

The Necessity of Transitioning from Traditional Class Management to Student Autonomous management in Chinese Basic Education

Chang Lu

China University of Petroleum (East China), Qingdao 266580,
Shandong, China

Abstract: Class management is a basic component of school governance in basic education. Traditional class management in China has overemphasized teacher control, discipline, and order, restricting students' all-round development. In the context of intensified educational reforms, there is a need for transitioning to student autonomous management, a more student-centered class management style. This article gives a brief overview of the evolution of class management in modern China, expounds on the necessity of introducing student autonomous management as well as its chief features, and proposes pathways for its implementation, with the view to providing insights for ongoing educational reform in China.

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About the Authors: Chang Lu, College of New Energy, China University of Petroleum (East China), Qingdao 266580, Shandong, China. E-mail: luchang901225@126.com

Correspondence to: Chang Lu at China University of Petroleum (East China) in China.

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Introduction

THE class is the building block of a modern education system, and the efficacy of its management significantly affects student growth and development. A review of class management practices in China reveals that traditional teacher-dominated class management, a management style prioritizing order and discipline, has prevailed in its basic education. While it has historically played positive roles in Chinese education system, its limitations, such as constraining students' agency in the classroom, are becoming increasingly evident in the context of the calls for social democratization and respect for individuality. Also, the burdens it brings to teachers are enormous, for they must spend a lot of time and energy in dealing with onerous class management work, which is a severe impediment to the enhancement of their professional competence and teaching levels. Moreover, despite all their efforts, issues with the class management remain, including the low motivation levels among students and disorderly organization of classroom activities (Yuan, 2007).

Placing student's needs at its center is the paramount requirement for modern education. Hence, it is imperative to introduce a more scientific and productive class management style in Chinese basic education in order to more effectively promote student all-round development.

Historical Evolution of Class Management in China

Explorations of class management styles have been ongoing since the inception of class-based instruction in the 17th century in the world. Many Western psychologists and educationists have conducted in-depth research into this area. For instance, based on the theory of human cognition, cognitive psychologists argue that it is important to increase students' understanding of classroom rules and the rationale behind teachers' class management practices in order to develop self-regulation in students, foster positive teacher-student relationships, and enhance classroom order. Humanistic psychologists focus on analyzing students' psychological needs and potential and apply their research findings to exploration of the roots of students' classroom behaviors, contending that effective class management can be achieved through motivation, guidance, and psychological suggestion. Education researchers have extensively drawn on research results from various domains, including philosophy, ecology, management, etc., applying them to addressing issues like classroom environment arrangement, teacher-student interaction, and confrontation and negotiation between class members (Wang, 2009).

Systematic research on classroom management, like other educational studies, emerged later in China than in Western countries. It was

not until the 19th century, where Western educational theories were introduced into China and substantially advanced Chinese educational reforms, that classroom management began to garner the attention of educational researchers and became a significant research area (Tian, 2009).

Introduction of Western Grade-Based Class Management in the Late Qing Dynasty

With the rise of the Westernization Movement in the mid-19th century, modern-style schools, such as the Capital School of Combined Learning (CSCL), emerged, which adopted class-based instruction initiated in the Western countries, to replace the individual-specific teaching modality, a long-standing tradition of instruction in China. The CSCL's grade-based class system divided the students' learning progression into three grades and grouped the students into three categories of classes: English, French, and Russian. This practice marked the initiation of class-based instruction in Chinese education history. To maintain classroom order, the CSCL set the positions of Tidiao (a high-ranking official for coordinating educational affairs), whose responsibilities were comparable to those of today's homeroom teacher. The chief Tidiao was held responsible for running the school's three-level management system consisting of the chief Tidiao, assistant Tidiaos, and instructors (Huang & Tu, 2003).

