

THE SMALL CLASS DEBATE

Cutting the size of classes motivates students but it does not always boost results, writes **Linda Yeung**

The atmosphere was boisterous as the Form One students at Raimondi College simulated a debate about how to deal with the deadly Ebola outbreak within an affected community. The class was divided into groups of five students, their desks were pushed together to form mocked-up conference tables and each student was allocated a role by the teacher.

One took the part of a man called Javier who was infected with the lethal virus, another spoke for the dog he had kept for years, a third was an animal rights activist, the fourth was a neighbour and the fifth a health official.

Their task was to decide whether the victim's dog should be killed for the sake of public safety. Each group then had to send a representative to report their conclusion to class.

"We should not kill the dog because it has feelings," one student said in English. Another student, Daren Cheng, who played the health official, countered: "No, it has to be killed to stop the spread of the disease."

It's not difficult to understand the youngsters' aversion to putting down a dog. The purpose of the discussion, after all, was primarily to give the students ample chance to practise talking and expressing their ideas in English. A small group setting is believed to encourage



Form One students at Raimondi College take part in a role-play exercise about the Ebola virus. Photo: SCMP Pictures

more participation and build up students' confidence to speak.

The positive effect of small-class teaching on students' attentiveness and motivation to learn is supported by a large body of research. And the former boys' school in the Mid-levels, which went co-educational in 2008, plans to extend small-class teaching to Form Two next year, reducing class sizes from 34 to 27, as well as further cutting the size of Form One classes to 26. The reform will be introduced progressively in higher forms over the next six years.

Principal Luisa Lo Wing-kum says: "Many schools implemented small-class teaching for core subjects only, but we introduced it for all courses. It is important to have the support from teachers, and our teachers are ready."

Raimondi managed to tap the generosity of its extensive alumni network and has successfully raised millions of dollars to fund the hiring of new teachers for extra classes. It has also got the additional space needed - classrooms that were vacated by the school's primary section, when it relocated to Wan Chai.

Lo is pinning her hopes on the costly change to attract students at a time of falling student rolls across the secondary sector, and in the face of rising competition from Direct Subsidy Scheme schools. "Small classes can help teachers better care for students and cater to their diverse needs," she says.

Alumni support also made possible the drive to reduce class sizes at the elite Wah Yan College. Since 2008, the Jesuit school has been splitting junior form students into smaller groups for the core subjects of Chinese and English and mathematics, drawing on a special fund of \$60 million raised by the Wah Yan One Family Foundation.

The two Wah Yan colleges in Hong Kong and Kowloon have since hired 20 additional teachers to handle extra student groups, at a cost of about HK\$6 million each year, says principal So Ying-lun. Students relatively weak in the core subjects attend classes of only 12.

Besides enhancing academic performance, the move ties in with the school's emphasis on personal care and whole person development, says So.

A study on Wah Yan's small class drive that was commissioned by the school from the University of Hong Kong found that students were more attentive in a small setting, while teachers spent less time on classroom discipline and became better motivated for curriculum planning and professional development.

But it also noted that those in the "weaker" classes might feel a slight sense of labelling or question the selection criteria. The report concluded that improvement in teaching and learning is dependent on many other factors, not just class size alone, and school culture always plays a key role.

Therefore the same small-class-teaching measures may not always yield a positive outcome in all school settings.

With support from the Education Bureau, 334 primary schools - more than 70 per cent of

the total - have adopted the approach, setting the maximum student number in each class at 25.

But it may take much longer before the trend becomes the norm in secondary schools because of the costs involved and continuing disagreement over its effectiveness. In some schools, however, classes are split into smaller groups for key subjects at senior secondary levels to enhance students' public examination results.

The Education Bureau points out that international studies on small-class teaching indicate that it is more effective when students are young and the impact tends to wane as they get older.

Meanwhile, schools in Hong Kong have enlisted the help of academics and researchers to help improve their teaching methods.

The Chinese University of Hong Kong's Quality School Improvement Project has offered advice and support to about one-third of local primary and secondary schools since 2004, advising on class teaching, and helping teachers develop

interesting, tailored teaching materials and worksheets.

"We try to increase teachers' capacity and teach them skills that can only be nurtured on the spot," says project director, Dr Chiu Chi-shing. "For example, you try to grab students' attention not by being funny in class but by making sure that students truly understand what they have been taught."

Chiu agrees that there is no conclusive evidence supporting the introduction of small classes in all schools. He says: "There is no obvious difference in students' academic results between secondary schools with small classes and those without."

But Chiu says that a size of 25-28 is optimal for maximising student-teacher interactions and he is not worried that a labelling effect could result from splitting a class on the basis of students' ability.

"We see it as positive discrimination," he says. "What matters is there should be support measures provided. Students will not feel labelled, if they make improvements."



The Wah Yan College team celebrates as champion in the Hong Kong Battle of the Books 2013. Photo: Chris Lau