

Current and Emerging Issues in Education Policy

Muteb Alharbi

De Montfort University, United Kingdom

Abstract

The issue of class size in infant classes has become a critical consideration in the efforts to improve the achievement of students. Emerging evidence demonstrates that a large class size registers adverse outcomes on student achievement. Other implications of a large class size include challenges in classroom management, a factor that may lead to uncontrolled behaviours among learners. With the increasing number of students gaining entry into the school system, local authorities have faced the compulsion to increase class sizes beyond the legal limit of 30 pupils. Such a move has been associated with the compromised interactions between learners and teachers. Many scholars agree that class size is an important determinant of the quality of education. Specifically, the number of students that a teacher must handle determines the level of learning that is likely to occur. Therefore, emerging policies on class size should seek to remedy the current situation. Increased funding to schools will ensure that each school can afford more teachers who will handle the increasing number of students. Ongoing reforms affecting the ratio of teachers to pupils are also likely to register a positive impact on the quality of education. The most important aspect is to ensure that class sizes promote the achievement of children in infant classes. Having large classes may compromise the levels of literacy as well as the skills observed in different subjects. Based on the available evidence, it is imperative to establish remarkable policies that will govern class sizes without compromising student achievement. Similarly, the hiring of teaching assistants may serve as a potential solution in helping teachers to meet the needs of all the learners. Other arguments that reveal no impact of class size on student achievement have been surpassed by recent evidence regarding this issue.

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Introduction

Since 2002 there has been a significant increase in the annual rate of births in the United Kingdom and this puts pressure on the number of school places required as these children reach school age. The estimated number of places available for the 2017/2018 academic year was shown to be significantly short of the number needed, meaning 155,000 children not being able to find a school place in their area (Department for Education, 2012). Where the schools have had an obligation to accept children, the class sizes have grown and in 2018 there are 81,635 infants in classes with more than 30 pupils, although the majority of infant classes in the UK have exactly 30 pupils (Department for Education, 2018).

Given that class sizes can determine the amount of individual attention a child receives from the teacher, having 30 pupils in an infant class could be detrimental to the future of these children. Research has shown a strong relationship between class size and accomplishments (Odden, 1990), as well as class size and achievements (Monks & Schmidt, 2010). Furthermore, Ronald et al (2001) found that a large class can have a significant impact on the progress that a child makes in class and also on their social relationships with others in the group. In terms of classroom management, the teacher may find more difficulty in controlling behaviour; this in turn has an

impact on the amount of teaching and learning time in the class as the teacher is involved in disciplining children instead of instructing.

Class size is clearly a key issue facing teachers and parents in education. This report explores the main influence that class size has on the learning outcomes of students. The next section will discuss implications of class size in primary schools and reviews the literature on the topic.

Importance of Class Size

A research report released by the Department for Education (2011) confirms that annual birth rates have increased in England since 2002 and in 2010 were already 20% higher than eight years previously. The legal limit for class size is 30 pupils and it has become more challenging for many local authorities to keep within these guidelines, given the rapid surge in number of children entering the school system. The evidence between class size and attainment suggests that children are disadvantaged in the early stages of their school life as they miss out on individual attention from the teacher; in addition more time may be spent by the teacher in dealing with non-teaching activities, such as attendance registers. However, it is difficult to measure class size accurately, especially in reception classes where children may join at various times during the year (Blatchford, 2003).

Additionally, there are also exceptions to having the legal limit of 30 pupils, when it is permitted to have large classes. This is where it may not be in the best interests of the child to be refused entry to a particular school. The circumstances revolve around a child having special needs, being in care, where a family has moved into the area and there are no other school places available, or where the local authority has made an error in not admitting a child (Department for Education, 2011). Consequently, in some schools there may be significantly larger classes due to the number of pupils falling into these categories.

Parents believe that class size affects the quality of teaching their child receives but research carried out by Hattie (2009) found that smaller classes did not have much effect on attainment. Both Rivkin et al (2005) and Hanushek (2011) assert that class size is not as important as the effectiveness of the teacher and suggest that the most effective teachers are given the larger classes. The report carried out by the Sutton Trust (2011) found that there was a significant 40% difference in learning between pupils who had a high quality teacher and those who had a less effective teacher.

Nevertheless, class size has been an issue over a number of years, as there has been a perception that large classes determine the quality of education, especially when one teacher is responsible for dealing with the individual needs of more than 30 children in the early years of education. It is regarded as being a time when young children are ready to take on new ideas, but they are still developing at different rates. This means that a teacher has to cater for these variations in learning and a large class making the teacher unable to move around the classroom and spend valuable time with each child.

