


Perspectives on Class Size Reduction

The background of the slide is a green chalkboard. In the lower-left quadrant, two pieces of pink chalk are lying on the surface. One piece is standing upright, and the other is lying horizontally next to it. There are several faint, white chalk markings scattered across the board, including a large 'C' on the left, a curved line in the center, and some scribbles at the bottom.

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Interviews speak to the literature

- Charles Achilles - STAR
- Alex Molnar - SAGE
- Joan McRobbie - California
- Bruce Biddle - synthesis
- David Grissmer - synthesis
- Adam Gamoran - synthesis/secondary SAGE analysis
- Eric Hanushek - economic analysis
- Norman Webb - secondary SAGE analysis




Focusing on class size alone is like trying to determine the optimal amount of butter in a recipe without knowing the nature of the other ingredients.

Berger, 1982

Class size reduction vs. pupil teacher ratio

- Pupil teacher ratio: lowering the proportion of students per teacher
 - Assumes that quality is tied to investment
 - Mechanisms: more access to teacher expertise, more effective w/ certain content
- Class size reduction: reducing the number of students assigned per class
 - Teacher knowledge of individual children & relationships among teachers, students & families

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- Pupil-teacher ratio is to assure equitable distribution of funds. To make sure that every building & every youngster, whatever the state formula is, gets his or her share of the money. It's not an organization for instruction. It's an administrative device to trace money.

» Charles Achilles

When does CSR have the most effect?

- The evidence favoring small classes in the early grades is just overwhelming. There is just no way to wiggle around it. Critics have tried to criticize individual studies, but that's not the issue.
 - Bruce Biddle
- The argument over K and 1st grade is not an empirical argument. It's an argument about policy preferences & the relative cost of programming. That's what it's about. It can't be answered through social science, it's a political argument.
 - Alex Molnar


How small do classes need to be?

- There is no magic number but the small classes in the STAR study were between 13 and 17 students. So then states look at that and say how much can we afford & come up with a number like California did, 20. There is nothing you can point to in research that says, well 20 is the magic number.

- Joan McRobbie

Teaching practices


- The fact that learning in a classroom is so dominated by the quality of the teachers that it overwhelms any of the small differences in class size we are normally talking about. And secondly, the fact that for the most part, the evidence seems to suggest that with changes in class size, teachers don't change much what they do.
 - Eric Hanushek

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- The key issue is figuring out how to make sure the teachers get the kinds of professional development that they need in order to be able to do the job, as opposed to the kind where you just go off to a hotel to a conference all day. . .the kind that is sort of embedded in your daily work that has to do with mentoring & modeling and meeting with other teachers & sitting down and saying, "Here's what we know the kids need to learn, how do we know if they are learning it & what do we do if they are not?"

- Joan McRobbie

Who benefits?


- CSR in the early grades helps kids who are at risk primarily. In other words, it's not an across the board thing. That doesn't mean that middle class kids aren't helped, they are helped by CSR, but the evidence suggests that the amount of help is greater for kids from minority backgrounds & from impoverished homes.
 - Bruce Biddle

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- Every time it comes up to make some kind of change, groups like the CTA & PTA (the Teachers Association & the Parent-Teachers Association) slam the brakes on because they are afraid of losing it. They are afraid that it will get watered down & that that would be a first step toward losing it.

- McRobbie

What kind of research do we need?


- I would like to see more quantitative work that would use the high stakes tests the states are using . . . And would try to quantitatively or statistically link instructional activities with student outcomes.
 - Adam Gamoran
- I don't think we need another experiment. I think STAR answered that question. If you want to do one, if you don't believe that when they put hydrogen & oxygen together you get water, the you can go ahead & do it.
 - Charles Achilles

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- One of the key problems in the research community is that we are not oriented to answering the question "Why do things work?" We tend to measure class size effects & go home rather than say, "Well, why do class size effects work, why do smaller classes work?"... [We need to] begin to develop a theory of what happens that improves achievement. This is, experiments only give us sort of a single measurement. What science tries to do is develop a theory to explain several measurements. Parent do this, teachers do this... But it's a theory, the scientific consensus forms around a theory.

- David Grissmer

Research as situated

- What we know is shaped by how we know it
 - By the perspectives on the literature
 - Criteria used for judging
 - Presumed audience

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- Discussion about what counts as evidence
 - The literature doesn't speak, tribes of likeminded scholars talk
 - CSR is about equity
 - Not a silver bullet, not enacted in a vacuum
 - Need a systemic approach to the array of studies, across varied approaches