

Teachers' Responses To Class Size At The Primary Level In Malaysia

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ABSTRAK

Objektif penulisan ini adalah untuk berkongsi dengan anda respon-respon guru-guru sekolah rendah di sebuah daerah di Selangor berkenaan size kelas dan masalah-masalah yang berkaitan dengannya. Kajian ini telah memberi maklumat yang lebih mendalam berkenaan dengan pengalaman dan persepsi guru mengenai size kelas. Guru-guru sekolah rendah mengalami purata size kelas seramai 40.1 murid-murid di mana mengikut pandangan mereka adalah kelas pesat (ramai) dan bermasalah. Masalah-masalah yang dihadapi oleh guru-guru berkaitan dengan ketidakmampuan melaksanakan cadangan-cadangan dalam Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Rendah.

Introduction

The aims of the New Primary School Curriculum (NPSC) or 'Kurikulum Baru Sekolah Rendah' (KBSR) in Malaysia are to provide for the overall development of the child stressing a firm foundation in the basic skills of reading, writing and arithmetic, as well as the inculcation of thinking skills and ethical values across the curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1994). To achieve these aims, at the planning stage of NPSC, several requirements were outlined. Amongst others, it was held that one of the conditions that would assure the success of the NPSC was the number of pupils in each class which should not be more than 35 (Hussin, 1993:256). However, when the NPSC was implemented for the first time in Malaysia in 1983, primary school teachers experienced teaching classes of more than 35 pupils. Although classrooms space was small the class size was between 40 to 50 pupils (Ministry of Education, 1988:21). After a decade, the Ministry of Education (1994:14) reported that in some large schools, it was common to find an average class size of 50 pupils.

The Ministry of Education has carried out evaluations from time to time to examine the effectiveness of the NPSC. University of Science Malaysia (USM) has also conducted an evaluation programme of the NPSC. The aspects that were assessed by these two bodies included: the implementation of NPSC in the classroom, the teacher's capability, the ability of head teachers to manage the curriculum and the suitability of teaching materials. In 1993, the Ministry of Education decided to change the name NPSC to Integrated Primary School Curriculum (IPSC) or 'Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Rendah' since the IPSC emphasised 'integration'. This suggests that teaching and learning will stress 'child-centredness' where children are engaged in activities. The activities are planned in such a way that children have the opportunity to be actively involved in learning. 'Child-centredness' aspect of the NPSC was given more emphasis after several evaluation programmes had been conducted (Ministry of Education, 1995).

The question arises, can the primary school teachers achieve the aims of the IPSC if there are many pupils in a class? This study was undertaken mainly for two reasons. First, as literature has shown that teachers in developed countries are concerned with class size (Varner, 1968; Sitkei, 1968; Ryan and Greenfield, 1975; Glass and Smith, 1978; Cullen, 1979; Burstall, 1979 and; Blatchford and Mortimore, 1994) the question arises if teachers in Malaysia are also faced with the same predicament? Second, the problems of teaching in large classes have been reported by several previous studies (Cannon, 1966; Wright, et. al, 1977; Carver, 1988; Wyly and Frusher, 1990; Coleman, 1991; Dewhurst, 1993 and; Bennett, 1996).

The main aims of this study are:

1. To gain an understanding of teachers' experiences and perceptions of class size at the primary school level.
2. To elucidate the relationships between experience and perception of class size (particularly among the variables in this study).

To achieve these main aims, the following specific aims for the study are set into three specifications: class size, relationships between variables and problems encountered.

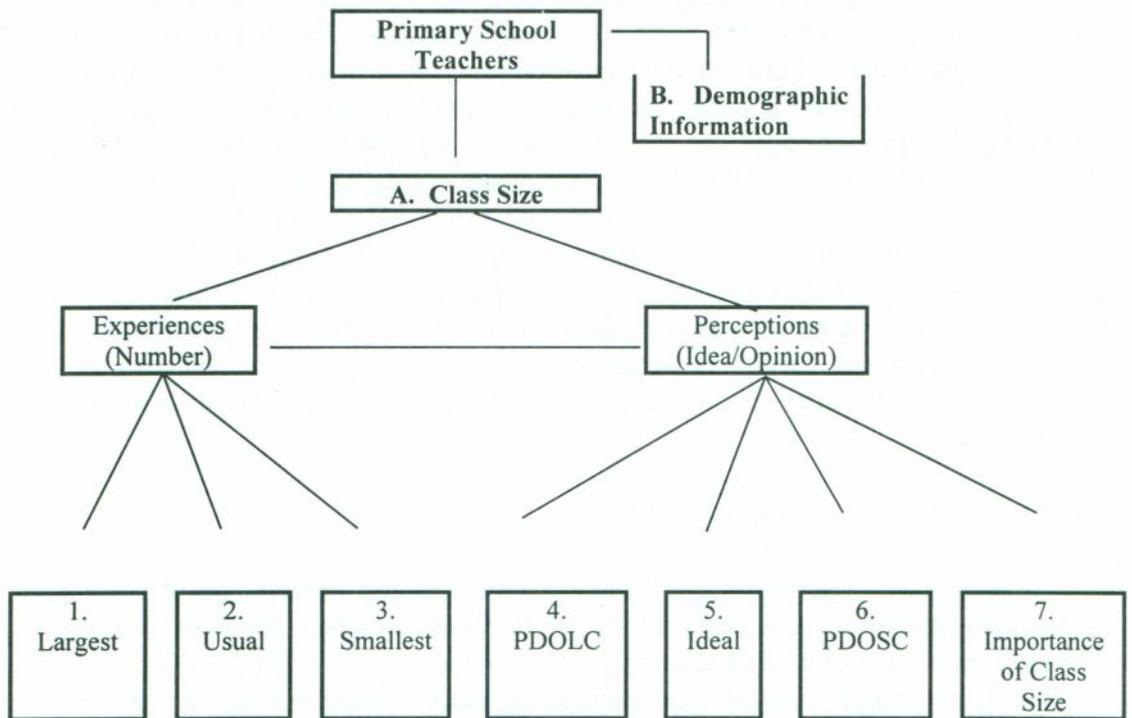
1. To examine *teachers' experiences* of (largest, usual and smallest) and *perceptions* of (the numbers of pupils which cause problems that are difficult to overcome in a large class, which cause problems that are difficult to overcome in a small class and, which are ideal) class size at the primary level in general, and according to school size and demographic variables specifically.
2. To analyse the relationships between teachers' experiences and teachers' perceptions of class sizes.
3. To determine to what extent class size is 'important' or problematic among the primary school teachers. If class size is a problem, to identify the problems these teachers encounter.

Methods

Based on the aims of this study, a framework to investigate the teachers' response to class size was designed (see Figure 1.1). In brief, the study employed survey methods which '..... are used for both *descriptive* and *analytic* purposes' (O'Shea, 1992:1323). Descriptive survey design was adopted since this study attempts to obtain information from primary school teachers about class size. Thus, the arrows with solid lines in the framework (Figure 1.1) indicate the teachers' responses to class size (seven variables). The analytic survey was employed because this study also aims to examine and explain the relationships between the variables of class size (experiences and perceptions).

(These relationships are illustrated by the arrows with dotted lines in the framework. The capital letters A and B refer to the focus of class size and demographic information respectively. These letters also demonstrate the organisation of sections and of questions in the questionnaire used.)

Figure 1.1: Schematic Theoretical Framework to Survey Teachers' Responses to Class Size at the Primary Level.



—— Teachers' responses (Descriptive Survey Method)
 — Relationships between variables (Analytic Survey Method)

PDOLC The number of pupils which causes problems that are difficult to overcome in a large class

PDOSC The number of pupils which causes problems that are difficult to overcome in a small class.

The data was gathered by means of *questionnaire and interview*. The questionnaire was designed to measure two specifications: *class size* (experiences and perceptions) and *teachers' background* (gender, types of teacher, overall teaching experiences, teaching experience at the present school, teaching periods per week). Semi-structured

interview was employed to understand whether class size was a problem for teachers and if so, what were the problems they encountered. Since the questionnaire was designed more towards description, the interview was employed to complement or support the data not obtainable by questionnaire. The interview was more oriented towards explanations of the relationships that emerged.

The *sample* of the study included 35% of the total population (2143 teachers) in one of the districts (Hulu Langat) in Selangor. Thirty-four National and National Primary Schools were involved where 752 respondents participated. However, 556 respondents (26%) returned the questionnaires. Meanwhile, thirty-five respondents involved in the interviews but thirty-one of the interviews were analysed. The method of selecting the sample to participate both in the questionnaire and interview was 'convenience sampling'. It involved choosing the nearest individuals to serve as respondents and continuing that process until the required sample size had been obtained (Cohen and Manion, 1994:88, Robson, 1993:141). The disadvantage of this method is that it does not produce representative sampling (Robson; 1993). However, the researcher has to emphasise that it was not her attempt to expand the conclusions of the study by reasoning from the sample (specific) to the population (general). Johnson (1977:140) emphasises that '.. a representative sample is by no means a general requirement in educational research ... teachers accessible to the investigator can be studied for the information they provide. The findings do not have to be automatically extrapolated to a larger group'.

The data collected was *analysed* as follows:

- The responses to these six questions (experiences and perceptions of class size) in the questionnaire were analysed by using three statistics: the mean, median and mode (measures of central tendency). The 'measure of variability' was also used to identify the range of class size teachers experienced and perceived. (Prior to this, the responses regarding the teachers' experiences and perceptions from the first six questions were selected according to the conditions set out by Coleman (Project Report No. 4, 1989.)
- To identify the strength of the relationship between teachers' experiences and perceptions of class size, Pearson Product Moment r was adopted.
- The means were used to compare teachers' experiences and perceptions of class size in general; and various teachers' responses to class sizes in relation to their school size and demographic variables.
- The response to the seventh question in the questionnaire was calculated using the frequency distribution and percentage count.

- The interview data was recorded on tape. After the preparation of the transcripts of each interview, the points made by the interviewees were identified with cue words in the margin. However, this did not involve quantitative analysis.

3.0 Results

1. The result of this study shows that teachers' experiences of class size (ranging from 2 to 60) and perceptions (ranging from 1 to 55) vary considerably. The mean of actual largest, usual and smallest class sizes were 45.7, 40.1 and 32.3 respectively. The mean class sizes which teachers believed to be ideal, large which cause problems that are difficult to overcome and small which cause problems that are difficult to overcome are 29.6, 42.7 and 12.4 respectively. This indicates that the teachers were experiencing large class sizes according to their own definition since their experiences were larger than their perceptions of class size.
2. Correlation between experiences and perceptions of class size shows significant relationships. Two revealing conditions emerged: first, the usual class size has a strong relationship on perceptions of class size, and second, small classes were outside the teachers' experience.
3. Comparison between reported usual class size (end of 1995) and the data obtained from the District Education Office (1994/95 session) reveals that the teachers' reports of their own class sizes were accurate and can be trusted as a reasonably reliable record. This finding indicates the consistency between teachers reported usual class size and official data obtained at different times.
4. Another useful finding, although expected, is that teachers teaching in large schools were more likely to have large classes, while teachers working in small schools were more likely to have small classes. Generally, large schools were situated in urban areas and small schools were situated in rural areas. In addition, there are no significant differences between teachers' experiences and perceptions when analysed in terms of demographic variables (gender, types of teachers, 'overall teaching experience', 'teaching experience at present school' and teaching periods).
5. Furthermore, nearly all the respondents reported that class size was problematic (99%). The problems encountered were classified as *teaching and learning, classroom management, marking, EM, time and miscellaneous*.

- This study has identified the problems of *teaching and learning*, including teachers' dissatisfaction with being unable to provide individual attention, children's achievement in reading, remedial and enrichment activities, and whole class and group teaching. These problems are related to the inability of the teachers to implement the suggestions of the NPSC. Attempts to provide individual or group attention were made after whole class teaching and while the children were doing their individual work. In this way, teachers could assist weak children and implement some of the recommendations of the NPSC. This is the coping strategy the teachers practised to provide individual attention, although this is still considered not sufficient. Although teachers understood the recommendations of the curriculum, teachers were unable to practise the ideal suggestions.
- This study has shown that *classroom management* problems that include class control and discipline, noise, large groups, overcrowding and arrangement of tables and chairs are overwhelming difficulties. However, the teachers were accustomed to facing these problems and they were seen as common issues for them.
- *Marking* was also a burden for the teachers since they complained of not having enough time and attention for marking. This is not surprising because teachers are required to complete certain targets of the syllabus. It appears that teaching is more important than learning.
- In addition, the problems of non-availability and inadequate materials and equipment prevailed. Although the teachers were conscious that EM were effective for children and the children were interested when EM were used in classes, the types used were not varied. Teachers preferred EM that were provided or available, easily accessible and where the preparation did not demand extra time. This is due to the problems of not having enough time, heavy workloads and being appointed to other responsibilities. Certain types of EM that require more expertise were not preferred since the teachers admitted that they did not have the skills required. In addition, the types of EM that resulted in difficulty in classroom management which involved class control and discipline were also unpopular.
- Other problems are grouped under miscellaneous which includes complaints of a large workload and other responsibilities, besides suggestions provided by the respondents. An outstanding issue that arises in this last category is that some teachers believed that if the pupils were of the same ability, class size appeared not to be a problem.

4.0 Conclusion of study

This study has succeeded in developing an understanding of teachers' experiences and perceptions of the current issue of class size. There are several possible insights gained from the study that require further consideration because of the potential impact on primary education. Firstly, the study has revealed that teachers are experiencing large classes within their own definition. Secondly, the problems teachers encountered are concerned with teaching and learning where providing individual attention, children achieving reading skills, being unable to carry out remedial and enrichment activities, and practising whole class and group teaching are predominant. These conditions are related to the teachers' inability to implement the ideal recommendations in the NPSC (New Primary School Curriculum).

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