A SURVEY OF PARENTS' OPINIONS AND ATTITUDES ON THE TRACKING PROGRAM USED BY LONGFELLOW JUNIOR HIGH STUDENTS IN LA CROSSE, WISCONSIN

A Seminar Paper
Presented to
Dr. Burton E. Altman, Professor
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Wisconsin State University at La Crosse

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Science in Teaching in Elementary Education

by
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GRADUATE COLLEGE

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I recommend acceptance of this seminar paper to the Graduate College in partial fulfillment of this candidate's requirements for the degree Master of Science. The Candidate has completed his oral seminar report.

July 28, 1971

Date

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This seminar paper is approved for the Graduate College:

July 28, 1971

Date

Dean, Graduate College
ABSTRACT

Statement of the problem. It was the purpose of this study: (1) to determine by means of a questionnaire the opinions and attitudes of the parents of students in Longfellow Junior High School concerning tracking in that school building; (2) to review literature and research studies pertaining to tracking and ability grouping; (3) to ascertain if opinions differ due to such variables as grade placement, track assignment, sex of student and method of grading; and (4) to formulate any other conclusions from the results of the survey which may be regarded as significant by the surveyor.

Procedure used. Twelve questions were prepared and distributed in the form of a questionnaire to one hundred parents representative of parents of students in grades seven, eight and nine in Longfellow Junior High School. Eighty-six questionnaires were completed and returned. The first three questions identified the student as to grade, track and sex. Questions four through six dealt with the attitudes and behavior of the student as observed by the parent. The last six questions were related to the tracking program. In addition to yes and no answers, provisions were made for comments by the parent. The raw data were tabulated and treated with the statistical formula Chi-square $\chi^2 = \frac{n(a - e)^2}{e}$. The 1130 IBM computer at Wisconsin State University, La Crosse, was used in analyzing the data.
Summary. The final analysis of the data garnered from the survey conducted with parents of Longfellow Junior High School students was that in only two areas were there significant differences in parental attitudes and opinions. The null hypothesis was rejected twice. A significant difference in the responses of parents of seventh, eighth and ninth grade students to the subject of basic text requirements resulted in that rejection. Parents of seventh grade students indicated that the same basic text should not be required of all grades. Parents of eighth and ninth grade students indicated that all three grades should cover the same basic text. The second rejection was the result of the responses of parents of female students regarding placing all accelerated students in one track. All other data treated by this surveyor was accepted at the .05 level of significance.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE PROBLEM</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement of the problem</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance of the study</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EXPLANATION OF TERMS</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability grouping</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average group</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bottom track</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Longfellow Junior High, La Crosse, Wisconsin</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opinion</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top track</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tracking</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASSUMPTIONS AND LIMITATIONS</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assumptions</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RESEARCH DESIGN</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procedures used</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Null hypotheses</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
III. DESIGN OF THE STUDY ........................................... 10
    PROCEDURE ...................................................... 10
    THE QUESTIONNAIRE ............................................ 10
    METHOD OF GATHERING DATA .................................... 11
    TREATMENT OF DATA ............................................. 12

IV. ANALYSIS OF DATA ............................................... 13

V. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS .......................... 20

BIBLIOGRAPHY ...................................................... 22

APPENDIX A (Letter to Parents) .................................. 24
APPENDIX B (Questionnaire) ....................................... 26
CHAPTER I

OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

THE PROBLEM

Statement of the problem. It was the purpose of this study:
(1) to determine by means of a questionnaire the opinions and attitudes of
the parents of students in Longfellow Junior High School concerning tracking
in that school; (2) to review literature and research studies pertaining to
tracking and ability grouping; (3) to ascertain if opinions differ due to
such variables as grade placement, track placement, sex of student and
method of grading; and (4) to formulate any other conclusions from the
results of the survey which may be regarded as significant by the surveyor.

Importance of the study. Educators are cognizant of the values of
various types of grouping to facilitate the learning process. Parents are
concerned about the grouping or divisions within the class structure as it
affects the student's social growth as well as his academic growth. Com-
ments from some parents indicated concern about the grouping practices in
respect to competition between groups as well as individuals within a group.
The stigma attached to a slow group prompted some parents to question the
value of grouping students.

As the investigator considered these factors she was stimulated to
conduct a survey to learn about and attempt to evaluate the opinions and
attitudes of parents concerning tracking in Longfellow Junior High School.
EXPLANATION OF TERMS

Ability grouping. Structuring a class by means of Iowa Basic Skills and Stanford-Binet test scores, and report card grades.

Attitude. A way of thinking, acting or feeling.

