Rethinking Class Size

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Class size and classroom processes: Peer relations

Introduction

Our focus in this chapter is the world of peer relations and the ways in which it is affected by the classroom contextual feature of class size.

As we saw in Chapter 1, the classroom is an interesting and, in a sense, rather unusual environment in that it often comprises one adult – the teacher – and a large number of children. From the pupils’ point of view, they will typically spend more time with their classmates than with the teacher or other adults. It is interesting that we rather take for granted perhaps this most obvious feature of the classroom environment.

Though teachers may be aware of the importance of the relationships between children in their class, researchers have unfortunately paid relatively little attention to this aspect of classroom life, and peer relations in classrooms are not well understood. Nuthall (2007) showed that there is a semi-private world of peer relations that runs in parallel to and largely invisible to the more public world of coverage of the curriculum, learning and assessment. This is one reason why, as Christine Howe (2010) points out, the rich potential for a ‘cooperative’ mode, in which children collaborate and learn from each other, is underdeveloped as a pedagogical strategy. Joyce Levy Epstein (1983) went even further and suggested that the way schools approach peer relationships and friendships is one of ‘suppression’. This might seem rather extreme but even casual observations in classrooms shows that a lot of lesson time is spent making sure that children behave responsibly, and a good deal of
a teacher’s time is spent in classroom management of pupil groups and friendships to help with this process.

There is a strong tradition of work in psychology which argues that peer relations have particular value for social and even cognitive development. Some years ago, in a ground breaking book, Youniss (1980) adapted the theories of Piaget and Sullivan to show how peer relations were important in their own right and differed from adult–child relations by showing equality, cooperation, reciprocity and mutuality – all of which make a contribution to social development. One theory of socialisation went further and downplayed the role of parents and other adults in favour of a more important role for the peer group in development (Harris 1995). Much recent developmental psychological research on peer relations agrees about the importance of peer relations though also paints a negative picture, stressing the difficulties experienced through rejection, bullying, victimisation and withdrawal.

There are now a number of general reviews of developmental psychological research on peer relations (for example, Bukowski et al. 1996; Dunn 2004; Gifford-Smith and Brownell 2003; Ladd 2005; Rubin et al. 2013; Rubin et al. 2006; Rubin et al. 2005). They tend to discuss research on peer relations in terms of three main aspects: (1) Social status, in terms of, for example, terms like popularity, rejection, social impact; (2) friendships in terms of, for example, their number and quality; and (3) social networks in terms of cliques and other subgroups, and the centrality of individuals and groups in the network. Much of the research on peer relations has examined associations between measures of peer relations such as social status and friendships on the one hand, and aspects of social and academic development on the other. It generally finds that children who are rejected tend to have poorer social and academic outcomes; some researchers have also found longer-term consequences in terms of mental health and criminality (Parker and Asher 1987).

Taken together, this field represents an impressive body of work. However, it has been pointed out that there has been relatively little attention paid to the everyday interactions and relationships within school contexts through which these psychological constructs are presumably enacted, and which most directly influence children (for example, Rydell Altermatt 2012).

Social psychologists have had a lot of interest in group processes and group structures (Baron and Kerr 2003; Brown 2000), which has relevance for peer relations. Some of the early pioneering work in social psychology by Lewin, Deutsch, Bales and many others (see for example
the review by Brown (2000) was concerned with group processes. In his review, Brown discusses several underpinning group processes: interdependence, the development of norms, cohesion and social structures, including leadership. However, this interest in social psychology has tended not to be applied to schools and classrooms, even though a classroom of students and adults can, at a basic level, be seen as a group, and therefore social psychological insights and approaches are applicable. We return to this point below.

Peer relations in schools

So what about peer relations in schools? Reviews of peer relations in schools by Blatchford and Baines (2010) and Blatchford et al. (2016a) show how easy it is to underestimate just how important are relationships with friends and classmates for children of all ages. We know from surveys of pupils’ views that they feel that the best thing about school is being with friends; Blatchford et al. (2016a) show that they have an important ‘socialisation function’, that is, children learn important social skills during interactions with peers, relevant to adult life (Sluckin 1981), and these are not acquired through formal instruction. Hartup (1989, in 1992) has described the peer group as an important ‘cooperative socialization context’, in which children learn about cooperation, reciprocity, effective conflict management, intimacy etc. And Maxwell has said:

The peer group provides arguably the most efficient and highly motivating context for the learning and development of social skills which will ultimately enable children to live effectively as a member of adult society. (1990, 171)

Peer relations can also help with adjustment to school by helping with stressful events (Ladd et al. 1996), helping with life after school transition (Hargreaves and Galton 2002), helping encourage a positive view of school (Berndt and Keefe 1995), and helping create a better sense of ‘school belonging’ (Lubbers et al. 2006). (See review in Blatchford and Baines 2010.)

But peer relations are also important in relation to learning and academic attainment (Webb and Palincsar 1996). Perhaps the most obvious role of peers in school learning is that they can be a source of information. If a child gets stuck on a piece of work other children either informally or formally can help. Interestingly, and against some teachers’ views, friends perform better on school tasks (Newcomb and
Bagwell 1995; Zajac and Hartup 1997), for example, because they know each other better, there is more commitment, and they are better able to resolve disagreements.

Another, more formal, role of peers in school learning is through the learning that takes place in group work. Following on from the tradition of social psychology mentioned above, particularly with roots in the notion of interdependence, some researchers have found collaborative group work to be an important educational initiative with benefits for academic and social development (Johnson and Johnson 1987; O’Donnell and King 1999; Slavin 1990). But, despite this evidence, we saw in the last chapter that collaborative group work is relatively rarely seen in classrooms (Kutnick and Blatchford 2014). In line with the comments at the end of Chapter 5, we also make the point that teachers do not often make the most of the opportunities for learning arising out of peer-to-peer interactions. We return to this point in the conclusions of this chapter.

