

Re-conceptualizing Teacher Authority: When to Exact

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Abstract

Background: This paper re-conceptualizes issues related to teacher authority by integrating the constructivist (including social constructivist) and critical perspectives. The traditional perspectives perceive that teacher authority inhibits children's autonomy of learning. This perspective has been largely challenged by two groups of studies—the (social) constructivist perspectives and the critical perspectives.

Aims or focus of discussion: We argue that either of the two challenges alone is important but not sufficient. We discuss these two perspectives respectively first and the integrating efforts are made after discussion. The studies adopting the (social) constructivist perspectives highlight that classroom authority should be shared between the teacher and children. The teacher exacts authority when the intention is to facilitate the child's construction of understanding; that is for learning significance. The studies adopting the critical perspectives focus more on empowering every child and making reciprocal relationship; this is for social significance.

Arguments/comments/suggestions: In this paper, we re-conceptualize that the teacher should exact authority for the purposes of facilitation, freedom of intelligence, empowerment, equity, reciprocity. The definition of each and the classroom practical episodes will be provided to support the practical implementation of the re-conceptualized view.

Conclusion: The concerns over the limited interpretation about teacher authority and suggestions to the future studies based on this re-conceptualization are discussed. The conclusion is consistent with Kauffman's reflective view (2008) to remark the importance of the critical interpretations any phenomenon or human interaction (such as teacher authority) from an ecological view with the enlarged purpose and impact.

Keywords: authority, critical theory, teacher-children interaction

再概念化教師權威：該何時使用？

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摘要

背景：本文以整合建構及批判主義兩大學派的方式來再概念化教師權威及其相關議題。

討論要旨：這兩大學派已經駁斥過去二元式思考方式——以為教師權威會抑制孩童自主性學習——並提出新的見解。建構思潮的相關研究認為教師權威是必需存在的，但要跟孩童分享，並稱作分享式的權威，以發揮孩童最大學習效能。因此，教師權威對建構思潮而言，是學習上的意義。批判主義著重於平等與互惠的觀念，對他們而言彰顯每個來自不同家庭或文化背景孩童的學習自主，與確保弱勢孩童被老師及同儕尊重是很重要的。因此，他們著重於從社會意義層面來看教師權威這個議題。本文強調任一學派的理論都有其意義，但都不能完整得來闡述教師權威。因此，我們以重整兩大學派的論述觀點來再概念化教師權威。

論點與建議：這個重整讓我們肯定教師權威應該有四個意義：發揮孩童潛力及促進學習效能；彰顯弱勢孩童的能力與可能被埋沒的價值；教育平等；與互惠的關係。我們並提出四個相關實務課室例子以提供參考。

結論：本文以引用最新Kauffman（2008）系統反思理論以反對現有狹隘的解讀教師權威來做為總結。

關鍵字：權威、批判理論、師生關係

Introduction

Often time, teachers feel bad or guilty if they give orders or control to a child no matter at free-choice or learning corner time in a classroom. They feel guilty because they thought their directives are against their educational beliefs of child-centeredness and progressivity. This guilt can be acerbated by guidelines such as DAP (Developmentally Appropriate Practices) (NAEYC, 1997) in early childhood education (ECE) which cluster teaching behaviors under DAP and non-DAP; guidelines of learner-centered approach which dichotomize teacher control and children's autonomy for any educational setting (McCombs & Miller, 2006). Based on such dichotomy, teacher authority can be easily misinterpreted as threatening children's autonomy for learning. Subsequently, it creates myths about the relationship between teacher authority and children's autonomy for learning. Is teacher authority always inappropriate? If it can be appropriate, for what purpose? and when to exact teacher authority?

This paper starts with the traditional perspectives of teacher authority. We then introduce two groups of studies which challenges the traditional perspectives. The (social) constructivist perspectives (e.g., Dewey, 1998; Olyer, 1996, Pace & Hemmings, 2006) assert that teacher authority can be constructive. Teacher authority is more for scaffolding children's learning in various domains while maintaining respect for individual differences. The teacher exacts authority to scaffold a child's construction of understanding. Critical perspectives (e.g., Crawford, 2008; Foucault, 1980; Gonzalez et al, 2005; LeBlanc & Bearison, 2004) approach this issue of teacher authority through the lens of power and knowledge. It is accomplished by emphasizing children's funds of knowledge (will be elaborated more later) in order to empower them and uphold the beliefs about children's reciprocal learning.

