

Comments on the Paper “Progress of the Study on Small Class Teaching”

Lai Kwok Chan, Ph.D.

Head

Centre for Development and Research in Small Class Teaching

The Hong Kong Institute of Education

(LC Paper No. CB(2)1041/06-07(01))

1. Despite the Paper asserts that “it is premature to draw any firm conclusions based only on data collected so far”, its findings and observations (para. 7) have been widely cited by the media and some policy makers as conclusive evidence of the effectiveness of small class teaching in the HKSAR. In this regard, it will be important for the public and the educational community to be better informed about the design of the study and the key data which have led to the interim findings and observations.
2. Hitherto, the public has been informed of the “findings and observations”, but has little information on the research design of the Study and no access to evidence or data that back the interim findings. Many schools who take part in the Study also have little idea of how the research is designed. We believe that the following aspects of the research design should at least be made available to the public:
 - a. How is the comparison/control group selected? When comparisons are made, are characteristics of the pupils that may contribute to differences in class size effects taken into account?
 - b. How are the attainment tests designed? How are the sub-scales for the generic skills conceptualized?
 - c. How are the tools used to measure pupils’ “subject attitudes” and “motivation” designed and administered, bearing in mind the young age of the pupils?
 - d. What is the methodology of the case studies?
3. It is good practice for researchers to acknowledge the limitations of their studies when releasing their findings. We believe that the limitations of the Study should have been acknowledged or addressed in the Paper:

- a. The class size reduction (CSR) in the Study is partial in the sense that, for many participating schools, it takes place only in three school subjects at the lower primary level, i.e. English, Chinese and Mathematics. This may limit the effect because there is a lack of continuity and stability in the class environment.
 - b. From the outset, the Study did not include a wide variety of primary schools. In this regard, the background characteristics of the 37 participating schools should have been more fully described in the Paper.
 - c. The Study is combining a pretty considerable class size reduction (CSR) with professional development in schools and with teachers, so it may not be possible to determine the effects of each. In addition, we understand that there has been a wide variation in the type and intensity of participation by individual schools and teachers in professional development, which may further confound any analysis.
4. We would appreciate if further information related to the following statements in the “Findings and Observations” could be provided (para. 7):
- a. While it is mentioned that “systematic classroom observations revealed signs” of change of practice that resulted in improvement of questioning and feedback, this is immediately followed by a comment that “there was little evidence of a dramatic change in teaching modes”. The wording of the latter clause is a bit surprising. Which educational initiative in the HKSAR or elsewhere has resulted in a “dramatic” change of teaching modes in a duration of two years?
 - b. It is also mentioned that “systematic lesson observation data showed low levels of individual attention that teachers provided for pupils in the small classes”. It will be useful to know how this compares with teaching in large classes.