Nowadays social relationships are developing as children enter the educational system; such relationships are formed with both peers and teachers. The amount of time a child spends in time means that the teacher becomes an important adult figure in their (Cemalcilar, 2010); this relationship can enhance a child's emotional and behavioural development, in addition to their academic progress (Cemalcilar, 2010; Furrer & Skinner, 2003). In a large class the development

of this important social relationship between teachers and pupils may be more limited, as the teacher does not have the opportunity to spend valuable time with individual children.

Class size is one of the most debated issues in education and it can be seen that there are two sides to the argument: one is that large classes inhibit the time a teacher has for each child and the other is that a high quality teacher can manage a class of any size. However, the size of a class in primary school is determined more by policies rather than pedagogy.

Policies Affecting On Class Size

A huge number of policies may have an essential influence on class size. Funding is the main issue as the cost of teachers represents the largest cost for any school. The fewer teachers and the larger the class, the more economically beneficial it will be to the school. This is especially noted when governments do not increase funding in line with increases in the number of pupils entering the system (Department for Education, 2011). Additionally, teachers now have time for planning lessons and marking written into their contractual hours; in the case of primary school teachers this is 10% of their time. However, although this is a laudable policy, it has impacted on the school budgets as it has meant more teachers are needed to cover the existing curriculum requirement.

Moreover, it has also been an issue for the education authorities to recruit enough suitable teachers to cover rises in pupils entering the school system. Doherty and Gerrard (2015) reported that 2015 was likely to see the teacher shortage reach its peak and stated that 53% of teachers were considering leaving the profession. Most of this was due to long hours and low pay, and has resulted in a significant lack of qualified primary school teachers in rural and inner city deprived areas. Teacher recruitment and retention clearly have a considerable impact on the number of teachers in schools.

As class size is perceived by parents as being a sign of quality in teaching, many parents have decided to send their children to private schools, where class sizes are smaller. This has been facilitated by government policy introduced in 2010 academic year which enabled independent schools to become free schools (Department for Education, 2015); in the 2016/2017 academic year there were 425 free schools in the UK (Bolton, 2016). Previously parents had to pay significant fees for their children to attend independent schools but this policy suddenly allowed parents, teachers and community groups to set up their own new schools which were funded by the taxpayer. Under the terms of the agreement, schools are not allowed to be selective and are subject to government inspections. However, such schools pride themselves on their small class sizes and in 2015 they had an average of 24 pupils in a primary school class (Bolton, 2016). Although this does not specify whether these classes are reception or higher primary school level, there is evidence that many free schools are offering primary school classes of 18 pupils per class (see Steiner Academy, 2018).

Reforms aimed at reducing the ratio of teachers to pupils and thus seen to be reducing class sizes were set in place by bringing more adults into the classrooms. These were teaching assistants, who contributed to numbers of adults available to offer more individual supervision to children (Blatchford et al, 2003). They may have provided some support to teachers but their presence did not contribute to pupil attainment as they lacked professional training. It was also not popular initially with teachers and teaching unions, as they saw it as a devaluing of the teacher's role and

professionalism, although Blatchford et al (2003) conceded that teachers were generally positive about having support in the classroom.

The initiatives and policies that have led to the debates on class size have been associated with determining whether the number of children in a class has a negative effect on a child's attainment and the next section discusses this.

Impact on Achievement

The main question that is related to class size must be whether or not children are learning and achieving. Whilst teachers may have advocated the pedagogical benefits of small classes, the politicians and policy makers may have been playing down such benefits due to costs. Nye et al (2000) found that children that are in small classes did well in literacy and maths and this particularly applied to children from ethnic minorities. The individual attention they received has clearly been beneficial in these important functional skills. Yet other research has found that these gains do not last.

One of the most influential research projects on class size has been the longitudinal study by Blatchford et al (2003). They found that in large classes over 25 children, the size of groups that children worked in were likely to involve 7 – 10 pupils. This meant that children had less chance of peer interaction which could reflect on the quality of work they produced. In addition, the larger the class, the less teaching that went on in the classroom and the less interaction the children had with their teacher. Ultimately, this led to children being more prone to distractions and consequently lacking in concentration (Finn & Achilles, 1999).

Children in large classes may be seen as behaving badly, simply because they spend more classroom time with their peers and may still regard classroom time as playtime. However, Blatchford et al's (2003) study revealed that social relationships of young children were not strongly related to class size. This means that the development of social behaviour norms and building social relationships are not reflected in the class sizes of primary school children.

