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## A Qualitative Examination of Teacher-Student Power-Sharing in Chinese Classrooms: A Study in Hong Kong

**Abstract** This article explores the dynamics of power-sharing between teacher and students in learning and teaching situations, and describes the theoretical bases, implementation, and results of an empirical study in three elementary schools in Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People’s Republic of China. Findings from 58 class observations and interviews with 50 students, 25 teachers, and three school principals suggest that teachers can empower students by acknowledging their right to and responsibility for learning and by sharing power with students. Power-sharing classroom practice requires the dual efforts of teachers and students, and can be facilitated by the teachers’ interactive teaching mode, students’ cooperation and willingness to engage in learning, and school policy and culture, etc. In the power-sharing classrooms, teachers played the role of facilitators and students played as collaborators. In this article, theoretical implications for understanding power-sharing and critical pedagogy are discussed. The empirical evidence from this Hong Kong study contributes to an understanding of teacher-initiated power-sharing in the Chinese context, and the practice of critical pedagogy in classrooms.

**Keywords** power-sharing, critical pedagogy, elementary schools, Hong Kong education

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### Introduction

Numerous studies have shown that classroom learning/teaching is shaped by teacher-student power interactions that are, in turn, affected by such factors as teachers’ characters, student-teacher relationships, structural factors, and the

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learning/teaching context (see Schwarzwald, Koslowsky, & Brody-Shamir, 2006; Traynor, 2003; Winograd, 2002). Less attention has been paid, however, to the characteristics of teacher-student power-sharing in learning/teaching situations, and corresponding micro-contextual factors. Specifically, this paper tries to show how teachers and students act in power-sharing relationships and what micro-characteristics inform the observed power-sharing situations.

This study is part of a larger empirical study that explores, through documentary analysis, classroom observations and interviews, teacher-student power interactions in Hong Kong elementary schools. The study identified three patterns describing a continuum of teacher-student power relations; this paper mainly discusses one such pattern occupying approximately the middle of the continuum, Relatively Balanced Opportunity for Power Sharing (RBOPS). Compared with the other two patterns, teachers and students in RBOPS situations enjoy relatively balanced opportunities to exercise power in the teaching/learning context, with each performing different roles and using different power-sharing strategies; teachers guide, but do not dominate, students' learning, while students are more involved in their learning and own their ideas.

The paper first reviews the literature on power in human relations and teaching/learning and for social development. Next, it describes the study's research design. Third, it presents the study's major findings on power-sharing relationship, including the roles the teachers and students played and the strategies they employed. Fourth, it examines the factors that shape teacher-student power-sharing. Finally, it identifies theoretical implications for understanding power-sharing in teaching/learning.

### **Concepts of Power, Power-Conflict and Power-Sharing**

In different ways and to various extents, power exists in all human relationships and institutions, and multiple schools of thought seek to explain its role and function. Parsons (1963), from a functionalist perspective, depicted power as the capacity to act, whereas Weber (1978), from a conflict theory perspective, viewed it as the ability to resist. While these theorists focused more on power in macro-level interactions, others explored power at the micro-level of human interactions. Foucault (1981) conceptualized power as a "complex strategical situation" within human relationships that includes the possibility of resistance

(Foucault, 1982). Power can be reflected in micro-level teacher-student interactions, assuming both teachers and students also could employ power to act in teaching/learning situations involving negotiation, conflict and resistance.

This view has been criticized, however, for focusing on teacher-student power-conflict and neglecting incidents of harmony and cooperation, and has been supplemented by the contention that conflict and harmony coexist. As Blackledge and Hunt (1985) argued, “we negotiate with our pupils and students, but we also co-operate” (p. 271). Both negative and positive aspects of power—power-conflict and power-sharing, respectively—are evident in teacher-student interactions. Power-conflict is not the only teacher-student relationship pattern.

Power-sharing allows two parties to develop each other’s power through interactions (Garman, 1995); this facilitates student learning and empowerment by allowing students to share power over and responsibility for their learning, and increasing students’ ownership of their ideas, thus changing them from silent participants in the learning process and helping to develop harmonious and cooperative relationships between teachers and students.