We argue that either of the two challenges alone is important but not sufficient. In this paper, we propose that the teacher should exact authority for purposes of facilitation, freedom of intelligence, empowerment, equity, and reciprocation. It is our belief that this new perspective of teacher authority encourages an egalitarian classroom. With this constructive forward-looking perspective, future research may focus on the transformation of teacher authority to learning and social significance by adopting the view of reflexivity (Kauffman, 2008).

Two Perspectives to Teacher Authority

Many educators highlight the importance of the child's autonomy in making free choices in the school setting because of the belief about child-centeredness. Classroom practices such as learning centers, free play time, and conducting a project in any educational setting provide opportunities for children's exploration, and reflect this belief by "removing" teacher's direct instruction. In other words, the notion of teacher authority is usually presented as oppositional to the child's autonomy. It has often been misinterpreted as a myth that teacher authority impedes children's learning autonomy. It is our observation that educators adopting this view usually face an artificial tension created by this myth. In the following sections we first introduce two alternative perspectives to the predominant interpretation of teacher authority. Each perspective addresses this issue to a useful extent. We propose an integrated perspective to provide a more holistic approach to this perplexing issue.

The (Social) Constructivist Perspective

The (social) constructivist theorists argue that the teacher's authority should not be removed. Rather, it

is an active one in achieving two goals: (a) facilitating children's learning in the classroom and (b) fostering freedom of intelligence. The first goal is supported theoretically (Vygotsky and Piaget) and empirically (Pace & Hemming, 2006; Olyer, 1996). The second goal is proposed by Dewey (1974) where he underlines how teacher authority fosters children's freedom of intelligence. We briefly discuss these ideas below.

In terms of facilitating children's learning, both Piaget and Vygotsky believe that teacher authority is still relevant in today's classroom (Tzuo, 2007). Vygotsky maintained that learning takes place between the teacher's scaffolding and children's active construction of understanding. Piaget believed that both adults and children are active agents in the classroom setting. In such a setting, children construct knowledge with adults' design of activities involving deliberations such as selections of materials, and assistance (Wadsworth, 1995; Piaget, 1937, as cited in Wien, 1995). Although often critiqued from postmodernists that these views may not be sufficient to explain children's development, these diverse interpretations intrigue a long line of debate focusing on teacher's roles in the classroom. For example, Newman and Holzman (1993) re-interpret Vygotsky's work by arguing that teaching should be improvisational and it is to explore children's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Although this kind of analysis appears to minimize teacher authority and give more attention to children's autonomy, we regard that their views still largely assume the necessity of various types of teacher authority.

On the empirical front, Olyer (1996) found two types of authority - content authority (to facilitate what counts as knowledge and who is the knower) and process authority (to facilitate the procedure to pursue it) in the classroom. She further argues

that both types of authority are to be shared (Olyer, 1996). The teacher and the children share "content authority" to balance between the curriculum goals and interests of individual children. For example, in a study by Olyer and Becker (1997) on language and literacy practices in a classroom, the teacher set the curriculum goals such as being able to read and comprehend the passage independently. The negotiation happens when she provides students with choices to explore freely while maintaining the curriculum goal. The children select reading topics and materials based on their personal interests. Although the curriculum goal is set by the teacher, the learning content is negotiated. The "process authority" is also to be shared. It is to explore various ways to achieve that negotiated learning content. For example, children are encouraged to embark on different projects, such as drama, to achieve the curriculum goal of being able to read and comprehend independently. In general, her study indicated some themes of shared authority in the classroom by balancing teacher authority with student-led inquiries and student-initiated discourse patterns.

Another empirical study by Pace and Hemmings (2006) has indicated that the shared authority should be critically examined beyond the classroom. It is intertwined with the larger social contexts, which may include policy, history, race, and social class, etc. For example, in their study, a Caucasian teacher tried to facilitate a Latino student's achievement of language literacy. Their negotiation of learning contents (shared content authority) was far from sufficient. They even had to negotiate whether such a goal is meaningful to life. This is due to their diverse values based on differing culture backgrounds. The work of Pace and Hemmings reminded that teacher authority is value-laden and culturally sensitive. However,