In 1904, the *Constitution of the Schools Authorized by Imperial Edict* was released, which divided schoolteachers into two categories: chief instructors and subject-specific teachers. The chief instructor was responsible for the administration of student affairs, aside from teaching a core subject (Wang, 2011). In short, class management in late Qing Dynasty is characterized by: firstly, teacher role differentiation, explicitly defining teaching and administration roles; and secondly, stringent discipline, achieved through detailed regulations on student behaviors, for ensuring the orderly enactment of teaching activities. These practices represent the initial experiments of class management in China; nevertheless, there was a lack of an established and systematic framework for class management at the time (Tian, 2009).

Institutionalization of Class Management through Legislation in the Republic of China

During the period of the Republic of China, China's education system underwent considerable improvement. *The Secondary School Law*, promulgated by the National Government in 1932, provides the implementation of "the grade-specific homeroom teacher system," underscoring the pivotal role of homeroom teachers in class management (Li,

2006). In 1938, the National Government's Ministry of Education, drawing inspiration from the mentoring systems of the UK's Oxford and Cambridge Universities and combining them with China's traditional Confucian mentoring system, created the *Outline of the Mentoring System for Secondary and Higher Education Schools*. The outline stipulates that the secondary and higher education students be divided into groups of 5–15, with each group assigned a dedicated mentor appointed by the principal from among the ordinary teachers. Additionally, a chief mentor was selected to oversee school-wide mentoring affairs. This design helps remove the limitations of the prior grade-specific homeroom teacher system, where homeroom teachers were only responsible for teaching management, by holding mentors responsible for student moral education, academic guidance, and physical and mental development (Gu, 1990).

The mentoring system was a more sophisticated class management, highly emphasizing the integration of teaching and student management. As required, mentors must be concurrently subject instructors; each of them had the responsibility to provide comprehensive mentoring services to a certain number of students, including but not limited to ideological guidance, behavioral correction, academic instruction, physical and mental health advice, and further education or career planning. Furthermore, the system stresses the shared honor or blame between the mentor and students. In other words, the students' excellence would bring accolades to the mentor, and the latter be held accountable for the former's misconduct. This mechanism largely heightened the mentor's senses of responsibility, contributing to the optimization of class management (Tian, 2009).

Emphasis on Collectivist Values in Class Management in New China

Influenced by the educational philosophy of the former Soviet Union, class management in new China was infused with socialist educational thought, emphasizing the imparting of collectivist values. For instance, the *Provisional Regulations for Secondary Schools*, released in 1952, explicitly state that homeroom teachers' duties include ideological education, academic instruction, and life management education (Ministry of Education of China, 1952).

Class management during this period featured: (i) *Politicized objectives*. Developing the class into a highly cohesive and disciplined team and cultivating socialist builders were the overriding objectives of class management. The efforts of individuals must be directed to the collective development of the class. Inter-class competitive activity and excellent class selection were enacted to stimulate students' pursuit of collective honor. (ii) *A hierarchical management structure*. The class was typically managed with

a three-tier structure constituting the homeroom teacher, class cadres, and ordinary class members. It was a top-down control system, with the homeroom teacher being the decision-maker, class cadres being the organizers of collective activity, and ordinary students being passive participators. Consequently, the homeroom teacher became the absolute authority in the classroom, and students must obey them unconditionally. While the recognition of teacher authority might stem from the respect for the teacher's professional knowledge and educational experience, it truly mirrored the societal emphasis on order and discipline at the time. (iii) *Detailed evaluation criteria.* A set of standardized procedures and criteria governed class management, from the establishment of class rules to the supervision of in-school behavior. For instance, there were clearly specified requirements on school attendance, classroom discipline, and homework checks, and the teacher managed students accordingly to ensure the smooth operation of the class.

Since the 1980s, the introduction of democratic management theory into the country has aroused the attention of the education community on the personal development of students, particularly the development of their individuality within the collective framework. There has been a growing awareness of students' agency in class management. However, the traditional class management style has not undergone fundamental changes.