### **Power-Sharing for Social Development**

Teacher-student power-sharing, in fact, has important implications for social development, rather than being simply an issue at the school and classroom levels. Some critical pedagogues have called for emancipated, democratic schools and more critical pedagogy (e.g., Apple & Beane, 1999; Freire, 1996; Giroux & McLaren, 1986; Shor, 1996), including alternative power relations and corresponding social change. For example, Beane and Apple (1999) suggested that democratic schools foster democracy by bringing “democratic structures and processes” and “democratic experiences” to life. Shor (1996) encouraged democratic classrooms through power-sharing with students, while hooks (1994) emphasized “engaged pedagogy,” highlighting the importance of engaging in dialogue to cross different group boundaries.

Critical pedagogues, in general, see the “classroom as an arena of struggle,” suggesting various focuses for critical pedagogy, including “student engagement,” “ownership of learning,” “social justice” and “social change and democracy,” etc. (see Breunig, 2011). The development of critical theory

encourages the liberation of student power and suggests pedagogy as a social movement in which education is “a vehicle for individual empowerment and social reconstruction” (Gallagher, 2002, p. 71). However, most critical pedagogy studies are at the theoretical level, and lack an understanding of its practices and the connection between theory and practice (see Breunig, 2005; McLaren, 2000).

### **Complexity of Power-Sharing Practices in Classrooms**

Some studies suggest sharing power with students through group work, peer assessment, community service, and participation in school decision-making or cooperative learning (Reeves, 2008; Stanier, 1997; Sullivan & King, 1999). However, the teacher-student power relationship is complex. An equal and collaborative power relationship is not necessarily achieved simply by employing student-centric teaching practices (Gore, 2002, December). Teachers might exert their authority when facing students’ power and resistance (Perumal, 2008). In such interactive power-negotiation process, teachers and students use various strategies to control/resist each other (Pollard, 1985; Woods, 1983), including open negotiation, routinisation, manipulation and dominance by teachers (Pollard, 1985), and non-participation, personality power and disruption by students (Cothran & Ennis, 1997).

As such, it is valuable to examine further the roles and strategies teachers and students use in classroom practices to develop a relatively equal relationship. Investigating the characteristics of classroom power-sharing (in terms of roles and strategies) could further help us understand current classroom practices; as critical pedagogues have suggested, that may help to formulate directions for those practices and create a more social and just world.

### **Teacher-Student Power Relations in Chinese Classrooms**

As most studies on power relations have been conducted in Western contexts, they cannot fully explain the power phenomena observed in Chinese classrooms, in part because Chinese classrooms may have culturally-specific backgrounds that affect the power relationships therein. For example, cultural differences were found in how Chinese and Western students perceived their teachers’ actions; behaviours that Western students saw as overtly controlling, Chinese students

accepted with relative equanimity (see Zhou, Lam, & Chan, 2012).

Power relationships in the Chinese context are still relatively under-researched, despite several recent efforts. Wang (2006) investigated the power distribution in regular classroom teaching in Chinese mainland; Li (2007) studied the influence of globalization on changes to power and rights in Chinese classrooms; Wu (2008) discussed students' power over curriculum decisions; and Ceng (2012) and Han (2008) explored the emerging relationship between teachers and students in the context of curriculum reform. Chinese classrooms are teacher dominated, with the teacher controlling both classroom management and student affairs; this teacher-student relationship is influenced by deeply-rooted Chinese sociocultural traditions (see Li, 2007). Extant Chinese studies have examined both traditional Chinese views on the teacher-student relationship in general, and the emerging teacher-student relationship in contemporary China, with specific reference to curriculum reform and globalization. However, Chinese studies supported by data-given discussions are rare, and the empirical power-sharing situations in mainland Chinese classrooms are not fully understood.

Empirical studies on power relations in Hong Kong Chinese classrooms are equally rare. Liang (1999) and To (2006) have explored, respectively, the teacher-student relationship in school disciplines, and the power struggle underlying the relationships between students, teachers and school social workers in Hong Kong schools. Although their studies provided some empirical data about teacher-student power relations, they did not focus specifically on the power-sharing relationship in learning/learning situations.

It is important to note that, in recent years, the need to and trend of changing from a teacher-dominated to a student-centric classroom culture has been noted by some Chinese mainland and Hong Kong researchers examining the basic purpose of power-sharing, which is to benefit students' learning and social development (see Ceng, 2012; Han, 2008; Wang, 2006; Wong, 2014). This empirical study, which explores the micro power-sharing relationship by selecting Hong Kong as a case, supplements the existing theoretical understanding of teacher-student power-sharing in the specific learning/teaching context of Chinese classrooms.

