liberating structure. A professional development programme imposed from above is not liberating structure. Institutional structures that liberate are co-created with the people who work within them.

Systems Level — District, Network, Policy

At the systems level, the conditions apply to the relationship between institutions and the authorities that govern them. A district that imposes rigid curriculum standards without room for professional judgment is over-controlling its schools — exactly as an over-controlling teacher constrains her classroom. A network that offers "school autonomy" without shared expectations or support structures is under-structuring — exactly as an under-structured classroom abandons its children.

The diagnostic claim scales: when these conditions are present at the system level — when schools feel safe to innovate, when leaders have genuine agency, when the system communicates with intention, and when policy provides enabling constraints rather than rigid prescriptions — schools thrive. When the conditions are absent, even the best schools struggle against the weight of a system that constrains rather than enables.

A 90-Day Entry Point for a New Practitioner

If you are reading this guide and wondering where to begin, here is a concrete path:

Days 1–30: Audit and observe. Read through the self-assessment questions for each condition. Observe your own classroom honestly. Where are the conditions present? Where are they absent? Do not change anything yet. Just notice.

Days 31–60: Choose one condition and practise one behaviour. If safety feels most urgent, build a peace corner and commit to keeping your volume low for 30 days. If language feels most accessible, choose one directive you use often and replace it with a question. If structure feels most concrete, co-create one routine with your students. Practise one thing until it becomes habitual.

Days 61–90: Expand and connect. With one new practice established, add a second. Notice how the conditions reinforce each other — how the peace corner (safety) makes the co-created routine (structure) more effective, how the question frame (language) supports the child's ownership (agency). Begin to see the system, not just the individual conditions.

At the end of 90 days, you will not have transformed your classroom. But you will have begun a practice — a direction of travel that, sustained with intentionality, changes everything.

Chapter 9: The Whole-Classroom Diagnostic

Instructions

Choose a typical lesson — not your best day, not your worst. Observe your classroom with these twenty statements in mind. For each, rate how consistently you observe this in your classroom.

Scale: - **1 — Rarely:** This is not yet part of my classroom reality. I see it in isolated moments or not at all. - **2 — Occasionally:** I see this sometimes, with some students, in some contexts. It is not yet consistent. - **3 — Sometimes:** This happens regularly but not reliably. Some students, some days — I can see it developing. - **4 — Often:** This is a consistent feature of my classroom for most students most of the time. - **5 — Consistently:** This is embedded in my classroom culture. It holds on ordinary days, not just good ones.

Section A: Cultivate Safety

A1. Students volunteer wrong answers, half-formed ideas, or "I don't know" responses without visible anxiety or embarrassment. What to observe: Watch what happens when a student gives an incorrect answer. Do other students look away, smirk, or rush to correct? Or do they listen, build on the idea, or ask follow-up questions?

A2. When students write freely (journals, reflections, low-stakes writing), they choose topics from their own lives — including difficult, personal, or unconventional topics — rather than defaulting to safe, predictable subjects. What to observe: In open writing tasks, do students write about birthday parties and school trips, or about things that genuinely matter to them — confusions, fears, losses, curiosities?

Corpus anchor: "A child will write without inhibitions if he is not going to be judged." (Low Stakes Writing, 2019)

A3. When conflict occurs between students, the classroom culture defaults to repair ("You break it, you fix it") rather than punishment, retaliation, or avoidance. What to observe: After a conflict, do students have language and space to make things right? Is there a physical or relational space (peace corner, cooling-off time) where students regulate before re-engaging?

Corpus anchor: "A logical consequence is not an angry response to a behavior. It is a responsible action to help rather than hurt." (Logical Consequences, 2019)

A4. Students bring genuine personal questions, concerns, or feelings into the classroom space — they treat the room as a place where their inner life is welcome. What to observe: Do students share what they actually feel, or do they perform composure? Do they get "in touch with their own feelings, emotions and [have] the courage to share them"?

