

Introduction

Just one: great public schools with classes of twelve or smaller.

—**Kurt Vonnegut** (1922–2007) when asked, “If you were to build or envision a country you could consider yourself a proud citizen of, what would be *three* of its basic attributes?” (*Infinite Mind* 2006, emphasis mine)

In Philip Jackson’s classic study, *Life in Classrooms*, he writes, “The crowds in the classroom may be troubling. But there they are. Part of becoming a student involves learning how to live with that fact” (1990, p. 19). Class size is easy to take as a given of schooling if you’ve always taught or seen classes of relatively equal size. That’s not my experience. I’ve taught for eight years at a public school with fluctuating enrollment, which makes for fluctuating class sizes. It’s been a laboratory of sorts, a laboratory particularly suited to the formation and testing of hypotheses about class size. The genesis for this book came when I began to observe myself reacting to some students differently in large classes. I began to notice that I tend to throw up my hands sooner in a large class and say to myself, “This student doesn’t belong here.” Meanwhile, I noticed a similar student in a smaller class doesn’t appear so beyond help. Instead, I feel up to the challenge of meeting his or her needs by offering a more basic option or a slower-paced plan—or something more tied to the student’s interests or background rather than simply the mandated curriculum—allowing both of us to feel a sense of success. The same tendency held true for the done-in-half-the-time disruptors—they seemed to me not to belong only in the context of larger classes. In a small class I was more able to successfully engage them in additional or more challenging work.

After some self-study, I came to believe it’s not simply a function of the amount of extra time I have in a small class to do that sort of

accommodating or individualizing, much less of being a “bad” person or teacher. There is also a change in my attitude and outlook that is a product of having less time per student. In a large class I unthinkingly retreat from a sense of responsibility to each and every student. Because I perceive I can’t much help this student in this particular situation (a large class), I fear that the student will create a sense of failure for me or endanger the standard I am attempting to set, whether academic or behavioral. In anticipation of that, I retreat from my duty to the student so I can protect myself from that feeling. I rationalize it by the belief that the problem resides in the student, not in me. (It really resides in the situation.) So instead of thinking, “I can’t help this student,” which makes me feel powerless, I think, “This student can’t be helped.” And, especially in my first several years of teaching, I often vented my frustration on that student for being in my class and not “belonging” in it. In a small class, all of a sudden, every student is transformed, by the magic of the situation, into someone I can help and who deserves it. With very few exceptions, I end up enjoying the company of every student in my small classes.

I tried to find a book on the issue, one that didn’t just skim the obvious surface of things. It turns out there wasn’t one.

Relationship Load Reduction

Bluntly put, our schools are neglecting our children, depriving them of the adult attention that is the cornerstone of their development into happy and responsible adults and parents. What’s more, we’re subjecting teachers to working conditions in which they are more likely to hurt our kids with the little attention they can pay them. This raises hints of abuse. The question of style of control is central to the question of nurturance in school. When truly faced with it, I suspect most of us find it hard to stomach that coercion is still an enormous component of teaching. I argue that large *relationship load*—the number of relationships we ask students and educators to sustain—is a predominant factor.

No, schools are not *completely* neglectful. Yes, our schools teach important information and skills. Yes, they are a chance for young people to be with and learn from each other. But these benefits come at a great cost when out of balance with adult attention. In this book you will find outrage but also hope. Obviously we *do* care about children, but in the case of schooling we fail to question assumptions that block that care from being apparent to them. By accepting that schools are *a part of* and not *a break from* childrearing, we can restructure them to be closer to what our children (future adults) need.