This study identifies and examines power-sharing situations, exploring the dynamics and complexities of teacher-student relationships therein. It poses three research questions:

- (a) What roles do teachers and students play in their power-sharing relationship?
- (b) What strategies do they use to share power? and
- (c) What factors facilitate classroom power-sharing?

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## Research Study

### Background

A British colony for about 150 years before being returned to China in 1997, Hong Kong is a city where East meets West. In 2011, its population was 7.1 million, of which some 95% were Chinese. A majority (about 85%) of local elementary schools, while government-subsidized, are run and managed by religious or social organizations; government and private schools make up the remainder (Secretary for Education, 2012).

Teacher-student relationships in Hong Kong elementary schools are situated in specific sociocultural and educational contexts. On the one hand, Hong Kong schools typically feature hierarchical power structures and relationship. Teachers enjoy both positional and cultural authority over students based on traditional Chinese values (Ho, 2001). As such, teachers wield a great deal of authority, which students are expected to obey. On the other hand, Hong Kong education embraced Western, particularly British, theories and practices during the late-colonial period, and introduced several initiatives (e.g., Activity Approach (in the 1970s) and Target Oriented Curriculum (in the 1990s)) to encourage students to learn by doing and constructing knowledge. In the early 2000s, the post-colonial government reformed school curricula to allow “students more room and flexibility to organise and take charge of their own learning” (Education Commission, 2000, p. 36). The conflict between traditional Chinese respect for authority and teachers and the promotion of student-centric teaching forms the specific context for this study.

### Research Design and Methods

The study focuses on three government-subsidized elementary schools, selected based on religious background and school history, assuming two contextual

school factors affecting teacher-student relationships. Many Hong Kong subsidized schools are sponsored by religious bodies, whose philosophical outlook influences the schooling and moral education they provide (Cheng, 2004), while long-established schools tend to have firmly established hierarchical mechanisms and cultures. School A was a secular school in operation for at least 50 years, School B was a secular school in operation for fewer than 10 years, and School C was a Christian school in operation for over 50 years.

The study gathered data through document analysis, non-participant observation and individual interviews. School documents (e.g., curriculum plans and student worksheets) provided basic demographic information, explained policies and curricula, and provided a context for identified power situations. Non-participant observation of 58 lessons (each 30–40 minutes in length) in two 4th grade and two 5th grade classes from each school allowed the direct, natural examination of teacher-student power dynamics (Schwarzwald et al., 2006). All observed lessons were selected by the teachers, and most were in subjects traditionally classified as values education (e.g., Moral Education and Personal Growth Education). The lessons were videotaped, with permission, for later review, and notes taken to record key events. Semi-structured interviews involving three school principals, 13 senior teachers, 12 classroom teachers, and 50 students (aged 9–11) from the three schools allowed the in-depth probing and collection of “data on subjects’ opinions, beliefs, and feelings about the situation in their own words” (Ary, Jacobs, & Razavieh, 2002, p. 434). All interviews were individual, conducted in private rooms, and audio recorded with permission. Three to four students from each observed class were interviewed, chosen for their high levels of in-class activity (asking questions and participating in discussions) or passivity (silent in class, but expressive to group partners). Student interviews lasted, on average, 15 minutes, while principal and teacher interviews were about 45 minutes in length.

Basic analysis involved data reduction, dividing data into smaller segments so that patterns and themes could be identified (Hittleman & Simon, 2006). The observation data, including videos, actions and reactions, and notes on classroom complexity were broken into component parts (as Sherin, 2004, suggested), then identified and categorized for further analysis using “sign coding” (Ary et al., 2002), with useful information being categorized by units of analysis (including pattern features, and teachers’ and students’ power strategies). Similar methods

were used to analyze interview data and school documents (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007). Finally, all data were reorganized according to themes related to the various research questions.

## **Findings: Characteristics and Micro-Level Factors of Power-Sharing Relationship**

This section discusses the characteristics of the identified pattern of RBOPS, including the strategies teachers and students used and the roles they played. It also analyses the factors facilitating RBOPS.

