

Class Size Back on Agenda as Births Plummet

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Bringing class sizes down has become a hot topic in Hong Kong. It wasn't one five years ago because it was simply unaffordable. And 10 years ago it was controversial among academics only because no one was certain whether reducing the number of children in a class really had a significant impact on learning or not.

Things have changed because the consistent decrease in the birth rate over the past decade has made the reduction of class sizes affordable.

There were more than 68,000 babies born in 1991, but this declined to 48,000 in 2001, a decrease of nearly 30 per cent. Social policy strategies may have started to worry about the future, with too few youngsters supporting many elderly people, but in education it has provided an unexpected and invaluable opportunity to enhance quality – something the government is keen to achieve. It means more money can be spent on each student without increasing the total budget. This seems even more possible since the Secretary for Education and Manpower, Professor Arthur Li Kwok-cheung, indicated he favoured smaller classes in primary schools.

Various reports from the oft-quoted STAR (Student-Teacher Achievement Ratio) Project undertaken in Tennessee, US, have confirmed that small classes of 13 to 17 pupils in K-3 have brought statistically significant academic benefits in every grade, and in all academic subjects, by comparison with regular-size classes of 22 to 26 pupils. In Hong Kong class sizes hover around 40.

While all students benefit from small classes, the studies confirm that minority students or those attending inner city schools benefit most, helping to close the huge gap in academic attainment between different races and social classes.

Even more encouraging are the side-effects of small class teaching. Follow-up studies show that when these students return to a regular-size class in Grade Four, the impact of attending small classes continues to be statistically high. Reports even show that the teen birth rate is significantly lower for those assigned to small classes in early years.

What the STAR Project tells us is that a reduction of class size to fewer than in lower primary level in the context of the US brings about tremendous benefits to the children. What it cannot exactly tell us is how or why small classes effect these results. Some academics attribute the success to a more peaceful classroom environment. Others point to the fact that on-task activities of pupils increase, or that teachers can cater better for individual needs.

Of course it does mean that more trained teachers are needed. California's multibillion-dollar effort since 1996 to reduce class sizes – which led to an increased demand for teachers – resulted in a large number of unqualified teachers being recruited by the poorer school districts.

Elsewhere, in South Korea, President Kim Dae Jung last year promised to reduce class sizes even though the birth rate was still increasing. Recent reports in South Korea have shown that a number of school playgrounds have been turned into classrooms in order to accommodate the high number of extra classes.

Here lies the golden opportunity for Hong Kong. With the sharp reduction in the birth rate, we can reduce class sizes without building new schools or turning

playgrounds to classrooms and without lowering the entrance requirement of school teachers. We can therefore avoid the problems experienced in California and South Korea.

We can also learn from other examples; from regions of similar situation such as Shanghai and Taiwan, where the birth rate has also been dropping. Both places have declared their support for small-class teaching since mid-1990s.

Policymakers well understand that large classes might be successful in traditional styles of teaching. But it is extremely difficult, if not possible, for Hong Kong to implement more children-centred education reforms if classes remain as crowded as they are today. We should note that in Shanghai, one-third of its primary schools have already started implementing classes of 24 pupils. In Hong Kong, English Schools Foundation and other international schools, which have attracted an increasing number of local children, have a long tradition of small-class teaching, allowing them to offer a more interactive and non-authoritative way of teaching and learning, a major attraction for the local population.

Small classes can be beautiful and affordable. The proposal by Professor Arthur Li deserves consideration and support.

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