Average group. All students who are not part of the top or bottom track. Also referred to as track 2.

Bottom track. The twenty or twenty-five students of each grade with the lowest standardized achievement test scores and report card grades. Also known as track 3.

Longfellow Junior High, La Crosse, Wisconsin. The seventh, eighth and ninth grades.

Opinion. What one thinks; a belief not as strong as knowledge.

Top track. Those students ranking highest in each grade in standardized achievement test scores and report card grades. Also referred to as track 1.

Tracking. A method of grouping students into three distinct ability groups.

ASSUMPTIONS AND LIMITATIONS

Assumptions. The investigator made the following assumptions:
(1) the questionnaire was clear, understandable, and a valid instrument; (2) each of the respondents answered the questions to the best of his ability; (3) each of the participants involved in the study was aware that neither he nor his child was directly identified in this study; and (4) those parents surveyed who did not respond to the questionnaire did not affect the findings of the study.
Limitations. The findings of this study were limited for the following reasons: (1) the time for surveying the population may not have been conducive to a good return inasmuch as the students took the questionnaire home on the last day of school and vacation plans may have interfered with returning the survey; (2) a questionnaire may not measure opinions and attitudes without reflecting the bias of the parent; (3) the sample, one hundred families, was a small percentage of the total families enrolled, which was approximately three hundred thirty; and (4) only one questionnaire was sent to a family to be answered by either parent.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Procedures used. A questionnaire was devised as the instrument to gather data to satisfy the problem. It contained twelve questions. The initial three questions identified the student, the ensuing three questions concerned the parent's observation of his child's emotional attitude, adjustment to his class and success in learning. The final six questions dealt solely with the parents' attitudes and opinions concerning the tracking program. When completed the questionnaire was tested for validity, reliability, and clarity by a group of five parents from a similar school situation.

After final revision the questionnaire was sent to one hundred families of students involved in tracking at Longfellow Junior High School. The distribution was representative, with the only control being each grade and each track was given copies of the survey.

The data was treated with the statistical formula Chi-square

\[ \chi^2 = \frac{\sum (o - e)^2}{e} \]
CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

One argument for ability grouping has been that if we narrow the range of ability and achievement we can increase the quantity of learning within that group.

The way children are to be grouped for instruction continues to be a subject of much debate and research.

A. Montgomery Johnston from the University of Tennessee, when voicing his opinions about tracking, stated:

Grouping by intellectual ability as is generally practiced in our schools is often intellectual segregation. Pupils in Miss Jones's "dumb" class have little opportunity to associate with pupils in Miss Brown's "average" class or Miss Smith's "bright" class. The "dumb" class soon becomes known as such, and parents of "bright" children sometimes openly discourage out-of-school friendships with these "slow" children.1

Richard J. Mueller made the following statement concerning the low-ability classroom.

Around the school building, of course, the alienation of the low-ability student is almost total. Few of them participate in the extracurricular program, and they usually do not interact in the social climate of the school.2


J. B. Conant voiced opposition to a "track system". As a result of his studies of junior and senior high school grouping he expressed a need for individualized programs. A student could be top track in English, but average or bottom track in mathematics. Regarding parents' concerns about grouping, Conant said:

If there be worry among parents about homogeneous grouping being undemocratic, the attitude of the administration can be made clear if it adopts my recommendation about the course in American Democracy. I believe strongly that the classes in such a course should be heterogeneously arranged so that all youths will have an opportunity of discussing problems with those who have varying scholastic records and family backgrounds.

If a comprehensive junior high school is to fulfill its social and political functions there must be one course required of all in which the assignment to a class is not in terms of ability or promise but on a random basis.3

The value of random grouping was emphasized by Joseph Crescimbeni when he wrote:

Unless children have a chance to enjoy many types of experiences, it is very difficult to know their real capacity.4

W. C. Olson indicated the value of a variety of criteria in determining a group. He observed the results of these factors in measuring the degree of homogeneity within the group. Olson stated his values thus:

---


When there are varied goals it may be an advantage to have several criterions for grouping. If we measure a group of children of a given chronological age on any one factor, there is a great variety. But if we include several factors the homogeneity is greater.

Another consideration is the possible effect of one or another plan on a child's self-concept. Will placing him in a slow group lower his self-estimate and self-confidence, his acceptance of himself, feelings of belongingness, sustained motivation, or productivity?5

Ernst Dyson conducted a study of ability grouping and its effect on the child's self-concept. In this study of seventh graders, the groups had been determined by I.Q. scores, achievement test scores and sixth-grade teacher evaluations. The school had made a definite attempt to place students in class sections or groups that were homogeneous in regard to academic learning ability.

