

Does **size** matter?



*Class sizes in British primary schools are among the highest in the world, despite Government promises. Teacher **Robert Watts** assesses the impact*

PHOTOGRAPH: ALAMY

Be honest: aren't there times when, having succeeded in getting your children fed, dressed for school and out the door, you feel you deserve an award of some kind? And don't you feel a little guilty when, a few minutes later, you deliver your offspring to a teacher in charge of not two, not 13 but 30 children?

Recoiling in horror at the thought of spending your day surrounded by under-eights? Then you might be shocked to learn that, despite government pledges, more than 20,000 children aged five to seven are taught in classes of more than 30. Classes in Britain's schools are among the largest in the world; only six countries have larger state primary class sizes.

'How can you deliver personalised learning in large classes?' demands Steve Sinnott, general secretary of the

Average number of pupils per primary school class in state schools

Belgium (French community)	20.4
Poland	20.6
Germany	22
Netherlands	22
US	23.6
Australia	24
Ireland	24.3
UK	25.8
Israel	26.6
Turkey	27.5
Japan	28.4
Korea	32.6

National Union of Teachers. And to underline the point, the Scottish Parliament has recently announced that schools north of the border will aim to reduce the maximum number of children in infant classes to 18.

Instinctively, most of us feel that the smaller a class, the better the quality of education received by children: teachers will be able to pay more attention to individuals and there is less chance of learning being disrupted by bad behaviour. But is this really the case?

Big can be beautiful

Many commentators are becoming convinced that class size is an issue seized on by politicians who have not fully considered other factors that influence children's learning. 'The issue of class size has been enthusiastically



espoused by virtually every political party as an educational panacea,' says Keir Bloomer, education director of Clackmannanshire Council. 'But there is no evidence smaller class sizes will mean more attention for each child.'

'Teachers teach smaller groups the same way they teach bigger ones,' adds Keir Bloomer. 'Smaller classes may create the opportunity to give more attention but in practice that opportunity isn't taken up.' He adds that parents are wrong to believe that smaller classes automatically mean improved discipline and more attention for their child.

Reception class teacher Emma Johnson admits that, in an ideal world, she would prefer 20 names on her register rather than 30. But she is also quick to point out that there are times when it's a case of the more the merrier. 'Most children benefit from the social side of being in a larger class: they have a wider variety of playmates to choose from and, as a teacher, you need enough children to

Only six countries have larger state primary class sizes than Britain

create energy and ideas. In smaller classes children have fewer playmates and there are fewer ideas coming through.'

Emma is also aware that children often learn lessons from each other as well as from their teacher: 'You need a couple of children in the class who, for example, are good at activities such as role-playing or building, and that encourages the others.'

A helpful factor has been the emergence of teaching assistants. Classes may not have got much smaller in the last few years, but the adult:child ratio has – thanks to the growing band of teaching assistants. They can give a teacher invaluable support in a typical classroom with its



wide ability mix. 'The adult to child ratio is crucial,' says Emma. 'Children can have quality interaction if there are enough well-trained adults working with them. If teaching assistants are interested and informed about learning and development, then children will get the interaction and attention they need.'

Large scale strategies

However large or small a class, it will almost certainly be split into different groups and the teacher will have a strategy which will take account of the individual children, the group sizes and the class size. She will adapt her strategy not only to suit different ability levels, but also to vary the pace of learning in the classroom. Teachers are aware that children have individual personalities and styles of learning, and that for some, working in a small group works best.

'Sometimes you want more energy and interaction so you have a bigger group and sometimes you want to make sure that everyone's keeping

up with you so it's better to work with a smaller group,' says Emma Johnson. 'As a general rule, younger children work better in smaller groups because they can't maintain their concentration for long.'

But, according to Emma, very few children find the prospect of learning in a class of 30 a little too much. 'From time to time I meet a child who would benefit from being in a smaller class but they are the exception. I think they possibly need more opportunities for nurturing than we can offer them.'

Impact on learning

Even if children enjoy the social benefits of a full classroom and teachers manage learning through adapting their strategies, what impact does class size have on academic performance? Well – it depends who you listen to.

A wide-ranging review recently carried out by the Scottish Council for Research in Education suggests that there is a relationship between small

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classes and pupil attainment in the early years. On the other hand, a recent report by the Social Market Foundation played down the importance of infant class size, claiming that the organization of children into ability groups and the carrying out of regular tests were the key factors in preventing children from falling behind.

What emerges from several studies is that class size is less significant than other factors that influence performance. Research suggests that children perform best when they receive clear and constructive feedback from their teachers; when behavioral problems are dealt with effectively and when individual learning needs are addressed from the start. Even the quality of diet is judged to be of more significance to attainment than class size.

It's worth remembering, too, that smaller classes come at a price. You can take your child out of state school and put her into a private school, where classes will almost certainly be smaller – but you will have to pay for the privilege. And in state schools, there's a stark choice: smaller classes mean either restricted intakes or more classes. And who will fund the extra teachers, classrooms and facilities that would call for?

We send children to school for a reason: we want them to be able to relate to others, resolve the issues that arise from working in a group environment and receive the social as well as academic education that teachers strive to provide. It is also heartening to know that Government spending per pupil at primary, secondary and higher education is above average compared with 29 other developed nations.

Ultimately, for most parents, it should not be size that matters: it should be the quality of teaching.

School before class size



Duncan and Gez, parents of Euan, four (left), believe that there's more to quality education than class size.

'People might assume that

smaller classes are better because private schools get good results with small classes. But they also have better facilities, more money spent per head and, I suspect, more driven parents. Teachers can give more 1:1 attention in smaller classes, but the teachers in Euan's school seem well geared towards identifying children who need extra help,' says Duncan.

'It's always perceived that being in a smaller class is going to get your child a better education, but there are a lot of other things to consider as well. A happy environment, friendly staff and pupils and good test results are all more important factors,' he adds.