

Class Size and Quality of Education

By C.H. Vanderwolf, PhD

One of the effects of reduced funding for education is that fewer teachers are being hired and classes are getting bigger. We are often told that larger classes result in lower quality education. Is this true?

Fortunately, it is easy to answer this question. There are many published studies of the effect of different class sizes on student achievement. In very general terms, students perform somewhat better in classes with fewer than about 15 students but the effect is not very consistent.

Sometimes small classes are better; sometimes large classes are better; often there is no obvious difference between large and small classes. Over the range from 16 to 40 students per class there seems to be no relation at all between class size and student achievement.

Nonetheless, there are many reasons why teachers prefer small classes. Apart from the obvious fact that fewer students mean fewer papers to mark, the current situation in education makes large classes unattractive in several different ways.

First, it is harder to maintain order in a large class, especially since teachers no longer have ineffective means of disciplining unruly students.

Second, there are fewer textbooks available now than there were a few decades ago and teachers are expected to create individualized programs for each student. Think about it. If a teacher spends six hours per day in actual contact with students (not counting the time taken up by marking papers, preparing lessons, etc.), this works out to 12 minutes per student in a class of 30. With plenty of good textbooks and encouragement to teach the class as a whole, a teacher can easily manage a class of 30 students, but unrealistic demands for individualized instruction make large classes a nightmare.

A third factor that makes large classes impractical for the teacher is the wide variation in student achievement that has resulted from years of educational mismanagement. A grade six teacher may have some students who read at a grade eight or high school level and others who are still struggling at a grade one or two level. Students in the latter group are likely to hate school and pose problems in discipline. Further,

teaching to the class as a whole is impossible if students are performing at widely-different levels.

It is apparent that classes as large as 30-40 could be managed quite well by a competent teacher who had good textbooks, students at a uniform level of achievement and the authority to impose discipline when it is needed. There are many problems in education that are far more serious than the problem of increasing class size.

(Dr. Vanderwolf is professor of Neuroscience at the University of Western Ontario.)