

Collaborative group work and autonomy

A case study of teacher practice and cognition in China



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Outline

- ❖ **Why this research**
- ❖ **Research questions**
- ❖ **Research setting and participants**
- ❖ **Methodology**
- ❖ **Findings**
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Why this research

- Autonomy for genuine education
 - *Only when autonomy is practised, is genuine education happening: anything less is conditioned education.* (Little, 2007)
- Autonomy and collaborative learning highlighted in the Chinese curriculum reform
 - *<The new curriculum> encourages experiential, participatory, **collaborative** and communicative **approaches**, ... to make the process of language learning a process in which students develop positive attitudes, **active thinking**, cultural awareness and their **autonomous learning ability**.* (MoE, 2006)

Why collaborative group work for autonomy

Holec
(1981)

- Autonomy is the ability to take charge of one's own learning

Benson
(1997)

- Autonomy in three versions: technical, psychological and political, focussing on physical situation, learner characteristics and power relation respectively.

Oxford
(2003)

- The sociocultural perspective of autonomy focuses on the social, interactive and collaborative aspect.

**From
collaborative
group work
to autonomy**

- Bergen definition: A capacity and willingness to act independently and in cooperation with others, as a social, responsible person (Dam, Eriksson, Little, Miliander and Trebbi, 1990, p. 102)
- Little (1996) identifies **collaborative group work** as an effective way to foster autonomy in classroom settings

Why teacher cognition on autonomy

- *While autonomy has been defined and applied from different theoretical perspectives, **language teachers' views have not been awarded much attention** (Borg and Al-Busaidi, 2012, p. 283).*
- *In the field of teacher education, it is well established that **teachers' beliefs influence their instructional choices**, therefore an understanding of teachers' beliefs needs to be an integral part of initiatives that aim to promote change in what teachers do in the classroom (Wedell, 2009).*

Research questions

1. To what extent and in what ways did the teachers **use** group work in their class?
2. How did the teachers **interpret** their practice of using group work to enhance student autonomy?

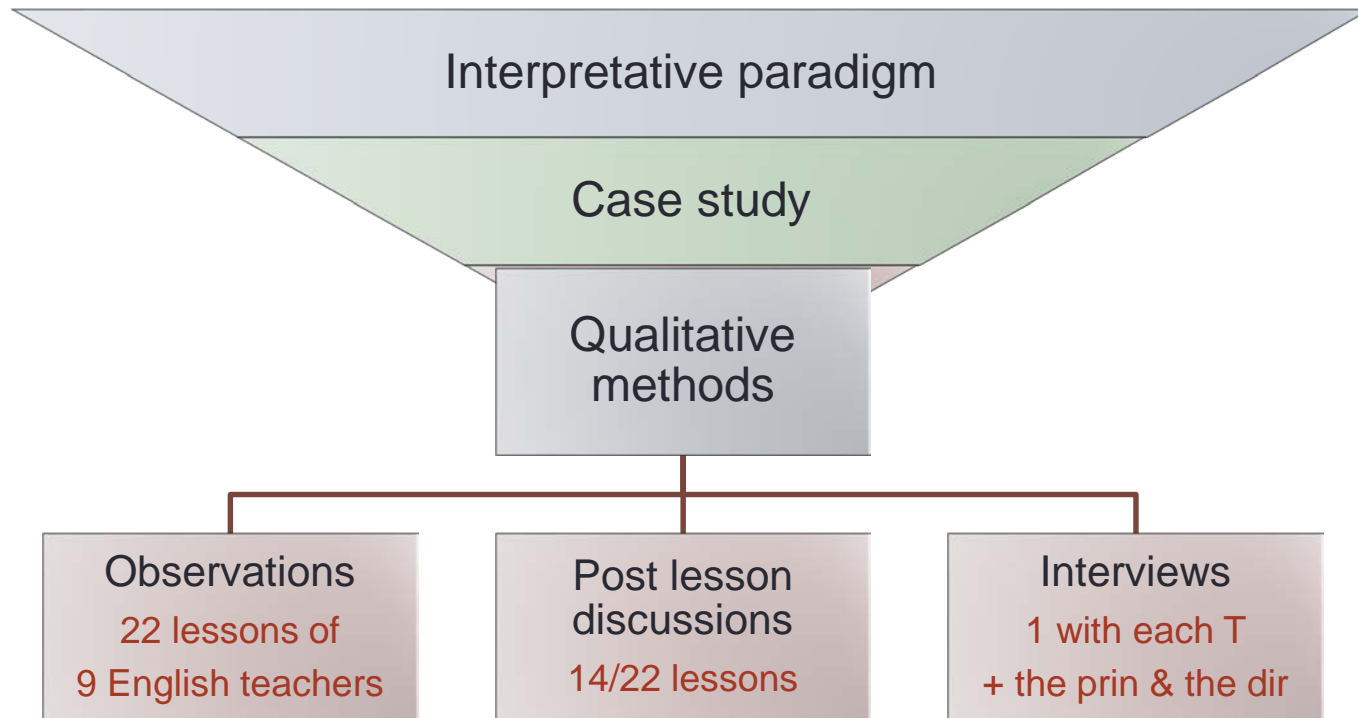
The research setting and the participants