Mostly this book is practical in outlook, which means I may make compromises with—or departures from—the status quo that rub some readers

wrong. Pedro Noguera, a prominent voice for educational equity, calls this kind of approach “pragmatic optimism” (2003, p. xiii). I would prefer, for example, not to have to resort to a supposedly universal human nature, or to resort to a philosophy of “development” to justify why we should meet children’s needs *now*, or indeed to resort to a concept of “child” laden with assumptions that it is such a unique category of human being. But those are the frames within which research has been done and within which readers will respond. I would also like to include my worries about whether making the United States a healthier place to grow up might actually enhance the often selfish and harmful impacts of its superpower status in the world, but that would probably weaken my arguments. There are some philosophical compromises I refuse to make, however. Principally, the shift in outlook I am asking readers to consider is to see that schooling consists of relationships built around learning, rather than relationships valued only insofar as they benefit learning. That shift forces us to think outside our hyperindividualism (our philosophy of separation, as I’ll call it), to see that we are embedded in a community and that the intentional or unintentional isolation of our children from the influence of nonparental adults is not only futile but also destructive. What it will take to make schools help rather than hurt childrearing is an up-front investment that will return to us with interest in the long run. My proposal is to restructure schools with positive adult attention as their primary goal and academics as their secondary but simultaneous goal.

I have tried to make this book the strongest case ever made for smaller classes, smaller schools, a maximum of continuity of teacher-student relationships, and fewer and deeper school relationships for parents and guardians. All these are aspects of what I’ll call either *grouping size* or *relationship load*. The number of kids grouped together for learning purposes necessarily places a certain number of relationships on the educator’s job description. Similarly, the number of teachers a student is asked to work with over the years makes for more relationships the student has to start “cold” and *to lose*. Parents and guardians, as well, are confronted with a certain number of relationships at schools that can either foster or impede cooperation and trust between the home and the classroom. I will show that the smaller these numbers, the better for our kids *and* their caregivers.

You’ll notice that my arguments feature class and school size reduction—most prominently—and class size more prominently than school size. This is because the elements of relationship load seem to rank themselves in importance in direct proportion to the amount of sacrifice they would require and therefore the amount of resistance they’ll face. So you’ll notice that my arguments focus least on parent load reduction. This is because it is largely achieved as a by-product of implementing the other three elements. Because of its automatic nature, I could have defensibly left it out as a “mere” effect, but that

would reinforce the mind-set that leaves parents out of the equation of schooling and schooling out of the equation of childrearing.

In making my case, I've refrained from promising gains in test scores. I do that *not* because I think humane schools won't get better academic results. I do it because I'm afraid that readers may hold to the mistaken belief that better academic results are the most legitimate reason for humane schools. That is a pervasive and damaging attitude shared by many of our citizens and their policy-makers. Academic achievement, such as we've measured it, has not declined in any overall way, despite myths to the contrary. Nor, as I will attempt to show, do changes in the economy demand better knowledge any more urgently than they demand better childrearing. Knowledge is not in trouble, but nurturance—and therefore our society as a whole—is. Let's ignore the fake crisis. The *real* crisis is that children are getting less-than-adequate adult attention, and it's partly the fault of schools. But schools can be a key to the solution—if relationships come first. Everything that is mature, ethical, compassionate, and responsible in our soon-to-be adults and parents depends on whether and how adults attend to them.

There is some talk in the education literature about the role of schools in mitigating the problem of neglect at home. Few dare suggest schools actually *participate* in the neglect of our children. It's a threatening concept that implies we are all accomplices in a culture-wide cruelty. If an individual did it, we'd prosecute or at least help that person. Since it's all of us, we call it "the way things are," and by implication, the way they have to be or should be. We all care about kids—I don't doubt that. But our school grouping size tells kids otherwise, and what *they* perceive matters more in the end.

Some may say this is all preposterous, perhaps pointing out that "emotional abuse is a pattern of behavior that impairs a child's emotional development or sense of self-worth. This may include constant criticism, threats, or rejection, as well as withholding love, support, or guidance" (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2006). Since schools try their best, they are not "withholding," they're just doing what they can with their resources. People who make this argument rarely acknowledge that we make decisions about how many resources to allocate—budgets are not accidents. From the child's perspective, the distinctions between school personnel and budget-makers and between intention and lack of intention are not significant (Daniel, Wassell, and Gilligan 1999, p. 131).

