

Little research evidence exists on the effects of small class sizes in special education



There are surprisingly few studies exploring the effects of small class sizes in special education on any outcomes.

What is the aim of this review?

The objective of this Campbell systematic review was to synthesise data from existing studies to assess the impact of small class sizes in special education on students' academic achievement, socioemotional outcomes and well-being.

Despite carrying out extensive literature searches, the authors of this review found only seven studies exploring the question of class size in special education. The authors therefore call for more research from quantitative and qualitative researchers alike, such that practitioners and administrators may find guidance in their endeavours to create the best possible school provisions for all children with special educational needs.

What is this review about?

While research on the relationship between general education class size and student achievement is plentiful, research on class size in special education is scarce, even though class size issues must be considered particularly important to students with special educational needs. This systematic review sought to examine the effects of small class sizes in special education on the academic achievement, socioemotional development and well-being of children with special educational needs.

Furthermore, the review aimed to perform a qualitative exploration of the views of children, teachers and parents concerning class size conditions in special education.

A secondary objective was to explore how potential moderators (e.g. performance at baseline, age, and type of special educational need) affected the outcomes.

What studies are included?

This review included seven studies, of which two were quantitative, four were qualitative, and one was both quantitative and qualitative. It was not possible to perform a meta-analysis, nor a qualitative thematic synthesis. The included studies were critically assessed, coded for descriptive data, and narratively summarised.

One quantitative study was assessed to be of sufficient methodological quality following risk of bias assessment. Unfortunately, it was not possible to extract an effect size from this study



How up-to-date is this review?

Searches in bibliographic databases and EBSCO OPEN Dissertations were performed in April 2021, while the remaining searches for grey literature, hand searches in key journals, and citation tracking took place between January and May 2022.

What is the Campbell Collaboration?

Campbell is an international, voluntary, non-profit research network that publishes systematic reviews. We summarise and evaluate the quality of evidence about programmes in the social and behavioural sciences. Our aim is to help people make better choices and better policy decisions.

About this summary

This summary is based on Bondebjerg, A., Dalgaard, N. T., Filges, T., & Viinholt, B. C. A. (2023). The effects of small class sizes on students' academic achievement, socioemotional development and well-being in special education: A systematic review. *Campbell Systematic Reviews*, 19, e1345. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cl2.1345>.

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since it did not report the required information and the study authors could not be contacted.

Three qualitative studies were assessed to be of sufficient methodological quality following qualitative critical appraisal.

What are the main findings of this review?

There are surprisingly few studies exploring the effects of small class sizes in special education on any outcomes. The included qualitative studies find that smaller class sizes are the most preferred option among students with special educational needs, their teachers and school principals. This is because of the possibilities afforded in terms of individualised instruction time and increased teacher attention to the needs of each student.

What do the findings of the review mean?

The impact of small class sizes in special education is under-researched both within the quantitative and the qualitative literature.

Future research should aim to fill this knowledge gap from diverse methodological perspectives, paying close attention to the views of parents, teachers, administrators and, most importantly, the children and young people whose everyday lives are spent in the various special education provisions.

