For students to feel seen, class size matters
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For students to feel seen, class size matters

Attention matters not just for academic support, but also because relationships underpin how students learn and develop.

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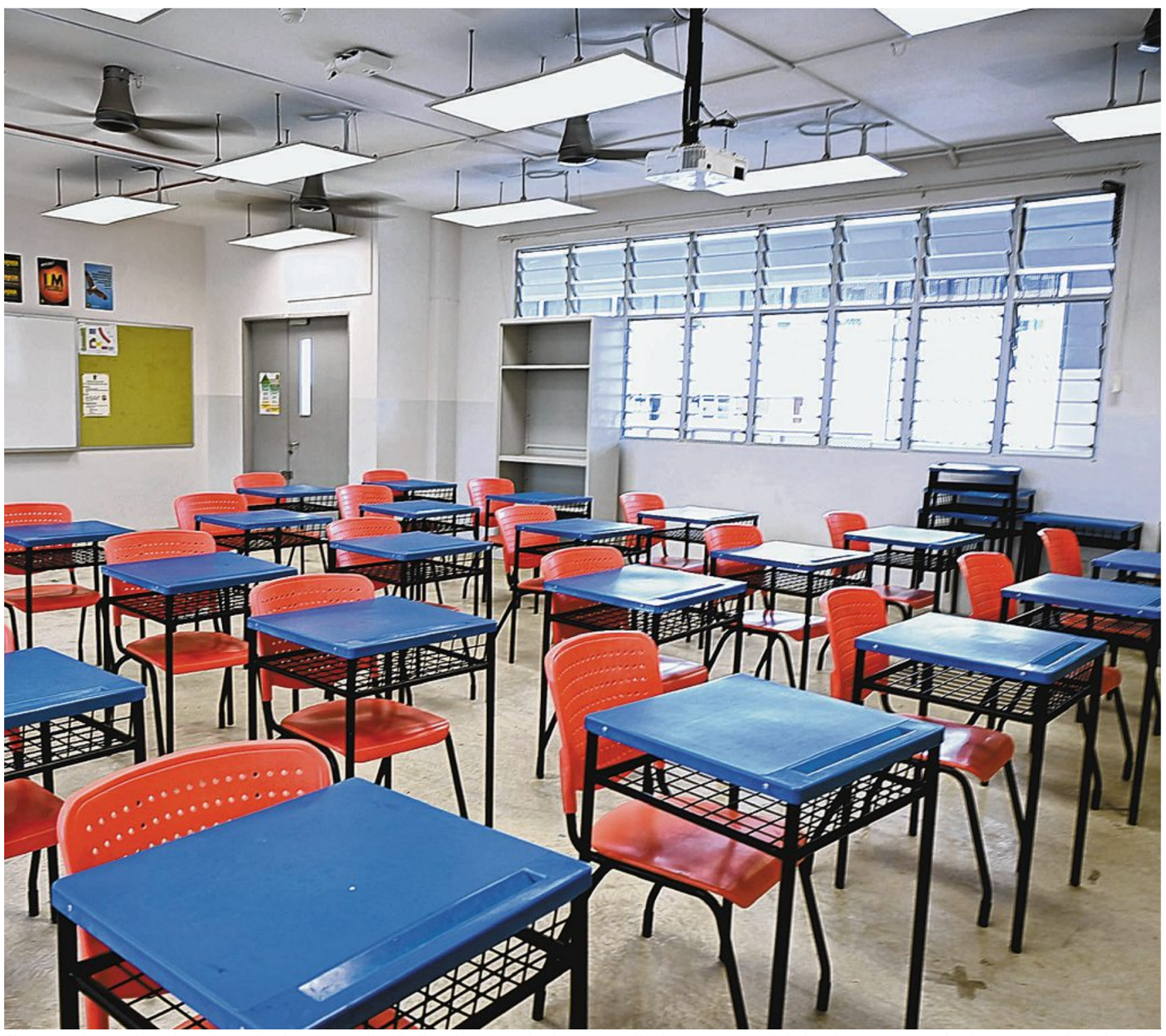

Those arguing against class size reduction cite studies finding that class size is not actually that consequential when it comes to academic outcomes. But, given the methods used to arrive at this conclusion, our confidence in it might be misplaced, says the writer. ST FILE PHOTO

In her best-selling memoir Totto-chan, Tetsuko Kuroyanagi tells the story of how she was expelled from school as a first-grader for her disruptive behaviour, but eventually flourished at Tomoe Gakuen, an alternative school.

Whereas she was distracted and disengaged in her old classroom, her new school gave each student the flexibility to begin the day with whatever learning activity most appealed to them. Totto-chan formed lifelong friendships at Tomoe, and even made a promise to her headmaster that she will return to teach there as an adult.

As someone who studies education, I can't help but ask: What explains the contrast between her two experiences? The pedagogical philosophy of Tomoe's headmaster is no doubt a core ingredient. But class size was likely also a key factor.

In the 2023 film adaptation of the book, there is a scene of Totto-chan's old classroom that has exactly 40 students in it. At Tomoe, there are no more than 50 students in the entire school.

THE POLICY QUESTION

What class size is appropriate? This is a perennial question in education policy. In Singapore, it has been debated in Parliament since at least the 1980s. It has once again surfaced amid concerns about teachers' workloads.

The Ministry of Education's (MOE) latest numbers show that our pupil-teacher ratio is 15.6 in primary schools and 12.7 in secondary schools. This is the total number of students enrolled across schools divided by the total number of teachers.

Our ratios are respectable by Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) standards. But low ratios may not translate to small classes.

In Primary 1 and 2, class sizes have been capped at 30 since 2006. Between Primary 3 and 6, average form class sizes range from 35 to 37. Between Secondary 1 and 4, they range from 33 to 35.