On the other hand, at the same time other researches point to the teacher-pupil relationship as being very important in enhancing the child's behavioural and emotional development, increasing their self-esteem, motivation and sense of belonging (Cemalcilar, 2010; Forsyth, 2005; Furrer & Skinner, 2003). In addition, a supportive teacher-pupil relationship has been found to have a positive effect on peer relationships (Hughes, 2012).

The relationship with the teacher is especially important at reception class level. Ahnert et al (2012) stress that children, who do not have enough teacher emotional support at entry school level, can show later signs of anxiety and stress. This may prevent them from forming positive relationships with other children and may affect future relationships with peers and teachers, deflecting them from making progress academically and socially (Ahnert et al, 2012). Blair (2010) suggests that such anxiety at an early stage in their schooling can have an impact on their learning and achievement.

In terms of children in smaller classes showing better literacy and maths attainments, Blatchford et al (2003) found that such gains were lost after the first year or two, therefore they were not sustained. Nor did additional adults in the class provide any extra benefits in literacy or maths progress. Nevertheless, the initial gains in the first year of school show that small class sizes

appear to be more beneficial when children first enter school; Blatchford et al (2003) found no evidence that small classes later in primary school had any significant effect on pupil attainment.

The additional adults in a class mainly related to teaching assistants and the research on any relationship between their presence reducing the ratio of adults to pupils in a class and pupil attainment has found a negative result (Sharples et al, 2015). A surprising result was that special needs pupils in primary schools had a lower rate of achievement when supported by a teaching assistant than similar pupils who were unsupported (Klassen, 2001; Reynolds & Muijs, 2003). This has been explained by academics as teacher assistants focusing on completing tasks with pupils rather than allowing them to work independently and discovering for themselves (Moyle & Suschitzky, 1997), or of separating children from their peers by giving them one-to-one support (Giangreco, 2010).

The problem of class size, the policies that have resulted in large classes, and the effect the size of the class may have had on a child's attainment have all been discussed and this leads to certain recommendations that can be based on these discussions.

Recommendations and Outcomes

There is no doubt that it is clear that there are differing opinions on class size being associated with better student achievements. However, across the different research studies that have been conducted, it was noticeable that reception classes were likely to benefit most from a reduction in class size. The recommendation based on this is for a policy to ensure that reception classes be kept small, even if this may be at the expense of later stages of primary school education. It would benefit children more to have a class of up to 20 children in the first year of school. This may be a period of adjustment for them and they may need more attention from the teacher. However, research has indicated that benefits of small class size dissipate after the first year or two and there is no longer an advantage to have small classes. Children's achievement rates and progress depend on the reception class being an environment where they can develop.

Teaching assistants usually do not contribute to the overall attainments of children in primary schools. It has even been suggested that they may be detrimental to a child's progress, both in terms of academic achievement and social development. However, the teachers value some extra support in the classroom, especially when they have a large class. The teaching assistant may still have a place in the classroom but more attention should be paid to their role in supporting the teacher. It is recommended that the training of teaching assistants should focus on their administrative and non-teaching supportive role. This would release teachers to give their full attention to teaching and ensuring an inclusive environment for all children.

As there is such a significant difference in attainment between children taught by a high quality teacher and an effective teacher, more teacher training may be needed for primary school teachers. This could be in the form of observation and reflection on best practice. It is clearly an issue in teachers having the availability to observe high quality teachers during school hours but technology may be used here to good effect. Top performing teachers could be videoed during teaching sessions and these sessions could be observed by teachers at times to suit them, enabling them to review and reflect on how well particular strategies worked. They could then be encouraged to include these ideas in their own lessons. Training such as this could also be included in the school's in-service training days, adding to a teachers continuing professional

development. This may prepare all teachers better to deal with larger classes and therefore benefit the children they are teaching.

In addition to that, there is another area that needs to be addressed and this is the social development of a child. Although some research point to class size not having a great effect on a child's future social development, it is debateable as to whether the same applies to their relationship with their teacher. A number of studies have identified that the relationship a child has with a teacher is important as it shapes the way in which they relate to adults and it increases their self-esteem. In addition there is a strong correlation between emotional security, aligned with child's positive relationship with their teacher, and achievement. Consequently, this recommendation is for schools to ensure there is enough time for reception level teachers to develop positive relationships with all the children in their class. Additionally, teachers need to reflect on the interactions they have with the children in their class. In practical terms, this may mean smaller classes at reception level so that children can benefit emotionally as well as academically from their initial days in the school system.

Summary

Taking everything into account, this paper has weighed up the different arguments both for and against class size and from the literature has determined that there are both advantages and disadvantages for children and schools. From all the studies it appears that reception level children are the ones most influenced by the number of children in a class and therefore recommendations have been focused on the first reception year in primary schools.

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