Schmuck and Schmuck (2001) argue that the formal school curriculum and classroom learning and instruction cannot be separated from the powerful informal relationships within the peer group. Peer relationships will affect academic learning, and vice versa. The researchers give the example of their own seven-year-old son. He was struggling to make new friends, and at the same time was having a frustrating time learning to read. In consequence he became, for a short time, out of control at home, and withdrew into excessive, sullen TV viewing. The emotional dynamics of the informal peer group can go hand in hand with academic learning.

In a similar way, Nuthall has stressed how relationships between children can be fundamental to learning, in that they affect how information is handled and received. The common-sense view is that learning results from engagement with the teacher and in classroom activities: do what you should do, and learning follows. But Nuthall (2007) argues convincingly that learning is filtered through different power relationships and social status hierarchies, so that each student engages in tasks in different ways. There is no guarantee that doing the task means learning is taking place.

As every teacher knows, pupils vary a good deal in how well they work together. Some are helpful and constructive, others are over-dominating, some are passive and left out, and still others are destructive and unhelpful. These differences are important because they can mean the difference between a class that is easy to teach and academically productive and a class that is not. Teachers often report that peer
relations affect the quality of classroom processes and learning, and can cause difficulties that must be resolved by the teacher.

Class size and peer relations

Despite the importance of peer relations in academic and social development, and the role of classroom contexts and interactions in school progress, we know next to nothing about the ways in which these two things are connected, that is, whether and in what ways peer relations are affected by the classroom contexts pupils experience during the school day.

Some years ago, Bourke (1986) concluded that the effect of class size on student interpersonal relations is in need of further study; this, it seems, is still the case. As we saw in the last chapter, logically and empirically the number of pupils will affect the size and/or the number of within-class groups. We also saw some ways in which relationships between pupils in a class can be affected by the size of the class, for example, in terms of cohesion and tolerance. There are some suggestions from social psychology that group processes like cohesion can be affected by size of group (Brown 2000), though to our knowledge this has not been developed for school contexts. In this chapter we explore these possibilities more fully.

Given the lack of research on class size and peer relations, any predictions about the connection between them will need to be tentative. In general terms it seems likely that in larger classes there would be more negative and aggressive behaviours between children, and this is supported by some reviews (for example, Finn et al. 2003). Research on children at nursery level has found that less favourable staff–pupil ratios result in more negative relations between children (Smith et al. 1988).

With more children we might also expect relationships to be more spread out and diverse, and there to be more likelihood of the formation of peer cliques. This might also mean the class as a whole is less integrated and cohesive. It is also possible, of course, that the greater diversity and more numerous subgroups likely in a larger class mean that rejected children can find others to work and play with. Finally, we might expect larger classes to present more problems for the teacher in terms of managing relationships between pupils. But, again, this might work the other way round, in that children in larger classes may be forced to rely less on the teacher because her attention is spread across more pupils, and therefore become less reliant on her.
In this chapter we seek to follow up on these possibilities and find out whether (and if so, how) class size and peer relationships are connected.

Results on class size and peer relations

In this chapter we rely on three sources of data. We first look briefly at results from the systematic observation part of the CSPAR KS2 study, but we rely mostly on two main sources of data – the CSPAR KS2 Years 5 and 6 case studies and the Years 5 and 6 teacher questionnaires (TQs). As we have already seen, these two forms of data collection rely on the views and experiences of teachers, and there is an obvious question about the validity of teacher views of children’s peer relations. Teachers themselves sometimes seemed to be aware of their own distance from relationships between children in their classroom; this was seen in its most extreme case when they suggested we ask the children what they felt, as if recognising that the children themselves are the experts on this feature of classroom life.

Though we therefore need to acknowledge the limits of the data presented in this chapter, we also, once again, defend the use of teachers as informants. Teachers can get to know their pupils well over the course of a school year, in particular in primary schools, where – in the UK at least – they will often teach pupils for most school subjects. They will both experience and manage the countless everyday contacts between children. Of course, their views and experiences have to be treated as subjective, but they are a rich resource, full of wisdom often born of many years’ close experience in managing and observing children. More than this, their comments are unique as a primary source, reflecting privileged access to their pupils. By comparison, even the most diligent and well-funded observation study is unlikely to get anywhere near the same access to children’s school lives.

Class size and the amount of peer interaction: A result from the systematic observation study

Before we turn to the case studies and TQs, we first report one result from the CSPAR KS2 systematic observation study. This is the part of the study which we used to address teacher–pupil interactions in Chapter 4. We saw there that the observation category system was divided into three main ‘social modes’ – first, teacher–pupil interaction; second, times
when pupils were not interacting with anyone; and third, times when pupils interacted with other pupils. Here we just briefly report on the results on the third social mode.

We found that there were significantly more target child–child interactions – in other words, peer interactions – in small classes, compared to large. The converse also applied, that is, in larger classes there is less peer interaction. Putting the main observation results together with those from Chapter 3, therefore, shows that in large classes in Year 6, children are more passive and receive less individualised attention from teachers, and yet there is not the compensating effect of more peer interaction. We return to this finding in the concluding section of this chapter.

Class size and peer relations: Years 5 and 6 case studies

We now turn to results from the CSPAR study case studies to see what light they shed on the connections between class size and peer relations. As described in earlier chapters, case studies were carried out in classrooms when the pupils were in Years 5 and 6 (9–10 and 10–11 years of age). Let us start with a look at the five case studies of small classes at Year 5.

One component of the case studies were the observations by the researcher. These indicated that in these small classes there was a high degree of harmony between the children and a willingness to support one another. Only one of the five small Year 5 classes showed a lack of cooperative relationships, and this was confined to a small number of girls in the class. In line with the observations, the teachers and TAs in their interviews spoke well of the relationships between pupils in their classes. It became clear to the researchers that the teachers had a lot to do with this state of affairs, which was their reward for spending a lot of time, especially in the earlier weeks of the year, cultivating positive relationships. It seemed that children who had been together in previous years started with an advantage, and this no doubt helped in the overall adjustment of the class. The teachers indicated that there were still some individual pupils whose behaviour required careful handling, for example, in terms of where they could be allowed to sit and who they could be set to work with.

