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Pushing For Privileged Passage: A grounded theory of *guardians* to middle level mathematics students

Tina L. Johnston, Ph.D.

Abstract

This grounded theory research identified conflict over decisions about placement into high ability mathematics classes. A theory termed *pushing for privileged passage* emerged from data collected from parents and educators in the Northwest United States as well as international literature. *Pushing* occurs following a break down of trust among parents and/or educators over various facets of the school and over student ability-grouping decisions in mathematics specifically. Subsequently they try to circumvent the system to gain advantaged placement for specific students. Those who push use *investing* strategies to insure a child's future success. They use *pressuring* techniques on decision-makers to garner advanced mathematics access. Finally, those who push use strategic *lobbying* for program changes.

Introduction

Despite research suggesting that grouping students by ability is detrimental to low and high achieving students (Ballantyne, 2002; Boaler, 2002; Boaler, Wiliam, & Brown, 1998; Camblin, 2003; Oakes, 1985; Slavin, 1990; Slavin, 1995; Stevenson, Schiller & Schneider, 1994; Wheelock, 1992) and ill-advised by research on the needs of adolescents (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989; Camblin, 2003; Mills, 2001; Oakes, et al, 2000), ability grouping is a common practice in middle level mathematics classes (Braddock & McPartland, 1990; Wheelock, 1992). Most schools offer a low, average and advanced mathematics group. However, schools also exist with as many as six and as few as two group levels, at both grade level and advanced (Johnston, 2006; Oakes, 1985).

Middle schools that group students by ability use criteria for placing a student into the various mathematics groups. A committee organizes and establishes these filtering criteria. This

process is sometimes affected by outside forces along with the committee participants' beliefs, student population needs, and examples from other schools. Once criteria are established, students are filtered into various ability groups by educators or counselors using the filters as well as personal or group judgments (Johnston, 2006; Oakes, 1985).

Methodology

This study employed the use of classic grounded theory (GT) based on the early work of Glaser and Strauss (1967) and further development by Glaser (1978, 1992, 1996, 1998, 2001, 2005). The study set out to better understand the issues surrounding the various ability grouping models in middle level mathematics classes, hoping to better understand the practice and problems associated with it. The resultant theory centers around the issue of mathematics placement, outlining a process that explains the actions of the various guardians (parents & educators) in a child's education.

Forty-one subjects who worked with or had children attending 13 schools in 10 school districts and three states were interviewed. Sixteen teachers, three administrators, and 23 parents were interviewed. Twelve of the 14 teachers taught middle level mathematics classes and two taught 5th grade students. Nineteen of the parents had one or more children at the middle school level; many also had children in other school levels. One had children only in high school and two had children only in elementary school. Seven parents had children in at/below grade level classes and 16 had children placed in advanced mathematics classes. Six out of the 19 teachers and administrators spoke of their own middle school aged or older children.

Open-ended interviews were conducted. Subjects were informed of the topic of the project. If administrators or teachers did not immediately begin to share their thoughts on ability grouping in middle level mathematics, the researcher asked them to discuss their schools' mathematics ability grouping arrangement; similarly parents were asked to discuss their children's mathematics placement. Following this, minimal prompting was required except to probe topics initiated by

subjects. Interviews ranged from 30 minutes to two hours. In addition school district demographic information and research literature was collected that related to problems, categories and properties of the developing theory.

In early phases of coding and comparing, the researcher focused on identifying problems and broad categories. As more data were collected, focus shifted to identifying properties of the categories. Throughout the process, coded statements/notes and memos were sorted together. Theoretical sampling (in the field and from within collected data), memo writing, coding and comparing actions were repeated until the main problem identified by educators and parents became prominent and a principle category was found that explained how subjects continually tried to resolve the prominent problem. As the theoretical framework stabilized, theoretical sampling moved towards saturating the core and related categories and associated properties until all relevant categories were well developed and stable.

As the main concern became apparent from early interview data, the researcher approached administrators, teachers and parents for their perspectives. If most of the interviewed parents had children in the high mathematics group, the researcher sought parents with children in at/below grade level classes for contrast. As parents mentioned others who were actively working towards advanced middle level mathematics placements, the researcher contacted them for interviews. Since the same problem developed among several schools in one part of Oregon, the researcher interviewed teachers from wider regions within Oregon and the Northwest United States. Literature was collected and integrated representing research projects across the United States, Canada and United Kingdom as well as from multi-nation studies. Finally, as parents with ties to India, China, Korea and Mexico were interviewed, the researcher requested information about how students were grouped in mathematics in those countries. Although specific gender, ethnic, and socioeconomic data were not collected the researcher attempted to gather data from a variety of sources, including gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status.