While class sizes may be smaller for higher-needs students and for specific subjects, we should focus on what the typical class size is for the modal student taking a core subject.

In the recent debates about teacher workload, class size reduction (CSR) has been absent from the menu of solutions offered by MOE. Instead, technology has been offered as an alternative. The recent introduction of AI-powered tools is intended to reduce workloads while customising teaching to individual learners' needs.

Nonetheless, CSR continues to have strong advocates. Some teachers have voiced their opinion on social media, while parent group EveryChild.SG has proposed a plan to reduce class sizes in primary schools.

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS – AND DOESN'T SAY

Those arguing against it cite studies finding that class size is not actually that consequential when it comes to academic outcomes.

In recent years, MOE has repeatedly cited the OECD as an authority on this issue. The OECD's reports argue that policymakers would see greater improvements in student outcomes if they invested in higher teacher quality rather than smaller class sizes.

Yet, given the methods used to arrive at this conclusion, our confidence in it might be misplaced.

The OECD reports are based on comparisons of all countries taking part in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), and identify factors that are correlated with their PISA results. It turns out that teacher salary is highly correlated while class size is not.

Mr Andreas Schleicher, who directs the PISA studies, illustrates it this way in his 2013 TED talk: South Korea does well in PISA, despite its large classes. It also pays its teachers well. In contrast, Luxembourg performs below average, has small classes, and does not pay its teachers well. Thus, teacher quality trumps class sizes.

The problem is that we don't have a complete picture of all the other factors that may be affecting PISA performance in these countries. Something else – for instance, its competitive educational culture – could be driving South Korea's students to do well despite studying in large classes.

The most rigorous studies use methods that help ensure that class size is the only factor that varies between comparison groups. This set-up gives researchers greater confidence that variation in outcomes is specifically due to variation in class sizes.

A prominent example is Project STAR (Student-Teacher Achievement Ratio), a large-scale, randomised controlled trial conducted in the 1980s in Tennessee that placed young students in classes of different sizes. Several studies using STAR data have found sizeable, positive effects of smaller classes.

Other studies using quasi-experimental methods have also found positive effects of varying sizes, while some have found no effect.

Overall, the literature does not argue that class size is an unimportant factor. Instead, it suggests that reducing class sizes may have a positive impact, under specific circumstances.

BEYOND TEST SCORES

Even so, what we can learn from the literature is limited, because of its overwhelming focus on the impact of class sizes on academic outcomes.

By now, we can all agree that the goals of education stretch far beyond test scores. In this context, a country's PISA performance cannot be the only barometer for evaluating the benefits of smaller classes.

Here are some other questions we should also be asking. Does class size influence whether students love learning, develop confidence, and learn to communicate their ideas?

If large classes mean that students and teachers cannot learn and teach in the ways they want to, is this what drives them towards the tuition industry or international schools?

Given that a third of our youth report poor mental health, and more students with special educational needs are enrolling in mainstream schools, how does class size impact teachers' capacity to care for their students?

The research on these questions is limited. Nonetheless, we can make some educated guesses based on the data we have right before us: the lived experiences of teachers and families.

In my own research, I interview parents to learn about their experiences of the education system. The issue of class size regularly emerges, unprovoked. "The child feels lost," as one mother said, explaining that children in large classes do not receive enough individual attention.

Her children say that their teachers are "very shouty", which may be because classroom management is often more difficult in large classes.

Many parents say their parent-teacher meetings are 10-minute Zoom conversations, which simply cannot be very meaningful.

As a teacher myself, I know why this happens.

Last year, I had 15 students in my first semester and 41 the next. In the larger class, I sometimes had to deny students the opportunity to participate so we could end class on time.

My students wished they could write longer papers, yet I could not afford more time to grade these. By the end of the semester, I had got to know – as humans, not just as members of a class – a smaller fraction of the students than I had the previous semester.

To state the obvious, there is a mechanical relationship between the number of students a teacher has and the amount of attention they can give to each student.

LEARNING NOT JUST A COGNITIVE PROCESS

Attention matters not simply because it enables students to get the academic support they need. It matters because relationships are foundational to a student's learning and development.

Recent research in neuroscience, led by Professor Mary Helen Immordino-Yang, finds that learning is a deeply emotional process, not just a cognitive one. And students become more emotionally invested in their work if they can see its relevance to their lived experiences and identities.

This research provides evidence in support of what many teachers intuitively know: to get students engaged, make the material relevant to their lives. But to do this well, we first need to pay attention to our students and understand who they are.

Can we do this with technology, instead of smaller classes? That is a question for the teachers and students currently experimenting with AI-powered tools. But we would do well to heed sociologist Allison Pugh's warning about a possible "depersonalisation crisis". As more job functions are delegated to AI, Professor Pugh argues that we risk losing the "connective labour" that those in the caring professions provide – the seeing, the listening, the being with the other person that is as much a part of their value to society as is their technical function.

Connective labour is what the headmaster of Tomoe Gakuen provided when he listened to Totto-chan talk for four hours the first time he met her. "You're really a good girl," he told her at the end. This was news for Totto-chan, who had known herself to be a "bad girl" before that.

When we consider a change like reducing class sizes, we pay a lot more attention to the cost of the change than we do the costs of the status quo.

What is lost when a student is turned off from school because her teachers are "shouty"? Or when she misses out on chances to develop supportive relationships with adult mentors? What is lost when a burnt-out teacher misses a student's distress signals, delaying the necessary interventions?

Thinking through these questions, we might ask how many Totto-chans sit quietly in our classrooms today, waiting for the time and attention that would allow them to flourish.

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