



What Matters About Class Size?

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Class size remains one of the most persistent issues in public policy for education because it is contentious. It provides a useful example of both the limits and possibilities of research in aiding decision-makers in resource allocation. That smaller classes are a good thing is common sense; it is a proposition that most people of sound judgment – without dependence on esoteric knowledge, study or research – believe to be true.¹ Parents want smaller classes for their children; educators prefer to teach smaller classes; students call for smaller classes, especially at the post-secondary level; and indeed one of the key competitive advantages of private schools is smaller class sizes. It is hardly surprising, then, that average class sizes have steadily declined over the last fifty years. And today several governments in Canada have included caps on class sizes in the early grades or fixed teacher pupil-ratios in policies intended to improve school achievement.²

Class size is among the most studied issues in education. Over the last twenty years researchers have come to quite different conclusions about the relative importance of lowering class sizes, leading Suzanne Zeigler, summarizing results, to conclude that “if classes in kindergarten through Grade 3 are reduced in size to 17 or fewer students, those students would show, on average, small to moderate increases in reading comprehension and mathematics test scores.”³ A more recent literature view concludes that the gains from smaller classes continue into later years of schooling and are greater for students who are educationally disadvantaged.⁴

By calculating both the cost of class size reductions and their impact on achievement, academics have concluded that reducing class size is not the most efficient way to raise student achievement. Indeed, Zeigler offers a number of proven, lower-cost alternatives – one-to-one or very small group tutoring for struggling students, peer tutoring, and cooperative learning.⁵ In spite of repeated similar conclusions, the popularity of smaller class sizes remains strong. One might be tempted to conclude that class size is an example of how research fails to inform policy.

But the problem may reside in our tendency to look for a cause and effect relationship between smaller classes and academic achievement. Do parents advocate smaller classes on the basis of improved academic achievement? Do teachers claim that overall achievement levels will improve with one, two or three fewer students? Not likely. When justifying the ‘common sense’ of smaller classes, people speak of relationships. It seems quite plausible that the smaller the group, the more likely it is that students develop productive relationships both with each other and with their teachers. More personal attention to each child is at least a possibility.

Biddell and Berliner describe several theories that explain why smaller class sizes may produce academic gains.⁶ One group of theories focuses on the teacher’s work. For example, in a small class in the early grades the teacher is able to provide individual attention as young children learn the habits of the classroom and form their ideas about success in school. This theory might explain the findings that small classes have a differentially greater impact on children who are less ‘ready for school’. In addition theories

about teachers’ work propose that children will learn better when teachers are well qualified and enthusiastic, the curriculum is engaging and challenging, and the physical environment is conducive to learning. A second group of theories considers the classroom environment and culture, arguing that discipline and classroom management issues are likely to be less prominent in smaller classes, and small in-class groups are easier to manage with a smaller total group.⁷

Modern classrooms are complex communities. Some decision makers have noted that class composition or the degree of diversity among the student population may have a more significant effect than class size on most students’ school experience.⁸ Inclusion, a relatively new value embraced by the education sector, has serious implications for teachers’ work and the supports they require to be effective with all students.

In the quest for better schools, researchers pursue a number of promising lines of inquiry: professional learning communities and the challenge of collaboration among teachers;⁹ assessment for learning;¹⁰ theories of learning; learning with technology; pedagogical, curriculum and leadership studies; and studies of school and system change. In the end the return on large investments of public money to make classes smaller must be measured by improvements in student learning. If we want those returns to be high, decision-makers at all levels need to embed class size policies within coherent and comprehensive strategies based on the best available research about improving teaching and learning. |

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Notes

- 1 “Common Sense,” in *Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia*. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Common_sense
- 2 See Canadian Council on Learning, “Making Sense of the Class Size Debate. Lessons in Learning.” <http://www.ccl-cca.ca/english/resources/lessons/080905.asp>
- 3 Suzanne Ziegler, “Class Size, Academic Achievement and Public Policy,” *Connections 1*, no. 1 (Canadian Education Association. 1997).
- 4 Bruce J. Biddell, and D.C. Berliner, “What Research Says About Small Class Sizes and Their Effects,” *Policy Perspectives* (WestEd. 2002) http://www.wested.org/online_pubs/small_classes.pdf
- 5 Zeigler.
- 6 Biddell and Berliner, *ibid*.
- 7 *Ibid*.
- 8 “Discussion Paper on Class Size and Composition,” British Columbia School Superintendents’ Association, 2005. <http://www.bcssa.org/topics/LR-bcssapaper1205.pdf>
- 9 J. Lawrence Leonard, “Schools as Professional Communities: Addressing the Collaborative Challenge,” *International Journal For Leadership in Learning 6*, no.17 (2002). <http://www.ucalgary.ca/~iejll/volume6/leonard.html>
- 10 Lorna Earl, *Assessment as Learning: Using Classroom Assessment to Maximize Student Learning* (Thousand Oaks, California: Corwin Press, Inc., 2003).

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