The Main Concern

Interviews with participants revealed a two-tiered concern. At the more general level, educators and parents involved in this study had lost trust in the educational system (Johnston, 2006). Secondly and more specifically they either worried that an ability-grouping filter would pass over their focus student (this student may be their own child or one in whom they see promise) or the student had actually been passed over for placement in the advanced mathematics group. These parties disagreed with this decision. A lack of trust in general and, more specifically, a lack of trust in the school ability grouping filter system were identified as the main concern voiced by subjects when asked about their experiences of the substantive area.

> My son exceeded the benchmark but didn't do well on the placement test. He was placed into 6th grade math. When I talked to the principal she acted like she didn't believe me. The next week she called me back to tell me that indeed my son had exceeded the benchmark. I'm not one to push my kids but I want them to progress and not stay stagnant.

The Theory of Pushing For Privileged Passage

Pushing is a way for parents and educators to deal with the lack of trust and fear and/or disappointment in the student placement process into mathematics ability groups. When untrusting parties become cognizant that a student whom they believe is mathematically extraordinary may fail or has failed passage through an ability grouping filter into an advanced mathematics class, they begin to push against that filter. They push by *investing* time and money in preparation for the focus student to successfully pass through the grouping filter. If this fails, they employ more combative methods by *pressuring* decision-makers to alter the placement. Finally, pushers may use strategic techniques by *lobbying* within the school system to change that system. By *pushing,* these 'guardians' are *investing*, *pressuring* and *lobbying* the mistrusted system in order to provide a *privileged passage* for their focus student or ward. A basic social process that explains the different stages of *pushing* employed by educators and parents with students in middle school mathematics classes is detailed below.

Pushing

The principal category and ultimately the title of the theory (*pushing*) developed from the words subjects used to describe the focus student's needs, the reasons they felt that the student should have access to advanced curriculum as well as descriptions of the actions taken by themselves (the pusher) to gain access to advanced curriculum. The group of words, seen repeatedly in interview notes were, 'push', 'pushing' and 'pushed'. Parents and educators viewed these students (perceived as having advanced abilities) as needing to be 'pushed'; as perhaps 'parent pushed'. Other parents and educators suggested that, while they not ones to 'push', they wanted students to progress. Time and again, the word push was used. As interview statements were coded and compared, more and more fit under the category of *pushing*. At times, words were used that were synonyms of pushing such as advocated, look out for, supervise, etc. These were sorted into the *pushing* categories where they fit best. Once the main *pushing* category was found, the coded data and memos were compared and sorted, seeking the stages of *pushing*. These stages became *investing*, *pressuring,* and *lobbying*.

Pushing can be defined as exerting oneself continuously, vigorously, or obtrusively to gain an end or engage in a crusade for a certain cause or person; in essence, becoming an advocate for a particular cause or person (Wordnet, 2006).This definition presents *pushing* as a positive action. In theory, educators are the pushers or advocates for all students (Mann, 1848). Parents are the pushers or advocates for their children (Crozier, 1997). So how do seemingly positive notions create conflict? The problem lies in who is deemed deserving of challenging material, all children or specific children? If all children do not receive access to advanced mathematics content, how are those children who should receive the attention and material selected? Although neither a plot nor scheme, pushers are fighting to garner access into classes with an elite group of students receiving advantaged instruction (Kohn, 1998; Oakes & Wells, 1998; Spear, 1994). The pushers do not want their focus students to learn with the remaining average or below-average majority.

There are three levels of *pushing*. Some pushers may work at all of these levels over a period of time while others may

only apply one or two in their quest to garner advantaged placement for their focus student. The levels have been arranged by scope (foundational, combative, and strategic). They are also offered in the order by which most pushers employ them. At the most basic or foundational level, pushers employ *investing* strategies aimed at preparing students to successfully pass through the mathematics placement filter into the advanced group. If the focus student fails to get into the advanced mathematics track despite the employment of investment strategies, pushers will often demand and successfully achieve placement. If this fails or if the pusher is particularly knowledgeable of the school system more strategic lobbying strategies can be implemented that will 'improve' the system (Hatton, 1985).

Investing

Investing is an action characterized by laying out capital with an expectation of profit. The actions discussed in this category are the most common methods by which parents participate in their child's schooling (Crozier, 1997). Those who do not trust ability-grouping filters in mathematics will invest their capital on the child. There are three properties of *investing (or types of capital)*; personal tutoring, purchased tutoring, and classroom volunteering.

Investing pushers provide students with extra tutoring and one-on-one homework supervision. These may be as specific as participating in nightly homework sessions where students are assisted with completing work, correcting mistakes and redirecting correction or errors or as general as providing periodic progress checks and availability for assistance. Investors may provide focus students with access to outside materials or tutoring. They may be provided with math books, computer software and even enrolled in formal tutoring or cram classes so that students garner 'more mathematics' which may be focused on basic skills practice, deeper knowledge of mathematics, or advanced topics.

