

Public Seminar

Is it true that class size does not matter? A critical review of research on class size effects



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Date: 18 March 2013 (Monday)

Time: 3:00 - 5:00 pm

Venue: D2-LP-09, Tai Po Campus, HKIEd

Chairperson: Dr. Chan Kam Wing

Director, Centre for Small Class Teaching, HKIEd

Around the world the debate over the importance or not of class size – the number of pupils in a school class – continues. To the dismay of many teachers and educators, over the past few years there have been increasingly strong claims that class size is not an important factor in pupils' educational progress. Reports from bodies like the OECD, The Brookings Institute and the English Education Dept have drawn on the work of economists and international comparisons of differences between countries to argue that class size reductions are not an effective educational strategy and funds should be spent in other ways.

In this seminar Peter Blatchford critically examines the evidence base for these claims and argues that cross country comparisons and econometric analyses can be limited and even misleading. He argues that commonly reported mismatch between teachers' favourable view of small classes, and the negative results from some research, is because the pedagogical aims of small classes are not always captured by academic test scores often used in research. He argues that the evidence base on class size effects is still limited and sets out to clarify what can be said with certainty on the basis of previous research, drawing on the studies with the most robust designs. He describes recent research from the IOE and elsewhere to show the positive effects of class size on academic attainment but also on classroom processes like individual attention and collaborative learning. Recent research at the IOE has produced interesting results on the benefits of small classes to the classroom engagement of low attaining pupils in secondary schools. But he argues that class size reduction policies without attention to effective teaching and learning are unlikely to be effective. He examines recent allied evidence from England on the impact of extra adults (Teaching Assistants) and the role of class size in the education of pupils with learning difficulties in mainstream schools. He ends by arguing that there is huge potential for valuable research in East Asia on effective teaching approaches in small classes.

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