

A BRIEF ON SMALL CLASS TEACHING FOR TEACHERS

Preamble

The Report on the Study on Small Class Teaching (English version only) has been uploaded onto the Education Bureau homepage. Key points of the Report for teachers to optimise the benefits of small classes with a view to enhancing the effectiveness of learning and teaching are listed below:

What are the indicators of effective small class teaching?

Six core principles - culled from the latest ideas about how children are motivated to learn and the research findings of which classroom activities improve academic performance – can be used to evaluate the effectiveness of teaching and learning in a small class context. To put these principles into practice teachers should seek to:

- Clearly communicate the learning goals at the start of the lesson and review them at the end to assess whether pupils have reached them - focus less on outcomes and more on the purpose and processes of learning.
- Use questioning techniques including open questions and ‘thinking time’ to stimulate thoughtful debate during whole class discussions.
- Boost pupil participation during class discussion. For example, encouraging the class to ‘meet and greet’ each other at the start of the lesson and to share ideas informally before responding to the teacher’s open questions.
- Develop co-operation between pupils through pair and group work, with teachers helping children to draw up their own rules for working together, and reaching consensual decisions – then evaluating how effectively they collaborated at the end of the task.
- Give feedback that helps pupils to reflect on their work, discover and correct errors, and develop problem solving skills to ultimately self-regulate their learning.
- Create a framework to assess learning not only through tests and worksheets but by probing the pupils’ thought processes to see whether they can use the information to solve new problems.

How can schools best put these ideas into practice?

Teachers need more time to plan, reflect and evaluate their classroom practice - this is best done in cooperation with colleagues as part of a ‘learning community’. School Principals can help support their staff by taking an active part in these professional development activities, and by:

- Providing non-contact periods so that teachers have time to talk about their experiences and engage in joint reflection.
- Organising teachers’ timetables so that they can concentrate on fewer year groups and have the chance to teach the same lesson to another class in a school year.
- Ensuring that, as much as possible, teachers concentrate on the subjects that they have taken as their major/elective.
- Increasing the length of lessons so more demanding activities, such as group work, are easier to manage.
- Setting up evaluation procedures (distinct from those used for appraisal) which explore the effectiveness of different teaching approaches.
- Encouraging staff to be more flexible in the use of text books and seeking to change parental expectations in this respect.

Are there any practical suggestions for beginning small class teaching?

Don’t do too much too quickly

Take it slowly – when attempting to modify classroom practice making small changes one at a time will see better results. A simple checklist of behaviours can be very useful for monitoring teaching progress and is better than an observer ‘merely watching a lesson’ and offering general comment. For example, when evaluating group work the colleague might observe several pupils in turn to see if they were participating by recording every 30 seconds whether

Category of pupil talk	1	2	3	4	5
1 pupil begins a conversation					
2 pupil responds to another pupil’s attempt at a conversation					
3 pupil ignores another pupil’s attempt at a conversation					
4 pupil sustains conversation into next 30 seconds					

Choose the teaching method to suit the situation

We are not suggesting direct instruction should be scrapped altogether. But, where appropriate, the aim is to have pupils explaining how they *reached* an answer, rather than simply knowing it. Questions like “Why do you think s/he said that” can provide a useful starting point.

Take into account classroom conditions

The six principles are important but only teachers can judge the best way to put them into practice. For example, whether to use group or pair work may depend on the subject, the topic, the ability/motivation of the pupils and the classroom seating arrangements.

Encourage pupils to work together

Cooperative learning is important because it increases pupils' confidence, improves relationships and provides opportunities for children to work things out for themselves without too much help from the teacher. It is probably better to begin with pairs before bringing two pairs together to form a group. Initially, it is better to have tasks where each pupil makes an individual contribution to stop them getting bored.

Enhance pupils' participation and interaction

During group work, be careful when assigning individuals various roles (organiser, timekeeper, reporter etc.) so pupils don't limit their contribution to solely this activity. Pupils need time to learn how to be 'a good group person.' Outline basic rules such as making sure everyone gets a turn, speaking one at a time etc. Regularly debrief the class on (a) how well these rules operate and (b) what suggestions pupils have for making the groups work even better.

Allow pupils' ideas and experiences to become the focus of discussion

In class, pupils' vocal participation will increase if the topic is related to their own experience. Pupils learn best when the contexts have relevance to their daily lives. Thus a lesson in English on shopping will be more meaningful if the teacher can project digital photographs of local shops on to the screen rather than use the examples from the textbook. The school environment can also be a useful tool in itself. For example, in mathematics, the properties of different shapes could be investigated by taking a walk around the school and observing various objects and patterns.

Use pupils as resource

More able pupils can be trained to act as 'little teachers.' Research shows that 'peer tutoring' improves academic performance and the classroom environment.

Foster communities of practice

Teachers need colleagues' help to improve their teaching. Studying classroom practice on your own can be difficult. Even teachers from other subjects are useful for observation purposes. Where videotape is used to review classroom practice, limited segments of not more than 10 minutes taken at the beginning, middle and end of a lesson is generally sufficient to promote useful discussions amongst colleagues.