



# AUSTRALIAN EDUCATION UNION

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## **CLASS SIZE**

## **THE RESEARCH**

**AUSTRALIAN EDUCATION UNION  
(Victorian Branch)**

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# CLASS SIZE RESEARCH

## Summary

The impact of class size on student achievement and non-cognitive outcomes is one of the most contentious areas of educational debate. However the most reliable and valid research on the impact of class size reductions (recognised as such within the education research community) is the large randomised studies known as the Tennessee STAR project and the follow-up Wisconsin SAGE project. They clearly demonstrated the positive effects of smaller classes on student cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes. These effects persisted throughout the school life of the students concerned.

The problem with replicating these “gold standard” studies today was highlighted by Wilson (2007)

“...class size research is both difficult to undertake and costly to initiate and to sustain. Some also suggest that it is unethical and politically unwise to conduct experimental and control studies by assigning children to different sized classes.”

The STAR/SAGE studies concentrated on the earlier primary years. However a range of other research has found positive impacts on students in the later primary and secondary years, emphasising the benefits of small class size on low performing students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Recently the debate has focused on the cost-benefit of class size reductions. Governments have used the work of economists such as Hanushek and Hoxby in the United States and Jensen in Australia to claim that even if smaller class sizes have a positive impact on students, they cost too much and that improving ‘teacher quality’ will have a greater effect at less cost. The evidence to support this contention is subject to challenge on many grounds.

Diane Whitmore Schanzenbach’s recent summary of class size research [see below] concluded:

“Policy makers should carefully weigh the efficacy of class-size-reduction policy against other potential uses of funds. While lower class size has a demonstrable cost, it may prove the most cost-effective policy overall”. [Schanzenbach, February 2014]

Alan Reid, Professor Emeritus of Education from the University of South Australia, contends that there is a basic misapprehension in the “teacher quality”/cost-benefit argument. Teachers are seen as independent variables separate to other factors such as class sizes and resources whereas the research shows that “it is the interrelationship of the variables in the context of the learning which is important”.

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## RECENT SUMMARIES OF RESEARCH

### **Does Class Size Matter? – Schanzenbach (2014)**

A report from the National Education Policy Center in the US – *Does Class Size Matter?* (February 2014) concluded:

“Research supports the common-sense notion that children learn more and teachers are more effective in smaller classes”.

The author, Diane Whitmore Schanzenbach from Northwestern University, reviewed the academic literature on the impact of class size and found that it is an important determinant of a variety of student outcomes, ranging from test scores to broader life outcomes. She found that smaller classes “are particularly effective at raising achievement levels of low-income and minority children”.

The reasons why smaller classes are more effective arise from a mixture of increased time on task, greater opportunities for teachers to tailor their instruction to the students in their class and the positive impact on “student engagement behaviors” – the amount of effort put forth, initiative taken, and classroom participation.

Schanzenbach found that the positive impact of class size reductions did not occur only when classes fell below a particular size:

“...some researchers conclude that the evidence supports better outcomes only if classes are below some threshold number such as 15 or 20. Sometimes the argument is extended to suggest that reducing class size is not effective unless classes are reduced to within this range. The broader pattern in the literature finds positive impacts from class-size reductions using variation across a wider range of class sizes, including class-size reductions mandated by maximum class-size rules set at 30 (Sweden) or 40 (Israel).

In fact, the per-pupil impact is reasonably stable across class-size reductions of different sizes and from different baseline class sizes. For example, when scaled by a 7-student class-size reduction as in the Tennessee experiment, the Israeli results imply a 0.18 standard deviation increase in math scores, which is nearly identical to the Tennessee results.” (p.6)

She also determined that raising class sizes would harm the educational futures of students:

The evidence suggests that increasing class size will harm not only children’s test scores in the short run but also their long-term capital formation. Money saved today by increasing class sizes will be offset by more substantial social and educational costs in the future. (p.10)

According to Schanzenbach the research literature has concentrated on the early years of schooling and further research is needed on the effects on students in the final years of primary and secondary. A limited number of studies of reduced class sizes in secondary schools have found positive effects on student achievement and engagement.

The National Education Policy Centre report is available at:  
<http://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/does-class-size-matter>

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## **Class size and academic results, with a focus on children from culturally, linguistically and economically disenfranchised communities – Zyngier (2014)**

David Zyngier from Monash University carried out a review (April 2014) of the literature on the effects of class size for the Australia and New Zealand School of Government. This is the first thorough review of the evidence on this important topic from an Australian academic for some time.

