

HOW MUCH DOES CLASS SIZE ACTUALLY MATTER?

The debate seems bigger than the issue itself.

BY IMFC STAFF

The accepted wisdom is that smaller classes improve academic outcomes. As early as 1980, the province of Alberta lured striking Calgary teachers back into schools with the promise of fewer students in the classroom. In October 2005, British Columbian teachers walked off the job; among the reasons cited was the failure of the province to confirm (smaller) class sizes. The Ontario government initiated a four-year class size reduction program in 2004 and in June 2006 also created an online class size tracker to show parents the progress school boards are making in reducing the size of primary classes.¹ Class size remains a critical issue for teachers, boards and parents alike, all in spite of a lack of consensus about its effect on academic outcomes. Countless studies have attempted to produce definitive answers, to no avail. The most agreement lies around the younger years – a class size cap at 17 students for children from kindergarten to third grade may produce some increased benefit in academic outcome.

The bigger question is whether the attention given to class size caps overshadows other important initiatives to improve schooling. A 1997 Canadian Education Association report concurred with previous findings regarding class size in the primary grades, but warned that caps are not the most efficient way of improving overall achievement.² Teaching methods, “teacher quality,” parenting and finally parental involvement can significantly affect academic outcomes. And then there are finances. At a time when school boards and provincial education ministers are attempting to offer more with limited resources and are legally obligated to operate a balanced budget, do the purported benefits of class size caps justify the financial cost and sacrifices to other education programs? Class size debates should not overshadow other important elements of improving education.

THE METHODS BEHIND THE MADNESS

“Teacher quality” may be difficult to measure; measuring how effective teaching methods are is less so. Project Follow Through, the largest, most expensive educational study ever undertaken in the United States, began in 1967 under then president Lyndon B. Johnson, who wanted to “find ways to break the cycle of poverty through improved education.”³ At a cost of about one billion dollars,⁴ the study continued until 1995. The government asked educators to submit pedagogical techniques, which would then be used and compared with other non-Project Follow Through programs. Of all the approaches reviewed, only the Direct Instruction Model, a teacher-centred approach, was found to rate more positively than others in all three designated assessment areas.⁵

Another meta-analysis of teaching methods, published in 2005 by the American Institutes for Research, allowed researchers to review 22 school reform models used mostly in high-poverty, low-performance schools and found that of those 22 models, Direct Instruction came out as a high performer above all but one other teaching model.⁶

However, where today is discussion of the best teaching methods? Child-centred learning approaches retain popularity and Project Follow Through is virtually unknown. Neither has Direct Instruction been propelled to the front of the class, leading Cathy L. Watkins, a California academic and author of *Project Follow Through: A Case Study of Contingencies Influencing Instructional Practices of the Educational Establishment* to ask, “Why were both the study and the dissemination of its results watered down?” She also analyzes the reasons why the educational establishment “ignore[s] teaching methods that are effective in raising the academic achievement of disadvantaged children.”⁷

That teaching methods are as important as class size was the conclusion of a rebuttal to a government assessment of public education in New South Wales, Australia, done in 2001. When the government affirmed the necessity of smaller class sizes, an independent think tank exposed some of the faulty research supporting this and examined the research more fully, explaining some research supported smaller classes only when partnered with changed teaching methods. “Another study...found that classroom practices differed between the small classes that achieved the largest and smallest gains. That is, small class benefits were mediated by the quality and method of teaching.”⁸ Ultimately, the author concludes that “effective teaching is much more important than the number of children in the classroom.”⁹

WHERE ARE ALL THE APPLE POLISHERS?

But just as class size alone cannot remedy poor academic outcomes; neither does the implementation of the best teaching methods function in a vacuum. Teachers rely on parents to raise – the odd childhood prank aside – well-behaved kids. In a perfect world, class size might be a non-issue because student behaviour would always be exceptional. Unfortunately, according to many teachers, we are far from utopia and disruptive classroom behaviour is rising.