- Private
- Established in 2009
- Well-recognized principal
- **Expert executive director**
- Parents of mid/upper class
- **Teachers** selected by principal
- Class size 20-36

- *'An extreme and unique case as a **'test bed'** (Robson, 2002, p. 182)*
- *If a programme cannot work here, it is unlikely to work elsewhere.*

Methodology



grounded analysis
(Charmaz, 2006)

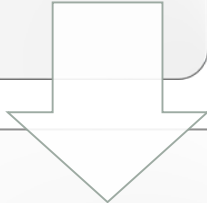
**Let data talk,
and themes
emerge.**

Findings

* A group-based innovation programme to develop autonomy in the research context



* Teachers' **practices** of using collaborative group work to develop autonomy

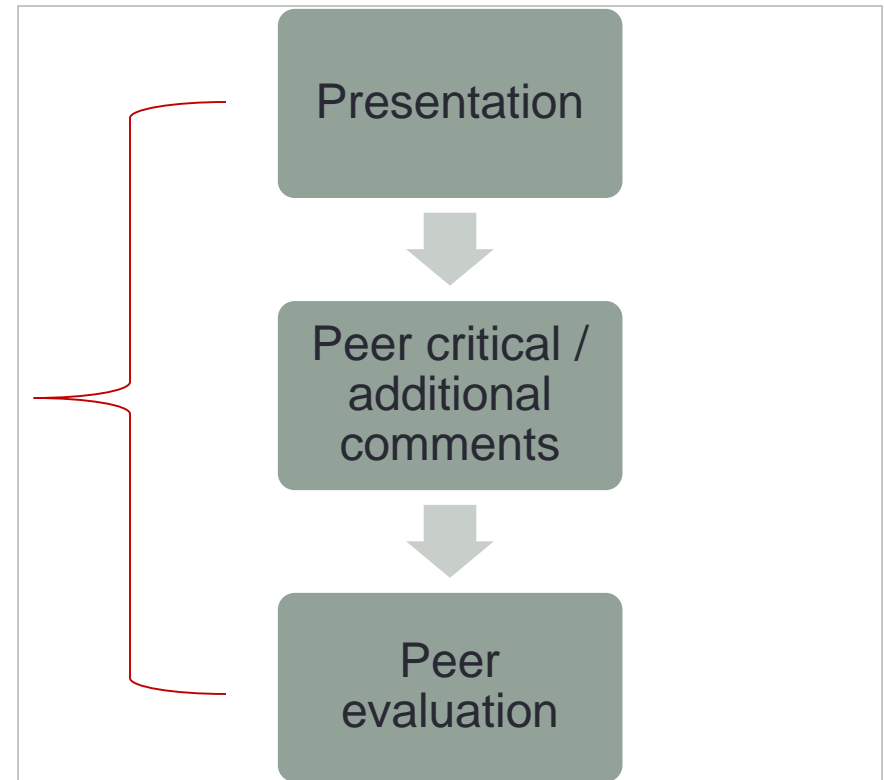
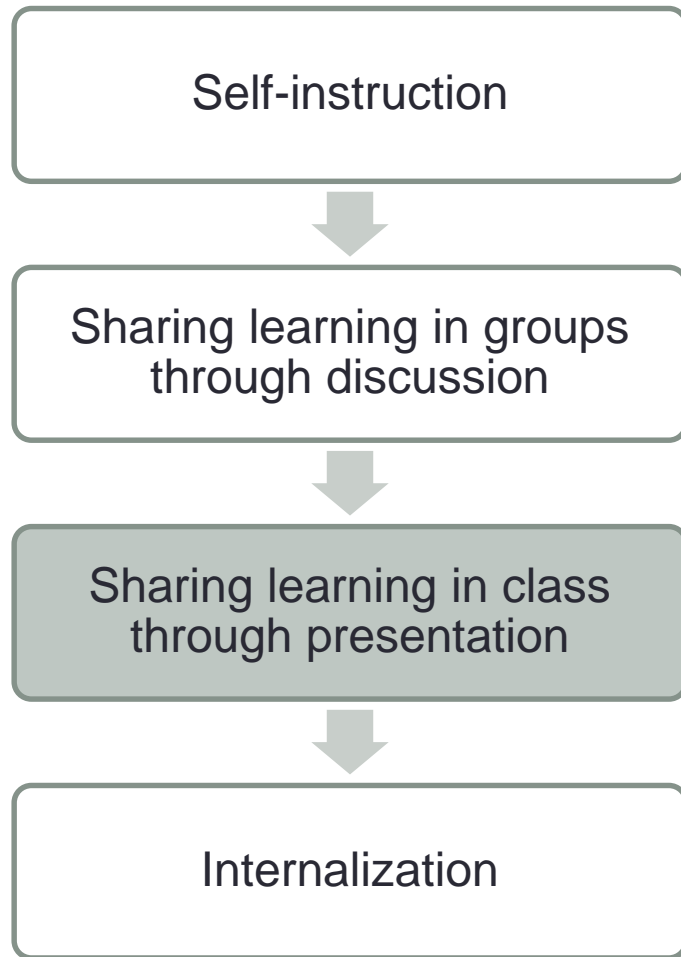


* Teachers' **interpretations** of their practices

Findings _ A group-based innovation programme

Key principles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Students as the agents for their own learning * Self-instruction before other-instruction * Collaborative learning through group discussions and presentations * Helping as a common approach, seeking help actively rather than waiting passively to be helped