The Necessity of the Transition in Class Management Style

From the modern perspective of education, the core mission of education is to promote student all-round development, which necessitates not only a curriculum that encompasses moral, intellectual, physical, aesthetic, and labor education but also a high emphasis on character building and individuality development in students. In this context, to achieve high quality class management, the teacher needs to adopt an innovative management style that encourages student autonomous management rather than relying on an authoritarian one based on stringent control (Jiang, 2013).

Drawbacks of Traditional Class Management

Traditional classroom management in current Chinese basic education caters primarily to exam-focused education, emphasizing hierarchical classroom organization, prioritizing academic competition, and being characterized by control and discipline (Wang, 2009). Its classroom hierarchy consists of the homeroom teacher, class monitor, other class-level cadres, group leaders, and ordinary students in order of ranks. Students with higher positions in the hierarchy often undertake more important management responsibilities,

enjoy more rights, have more opportunities to communicate with the teacher, and thus feel stronger senses of superiority. In addition, they are likely to receive more accolades. Due to the limited numbers of class cadre positions and accolades, coupled with the homeroom teacher's absolute authority, students are motivated to engage in fights, overt and covert, for benefits, willingly submitting to the teacher's control. This class management style is characterized by:

- *Skewed Power Distribution.* Power centralization features the traditional class management style with the homeroom teacher dominating decision making in all class affairs, ranging from routine activities to class development planning. This overly centralized management approach ignores the agency of students, who can only play passive roles, being deprived of opportunities of autonomous decision making and management, which prevents them from fully unlocking their potential. In the long run, this is unfavorable for comprehensive competence development of students.
- *Relational Challenges.* The overemphasis on order and discipline in traditional class management resulting in management practices void of teacher-student affective connection. The homeroom teacher often assumes an authoritarian role, prioritizing the enforcement of rules and maintenance of discipline while disregarding emotional communication with students. Consequently, the latter can only perceive cold, rigid constraints rather than warm care and guidance, leading to a lack of deep understanding and trust between the teacher and students. At the same time, the competitive culture prevalent in traditional class management largely undermines the cooperative mentality of students. In striving for ideal positions in the class hierarchy, students often treat their classmates as rivals, with a dearth of mutual collaboration and communication. This is not beneficial for developing healthy interpersonal relationships between them or for cultivating teamwork awareness and ability in them, running counter to the requirements for talent in modern society.

Calls for Developing Student Self-Directed Management Ability

Student autonomous management is a class management style which affords students the central role in class management, aiming to fuel active self-education and self-management in them and fostering their self-reliance, self-regulation, and social skills through their involvement in class management. This class management style is in line with:

- *The Global Trend in Student Development.* Human society is experiencing information explosion in the age of information. The expedited advancement of information technology has

brought unprecedented convenience in information access and communication. Nevertheless, the immensity and complexity of the knowledge body also pose high requirements on the individual's ability to extract useful information while identifying harmful content. This is particularly challenging to adolescents, who are still in the stage of developing appropriate discrimination and are highly susceptible to the negative influence of harmful information (Teng et al., 2023). Against this backdrop, developing students' self-regulation skills has become an imperative.

- *The Requirement of the National Curriculum Reform.* The current curriculum reform in China calls for shifts in class management in basic education, from centralization to openness, from involving a portion of students to engaging all of them, from student passive involvement to active engagement, from individual work completion to mutual support, and from a focus on subject-specific knowledge acquisition to an emphasis on developing a more diverse range of competences. This necessitates innovation in class management to support these transitions. *The National Compulsory Education Curriculum Program and Course Standards 2022* explicitly define self-directed development as one of the four core competencies to be fostered in students, emphasizing the need to enable them to learn how to learn, teach them how to live healthy lives, and support them in becoming well-rounded individuals with ideals and senses of responsibility for the new era (Ministry of Education of China, 2022). The new curriculum program provides strong policy support for the nationwide reform of class management.
- *The Need to Change Education Notions in Teachers.* The practice of student autonomous management is grounded on extensive research on the role of students' agency in learning, offering new possibilities for competence-focused education. This practice has the potential to instigate changes in teachers' educational notions, from teaching knowledge to facilitating student all-round development. It will prompt them to embrace the student-centered educational philosophy, using teaching as a means for the end of student development, which can significantly bolster their educational outcomes.