Corpus anchor: (Read Aloud, 2019)

A5. My volume, tone, and physical presence communicate trust and respect rather than authority and control — even when I am redirecting behaviour or addressing a problem. What to observe: When you redirect a student, is your volume low? Do you speak to the student privately rather than publicly? Does the student's body language suggest they feel respected or shamed?

Corpus anchor: “The child feels trusted and respected when we keep our volume low, respect them and show faith in him to fix a situation.” (Logical Consequences Part 2, 2019)

Section B: Honour Agency

B1. Students make genuine choices about what to learn, how to learn it, or how to demonstrate their understanding — not pre-approved options, but real decisions that affect the direction of their work. What to observe: Are students choosing between two teacher-designed options (limited choice) or genuinely directing aspects of their learning (real agency)?

Corpus anchor: “Learners are agentic and we do not give agency; we only need to provide opportunities.” (Innovations, 2021)

B2. Students initiate work, solve problems, and make decisions without waiting for the teacher’s instruction or approval. The teacher is not the hardest-working person in the room. What to observe: During transitions and independent work, do students look to you for the next step, or do they move forward on their own? Who is doing the cognitive work — you or them?

B3. When something goes wrong (a mistake, a conflict, a failed attempt), students take responsibility for fixing it rather than waiting for the teacher to resolve it. What to observe: “The Responsive Approach puts the responsibility on the child to fix a problem or come out with a solution.” Do your students propose solutions, or do they report problems and wait?

Corpus anchor: (Responsive Attitude, 2019)

B4. Students express what matters to them through their work — their writing has voice, their projects reflect genuine interest, their questions come from curiosity rather than compliance. What to observe: “Writing what matters or writing what you own builds self-efficacy in children.” Does student work feel like it belongs to the student, or like it was produced for the teacher?

Corpus anchor: (Every Child is a Writer, 2021)

B5. Students choose their own topics or approaches when given the opportunity, and they can articulate why their choices matter to them. What to observe: When offered choice, do students choose immediately and with purpose, or do they ask "What should I pick?" The former suggests agency is being exercised; the latter suggests it has been suppressed.

Corpus anchor: "Children love choice and being in control, don't they?" (Read Aloud, 2019)

Section C: Speak with Intention

C1. My default mode when addressing student behaviour is the question ("What do you need to be doing right now?") rather than the directive ("Sit down," "Hurry up," "Pay attention"). What to observe: Track your own language for one lesson. How many of your behaviour-management interactions are directives vs. questions that put responsibility back on the student?

Corpus anchor: "What do YOU need to be doing right now?" (Responsive Attitude, 2019)

C2. When a student gives a wrong answer or asks an unexpected question, my response preserves and extends their curiosity rather than redirecting toward the "correct" answer. What to observe: After a wrong answer, does the conversation continue (exploring the student's reasoning) or close (moving to another student for the right answer)?

Corpus anchor: "I killed her instinct to know more and took away her opportunity to make connections." (Children's Questions, 2020)

C3. I address behavioural concerns privately and respectfully — I do not correct, shame, or single out students in front of their peers. What to observe: When a student needs redirection, do you move to their desk and speak quietly, or do you address them from across the room?

Corpus anchor: "It is also imperative that we talk to the child about his logical consequence in private and not in front of his siblings or peers, so we are RESPECTFUL to the child." (Logical Consequences Part 2, 2019)

C4. Students ask genuine questions — questions they don't already know the answer to, questions that come from real curiosity rather than from trying to please the teacher. What to observe: Are student questions procedural ("Is this due Friday?") or genuine ("But why does that happen?")? Do students ask because they want to know, or because they think asking looks good?

Corpus anchor: "It is my responsibility to keep her fire of inquiry going." (Children's Questions, 2020)

C5. My language reinforces, reminds, and redirects — rather than corrects, instructs, and penalises. I use language that communicates belief in the student's capacity. What to observe: "Reinforce, remind and redirect" — is this the pattern of your language cycle, or does your language default to telling students what they did wrong and what to do instead?

