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Class size, class size DOES make a difference

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AARE blog, Christopher Pyne, class size, David Zyngier

May.25.2014

Class size DOES make a difference: latest research shows smaller classes have lasting effect

By Dr David Zyngier

Money spent on reducing class sizes has not been wasted as Education Minister Christopher Pyne believes. The advice he has been given is wrong.

Reducing class size **does** make a difference, and the biggest difference it makes is to the schooling outcomes of our most vulnerable children.

I have just completed a comprehensive review of 112 research papers on class sizes written between 1979 and 2014 by researchers in Australia and similar education systems in England, Canada, New Zealand and non-English speaking countries of Europe.

I found that reducing class size in the first four years of school can have an important and lasting effect on student achievement. The more years students spend in small classes during grades K-3, the longer the benefits for achievement last during grades 4-8.

Smaller class sizes are especially important for children who come from disadvantaged families. I need not point out these children are overwhelming the responsibility of public schools in Australia.

The policy advice and commentary that says class size doesn't matter, or is a waste of money, relies heavily on a Grattan Institute [report by Ben Jensen's on Australian education and teacher quality](#).

Jensen suggests that the majority of studies around the world have shown that class size reductions do not significantly improve student outcomes, and that the funds should have been redirected toward enhancing teacher quality. The results of individual studies are always questionable.

But most significantly a range of **newer** peer reviewed studies on the effects of small classes have now emerged and they paint a very different picture.

I have used these in my review.

Notably, of the 112 papers I reviewed, only three authors supported the notion that smaller class sizes did not produce better outcomes to justify the expenditure.

Reducing class size to increase student achievement is an approach that has been tried, debated, and analysed for many decades. The premise seems logical: with fewer students to teach, teachers should achieve better academic outcomes for all students.

For those who choose private education for their children in Australia, it is often cited as a major consideration.

So it is important that politicians and educational decision makers get the right advice and the right information about class size.

For example it is commonly assumed that class sizes in Australia are smaller than they have ever been. This is not the case. While older members of our society may recall being in classes of 40 or more students in the 1950s and early 1960s, by 1981 class sizes in Australia were generally capped at 25 in high schools and 22 in technical schools. These caps have increased since their low point in 1981, even in primary schools; while the early years in many jurisdictions are capped below 26, grades 3-6 are treated like secondary classes and capped between 28 and 30.

In Australia commentators and politicians alike point to high performing systems such as Shanghai, Hong Kong, South Korea, Taiwan and Singapore, where large class sizes are the norm, as evidence that reducing class sizes is a futile exercise. But research indicates that students from Confucian heritage cultures are socialised in ways that make them amenable to work in large classes, so that management problems are minimal and teachers can focus on meaningful learning using whole-class methods.

An educational system forms a working whole, each component interacting with all other components. Isolating any one component (such as class size) and transplanting it into a different system shows a deep misunderstanding of how educational systems work.

However **let's look at how our class size compares.** In 2010 Australia's average public primary class size was 23.2 – above the OECD average of 21.3 and EU average of 20. This compares to 15 in Korea; 17 in Germany and the Russian Federation; 19 in Finland; 20 in the UK, Poland and Luxembourg; and 26 in India (OECD 2013).

Class sizes are smaller in both the Independent and Catholic sectors in Australia.

As far back as 1979 there has been evidence that smaller class sizes make a difference.

Class size can make an even bigger difference when teachers change their teaching methods to suit smaller groups. Read [my paper](#) for more.

You might be interested in this list of things that happen in smaller classes:-

- Teachers were more able not only to complete their lessons in smaller classes, but to develop their lessons in more depth;
- Teachers moved through curricula more quickly and were able to provide additional enrichment activities;
- Teachers reported that they managed their classes better, and classes functioned more smoothly as less time was spent on discipline and more on learning;
- Students received more individualised attention, including more encouragement, counselling, and monitoring;
- Students were more attentive to their classwork;
- Students had to wait less time to receive help or have their papers checked, and they had more opportunities to participate in group lessons.

Go to [my paper](#) for more lists of beneficial outcomes of smaller class sizes.

Policy makers, politicians and media too often discuss data about class sizes and impact on student learning without an evidence base, relying largely on second-hand research or anecdotes. Too frequently, advocates for particular positions select their evidence, conveniently ignoring research that raises questions about their favoured position.

Class size reduction is about equity – any policy debate must start with the basic inequality of schooling, and aim to ameliorate the damage that poverty, violence, inadequate child care and other factors do to our children's learning outcomes.

I suggest we should have a policy to reduce class size in Australia's most disadvantaged schools during the first four years of education specifically when children are developing literacy and numeracy skills. **This is more cost effective than an across the board approach.**

While lower class size has a demonstrable cost, it may prove the **more cost-effective policy overall in closing the widening gap** between the lowest and highest achievers. Anyone looking at the bottom line of future costs to Australia needs to urgently and seriously consider further policies to reduce class size.



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David works in the Faculty of Education at Monash University as a Senior Lecturer in the areas of *Curriculum and Pedagogy*. He was previously a teacher and school principal. His research focuses on teacher pedagogies that engage all students but in particular how can these improve outcomes for students from communities of disadvantage focusing on issues of social justice and social inclusion. He works within a critical and post-structural orientation to pedagogy that is distinguishable by its commitment to social justice (with interests in who benefits and who does not by particular social arrangements) and its dialectic critical method investigating how school education can improve student outcomes for all but in particular for at risk students.