

Class Size Effects on Reading Achievement in Europe: Evidence from Progress in International Reading Literacy Study

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Abstract : During the past three decades, class size effects have been a focal debate in education. The idea of having smaller class is enormously popular among parents, teachers and policy makers. The rationale of its popularity is that small classroom could provide a better learning environment in which there would be more teacher-pupil interaction and more individualized instruction. This early stage benefits would also have a long-term positive effect. It is a common belief that reducing class size may result in increases in student achievement. However, the empirical evidence about class-size effects from experimental or quasi-experimental studies has been mixed overall. This study sheds more light on whether class size reduction impacts reading achievement in eight European countries: Bulgaria, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia. We examine class size effects on reading achievement using national probability samples of fourth graders. All eight European countries had participated in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) in 2001, 2006 and 2011. Methodologically, the quasi-experimental method of instrumental variables (IV) has been utilized to facilitate causal inference of class size effects. Overall, the results indicate that class size effects on reading achievement are not significant across countries and years. However, class size effects are evident in Romania where reducing class size increases reading achievement. In contrast, in Germany, increasing class size seems to increase reading achievement. In future work, it would be valuable to evaluate differential class size effects for minority or economically disadvantaged student groups or low- and high-achievers. Replication studies with different samples and in various settings would also be informative. Future research should continue examining class size effects in different age groups and countries using rich international databases.

Keywords : class size, reading achievement, instrumental variables, PIRLS

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