

## Evolution of Class Management: Advancing with the Times

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*“Success is a journey not a destination.”  
-Arthur Ashe*

CLASS management, an important component of the education system, evolves with the changes in social needs and educational paradigms in various historical phases. Before the wide adoption of class-based teaching, individual-specific instruction predominated in education in the long history of small-scale farming- and crafts-dominated social production (Tian, 2009). Still, there were certain preliminary experiments with class-based instruction in the early times. For instance, ancient Romans had tried it in the first century AD, which was praised by the educationist Quintilian, who strongly argued for the advantages of this teaching form (Wang et al, 1993). In the twelfth century, boarding became popular in the U.K.’s schools such as Oxford and Cambridge, with which came the “mentoring system,” where the mentors were responsible for supporting students in knowledge acquisition and cognitive development, as well as in moral, spiritual, aesthetic, and physical growth. Their roles were parallel to those of today’s homeroom teachers (Ban, 1996). In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, classical secondary schools in Western European countries organized their students into classes by age. The renowned educationist Erasmus of that time first advanced the concept of “class” (Jin, 1993).

The advent of the First Industrial Revolution in the seventeenth century instigated a fundamental shift in social production from hand-powered to machine-driven processes. The industrialized economy catalyzed educational transformation, a significant outcome of which was the widespread introduction of the class-based instruction system. The Great Didactic, published by Comenius in 1632, gives the first systematic elucidation on the system, shedding light on its key elements such as the academic year, grade, class, and classroom (Wang et al., 1993). Essentially, the system was meant to maximize the efficiency of education and serve the needs of the large-scale industrialized production by generating large numbers of skilled labor forces inculcated with ideas of discipline and

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cooperation (Chen, 1999). In the history of the class-based instruction system, several alternative approaches have been experimented with. For example, at the turn of nineteenth century, the British priest Andrew Bell and educator Joseph Lancaster developed the mentoring student model, in which a senior, high-achieving student, after being taught certain teaching materials by teachers, was appointed as the instructor and mentor for 10 junior ones, to meet the surging demand at the time for workers with the elementary education level (Wang et al, 1993). In the U.S.'s City of Saint Louis, William T. Harris introduced an innovative approach to class organization, which groups students into classes in different grades by ability level rather than by age. In the late nineteenth century, the Mannheim Support System for Schools emerged in Germany, an initiative aiming to improve educational outcomes by offering targeted support to pupils, with children with normal intelligence being enrolled into regular classes and those with varying degrees of intellectual disabilities into distinct special classes (Tian, 2009).

The twentieth century witnessed new waves of educational reform, which brought about novel class organization patterns, such as the Dalton Plan, Jena Plan, collaborative teaching, and non-grade-based class system. Among these, the Dalton Plan was the most outstanding for it broke the constraints of both the grade and class. Under this plan, students were given individualized projects (assignments) to complete at their own pace in a flexible environment. They can autonomously choose laboratories, formulate study plans, and use different learning materials. The goal was to cultivate confident, capable, and socially responsible individuals by allowing them to take ownership of their education and develop essential life skills (Wang & Wang, 1988). These endeavors mirrored growing attention on student autonomy in education, posing new challenges and requirements for class management.

The survey of the evolution of class organization reveals that class management has been constantly aligned to social and economic advancement of the times. *The Necessity of Transitioning from Traditional Class Management to Student Autonomous management in Chinese Basic Education* in this issue expounds on the significance of transitioning from the teacher-dominated style of class management to the student autonomy-valued one against the backdrop of the ongoing national curriculum reform in China, as well as proposing pathways for successful enactment of student autonomous management (Lu, 2025). It is hoped the article can spark more discussions on innovation in class management in the context of the new era's educational reform.

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