In the pattern of RBOPS, teachers guided students as needed and allowed them control over part of their learning, while students took some power and responsibility and had opportunities to express their individual viewpoints or disagree with others, with no one party being dominant. Overall, 24 of the 58 observed lessons (41%) showed the above features of RBOPS: 25% of observed classes in School A; 65% in School B; and 33% in School C (Table 1).

**Table 1** Number of Observed RBOPS Lessons

Schools	Number of Observed Lessons	Number of RBOPS Lessons
A	20	5 (25%)
B	20	13 (65%)
C	18	6 (33%)
Total	58	24 (41%)

### **Overview of Selected Lesson Segments**

In this first part, some relevant lesson segments retrieved from three RBOPS lessons (Lessons 1–3) in the three schools are selected as major examples to illustrate the pattern of RBOPS, due to their richness in its features (Table 2). Other relevant RBOPS lessons and segments are used to supplement the illustration.

Lesson 1 was School A’s Moral Education lesson on “emotional release.” This lesson adopted game play, with students sharing real-life experiences and suggesting ways to release emotions by using a sheet of paper.

Lesson 2 was School B’s Personal Growth Education lesson, which used the game, “Who is the best at...?” to help students discover and appreciate



group-mates' qualities; in each round, the group identified which member was best at a specific activity (e.g., mathematics, memory, or logic), with the victor representing the group in a whole-class competition.

Lesson 3 was a School C's Personal Growth Education lesson. The teacher adopted auction game as the major strategy in the lesson, in which the teacher "auctioned off" either material goods (e.g., a pencil case) or spiritual goods (e.g., parental love) to student "bidders."

**Table 2** Profile of the Three Examples of RBOPS Lessons

Lessons	Schools	Subjects	Teaching Topics	Major Activities
1	A	Moral Education (including Personal Growth Education)	Forms of emotional release	- Sharing real-life experiences, - suggesting ways to release emotions by using a sheet of paper;
2	B	Personal Growth Education	Understanding and caring for others	- Game playing, - identifying the member who was best at a specific activity (e.g., mathematics, memory, or logic);
3	C	Personal Growth Education	Spiritual satisfaction	- Game playing, - playing as "bidders" to bid for either material goods (e.g., a pencil case) or spiritual goods (e.g., parental love).

### Sharing Partial Power and Opportunity with Students

In RBOPS, teachers employed a strategy of giving-power that avoids domination and authoritarian management while sharing power by creating opportunities for students to manage their learning. Teachers employed power for classroom management, to facilitate learning and achieve teaching/learning goals. In the 58 lessons in Schools A, B and C, teachers in RBOPS lessons were observed mainly to use five techniques to share partial power with students, establish a safe learning environment, facilitate students to actively manage their learning, and reduce teacher's authoritarian domination while still providing appropriate support, through authoritative, but not authoritarian, teaching.

### Interactive Teaching Mode

The first basic technique involved the use of interactive teaching mode. For example, in Lesson 2, teacher B/T03 adopted a game of "Who is the best at...?"

in which the teacher and students played distinct, but equally important, roles. Teacher B/T03 provided instructions, explanations and comments, while student groups completed and discussed the assigned tasks and selected representatives to perform them for the other groups.

A similar interactive mode could be found in other RBOPS lessons. In Lessons 3, teacher C/T04 used an auction game to facilitate interactions with students. In the lesson, students were given time and opportunities to explore, and were not dominated or provided information directly; students learned by doing researching, completing tasks, discussing and offering suggestions. With teacher guidance, students engaged in and contributed to the whole process based on their own learning progress. The use of interactive mode provides students with opportunities to engage highly in the management of their learning. An observed School C lesson (Lesson C/L01) also demonstrated similar interactions between and among the teacher and students.

### **Encouraging New Ideas**

The second technique involved encouraging and accepting students' sharing of new and diverse ideas. In Lesson 1, teacher A/T03 asked students to explore and express their emotions using a sheet of paper by asked an open-ended question "How do you use this sheet of paper to release your emotion?"; one student shouted, "Can I say what I think?" was told, "Yes, of course! Why not?" (Lines 3–7), and then shared his response with the class. The open-ended teacher-asked question gave students space in which to think and express their own ideas. The teacher's reply confirmed the possibility and validity of different individual viewpoints, eased students' worries and encouraged them to express original ideas, which is essential for the development of equal human relationships.