His comparative review of 112 research papers from 1979 to 2014 included studies from Australia, the US, the UK, Canada, New Zealand and non-English speaking countries. His extensive reference list is one of the most useful parts of the paper.

Zyngier looks at the development of the growing debate about class size effects from the 1980s though to the present day. His findings largely mirror those of Schanzenbach [see above]. He comes to the conclusion that:

“Findings suggest that smaller class sizes in the first four years of school can have an important and lasting impact on student achievement, especially for children from culturally, linguistically and economically disenfranchised communities. This is particularly true when smaller classes are combined with appropriate teacher pedagogies suited to reduced student numbers.” (p.1)

[David Zyngier, “Class size and academic results, with a focus on children from culturally, linguistically and economically disenfranchised communities”, *Evidence Base* Issue 1, 2014]  
<http://journal.anzsof.edu.au/publications/9/EvidenceBase2014Issue1.pdf>

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## **PROJECT STAR AND PROJECT SAGE**

### **Smart Class Size Policies for Lean Times – Gagne and Lenard (2012)**

Gagne and Lenard carried out a review of class size research (March 2012) on behalf of the Southern Regional Education Board in the United States, Entitled *Smart Class Size Policies for Lean Times*, it looked at the case for smaller class sizes in the context of the economic downturn in the US following on from the GFC.

The review looks at the question of how class size affects student achievement. It identifies two methods for doing this – analysis of historical data and conducting randomised experiments.

While research based on historical data is important, the randomized experiment is regarded as the research ‘gold standard’. The randomised study that stands out is Project Star in Tennessee.

“The results revealed that students placed in small classrooms performed better than their peers in larger classrooms across all grade levels tested and all geographic regions. Moreover, findings showed that the sooner students were placed in smaller classes — even as early as kindergarten — the better they performed on third-grade assessments.” (p.4)

“A 1999 analysis of STAR data by Princeton economist Alan Krueger revealed similar results that are statistically significant. Krueger concluded that student performance on the standardized tests increased on average by about 4 percentile points in the first year students were assigned to small classes, regardless of the grade in which the student first attended a small class. He also concluded that student performance increased by about 1 percentile point per year for students in small classes compared with those in regular-size classes, and that class size has a larger effect on test scores for minority students and for those eligible for the free and reduced-price meal program.” (p.4)

In 2008, economists Joshua Angrist (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) and Jörn- Steffen Pischke (The London School of Economics and Political Science) still recognized the STAR study as “unusually ambitious and influential,” with results that “point to a strong and lasting payoff to smaller classes.” (p.4)

“In a 2005 analysis of STAR data, Finn and his colleagues found that students who had been in smaller classes for all four years of the STAR experiment were 80% more likely to graduate from high school than their peers in larger classes. They also found that students from low-income families who spent three years in smaller classes in the early grades were 67% more likely to graduate from high school than their peers in larger classes, and this likelihood doubled if they spent a fourth year in smaller classes.” (p.4)

A second randomised research project - the Student Achievement Guarantee in Education (SAGE) program - was launched in Wisconsin in the 1996-1997 school year. The Wisconsin Center for Education Research evaluated SAGE and found results that mirrored those in Tennessee. Students from three separate cohorts who began first grade in smaller classes made sustained progress through the third grade that exceeded that of their peers who were placed in larger classes in first grade. The strongest gains — especially for black males — occurred in reading, language arts and mathematics for the first graders in small classes. (p.4)

[Gagne, Jeff and Lenard Matthew (2012), *Smart Class Size Policies for Lean Times*, Policy Brief, SREB]

[http://publications.sreb.org/2012/12E02R\\_Smart\\_Class.bkmark.pdf](http://publications.sreb.org/2012/12E02R_Smart_Class.bkmark.pdf)

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## **Research on the Academic Effects of Small Class Size**

[US Department of Education – 1998]

## Tennessee's Project Star

Project STAR, the only large-scale, controlled study of the effects of reduced class size, was conducted in 79 elementary schools in the state of Tennessee from 1985 to 1989.