Teacher support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Establishing group-based classroom management, using <i>Performance Marks</i> * Group lesson planning in the form of the suggested <i>Learning Guide</i> * Peer observation and evaluation with reference to given <i>Standards</i> * Weekly <i>Departmental Meeting</i> for reflection and peer-feedback giving.
The group-based model for classroom instruction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Students learn by themselves * Students share by discussion in groups * Students share by presentation in the class * Students internalise what's learned by themselves and from others

The suggested model



Findings _ teachers' practices and interpretations

Teachers' practices of using collaborative group work

- * Classroom management was generally group-based.
- * Collaborative group work activities were commonly found in all the 22 observed lessons.
- * The way in which group work activities were conducted varied greatly from teacher to teacher and from activity to activity.

Teachers' interpretations of their practices

'By-tables layout generates dependence.'

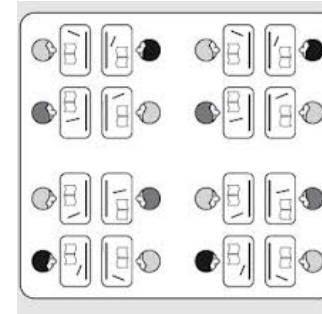
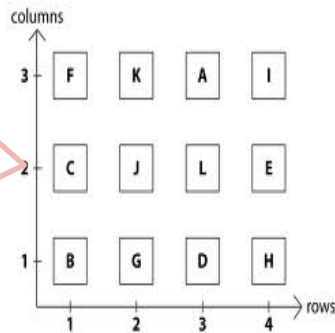
'I designed the group work to develop autonomous learning'.