Of course, this kind of descriptive account cannot be taken as evidence of a causal link with class sizes. Moreover, there was not agreement between teachers in how important they felt class size to be. Nevertheless, most teachers’ and TAs’ comments, along with the observer’s notes, indicated that class size was one factor that affected
It seemed to teachers that smaller classes allowed a more supportive ethos and that, in line with results in Chapter 4, having more pupils meant less time per pupil, and the building of a relationship with each child was consequently harder to achieve. One teacher specifically put relationships at the heart of learning.

Let us look in a little more detail at the views of the teacher and TA in one small Year 5 class. The teacher in this class was specific in saying that the small class has allowed her to address very difficult behaviour from last year:

> We’ve been able to take the time and talk about how we behave with each other, and they’re getting there … they’re appreciating each other’s work and I don’t think they’d have the space and comfort to do it [if class was bigger] … (Year 5 teacher)

The pupils had learned to avoid making one another angry, and they were now better adjusted. The teacher was adamant that with a larger class the pupils would not have made as much progress in their relationships. She had tried to create a positive atmosphere, with an emphasis on independent working and working well together, and with appreciating each other’s ideas.

The TA in the same class also felt that the children’s adjustment was very good, they had friendly relationships, and were helpful and caring. They were now able to hold discussions in small groups which they could not do at the start of the year. She felt that in a larger class with bigger groups, cooperation between children would not be so good and it would be harder to get agreement.

Another Year 5 teacher also found the children worked well as a class and respected one another. She described them as like a ‘family’, with ‘clowns’ and ‘leaders’. The teacher felt that in a bigger class there would be less chance of all getting on and there would be more problems. Her view was that relationships between pupils underpinned productive learning experiences and interactions. She valued the free and open discussion she found in this small class and felt that this was less likely in a big class, where there was less time for each pupil. Sometimes there were arguments leading to tension, but generally the pupils were happy, and overall there was a relaxed atmosphere.

Turning to the Year 6 case studies of small classes, the teacher in one class also saw class size as a factor benefiting social relationships in the class. She said there were problems with some boys and as a result they had to be spread around the classroom. In the teacher’s view,
more pupils of the same sort would make for a very different situation: ‘the makings of a nightmare’. Given the composition of the class, the teacher felt that small numbers had benefited the class. There was at least one complication resulting from small classes however, which became evident in the difficulties in assimilating a newcomer to the class mid-term. The teacher felt the pupil did not help his case because he had ‘baggage’ which affected his attitude and others’ responses to him. In an echo of some comments from the TQ which we look at later, ‘a larger class may have been easier for him to blend’.

The TA in the same class said the pupils were very well bonded, and pleasant to work with. This was helped by the fact that the ‘majority have been together since day one’, and in consequence were ‘a happy unit’. The TA’s view was that the number in the class would not make a difference to this, though only up to a point.

... beyond that point I think children would diversify into their different little groups more and I think we would have bigger behaviour problems.

Some of the teachers involved in the case studies of small classes at Year 5 and Year 6 felt that the type of pupils and existing relationships between the children were the most important thing. The teacher of one Year 5 class said that the children in her class had very good peer relationships and positive attitudes, and that the atmosphere in the class was calm and quiet. There was a caring ethos in the class and an indication of this was the way the whole class had shown interest in the progress of a boy with Asperger’s syndrome. In her view, the important driver was the type of individuals in the class. The TA of the same class felt the class was like an extended family – they had known each other a long time and they cared about each other. Like the teacher, the TA felt that a larger number of pupils would make no difference – it was the ethos of the school that helped make newcomers instantly accepted as well as existing relationships between pupils which were warm, understanding and tolerant. We look more specifically at the types of pupils in the class in Chapter 9.

Turning to large classes, the classroom observations by the researcher showed that most large Year 5 classes, like the small classes, demonstrated good peer relationships, characterised by tolerance, cooperation and respect for one another. Only one teacher was negative about the pupils’ behaviour and relationships, blaming the parents for the children’s poor social skills.
The opinions of these Year 5 large class teachers differed regarding the effect of having more pupils in the class. Some suggested that larger classes run the risk of less cohesion, more cliques and a less relaxed atmosphere, but the teachers also felt that the particular pupils in a class were significant in how relationships developed. One referred to pupils whose level of maturity has a bearing on their behaviour with others in the class.

There was similar picture in the Year 6 large classes. The classes were described as well adjusted, with good relationships, and classroom observations showed that the atmosphere in the five classes was characterised in positive terms. Three of the teachers commented on the ‘temperamental’ behaviour of some of the pupils, which was put down to their developmental stage.

The teachers in these large classes felt that class size was a possible influence on peer relations. Two teachers felt that a larger class affects their knowledge and understanding of the individuals in the class, since they do not have as much time with each child. A smaller class was seen quite differently by two teachers: one saw it as a benefit, with reduced potential conflict, whereas the other thought that the intensity of relationships in the smaller group would lead to more trouble.

Summing up the case studies

This description of results from the case studies, while unable to provide conclusions about the causal effect of class size, brings out some of the complexities of the connection between class size and peer relations. Some teachers felt smaller classes allowed a more relaxed and secure atmosphere and that this allowed teachers to deal with antisocial behaviour more easily, and for children to develop positive relationships and the ability to work constructively together. However, some teachers and TAs were of the view that class size was not the main factor in peer relations (though could still be one factor) and that the composition of the class and the extent of time they had been together were more important influences.

Class size and peer relations: TQ data

We now turn to the answers from Year 5 and Year 6 teachers in the annual teacher questionnaire (TQ) survey. They were asked a question concerning how they felt that class size had affected (if at all) relationships between pupils in the class. In comparison with the case studies,
there were many more responses across many more schools and so it was possible to get a broader basis for a thematic analysis of responses and a more reliable estimate of their prevalence.