Star was a controlled scientific experiment:

- Pupils entering kindergarten in 1985 were assigned at random to a small class (13-17), a regular class (22-26), or a regular class with a full-time teacher aide *within each participating school*. Teachers were assigned at random to the classes.
- The class arrangement was maintained all day, all year long. *There was no other intervention*, for example, no special training for teachers and no special curricula or materials were used. Other services were available as usual, for example, special education programs.
- Pupils were kept in the same class grouping for up to four years (Grade 3); a new teacher was randomly assigned to the class each year. All pupils returned to full-size classes in Grade 4.
- The first year involved approximately 6,300 pupils in 79 schools – over 300 classrooms – in 46 districts. The second year was larger. During the four years, almost 12,000 students participated in all.

Conclusions:

- A significant small class advantage was found in inner-city, urban, suburban, and rural schools alike and the advantage of small classes was found both for males and females.
- In each year of the study, some of the benefits of small classes were found to be greater for minority students than for non-minorities, or greater for students attending inner-city schools.
- This research leaves no doubt that small classes have an advantage over larger classes in student performance in the early primary grades.

The follow-up: the Lasting Benefits Study

- Students who had been in smaller classes had higher achievement in all academic areas compared to students in regular or teacher-aide classes.
- Pupils who had been in small classes were rated as expending more effort in the classroom, taking greater initiative with regard to learning activities, and displaying less disruptive or inattentive behaviour compared to their peers who had been in regular-size classes.

Project Challenge

- Each additional year in the small-class setting was accompanied by further improvement in reading and mathematics.

Two smaller studies of class size were conducted in North Carolina

- Teachers of small classes spent significantly more time on task and significantly less time on discipline or organisational matters compared with teachers of regular-size classes.

## General Conclusion

“A clear small-class advantage was found for inner-city, urban, suburban, and rural schools; for males and females; and for white and minority students alike. The few significant interactions found each year indicated greater small-class advantages for minority or inner-city students. Targeting small classes in particular schools or districts may provide the greatest benefits at a cost that is contained, although it may also mean denying the benefits to other students or schools.”

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## Project SAGE

Enacted by state law in 1995, Wisconsin’s Student Achievement Guarantee in Education (SAGE) program began as a five-year pilot program in the 1996-97 school year to test the hypothesis that smaller classes in elementary schools raise the academic achievement of disadvantaged students.

More than 3,000 kindergarten and first grade students attended SAGE schools in the first two years of the program. Evaluators compared the scores of these students with scores of more than 1,600 students in comparable district schools with similar socioeconomic demographics. SAGE classrooms had a student-teacher ratio of 12-15 students to 1 teacher and comparison classes had 21-25:1.

SAGE and comparison school students began first grade with similar reading, language arts and math scores on pre-tests, but by the second and third grades, SAGE students outscored their peers in comparison schools on every test administered by the evaluators. The gap was statistically significant in every subject except reading.

Though they started first grade with the same academic profiles, African American students made greater gains in the small SAGE classes than African Americans in larger classes. The SAGE initiative reduced the gap between white and African American student achievement, with the strongest effect observed during the first grade year. By contrast, the achievement gap increased over time in comparison schools.

According to a survey of 150 first- and second grade teachers in SAGE schools, the smaller class sizes allowed for new teaching strategies, including:

- individualized instruction
- classroom discussion
- hands-on activities
- more content coverage
- less time dealing with disciplinary problems

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**Class Size Reduction; A Fresh Look at the Data** - Smith, Molnar and Zahorik (2003)

Wisconsin's Student Achievement Guarantee in Education (SAGE) program, first implemented in 1996, was designed to increase the academic achievement of low-income students by reducing K–3 class size to 15 students to 1 teacher.

To gauge just how much of an effect SAGE has had on student achievement, the researchers tracked from 1996 to 2001 the academic performance of students in 30 schools from the 21 school districts that initially participated in the program. They compared the academic performance of SAGE students with the performance of a comparable group of students in larger classes from 17 non-SAGE schools in the same districts.

Overall, SAGE first graders scored significantly higher than did the comparison group on the reading, language arts, and mathematics subtests of the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills (CTBS). At the end of first grade, SAGE students' test results showed a 25-30 percent higher level of academic achievement than that of their counterparts in larger classes, and they maintained that gain through third grade – the last year of the program. By the end of third grade, SAGE students were achieving a level of one-third to one-half a year ahead of students in larger classes.

