

For discussion on 28 April 2003

LegCo Panel on Education

**Study on Effective Strategies of Class and Group Teaching
in Primary Schools**

Purpose

This paper seeks to advise Members of the design of a proposed study on effective strategies of small class and other variable group teaching in primary schools.

Background

2. The issue of small class teaching was raised in the Legislative Council (LegCo) sittings on 13 and 27 November 2002. We revealed that before making a decision on whether and how class size could be reduced to enhance the quality of teaching and learning, a study would be conducted to assess the cost-effectiveness of small class teaching, and the pre-conditions required to make it effective. Members requested to be informed of the design of the study.

Considerations

3. Taking into account the concerns of LegCo Members, relevant research findings, factors affecting the quality of teaching and learning, the diverse needs of different schools and students in different key learning areas, as well as the resources available, we have decided to carry out in-depth case studies on how schools may employ effective strategies of small class and group teaching to enhance teaching and learning effectiveness.

4. People of Hong Kong have diverse views and expectations on the proposed study on small class size. There is, for example, no consensus on the optimal number of students in a “small class”. Numerous overseas research studies on class size over the past two decades have produced conflicting findings on its effects on student learning. More importantly,

we are well aware that the outcome of an experimental study may not be directly transferable to other schools without concomitant changes to other important contextual variables, such as school heads' leadership, teachers' professionalism, school facilities, parents' support, etc. as they all have an impact on student outcome. Given the diverse needs of students within a school and among schools, as well as the different learning targets in different key learning areas at different levels, there cannot be a "one-size-fits-all" class setting that suits all circumstances.

5. In Taiwan, the size of "small class" is around 30 to 35 while that in Shanghai about 30. In these places, "small class teaching" emphasizes the creation of a school/classroom environment that facilitates students' active participation in learning and interaction with teachers. This implies that meaningful student-teacher interaction is the ultimate objective and reduction of class size is only one of the means.

6. In Hong Kong, some schools have tried out various teaching strategies *via* variable class size depending on the nature of the learning activity and small group teaching¹ to enhance learning effectiveness. While empirical study of such class and group teaching strategies has yet to be conducted, the outcomes in respect of enhancing teacher-student interaction and promoting creative learning are reported to be positive.

7. The resources available to all public sector primary schools are broadly similar. Yet, some schools fare much better than others in optimising the use of resources through variable class size and group teaching strategies to enhance learning effectiveness. Since such practices invariably emanate from a school's reflection of its needs and priorities, it is feasible that, with professional support, the experience can be rationalised and adapted by other schools for enhancing learning effectiveness. It is also possible to extrapolate the findings to inform future policy deliberation on the optimal class size for Hong Kong.

¹ Examples of these pupil grouping/cross-subject settings being practised in secondary and primary schools are: (i) re-arranging the pupils from classes into different groups or learning/activity teams; (ii) practising small group teaching in "catch up" or "booster" classes at some levels so that greater attention can be given to individual gifted or slow learning pupils etc.; and (iii) assigning smaller/larger groups of pupils in specific learning groups for specific subjects or topics, or for collaborative learning and project-based activities.

Proposal and Justifications

8. Given the above considerations, we shall carry out an in-depth study on how learning effectiveness in exemplar schools can be enhanced through the adoption of small class and other variable group teaching strategies by optimising the use of existing teaching and learning resources, the supporting conditions for success, any problems encountered, and how good practices may be successfully acquired/adapted by other schools.

Objectives of the Study

9. More specifically, the objectives of the study are:

- (a) To see how different pupil grouping strategies can be achieved in schools through strategic and flexible re-deployment of existing resources, to break through the rigid “class size” concept, which will enhance effective learning having regard to students’ needs in context;
- (b) To identify the attributes contributing to successful pupil grouping strategies and effective learning; and
- (c) To study whether, with professional support, the successful experiences of variable class size and small class and group teaching strategies can be acquired/adapted by other schools.

A Case Study Approach

10. The proposed study will last for three years, commencing in the 2003/04 school year. It will be in two stages. Stage one will commence with a survey on existing good practices of effective small and variable group teaching strategies now being adopted in schools. Schools reported to have adopted such practices will be marked as “potential exemplars” for further investigation on their experiences. After an in-depth study, the confirmed success cases will have their specific circumstances, problems, needs and improvements analysed. On the basis of the analysis, the study team will identify and categorise the common features or attributes underpinning the strategies that are found to be effective, with a view to developing plausible “models” of good practices for reference and

adaptation by other schools.

11. During stage two, the attributes of success as identified from the “exemplars” will be applied insofar as is possible to selected schools (i.e. case study schools) where conventional class teaching is being adopted. The research team will assist selected schools, through re-deploying their available resources, to try out and share among themselves different strategies of pupil grouping and pedagogies which have been successfully practised in other schools. The changes in the process of teaching and learning, and the impact on learning effectiveness in the case study schools will be observed and evaluated at regular intervals in order to ascertain whether learning effectiveness has been enhanced. Upon completion of the study, the attributes of success and the “models” of good practices, if proven to be generally transferable, will be further disseminated to other schools for adaptation and adoption.

12. A graphic description of the procedural flow of the study is at Annex.

Implementation & Evaluation

Selection of participating schools

13. We shall invite about 10 public sector primary schools to take part in the second stage of the study. Schools which have the willingness and the drive to try out new education initiatives and different grouping and teaching strategies will be selected as case study schools. An expert panel involving both EMB and reputable educational professionals will select the case study schools.

Support to participating schools

14. Participating schools will be intensively supported and mentored in trying out different modes of group teaching arrangement through:

- (a) thematic workshops on different group teaching strategies;
- (b) exchange and sharing among case study schools and mentoring sessions by mentor schools (i.e. the “exemplars”);
- (c) experience-sharing workshops on non-local experiences (to be

facilitated by guest speakers from Shanghai, Taiwan, United Kingdom, etc.);

- (d) on-site support by experts in primary classroom teaching/practices.

Evaluation

15. Various case study methods, such as classroom observations, questionnaire surveys and interviews, etc. will be used. Attainment tests in Chinese, English and Mathematics will also be administered. The evaluation will be conducted by an expert team involving EMB project officers, local academics and educational professionals. We expect the final report on the study, with findings and recommendations, to be available by end-2006.

Education and Manpower Bureau
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Design of Study on Effective Strategies of Class and Group Teaching
Procedural Flow

