

CALL TO CUT CLASS SIZES TO IMPROVE READING SKILLS

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Class sizes should be cut to a maximum of 25 to help young children who struggle with reading, a report on primary education said today.

The study by London University academics suggested that 12-year-olds in the first year of secondary school could also potentially benefit from small class sizes.

But despite evidence that smaller groups yield results, there has been an increase in "whole class" teaching, which was traditionally associated with children learning by "rote", the report said.

The findings followed a row over suggestions by Schools Minister Jim Knight that classes of up to 70 were "perfectly acceptable".

The research was conducted as part of the Cambridge-based Primary Review, the biggest inquiry into primary education in England for 40 years.

Academics at the Institute of Education and King's College London examined the impact of different ways of organising pupils into teaching groups.

The study said: "The age of the pupil is important when considering class size effects.

"There is a clear case for small class sizes in the reception year, but research also shows where resources could be further targeted.

"That is, on achieving classes smaller than 25 for those children with most ground to make up in literacy.

"Another important implication is to maintain smaller classes from one year to the next where possible."

They said schools should consider grouping children within their classes and allowing them to interact with each other more in lessons.

But the study added: "Recent pressures relating to the curriculum... have resulted in an increasingly heavy emphasis on whole class teaching with little room for group work."

The academics called for further research into the idea that "smaller classes may be advantageous" later in children's schooling, for "example in the first year of secondary education".

In March, the Schools Minister said he had seen a good maths class with 70 secondary school pupils and three or four adults in the room. Teachers condemned the remark.

A spokeswoman for the Department for Children, Schools and Families said: "We know small class sizes in the early years is important which is why the legal class size limit for five-, six- and seven-year-olds is no more than 30.

"In fact, the average class size for (this age group) is 25.7.

"There are more staff in primary schools than ever before which means the pupil teacher ratio has fallen to 12 pupils per staff member.

"We've made dramatic improvements in bringing down infant class sizes – in 1997, one in four infant classes had 31 pupils or more and a third of children were in oversized classes.

"Today only around one in 250 classes are unlawfully over legal limit."