[Smith Phil, Molnar Alex and Zahorik John (2003), *Class Size Reduction: a fresh look at the data*, Educational Leadership, September 2003]

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**LATER PRIMARY AND SECONDARY STUDENTS**

**Do low attaining and younger students benefit most from small classes?** - Blatchford, Bassett and Brown (2008)

Results from a systematic observation study of class size effects on pupil classroom engagement and teacher pupil interaction

This British study confirms the benefits of smaller class sizes for both primary and secondary students. A University of London Institute of Education study involving 27 primary schools and 22 secondary schools found that students are more likely to be 'off task' when they are in larger classes.

The students were closely observed by teams of researchers who recorded their 'moment-to-moment' behaviours in blocks of 10-second intervals. They found that adding five students to a class decreases the odds of students being on task by nearly a quarter.



The study found that 'low attaining' students were nearly twice as likely to be disengaged in classes of 30 students as they were in classes of 15. The researchers found that there was no 'threshold effect' in their study ie classes did not need to be reduced by 15 to 20 students to have any benefit. Reducing class size at any end of the class size spectrum seemed to help.

"Perhaps the main implication of this study is that smaller classes can benefit all pupils in terms of individual, active attention from teachers, but that the lower attaining pupils in particular can benefit from small classes at secondary level. This suggests that small classes can be a valuable educational initiative right through school, but could be particularly targeted, at secondary level, at lower attaining pupils. If not, the evidence is that they will be more prone to go off task and teachers will have to use up more time bringing them back on task." (p.25)

[Peter Blatchford, Paul Bassett and Penelope Brown, Institute of Education, University of London, Paper to symposium 'Class size effects: new insights into classroom, school and policy processes', American Research Association Annual Meeting, 2008, New York]  
<http://www.classsizeresearch.org.uk/aera%2008%20paper.pdf>

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## **The Non-Cognitive Returns to Class Size** - Dee and West (2011)

The authors use nationally representative survey data and a research design that relies on contemporaneous within-student and within-teacher comparisons across two academic subjects to estimate how class size affects certain non-cognitive skills in middle school. The term non-cognitive skills refers to a broad range of work habits (eg effort and self-control) and behavioural traits (eg confidence and emotional stability).

Their results indicate that smaller eighth-grade classes are associated with improvements in several measures of school engagement, with effect sizes ranging from .05 to .09 and smaller effects persisting two years later. Patterns of selection on observed traits and falsification exercises suggest that these results accurately identify (or possibly understate) the causal effects of smaller classes. (p.24)

The study also looked at the cost of class size reductions compared to the benefits on labour market outcomes and found that the benefits are nearly twice the estimated cost. (p.41)

"We find qualified evidence that eighth-grade class size reductions may be cost-effective, in light of the apparent long-term labour-market benefits of these non-cognitive skills." (p.43)

"Given the estimated earnings impact of these non-cognitive skills, the implied internal rate of return from an eighth grade class-size reduction is 4.6% overall, but 7.9% in urban schools." (p.23)

[Thomas Dee (University of Virginia) and Martin West (Harvard Graduate School of Education, (2011), *The Non-Cognitive Returns to Class Size*, *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, March 2011, Vol. 33 No 1]

<http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.lib.rmit.edu.au/stable/41238536>

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## OLDER SUMMARIES OF RESEARCH

### **Reducing Class Size: What do we know? – Bascia (2010)**

“The research confirms that class size reduction does provide the environment in which teachers can teach differently. In smaller classes, they interact with individual students more frequently and use a greater variety of instructional strategies. They can create more opportunities for higher-order co-construction of meaning by students. They also may spend out-of-classroom work time on more creative planning (and less on routine marking), and they may interact more frequently with other teachers and adults in support of classroom teaching.

The research on student outcomes and behaviour tends to support teachers' beliefs that they can teach more competently and effectively in smaller classes. In smaller classes, students learn more academically and socially; they are more engaged and less disruptive. Even when it is not evident that teachers have significantly changed their instructional activities, student learning may improve, engagement may increase, and "behavioural problems" may decrease. These improvements may be partially explained by an increase in physical classroom space per student, providing more opportunities for movement, different grouping strategies, and interaction among students and between students and teachers.

But the research also suggests that the full gains of class size reduction cannot be achieved if it is implemented without paying attention to other factors that support innovative practice. Some of the most important factors include the ways in which teachers and students work together; the curriculum in use; and teachers' opportunities to learn new teaching strategies.”