> One of my friends sent off for Chinese curriculum in mathematics and other subjects. She has taught them at home after school each day in order to make sure they get into the gifted track program. Her daughter is now

> taking Pre Calculus while in 8th grade. She says I should do the same but I'm not sure if that isn't too much pressure.

Spending time building relationships with those who will ultimately play a role in grouping decisions is also an investing strategy employed by *investing* pushers. Whether personally tutoring, arranging, outside tutoring or supplemental curricula or building relationships with people who may assist them in future placement these *pushers* are focusing action on the student, an investment that they hope will be rewarded with access to higher mathematics placement.

Pressuring

Pressuring pushers attempt to persuade, exert force or coerce decision-makers into bending to their will. At this level, those who have been disappointed by a focus student's ability-group placement in mathematics may turn their focus to *pushing* those in charge of the placement process attempting, and usually succeeding, in changing the decision. Pressuring may be employed in three ways; rallying support, exerting pressure on the teacher, and/or pressuring administrators.

Pressuring pushers who rally support may talk to others about the focus student's disappointing class placement. These conversations may be between educators, parent to parent or between parents and educators. In all cases, the goal of these conversations is to rally support. *Pressuring* pushers then go, as teams, to those who can alter decisions (advanced group teachers or administrators) to ask for altered placements (for one or more of the supporters focus children).

> When I talked about with the other parents that he hadn't got into the high math group they suggested I put in a change of schedule request and planned go to the principal As soon as possible to get him changed. One of the moms that I knew from Downs Elementary (with an older son in the high math class) said we should go together. Her daughter did not get into the high math class and she wanted her in too.

Pressuring pushers may alternatively ask their supporters to separately contact those able to reverse the decision to ask for

changed placements.

Pressuring pushers may go directly to the teacher in charge of the advanced group and ask if the focus student can be added to their class. This strategy can only be employed by those who have knowledge of the teaching schedule thus is only used by those who have privileged knowledge such as fellow school employees or parents who have already had older children in the class. Most *pressuring* pushers take their request for changed student class placement to an administrator, either a building principal or counselor. Administrators may explain the filtering criteria as an argument against the change in placement while others will simply place the student into the higher level math class with no discussion. In either case, this approach is almost always successful and students are quickly moved to higher level mathematics classes.

Lobbying

Lobbying occurs when pushers act to influence policy-makers for a specific cause or to change the system. Lobbying has three properties: *positioning, policy-changing*, and *systemic change*. This pushing action may not be the most commonly applied strategy; however, it is the one that stands to have influence over the greatest number of students. *Lobbying* pushers with focus students in middle-level mathematics classes employ this strategy by *positioning* themselves on school or district committees. As a participant on these committees, they may work towards *changing policies* (such as filtering criteria or class offerings). Finally, lobbying pushers may assist schools in working on *systemic change* (such as rearranging school schedules, curricula or finding funding for and designing a magnet school).

Lobbying pushers who are *pushing* against group filters may position themselves onto a variety of committees that may benefit their focus student's placement in mathematics class. *Lobbying* positioners have contacts within the school who make them aware of upcoming volunteer positions. They may at one time have been a classroom volunteer having this earlier investment pay off in terms of access to lobbying instead of, or in addition to, benefiting from a return in terms of advanced placement for their focus student. The type of committee(s)

determines whether the pusher has a direct impact on grouping decisions or a much greater impact on the student's education.

Once in position, the pusher who works on policy-changing committees works towards setting policies that will directly affect his/her focus student or with that student's future needs in mind. Following a conversation about how an older son was not accepted into the high math class and remained unchallenged for the year, one parent said:

> Because of his brother, I pushed for the creation of the 6/7-math class instead of having students jump right into Algebra. I was hoping this 6/7 math would aid in smoothing students' transition to Algebra.

Lobbying pushers also work towards larger policy changes by participation on committees. They may work on school boards or grant writing teams. They may take jobs as administrators or serve on district steering committees. Pushers in these positions are most often very knowledgeable of the school and educational policies. They are very often teachers, administrators or work in peripheral education fields (university positions, educational service districts, etc.) These pushers can have the greatest impact on both their focus student's access to education as well as other students impacted by the policy changes they implement. Most often the focus student in this situation is the pusher's own child or children (Hatton, 1985). The policy changes that result are not always, but can be, detrimental to other students' access to a rigorous mathematics education.

Discussion

Pushing for privileged passage has implications for several aspects within the field of education, including issues of trust, equity, and advocacy.

Trust

The impact of a loss of trust on the subjects of this study, as well as documented in the literature, would suggest that schools need to pay attention to both work (within school) and community relationships (Tschannen-Moran, 2000; Wells & Oakes, 1996). Within-school trust is important to building positive working and learning environments for students (Fullan,

Bertani & Quinn, 2004). This is also true of school and community trust. Some studies suggest that students' perform better, they stay in school longer and they have more positive attitudes towards school when schools and parents have a trusting relationship (Northwest regional educational laboratory, 2007). Building strong and high-quality school-home communication is a key to building such trust (Adams & Christenson, 2000).

Rewarding *pushing* behaviors

The actions taken by the subjects of this study indicate that schools are rewarding parent involvement by allowing them a say in decision-making. This in and of itself is clearly positive. There are lots of articles that discuss the benefits of building community relationships where community members actively participate in decision-making (Fullan, 1995; Fullan, Bertani & Quinn, 2004; Reyes, Scribner & Scribner, 1999). There is, however, a down side. The results from this and other studies indicate that sometimes 'community members' are not acting in the best interests of all students. They are acting in the best interests of specific students (usually their own children). Sometimes termed squeaky wheels, these community members successfully pressure schools into making decisions that may negatively impact populations of students who do not have the benefit of an educational guardian. In fact, this study would suggest that the 'rewards' from the school are actually detrimental to unrepresented students (Benveniste, Cornoy, & Rothstein, 2003; Johnston, 2006; Hatton, 2985).

How much pushing?

Finally, there is growing consensus that students need some *pushing* in order to become successful learners. High-press questioning is an example of a positive pushing technique used by some teachers. Research of this method suggests that students who are pressed to explain their thinking learn more (Kazemi & Stipek, 2001). Studies suggest that parents can also have a strong effect in raising academically successful children (Belfield & Levin, 2005; Poliakoff, 2006; Doherty & Peskay, 1992).

On the other hand, there is also evidence that too much pressure can be applied. Recent research on high school students suggests that too much pressure is placed on students to earn

high grades, to take too many advanced classes, and to maintain large numbers of after school activities. This pressure can take a toll on children who are pushed. Some pushed students suffer from high anxiety and even depression. They may take unethical measures such as cheating to stay at the top of their class in their quest for highly sought after university acceptance (Greenless, 1996; Harrington-Leuker, 1989; Jing & Chen, 1995; Raymond, 1995). How much *pushing* is enough and how much is too much? More knowledge is needed to discern the lines between these two extremes.

General Implications

This substantive theory of *pushing* suggests some general implications as follows:

The main concern: There exists a subset of adults (hereafter guardians) who face situations where their powerless wards (may be a child or not depending on the circumstances) are at the mercy of mistrusted organizations.

Pushing as the core category: To resolve issues of lost trust, guardians push against mistrusted organizations, seeking to protect their wards and to assure them of *privileged passage*. The strategies used by guardians include:

> *Investing*: The guardian invests time and resources on their ward. They also make themselves visible within the mistrusted organization in order to smooth passage for their ward
>
> *Pressuring*: When the guardian feels that their ward has been denied the privileged passage they are due they act by rallying others and pressuring low-level and upper-level managers to rectify the unfair treatment.
>
> *Lobbying*: The guardian takes action to change the mistrusted system. They position themselves into power positions and then act to create a trusted environment for their ward.

Powerless Populations: There are several social situations where issues of trust and advocacy come into prominence. Several segments of the population commonly fall under the care of, or require specific assistance from, persons taking on the role

of a guardian including aging parents, persons with special needs, persons with mental illness, the injured, minority groups, children, etc. These populations may need medical care, mental health treatment, work permits, funeral services, legal advice, etc. These represent similar situations to the one outlined above however there is a distinct difference between these and an educational setting. Unlike most other institutional settings, the focus of 'treatment' in schools is almost always a large group. Changes made affecting one student also affect classmates (Osborne, 2000). These group affects make the impact and potential consequences of *pushing for privileged passage* more pronounced.

Athletics: Much documentation exists on the phenomenon of adults pushing athletic success among youth and the effects that pushing has on their participation in sports. Studies have been conducted on the effects that pressure to be the best player, garner specific positions, or win competitions may have on a player's well being as well as sociological consequences for these individuals and their teams. Players who are placed under too much pressure, similar to those under academic pressure, may cheat, use performance enhancing drugs, develop injuries, or exhibit aggressive behaviors. As a result, some youth programs work with parents to reduce pressuring, seeking to return youth sports to a leisure activity. At the university level, pressures to win may cause coaches to illegally pay players, exert pressure on instructors to award passing grades or coerce other students to provide homework for players. Players may cheat on school-work or use performance enhancing drugs. Some university participation licenses and players have been suspended for illegal and/or unethical practices such as this (Citizenship through Sports Alliance, 2005; Barrett, 2006; Hellstedt, 1988; Leonard, 1988).

Although these different push situations are not exactly the same as the pushing that occurs in middle level mathematics placement situations, plenty of indication exists that a formal theory of pushing could be researched and developed using these situations as well as others. Future researchers have much room to develop both substantive theories in these areas as well as move toward a formal theory of pushing.

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