All the comments from teachers were examined carefully and categorised into themes. The comments fell into three broad categories. The first of these was those comments that were either positive about the effect of small classes or negative about the effect of large class sizes on peer relations ($n = 121$). We shall see that this theme was further divided into six sub-themes. Second, there was the smaller number of comments that were positive about the effect of large classes or negative about the effect of small classes on peer relations (27). Third, there was a group of comments within which teachers felt there was no connection between class size and peer relations, where other factors were implicated or where it was not possible to determine if class size was seen as a factor in affecting peer relations (111). As answers in the third category were often not very forthcoming or informative about class size and peer relationships, in this chapter we concentrate on the first two categories, which were further sorted into whether the teacher had a small (25 pupils or under) or large (30+) class size.

Tallies or counts of responses provide some measure of the prevalence of each main category, though the aim of this section is not to pin down a precise estimate of each category but rather to provide a description of the different ways class size and peer relations were seen to be connected.

An analysis of this sort faces a number of difficulties, for example, because teachers sometimes gave a long and detailed account that covered multiple points – even, on occasions, seemingly contradictory points (for example, pointing to both the positive and negative aspects of large class sizes). Sometimes a response could be coded in more than one way, as, for example, when a comment was coded as relating to space problems as well as relating to peer relationships. This can mean that for a given teacher there will be multiple codes; the number of codes therefore exceeds the number of respondents.

Positive with small classes/negative with large classes

The detailed analysis of the comments in this category identified six main sub-themes under which their comments could be classified.

**General – positive relationships.** This first sub-theme covered relatively general comments on how small classes benefited the relationships between pupils (there were 9 comments for small classes and
24 for large). The following quotations are responses from Years 5 and 6 teachers in small classes under 25:

Less children = Children ‘get on better’. [The teacher reported these were the children’s own words.]

Good relationships within class.

Relationships have developed well and most children regard each other in a positive way.

The following Year 6 teacher with a class of 23 is a little more specific and shows the interconnectedness of class size, peer relations and other factors, which will be a theme of this chapter.

They have fewer people to relate closely with on a regular basis which makes it easier for them to maintain good relationships with each other. Any problems that occur are quickly apparent, and therefore quickly sorted out, resulting in a better overall learning environment.

This teacher connects fewer people, good relationships, visibility of problems and ease with which teachers can sort out problems in service of a better learning environment.

There were also general comments on the connection between class size and peer relations from teachers with large classes, sometimes well in excess of 30 ($n = 24$):

Do not have such a close relationship with many of the class.

Some children have hardly got to know each other.

One factor connecting class size to peer relationships might be that there is more mixing across the whole class when there are fewer children. Here is a Year 6 teacher with 36 in their class:

More mixing was possible in smaller class size. Children tend to work with same peers, less opportunities to mix with all Y6.

We come back to the issue of fragmentation of peer relations in larger classes below.
This Year 6 teacher links restriction of movement and building peer relationships in a larger class:

Not all children relate to ‘formed groups’ within the classroom – inevitable – geography of thirty-two in a class restricts movement therefore restricts building of relationships.

There was one subcategory of comments ($n = 21$) that could be situated in this theme of general comments on the effect of class size on peer relations. There were a number of comments that showed that one of the problems possible in a large class was the greater likelihood that children would fall out and clash. Here is a sample of the terms used by teachers when describing the effect of a large class on peer relations: ‘don’t get along’, ‘frictional relations’, ‘children clash together’, ‘personalities clash’, ‘strained’, ‘lots more arguments and fights’, ‘petty squabbling’, ‘verbally and physically aggressive to each other’, ‘needless squabbling’.

And here are more detailed comments from teachers with large class sizes, again of well in excess of 30 pupils.

I have experienced a lot more arguments and fights mainly to do with football. (33)

Occasionally they get irritable with each other about lack of space. (35)

On the whole, the group get on well together, numbers and lack of space, however, often leads to petty squabbling. (35)

There are 30 in the class and often they are verbally/physically aggressive towards one another because they are in a confined space. (31)

This tendency to fall out with each other was only mentioned by teachers with large classes. Some of these were also double coded when they linked the negative effect of large class sizes on the amount of space (see below).

Another subset of these general comments concerned the difficulties faced in stopping clashes between different personalities in the class (one way in which class size, type of individual pupils and peer relations are almost necessarily interconnected – as discussed below).
In large groups it is almost inevitable that personalities will clash and this is always considered when organising class groupings. (30)

Some problems again in keeping apart potentially frictional relationships. (35)

It can be quite strained. Several of the boys are on/off friends. There aren't enough corners to put them in. (30)

... because of the numbers if someone falls out they all ‘gang’ up together. Some children find it difficult being in a large class and become quiet, whilst the loud ones tend to perform to an audience! Also they fall out because of the lack of space on tables as a greater number of children have to share a table! (34)

We now turn to the other five sub-themes within this category. These reflected more specific, discrete aspects or qualities of positive peer relationships.

Cohesiveness/integration. The value of small classes for some teachers is that they enable the children to become a cohesive group \((n = 5)\). The terms used to describe this were also ‘gelling’ and ‘forming a close bond’ as a group. In the teachers’ own words:

Less children = ‘gel as a class’. [their own words]. (22)

Although there are problems, I believe that the size of the class has helped make the bond with each other stronger. (23)

Small class size has put strain on some relationships and strengthened others. Generally bonded much better as a class. (18)

The converse process – that is, a negative impact on the cohesiveness of peer relations – was described in the case of large classes \((n = 8)\):

It has taken longer for the class to bond together as a group which has led to a great deal of friendship group arguments. (31)

Due to there being so many, there can be friction in the class and they are not a closely bonded. (31)
A larger class is more difficult to shape into a cohesive team, so relationships suffer from this. (32)

One subgroup of comments was classified under the cohesiveness theme and this might go some way to accounting for the lack of cohesion in children’s relationships noted by teachers. A number of teachers \((n = 13)\) were consistent in finding that in their larger classes there was a process of fragmentation of peer relationships, for example, in terms of the formation of more subgroups and cliques, and that this process had a detrimental effect on the cohesiveness and bonding of peer relations as a whole.