Corpus anchor: (Responsive Attitude, 2019)

Section D: Design Liberating Structure

D1. My classroom routines and expectations were co-created with students — students helped design them, understand their purpose, and treat them as "ours" rather than "the teacher's rules." What to observe: Can students explain why a routine exists (not just what it is)? Did they have input in designing it? Do they refer to it as something they agreed to, or something imposed on them?

Corpus anchor: "My daughter and I sat down together for a discussion on how our routine should be. We created our schedule." (New Normal, 2020)

D2. Students operate independently within the classroom structure — they know what to do, when to do it, and how to manage transitions without step-by-step teacher direction. What to observe: During routine moments (entering class, starting work, transitioning between activities), do students need instructions from you, or do they navigate the structure on their own?

D3. The classroom feels both structured and free — there are clear expectations, but within them, students make genuine choices about how they work, where they sit, and how they use their time. What to observe: "The program was structured and yet the children felt the freedom." Can you identify both the structure (clear routines, expectations) and the freedom (real choices within them) in your classroom?

Corpus anchor: (IB School Visit, 2019)

D4. My structures are living and flexible — they evolve based on student input, changing needs, and what is actually working, rather than remaining fixed once established. What to observe: Have your routines changed since the start of term based on student feedback? Have students suggested modifications that you implemented?

Corpus anchor: "A living planner is co-created with students." (Humanistic Leadership, 2026)

D5. If I were absent for a week, the classroom structures would hold — students would know the routines, maintain the expectations, and continue to work productively without my personal energy sustaining it. What to observe: This is the ultimate test. Are the conditions structural (built into the room, the schedule, the culture) or personal (dependent on your presence, energy, and good days)?

Scoring

Add your scores for each section:

Section	Condition	Your Score (5–25)
A (items A1–A5)	Cultivate Safety	___
B (items B1–B5)	Honour Agency	___
C (items C1–C5)	Speak with Intention	___
D (items D1–D5)	Design Liberating Structure	___
Total		___ / 100

Interpretation Bands

20–39: The Conditions Are Emerging This is where most practitioners begin — especially those who are new to the framework or working in institutional contexts that don't yet support these conditions. Your classroom may have moments of safety, choice, or intentional language, but they are not yet consistent or structural. This is not a judgment. It is a starting point. Turn to the decision tree below to find your entry point.

40–59: The Conditions Are Developing You have begun the work. Some conditions are present some of the time, for some students. You are likely stronger in one or two conditions and still building the others. This is the most important range — it is where intentional, targeted practice produces the most visible change. Use the decision tree to identify which condition to strengthen next.

60–79: The Conditions Are Established Your classroom has the conditions for genuine learning most of the time. Students experience safety, agency, intentional language, and liberating structure as features of the room, not as occasional events. Your next work is consistency — making the conditions hold on difficult days, with challenging students, and under institutional pressure. Look at your lowest-scoring condition and turn to its chapter for refinement.

80–100: The Conditions Are Thriving The conditions are embedded in your classroom culture. They hold without your conscious effort on most days. Your next move is not to improve your own classroom but to help others build theirs. Consider mentoring a colleague, leading a PLC inquiry using this guide, or working with your school leadership to create institutional conditions that support what you have built in your classroom.

Per-Condition Decision Trees

If Your Lowest Score Is in Cultivate Safety (Section A):

Start here. Safety is the soil — until it is present, the other three conditions cannot take root.

If you scored 5–10 (Emerging): Your classroom may look orderly but children are managing their fear of judgment. Begin with Chapter 3: Cultivate Safety. Your first move: introduce ten minutes of daily low-stakes writing — ungraded, unjudged, with the child choosing the form. Write alongside your students. Do not read what they write unless they choose to share. Within two weeks, watch for what changes.