In Lesson 3, teacher C/T04 encouraged broader student participation by inviting passive students to share their ideas (Lines 20, 47 and 51) and explicitly encouraging students to share different or contrary viewpoints (Line 129) and challenging those of other students (Line 90). Similar encouragement was seen in non-values education lessons (e.g., Lesson C/L07, Line 52).

The above examples illustrate how teachers' encourage and support allowed students to conceptualize and express their own ideas, and how acceptance of their divergent thinking eased students' worries and encouraged them to share

their thoughts. The power-sharing relationship was reflected in the mutual respect between teachers and students and the assumption that both teachers' and students' ideas could contribute to student learning.

### **Delaying to Show Opinions**

The third important technique was to let students share their views before the teachers did. In Lesson 1, teacher A/T03 asked students how they could release their emotions using a sheet of paper; a student suggested they could release their emotions by shredding the paper or stabbing a paper doll (Lines 9 and 12). Teacher A/T03 did not share her views until the end of the lesson, at which point she suggested ways of releasing one's emotions without damage to persons or property.

Likewise, in Lesson 3, teacher C/T04 withheld his ideas until his students shared theirs, thus giving them more space in which to develop and explore their own opinions (Lines 131–154).

Withholding their opinions, as a teaching technique, could help teachers to conceal their regular teacher authority and provide space for students to develop preliminary ideas about how to construct their own knowledge during the learning process.

### **Guided Questions**

The fourth technique facilitating RBOPS was teachers' use of guided questions, rather than direct instruction. In Lesson 2, teacher B/T03 helped students review their game play and discover what they had learned by asking the group to examine its representative selection criteria ("When you send a representative for your group, what is the principle of selection?" Line 85), categorize its discussion topics ("Overall, what categories are the topics grouped in?" Line 93), and explain why some students were not chosen as group representatives ("Some students had not been a representative for the group [in all different topics]. Why?" Line 133); the students' responses often led to follow-up questions. Teacher B/T03 also asked students to reflect on their game-playing experiences, rather than telling them what they were supposed to have learned. No model answers were provided.

In other observed lessons (e.g., Lessons A/L05 and B/L17), teachers also asked similar guided questions to stimulate students and encourage them to think, develop ideas, and learn through exploration and discussion.

In RBOPS classrooms, learning relied on teacher-student collaboration. Although teachers would purposively decrease teacher domination, their teaching authority still existed. Teachers would provide appropriate help and guidance through authoritative, rather than authoritarian, teaching.

### **Prompt Responses**

Prompt responses and feedback also facilitated RBOPS. During Lesson 2, when students could not reach a consensus, teacher B/T03 refocused the discussion, urging them to think matters through and discuss them as a group (Line 126); his prompt feedback helped his students solve the problem and manage their learning.

Similarly, after each auction game round in Lesson 3, teacher C/T04 identified important points his students needed to address. After several students suggested how to gain their teachers' praise, teacher C/T04 commented that they did not see how their actions benefited them (Lines 15–17). He also used hints to help students analyze their ideas; when discussing material and spiritual satisfaction, he asked "Any other differences?... There is a point that you may want to consider! Do spiritual goods have a base price?" (Line 113), to which a student replied, "Money cannot buy spiritual satisfaction... Spiritual satisfaction comes from your feelings about others' caring... [with] material satisfaction, you feel happy just because you can buy and get what you want" (Line 121). In this and other observed lessons (e.g., Lessons A/L05, B/L18 and C/L03), teachers' responses and hints facilitated student learning, reflecting the positive effect of teacher assistance, in this case, by deepening students' discussion to include the sources and meaning of satisfaction.

Students in the learning process meet problems, and their learning success relies on the extent to which they can resolve those problems. In RBOPS classrooms, teachers would first give students opportunities to try out or share ideas and manage their own learning, then respond to student requests at crucial moments to help the students further tackle their learning problems.

In sum, the first teacher technique—an interactive teaching mode—provided a platform for the occurrence of RBOPS lessons, whereas the second and third techniques increased space for the students to share views and opposite ideas.

The last two techniques further allowed the teacher to provide assistance when necessary or at the students' requests; this helped them to solve problems and manage their learning. The classroom power shown in the lesson segments was not only owned by teachers, but shared by teachers and students.