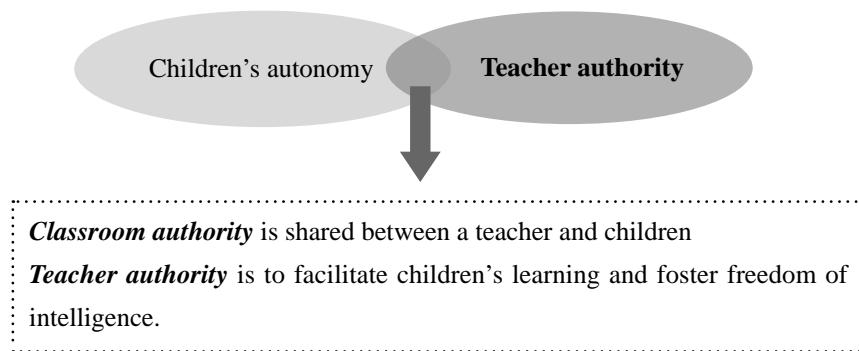
their study did not explicit the how's (i.e., shared process authority). That is, how to facilitate children's learning as well as exercise teacher authority with this understanding of social contextuality.

A second goal of teacher authority is to foster children's freedom of intelligence. Dewey (1974) defined *freedom* as "freedom of intelligence" and distinguished it from "impulses." The former refers to comprehensiveness of thinking, such as considering the consequences of actions before making a decision, whereas the latter is mainly driven by

wants. According to Dewey (1974), the intelligence to use freedom in a better functioned way is not innate; rather, it usually requires teachers' guidance and directives. Even though Dewey proclaims that a child owns autonomy in learning, he opposed a bond-free interpretation driven mainly by wants and individuality.

Before introducing the critical perspectives, *Figure 1* below summarizes the (social) constructivist views on the goals of teacher authority.

Figure 1: *Social constructivist's view on teacher authority*



The Critical Perspectives

Unlike the (social) constructivist perspective that focuses more on learning for their analysis, the critical perspective focuses more on issues related to power and social justice. In addition, the former analyzes issues more pertaining to the relationship between the teacher and the children whereas the latter more the relationship among children. Consequently, children are empowered to create knowledge more productively.

Democratic attempts moving toward the critical theorists argue that teacher authority is to promote civility among children. For example, Dewey (1998) remarked that teacher authority can

also promote good interactions among children. Children are encouraged to respect and learn from each other in a classroom community as an attempt to pursue democracy. In practice, this can be reflected in issues related to ethnicity and academic achievements. In her study, Thayer-Bacon (2006) set rules to respect minority children. Children had to take turns introducing their heritages to one another with understanding and respect. Similarly, when children are engaged in group work, Nichollas and Hazzard (1993) provided lower achievers with equal opportunity to present their work and show their strengths.

These democratic attempts at critical perspectives mainly focused on civility and good interaction among peers for democratic purpose. However, egalitarian attempts add that classroom power (e.g., teacher authority) can be utilized to distribute power among children fairly. These may result in three characteristics of criticality in the classroom. We briefly discuss them below.

Empowerment.

Foucault contends that the ultimate intention of power is to empower, not to remove power (Foucault, 1980; Kincheloe, 2008). He clarified that power has always existed and cannot be removed. He asserted that power is not necessarily repressive and can be productive.

What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms of knowledge, produces discourse. (Foucault, 1980, p.119)

While Foucault's intention was empowerment, Graue (2005) observed that this notion can be misinterpreted as justifications to remove power with no refrains. Subsequently, the effort has focused on problematizing and removing the dominant and the one who suppresses. Efforts have been made by often polarizing issues such as the dominant versus the marginalized and the one suppresses versus the one being oppressed (such as adults versus children, males versus females, white versus color). Taking this interpretive trajectory, teacher authority is often regarded as opposing the children's autonomy.

However, Zournazi (2002) cautioned that while it was necessary to enable each one to exact more power to construct knowledge and understanding, the

removal of power from a particular party only shifted the dominance of power to another. It does not really solve the problem of inequity. Adopting this lens of exacting power to achieve the goal, teacher authority can be constructive if the purpose of exacting power is to endow each child with the equal strength of power in a classroom.

Equity.

A second characteristic of criticality in the classroom is achieved by rearranging classroom power, based on the idea of funds of knowledge. Gonzalez et al (2005) argued that each child has "funds of knowledge." A child gains knowledge funds from his/her family or cultural background. These funds can be utilized to share with the teacher and other children in the classroom. These funds in a way can be seen as a type of content authority in the classroom (as introduced above) which is a form of power. Based on a similar idea, Crawford (2008) focused on teacher rearranging classroom power (e.g., children's content authority or funds of knowledge) to achieve equity. In her study, Crawford rearranges classroom power by positioning all children equally as experts based on their respective life experience (i.e., funds of knowledge in Gonzalez et al's term). She designated a period of sharing time every day for every child to share their life-related expert knowledge such as animal caring, drawing and fishing, etc. She discovered that such sharing is productive to children's diverse knowledge construction. Based on this approach, a teacher exacts authority productively to position each child as a competent knowledge contributor and maker.