Corpus anchor: “Low stakes writing is the beginning of good high stake writing.” (Low Stakes Writing, 2019)

If you scored 11–17 (Developing): Safety is present for some students in some moments. Your work is extending it — to the quiet students, to the difficult topics, to the ordinary days. Re-read Chapter 3, focusing on the "What Safety Looks Like in Practice" section. Your next move: establish a physical space for emotional regulation (a peace corner or calming area) and explicitly model its use.

If you scored 18–25 (Established/Thriving): Safety is a consistent feature of your classroom. Turn to your second-lowest condition.

If Your Lowest Score Is in Honour Agency (Section B):

Check safety first. If your Safety score is below 15, start there — children will not exercise agency in an environment where they do not feel safe. If safety is established, proceed.

If you scored 5–10 (Emerging): You may be the hardest-working person in the room. Children wait for instructions because the classroom is designed around your decisions, not theirs. Begin with Chapter 4: Honour Agency. Your first move: co-create one classroom routine with your students this week. It can be small — how they enter the room, how they choose reading material, how they signal they need help. The act of co-creation shifts the ownership.

Corpus anchor: "We do not give agency; we only need to provide opportunities." (Innovations, 2021)

If you scored 11–17 (Developing): Children exercise agency in some domains but defer to you in others. Your work is expanding the space where genuine choice is possible. Re-read Chapter 4, focusing on the observable student behaviours. Your next move: identify one area where you currently make decisions for students, and hand it back to them — with structure, not abandonment.

If you scored 18–25 (Established/Thriving): Agency is embedded. Turn to your second-lowest condition.

If Your Lowest Score Is in Speak with Intention (Section C):

This condition is the fastest to improve — because it requires changing your words, not your classroom structure. But it also requires the most sustained practice, because habitual language patterns are deeply embedded.

If you scored 5–10 (Emerging): Your default language may be directives, corrections, and time pressure. Begin with Chapter 5: Speak with Intention. Your first move: for one week, replace every "Hurry up" with "What will you need to do so you can be ready?" and every "Sit down" with "What do YOU need to be doing right now?" Track how many times you catch yourself. The discomfort is the learning.

Corpus anchor: "It is imperative that adults make the right choice of words when they speak to the children." (Logical Consequences Part 2, 2019)

If you scored 11–17 (Developing): You are already using intentional language some of the time. Your work is extending it to high-pressure moments — when you are tired, when a student is defiant, when the schedule is disrupted. Re-read Chapter 5, focusing on the absent-state description. Your next move: when a student gives a wrong answer, practise extending the conversation by three exchanges before moving on.

If you scored 18–25 (Established/Thriving): Intentional language is your habit. Turn to your second-lowest condition.

If Your Lowest Score Is in Design Liberating Structure (Section D):

Check for the two failure modes. If your classroom is highly controlled (students follow instructions precisely but exercise no judgment), you have over-structure. If your classroom offers "freedom" but students flounder (choosing easy paths, asking what to do next), you have under-structure. The fix is different for each.

If you scored 5–10 (Emerging): Your structures may be teacher-imposed (over-control) or absent (under-structure). Begin with Chapter 6: Design Liberating Structure. Your first move: choose one existing routine and rebuild it with your students. Sit down together. Ask them what works, what doesn't, and what they would change. Implement their suggestions. Watch what happens when the structure is theirs.

Corpus anchor: "The program was structured and yet the children felt the freedom." (IB School Visit, 2019)

If you scored 11–17 (Developing): Some structures are co-created; others are still teacher-imposed. Your work is making all structures living — flexible, evolving, responsive to student input. Re-read Chapter 6, focusing on the "living planner" concept. Your next move: at the end of each week, ask students one question: "What should we change about how our classroom works?"

If you scored 18–25 (Established/Thriving): Your structures liberate. Turn to your second-lowest condition.

If Two Conditions Tie for Lowest:

If one of the tied conditions is **Cultivate Safety**, start there. Safety is the foundation.

