Class Size: A Question of Trade-Offs

Excerpts from the written testimony of E. D. Hirsch, Jr. before the Joint Congressional Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Youth, and Families Hearing on Teacher Preparation and Classroom Size Reduction

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The empirical evidence on the benefits of reducing class size is so mixed and contradictory, and so disconnected from adequate theory, that skepticism is warranted before spending large amounts of money without adequate and detailed justification.

Context sensitivity: Some theoretical explanations is needed for the great success of large class sizes in Asia and elsewhere (e.g., France), and the inconclusive evidence favoring smaller class size in the United States. The claim that the greater ethnic homogeneity of those nations explains this difference is not a complete or correct explanation, since in France, for example, the non-native ethnic mix in the Paris area is 23 percent, with much higher mixed-ethnic percentages in the lower-class suburbs. Yet classes of 35 students produce top results. (For example, France was in the highest group — with Singapore and Japan — in the recent TIMSS rankings in math.)

The correct explanation for these contrasts with the United States has probably been offered by Harold Stevenson and James Stigler in "The Learning Gap," namely that the disabling diversity of American classrooms is not ethnic or cultural diversity, but rather diversity of academic preparation. This explanation is compelling. Countries that prohibit social promotion and use a core curriculum produce classrooms in which all students in the class are ready to learn. This means that most instruction can be whole-class instruction during which all children participate and learn, and a smaller percentage of teacher time is taken up with individual tutoring. Paradoxically, more individual attention is possible under such circumstances, even though the class size is greater.

In a typical American context, by contrast, where many students are not at grade level and others are beyond grade level, each student receives less interaction with the teacher and less individual attention, even with smaller class size, because the teacher is rarely able to engage the class as a whole. While some students are being tutored, the rest are being left on their own in small-group activities or in isolated seatwork. Under these circumstances, making the class smaller by 20 percent would be immensely expensive, but would, even in theory, produce only marginal benefits. Clearly, the better solution educationally and economically is to ensure that all students in a classroom are at grade-level with respect to the subject matter. Adjustments of class size is an expensive band-aid, compared to this more fundamental needs. Moreover, money spent on reducing class size might be more productively spent on additional specialist teachers in such subjects as science, music, and fine arts.

An exception to this skeptical conclusion concerns the teaching of reading during first and second grades. Here the diversity of progress by students is inherent, and neither a core curriculum nor a policy of non-social-promotion will overcome that diversity. It has been found that decoding skill is best taught in small subgroups within the class. This argues that expenditure on smaller class size is most clearly justified for the teaching of reading in grades one and two.