

Smaller classes ideal to enhance learning

What is the primary reason you send your child to school? To learn, I guess. And, as a general rule, the smaller the class size, the more likely learning will take place.

The feeling among educators is learning and teaching grows more difficult as the class size exceeds 25; minds wander, individual attention is lacking, and control becomes more of an issue.

Smaller classes facilitate learning, but they do something else: they help develop tolerance. Let me give you an example. In a 12-student class, a child is likely to be part of a discussion, hear different viewpoints, and often will be called on to respond to something another student said.

“What do you think about what Johnny just said, Susan?” Or, “Can you elaborate on that, Mary?” Then, a discussion may ensue. This

scenario would be difficult in a 35-student class.

Many students in large classes are emotionally and physically distant to what is being said, and consequently, have little stake in listening carefully and developing discrimination and discussion skills; critical interaction is limited.

Children develop tolerance by having close, repeated interactions. Children are more tolerant with members of their family and close friends, for example. Not necessarily because their belief systems are the same as the child’s, but because the child has had multiple opportunities to

interact: discourses, arguments, time to synthesize disparate thoughts and ideas.

It’s the same with small classes. There is give-and-take, questions and comments and time for reflection – it’s not one sentence and out as it may be in a large class. Smaller-classes, by their very nature, teach tolerance. It’s

quite easy to be intolerant of someone if that person is 15 rows down from you. Not so easy, if you are facing someone across a lecture table.

You can’t simply decide to be tolerant. A child may say, “I will understand and be empathetic toward people.” Unfortunately, it’s not that easy. A child can’t think her way into tolerance. It has to be in the fabric of her psyche. All change comes from within, and unless a student has an opportunity to exchange ideas in a group setting, change and growth may be stymied.

Intolerance can’t be shattered in one blow. It takes face-to-face contact in small group situations. Smaller classes remove the barriers and force students to relate and engage. This allows the evils of intolerance, fear and ignorance to take a back seat to understanding and acceptance.

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