If neither tied condition is Safety, look at the individual items within each section. The condition with the single lowest-scoring item is where the most acute need lives. Start there.

If still tied: start with **Speak with Intention**. It is the fastest to change (it requires changing your words, not your systems) and its effects ripple into all other conditions.

Progression Level Tables

Cultivate Safety

Level	What It Looks Like	What to Do Next
Emerging	The classroom is quiet and orderly. Students complete work and follow instructions. But writing is safe and predictable. Questions are procedural. Students perform composure rather than showing genuine feeling. Wrong answers produce visible anxiety. This is where most practitioners begin — the absence of safety often looks like the presence of order.	Introduce daily low-stakes writing (10 min, ungraded, child chooses form). Write alongside students. Establish a peace/calming corner. Lower your volume when redirecting. Do not read student writing unless they choose to share. Watch for changes over 2–3 weeks. Corpus: "A child will write without inhibitions if he is not going to be judged." (Low Stakes Writing, 2019)

Level	What It Looks Like	What to Do Next
Developing	Some students take risks — sharing personal writing, admitting confusion, bringing genuine questions. Others still play it safe. Safety is present in structured low-stakes moments but breaks down during assessment, whole-class discussion, or high-pressure activities. Conflict is sometimes repaired, sometimes punished.	Extend safety to high-stakes moments. When a student gives a wrong answer in a test review, respond with the same curiosity you show during free writing. Establish "You break it, you fix it" as the classroom norm for conflict. Model vulnerability — share your own mistakes and confusions honestly. Corpus: "You break it, you fix it." (Logical Consequences, 2019)
Thriving	Children write about what genuinely matters. They say "I don't understand" without embarrassment. They bring personal questions and concerns into the classroom. Conflict leads to repair, not punishment. Safety holds on ordinary days, not just good ones. The condition is structural — it would persist if a substitute teacher walked in.	Extend safety beyond your classroom. Advocate for institutional conditions that support what you've built — observation practices that don't incentivise performative engagement, assessment cultures that allow genuine risk-taking. Mentor a colleague. Corpus: "The school's vision comes alive only when educators feel socially and emotionally supported." (Humanistic Leadership, 2026)

Honour Agency

Level	What It Looks Like	What to Do Next
Emerging	The teacher is the hardest-working person in the room. Students wait for instructions, ask "Is this what you wanted?", and choose safe paths when offered options. Work feels like it belongs to the teacher. Students who push back are seen as defiant rather than agentic.	Co-create one routine or structure with students this week. Offer genuine choice in one domain (writing topic, project approach, reading selection) and resist the urge to narrow the options. When a student asks "What should I do?", respond with "What do YOU think you should do?" Corpus: "We do not give agency; we only need to provide opportunities." (Innovations, 2021)

Level	What It Looks Like	What to Do Next
Developing	Students exercise agency in some areas (choosing writing topics, solving some problems independently) but defer to the teacher in others. Agency appears during low-stakes work but disappears during assessment or formal tasks. Some students are agentic; others still wait.	Expand the domains of genuine choice. Let students co-design assessment criteria, project timelines, or classroom expectations. When problems arise, default to "What could you try?" before offering your solution. Notice which students consistently defer — they may need explicit reassurance that their choices are valued. Corpus: "The Responsive Approach puts the responsibility on the child to fix a problem or come out with a solution." (Responsive Attitude, 2019)
Thriving	Students initiate, choose, and direct their own learning within clear structures. They fix their own problems. Their work has voice and ownership. They adapt structures to their needs. The teacher facilitates, removes obstacles, and trusts — she does not manage, direct, or grant permission.	Ensure agency is structural, not dependent on your personal facilitation. Design systems where agency is the default — students direct their own conferences, manage their own timelines, and evaluate their own growth. Help other teachers see that agency is inherent in children, not something adults bestow. Corpus: "Children love choice and being in control, don't they?" (Read Aloud, 2019)