[Bascia Ninia (2010), *Reducing Class Size: What do we Know?*, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, Canadian Education Association, 2010]

<http://www.cea-ace.ca/publication/reducing-class-size-what-do-we-know>

[For a review of the research issues in class size study see also Bascia N. and Freuda-Kwarteg E (2008), *Class Size Reduction: What the Literature Suggests about What Works*, Canadian Education Association]

<http://www.cea-ace.ca/sites/cea-ace.ca/files/cea-2008-class-size-literature.pdf>

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**Does Small Really Make a Difference? An Update:** A Review of the literature on the effects of class size on teaching practice and pupils' behaviour and attainment – Wilson (2006)

An update by Valerie Wilson from the Scottish Council for Research in Education of her 2002 review of research on class size.

- Most research studies reported here agree that class size reductions do not affect all children equally. Both American and English evidence shows that children in the early years of schooling and those in the lowest ability groups (usually members of minority ethnic groups in the USA) appear to benefit the most.
- The evidence from North American studies, in particular the large state-funded experiments, claim to have demonstrated an association between class size and pupil achievement, ie as class sizes reduce pupil attainment increases.
- Evidence from a large-scale study in primary schools in England broadly confirms American results and reports a decreasing score in literacy with increasing class size, little apparent change in performance between class sizes of about 18 and 25 and with low achievers benefiting the most.
- At the secondary stage English evidence is inconclusive because of the tendency for schools to teach less able children in smaller sets. Therefore, some examination results are higher from larger sets, composed mainly of more able pupils.
- Teachers in numerous studies in the USA and England report that smaller classes are easier to manage and that they are less concerned about discipline than in larger classes.
- Evidence from the USA suggests that small classes increase students' engagement with learning and reduce anti-social behaviour. The findings on pro-social behaviour (ie students helping and supporting each other) are less complete.
- Most studies show that teachers of smaller classes in the USA and England report that these are quieter and more easily managed than larger ones. Therefore, potential discipline problems are prevented from arising.
- Economists seem to be divided in their opinions as to whether a policy of class size reduction is a sensible use of resources, and continue to debate whether the marginal benefits of class size reduction outweigh the marginal costs. In practice it is extremely difficult to determine.

[Wilson, V. (2006) *Does Small Really Make A Difference? An Update. A review of the literature on the effects of class size on teaching practice and pupils' behaviour and attainment*, Edinburgh: ScottishExecutive]

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### **Small Class Size and Its Effects** - Biddle and Berliner (2002)

- When planned thoughtfully and funded adequately, small classes in the early grades generate substantial gains for students, and those extra gains are greater the longer students are exposed to those classes.
- Extra gains from small classes in the early grades are larger when the class has fewer than 20 students.
- Extra gains from small classes in the early grades occur in a variety of academic disciplines and for both traditional measures of student achievement and other indicators of student success.
- Students whose classes are small in the early grades retain their gains in standard size classrooms and in the upper grades, middle school, and high school.
- All types of students gain from small classes in the early grades, but gains are greater for students who have traditionally been disadvantaged in education.
- Students who have traditionally been disadvantaged in education carry greater small-class, early-grade gains forward into the upper grades and beyond.
- The extra gains associated with small classes in the early grades seem to apply equally to boys and girls.
- Evidence for the possible advantages of small classes in the upper grades and high school is inconclusive.

[Biddle Bruce J. and Berliner David C. (2002), *Small Class Size and Its Effects*, Educational Leadership, Vol.59 No.5, February 2002]

<http://www.ascd.org/publications/educationalleadership/feb02/vol59/num05/Small-Class-Size-and-Its-Effects.aspx>

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### **How Class Size Makes a Difference** - Egelson, Harman, Hood and Achilles (2002)

- Students in small class sizes of approximately 15 realise greater achievement gains than students in typical class sizes. It is unclear about how small is small enough.
- The more years in reduced class size classrooms the greater the academic benefit and the longer it is sustained. Project Star showed that at least three years were required to produce sustained benefit, and four years were even better.

- Teachers in smaller classes are better able to monitor and provide corrective feedback to students than teachers in large classes. Effective teaching strategies such as remediation, feedback and reinforcement are much easier to implement in smaller classes.
- Class size reduction especially benefits minority and low income students. Smaller class sizes help to reduce the achievement gap.