'This student is different and stubborn. I must straighten him out'.

'I wish the strong students would have helped the slow ones. I should have given them a push'.

Findings _ group-based classroom management

More independence-oriented ?



More dependence-oriented ?

In rows

- ☹ Inconvenient for organising group work; making chaos when ss moving together for discussion;
- ☹ Some ss get lost when not attended;

- ☺ Ss concentrate more; easy for management
- ☺ Ss depend on themselves more;

By tables

- ☺ Convenient for organising group work;
- ☺ Team-like, offering collective honour;

- ☹ Ss chat off the topic, easily distracted; more challenging for management
- ☹ Some ss turn to others for answer easily, don't think independently;

Extract #1: I do differently in my two classes. I get the top class ss sit by tables all the time, and they benefit by collaborating with others; but with the weak class, I use both ways, only get them sit together <by tables> when doing group work; otherwise I keep them separate <in rows>. By doing so, I'm telling them autonomy is the foundation, but collaboration is conditional. One cannot always depend on others. I think the combination is good. (T2)

Findings _ collaborative group work activities

* In all the observed lessons, a variety of activities were conducted under the name of group work. A close examination of these activities revealed that space allowed for autonomy varied considerably. For example, more critical / creative thinking and interaction would be required to co-make a story than drilling a sentence pattern.

- Peer-checking grammar rules
- Finding answers to the questions
- Filling in a chart with information from the text
- **Sentence pattern drilling**
- Sharing personal stories
- Discussing the given questions
- Describing and guessing a place
- Making a dialogue based on the learned ones
- **Making a story**
- Conducting a survey
- Gap-filling grammar/vocabulary exercises
- Rewriting a paragraph
- Peer-review of each other's writing
- Identifying new phrases from the text
- Summarising grammar rules
- Peer instruction

Findings _ ways of collaborative group work conduction

The ways to which the group activities were conducted varied considerably from teacher to teacher, and from activity to activity. The examples below are two extreme ones, from which the autonomy-oriented element displayed evidently.

Teacher gave instruction for group work



Students worked in groups



Students group presented by writing
on the blackboard



Students group presented by speaking to class



Peer students gave critical/additional
comments



T/ss co-evaluated the presented group work

(Summarised from T3_L1)

T: ... you can discuss in
groups...

SS: <silence for 30''>

T: OK, let's come back...

(Extract #2: transcribed from T6_L1)