Speak with Intention

Level	What It Looks Like	What to Do Next
Emerging	The teacher's default language is directives: "Sit down," "Hurry up," "Pay attention," "That's wrong." Volume is used for control. Corrections happen publicly. Student questions are answered quickly rather than explored. Curiosity is treated as an interruption.	For one week, practise one substitution: replace every directive with a question. "What do YOU need to be doing right now?" instead of "Hurry up." Track how many times you catch yourself. When a student gives a wrong answer, say "Tell me more about how you got there" before redirecting. Corpus: "What do YOU need to be doing right now?" (Responsive Attitude, 2019)

Level	What It Looks Like	What to Do Next
Developing	The teacher uses intentional language in calm moments but reverts to directives under pressure. Some students respond to the teacher's questions with genuine thinking; others still produce "right answers." The teacher models some vulnerability but not consistently. Private redirection happens sometimes, public correction still happens occasionally.	Extend intentional language to the hardest moments — when you're tired, when a student is defiant, when the schedule collapses. Practise keeping your volume low even when the room is loud. When you make a language mistake (a careless correction, a dismissive response), name it: "I could have said that differently. Let me try again." Corpus: "I killed her instinct to know more and took away her opportunity to make connections." (Children's Questions, 2020)
Thriving	Questions are the teacher's default mode. Students' curiosity stays alive — they ask genuine questions, not procedural ones. Wrong answers open conversations rather than closing them. The teacher models vulnerability and self-correction. Redirections are private, respectful, and framed as belief in the student's capacity.	Your language habits are now models for others. Share specific phrases and substitutions with colleagues. Lead a PLC session on the difference between positive language and intentional language (they are not the same thing). Help your institution adopt language norms that reflect intentionality. Corpus: "Reinforce, remind and redirect." (Responsive Attitude, 2019)

Design Liberating Structure

Level	What It Looks Like	What to Do Next
Emerging	**If over-structured:** The classroom runs efficiently. Routines are tight. But students exercise no judgment — every transition requires instruction, every task is teacher-designed. The structure constrains rather than liberates. **If under-structured:** The teacher offers "freedom" but students flounder. "Student-led" activities produce shallow, safe work because no framework guides productive challenge.	**If over-structured:** Choose one routine and rebuild it with students. Ask them what works, what doesn't, and what they'd change. **If under-structured:** Introduce one clear, named process (e.g., a writing workshop sequence with steps students can follow independently). Structure first, then freedom within it. Corpus: "The program was structured and yet the children felt the freedom." (IB School Visit, 2019)
Developing	Some structures are co-created and flexible; others are teacher-imposed and rigid. Students follow routines but haven't internalised them — they still need reminders. Flexibility exists in low-stakes moments but disappears under time pressure or during formal activities.	Make structures living. At the end of each week, ask students: "What should we change?" Implement at least one student suggestion per month. Gradually extend co-creation from daily routines to assessment structures, project frameworks, and classroom expectations. Corpus: "A living planner is co-created with students." (Humanistic Leadership, 2026)
Thriving	Students operate independently within co-created structures. They adapt routines to their needs. Transitions are smooth without teacher direction. The classroom would function if the teacher were absent — because the structure belongs to everyone, not just the teacher. Students can articulate both the structure and the choices they make within it.	Extend liberating structure beyond your classroom. Help your school design institutional structures (meeting formats, PD protocols, decision-making processes) that model the same principle: clear expectations that enable genuine participation. Structure and freedom at every scale. Corpus: "We created our schedule. However, we have left it flexible." (New Normal, 2020)

A Note on Self-Assessment

This diagnostic is a reflection tool, not a performance measure. Self-assessment carries inherent bias — most of us overestimate our practice in areas we care about and underestimate it in areas we haven't focused on. To calibrate:

- **Invite a trusted colleague** to observe one of your lessons and score the diagnostic independently. Compare your scores. The differences are where the most productive conversations live.
- **Focus on student behaviour items**, not just teacher behaviour items. It is easier to inflate what you do than what your students show you.
- **Score based on your ordinary days**, not your best ones. Intentionality means the conditions hold when you are tired, when the schedule is disrupted, and when no one is watching.

