

Quality or Quantity: The Overcrowding of Students in Schools

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Picture this: a classroom designed for 30 students now straining under the weight of 60. Desks jammed together like puzzle pieces that don't quite fit. A teacher's voice, fraying at the edges, barely audible over the constant murmur. Students vying, sometimes hopelessly, for a fraction of attention. This isn't speculative fiction. It's the day-to-day experience in overcrowded schools, particularly across developing nations where infrastructure can't keep pace with a ballooning student population. Athieno et al. (2025) make the connection clear: cramped, poorly ventilated classrooms with limited space correlate strongly with diminished student engagement and learning outcomes. So, while access to education is undeniably a triumph, a sobering question rises: Are we merely warehousing students, or are we genuinely teaching them? This essay contends that schools must not trade educational quality for headcount. A meaningful education isn't a bonus, it's the very point.

Perhaps the most immediate casualty of overcrowding is a teacher's ability to respond to students as individuals. Research consistently links smaller class sizes with stronger academic performance, largely because teachers can give personalized feedback, track student progress, and build the kind of rapport that turns classrooms into communities (Juldiz, 2025). But when the classroom is bursting at the seams, that kind of connection begins to fray. Teachers are stretched thin, not just physically but cognitively and emotionally, so much so that some barely notice when a student begins to drift. Reports from students in overcrowded schools suggest that many teachers, overwhelmed by sheer numbers, become passive observers rather than active guides. Motivation might still flicker among learners, but even the most determined student struggles to focus when wedged shoulder-to-shoulder, with barely enough space to open a notebook, let alone their mind. Yes, some point to tech-based or group-centered learning strategies as potential solutions. They argue these approaches promote independence and peer support. And sometimes, they do. But these strategies often assume a level of autonomy and prior understanding that many students simply don't have, especially when it comes to foundational skills like reading or algebra. The reality? Without hands-on guidance, concepts float past students like smoke, present, but impossible to grasp. And then there's the deeper issue: what kind

of system expects children to compensate for systemic shortcomings? If learners are asked to carry the weight of overcrowding, what does that say about our priorities?

The damage doesn't stop with academics. The physical and emotional atmosphere in these packed spaces often borders on unlivable. Poor air circulation, relentless noise, not enough chairs or even pens to go around, it all adds up. Ruhala et al. (2024) point out that even the ambient hum of outdated ventilation systems can disrupt students' ability to comprehend spoken instruction. In many cases, teachers resort to portable speakers just to be heard over the chaos, and even then, their voices struggle to reach the back of the room. Recognition becomes a luxury, students blur into a crowd, their needs muffled by the din. The consequences are more than logistical; they're deeply human. Frustration grows. Focus fades. Illness spreads more quickly. These are not minor inconveniences, they are barriers to learning. And yet, some still dismiss them as infrastructure problems, as if aching backs and unheard questions don't affect cognitive development. But students can't be expected to thrive in rooms that don't even let them breathe properly. Classrooms should be a place of safety and stimulation, not survival.

And then there are the teachers. Always the teachers. Overcrowding doesn't just strain their instructional capacity, it drains their spirit. Many educators are tasked with teaching multiple subjects, often with limited preparation time and insufficient materials. According to Castro et al. (2024), this kind of role-stretching demands a level of multitasking that borders on superhuman. And unsurprisingly, it's exhausting. Macuka et al. (2017) describe how teachers, pushed past their limits, begin to mask their frustrations with surface-level cheer, a phenomenon known as surface acting. Over time, this emotional dissonance corrodes motivation and leads to burnout. These aren't isolated anecdotes, they reflect a larger, systemic failure to value the emotional labor of teaching. Throwing professional development at the problem, while helpful in theory, often feels like giving a bandage to someone standing in a storm. Teachers don't just need training. They need time. Space. Respect. After all, you can't expect someone to light a fire in others when they're burning out themselves.

So what now? The evidence is clear: overcrowding undermines nearly every component of quality education, from individual attention and emotional safety to the physical health of students and teachers alike. Expanding access is important, vital, even, but if we sacrifice quality in the process, we risk building schools that serve as holding pens rather than places of growth. Policymakers must treat this issue with

urgency and imagination. That could mean hiring more teachers, constructing additional classrooms, or investing in smaller, community-based schools that lighten the load. Because the true question isn't how many students we can squeeze into a building. It's whether they leave that building wiser, more curious, more capable than when they entered. Education shouldn't feel like an assembly line, rushing kids through with barely a glance. It should feel like craftsmanship, slow, deliberate, and deeply human.

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ARTICLE DETAILS

EIR-0000027; Received: July 14, 2025; Accepted: July 16, 2025; Published: July 19, 2025

CITATION:

Dizor, Yoradyl C. (2025). *Quality or Quantity: The Overcrowding of Students in Schools*. *Education and Industry Review: Essays and Critiques*. DOI: 10.62596/eir.18xyqs09

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