Findings _ teachers' interpretations of their practice

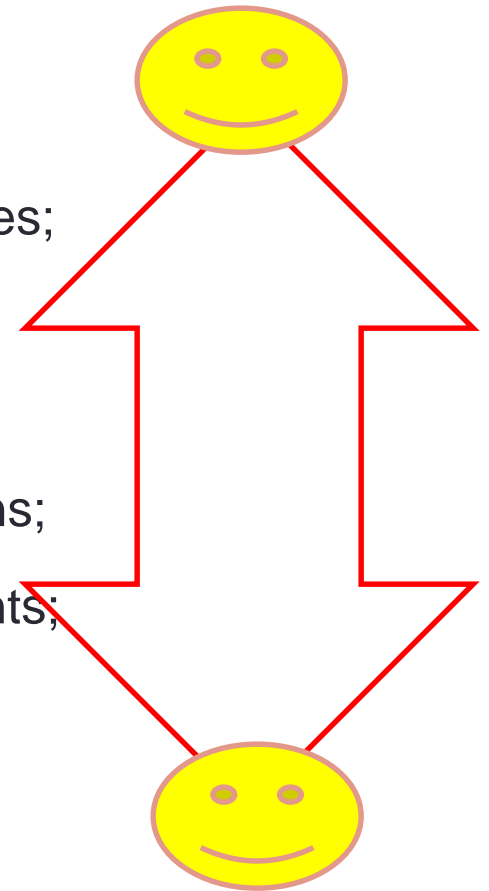
Extract #3: discussion of T3_L1

– *I designed this session, first of all, to develop students, by themselves, autonomous learning ability... These were all discussed, and prepared by themselves before class. ...In each group, there is a note taker, each group member actively participated.... Depending on how difficult the job is, the group leaders would decide. I don't intervene. Make sure that every student has an opportunity to come to the stage to present. ...<The grammar rules> are in the book, but I didn't tell them. Some students went over the book, and found them ...in the last few pages of the book. When I designed this, actually I didn't think about it. ... This, this is, absolutely not done by one student. ... 'Making additional or critical comments' is the essence of the presentation. When they did so, it meant that they did think, they listened carefully, they spotted the mistakes, where they didn't understand. I think this is the most crucial part. This way, they share their thinking. ... Also I gave them good marks, to put more weight on this practice, more marks than the presentation itself, especially, when they added valid points, sometimes they gave sth we teachers didn't think about, I gave really good marks. ... My purpose was to let them know, when someone is presenting in the front, you must engage, must pay attention.*

When the intended happened as expected...

- **Major points in extract #3**

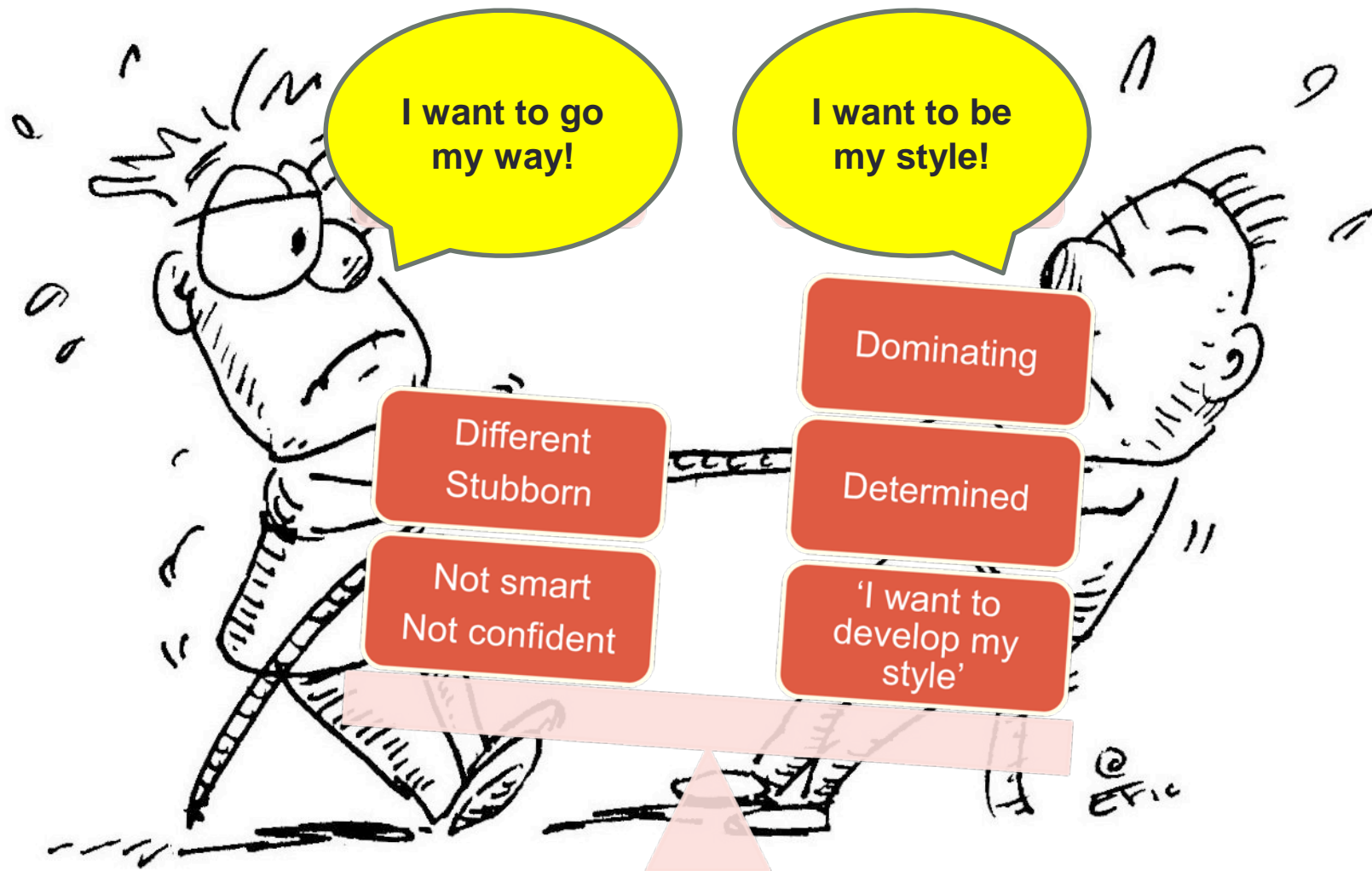
- ✓ T provided opportunities for ss learning collaboratively;
- ✓ Ss divided labour and assigned roles among themselves;
- ✓ Group leaders co-decided on who to present what;
- ✓ Ss collaborated on the job;
- ✓ Ss sought and found resources beyond T's expectations;
- ✓ Ss engaged and thought critically to give peer comments;
- ✓ Ss' comments may exceed T's expectations;
- ✓ T rewarded ss' good performance with good marks;
- ✓ T encouraged ss engagement.



