

Overcrowding in Classes

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My Story

During my sophomore year at Washburn High School. I took French 2 my classroom had nearly 35 students. We each had our own desks making movement restricted. This already made learning hard but halfway through the year, my teacher decided to take out all of the desks and replace them with basic chairs set up in rows. She made this decision after feeling frustrated by the confined classroom space, thinking that less furniture might allow for us to move and learn better. However, not having a platform for papers or space to lean on caused an increased lack of attention to learning and misbehavior from students. Even with less furniture, the space was not conducive to teaching and learning. Overcrowded classes, especially language classes which require added attention, creates a difficult atmosphere where students struggle to pay attention and are stuck shoulder to shoulder with limited personal space. The large size of the class made it difficult for individual students to get teacher help and support. My experience in this overcrowded classroom has affected my level of success towards an advanced French class. Our teacher had to change the way we learn and stuff from year one French we were learning again. Since I'll be taking IB French, not getting adequate preparation for it, makes each upcoming year of French harder and I worry I will fall behind.

The Problem: Overcrowded Classrooms

Overcrowding impacts the students for years, often negatively impacting learning. In schools today, exceedingly large groups of students are expected to learn the same way leading to negative academic outcomes, social divides in the classroom, and poor student-teacher relationships. Schools should add creative scheduling, personalized learning, flexible workspace, and differentiation.

In the 21st century, many classes have more students than they can handle. Overcrowding in classrooms contributes to negative effects on all the people (students and teachers) in the room. Every student is impacted by large classes, unequivocally leaving more students under one teacher. Each student has different ways of learning and capacity to learn yet more often than not large groups of students are expected to all learn the same way. Teresa May, a mother of 2, has her kids in a state with the highest student to teacher ratio, Utah. She wants the uninformed public to understand that overcrowding is a major problem students are facing in today's schools. She explains, "My kids are getting in trouble for being bored. They're being expected to just sit and be patient. That's not productive at all." Students that learn faster than others in the class are left academically unchallenged. This leaves capable students with an impression that school has no benefits for them. Teachers struggle to focus on the students who excel because they are often preoccupied with the students who have learning disabilities or that need more scaffolded support. Poor teacher to student relationships directly impacts all involved.

Overcrowding leads to larger classes that one teacher has to teach. More students lead to the number of students per teacher ratio increasing. This can further the damage between the students and teachers because the teacher has to provide for many students. Some students don't get to have one on one conversations, they may not feel like they can learn. At the beginning of the year, teachers report that initially learning students names can even be difficult when class sizes are large. For teachers that teach upper grades and have multiple classes of students, the challenge to learn everyone's name and form relationships with students (and their families) is all the more challenging. Leaving students with the impression that connecting with the teacher may not be worth the time. Teachers report that large classes make it difficult to get to know and form relationships with every student, especially students who tend to be more reserved or quiet

in groups. Another teacher reports that activities like checking-in with students informally take too long when the class size is large, leaving limited time for academic content. Since teachers are accountable for academic content, that often becomes prioritized at the expense of relationship building. In addition to the limitations that overcrowding places on teacher-student relationships, overcrowding also negatively impacts teachers' workload.

Overcrowded classrooms lead to an increased workload for teachers, which contributes to lower quality interactions and feedback for students. Many teachers become dissatisfied with teaching after experiencing teaching overcrowded classes. Teachers are leaving their profession early, in fact, an article on Teacher Burnout Solutions and Prevention states, "50% of teachers leave within their first five years." In 2009 the University of London's study of teachers in overcrowded classes noted "Failure to achieve the ideal of meeting every pupil's needs produces negative feelings towards their own work," the London study goes on to note. "The size of the class contributes to the severe criticism which some teachers express about their own teaching. In a sense, once the class size passes a certain point, the teachers are bound to 'fail' because the demands on their time cannot be met." Bryce Chamberlain a teacher at Bonneville High School finds it hard to build relationships with students, individualized teaching plans, and even hard to remember his student's names. He says it limits what he can do as a teacher. Some teachers like him have to change what they assign, like writing homework since it takes up an unprecedented amount of time leading teachers to stay hours after school ends to grade and plan. This causes teachers to get burned out easily making the learning experience for the students all the more frustrating. Overwhelmed and discontent teachers make the learning experience especially when the students don't feel like the teacher is providing them with the best learning experience.