In 1940, public school teachers listed the top seven disciplinary problems they faced in class: talking out of turn, chewing gum, making noise, running in the halls, cutting in line, dress-code violations and littering. In 1990, public school teachers listed drug abuse, alcohol abuse, pregnancy, rape, robbery and assault.¹⁰

A two-year Queen’s University study in 1992, commissioned by the Canadian Teachers’ Federation, found that teachers across Canada agree “while typically teachers can deal with discipline issues, most said it takes an inordinate amount of their time and can detract from both the quality and extent of what can be taught.”¹¹

The study also found that teachers felt their jobs were more difficult because of new public demands that schools deal with children’s social problems, as well as behavioural problems. A spokesperson for the study, which surveyed 17,000 elementary and secondary teachers, said, “In their (the teachers’) view, parents are turning over many of their child-raising responsibilities to the schools and making unfair, unrealistic demands of teachers.”¹² When teachers have to “socialize” other peoples’ children and begin teaching values instead of reading and writing, the academic

side of education takes a blow. This on top of the fact that young children arrive at school with varying academic levels: children who have been taught how to hold a pencil, how to identify shapes and colours, how to count and how to sit and read a story begin school at a different level than those who must learn these skills for the first time. The teacher should be able to focus on literacy and counting, rather than on concepts of sharing, not interrupting and behavioural problems which could grow more unwieldy as the child does. The survey finally cited that teachers rightly feel they cannot “compensate for the deficiencies of our families.”¹³

A Scottish survey of teachers’ unions concluded much the same. The union also blamed parents for children’s disruptive behaviour and called for the introduction of a national standard of pupil behaviour. The survey found that 64 per cent of secondary teachers and 46 per cent of primary teachers were verbally abused and three out of five nursery teachers were abused or assaulted. A member of the union’s executive committee said, “The survey confirms what we have suspected over the last decade. Many children are out of control. Some parents seem not to be parenting.”¹⁴

Finally, a poll of U.S. educators cited the most disturbing behaviour in a secondary school classroom was social defiance, or the “you can’t make me” attitude.¹⁵ Refusing to listen to instruction and inciting conflict with the teacher results in more time spent attending to problems and less time spent on teaching well-behaved students who are eager to learn.

PUBLIC SCHOOLS, PUBLIC FUNDS, PUBLIC PROBLEMS

All this is not to say that class size is irrelevant: the clearest evidence unearthed from the surveys and studies that engulf the class size reduction debate supports that primary-aged students may benefit from smaller classes because they seem to promote current higher academic outcomes. But these positive outcomes are delivered at a price that some critics argue is too costly to justify.

Yvan Guillemette argues in a C.D. Howe Institute report that the financial investment needed to transition and maintain grade one classes at the 17 student cap in a typical school would be fiscally unreasonable.¹⁶ Guillemette estimates that in a school with 120 grade one students, the cost of reducing class sizes from 25 to the optimal 17 would cost an additional \$1,000 per student before capital costs. Weighing this estimated cost against a minimal academic outcome, Guillemette argues that school boards would gain greater benefit from investing in more prosperous strategies such as greater school accountability, more competition, better teacher incentives and expanded school choice.¹⁷

Spending money in this way can take its toll elsewhere, as the following examples highlight. California’s class reduction budget overrun delayed implementation in the schools that were thought to benefit from the program most: those with overall low income and the highest concentration of ethnic minorities. To deal with the fiscal shortfall, schools reduced funding to libraries, computer resources, after school childcare and special education programs.¹⁸

In Ontario, the provincial government has recently undertaken an initiative to cap primary grade classes at 20 students, promising measurable academic returns. The Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario has called the initiative a “winning strategy,”¹⁹ yet

Toronto School Board Trustees argue that the cap comes at the expense of students in grades four to eight who are forced into crowded classrooms to make space for additional primary classes. Trustees argue that music programs are being cut in some schools to make space.²⁰ The ETFO continues to back the initiative, blaming the Province’s funding formula for the space and program crunch.