Chief Features of Student Autonomous Management

Student autonomous management as a style of class management comprises a variety of components, including delegating students to set the overarching

goal of the class, establish its rules and regulations, coordinate interpersonal relationships, handle day-to-day affairs, deliver rewards and penalties, and organize extra-curricular activities. This class management style may be dubbed the “class council management system,” or “class management committee system” and “cadre rotation system” in different schools. Regardless of their names, these systems share common features as follows (Wang, 2009).

Students’ Ownership of Class Management

With full autonomy in class management, the students are no longer passive recipients and executors of top-down management directives. Instead, they enjoy a wide range of rights, including rights to present proposals, participate in discussions, be involved in decision-making, implement decisions, supervise and evaluate classroom activities. The students not only enact class management but are also responsible for its outcomes. This class management style motivates students to fully use their initiative in managing learning environments, encouraging them to engage with a true sense of ownership towards their class.

Equal Participation of Every Student

In the process of student autonomous management, every member of the class has equal rights and opportunities to participate in class management. It is noteworthy that ideal student autonomous management is based on the tenet of cooperation, with an emphasis on mutual assistance and collaboration, rather than on that of competition, which may result in excluding a portion of students from management activities. This is to ensure that every student experiences genuine participation in class management. Also, fostering students’ cooperative mentality and ability is one of the primary objectives of practicing student autonomous management.

Agreement on Class Rules and Regulations among Class Members

In a class with student autonomy in management, class rules and regulations are the product of thorough communication and negotiation on the part of all class members, representing a consensus reached through discussions, dialogues, and compromise. They embody the collective will of the class rather than that of the homeroom teacher or certain student cadres. As a result, they are more implementable and applicable.

A Flat Leadership Structure

The practice of student autonomous management substantially weakens the hierarchical nature of management in a traditional classroom by providing a big array of management roles. Every student can be a manager as well as a service provider, which truly mirrors the principle of “everyone matters, and everyone is held responsible for something.” Furthermore, this class management style calls for position rotation, allowing class members to experience diverse management roles.

Presence of the Teacher as a Mentor Instead of a Dictator

With the student autonomous management style, the homeroom teacher and other instructors forgo their roles as the controllers of the class; instead, they act as mentors, advisors, coordinators, and support providers. Given their superiority in knowledge, experience, ability, and maturity over the students, teachers can still play a significant role in assisting with the formation of reasonable class goals, uniting the class, and coordinating students’ management duties. Their responsibility is to guide class development, ensure that class management is on the right track, and promote cooperation by increasing understanding and exchanges between class members, thereby facilitating the attainment of shared goals and targets.

High Value on Dialogue and Reflection

The workings of student autonomous management rely heavily on discussions and dialogues, through which class members collectively reflect on and tackle issues existing in their classroom, and resolve disagreements between teachers and students, as well as between students. Platforms for class conversations include weekly thematic class meetings, daily class assemblies, class logs, and more. Effective dialogues, discussions, and reflections prompt self-understanding and mutual understanding in students, heightening their senses of belonging to the class and aiding everyone in integrating into it.

Pathways for Successful Student Autonomous Management

The three basic elements in successful student autonomous management are effective decision-making, execution, and evaluation regarding class management, all of which should be grounded on the student-centered principle.