The goal is not a high score. The goal is knowing where to dig.

Chapter 10: School Leader Implementation Guide

For principals, vice-principals, heads of school, and instructional coaches. This guide provides structures for introducing The Learning Conditions across a school, observing for their presence, and building professional learning around them.

Leader Self-Check (Before Observing Others)

Before you observe teachers for the four conditions, examine your own practice:

1. **Safety:** Can your teachers tell you, honestly, when they disagree with a school decision — without fear of professional consequence? When was the last time a teacher told you something difficult, and what did you do?
2. **Agency:** Do your teachers have genuine decision-making authority over their classrooms — or do they implement your decisions? Where do teachers have real voice, and where is it performative?
3. **Language:** How do you speak to teachers in staff meetings, in written feedback, in corridor conversations? Would your language pass the same test you apply to teacher-child communication?

If the conditions are absent in adult interactions, they will not be sustained in classrooms. The framework's principle applies at every scale: "The school's vision comes alive only when educators feel socially and emotionally supported" (Humanistic Leadership, 2026).

Phased Introduction: A School-Year Plan

Term 1 — Awareness and Self-Assessment (Cultivate Safety focus) - Introduce the framework through a 90-minute staff session using the PLC questions for Cultivate Safety - Distribute the Whole-Classroom Diagnostic (Chapter 9) for teacher self-assessment; scores are private — leaders do not collect them - Conduct non-evaluative learning walks using descriptive evidence only ("I observed three students volunteer answers in 15 minutes" rather than "The classroom felt safe") - Establish weekly or fortnightly PLC groups organised around the four conditions

Term 2 — Deepening and Practice (Honour Agency + Speak with Intention) - Focus PLC sessions on Honour Agency and Speak with Intention, using the observation tasks from the PLC question sets - Introduce the audio-recording exercise for Speak with Intention — offer this as a voluntary, private learning activity, not a performance management requirement - Leaders conduct paired learning walks with teachers, co-observing for specific indicators and debriefing using descriptive evidence protocols - Share relevant case studies from the practitioner guide at PLC sessions

Term 3 — Integration and Structure (Design Liberating Structure + Whole-Framework) - Focus PLC sessions on Design Liberating Structure, with teachers mapping their existing routines against the "co-creation" criterion - Revisit the Whole-Classroom Diagnostic for comparison with Term 1 self-assessment; again, scores remain private — leaders facilitate reflection, not evaluation - Collaborative action research: each PLC group identifies one structure to redesign with students and documents the process - End-of-year reflection using the full framework as a lens

Observation Protocols for Learning Walks

When conducting learning walks, look for evidence, not judgment:

Condition	What to Look For	What to Record
Cultivate Safety	Children sharing uncertainty; absence of ridicule; peace or calming spaces available; adult tone and volume	Number of students who volunteer answers, ask questions, or express confusion. Describe what the adult did in the moments before.

Condition	What to Look For	What to Record
Honour Agency	Children making decisions without waiting for permission; genuine choice (not pre-approved options); children fixing their own problems	Number of decisions made by children vs. by the teacher in a 10-minute window. Note whether choices offered are genuine or performative.
Speak with Intention	Questions rather than directives; reminding/reinforcing language; private rather than public correction; adult tone communicating trust	Tally of directives vs. questions in a 5-minute window. Record exact phrases used during a correction or redirect.
Design Liberating Structure	Children operating independently within routines; evidence of co-created structures; children adapting routines	Describe one routine observed. Note who designed it, how much flexibility exists within it, and whether children extend or modify it.

Critical principle: Learning walks within the Learning Conditions framework are non-evaluative. They produce evidence for professional conversation, not data for performance management. If teachers experience learning walks as surveillance, the walks destroy the very safety the framework requires.