One teacher I interviewed recalled their experiences with teaching overcrowded classes. Without going out of the teachers' way to make time for relationship building the connection is usually surface level with no deeper understanding of the teacher-student relationships. Making extra time can be perceived as a waste of time by admins, parents, and other teachers. Zach, a teacher, has found ways to build relationships in larger classes by communicating one on one with students during group work and discussions where he intentionally finds ways to connect questions to the students and works to further understand them. Teachers can use extra time if there are a few minutes at the end of class or between activities, the teacher could connect with students individually during these moments. Another experience Zach discuss was having larger class sizes lead to an increased teacher workload. Teachers shouldn't be working 40 hours a week and an extra 10+ hours in unpaid activities like planning and grading after hours and over the weekends. In science classes having larger class sizes worries teachers since they have to deal with the safety of many students.

Recommendations

Flexible Scheduling

There are many solutions that we might consider to address overcrowding in classes. One solution that can reduce class overcrowding is to change the scheduling within the school into times. The diagram below shows how creative scheduling would look like:

Body A	Body B	Body C
7am-2pm	8am-3pm	9am-4pm
7:05-8:00	8:05-9:00	9:05-10:00
8:05-9:00	9:05-10:00	10:05-11:00
9:05-10:00	10:05-11:00	11:05-12:00
10:05-11:00	11:05-12:00	12:05-1:00
11:05-12:00	12:05-1:00	1:05-2:00
12:05-1:00	1:05-2:00	2:05-3:00
1:05-2:00	2:05-3:00	3:05-4:00

With multiple teachers in one subject and grade, they can add more classes depending on the number of teachers in that one area of teaching. It would work if the teachers have two different start and end days so they don't have to work the full schedule.

Personalized Learning

Personalized learning is a broad word used to describe many forms of individual learning. These types of individual learning include adaptive learning, blended learning, competency-based learning, differentiated learning, and individualized learning. Each of these varying methods for teaching is dedicated to meeting students needs. Each teaching method can be implemented to benefit students in overcrowded classrooms. An unhealthy teacher to student ratio causes a disconnected work environment where teachers struggle to focus on individuals and inevitably hinders the learning of students. Personalized learning allows students to learn to their best

abilities. When students know the curriculum objectives being taught, they are capable of applying themselves and choosing harder classwork. The same goes for people who struggle with what's being taught. Students struggling independently can get more help from the teacher when their peers can work independently. Teachers can specialize in helping students who need more time on targeted subjects while not leaving the students who understand and excel behind or left unchallenged.

Differentiation

Placing differentiation in classrooms can improve academic outcomes. One way teachers can differentiate is splitting learning objectives into varying levels of difficulty. Differentiation allows teachers to identify the level of difficulty each student is ready for. This is only effective when the teacher has a good understanding of each of their students. This type of learning is also up to the teacher and if they want to be able to have their students to work at different levels. It has been used throughout the US and other countries. Alberta, a Canadian Province, used differentiation in K-12 schooling. The student population with mild or severe learning disabilities saw more benefits come from differentiation and getting scaffolded support for their learning. More research on differentiation has been tested in math classes. It showed that the teachers were able to keep high ability students challenged. Differentiation simultaneously allows students that need the extra help and support to learn at their rate and students who are excelling ahead of the class to be satisfied and challenged with their learning.

Flexible Work Space

The idea of flexible workspace involves more creatively opening the school or classrooms as a workspace for students. This allows students to find an environment that they feel comfortable to learn. Giving students free will of where they go to learn doesn't confine them to four walls that prohibit where they go. This leads to groups of people coming together in a collaborative workspace rather than a larger group sitting together in the classroom. Assigning a project and allowing them to not only work where they want but choose what their project allows them to demonstrate in their style of learning and form groups that can improve their academic interests and show the teacher what they like and are good at. A study from the University of Melbourne in 2017 surveyed that all of New Zealand's schools were using flexible space. Dr. Imms a lead researcher concluded from the information saying "In other words, we've found a very strong correlation between innovative learning environments, high levels of deep learning and high-quality teaching."

Conclusions

As I have demonstrated through sharing my story and supporting these ideas with research, overcrowded classes have more negative impacts than positive. Overcrowding leads to detrimental effects on students and their academics. Students are not getting adequate support from teachers and teachers are also distressed and getting burned out quickly while working longer hours. Being in a class with over 30 students places a massive workload on our teaching force and makes it difficult for students. In my personal story learning French, overcrowding made it especially difficult for my peers and I to develop our French and advance. A large class and its effects have made it harder for me to succeed in going into IB French in my eyes. I

believe there is potential in schools to help with overcrowding. Overcrowding is a major problem that needs to be addressed, our students' success depends on it.

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