Findings _ teachers' interpretations of their practice

- Extract #4: discussion of T3_L1
- My consideration is, ...to develop such a teaching way...this student is relatively slow in the class, ... he is very different from others. ... He is quite stubborn. Actually, as the home teacher, I have been studying the way of educating him, what his mental activities are like. Whenever I talked to him, “yes, good, ok’ he would say, but he just won’t do it ...I think he didn’t get it, he must be very nervous, see, so many teachers were observing ... he is not that smart. ... maybe he got it, but he was not confident enough, ...educating him is quite a headache. I’ve talked to his mum, ...probably, subconsciously, maybe because I’m quite dominating, I can’t ‘straighten’ him out. I’ve tried all sorts of ways, still I can’t ‘control’ him. In my inner heart, I just think, ‘I must ...straighten you out’. I don’t know whether it’s right or not, but that’s my thinking. Actually, that’s what’s reflected in the class... actually my way of management was in there. ...You know other students in the class all laugh at him, because he, anything, he is just in a different manner...nothing shaped yet, I’m still studying how to educate him.

When a student appeared different...



Findings _ teachers' interpretations of their practice

- Extract #5:
- I: when you said 'you can discuss in your groups', what were you thinking then?
- T6: I had a patrol around, seeing some slow students hadn't finished yet. I have a same principle as the school's, that is, not to leave one student out. I was hoping those early finishers could help the few slow ones.
- I: Did that happen as you expected?
- T6: No, no discussion. The actual operation was not good at all.
- I: Reflecting on that now, what do you reckon caused that?
- T6: I should have given them a push, 'discuss quickly'; another push if no response 'why still no discussion?'; if still nothing happened, I would say 'deduct your performance marks, if still not to start'. The 'marks' is the best weapon. {laugh}
- I: How did you expect 'helping' to be done then, would the strong ss offer, or the other way?
- T6: Normally the strong ones would offer because they care about their group marks. Only when all have finished, would they get the marks for their group.
- I: how do you reckon the strong ones would help the weak?
- T6: the ideal way would be, of course, that strong students tell the weak the answer and why that answer, but actually, they just tell them the answer directly.

When group work did not work...



- Major points in extract #5:
 - The aim of group discussion was to get everyone to know the answer;
 - In response to students' slow/no action, the teacher's would choose to push; then punish, when pushing fails too;
 - Strong students might offer to help weak ones but would tell the answer directly, and the purpose was to get the group marks.

Discussions and implications

- It was evident that the teachers were implementing the promoted programme by using the suggested model in relation to enhancing student autonomy. However, given the diversities and complexities displayed in the implementation, should it be advisable that the school management stop for a reflection on and a close examination of the programme, and further a deep think about the necessity of such a thing called 'a model'. Perhaps the nature of autonomy and that of 'a model' have provided an answer.

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Thank You!
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