What’s clear from California and Ontario is that implementing class size reduction requires significant funding. Currently, Ontarians must weigh the advantage of small class sizes in the primary grades, with the potential loss of programs like music and increased crowding in the intermediate and senior grades. Class size reduction provides some academic outcome advantages at the primary level, but not without a significant cost.

SMALLER IS BETTER? NOT SO FAST...

To many parents, guaranteed smaller classes are a guarantee of a better education. To many teachers, it’s what allows them to keep their sanity. Class size is easily quantified: it allows governments to appear to be making improvements, and counting students is far easier than addressing the more nebulous concepts of “teacher quality” or child behaviour. Still, there are other policy options for education improvement, the bulk of which lie outside of government control. School boards must ensure teaching methods work and promote a willingness to change to new methods, where necessary. And while they cannot influence parenting, they can ensure teachers have effective tools for disciplining unruly children. Smaller classes are not a panacea. Until we broaden our focus to include other aspects of education reform, we will remain hooked on discussing one aspect of educational reform, the impact of which remains dubious.

endnotes

- 1 Online tracker can be viewed at <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/cst/>
- 2 Suzanne Ziegler as cited by Flower, D. (2001, April 1) Class size in Alberta - an ongoing debate! *Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives*. Retrieved from <http://www.policyalternatives.ca/index.cfm?act=news&do=Article&call=793&pA=A2286B2&type=6>
- 3 Grossen, B. (1995) The Story Behind Project Follow Through. *Effective School Practices*, vol.15 no.1 [Electronic version]. Retrieved from <http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/~adiiep/ft/grossen.htm>
- 4 *IBID.*
- 5 Direct instruction involves more rote learning, and the responsibility lies with the teacher for conveying information and ensuring students understand it before moving on, in contrast to other child-centered learning approaches, which may focus more on socialization or child-directed choices. See Adams, G. (1995) Project Follow Through and Beyond. *Effective School Practices*, vol.15 no.1 [Electronic version]. Retrieved from <http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/~adiiep/ft/adams.htm>
- 6 American Institutes of Research (2005) Study Rates 22 Widely Used Comprehensive School Reform Models. [Press release]. Retrieved from <http://www.air.org/news/documents/Release200511csr.htm>
- 7 Watkins, C.L. (1997) *Project Follow Through: A Case Study of Contingencies Influencing Instructional Practices of the Educational Establishment*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge Center for Behavioral Studies, 103.
- 8 Buckingham, J. (2003, FEB. 19) The Missing Links: Class Size, Discipline, Inclusion and Teacher Quality. A Response to the Vinson Report on Public Education in New South Wales. Melbourne: Centre for Independent Studies, 6
- 9 This result held even for the kindergarten to grade three age group. See Buckingham, The Missing Links.
- 10 Volokh, A., & Snell, L. As cited in Congressional Quarterly Researcher as cited by Toch, T., Gest, T. and Guttman, M. (1993, Nov.8) Violence in schools. *U.S. News and World Report*, 115(18). 13.
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- 12 *IBID.*
- 13 *IBID.*
- 14 Scotland’s Schools Face Discipline Problems. (2004). *Education*, 145, p. 1.
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- 17 Guillemette, *School Class Size*. pp.11-12.
- 18 Bohrnstedt, G.W. and Stecher, B.M. (2002, SEPT.) What we have learned about class size reduction in California. *CSR Consortium*. California Department of Education. pp. 46-48. [Electronic version] Retrieved from http://www.classsize.org/techreport/CSRYear4_final.pdf
- 19 Noble, E. (2006, SEPT. 14) Smaller classes a winning strategy [Letter to the editor]. *Toronto Star*, p. A29.
- 20 Kalinowski, T. (2006. SEPT.11) Class Size Caps Called ‘misguided.’ *Toronto Star*, p. B2.