

**Extract from the Official Record of Proceedings of
the Council meeting on 13 November 2002**

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Pilot Scheme on Teaching in Small Classes

2. **MR SZETO WAH** (in Cantonese): *Madam President, it has been reported that the Secretary for Education and Manpower has publicly stated that the Government will conduct a pilot scheme on "Teaching in Small Classes" or "Small Class Teaching". In this connection, will the Government inform this Council of:*

- (a) *the commencement and completion dates of the pilot scheme, the participating schools and the districts in which they are located, the class levels of target students, as well as the criteria for selecting the schools;*
- (b) *the mode in conducting the pilot scheme, phases of implementation and the relevant details, the scope of the pilot scheme (including the subjects and interdisciplinary subjects to be taught), the training provided for the teachers involved, the support given by the Education Department, as well as the resources required for conducting the scheme; and*
- (c) *the methods and criteria for evaluating the scheme, and whether it will, based on the evaluation results, formulate a long-term policy on "Small Class Teaching"?*

SECRETARY FOR EDUCATION AND MANPOWER (in Cantonese): Madam President,

- (a) "Class Size" is a highly controversial issue because of the inherent complex nature of the classroom as a place to construct knowledge. A lot of overseas educational research and experiences, which attempted to establish a correlation between "Small Class Teaching" and enhancing the effectiveness of learning, have been inconclusive. Given the huge amount of resources involved, the cost-effectiveness of "Small Class Teaching" is also a point of contention.

Generally speaking, although there have been many studies overseas on "Small Class Teaching", the findings are inconclusive. Besides, there is a lack of in-depth studies and discussion on many related aspects, for example:

- (i) Some studies showed that teachers generally did not adjust their instructional methods to take advantage of the reduced class size. Besides, the studies did not attempt to identify the changes in the process of teaching and learning brought about by the reduced class size.
- (ii) Many studies did not follow the students at grade four and above to study whether the benefits could be sustained after their return to regular classes.
- (iii) From the perspective of cost-effectiveness, whether alternative measures (such as teachers' professional development, teaching assistants, and so on) could lead to similar benefits.

In Hong Kong, there have been few empirical studies of similar nature on "Small Class Teaching". Given the controversial nature of this topic, the complexity of the problems involved and the resource constraints, it is imperative for us to consider the issue thoroughly and rationally before making a decision on whether there is a need and, if so, how to implement "Small Class Teaching". Hence, we would take into account the local context and draw references from the findings and practical experiences of overseas studies, and draw up the details of our own study on "Small Class Teaching". As the study is still in its planning stage, I could only reply to the Honourable SZETO Wah's question on the basis of some preliminary thinking as follows:

- (i) The study will be conducted in 30 to 40 public sector primary schools, starting from the 2003-04 school year. The participating schools will try out the class size of about 20 students at the junior primary levels. Relevant professional training and support will be provided to the teachers as appropriate.
- (ii) For evaluation, apart from analysing students' performance in the three basic subjects of Chinese, English and Mathematics, we would also observe the teaching activities (for example, teaching strategies adopted by teachers) to assess the impact of "Small Class Teaching" on the process of teaching and learning.
- (iii) Other details of the study, such as the completion date, the selection criteria for the participating schools and the districts in which they are located, the scope of the study, the training to be

provided to teachers, the resources required, and so on, are still under consideration. Professional views from experts in the field are being sought. Details of the study will be announced when ready.

- (b) The objective of the study is to find out the relationship between "Small Class Teaching" and the "effectiveness of teaching and learning". The main areas of study will include:
 - (i) whether "Small Class Teaching" is able to bring about positive effects on teaching and learning, and if so, how and to what extent;
 - (ii) how the expertise and teaching strategies of teachers affect the effectiveness of teaching and learning in "small" and "regular" classes; and
 - (iii) whether "Small Class Teaching" is cost-effective.
- (c) The Administration adopts a prudent yet open attitude as to whether "Small Class Teaching" should be adopted as a policy in the public sector primary schools in Hong Kong. The findings of the study mentioned above will provide important reference for relevant policy consideration.

Lastly, I would like to point out that the primary goal of "Small Class Teaching" is to enhance "diversified teaching and individualized learning". The existing teacher-to-pupil ratio in local public primary schools is 1:20.8, which is more or less the same as that in developed countries. Some local primary schools have indeed made use of existing resources and school facilities to implement various forms of small group learning for certain subjects. We expect that the proposed study will also identify other feasible and more cost-effective ways to enhance the quality of education.

MR SZETO WAH (in Cantonese): *Madam President, the Government indicated in the main reply that the study would be conducted in 30 to 40 public sector primary schools, starting from the 2003-04 school year. Will the Government inform this Council whether it will give priority consideration to schools in the districts with a sharp decline in the number of students in the course of selecting from these 30 to 40 public sector primary schools?*

SECRETARY FOR EDUCATION AND MANPOWER (in Cantonese): Madam President, as to the issue of whether schools which are experiencing a reduction in the number of classes would be given priority consideration, I think it is another issue. The redundancy among teachers as a result of the reduction in the number of classes is a matter of school administration as well as an issue about the supply of primary places, while "Small Class Teaching" is a matter of education; therefore they are two different things. Decision would not be made in connection with the selection of a school in a certain district simply because it has excess classes. We will make the ultimate choice according to the circumstances of each school.