The children in this class divide into quite strong friendship groups and find it difficult when asked to work with different children. (30)

Due to there being so many, groups have formed within the class which tend not to mix … This has meant that there can be friction in the class and they are not a closely bonded class. (31)

Splits into separate groups – bigger ‘gangs’ of friends (and enemies!). Not as many people to fall out with in a smaller class. (31)

Pupils tend to keep to small group of personal friends. (36)

More mixing was possible in smaller class size. Children tend to work with same peers, less opportunities to mix with all Y6. (36)

Sometimes, teachers said that the formation of social subgroups in larger classes involved children of similar attainment/ability levels, and this is one way in which larger classes can contribute to more academic and social segregation. It is also one way in which the allocation of children to attainment-level groups for working purposes can affect peer relations and friendship groupings:

Children tend to stick to small, well-established friendship groups with limited social mobility (especially between low and high achievers). (31)
Supportive and caring toward each other. A third theme \((n = 6)\) describing features of peer relations affected by class size was similar, though conceptually distinct. In small classes:

The pupils form caring and supportive relationships with their peers. \((16)\)

They are more aware of what is happening in each other’s lives and they are very supportive of each other. \((23)\)

Quality of friendship relations. One of the advantages of using teacher’s own words to describe any connection between peer relations and class size is that it can provide a grounded description of more subtle qualities that would be hard to access through other forms of data collection such as observation coding schedules. A fourth sub-theme referred more specifically to qualities of friendship relations being adversely affected by large classes, for example, in terms of durability, security, depth and lack of conflict in friendship relations \((n = 6)\). In small classes:

Children seem to cope and retain friendships for longer periods of time. \((24)\)

A smaller class has meant that the children do know each other very well. The majority of them feel secure in their friendships and relationships with each other. \((25)\)

While, in larger classes:

Friendships in a bigger class are shallower and more strained. \((31)\)

The longer comments below show the way that a large class can exacerbate the problem of dealing with friendship group issues:

We try hard to discuss problems as a class but it is easy for distractable children not to pay attention and distract others who want to work. Moving children who tend to be isolated by friendships is hard in a large class – the larger the class the more children who mustn’t sit next to or within a group of others. I must constantly move them around. There are always friendship problems but it does seem to take up a huge amount of time. \((35)\)
There are some conflicts in this class over friendship. Again because of the lack of space children do sit with others they do not get along with. They are fine in the classroom but at lunchtimes and playtimes they antagonise each other. Also, by the law of averages, the larger the class the more ‘rogues’ you have and again they are difficult to isolate. (38)

*Tolerance.* The fifth sub-theme referred to the greater likelihood of tolerance between pupils in small classes, and how it was easier to integrate newcomers, children with SEND, and provided less fertile conditions for bullying \( (n = 5) \):

When there are less children in the class they get on better with each other and are more tolerant. (29)

Conversely, in a large class there are more difficulties:

Bigger numbers = increased opportunities for ‘insecure’ class members to find vulnerable ‘new’ targets for bullying. I have set up a support group for vulnerable children \( (8) \) – of these, 3 are new to the school this year. (34)

*Better working relationships.* A sixth and final sub-theme category referred specifically to ways in which smaller classes allowed better working relationships – for example, working as a team, better group work, keep conversation going and more detailed, better social skills \( (n = 5) \). In more detail:

It has helped because the group in this class get on well and work as a team. If the class was bigger than this I don’t feel would be as effective. (21)

Small group encourages open dialogue. (12)

... generally work well together. (20)

They keep conversations going and they seem more detailed in what they discuss. (24)
Sometimes, teachers referred specifically to the connection between class size and collaborative group work:

Group work is easy to plan and they work well together generally. (24)

The quieter atmosphere has encouraged shy children to speak in class as contributions are more valued by their peers. Group work is more manageable as the children now work better together. (26)

To summarise this section on the TQ results, teachers tended to feel that the quality of peer relations was enhanced in small classes. This was seen in terms of six sub-theme categories: (1) positive relationships in general; (2) cohesiveness (bonding, gelling as a group); (3) being supportive and caring; (4) the quality of friendship relations in terms of, for example, durability, security; (5) tolerance – for example, it is easier to integrate newcomers, children with SEND; and (6) better working relationships – working as a team, better group work, keeping conversation going and more detailed, better social skills.

We are not arguing that these qualities only occur in small classes of course, but the teachers’ extensive comments suggest that that they will be more evident and more easily engendered in a small class environment.

In addition to these six sub-theme categories, two additional codes were needed to cover teachers’ comments on the effect of large class sizes on peer relations.

Space. There were a relatively large number of teachers (n = 27) who referred to the lack of space in classrooms, aggravated by large class sizes, and the knock-on effect this had on relationships between pupils. These comments were usually expressed in terms of the negative effects on peer relations of having less space or more confined conditions as a result of larger class sizes, though less frequently teachers cited the positive effects of a smaller class on peer relationships when there was more space. As we have seen, sometimes these overlapped with comments cited above: for instance, they also covered an accompanying increase in conflicts between children. The basic point is that class size and space in the classroom are interconnected factors that affect peer relationships. Here we present some quotations from Year 5 teachers with large classes (those from Year 6 teachers were similar).
Keeping distance between desks and chairs to avoid contact impossible so movement has to be restrained – leads to less investigative work. (30)

‘Rat syndrome’ at times. (31)

More irritable with each other due to less space/less personal space. (31)

When the classroom is crowded children ‘rub shoulders’ with others more frequently and this can cause tensions. An emptier classroom is much calmer and gives a quieter working atmosphere – when 6 go out for ‘booster’ classes for example. (35)

Close proximity to each other, none or little personal space means they conflict with each other more readily. (35)

Classroom management problems for the teacher. A second set of additional comments focused on the connection between class size and peer relations. There were a number of comments by teachers ($n = 20$) that showed how smaller class sizes made the job of managing peer relationships much easier, and how, conversely, larger classes made this more difficult. The following comments come from Year 5 teachers (again, those from Year 6 teachers were similar).