My proposal is based on both research and experience. On what wisdom have we based the status quo? Science? Tradition? Frugality? The squeaky-wheel principle? Since we are unable to advocate well for ourselves when we are children, it is relatively easy to subordinate childhood needs. But that can change. Admitting what kids really need—what we ourselves, who are now adults, needed—demands a fundamental questioning of relationship load (class

size, school size, teacher continuity, and parent load) as a tradition of schooling. Kids need more adults (and adults more) than schools currently provide.

As already implied, I do have an answer to the above question. We've based the status quo on an underlying philosophy of separation. I didn't originally want to make this point because I was afraid it would keep the proposal from appearing down-to-earth and practical. In the end, ironically, it was practicality that forced me to discuss it. In order to make the proposal affordable in the eyes of enough of the public and enough policy-makers, the separation of services for special needs kids and the overspecialization of teachers—both of which come from this philosophy of separation—must change. Schools that have despecialized their teachers and included a greater percentage of children with special needs in mainstream classrooms have often reduced their class sizes by as many as ten students without finding new sources of funding. In other words, not only are despecialization and inclusion a more humane and natural way to educate children, they are also a practical means of reducing the costs and recruitment demands of class size reduction.

The Complete Set

Perhaps the most unique feature of this book is that it calls for the packaging of the four aspects I've grouped under relationship load. Most advocates of relationship-centered schools don't bundle them, or don't with any depth. I will argue that it's not any one piece of relationship load that's the key—it's the whole package. A truly relationship-centered school is one centered on relationships in all their dimensions: day-to-day interactions (class size); less being a stranger, as well as more teacher cooperation (school size); time to reap the rewards (continuity); and trust between school and home (parent load). I'll argue that the assumption that the parts do or should function in isolation is untenable. Ultimately, however, if forced to choose only one of the four aspects, I would choose class size because it tends to ameliorate the drawbacks of implementing changes to the other aspects.

Here are the recommendations I will provide support for over the course of the book:

- Classes of twelve for most students
- Classes of nine for students in areas beset with poverty and racism
- Classes of six for “disabled” or extremely troubled students who cannot be mainstreamed
- Secondary schools of no more than 500 students for most students
- Elementary schools of no more than 300 students
- Secondary schools of no more than 300 students in areas of poverty and racism

In Chapter 5 I will explain the reasoning behind these numbers. With regard to teacher continuity, I will propose elementary teachers stay with the same group for as many years as possible, and I will suggest we eliminate separate intermediate schools. I advocate universal use of the advisory model in schools where students learn from multiple teachers as a principal mechanism for promoting deeper parent-school relationships. (Advisories also benefit students and teachers, of course.) I also advocate full-service schools for impoverished and racially stigmatized communities that would offer parents and other community members a broader spectrum of services to make parenting and growing up a bit easier. I think this plan for relationship load reduction could be implemented within twenty-six years.

Organization of the Book

Nobody wants to be told they don't care about kids. The value of this book is not in its general appeals to demonstrating our concern for kids—I'm sure you've heard them all before. The value of this book lies in a marshaling of the evidence for using relationship load reduction toward that end. I've structured the book to prove in depth all that I've said so far in brief. I will advocate a notion that may seem uncomfortably radical or idealistic at first, but whose basis—that future adults are worth sacrifices on the part of current adults—is as conventional as one can get.

Chapter 1 will sum up the reasons behind the proposal. It summarizes the major arguments of the book by listing eighteen reasons we should reduce grouping size before bothering to do any other tinkering with public schools. It points out, for example, that in every other analogous theater of human interaction, including daycares with school-age children, groups tend to be much smaller than we find in our schools. If schools were considered daycares, they would break the law in most states. It also points out the many ways in which relationship load reduction is already a secret ingredient in other recommendations and "alternatives."