Democratic Decision-Making Procedures

There are primarily two approaches to decision-making in traditional class management, namely, the top-down approach, where decisions are made by the homeroom teacher and subsequently communicated to and executed within the class, and the bottom-up approach, where suggestions may be first proposed by class members, but the final decision is made by the teacher and unconditionally executed by the class. Yet, both are not conducive to the maximization of student participation in class affairs (Zhong, 2001). Contrarily, in a class under student autonomous management, all class members should respectively act as the initiators, organizers, coordinators, and decision makers in the decision-making process. An advance notice of the decision to be made is required to allow students sufficient time for contemplations. All students have the responsibility to contribute relevant information and ideas, which form the basis of decision-making. Methods like brainstorming should be used to encourage free expression of opinions in class members to identify possible challenges, ascertain goals, and prepare options. All these democratic procedures are meant to ensure smooth progression of class decision-making (Lin, 2005).

Effective Execution Mechanics

A legitimate execution mechanism is crucial for the realization of class management objectives (Fan, 2003). Broadly, class management activities can be categorized in two dimensions: physical and cultural construction of the class. Physical construction covers the overall planning and improvement of the classroom environment, establishment of class rules and regulations, and organization of colorful class events; cultural construction concerns shaping the class's image, cultivating its values, and strengthening its unity (Yang, 2009). What roles each student plays and what responsibilities they have in these management activities should be clearly specified to ensure their full involvement. In the meantime, it is important to emphasize teamwork in these activities, leveraging students' senses of responsibility towards the class and their desire for autonomy in class management. This helps stimulate their enthusiasm, initiative, and creativity in their efforts to attain the shared objectives of the class.

At the same time, a supportive mentoring mechanism is crucial for the successful enactment of student autonomous management. Despite the students being the central actors under this class management style, the homeroom teacher's role as a mentor and facilitator is essential, who can provide advice on class management for students randomly in day-to-day interaction or formally at the regular class meetings. Also, using more

diverse avenues, including the homeroom teacher's mailbox and parent forum, can broaden the advisory channels.

Regular Feedback and Evaluation

Timely feedback assists students in understanding the extent to which their objectives have been realized and the effects of the methods employed in class management, thereby prompting them to make adjustments based on the actual circumstances (Xu & Zhong, 1995). In this process, students can examine their management activities from the perspectives of their homeroom teacher and classmates, compare their management outcomes with the set objectives, and decide how to improve their approach. This feedback and adjustment procedure can substantially enhance their communication with their teachers and peers as well as their management skills, facilitating their continuous self-improvement.

The completion of each class management activity should be followed by a thorough evaluation of the enactment process, devices adopted, student participation and collaboration levels, and its impacts on the class and other stakeholders, against the pre-determined objectives of the activity. The evaluation ought to cover both the attainments and inadequacies of the activity, as well as its implications for future comparable activities. An important role of the homeroom teacher in the evaluation is to teacher students how to collect data on class management and to make data-based evaluation of their management outcomes. The teacher needs to give objective comments on students' class management endeavors, with the consideration of their ability level and the specific contexts, and offer improvement recommendations, rather than making simplistic judgements.

Conclusion

Since the 1960s, the democratization of education has been a prominent trend in global educational reforms. As Mialaret (1991) points out, the democratization of education basically represents the direction of all educational reforms as well as the goal of all educational innovation efforts in the world. It can mean two things: democracy in education and democratic education. The former is about the extension of democratic principles from the political sphere to the field of education to ensure that every human has the right to education. The latter signifies a change in how education is delivered, aiming to remove the authoritarian elements inherent in traditional educational modalities and infuse democratic spirits into educational practices, which necessitates not only shifts in educational notions but also reshaping of the workings of the education system (Shi, 2009).

The style of school management evolves with social development, and class management should cater for the developmental needs of students.

Against the backdrop of the ongoing curriculum reform in Chinese basic education, there is a need for introducing student autonomous management. This student-centered style of class management has the potential to transcend the functions of traditional class management for discipline maintenance and handling of routine affairs, and render the classroom productive in assisting students' all-round development, including academic progress, character building, cultivation of practical competence, and more.

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