Feedback Norms for Post-Observation Conversations

- Lead with evidence, not interpretation: "I counted four questions and eleven directives in five minutes" — not "You're too directive"
- Ask before telling: "What did you notice about the transition?" before offering your own observation
- Connect to the framework: "The framework describes two failure modes for structure — over-control and under-structure. Where do you think this routine sits?"
- Close with the teacher's next move, not your recommendation: "What's one thing you'd like to try before our next conversation?"

Chapter 11: Promises and Limitations

What The Learning Conditions framework claims, what it does not claim, and where it might fail.

What the Framework Claims

The Learning Conditions claims that four observable conditions — safety, agency, intentional language, and liberating structure — must be present before any teaching method, curriculum, or programme can produce genuine learning. It claims that these conditions are created by adults, not by children. It claims that creating them requires intentionality — continuous, deliberate effort. And it claims that any thoughtful practitioner can begin building these conditions with the resources they already have.

What the Framework Does Not Claim

- **It is not a curriculum.** It does not tell you what to teach.
- **It is not a method.** It does not prescribe lesson structures, assessment formats, or instructional strategies.
- **It is not a guarantee.** Creating the conditions does not ensure learning outcomes — it creates the environment in which learning becomes possible.
- **It is not culturally neutral.** The framework's language, examples, and assumptions emerge from specific contexts (IB/PYP schools, Indian progressive education, Canadian classrooms). Practitioners in other contexts will need to adapt, not adopt.
- **It is not sufficient on its own.** Children need effective instruction, coherent curriculum, and appropriate assessment in addition to the conditions. The framework addresses what must be true before these elements work — not what those elements should be.

Five Factors That Cause Learning to Fail Despite Conditions Being Present

1. **Resource constraints:** A teacher may cultivate safety and honour agency but teach in a classroom of 50 students with no materials. The conditions are necessary but not sufficient; material resources still matter.
2. **Systemic opposition:** A teacher may create conditions in her classroom while the school's assessment regime, behavioural policies, and institutional culture actively destroy them. Individual classroom practice cannot indefinitely resist institutional headwinds.

3. **Assessment regimes that reward compliance:** High-stakes standardised testing can make it structurally irrational for teachers to honour agency or design liberating structure. When the system rewards convergent, time-pressured performance, conditions that support divergent, reflective learning face systemic pressure.
4. **Cultural resistance:** In contexts where questioning adults is considered disrespectful, or where teacher authority is a non-negotiable cultural norm, the framework's emphasis on shared agency and co-creation may require significant adaptation rather than direct application.
5. **Teacher burnout and moral injury:** Creating and sustaining conditions requires sustained emotional and cognitive energy. Teachers who are themselves depleted — overworked, under-supported, morally injured by systems that contradict their values — may lack the capacity to maintain intentionality. The framework's demand for continuous intentional effort is only realistic when institutions support the adults who create the conditions.

Empirical Transparency

The Learning Conditions framework is grounded in Mamta Motwani's 20+ years of practitioner experience across India and Canada, synthesised from a corpus of 19 published essays. Its theoretical grounding draws from established academic traditions (Edmondson, Deci & Ryan, Vygotsky, Freire, and others), but the framework itself has not been validated through controlled empirical research. The diagnostic instruments, progression pathways, and implementation checklists in this guide are practitioner tools, not psychometric instruments. They are designed to support reflection and improvement, not to generate research-grade data.

We believe this is honest and appropriate: the framework makes claims about conditions, not about outcomes. It invites practitioners to test whether these conditions improve their practice — not to accept them on authority.

About the Author

Mamta Motwani is an educator with 20 years of experience teaching across India and Canada, specialising in the IB Primary Years Programme. The Learning Conditions framework is built from her published essays written over eight years (2018–2026), grounding every claim in classroom observation and practitioner reflection. For more, visit mamtamotwani.com.