Reciprocity.

The third characteristic of criticality in the

classroom focuses on reciprocal relationships among children. In an empirical study, LeBlanc and Bearison (2004) investigated peer interactions by observing how peers worked together in a dyad through, for example, playing game. A child, when working with a peer with a different ability, always seeks ways to contribute by either providing knowledge or posing questions. In their study, the child teacher provides game-related knowledge by developing and indicating the rule to the child learner. Even though the child learner internalizes game-related knowledge, the child teacher may provide additional information to either object or complicate the rule. The challenges given by child learners give child teachers the opportunity to review the rules and restructure it by discourses, inquiring more game-related knowledge, and to represent it. The reciprocal learning takes place when child teachers and child learners are able to take turns to express their ideas. Reciprocity is reached by giving each other new understanding. With this empirical finding, we propose that teacher authority is to direct the reciprocal dialogues through setting the rule to take turns talking while showing respect for the different opinions. This rule is purposeful for ensuring every one's idea can be expressed and heard, as well as promoting children's knowledge construction productively.

In summary, the above three characteristics (empowerment, equity, and reciprocity) of criticality can re-conceptualize teacher authority. Each of these three characteristics is not born naturally in a classroom setting without the teacher's work. On the contrary, it has to rely on lots of teachers work (including teacher authority) to rearrange classroom power. Inequities have shaped children before they enter into a classroom. The inequity has been predetermined by a child's ethical and

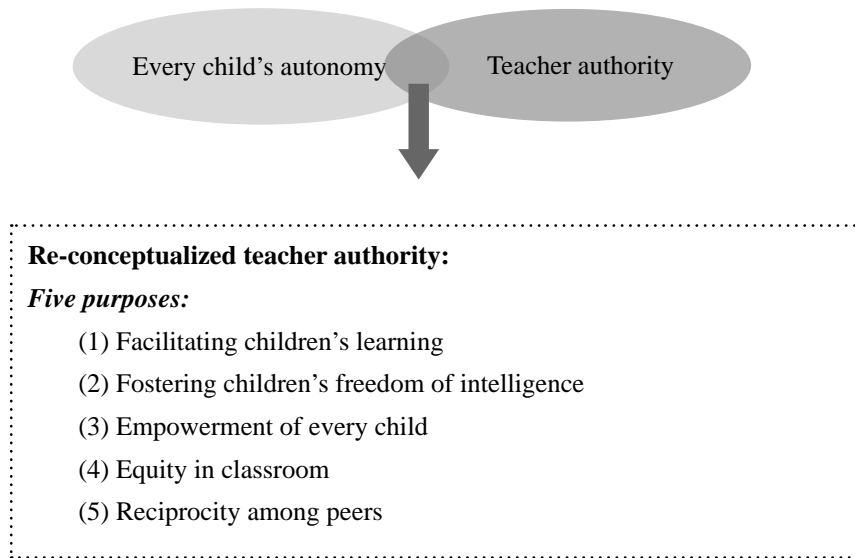
family backgrounds, developmental needs, and academic readiness. Furthermore, the inequities may be enlarged if there is no meditation from a teacher. It requires a teacher's use of authority to have justice- and equity-oriented pedagogy to rearrange the classroom power to empower each child. Teacher authority should be re-conceptualized to extend its purposes by integrating both the (social) constructivist and critical perspectives below.

Social constructivism-facilitating children's learning; fostering children's freedom of intelligence
Critical perspectives—empowering each child, equity, and reciprocity

Re-conceptualizing Teacher Authority Integrating Constructivist and Critical Perspectives.

We argue that teacher authority should be re-conceptualized to integrate the characteristics of (social) constructivist and critical perspectives. We believe that each of these is important, but insufficient to delineate the significance of teacher authority in a more comprehensive way. Social constructivism focuses more on learning, whereas critical perspectives focus more on equity. Critical perspectives emphasize particularly the social significance of education other than learning (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2006). Therefore, teacher authority, by adopting the (social) constructivist lens, is learning significance; whereas by drawing upon the critical perspectives it is social significance.

