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Importance of class size

FOR many people interested in educational issues and seeking to find a touchstone moral position from which to engage these problems, John Dewey’s argument — which he penned in The School and Society — seems to capture an ethical bottom line.

Dewey’s famous position which captures our best moral sentiment in regard to the education of all children in our society is as follows: ‘What the best and wisest parent wants for his child, that must we want for all the children of the community. Anything less is unlovely, and left unchecked, destroys our democracy.”

It is hard to think of a simpler or clearer moral proposition to drive public policy in education.

When we read educators suggesting that perhaps poor children or those from disadvantaged backgrounds do not really need or require what those who get the best receive, most of us feel a sense of deep unease.

This unease is natural and stems from our basic sense of decency. We sense that an evasion of Dewey’s basic proposition is an evasion of our duty to all the children in our community.

After all, our moral fibre is often seen in how we treat the poorest and most powerless members of society.

Those whose arguments in regard to educational provision rest on a negation of Dewey’s moral position have a high ethical bar to jump and this is as it should be.

One way to glean how we view disadvantaged children in society is by seeing what our attitude is to putting real resources to work in addressing disadvantage.

It is with this in mind that I will now discuss the issue of class sizes in schools.

Professor Diane Whitmore Schanzenbach, an economist at Northwestern University, has a strong interest in educational issues policy and child health.

She is also research associate at the National Bureau of Economic Research and a visiting scholar at the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago. Schanzenbach has produced an important and timely paper for the National Education Policy Center titled Does Class Size Matter?.

In this paper, Schanzenbach argues a clear and engaging case for the importance of class size and our continued engagement with it.

The executive summary of her paper captures her basic argument where she makes several policy recommendations:

— Class size is an important determinant of student outcomes, and one that can be directly determined by policy. All else being equal, increasing class sizes will harm student outcomes.

— The evidence suggests that increasing class size will harm not only children’s test scores in the short run, but also their long-run human capital formation. Money saved today by increasing class sizes will result in more substantial social and educational costs in the future.
— The pay-off from class-size reduction is greater for low-income and minority children, while any increases in class size will likely be most harmful to these populations.

— Policymakers should carefully weigh the efficacy of class-size policy against other potential uses of funds. While lower class size has a demonstrable cost, it may prove the more cost-effective policy overall.

Schanzenbach reminds us of the important analysis and critique by Professor Alan B. Krueger, former chairman of President Barack Obama’s Council of Economic Advisers and currently, Bendheim Professor of Economics and Public Affairs at Princeton University. Krueger’s critique of the findings by Professor Eric A. Hanushek, who is the Paul and Jean Hanna Senior fellow of the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, in regard to class size and its significance for achievement is a critical and incisive rejoinder to the argument made by Hanushek that “there appears to be little systemic gain from general reductions in class size (The Evidence on Class Size)”.

Krueger in his critique makes a point which I want to focus on. Krueger writes: “Further, economic considerations suggest that greater gains might be available if resources were targeted toward those groups — minority and disadvantaged students — who appear to benefit the most from smaller classes (Understanding the Magnitude and Effect of Class Size on Student Achievement)”. Krueger’s point which the wider literature also tends to support is that students from disadvantaged backgrounds and from minority groups may benefit more from smaller classes (Would Smaller Classes Help Close the Black-White Achievement Gap?).

In short, there is a clear social justice dimension to the debate about resourcing of schools and class size.

If we return to the words of Dewey, we are bound to take seriously the effects that issues such as school resourcing and class size can have on all students and especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Dewey’s core ethical commitment to social justice and doing the best for all of our children inspires how many of us as teachers, parents and fellow citizens see our obligation to education.

Resources matter, class size matters and our commitment to all of our children is diminished if we fail to recognise the needs and dignity of the most disadvantaged or imply that somehow they do not deserve what many of us take for granted for our kids.

Dewey was right when he wrote his words in another time, and he is still right in our time.