In summary of his study Dyson made the following statement:

It was concluded that grouping procedures do not significantly effect either facet of the self-concept, but success in school significantly influences the academic self-concept regardless of the grouping procedure used.6

Stewart Jones gathered data on grouping and concluded that grouping in itself does not increase the effectiveness of instruction. However, his data showed that both top and bottom tract students did slightly better when placed in high ability classes. His findings indicate that grouping


may increase the performance of the more able student but does so at the expense of the less able one.7

A different opinion was stated by Sister Gregory Sheehy as she observed:

The evidence for ability grouping indicates greatest relative effectiveness for academic learning for dull children, next greatest for average children and least for the bright children. Research studies conclude then, that learning processes are not necessarily hastened forward by the homogeneous grouping that is based on ability. It indicates that the social scars such grouping may inflict can be quite damaging.8

Commenting on the attitudes of ability grouped children, Jim Olsen said:

Any negative feelings they had of themselves as learners when they entered school were simply reinforced by their grouping assignments.

Our schools help to perpetuate the social-class stratification that exists in the larger society.9

W. C. Olson's concluding statements relating to ability grouping indicated a negative reaction as he made the following comment:

On the basis of what we know no one plan can be considered superior for inducing growth in achievement. In short, studies of grouping show a monotonous series of negative results.10


Margaret V. Evans likened the tracking program to a railway train. Unhappy with the results of the program in her classroom she was pleased when her principal said, "Clear the tracks!" Her policy was:

Let's down-grade grades and up-grade pupils. Consider each child as an individual and put him where he will do well in at least one subject.\(^{11}\)

CHAPTER III

DESIGN OF THE STUDY

This study was designed to determine the opinions and attitudes of parents of junior high school students toward the tracking program in Longfellow Junior High School, La Crosse, Wisconsin.

PROCEDURE

Having determined the problem, it became necessary to construct a pattern or instrument to accomplish that end. Examination of questionnaires used in similar types of surveys led to the forming of a fifteen question questionnaire. It was then tested by five parents of tracked junior high school students from a similar school program. The comments from these parents led to rewording of two questions and deletion of three questions from the original questionnaire. The revised questionnaire contained twelve questions.

THE QUESTIONNAIRE

The data-gathering instrument used to obtain the parents' opinions and attitudes toward tracking in Longfellow Junior High School was a twelve statement questionnaire. It contained three distinct areas.

Questions one, two and three identified the student by sex, grade placement and track. Questions four, five and six were designed to cause
the parent to reflect on his child's attitude toward school, adjustment to his class and learning and his emotional state at home. These questions related to the child and were expected to make the parent aware of the actions and attitudes of his child. With these facts in mind the parent was better able to formulate opinions about tracking as it related to his child. Questions seven through twelve dealt solely with the pattern and implementation of tracking. These six questions were answered with yes or no. A space for comments was provided.

METHOD OF GATHERING DATA

Having tested, rewritten and revised the questionnaire, the surveyor felt it was ready for distribution to the families. (See Appendix B).

On June 5, 1970, one hundred questionnaires, a letter to the parents and a self-addressed stamped envelope were distributed to students to be taken to their parents. (See Appendix A).

The only attempt to control the sampling was that the letters were distributed to one track 1, one track 2 and one track 3 homeroom in each of the three grades. This involved nine homerooms. This was done to insure a more representative sampling. During the last homeroom period of the last day of school, the teacher in charge of the homeroom distributed the letters. There was no pattern to this distribution as approximately one-third of the enrollment of the homeroom received a letter. Within three weeks sixty-five responses had been received. However, because there had been no definite return deadline stated in the letter, some letters were received as late as the third week in August, 1970. The final count of responses was eighty-six.
Chi-square ($\chi^2$) was used for the statistical treatment of the data tabulated from the questionnaire. The formula $\chi^2 = \frac{\sum (o - e)^2}{e}$ was used to find significant differences between opinions and attitudes of parents as affected by grade placement, track assignment, and sex of child. The statistical computations were accomplished on the 1130 IBM computer at Wisconsin State University, La Crosse.

The null hypotheses were accepted or rejected at the .05 level of significance.

Comments offered by parents were not treated statistically, but provided a basis for the writer's generalizations and assumptions regarding the tracking program.
CHAPTER IV

ANALYSIS OF DATA

The statistical analysis for this study was computed at the computer center at the Wisconsin State University, La Crosse. Chi-square ($x^2$) was used to determine the significant differences among the parental opinions and attitudes toward the tracking program in junior high school. The null hypotheses were accepted or rejected at the .05 level of significance.