### **Enjoying Teacher-Given Power and Responsibility**

Unlike traditional lessons using direct instruction, the RBOPS pattern involves both teacher and student contributions. Students in the RBOPS pattern employed a strategy of collaboration; they received and exercised teacher-given power; they had deeper involvement in the teaching/learning process. This complemented the giving-power strategy used by their teachers; teachers gave power to students to facilitate their learning, while students accepted that power to manage their own learning, share new ideas and enjoy new responsibilities. Although the learning was not totally student-initiated, teachers and students shared the same teaching/learning goal, and students enjoyed participating and working with the teacher.

### **Enjoying Learning through Exploration, Discussion and the Expression of Ideas**

Students in RBOPS classrooms worked together on and were deeply involved in learning activities and teacher-given tasks designed to engage them in their learning. Furthermore, they enriched the ideas presented to them in ways that enhanced teaching/learning quality, and willingly expressed opinions opposed to those of their peers or their teacher. For example, Lesson 2 students directly confronted their teacher's opinions in the debriefing session (Lines 119–129), Students seized the opportunity to express their individual opinions through direct disagreement, such as shouting out, “No! But observation could... In doing reading comprehension, observing the figure could [get marks]” (Lines 126 and 129), much as Lesson 1 students expressed their ideas, experiences and comments during various exercises; similar examples can be found in other lessons (e.g., Lessons A/L08, B/L02 and C/L07).

### **Taking Responsibility for Self- and Peer-Evaluation**

Students also took advantage of peer- or self-evaluation sessions. Students in Lesson 2 assessed their and their classmates' performance, effectively exercising

teacher-like authority over the learning process. Before the game, students listed the five fellow students they liked most, and why; after the game, students did so again, based on their experiences during and ideas drawn from the game, thus allowing them to reorganize their learning through self-reflection and self-evaluation.

Similarly, Lesson 3 students reflected on and evaluated their opinions and preferences during their learning activity, extending and altering the roles of both teacher and students; the former was no longer a detached judge, and the latter no longer passive learners.

Students in RBOPS lessons tended to be more deeply involved in learning activities than students in authoritarian classrooms, making contributions to and taking some responsibilities for their learning. Students advanced ideas and opinions that differed from those of their teacher and classmates, and learnt through experience, exploration, discussion, and idea exchanges. They self-evaluated their performances and furthered their classmates' learning through reflection, evaluation and feedback.

### **Flexible Use of Teacher and Student Power in Power-Sharing Situations**

The above classroom practices show that, unlike in traditional teacher-dominated classrooms, students in RBOPS classrooms had more opportunities to participate in the learning/teaching process, although teachers' power was implicit in their curriculum planning and implementation and classroom management. Teachers used their power flexibly and strategically employed techniques to avoid power's negative impacts on students and make the classrooms more open. Moreover, teachers purposively gave students room to engage in activities, share new ideas and learn from peers to facilitate increased student involvement in and ownership of the teaching/learning process. Students' power was reflected in parts of the process, i.e., co-learning with peers, owning individual ideas and taking up responsibility for evaluation. Both teachers and students contributed to different aspects of teaching/learning and shared power with each other. A more equal teacher-student relationship and a more democratic classroom atmosphere were observed.

### **Factors Facilitating RBOPS Classrooms**

This second part suggests some possible explanations, grounded mainly in interview and documentary data, for the power-sharing features in the observed RBOPS

classrooms. These features, it argues, can be seen as resulting from various micro-level contextual factors, including teacher, student and school factors.

### **Teachers as Facilitators**

The first major factor in power-sharing in RBOPS classrooms is the teachers, who minimize the authority they exercise over student learning by acting as teaching/learning facilitators and creating opportunities for students to exercise their power over learning. The teachers see students as capable learners who can learn through self-exploration, teachers' assistance, including feedback, timely help and encouragement for their participation in and shared responsibility for learning. They avoid authoritarian teaching, encourage student participation in learning management, and generally prefer "interactive teaching" (e.g., teachers A/ST01, A/ST05, B/T02 and C/T04); as teacher A/ST05 emphasised, "I do not want [students] to learn in lessons by only listening" (Line 84):

I do not think the teacher is a one-way transmitter; to directly indoctrinate knowledge about moral conduct or some information to students will not let students understand that. I think... the teacher should guide the students... not directly impose something on them. (Line 17)

As teacher B/T02 expressed, interactive learning activities "provide students a space for further thinking"; the teacher's most important job was to foster "critical thinking," so students can understand issues from different viewpoints (Line 59).