With a small class:

Any petty disagreements have been dealt with quickly as they have been easy to pinpoint. The classroom is large enough and the class small enough to have ‘time-out’ zones when required. (19)

They have fewer people to relate closely with on a regular basis which makes it easier for them to maintain good relationships with each other. Any problems that occur are quickly apparent, and therefore quickly sorted out, resulting in a better overall learning environment. (23)

Good class relationships. Squabbles or potential problems are easier to detect and therefore deal with before they become major incidents. (18)
With a large class:

Sometimes I feel that I haven’t got time to really sort out the more severe emotional/social needs because of the numbers. (30)

In large groups it is almost inevitable that personalities will clash and this is always considered when organising class groupings. (30)

We try hard to discuss problems as a class but it is easy for distracting children not to pay attention and distract others who want to work. Moving children who tend to be isolated by friendships is hard in a large class – the larger the class the more children who mustn’t sit next to or within a group of others. I must constantly move them around. There are always friendship problems but (in a larger class) it does seem to take up a huge amount of time. (35)

Positive with large classes/negative with small classes

There were far fewer comments \((n = 8)\) that argued – interestingly – that peer relations were worse in small classes and better in large classes. This was almost always connected to one factor: restricted social and friendship possibilities in small classes and the way large classes allowed more friendship choices. The basic idea is that it is easier for a child in a larger class to find someone to be friends with or with whom one is compatible, while in a smaller class if a child falls out with another pupil it may be more difficult to find alternative friends.

Here are a few responses from Years 5 and 6 teachers who were negative about small classes:

Occasionally difficulties can arise due to the fact there are less children to choose friends from and if you have a disagreement with a friend there are not so many others to turn to. (24)

Small class – not enough children for relationship building – divides into cliques. (23)

I feel (with a small class) it should be a lovely opportunity for children to work in different ways – individually, pairs, groups, class, but having worked a few times with very small classes,
disputes, minor incidents occur more frequently. Often some children feel isolated as they can’t find someone ‘like them’ – not enough children to choose from. (19)

And here are some positive comments from teachers about large classes ($n = 19$).

Larger number can be beneficial at times as a larger combination of groups gives variety. The good thing about a large class is that if any children do fall out they have several other friends in the class. (33)

Children feel a large class is good for interpersonal relationships as there are always people around to play with/talk to/work with. (35)

Larger classes can sometimes help relationships due to wider choice of friendship combinations. (31)

In larger classes there is more opportunity for children to find like-minded children. (34)

There were a few other comments in which teachers said that larger classes can help with sharing ideas, and with making it less easy for a dominant child to take over.

**Conclusions**

The importance of peer relations

Over and above any connection with class size, the case studies and the TQ results revealed fascinating insights into the world of peer relationships in classrooms. The interviews and answers from teachers showed their awareness of and sense of responsibility to how pupils lived together under their care. There was talk of the fallings-out between certain individuals, the development of friendship groups, the way children could divide on lines of gender or level of attainment, the way newcomers were sometimes accepted by their peers and sometimes not, and there was occasional talk of bullying and problems at breaktime spilling over into the classroom. In the case studies, in particular, we saw
how teachers commented on how pupils helped and cared for each other. Sometimes teachers felt this was because the class, or at least most in the class, had been together for many years, in some cases since the first reception year in school; they had therefore minimally got used to each other and at best developed positive, supportive relationships.

Though teachers often know a lot about the relations between children in their class, there are also, as Nuthall (2007) pointed out, limits in their knowledge of the often-hidden world of peer relations in schools. And, as we said above, teachers themselves sometimes seemed to be aware of their own distance from the relationships between children in their classroom.

Nevertheless, teachers spend a lot of time managing relationships between children, sometimes on an incident-by-incident basis and sometimes more formally, through a sustained setting out of rules and expectations at the beginning of the school year or a substantial intervention when the need arises. In many cases, teachers across the country do an astounding job of forming a productive social group out of a relatively large group of often diverse individuals. The scale of the achievement is often underestimated – not least by teachers themselves. The fact that teachers usually manage 25 or so pupils into a largely well-functioning and biddable group is a testament to how effective they are in managing pupils and relationships between them. Teachers are sometimes criticised in the media, but the everyday way the vast majority facilitate productive peer relationships hardly gets mentioned.

The common, albeit implicit, assumption that peer relations in school are in a sense peripheral to the main business of learning and academic performance is mistaken in our view. There are two main points to make here. First, as we saw at the beginning of this chapter, peer relations are important in their own right. The development of everyday interactions between pupils are not peripheral but important ‘outcomes’ in themselves. Elsewhere we have argued (Blatchford et al. 2016a) that the social skills revealed in informal peer relations, as seen in the classroom and on the playground – skills like turn taking, taking another person’s perspective, negotiating, accepting disappointment, avoiding and managing conflicts – are very similar to the kinds of skills used and needed in productive working interactions, and form the basis for cognitive enhancement. It is no surprise that employers are now more and more arguing that it is not just academic attainment they need from young people leaving schools and universities but the skills of being able to solve problems and work together. These are important human
qualities in their own right and of value in the world outside schools. In our understandable preoccupation with academic achievement we should not lose sight of this.

The second point to make about the importance of peer relations is that as well as being of importance in their own right they are important in underpinning productive classroom relationships and learning. As we saw at the beginning of this chapter, good peer relationships in the classroom can benefit learning. Learning in classrooms is not separate from positive social relationships but underpinned and facilitated by them.