In other words, teacher authority should be exacted to facilitate learning as well as building an egalitarian classroom, instead of selecting one of them only and neglecting another. Teacher authority should be re-conceptualized to integrate social constructivist and critical perspectives as below illustration.

Figure 2: *Re-conceptualized teacher authority.*

Why and When to Exact?

In view of the above re-conceptualized five purposes, why and when to exact teacher authority in classroom practices are illustrated below. The definitions and examples for the five aspects are elaborated respectively.

Why to Exact: (1) Facilitating Children's Learning. Teacher authority is exacted to guide, facilitate, or challenge children's learning of new experiences. Teacher authority should be balanced with children's autonomy by making plans with children and giving suggestions.

When to Exact: (1) Balancing between the Coverage and the Depth of a Child's Learning. In free play time, a teacher can exact authority to facilitate a child's learning with consideration of both the "coverage of a variety of learning areas," and the "depth in one mastered and interested area" a child is interested in. Children's decisions to make a choice according to their interests are respected. However, children should be open to other different learning

areas to make their learning and development varied. For example, on any particular day of a week, a teacher can ask each child to try activities which they have seldom engaged in. A teacher can call this "try something different day." The idea of "try something different day" can give a child who only prefer to stay in art area, for example, to explore something different other than art. However, most days he/she still can choose her preferred area. Teacher authority is exacted for the balance between coverage of depth of a child's learning.

Why to Exact: (2) Fostering Children's Freedom of Intelligence. Teacher authority is to foster children's constructive usage of freedom and autonomy, in prevention of negative usage for the sakes of impulses only. Children's autonomy can still be respected by expressing feelings freely and being able to plan (rather than being imposed by) with teachers the constructive application of autonomy.

When to Exact: (2) Developing the Constructive Problem Solving Skills. In a classroom, each child should not be encouraged to always use nonconstructive strategy such as crying as the “only” way to resolve problems. This is especially important for later ECE such as kindergarten and early elementary school children. If a child is always crying when he or she cannot get what she/he wants, a teacher may have to exact her authority in a proper extent in addition to giving emotional support. A teacher may provide appropriate challenges in a nonhurtful way to deal with his/her wants-only cry. For example, a child who always wants to play in the house area only every day and rejects exploring other options crying till she gets what she wants. Teacher authority is applied by a series of actions illustrated below to correct her utilization of crying only as the best way to resolve a problem in a daily life. First, a teacher may consider not compensating a child’s wants by her crying only if all the emotional support has been given to him/her continually. Next, a teacher can foster the child’s emotional and social development by conferencing with a crying child individually by comprehending others’ feeling when seeing her crying daily. Then, the teacher can guide a child how to deal with frustration and problem solving other than crying. For example, a teacher can demonstrate how to express his/her frustration in a nicer and friendlier way to let others know how to help and not only feel bad about his/her crying. Further, a teacher can encourage a child to act more positively to collaborate with others to resolve a problem. All these actions are what Dewey (1974) remarks about a child’s freedom of intelligence that has to be fostered by a teacher.

Why to Exact: (3) Empowerment of Every Child. Teacher authority is to ensure that each child

gets respects and is recognized by his/her strengths and proficiencies.

When to exact: (3) Removing the Labeling. In a classroom, perceiving each child with diverse strengths should dominate their classroom culture rather than labeling. Even for a child whose cognitive development or school performance is more advanced than that of the other children who could be a good leader, a child still has to have patience to listen to others, appreciate other’s strengths, and be capable of being led. For example, a teacher can sometime nurture an always-want-to-show child due to his/her higher abilities to appreciate other’s various capacities by rejecting his/her requests to dominate the classroom dialogues or always to be a leader. This helps other children have a chance to show-and-tell or be a leader. Therefore, teacher authority exacted is to empower every one by removing the labeling of being “able” and “unable” among each child.

Why to Exact: (4) Equity in Classroom. Teacher authority is to make sure each child regardless his/her abilities should be able to exercise autonomy fairly by taking turns of talking and leading others. Teacher authority should come in if a child dominates the classroom discourses regardless his/her abundance of capacities.

When to Exact: (4) Rearranging Classroom Power. A teacher can kindly ask each child to take turns to design a learning activity related to his/her funds of knowledge with a teacher and be positioned as an expert in charge of that learning activity. A teacher can acknowledge a child’s funds of knowledge (such as home language, specific life skills from a child’s family or cultural background) and transform it as knowledge and learning activity. This specific learning activity to acknowledge a child’s funds knowledge can be placed in a learning

corner at free-choice time and last for a week (as example) to invite each child to perform with a child expert. Therefore, teacher authority is to rearrange classroom power by setting the rule of shifting expert among each child.