MS AUDREY EU (in Cantonese): *Madam President, "Small Class Teaching" does not only involve the issue of number of students, but also the issue of whether students in the same class are of the same degree of intelligence. Let us take Mathematics for example, most schools abroad require students to sit for an examination to determine the aptitude of each students before arranging them into the different classes. I would like to ask the Secretary whether the "Small Class Teaching" study would include this feature? To be exact, in the course of the grading exercise, will the grouping of students be based on their degree of intelligence?*

SECRETARY FOR EDUCATION AND MANPOWER (in Cantonese): Madam President, we are studying whether this approach is necessary on the basis of professional views. In this regard, we have not made the decision yet. However, we hope this study could be implemented on a general basis. If we pick a batch of students good at mathematics and group them into a small class, we are sure that their results in mathematics would be exceptionally good, but it does not necessary mean that "Small Class Teaching" is indisputably effective. Therefore, I am putting emphasis on generalization, instead of picking children with good results and grouping them into small classes for study purposes.

PRESIDENT (in Cantonese): Ms EU, has your supplementary been unanswered?

MS AUDREY EU (in Cantonese): *Madam President, my question was not about students with good results, it was about students of similar intelligence in my supplementary.*

DR YEUNG SUM (in Cantonese): *Madam President, as far as I know, many countries and cities in Asia have implemented "Small Class Teaching" system, including Shanghai, Beijing, Japan and Taiwan. Shanghai in particular, is implementing a 25-student-per-class strategy based on birth issues. Will the Government draw on their experience and lessons and take them as a reference, in the hope that the system could be implemented as soon as possible?*

SECRETARY FOR EDUCATION AND MANPOWER (in Cantonese): *Madam President, we would certainly draw references from various "Small Class Teaching" systems implemented all over the world.*

MR LEE CHEUK-YAN (in Cantonese): *Madam President, one of the major purposes of the relevant study is to find out the cost-effectiveness of "Small Class Teaching". I would like to ask the Secretary how could cost-effectiveness be measured? Could we look at the volume of resources being input into the system and then come up with a conclusion? Cost-effectiveness is difficult to measure. We believe that after the system is implemented, students would be more attentive in classes, but it would be difficult to measure the knowledge that students had absorbed. As a result, I wonder how can the Secretary achieve that objective?*

SECRETARY FOR EDUCATION AND MANPOWER (in Cantonese): *Madam President, according to views of experts in education, it can be measured. As far as cost-effectiveness is concerned, we could identify its effectiveness from the results of students in various subjects as well as the resources being input in each small class.*

MR CHEUNG MAN-KWONG (in Cantonese): *Madam President, on the one hand, the Government permits British schools, International schools, Direct Subsidy Scheme schools and quality private schools to adopt "Small Class Teaching" and agrees that it may help uplift the quality of education; on the other hand, from the past to present, government officials have all along been casting doubts on the cost-effectiveness, questioning the academic results and dismissing the benefits of implementing "Small Class Teaching" in public sector schools. May I ask whether this is double standard and unfair treatment to students in local public sector schools? Can it be considered discrimination in education terms?*

SECRETARY FOR EDUCATION AND MANPOWER (in Cantonese): Madam President, "Class Size" is a controversial issue. Certainly, many schools have implemented "Small Class Teaching". As for the standard class size in Hong Kong, each activity approach class has 32 students and each conventional class has 37 students, some schools may have the class size as much as 40 students. However, with regards to the class size and the initial analysis on the performance of students in the Hong Kong Attainment Test, there is no obvious correlation between the class size and the effectiveness of learning. In fact, although some schools are having a class size exceeding 40 students, the performance of learning outcome is better than that of classes of reduced size. Of course, we understand that the phenomenon is affected by a number of factors, such as the background of students, the professional level of teachers, curriculum tailoring, and so on. For this reason, we consider that there is a need to conduct an in-depth study on class size and the effectiveness of learning.

PRESIDENT (in Cantonese): Mr CHEUNG, has your supplementary been unanswered?

MR CHEUNG MAN-KWONG (in Cantonese): *Madam President, I wish to seek the ruling of the President on whether the Secretary has responded to my supplementary. I was raising the issue of educational discrimination in my question. That is, why were British schools and International schools permitted to adopt "Small Class Teaching" and to have 25 student in each class, and why was it agreed that such a system may help uplift the quality of education, whereas the same attitude was not adopted towards public sector schools, and why did the Government have doubts over the implementation of "Small Class Teaching" in public sector schools?*

PRESIDENT (in Cantonese): Secretary, do you have anything to add?

SECRETARY FOR EDUCATION AND MANPOWER (in Cantonese): Madam President, perhaps I should further explain that the school sponsoring bodies Mr CHEUNG has just mentioned, especially private schools, have their own autonomy, the Government have no right to intervene. Therefore, the size of classes in these schools is entirely their discretion. As for government schools, they may have over 40 students in each class, but the results of their students are also very outstanding. In this regard, since the benefit of "Small Class Teaching" has been inconclusive, therefore we have to further study the issue, and there is no discrimination in it at all.

MR LEUNG YIU-CHUNG (in Cantonese): *Madam President, the implementation of "Small Class Teaching" will enhance education quality, but some people think that there is more benefit in reducing the workload of teachers than in the implementation of "Small Class Teaching". In order to find out the most effective way that students would be benefitted, will the Government take the second proposal into consideration, that is, to adopt the proposal of reducing the workload of teachers? If not, what are the reasons for that?*

SECRETARY FOR EDUCATION AND MANPOWER (in Cantonese): Madam President, we will look into different ways. We also know that teachers are facing very great pressure, but this matter seems to have very little correlation with the issue of "Small Class Teaching".

PRESIDENT (in Cantonese): Third question. Mr SZETO Wah will ask this question on behalf of Mr James TO.

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