Introduction to the Special Issue

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We are pleased to share with you this special issue revisiting the research on the relationship between class size and student achievement, along with its implications for education policymakers and practitioners. For over half a century, researchers have struggled to identify those variables that contribute in significant ways to students' academic success, and the resulting, voluminous literature is rife with contradictory results. At the same time, the positive results of class size research, which is part of the body of "production function" analysis, has received broad acceptance by policymakers, parents, and practitioners who believe "smaller is better."

The fiscal implications of this belief for state and local school districts have been enormous. As such, the re-examination of class size research is particularly relevant at a time when many states and localities are making significant cuts in education budgets that require hard choices as to which programs and initiatives can be reduced or eliminated without harming students. As states, schools, and local districts make these difficult decisions, it is essential that they balance cost-effectiveness with the best interests of students and maintain the ethical, moral, and legal imperatives of equality of educational opportunity and social justice.

To that end, this issue contains five interwoven articles by James L. Phelps, whose distinguished educational career has included serving as Special Assistant to Governor William Milliken of Michigan and Deputy Superintendent in the Michigan Department of Education. This special issue of *Educational Considerations* is unique in the sense that rather than a collection of articles, it more closely resembles a monograph comprised of five chapters. Dr. Phelps' perspective, which melds research, practice, and policy, is also unique, making his analysis of the past, present, and future of class size reduction research and initiatives invaluable.

The special issue opens with an article titled, "Another Look at the Glass and Smith Study on Class Size." Glass and Smith's iconic 1978 study[1] set the stage for much of the narrative around the impact of class size on student achievement which was later reinforced by results from the Tennessee STAR experiment.[2] The second article, "A Practical Method of Policy Analysis by Considering Productivity-Related Research," presents a fresh approach to the type of analysis that historically has underpinned much of class size research. In the third article, "A Practical Method of Policy Analysis by Estimating Effect Size," Phelps takes a critical look at the use of "effect size," an oft-used metric in class size research to judge its success in raising student achievement, and offers alternative methods for calculating and interpreting it. The fourth article, "A Practical Method of Policy Analysis by Simulating Policy Options," provides an example of how the cost-effectiveness of education reforms like class size reduction can be simulated statistically in ways that are robust and meaningful to education decision makers.

The final piece is a closing essay that summarizes the findings of the previous articles and reinforces the importance of the development of a unified theory of the production of student achievement, a thread that runs through all of the articles. At the same time, Phelps acknowledges the difficulty involved in operationalizing such a theory through research methods and statistical analyses that capture the complexity of human endeavors, making the research on class size and student achievement an ongoing endeavor.

Endnotes

[1] Gene V. Glass and Mary Lee Smith, *Meta-analysis of Research on the Relationship of Class-size and Achievement* (San Francisco, CA: Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development, 1978).

[2] C.M. Achilles, B.A. Nye, J.B. Zaharias, and B.D. Fulton, "The Lasting Benefits Study (LBS) in Grades 4 and 5 (1990–1991): A Legacy from Tennessee's Four-year (K–3) Class-size Study (1985–1989)," Project STAR, a paper presented at the North Carolina Association for Research in Education, Greensboro, North Carolina, January 14, 1993.