Why to Exact: (5) Reciprocity among Peers.

Teacher authority is to promote the reciprocal discourses among children by taking turns to express, response, construct the multiple interpretations, clarify, and reconstruct the meanings.

When to Exact: (5) Fostering the Reciprocal Dialogues. Reciprocal dialogue is expected. However, if there is a conflict, the teacher has to either provide guidance or exact authority by setting the rule to make sure dialogues are reciprocal. Reciprocal dialogues take place when no one feels superior/inferior, dominant or oppressed, and a win-win solution is gained. Therefore, each child's problem-solving skills are also enhanced.

A teacher can foster reciprocal dialogues by using her authority to direct children toward the "win-win" solution-finding conversation when there is a frustration or conflict. For example, if a child has been continually rejected by other children, a teacher can coordinate a reciprocal dialogue by

setting a conference and making a rule that each child should take turns talking. Each child has to request to express their feelings and then propose possible ways to resolve a problem. For example, here are strategies a teacher can do to direct the reciprocal dialogues: "Watch (a child's name)'s eyes as you try to tell him/her your feelings."; "Tell your feelings about being put down to (a child's name)."; "How can we let people not feel sad because of us and what can we say to each other?"; and "How can we make each of us happy next time?"

A teacher exacts her authority to make a rule of taking turns to talk in order to clarify each other's feelings. With teacher authority, the reciprocal conversation takes place when children can speak out, be heard, and be understood. Children's social development and problem-solving skills are therefore enhanced along such process with teacher's authority to set the rule and direct the conversation toward reciprocity.

Incorporating the above five episodes illustrate the five moments a teacher has to exact authority. Below summarizes the theoretical characteristics and practical examples we have discussed so far about teacher authority in a comprehensive way.

Conclusions: Towards an Egalitarian Classroom

Teacher authority has been re-conceptualized when and how to exact for the purposes of facilitating learning, fostering freedom of intelligence, empowerment, equity, and reciprocity. The re-conceptualized view is made for both learning and social significance by integrating both (social) constructive and critical perspectives. Simply giving a benchmark or labeling a teacher's practices by observing a segment of classroom

practices may misinterpret teacher authority and limit the interpretations. For social significance, teacher authority is exacted for a large context such as equity among children beyond the scope of a relationship between a teacher and a child.

Taking on our perspective of social significance of teacher authority, future studies should examine the influences of teacher authority with a larger ecological scope. This can be done by adopting Kauffman's (2008) reflexive view to perceive that everything is partaking as well as intertwining with

the larger social ecological system. In other words, teacher authority is intertwined with children's autonomy and both interact for the function of the larger ecology. The exact of either one has to be purposeful for maintaining the good, removing the bad, and further promoting a better society. Our

integrated perspectives has illuminated teacher authority to promote a better society by maintaining the good of the effective learning, removing the bad of inequities, building an egalitarian classroom, and prospecting for an egalitarian society.

Table 1

Re-conceptualized Teacher Authority: An Integrated Way

Theories	Re-conceptualized purposes of teacher authority	When to exact	Examples
(Social) Constructivist	Facilitating learning	Balancing between the coverage and the depth of learning	Setting a day as "Doing something different day"
	Fostering freedom of intelligence	Developing the constructive problem solving skills	Not allowing a child to do what he/she wants only. A teacher's conference with a child with proper challenges and suggestion other than permitting
Critical perspectives	Empowerment	Removing the labeling	Setting a culture that everyone takes turns to be a leader
	Equity	Rearranging classroom power	Setting a rule of shifting expert
	Reciprocity	Fostering the reciprocal dialogues	A teacher directs by children's taking turns to talk, requesting looking each others' eyes with understanding when talking, and respecting others' feelings

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4. 廠址及通訊處：九龍荔枝角永康街42號義德工廠大廈5字樓全層
電話：2728 6562 2387 2537

本廠精工製造各學校社團體育服裝、校褸、校章、恤衫、西褲、校裙、美勞袋、書包、皮鞋及運動鞋，質優價平，起貨快捷並有專人代客設計款式，歡迎比較。

(九龍及香港門市部)營業時間：星期一至星期六 上午10時至1時, 下午2時至6時30分

(新界門市部)營業時間：星期一至星期六 上午10時至1時, 下午2時至6時

(星期日及勞工假期休息)