The next three chapters lay the groundwork for the proposal by defining the off-target—and then the on-target—aims of schooling. Chapter 2 clarifies the philosophy of separation that underlies both the imaginary test-score crisis and the real childrearing crisis, then attempts to dispel any lingering doubt about which crisis our schools should be helping to solve. Chapter 3 shows the symbiosis between a focus on relationships and a focus on racial justice. Chapter 4 gives a psychological explanation for why children need both parental and nonparental adult attention.

Getting to the heart of the proposal, Chapter 5 describes the four interconnected aspects of relationship load: class size, school size, teacher continuity, and parent load. It explains how they interact to meet the childhood

needs identified in the previous chapter and why specialization and separation assumptions are interlaced with relationship load. I then lay out the reasoning behind my specific recommendations. Chapter 6 offers an in-depth look at relationship load reduction's effect on the teacher-student relationship. It provides particular detail on how teacher attitude and practice will change for the better.

Chapter 7 looks at the arguments most commonly used against relationship load reduction and shows where each one falls short. In Chapter 8, the "too expensive" argument is met with detailed cost projections that will surprise most readers. There you will find that to give our kids almost twice as much of their teacher's time, we'll only have to spend 20 percent more public money on education and only 0.8 percent more of the nation's wealth when all types of taxation are included. But that net increase will diminish in the long run as the costs of the effects of our neglect of children go down, for example, crime. Thus, halving the class size in the United States would cost between \$0 and \$420 a year for the average taxpayer, depending on how long one is willing to wait for savings to accrue. At worst, that upper figure is *a dollar a day* during the average worker's life between high school and retirement. I will try to show that dismissing the obvious solution as "too expensive" and dealing with the consequences is far more complex an undertaking than we pretend it is.

Chapters 9 and 10 discuss implementation issues not addressed earlier, including a timetable. They cover changes at the school, district, state, and national levels. Lest we forget that government is not the only entity with an impact on (and a responsibility to) the common good, Chapter 11 points out ways the private sector can help solve the nurturance crisis. Chapter 12 returns the focus to the parents and teachers who can turn the potential of smallness into the reality of nurturance.

I searched high and low for it, but a book like this simply hadn't been written yet. I can speak frankly and at length on the issue of relationship load because I've spent over eight years in the grouping size trenches and had my nose in a lot of books about education. The enrollment of the nontraditional public secondary school where I work fluctuates from year to year and as each year goes on. This means I've had an opportunity to teach classes that range from four to forty. And because of the satellite structure of my school, I've also taught at school sites that ranged from four to four hundred. My convictions on the effects of changes in relationship load are not conjectures but firsthand accounts. My arguments are supported by solid research, but at heart they are an expression of the most solid understanding my experience has left me with: School is not an exception to any rule, whether psychological or ethical; school is not separate from but is a part of childrearing—and it should behave as such.

How *Not* to Read This Book

I'm definitely not saying that relationship load reduction is a one-man show. There is clearly no such thing as a teacherless autopilot, but there are things that can make quality teaching easier and students happier and healthier. Doing something first and foremost does not mean doing *only* that thing. Small grouping size in schools is insufficient but necessary to solve the real crisis without bringing down average academic achievement or precluding its more just distribution, but although it's not the only ingredient, it's the most important and most easily fixed ingredient currently missing. And it does not imply that any other ingredients should be removed, such as teacher effort. Any reduction in teacher quality that comes with increasing the number of teachers to cut class size in half will be (a) inherently temporary and (b) counterbalanced by the job's becoming half as difficult. If you're worried about effort, research has indicated that educators tend to work *harder* in smaller schools and smaller classes, not *less* hard, despite the fact that success is easier to attain (Achilles 1999, pp. 38, 111; Jehlen and Kopkowski 2006; Toch 1991, p. 266). With that caveat in mind, let me try to chip away at any skepticism about whether relationship load reduction really should be first on our education reform "to do list."