Teacher power-sharing was confirmed by students. Some felt they held power when "expressing opinions" (students A/S02, B/S06 and B/S09), "doing project learning" (student C/S14), or "leading a drama play in groups" (student B/S09) in which students are encouraged to interact with their teacher and peers and share diverse views, allowing students to explore their learning processes and think of, express and discuss ideas.

However, teachers still exercise power as they offer help and provide space when appropriate throughout the learning process. This balance between flexibility and restraint was crucial to sharing power with and empowering students, showing authoritative, rather than authoritarian teaching, and could be affected by "teachers' competence" (teacher interviews B/T02 and C/T04),

techniques (teacher interview B/ST03) and professional “autonomy” (teacher interview B/T03) and “freedom” (teacher interviews A/T01 and A/T02) in curriculum and instruction.

### **Students as Collaborators**

Students are the second factor affecting power-sharing, and collaborate with teachers to master their learning. Teaching/learning, the RBOPS lessons suggest, can be co-shaped by teachers and students, engaging the latter in a guided learning process by having them participate in interactive learning activities and share, with the former, authority over and responsibility for the teaching/learning process. In these lessons, students collaborated with teachers, seized opportunities to exercise power, became deeply involved in the learning process and worked towards a common learning goal.

Some interviewed students and teachers believed that student power came from teachers, but that they “need and are willing to own [that] power!” (student interview C/S02 interview, Line 50); student C/S14 even insisted that students be given “the right to decide” whether to join a learning activity, share ideas or make responses. Regardless of its source, student power in RBOPS lessons can be affected by students’ willingness to engage in and contribute to their own learning through participation, which can be facilitated or hindered by such student factors as confidence (teacher interviews A/T03, A/S06, B/S02, and B/S09), competence (student interviews A/S07, B/S02, B/S09, and C/T02), and interests (student interview B/S02).

This suggests student willingness to share power and cooperate with teachers can change classroom power dynamics and create a more democratic classroom. In the observed lessons, had students not cooperated, the learning process might have remained teacher-directed. In this sense, teachers and students are important co-contributors to a more balanced power distribution. Both parties could share and employ power throughout the lesson, unlike in traditional, teacher-dominated Chinese classrooms.

### **School Policy and Culture as Catalysts**

In addition to the two direct individual factors (teachers and students), school



policy and the culture in which teaching/learning takes place also shape power distribution and can facilitate power-sharing.

Under the influence of curriculum reform, the three schools followed school requirements (based on prevailing educational trends) that interactive teaching modes be used in lessons; as shown previously, the use of interactive teaching modes was the first basic teacher techniques identified in RBOPS lessons. In particular, School B was established several years after the curriculum reform and had no historical burden; the school used student-centric teaching to attract students and parents and requested all teachers to give students more time to learn by doing projects and sharing ideas with peers, rather than teacher-directed instruction (school principal and vice principal interviews). In Personal Growth Education lessons, School B teachers were required to use “playing and experience” and post-activity debriefing sessions to teach (discipline master’s interview, Lines 25 and 36).

Interestingly, the study found that Schools A and C, despite being seen as older, more traditional schools with hierarchical cultures, could also facilitate RBOPS power patterns in their classrooms; RBOPS can be the result of micro-, rather than macro-contextual, factors.

In an interview, School A’s discipline master A/ST01 noted that it was difficult for his school to abandon its teacher-centric culture, due to the school’s concerns about obedience; students were expected to obey school regulations and “not argue,” as the school “did not appreciate [student] opinions” (discipline master’s interview, Line 3). Despite this, School A students still had opportunities to exercise power by managing their learning and engaging in the teacher-student power-sharing relationship, especially in values education lessons. This is partly because, in Hong Kong, values education subjects are elective, seldom tested in examinations, and taken less seriously than non-values education; teachers thus have more flexibility in their design and delivery. Students sense this discrepancy. Some interviewed students (e.g., student A/S02) indicated that they liked moral education (Personal Growth Education). They had different learning activities in their Personal Growth Education lessons differed from that which they experienced in regular academic subjects. Other interviewed students and teachers (e.g., students B/S02 and C/S05, and teachers B/T03 and C/T02) concurred.

