



Class Size Matters



Some successful school systems have long recognized that broadening the curriculum demands students and teachers be given greater freedom to move beyond rigid desk-based methods and pursue non-conventional ideas and assignments. To create the physical space and intellectual environment appropriate for these activities, there must be fewer students in the classroom. For example, in Finland, primary and middle school classes are capped below 22 students, which enables students to undertake a variety of projects while nurturing “critical co-operative skills” (Abrams, 2011). This accords with evidence from the United States, where studies have demonstrated the impact class size has on student achievement and in narrowing the achievement gap (Mathis, 2016; Zyngier, 2014; Schanzenbach, 2014). Experts have also agreed that the use of technology and online learning is only valuable if it is part of a broadly redesigned curriculum and pedagogy that supports deeper and more sustained student engagement, meaningful learning tasks, as well as additional opportunities for collaboration (Means et al., 2009). Smaller classes are necessary to facilitate these refinements.

Benefits of Smaller Class Size

The benefits of the innovative learning that can take place in smaller classes are immediately noticeable. They also persist over the long term. In their study of national data on Grade 8 students in the United States, Dee and West (2011) found class size reductions led to statistically significant improvements in psychological factors such as attentiveness and attitudes about learning. A similar conclusion was reached by researchers in Sweden, who found that smaller classes in the last three years of primary school (age 10 to 13) is beneficial for cognitive and non-cognitive test scores at age 13; for cognitive test scores at age 16 and 18; and for completed education and wages at age 27 to 42 (Fredriksson, Öckert, and Oosterbeek, 2013).

Research has also shown that smaller classes enable teachers to more effectively address the unique learning needs of special education students while building safe, integrated classroom communities (Froese-Germain, Riel, and McGahey, 2012; Bascia, 2010). This is also true when the class has partially integrated special education students, and especially true when there are several students with special education needs, or students with multiple exceptionalities. Research from the Canadian Teachers’ Federation found that 28 per cent of the nearly 10,000 classes surveyed had five or more students with special education needs, a percentage that has more than doubled in some jurisdictions over the past 10 years (CTF, 2011). Teacher surveys now highlight “class composition as the biggest obstacle to professional satisfaction” (Bennett, 2016). The government must commit to developing provincial class size and composition guidelines, which will help teachers to provide the best possible learning environment for all students.

Given that non-cognitive skills stick with graduates throughout their lives, and yield considerable labour market benefits, it stands to reason that maintaining reasonable class sizes is likely to be cost-effective in the long run (Chetty et al., 2011; Muennig and Woolf, 2007). Furthermore, as societies become more diverse, and the world grows more interdependent, the citizen-building elements of the educational experience are becoming increasingly significant. Schools and teachers have an integral role to play in helping students to value differences among participants and learn the “basic skills of productive citizenry” (Wasley, 2002). Smaller classes enable teachers to engage students in meaningful discussions that advance this sort of learning.

Skeptics often point to jurisdictions such as Japan and South Korea – where class sizes are large and test scores are high – as evidence that small classes are not necessary. However, they ignore the consequences of these large classes, such as lack of student engagement and social skills (Haimson, 2011). Many of these same systems have announced plans to reduce class sizes in order to better develop communication skills, higher order thinking, and collaborative learning (Yonhap, 2016; Blatchford, 2013; Harfitt, 2012).