Class size and peer relations: Summary of findings

Having made the point about the importance of peer relations in their own terms, we now turn to what we have learned about the role of class size in peer relationships. Examining the case study interviews and the extensive comments by teachers of Year 5 and Year 6 classes, some felt that class size was not related to peer relations, or that the connection was not direct but affected or mediated by another factor, such as the composition of pupils in the class.

Nevertheless, the majority of teachers in both the case studies and the TQ were clear that peer relationships were better in a small class or worse in a large class. In the case studies there were a number of comments on how smaller classes led to more positive relationships and less conflict, to more cohesive relations and less fragmented social and friendship groupings; children were more supportive and caring toward each other, more tolerant of newcomers and pupils with SEND, and showed better and more productive working relationships. A similar picture emerged in the analysis of the TQ responses, and we identified six main ways in which peer relationships were positive with small classes or negative with large classes (see Key Themes box below).

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Key Themes</th>
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<td>Peer relations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• General</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Cohesiveness/integration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Supportive and caring</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Quality of friendship</td>
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<td>• Tolerance</td>
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Interestingly, there were a few comments from teachers that indicated — contrary to the above view — that larger class sizes could benefit peer relations. We think we need to point out, however, that these positive comments all referred to the larger range of potential social contacts in larger classes and how this could be helpful when children fell out with existing friends. The important point here is that positive comments about large classes were confined to the quantity of social connections; it is only when addressing the benefits of small classes and the problems of large classes, that teachers commented on the quality of peer relations, for example, in terms of cohesiveness, supportiveness, tolerance etc. We think this is an important point.

There is a disjuncture here between the kinds of qualities of peer relations referred to in this chapter and the usual more easily measured outcomes of academic attainment. Many academics and policy makers would no doubt be unconvinced about talk of relationships in the class as a benefit of small classes, but this might be turned on its head so that the criticism could be that numerical analyses of academic attainment outcomes might be missing key and important features of classroom life which, although hard to research and measure, might nonetheless be vital for effective learning. This suggestion requires further attention and research.

We can consider peer relationships within the class not only as a pupil outcome but also as evidence of classroom processes; in this sense the work in this chapter is relevant to both the first and second aims of this book (concerning outcomes and processes, respectively). We have considered peer relations more in terms of a classroom process in this chapter, but if we for a moment consider peer relationships as a kind of pupil outcome of class size differences, then we think this extends the argument in Chapter 3 about the clash between the practitioner view and research findings. It may also help further extend the solution we offered in relation to the first of our two ‘class size conundrums’ (CSC1 and CSC2) — that is, the preoccupation in much research and commentary with academic attainment, narrowly defined, may miss important consequences of class size for pupils’ school progress and development.

The work on peer relations in this chapter may also contribute to our understanding of CSC2 (Why don’t pupils in larger classes seem to obviously suffer, and why don’t pupils in smaller classes more obviously make better progress?). Over and above any direct effect of class size on peer relations, there is also the way that class size can affect teachers’ management of peer relations. A large part of classroom management involves managing relationships in the classroom, and a clear result
from this chapter is the way that a large class could lead to more conflict and squabbling between pupils and more demands on classroom management.

This also leads to a point we make in other parts of this book – that the effects of large class sizes may be minimised because of the great efforts teachers in large classes make to mitigate the potentially adverse consequences of a large class, in this case on peer relations. It was clear that most teachers – no matter what the size of class – had clearly taught pupils how to behave well within the classroom context and had successfully established expectations which were the framework for class life. But it is also clear that teachers in larger classes had to work that much harder to achieve the same outcomes. We pick up this point about the compensatory efforts of teachers in large classes in other chapters in this book.

In this chapter we have concentrated primarily on the practitioner view on peer relations. We have reiterated our recognition that there are limitations in this form of data, both in terms of the extent to which data might not be an accurate portrayal of what actually takes place, and also because of the intrinsic difficulties any adult has in accessing the world of childhood relations and friendships.

It is therefore important we feel to conduct more research on peer relations in classrooms. Despite their undoubted importance, it is interesting how little researchers know about the everyday processes through which relationships between children develop and affect learning, and how friendships and cliques develop over time. The most appropriate method of data collection seems to us to be detailed observations of peer groups over time (see McGrath and Altermatt 2001). In particular, and connected to this book, there is also great potential for social psychological approaches to peer relations in schools, to help develop further insights into contextual influences such as class size on group cohesion, interdependence and social structures, including cliques and subgroups.

Interconnectedness of class size effects

It is very difficult to determine a precise estimate of the exact role played by class size in relations between pupils. This is not just because we do not have enough research or because our estimates are not accurate enough, but because there is an inherent difficulty with such a quest. To pick up on a recurring theme throughout this book, one of the values of a careful study of class size effects, as in this book, is that it brings out the
complex interconnectedness of many factors. What comes across is the way that, while class size probably does not have a direct role in pupil attainments or pupils' relationships with each other, there is a complex set of interconnections between class size, peer relationships, the history of the relationships between the children, the composition of the class, classroom size, and so on. Even when teachers felt that class size did not have a clear role in the formation of relationships between children, some recognised that large class sizes can make the handling of pupil relationships more difficult and that small class sizes can make it easier. We see again the fallacy of searching for the single cause and single effect. In a way, teachers – who often both experience and articulate the complexities involved – are one step ahead of much direction of research on class size effects. This is a point we return to in each chapter and develop further in the last chapter of this book.

Class size and peer relations: Pedagogical implications

In the last chapter, we saw that dealing with the group-based organisation of pupils in UK classes was made more difficult by larger classes, and at the end of the chapter we argued that more could be done to adapt teaching so that it made more of group-based organisation, and also, more specifically, used collaborative group work. We found no evidence that teachers used peer or group-based learning as a way of dealing with large classes.

