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Class Size and Achievement Across Grades

John Smith

Abstract

This fictional study compared small and regular classes in Grades 1 to 4 in one state. Small classes had a clear advantage in reading and mathematics in Grades 1 and 2, but the advantage was negligible from Grade 3 onward. Possible reasons for the difference between grades are discussed.

Introduction

Reducing class size is one of the most expensive educational policies, and its effects may not be the same at every grade. If the benefits of small classes are concentrated in particular grades, policy makers could allocate limited resources more efficiently.

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Method

Participants were students in 321 classes in Grades 1 to 4 drawn from 58 schools. Small classes had 13 to 17 students and regular classes had 22 to 25 students.

In Grades 1 and 2, classes were formed by a school lottery, so the assignment of students to small or regular classes was close to random. In Grades 3 and 4, class formation followed enrollment rules and principals' decisions, and assignment was therefore not random.

Achievement was measured with standardized reading and mathematics tests at the end of the school year.

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Results

Across all grades, students in small classes scored slightly higher than students in regular classes (reading d = 0.14, mathematics d = 0.13).

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Effects by Grade

Table 3 presents the estimated effects separately for each grade. The effect was substantial in Grades 1 and 2 but negligible from Grade 3 onward. This pattern held for both reading and mathematics.

Table 3 Effect sizes (d) of small classes by grade

Grade	Reading d	Mathematics d	Classes
1	0.31	0.27	84
2	0.22	0.25	79
3	0.04	0.06	81
4	0.02	-0.01	77

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Discussion

One interpretation is that smaller classes matter most when children are first learning the routines of schooling, when individual attention from the teacher is most consequential.

An alternative explanation concerns the assignment process itself. Assignment was close to random in Grades 1 and 2 but not in Grades 3 and 4, so part of the difference between grades may reflect differences in research design rather than a true difference in the effect of class size.

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Limitations

Class size was measured only at the beginning of the school year. This passage is placeholder text in a fictional sample article about limitations. It exists only so that the sample project has realistic page numbers, and it does not report any finding. Readers practicing with Article Scaffold should not make cards from this passage.

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