



Does Size really matter? Class Size that is!

Opinion piece by [Jane Turner](#) □ March 2012

When I first started teaching and ventured tentatively into the territory known as the staff room, it was like stepping into a society segregated by subject. The language of the Science site was alien to the habitat of the History faculty, Maths teachers shot quizzical looks towards their lesser-logical colleagues in the English zone, and nobody but the most determined countrymen ventured into the vibrant and colourful corner known as the Art area. But despite their cliquishness, there was one matter that united all staff, and which was a regular topic of staff room rants - student behaviour, and it was a frequently heard assertion that if only class sizes were smaller, *behaviour would improve and an improvement in results would follow*.

If I had a pound for every time I heard that from the green fields of Eton you could glimpse

through the latticed-windows and witness the tiny classes, and where the privileged few were lucky enough to be learning their Latin, then I'd be rich enough to pay their fees. But maybe this was just a case of carping teachers *passing the buck*. According to an Organisation for the Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) report, discussed on

[Radio 4](#)

, class size is

not

a determining factor in achieving a good education. It apparently has nothing to do with culture, buildings or technology either. The differences in educational outcomes it stated, is due to the ***quality of the teachers***

In fact, the report says that it would be better if class sizes were increased and some of the savings invested in paying for better quality teachers and quoted the results of a Florida case study that found that reducing class size was the most expensive and inefficient way of improving school grades. I can hear the roars of disbelief and disapproval from staff rooms across the land. The report quoted the example of Korea where class sizes are 36, and sometimes more, but whose students increasingly find their way into top universities in the UK and USA, regularly out-performing their UK counterparts. Korea invests heavily in good teachers where they earn comparatively more than those in the UK, and are seen as essential to driving student motivation and achievement.

The last Labour Government spent billions of pounds on education; the pay of teaching staff increased, many old and decrepit buildings were refurbished, architects designed and building contractors erected glossy high-tech new academies filled with state-of-the-art technology infrastructure. A good chunk of this money was spent on expensive consultants specialising in behaviour management strategies and curriculum enrichment, and on introducing a whole array of initiatives intended to improve results. I've lost count of how many times curriculum content was re-written. Yet despite such high levels of investment and interference, if you believe the findings of this report, taxpayers money has not been spent wisely. Worse still, not only has money been wasted, but plenty more could have been saved by increasing class sizes, sacking poor teachers and recruiting higher-calibre ones to take control and inspire larger classes, because none of the rest matters, you just need to put a good and inspirational teacher in control of a well behaved and motivated class of students.

Aha, I hear you say, that's the problem then - the students. They aren't well behaved or motivated, they're feral. They aren't interested in learning, they're bored. Well, you won't like the findings in this area either; the research shows that discipline and behaviour is **not** to be blamed on the students - another area of common agreement in staffrooms up and down the land. Teachers tend to cite the background and culture of a student as a reason for their behaviour and achievements, whether good or bad. In simple terms for example, those from ' ***the estate*** ' do poorly because of their culture, whilst those from Chinese communities do well because of their culture - and their 'tiger' or 'helicopter' parenting.



But, good behaviour and motivation according to this report has nothing to do with culture or background, and is due to sound management by strong school leadership teams who establish and communicate regimes of strong discipline and punishment which is understood and adhered to. Having worked in several differently managed schools with similar student intakes where behaviour contrasted vastly and in a number of institutions that provided education for offenders whose behaviour was exemplary (many of whom had been disruptive at school), I tend to agree that where there are established disciplinary practices, systems of punishment and rewards, students, even those with a criminal record and history of truancy and disruptive behaviour can and do perform well and get on with their lessons studiously.

There are examples of research that support the findings in the OECD report and those that contradict it. I don't really know what the answer is to the crisis in UK schools, but suspect it isn't as simple as just putting **good teachers** in front of large classes. The irony is though that despite vast expenditure and countless initiatives results are still poor, and standards are said to be lower than ever, with the UK falling behind many other countries (not just Korea) in terms of educational outcomes, and despite reams of research a solution still can't be agreed on.

If as this report finds, good education is down to good teachers, does that make teachers solely responsible for the crisis in UK schools? There must be more to it than that? What about the cultural trends that have undermined both the content of and belief in education and the loss of faith in the pursuit of truth? Once upon a time, teachers had authority in the classroom without the behavioural problems experienced today or the need for behavioural management checklists and strategists. This was surely because they were expert in their subject, that their academic knowledge was valued, and that this was the guiding principle in education.

Today, teachers are responsible for a bewildering number of non-educational aims such as diversity, diet, environmental concerns, re-cycling, emotional intelligence and happiness, all of which dilutes the academic content of the curriculum making it routine or **relevant**, which makes it un-interesting and undermines the teacher. The more teachers are trusted to impart actual subject knowledge and develop student's academic understanding, their authority will be strengthened with trust and discipline following. It wouldn't matter then how large or small the classes are, whether they are taught by

chalk and talk

or use the latest technology, in a sound-surround classroom or out on a dirt-track. I say make the lessons interesting, give authority back to the subject-teacher, tear up your behavioural management checklist, sack the behavioural management strategists and content consultants, and let students begin to enjoy learning once more.