In this chapter, examination of the connections between class size and peer relationships brings into sharp relief the overriding importance of peer relationships within the classroom and raises questions about what teachers can do to help develop high-quality relationships. We have to be careful here. We are not suggesting there is a serious problem with teachers' management of peer relations. We have repeatedly said that it seemed for the most part to be done effectively. We are not suggesting here the need for a general guide to aiding relationships between pupils.

We do, though, think that there is more that teachers can do to make the most of the opportunities of peer interactions for learning purposes. Teachers, as we have seen, and especially in large classes, can spend a lot of energy managing relationships between children. It is our view that they rarely find or take the time within the curriculum to work on child-to-child strategies that can help to overcome these difficulties. In other words, the management strategies are fundamentally teacher to pupils, rather than developing child to child solutions.
A ‘relational approach’ to encouraging high-quality group work: The SPRinG project

What we are suggesting is the value in encouraging the conditions needed for high-quality group work. This, we believe, is of value in large classes, to help teachers make best use of more limited time with each pupil. But it is also of value in small classes, where, as we found in previous research (Blatchford et al. 2001), there is if anything less group work taking place. In this chapter we introduce an approach adopted in another of our projects – the SPRinG project – which provides the basis for teachers and schools to introduce high-quality group work. One of the key principles of this work is that good relationships between pupils need to be developed in order to encourage high-quality group work. We stress the value of a ‘relational approach’ to develop collaborative learning and group work skills. This is perhaps particularly important in large classes because the teacher is less able to monitor each group.

There is a growing international impetus to enhance children’s active engagement and collaborative learning. It is increasingly realised across the world that students not only need to acquire knowledge but also the desire and skills to work well together. The ability to work collectively with others has been described as a key twenty-first-century skill (Griffin et al. 2012) and likely to be more in demand within the workplace as we move towards an increasingly automated and knowledge-based future.

However, it has been found that primary and secondary schools in Britain often do not utilise collaborative group working amongst pupils. The stress on school accountability and high stakes assessments of pupils often makes it difficult for teachers to feel they have the time for collaborative group work. In a programme of Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)-funded research we have shown that even when children sit around tables in groups, as is often the case in British primary classrooms, it is surprisingly rare for them to be asked to work collaboratively (Kutnick and Blatchford 2014). Although much psychological theory argues that collaboration with peers is a powerful force in conceptual development, active learning and communication, and despite collaborative learning being listed as one of the most effective approaches in the reviews of effective interventions in education (for example, Hattie 2009; Higgins et al. 2013), existing approaches to enhancing collaborative group working within school contexts are limited. Without effective strategies for teachers to promote successful group work, grounded in the realities of classroom life and interactions,
attempts to implement and utilise group work often result in frustration among teachers and pupils and the marginalisation of collaborative group work within the curriculum (see Kutnick and Blatchford 2014).

This was the background to the large-scale SPRinG project, co-directed by Peter Blatchford (UCL IOE), Maurice Galton (Cambridge) and Peter Kutnick (Brighton) and funded by the ESRC Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP). It was designed to address what were seen as limitations of other approaches to group work and to test the implementation and use of a new approach to group work in primary and secondary school settings. It is the single biggest study in the UK, and perhaps worldwide, on group work. It involved a year-long collaboration with teachers to develop resources and approaches to enhancing group working followed by a year-long quasi-experimental longitudinal evaluation of its effectiveness, and a further year identifying and testing applications of group work: for example, for schools working under challenging circumstances. The results, published in many publications (for example, Baines et al. 2007; Blatchford et al. 2006), gave clear support for the academic and interactional benefits of group work: children who took part on the programme had raised levels of achievement in English, maths and science, and group work improved pupils’ behaviour in class as well as raising levels of active engagement in learning and facilitating more higher level, thoughtful learning processes. There was also a Scottish extension of SPRinG led by Andy Tolmie, Christine Howe and colleagues, and SPRinG has been applied successfully in the Caribbean and East Asia. A full account of the research in primary schools can be found in Kutnick and Blatchford (2014).

The SPRinG approach goes beyond previous cooperative and collaborative approaches by stressing the strategic integration of group work across the curriculum and school day and also because of its relational approach to enhancing group working in classrooms. The programme aims to develop the following: (1) pupils’ social and communication skills, (2) teachers’ skills to organise the classroom environment for group work, (3) learning activities that warrant group working and enable integration with other instructional approaches and (4) how teachers can support groups undertaking group work. As a result of the work conducted with teachers, a handbook of guidance for schools and teachers was published by Routledge. A second edition has recently been published (Baines, Blatchford and Kutnick 2017) with several new features, including a whole-school approach and the international case for group work (for example, in East Asia).
The first principle of the SPRinG project is particularly relevant to this chapter – the focus on supportive relationships between pupils through a ‘relational’ approach. One cannot just put children into groups and expect high-quality group work; group work skills have to be developed. The ‘relational’ approach develops communication skills and sustains a positive group work ethos. The group work activities are organised around a developmental sequence: (1) Social skills (trust, sensitivity, dealing with conflict); (2) communication skills (taking turns, active listening, giving and asking for help, explaining and evaluating, arguing and counter-arguing; summarising); and (3) ‘Advanced’ group-working skills (making group decisions, compromises, coming to consensus, planning timescale for work, group roles). As a result of these activities, pupils should have trust and respect, be able to engage in high-level talk involving explanation and counter arguments, have an ability to organise work independently in groups, and have a willingness to reflect on how the group is working.

The programme handbook for teachers and schools (see Baines et al. 2017) provides guidance on the key role of the teacher in adapting group work for different learning tasks and in supporting groups. The key aim is to encourage pupil independence rather than directly teaching pupils. Another principle offers guidance on the role of the teacher in encouraging group work. In brief, the aim is for teachers to think strategically about their role in the group, in terms of supporting lessons through briefing and debriefing, supporting interaction through scaffolding, modelling and reinforcing group work, and monitoring group work.