Similarly, greater student engagement created opportunities for teacher-student

power-sharing in School C's classrooms. School C students could choose their project topic and learning pace (student interview C/S14), "share their opinions" with peers (student interviews C/S02 and C/S14), and complete tasks "without teacher involvement" (student interview C/S02). A School C student (C/S05) noted in an interview, "model answers" and "correct answers" were demanded by teachers in academic subjects, but not in Personal Growth Education lessons, allowing "much more space for thinking" (Lines 175–177, 179–183).

In addition to the influence of Hong Kong's sociocultural and educational contexts (as shown above), this study found that the occurrence of RBOPS was shaped by certain micro-contextual factors, including school culture and policy and teachers' and students' classroom practices. During the process, teachers and students were, of course, the major players shaping the teacher-student power relationship and facilitated power-sharing in democratic classroom situations. School culture and policy were identified as catalysts for RBOPS.

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## Conclusion

With reference to Hong Kong, this article has explored the dynamics and complexities of relationships and interactions between teachers and students in elementary classrooms in which they mutually provide opportunities to share and exercise power over learning/teaching, and the common strategies each used to do so.

The study presents four interrelated, theoretical implications for understanding the concept of power-sharing for learning/teaching. The first of these is that the classroom can be a site for power-sharing, rather than just power-conflict, and that teacher-student power relationships can be conflictual/harmonious and repressive/productive, echoing Blackledge and Hunt (1985) and Gore (1993, 1995). In this study, 41% of the observed lessons manifested major features of teacher/student power-sharing, including harmonious relationships and a democratic, mutually respectful classroom atmosphere.

Second, as Mason (2010) asserted, "no one is ever completely emancipated from [one's] context" (p. 138). Building a harmonious power-sharing learning/teaching environment requires strategic inputs from both teachers and students. This article agrees with Foucault (1981) that human relationships are strategic. As facilitators, teachers empower students in their learning; as collaborators,

students collaborate with teachers and actively master their learning by expressing their thoughts. Teachers take initiative to decrease the negative effects of teacher authority and share power with students by allowing them to share ideas and manage their own learning. This study also found that school policy and culture further encouraged teachers' and students' contributions and made RBOPS occur.

Third, this case study has revealed the authentic power interactions in Chinese classrooms, and explained the related factors. The empirical data provided supplements analyses of the contemporary learning/teaching context in Chinese classrooms advanced by such Chinese researchers as Ceng (2012), Han (2008), Li (2007), and Wang (2006). Both teachers and students have been and continue to be influenced by Chinese cultural traditions as they try to establish and maintain a good relationship. However, teachers still exercise a degree of power when they afford students space to self-manage their learning, and students are still willing to accept teachers' management and control. This shows an interesting and dynamic scene—Relatively Balanced Opportunity for Power Sharing—in Chinese classrooms.

Fourth, and more importantly, the empirical data presented and discussed in this study helps our understanding of the practice of critical pedagogy in classrooms, in response to Breunig's (2005) and McLaren's (2000) calls for critical pedagogy theory and practice to be linked. A critical, democratic classroom should concern an ideal situation in which "all members have equal opportunity to speak, all members respect other members' rights to speak and feel safe to speak" (Ellsworth, 1989, p. 314). This study has revealed how teachers made efforts to provide equal opportunity for dialogues in the observed RBOPS classrooms. Under the regular teacher authority used to create student-centric learning environments, students were free to express individual opinions, disagree with teachers and peers, and evaluate their and their classmates' learning; this empowered them academically, helping them to construct their learning, rather than passively awaiting their learning assessments (McQuillan, 2005; Stanier, 1997).

Finally, this study has theoretical implications and makes certain educational contributions. RBOPS classrooms show that teachers' and students' "trust, sharing, and commitment to improving the quality of human life" (Giroux 1988, p. 72) are fundamental for the development of critical pedagogy in classrooms,

and the basis of a more democratic, respectful and equal education system and society. This study has certain limitations, chiefly its small scale and the non-representativeness of the schools, subjects and lessons observed. More comparative, regional and international research is needed to investigate how teacher and student contributions and positive contextual forces can foster power-sharing in human relations, critical pedagogy in teaching and related social change.

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