

Published Online: March 25, 2008

Student Engagement Found to Rise as Class Size Falls

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A new British study quantifies and confirms what many teachers have long believed: Students tend to be “off task” more often when they are in larger classes.

The report, by researchers from the University of London Institute of Education, was one of several studies on the educational effects of reducing class sizes that were presented here Monday on the first day of the annual meeting of the Washington-based American Educational Research Association. The March 24-28 event is expected to draw more than 15,000 education scholars from around the world before it ends on Friday.

Studies on class size have long suggested that elementary school pupils tend to learn more in classes of 20 students or fewer. The papers presented yesterday, which were based on studies conducted in the United States and Hong Kong, as well as in the United Kingdom, extend and deepen the discussion on that topic by looking more closely at what goes on inside smaller and larger classes.

In his study of British classrooms, for instance, researcher Peter Blatchford found that both elementary and secondary students benefit from smaller classes and that the benefits at the secondary level are particularly strong for the lowest-achieving students. That study involved 686 students in 27 primary schools and 22 secondary schools in the United Kingdom. Benefits in Britain

The students were closely observed by teams of researchers who recorded their “moment-to-moment” behaviors in blocks of

10-second intervals. The researchers found that adding five students to a class decreases the odds of students being on task by nearly a quarter. In fact, the study found that low-attaining students were nearly twice as likely to be disengaged in classes of 30 students as they were in classes of 15.

“As class size increases, the amount of teaching also increases,” Mr. Blatchford, a professor of psychology and education, added. “But that’s explained by more whole-class teaching.” Teachers are not necessarily capitalizing on the smaller settings to engage more students in collaborative projects—a finding that some other studies have echoed.

In secondary classrooms with low-achieving students, though, teachers are also spending more of their time dealing with pupils’ off-task behaviors, Mr. Blatchford said.

Contrary to some class-size studies conducted in the United States, the British researchers also found no “threshold effect” in their study. In other words, classes did not have to be reduced to 15 or 20 students before the behavioral benefits started to kick in.

Reducing class size at any end of the class-size spectrum seemed to help.

Hong Kong Results Differ

A second study presented at the conference, though, suggested that cultural differences can also play a role in the way that class-size differences affect learning. Maurice Galton, an education professor from the University of Cambridge in Britain, has been studying the effects of an initiative to phase in reductions in primary-level class sizes over several years in Hong Kong, which, like other Asian countries, is noted for having larger classes than is typically the case in many Western nations.

In that 7,000-student study, though, the reductions appeared to have no effect on the level of student engagement—mostly because students are already on task much of the time, according to Mr. Galton. He also found that teachers’ one-to-one

interactions with students were just as frequent in classes of 20-to-25 students as they were in classes of 32-to-37 students.

Mr. Galton said that is because Chinese teachers typically make an effort to interact with each individual student, keeping track by ticking off the names on the class roster as they go along.

Teachers did spend more time talking with individual students in smaller classes, though, and their students were more likely to ask for help outside of class. Teachers in larger classes also relied more on textbooks for all of their instruction, the study found.

“We need to be able to collect data in different cultural contexts,” Mr. Galton said, “so we can tease out those things that are common and those things that are peculiar to that culture.”

The U.S. study, which was conducted by researchers from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, also attempts to focus on what goes on inside classrooms, rather than rely on measuring only outcomes like student achievement.

The study tracks schooling in nine Wisconsin schools taking part in that state’s **Student Guarantee in Education**, or SAGE, program, an initiative aimed at reducing the student-teacher ratio to 15-to-1 in kindergarten to 3rd grade classrooms serving economically disadvantaged students. Those findings are not due to be released by the state education department, though, until this summer.