Questions seven through twelve were treated statistically to determine the effect of grade placement, track assignment and sex, on the opinions of parents concerning the tracking program.

There were no significant differences in the responses of the parents because of grade placement, track assignment and sex concerning placing all slow learners in one track. The null hypothesis was accepted at the .05 level of significance.

The following data was used for acceptance of these hypotheses for question seven.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Grades</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
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<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

$x^2 = 1.2281 \quad P = .991 \quad df = 2$
Tracks  | 1 | 2 | 3  
Yes    | 17| 26| 8   
No     | 13| 19| 3   
$X^2 = 1.3165$  \hspace{2cm} P = 0.991 \hspace{2cm} df = 2

Sex    | Male | Female  
Yes    | 24   | 27       
No     | 18   | 17       
$X^2 = 0.0319$  \hspace{2cm} P = 3.841 \hspace{2cm} df = 1

There was no significant difference at the .05 level of significance among the opinions of parents because of grade placement, track assignment and sex in regard to tracking accelerated students. The null hypothesis was accepted at the .05 level of significance. The following data was used for acceptance for these hypotheses for question eight.

Question eight stated: Is it a better learning situation to have all accelerated students together?

Grades  | 7  | 8  | 9  
Yes    | 21 | 18 | 24  
No     | 5  | 6  | 12  
$X^2 = 1.5842$  \hspace{2cm} P = 0.991 \hspace{2cm} df = 2

Track  | 1 | 2 | 3  
Yes    | 23 | 30 | 10  
No     | 7 | 15 | 1  
$X^2 = 2.9851$  \hspace{2cm} P = 0.991 \hspace{2cm} df = 2
There were no significant differences in the responses of parents because of grade placement, track assignment and sex in regard to tracking the average student. The null hypothesis was accepted at the .05 level of significance. The following data was used for acceptance of these hypotheses.

Question nine stated: Do you think all average students should be in one group?

<table>
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<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Total</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>11</td>
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\[ \chi^2 = 1.0469 \quad P = 0.9911 \quad df = 2 \]

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<td></td>
<td>14</td>
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\[ \chi^2 = 1.6887 \quad P = 0.9911 \quad df = 2 \]

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<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>16</td>
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\[ \chi^2 = 2.2304 \quad P = 0.841 \quad df = 1 \]
There were no significant differences in the responses of parents because of grade placement, track assignment and sex in regard to the grading scale used. The null hypothesis was accepted at the .05 level of significance. The following data was used for acceptance of these hypotheses for question ten.

Question ten stated: Should all three tracks be graded on the same scale?

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\[ X^2 = 4.83 \]
\[ P = 5.991 \]
\[ df = 2 \]

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<tr>
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<td>6</td>
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\[ X^2 = 0.7798 \]
\[ P = 5.991 \]
\[ df = 2 \]

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<td>19</td>
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<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>27</td>
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\[ X^2 = 0.3375 \]
\[ P = 3.841 \]
\[ df = 1 \]

There was a significant difference in the responses of parents concerning the use of the same basic text, because of grade placement. The null hypothesis was rejected.

The parents of the seventh grade students opposed the idea of all tracks covering the same text. Whereas the parents of the eighth and ninth grade students were in agreement to the use of the same basic text.
There were no significant differences in the responses of parents concerning the use of the same basic text because of track assignment and sex. The following data was used for the rejection and acceptance of these hypotheses.

Question eleven stated: Should all tracks be required to cover the same basic texts?

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\[ \chi^2 = 12.7553 \quad P = 5.991 \quad df = 2 \]

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<td>No</td>
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\[ \chi^2 = 0.6874 \quad P = 5.991 \quad df = 2 \]

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<td>29</td>
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<tr>
<td>No</td>
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</table>

\[ \chi^2 = 1.1171 \quad P = 3.841 \quad df = 1 \]

The responses of parents to mixed-ability grouping showed no significant differences. The null hypothesis was accepted. The following data was used for the acceptance of these hypotheses.

Question twelve stated: Would you prefer to have your child in a mixed-ability group?
There was a significant difference in the responses of parents of female students regarding placing all accelerated students in one track. The null hypothesis was rejected at the .05 level of significance.
SUMMARY

The final analysis of the data garnered from the survey conducted with parents of Longfellow Junior High School students was that in only two areas were there significant differences in parental opinions and attitudes. The null hypothesis was rejected twice. A significant difference in the responses of parents of seventh, eighth and ninth grade students to the subject of basic text requirements resulted in that rejection. The second rejection was the result of the responses of parents of female students regarding placing all accelerated students in one track group. All other data treated by this surveyor was accepted at the .05 level of significance.
CHAPTER V
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

After the completion of the survey which stated the opinions of
Longfellow Junior High School parents concerning tracking, the results of
the questionnaire were tabulated. These results were statistically
treated by Chi-square ($\chi^2$) which determined the acceptance or rejection of
the null hypotheses.

