

CLASS SIZE AS A MEANS OF THREE-TIERED SUPPORT IN FINNISH PRIMARY SCHOOLS

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The aim of this study is to investigate how the class size is related to the development of performance of pupils receiving support in primary school. In Finland, class size is also used as a mean of support by placing pupils with milder support needs in slightly smaller classes in the three-tiered support model, resulting in seemingly surprising positive correlations between class size and performance in cross-sectional studies. The present study tests the scientific base of this common practice by following the development of 869 pupils' learning to learn (later LTL) skills from the beginning of fourth grade to the end of sixth grade, analysing the effects of class size on the development of performance and the patterns of it in the groups receiving intensified (tier 2) or special support (tier 3). To summarise, the research questions investigated in this study are: (1) How the class size is related to performance in the LTL-test already in the beginning of 4th grade due to selection and the using of diminished classes as a means of support? (2) Is class size related to the development of LTL performance or does it simply reflect initial differences between the pupil populations of the classes? (3) Does the regulating of class size function as a means of support for pupils with identified support needs? That is, when only pupils with intensified and special support needs are studied, does their performance increase when class size decreases? The data consist of an on-going 9-year longitudinal study in a Finnish municipality in which pupils' learning to learn skills (later LTL) have been assessed from the beginning of the comprehensive school. The present study utilises the 4th and 6th grade data (N=869). The LTL assessment consists of cognitive tasks and learning-related attitudes. The LTL is assessed using measures of general reasoning skills, mathematical thinking skills and reading comprehension skills (Vainikainen, 2014). Descriptive statistics were calculated, and oneway and repeated measures ANOVAs performed with SPSS18. Multiple-group path modelling was applied in AMOS21. The results indicate that there are class size based differences in performance already in the beginning in 4th grade and that class size predicts 6th grade test performance weakly but statistically significantly even though the initial differences were controlled. Class size reduction is an appealing school intervention because it is considered to be rather easy to implement (Hattie, 2005). Therefore class size is topical in the political discussion not only in Finland but globally as well, and it's straight related to an economical decision. Despite the controversial results, the most commonly found benefit of smaller classes has been attributed to weaker pupils, while some have stated that even the pupils with special educational needs profit from somewhat bigger classes (Ruijs et al., 2009).