[Paula Egelson, Patrick Harman, Art Hood, Charles Achilles, *How Class Size Makes a Difference*, Regional Educational Laboratory at SERVE, University of North Carolina, contracted by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, US Department of Education, 2002]

<http://www.serve.org/FileLibraryDetails.aspx?id=90>

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## QUESTIONING THE VALUE OF SMALLER CLASS SIZES (1)

Opponents of class size reductions usually cite the work of John Hattie who concludes that smaller class sizes only have a small effect on student achievement compared to many other (less expensive) strategies. Politicians and bureaucrats uncritically use and misuse his work to forward their own agendas of cost-cutting and a 'blame the teacher' approach to education reform.

Hattie's work is distinguished by the methodology he uses to synthesise 800+ meta-analyses of variables which are said to affect student achievement. (J. Hattie, *Visible Learning*, Routledge, 2009) He places the results of his synthesis along a continuum (and in league table form) of what has the greatest impact on student achievement. Each variable is positioned in relation to a "hinge-point" average effect size of 0.40 with the "zone of desired effects" being 0.40 or above. He concludes that class size is 0.21, a moderate positive effect on achievement but below the hinge-point. He ranks it at number 106 out of 138 variables in the league table.

Hattie's conclusions about the effect of class size have been criticised by various other academics. (Most notably Ivan Snook et al from Massey University in "*Invisible Learnings? A commentary on John Hattie's Visible Learning*" [http://www.nzei.org.nz/site/nzeite/files/misc%20documents/Invisible\\_Learnings.pdf](http://www.nzei.org.nz/site/nzeite/files/misc%20documents/Invisible_Learnings.pdf) )

The critics have cited the methodological problem of synthesising a whole range of meta-studies each with their own series of primary studies. There is no quality control separating out the good research studies from the bad ones. The different assumptions, definitions, study conditions and methodologies used by these primary studies mean that Hattie's meta-analysis of the meta-analyses is a homogenisation which may distort the evidence (comparing apples with oranges).

The 0.21 effect he claims for class size is an average so that some studies may have found a significantly higher effect than that. For example, 'gold standard' primary research studies (using randomised scientific methodology) such as the Tennessee STAR project recorded a range of effect sizes including some at 0.62, 0.64 and 0.66, clearly well above the 'hinge-point' and the same as most variables which Hattie regards as very important.

Another limitation of the Hattie study is that it is concerned with one dimension of schooling – student achievement which is amenable to quantitative measurement. Many class size studies cite the effect of smaller classes on student attitudes, non-standardised tested learning, behaviour and a range of non-cognitive qualities which are valued in the labour market and in the wider society.

Hattie's approach also explicitly excludes the social effects/background context effects on student achievement because they cannot be influenced in schools. This rules out a discussion of the effect of issues such as social class, poverty, family resources and health. A number of class size studies have emphasised the particular value of small class sizes for poor performing students from low SES backgrounds.

Hattie himself concedes that evaluating the effect of class size on student achievement is a complex matter because class size cannot be seen in isolation from a number of other variables. He speculates that the reason why he has found such a moderate effect may be because teachers do not always change their teaching strategies when classes are smaller.

“The message could be that if teachers were retrained to work with smaller class sizes then indeed many of these optimal strategies may take effect; but merely reducing the number of students in front of teachers appears to change little—in teaching and in outcomes.” (Visible Learning, p.88)

He also notes that smaller class sizes do have a positive effect on student learning so that raising class size is “poor policy” (ibid, p.88)

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## **Questioning the Value of Smaller Class Sizes (2)**

The most commonly cited source (in the politics of education in Australia) for the contention that class size has little or no effect on student outcomes is the economist Ben Jensen, formerly of the Grattan Institute, and his paper *Investing in our Teachers, Investing in our Economy* (2010). Jensen's paper has been used many times by the Federal Minister for Education, Christopher Pyne, Ministers in the Baillieu/Napthine Victorian Government, and various conservative media commentators, to justify their opposition to class size reductions.

The Jensen paper devotes only one and a half pages to class size and is basically just a polemical commentary on the class size debate rather than any attempt to weigh up the range of evidence. Jensen is highly influenced by the conservative American economist Eric Hanushek and uses his meta-analyses from the early 2000s and a single study from Florida to conclude that:

“Class size reductions, even in the early years, are very expensive and have a negligible impact on student outcomes.” (p 9)

He goes on to argue that “even if there were positive outcomes ...reducing class sizes, even by just a few students, has a large impact on school budgets.” He links class size reduction policies to “a waste of money” – a politically useful phrase later picked up by Christopher Pyne and many others.

As with many of the Grattan Institute school education publications, this paper is as much about ideology as ‘research’ and is basically aimed at influencing the political debate in education.

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