Many comments by the parents indicated that a continuance of the
tracking program was desired. A few parents felt a discontinuance of the
program would benefit all tracks. The accelerated or top track student
would continue to do superior work in a class with average, low and other
top track students. They felt he would develop traits of leadership much
more easily. Some parents felt the slow student would learn from observing
and listening to the more able students. His inability to read well would
be compensated by his being able to listen and learn from his peers. One
parent commented on the class size. It was suggested that if the size of
the classes were better regulated, tracking would not be necessary.

Parental responses to questions four, five and six indicated that
most of the students were somewhat positive in their attitude toward class
and school activities, they rated average or above average in their
adjustment to classes and learning and their general emotional state at
home was comfortable and cheerful.
The consensus of the parents who favored tracking indicated that top track students were not restricted in their rate of learning and so retained a higher degree of interest and in turn this reflected better classroom behavior. In the bottom track each child received more individual attention from the teacher, the material was geared to his ability and so he experienced a measure of success. One parent commented that his child was recognized and not "swept under the rug," as had occurred in a mixed-ability grouping previously.

There were eighty-six responses from the one hundred questionnaires distributed. A majority of the parents indicated their acceptance of the tracking program for the students. These parents did not want their child in a mixed-ability group. The eighth and ninth grade parents agreed on each track covering the same basic text. A majority of parents felt the students in the three tracks should not be graded on the same scale.

The surveyor was gratified by the returns and comments. It was an indication to her of the concern and interest of these parents for their children. They showed an awareness of the student's need for social growth as well as scholastic growth. One parent commented that a child forms his attitudes in part from peers he knows and respects. He can hope to better himself only if he can associate closely with the value-setters.

The suggestion this writer would offer for further study of the tracking program would be ability grouping by each subject. This would allow many children to move into various groups during a school day.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

PERIODICALS


APPENDIX A

LETTER TO PARENTS
June, 1970

Dear Parents:

What is your opinion of ability grouping (tracking) of junior high students? Do you feel your child has benefited from such grouping, or has he been disadvantaged because of it? Have you observed any differences in his learning pattern, social activities, or general conduct? I hope, through your observations, to gain an idea of parental opinions on the subject of tracking.

I am asking for your assistance in gathering data to complete a research paper as a requirement for the completion of an advanced degree.

The enclosed questionnaire is being sent to one hundred families whose children are presently enrolled in this junior high school. It is concerned with the opinions of parents as they evaluate the tracking program.

Please fill out the questionnaire and return it in the enclosed, stamped envelope at your earliest convenience. It is not necessary for you to sign the form as I am concerned with the opinions rather than identities.

Your efforts and cooperation will be greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,
APPENDIX B

QUESTIONNAIRE
QUESTIONNAIRE

DIRECTIONS: Read each question carefully before answering. Check the answer that best reflects your thinking. Feel free to add comments where space permits.

1. What is your student's sex?
   (1) male ___ (2) female ___

2. What is the grade placement of your student?
   (1) seventh ___ (2) eighth ___ (3) ninth ___

3. In which track is your student placed?
   (1) track 1 ___ (2) track 2 ___ (3) track 3 ___

4. Characterize your student's attitude toward class and school activities.
   (1) very positive ___ (2) somewhat positive ___
   (3) neutral ___ (4) indifferent ___
   (5) somewhat negative ___ (6) very negative ___

5. Evaluate your student's success in adjusting to and learning from his class in school this year.
   (1) excellent ___ (2) above average ___ (3) average ___
   (4) below average ___ (5) poor ___

Comments:

6. What have you observed in regard to your student's general emotional state at home? (check as many as are appropriate)
   (1) cheerful ___ (2) depressed ___ (3) anxious ___
   (4) confused ___ (5) withdrawn ___ (6) comfortable ___

7. Should all slow learners be placed in one track?
   (1) yes ___ (2) no ___

Comments:
8. Is it a better learning situation to have all accelerated students together?
   (1) yes (2) no
   Comments:

9. Do you think all average students should be in one group?
   (1) yes (2) no
   Comments:

10. Should all three tracks be graded on the same scale?
    (1) yes (2) no
    Comments:

11. Should all tracks be required to cover the same basic texts?
    (1) yes (2) no
    Comments:

12. Would you prefer to have your student in a mixed-ability group?
    (1) yes (2) no
    Comments: