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LOSS OF PIANO STUDENTS DURING THE FIRST YEAR OF
STUDY IN THE MISSOULA SCHOOLS

A Professional Paper

by

RUTH WINNER MARSHALL
B.S., Wittenberg College, 1947

Presented in partial fulfillment of the
requirement for the degree of Master of Music in
Music Education

Montana State University

1950

Approved:

Stanley M. Teel
Chairman of Board
of Examiners

W. P. Clark
Dean, Graduate School

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The author wishes to thank the principals, grade school teachers, and parents of the children who discontinued piano study during the first year, for their time and aid in furnishing information needed for this study.

The author is also greatly indebted to Professor Stanley Teel, who has advised and guided the writing of this paper.

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INTRODUCTION

Realizing the lasting wealth that music will bring into the lives of today's children, educators are becoming alarmed at the number of children who are being exposed to music, but in a short time are losing interest. In recent years, a nation-wide survey¹ was conducted which showed that of those children who started piano lessons, 60% discontinued their study during the first year. Any contact with music is bound to be of some enrichment to their lives, but certainly a lasting and full experience can not result from such a short exposure to something that can do so much in giving them a broad and happy outlook on life.

Missoula, Montana, may be considered a cultural town, due to the fact that it is the home of the headquarters of Region I of the Forest Service, and the State University. With such a professional influence over the town, especially since the University has an accredited Music School, Missoula might not be expected to be typical of the statistics in the survey mentioned above. To determine the situation in Missoula, questionnaires were distributed among five of the Public Grade Schools, picked from the various sections of town. The schools participating in this cross section were: Central, Franklin, Paxson,

¹Cole Watkins, "How To Get And Hold Pupils", Etude, (February, 1940), p. 89.

Roosevelt, and Whittier. The questionnaires were distributed to all children in these schools who had ever studied piano, regardless of duration of study, or when the study occurred. The results from these questionnaires are discussed in the following paper.

THE PROBLEM

The problem presented and discussed in this paper is, to determine the reasons for the large percentage of loss of piano students from the Missoula Public Grade Schools during their first year of study. Development of this problem proceeds in the following manner: (a) data showing the loss of beginning piano students, and (b) data determining the reasons as a result of a survey carried on in this field.

The problem is limited to cases found in five of the Missoula Public Grade Schools during the years 1949-1950. These schools will be referred to as Schools A, B, C, D, and E throughout this paper.

The main sources of material are questionnaires, personal interviews, and school records.

Beginning with December of 1949 and continuing into 1950, a questionnaire² was circulated and filled out by those students of Missoula Grade Schools A, B, C, D, and E who had at any time taken piano lessons. From these questionnaires it was possible to determine the percentage that had discontinued their piano study; and from those that had discontinued study, the percentage that did so

²See Appendix A

during the first year. In Figure 1, the results from School A are shown.

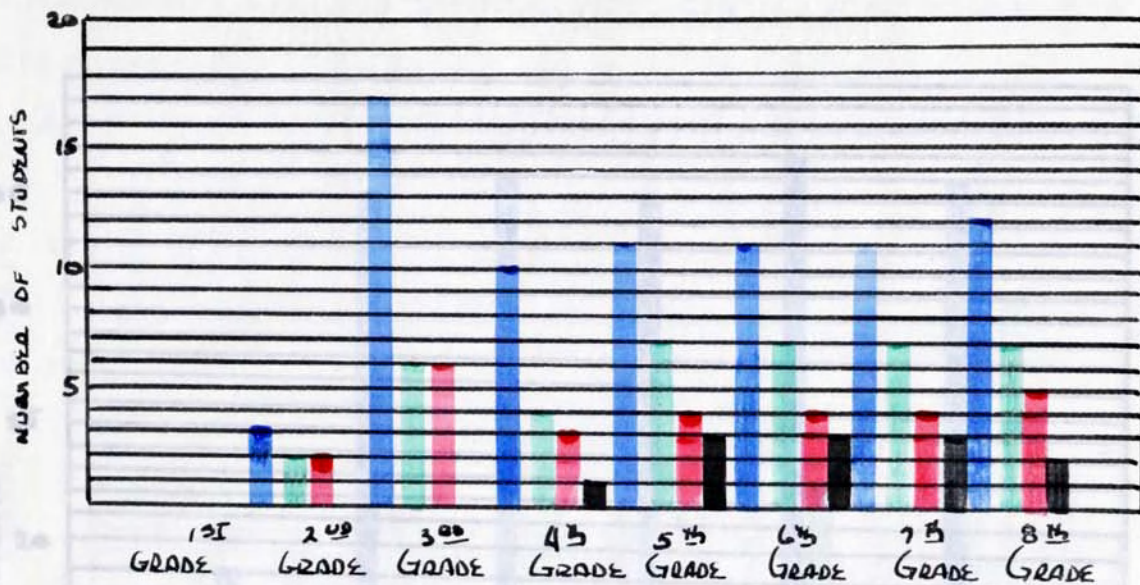


Figure 1

DISTRIBUTION OF STUDENTS BEGINNING AND DISCONTINUING PIANO STUDY IN SCHOOL A

- Total number that began piano study ■
- Total number that discontinued. ■
- Number that discontinued with the first year. ■
- Number that discontinued between the first and ninth year ■

Of a total of 64 children who have studied piano, 52% of these children have discontinued; 77% doing so within the first year of study. A discussion of individual cases will follow after the results from the remaining four schools are shown.

Figure 2 shows the percentage of loss of piano students from School B. Despite the fact that there are only seven grades in School B, it has the largest enroll-

ment of the five schools in this study. In this school there were 205 children who had started piano lessons. Of this number, 44% have discontinued, 57% doing so within the first year.

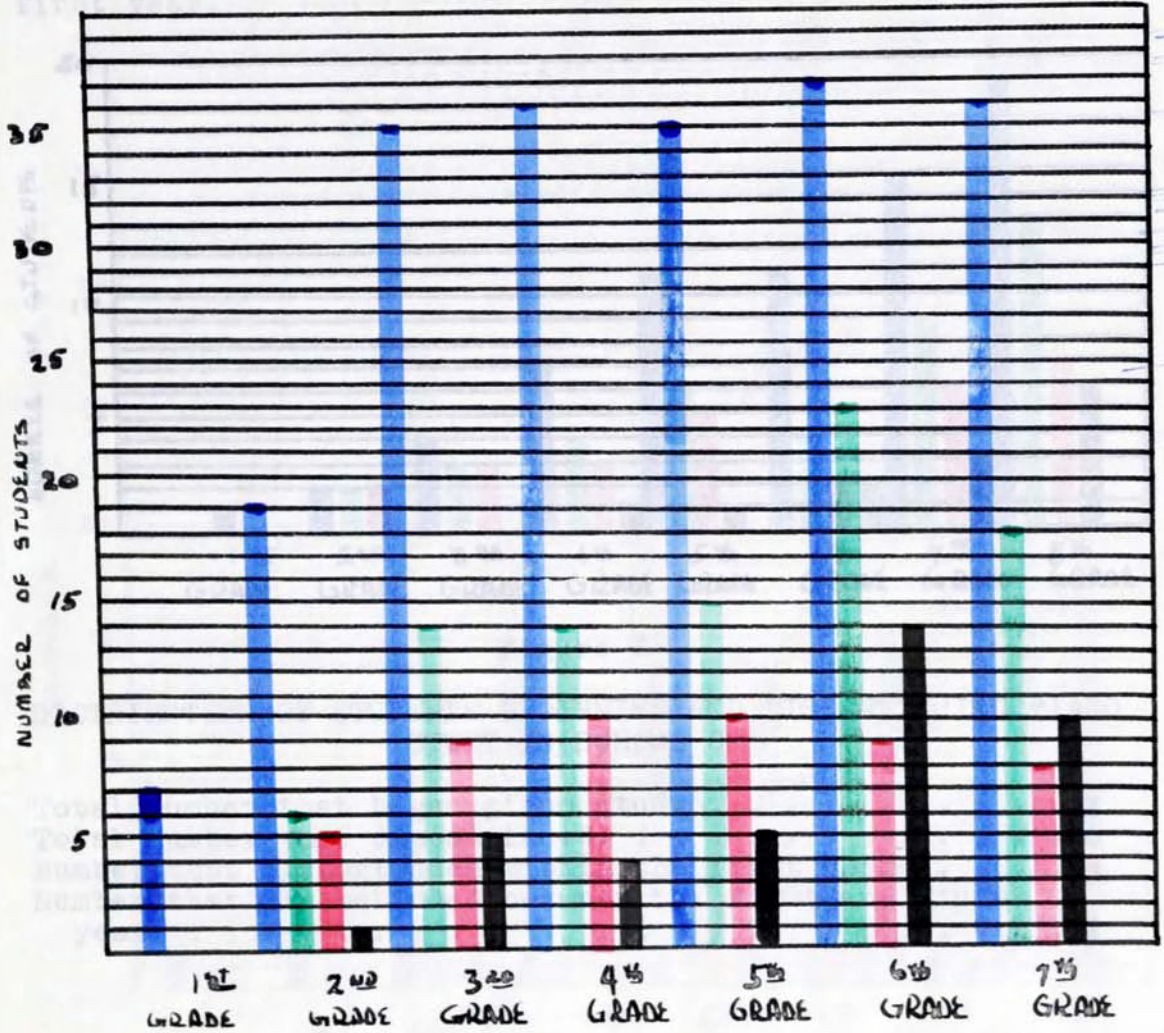


Figure 2 shows the results of the questionnaire from School C. In this Figure 2 70 children have had piano lessons. Of the 40% who have discontinued lessons, 31%

DISTRIBUTION OF STUDENTS BEGINNING AND DISCONTINUING PIANO STUDY IN SCHOOL B

Total that began piano study.

Total that discontinued

Number that discontinued within the first year.

Number that discontinued between first and ninth year.

lessons. Of the 40% who have discontinued lessons, 31%

ment of the five schools used in this study. In this school there were 205 children who had started piano lessons. Of this number, 44% have discontinued, 57% doing so within the first year.

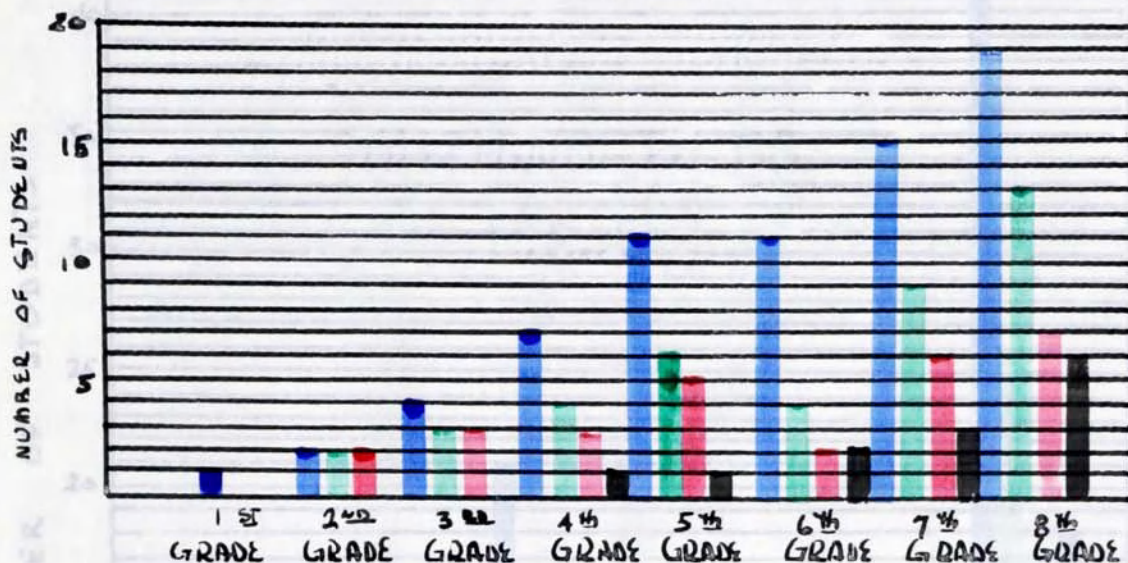


Figure 3

DISTRIBUTION OF STUDENTS BEGINNING AND DISCONTINUING PIANO STUDY IN SCHOOL C

Total number that began piano study [blue bar]
 Total number that discontinued. [green bar]
 Number that discontinued within the first year. [red bar]
 Number that discontinued between the first and ninth year. [black bar]

Figure 3 shows the results of the questionnaires from School C. In this school, 70 children have had piano lessons. Of the 59% that have discontinued study, 68% did so within the first year.

In Figure 4 the results of School D are shown. This school has a total of 128 children who have had piano lessons. Of the 48% who have discontinued lessons, 51%

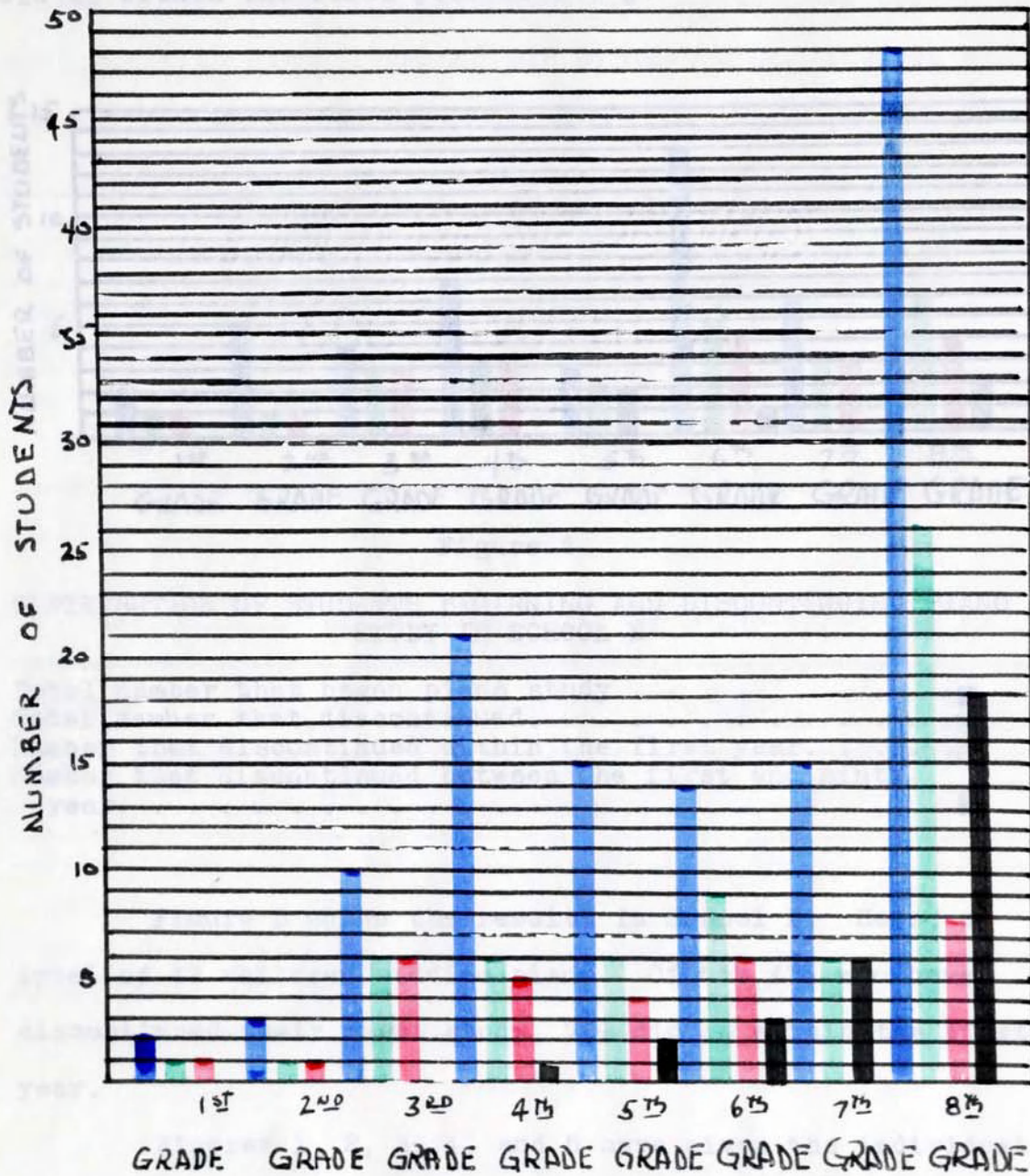


Figure 4

DISTRIBUTION OF STUDENTS BEGINNING AND DISCONTINUING PIANO STUDY IN SCHOOL D

- Total number that began piano study
- Total number that discontinued.
- Number that discontinued within the first year.
- Number that discontinued between the first and ninth year.

... of the five schools. Collectively, there are 116

did so within the first year of study. The 43% who failed to continue with piano lessons, 61% of this group stopped study-

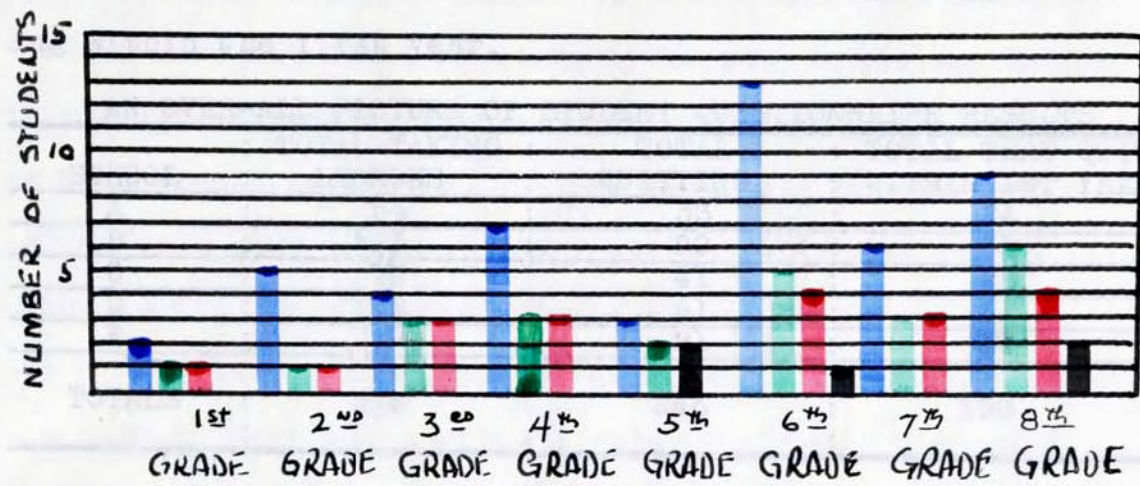


Figure 5

DISTRIBUTION OF STUDENTS BEGINNING AND DISCONTINUING PIANO STUDY IN SCHOOL E

| | |
|--|---|
| Total number that began piano study | ■ |
| Total number that discontinued. | ■ |
| Number that discontinued within the first year. | ■ |
| Number that discontinued between the first and ninth year. | ■ |

Figure 5 shows the results in School E. Here, a total of 49 children studied piano. Of the 43% who have discontinued their piano study, 76% did so within the first year.

Figures 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 have given the individual pictures of the five schools, showing the number of children in the various grades who have started piano study, discontinued piano, discontinued within the first year, and those who discontinued between the first and the ninth year.

Table I gives an overall picture comparing the results of the five schools. Collectively, there are 516

children who began piano lessons. Of the 48% who failed to continue with piano lessons, 61% of this group stopped studying within the first year.

AN OVER-ALL PICTURE OF STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE RESULTS

| SCHOOL | TOTAL TAKING LESSONS | TOTAL QUITTING | TOTAL THAT QUIT WITHIN 1ST YEAR |
|--------|----------------------|----------------|---------------------------------|
| A | 64 | 33 | 24 |
| B | 205 | 90 | 51 |
| C | 70 | 41 | 28 |
| D | 128 | 61 | 31 |
| E | 49 | 21 | 16 |
| TOTALS | 516 | 246 | 150 |

TABLE I

APPROXIMATE TIME STUDENT SPENT STUDYING PIANO BEFORE DISCONTINUING

| SCHOOL | 3 MONTHS | 6 MONTHS | 9 MONTHS | 1 YEAR |
|-------------|----------|----------|----------|--------|
| A | 13 | 6 | 1 | 4 |
| B | 15 | 11 | 6 | 20 |
| C | 8 | 8 | 1 | 11 |
| D | 12 | 6 | 1 | 11 |
| E | 8 | 2 | 0 | 6 |
| TOTALS | 56 | 33 | 9 | 52 |
| PERCENTAGE: | 37.3% | 22% | 6% | 34.7% |

TABLE II

Working with the figures of the group that discontinued piano study within the first year, the largest percentage quit within the first three months. The next largest group studied from nine months to a year. These percentages are charted in Table II.

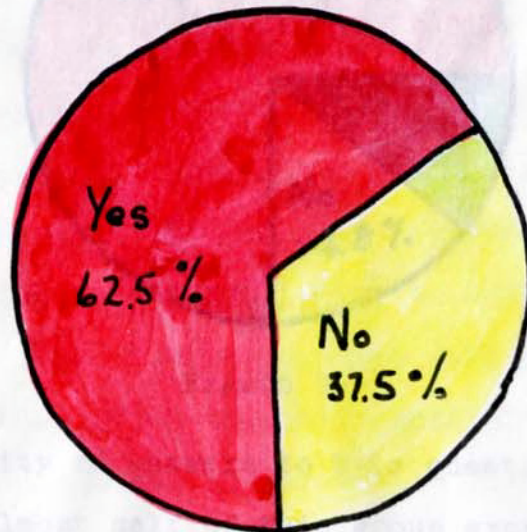
Despite the cultural and professional background of Missoula, the loss of beginning piano students has

reached the alarming high indicated by the nation-wide survey. The only reliable manner to secure the real reasons for the discontinuance of study by so many children, would be to contact personally the parents, either by telephone or by personal interview.³ This course was undertaken.

Of the 150 cases involved, 19 were not contacted due to illness, moving, or the inability to reach the parents.

In the following pages a statement of the questions the parents were asked will be made, followed by a graph showing the percentages of the answers, and a discussion of these answers.

QUESTION 1. DO YOU HAVE A PIANO?



The majority of the parents who responded to this question was yes, as shown above. (Almost all of the group expressed a great enjoyment from their musical experience.) One parent felt that her daughter enjoyed the piano, but got practicing. Several parents knew their children enjoyed their experience at the piano, yet at the same time knew they wanted to study a band instrument. A little larger

³See Appendix B

The explanation for so many children having had piano lessons without a piano in their home, may be due to a class piano workshop offered at the University during the summers of 1948 and 1949, plus similar classes given at several of the grade schools, which were open to children with and without pianos in their homes, in order to give all a musical experience. Others were able to have relative's pianos in their homes for a period of time, or to use a neighbor's piano until they moved, or it became too inconvenient.

QUESTION 2. DID YOUR CHILD ENJOY HIS EXPERIENCE AT THE PIANO?

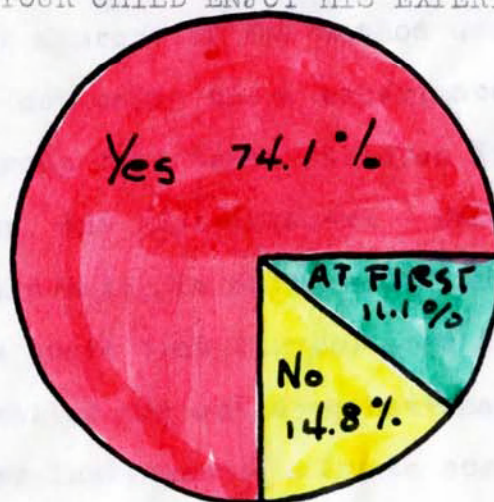


Figure 7

The majority of answers to this question was yes, as shown above. (Almost half of this group expressed a great enjoyment from their musical experience.) One woman felt that her daughter enjoyed "playing" the piano, but not practicing. Several parents knew their children enjoyed their experience at the piano, yet at the same time knew they wanted to study a band instrument. A little larger

group, although saying that their children did enjoy their experience at the piano, felt they had started too young and would get a great deal more from their experience if they were somewhat older.

The next group in size were those saying that their children had an unsatisfactory experience. The majority of parents could give no enlightenment as to why, feeling unqualified to do so. Two of the parents did not approve of the method of teaching, since it was entirely different from the way they had been taught. These same parents would give no indication of the reaction of the children. The parents did not approve of the method used, therefore, their children did not enjoy their experience.

The last group felt their children did enjoy their experience at first, but lost interest. Many parents wish their children would maintain an interest in something, as this seems to be a trait that carries over into all of their activities. Several of the children have had the opportunity to study other instruments, only to come to the same result - losing interest after a short period of time. A few cases were found where the child got behind the other children in class lessons, either due to illness or some personal difficulty and then lost interest.

QUESTION 3. WAS PRACTICING A PROBLEM FOR THE CHILD?

As shown in Figure 8, on the next page, more than half of the children had trouble with practicing. There were a number of different reasons given. Trouble frequently stemmed from the fact that there was no piano in



Figure 8

the home. Although some of these same children had an opportunity to practice at school, the hours set aside for this were too early in the morning, or during their noon hour. Another large section of this group claimed that practice time interfered with play time - children did not want to leave their chums to go and practice by themselves. The following reasons were given by just a few parents, but should not be overlooked: Child sets up resistance easily, is lazy, had no interest, more than one child in the family taking lessons making it hard to find a time to practice, too many small children in the family who interfered with practice, too young, interfered with school work, lack of personal drive.

The group that identify themselves with the answer, "Sometimes", gave very few reasons. Part of the parents said that at first when the lessons were new, the practicing was not too much of a problem, but as time went on, it became more and more of a grind.

The "Not sure" group, mainly consist of those families who had children practicing at school or at a neighbor's home, and knew little if anything of their children's experience at the piano.

QUESTION 4. WAS IT THE PARENT'S OR THE CHILD'S IDEA TO BEGIN PIANO LESSONS?

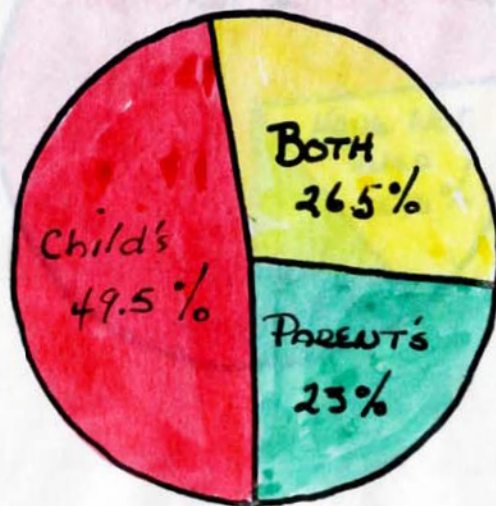


Figure 9

The graph in Figure 9 shows that 49.5% of the children themselves suggested the idea of piano study. The answers for all three groups fit fairly well together. If the child suggested the idea, the parent agreed. In most cases, this worked the same way when the idea was suggested by the parent. In a few cases, the parent did not consider

the feelings of the child, assuming music lessons to be part of their general education.

In the cases listed under "Both", it was indefinite as to where the idea originated, since both child and parent wanted the child to have piano lessons.

QUESTION 5. WAS FINDING A PIANO TEACHER IN MISSOULA A PROBLEM?

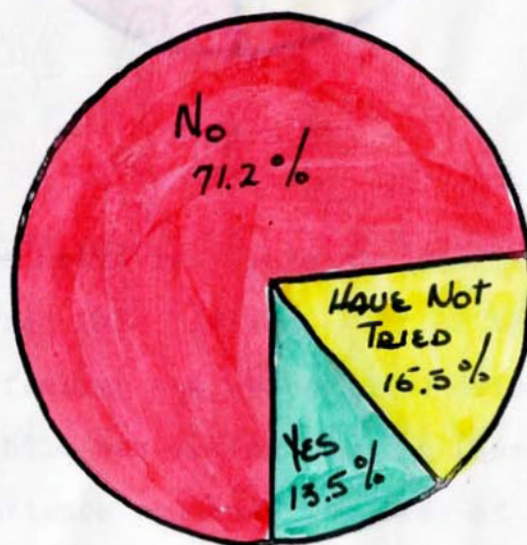


Figure 10

A fraction of the group having no trouble finding a teacher are those that teach their own children. Others in this same group, have found a teacher but not to their satisfaction; some people being dissatisfied with the method used by the teacher, others dissatisfied with the time or place of the lesson.

QUESTION 6. WERE YOU SATISFIED WITH THE TEACHER, METHODS, ETC.?

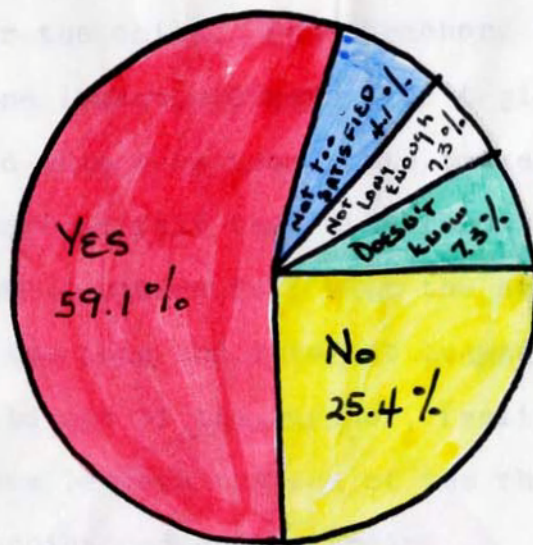


Figure 11

As can be noted in Figure 11, the largest group answered "Yes". From this section, half of the parents were very satisfied, feeling the teacher was doing a splendid job. If their child was taking private lessons, they commented on the patience and understanding of the teacher. If the child was in a class, the comments were similar to those just stated, plus the idea that the lessons in this manner were fun for the child, and did not isolate them from their playmates. Many parents felt the class lessons were especially good for beginners.

Various reasons were given by the group that answered "No". Several parents mentioned that their child had been started with a careless teacher in respect to keeping time, or learning fundamentals. This careless beginning followed by conscientious teaching, lead to dis-

couragement for the child. Some teachers assigned too much material for one lesson. Others didn't give enough, or the pieces they did give were too simple to keep the pupil interested. Some parents felt that a half-hour lesson was not long enough, while others felt that the hour lesson their child had was too long and interest lagged. Several parents commented on the age of the teacher, feeling that the extreme difference between the age of the child and that of the teacher handicapped understanding.

One woman felt that the fact that their teacher never gave recitals with her pupils was a serious injustice, and did not promote interest. Several complaints were made about popular-style teaching, feeling that their children were either too young for such a method, or that they did not receive enough background of fundamentals. Several comments were directed against the class piano method. A few parents felt the classes were too crowded (although the method itself did appeal to them), others thought this method did not give enough individual attention. Some parents admitted that they might be a bit old fashioned in their thinking, but since the class method was so entirely different from their own experience, they preferred the individual lessons (begin with learning names of lines and spaces, key names, etc.). Two parents felt their teacher was interested only in the money received, rather than the results.

A very small percentage of the parents felt that their child's experience had been too short to make any comment, or that their own musical background was so poor, that they were not qualified to answer.

QUESTION 7. DID YOUR CHILD EVER MAKE USE OF HIS PIANO TRAINING? (Play at recitals, for school or church.)



From Figure 12, it is easy to see that two-thirds of the children have had no experience playing before any sort of a group. Of the small percentage who have, it is interesting to note that 93% played in recitals, and only 2.3% played for their class or assemblies and programs at school. The remainder played for family gatherings, or did not specify where.

QUESTION 8. WERE THE LESSONS TOO EXPENSIVE?

Very few people enlarged on their answer to the they would care to pay what a fair price for a piano lesson would

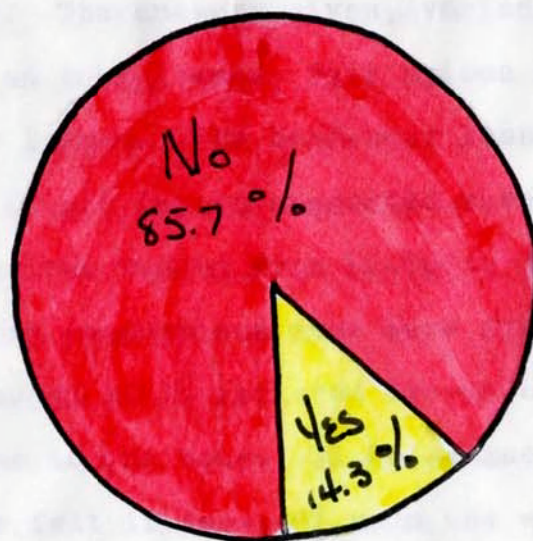


Figure 13

above question. Several were of the opinion that they had paid too much for lessons, since the child would not practice, feeling anything was too much when the children wouldn't work. Some families found any price too steep, due to their financial situation. One supposedly half-hour lesson never lasted beyond fifteen to twenty minutes, and for such a small amount of time, the mother felt she was paying too much.

The exact prices quoted as being too high were:

- \$1.50 per half-hour lesson
- \$1.50 for fifteen to twenty minutes
- \$1.00 per half-hour lesson
- \$6.00 for five half-hour lessons.

With this same question, parents were asked if they would care to say what a fair price for a piano lesson would

be. There were only 45% of the parents who had any idea or cared to say. The answers given, varied.

For an hour lesson, fair prices ranged from \$2.50 to \$1.00 per lesson. The half-hour lesson was more popular with the \$1.00 per lesson suggested more frequently. However, fair prices ranged from \$2.00 to \$.50 per half-hour lesson. Other suggestions made were from \$2.50 to \$2.00 per half-hour lesson if it included lesson and music. If a teacher would come to the house, \$1.25 seemed reasonable for some. Still others felt it depended upon the worth of the teacher.

The prices quoted are for individual lessons, since the class lessons now being given seemed to follow a closer price scale, and were satisfactory for all contacted.

QUESTION 9. WOULD YOUR CHILD LIKE TO CONTINUE WITH PIANO LESSONS? WOULD PARENT AGREE TO THIS?



Figure 14

From the small percentage of answers that were "No", the reasons given for most children is the fact that they are now studying some other instrument and will stay with it rather than begin again with the piano. Financial difficulties and athletic competition were other reasons given. A few families had warned children, that if they quit taking lessons they would never get the opportunity from their parents again.

For those children who expressed a desire to continue with piano lessons in the future, all parents were agreeable, some with conditions. - the largest number agreeing if they were able to acquire a piano in their home. Other conditions were voluntary practice, financial stability, waiting until children were older and could appreciate their experience more, finding a good teacher, and budgeting free time.

QUESTION 10. IS THE CHILD TAKING SOME OTHER INSTRUMENT?

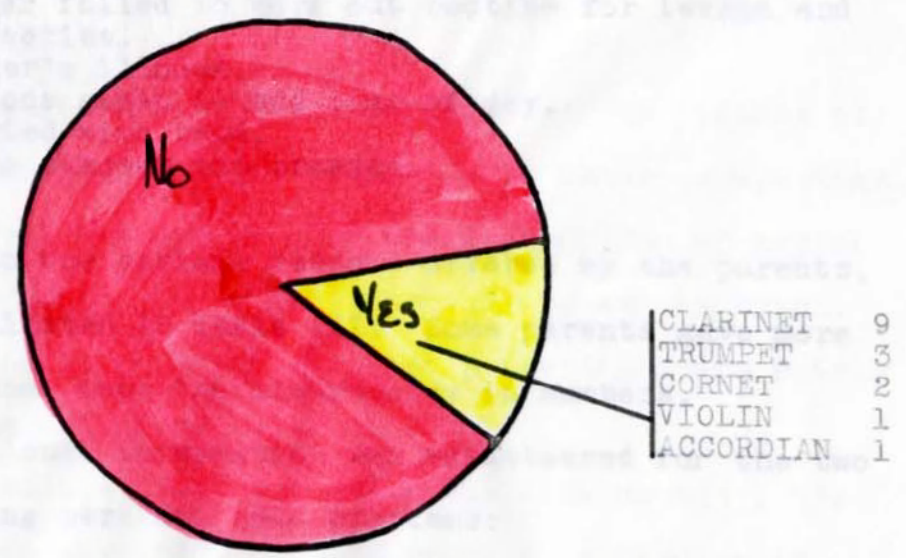


Figure 15

Besides the instances shown in Figure 15, five other children began another instrument, but lost interest in it just as they did with the piano.

QUESTION 11. REASONS FOR QUITTING AND ANY OTHER ADDITIONAL INFORMATION?

TABLE III

| | | |
|-----|----|--|
| 1. | 47 | No piano. |
| 2. | 26 | Would not practice. |
| 3. | 18 | Lost interest. |
| 4. | 9 | Financial difficulty. |
| 5. | 7 | Too young. |
| 6. | 7 | Could not find teacher. |
| 7. | 7 | Taking some other instrument. |
| 8. | 5 | Child's illness. |
| 9. | 5 | No time, due to too many outside activities at school. |
| 10. | 4 | Moving. |
| 11. | 4 | Interfered with school work. |
| 12. | 4 | Teacher too far away for children to travel. |
| 13. | 3 | Athletic interference. |
| 14. | 3 | Their class lessons were discontinued. |
| 15. | 2 | Not satisfied with the teacher. |
| 16. | 2 | Did not like the piano. |
| 17. | 2 | Made the child too nervous. |
| 18. | 2 | Careless teacher discouraged the child. |
| 19. | 2 | Large family interfered with practice. |
| 20. | 2 | Personal home problems. |
| 21. | 1 | Mother failed to work out routine for lesson and practice. |
| 22. | 1 | Mother's illness. |
| 23. | 1 | Lessons given at bad time of day. |
| 24. | 1 | Started with band. |
| 25. | 1 | Piano classes too crowded. |

Due to the various reasons offered by the parents, they will be listed in Table III. Some parents gave more than one reason, thus the discrepancy in numbers.

Additional information was volunteered for the two cases answering personal home problems:

In the first home, big sister was given piano les-

sons, lost interest so discontinued study. Later little sister asked for lessons, began study and was doing well. This stimulated the desire in big sister, so she began to study again. In addition to her own work, she would play little sister's lesson, commenting of its simplicity - doing so in such a manner that in no time she had killed all interest of little sister. Mother feels this to be a real psychological problem and is much alarmed.

The second problem presented was somewhat different. Sister-in-law, with child and piano, moved in with Family A, with child of same age. Family A took advantage of having the piano in the home, and both children took lessons. The difficulty arose when every time child of Family A went to practice, the other little girl decided she wanted to play the piano, too. Since it was her piano, Child A had to wait. Rather than cause a family argument, Family A decided to discontinue the lessons for their daughter for an indefinite period of time.

Figure 16 shows the distribution of the parents of children discontinuing piano study, as to their occupations. Since the survey was not made of the occupations of beginning piano students, no definite conclusion can be drawn. However, it can be observed that the percentages are fairly close, the largest group being only 33%.

From school records a check was made on the I Q's of the children involved in the survey, to determine if mental ability had any bearing on this problem. All children

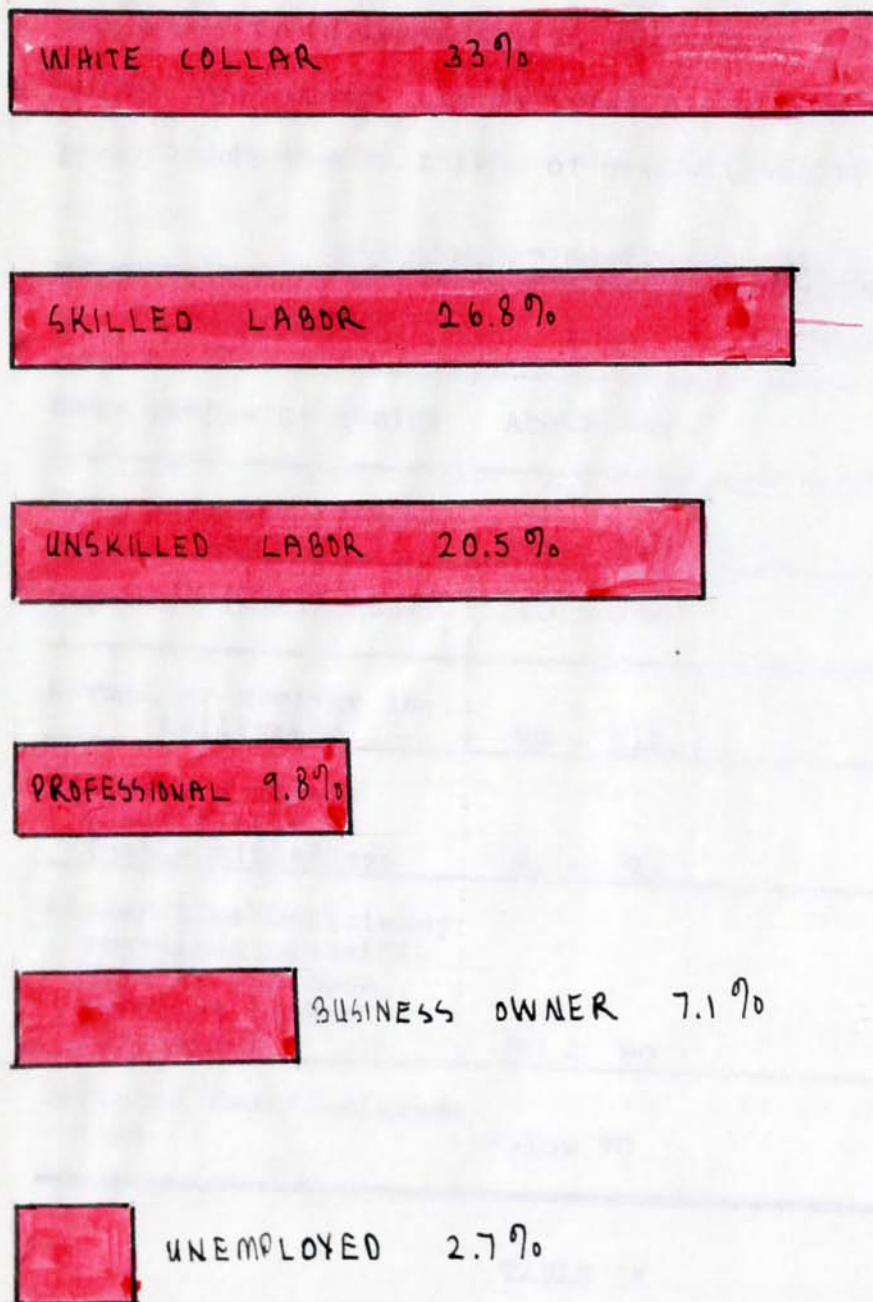


Figure 16

QUESTION 12. PARENTS' OCCUPATIONS?

used in this study did not have an I Q score recorded. The 65 scores that were found are charted on Table IV. Since the majority of marks are in the normal classification or above, presumably, the children did not discontinue their piano study due to a lack of mental ability.

CLASSIFICATION OF I Q SCORES

| CLASSIFICATION | I Q | PERCENTAGE OF SCORES |
|--|-----------|----------------------|
| Near genius or genius | Above 140 | 0 |
| Very superior intelligence | 120 - 140 | 16.9% |
| Superior intelligence | 110 - 120 | 27.7% |
| Normal or average intelligence | 90 - 110 | 52.4% |
| Dullness - rarely classifiable as feeble mindedness | 80 - 90 | 1.5% |
| Border-line deficiency: sometimes classifiable as dullness, often as feeble mindedness | 70 - 80 | 0 |
| Definite feeble-mindedness | Below 70 | 1.5% |

TABLE IV

OBSERVATIONS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The author realizes that for this study, only half of the grade-school children of Missoula were contacted, which may not lead to an exact survey. However, from the cross-section of schools studied in this problem, it is felt that a fair picture of the situation has been presented.

Knowing the wealth of experience that can result from musical knowledge, it appears that here is a serious problem for music educators and parents alike, and it has been shown that this problem does exist in Missoula. It is clear that some reasons - illness and financial difficulties - will be ever present and are uncontrollable by teacher or parent to a certain extent. On the other hand, many of the problems could be avoided by better parent-teacher association, a more conscientious effort to make the experience an enjoyable one, and introducing more varied uses of the piano for students.

Summarizing the answers received from interviewing the parents, we find a greater majority to be:

1. Families own their own piano.
2. Children enjoyed their experience at the piano.
3. Practicing was a definite problem.
4. It was the child's idea to begin piano lessons.
5. Finding a piano teacher in Missoula was no problem.
6. Parents were satisfied with teacher, her methods, etc.
7. Children did not make use of their pianos by playing at recitals, school or church.

8. Lessons were not too expensive.
9. Children would like to continue with piano lessons.
10. Children did not quit to study other instruments.
11. The largest number of parents gave the reason of having no piano for their children discontinuing piano lessons.
12. No great majority turned out for parent occupation. The white-collar group was the highest with 33%.

The negative answers of vital importance to piano teachers are the facts that practicing is such a problem, children made no use of their piano study, and that so few children who quit piano study are continuing with other instruments.

Since practice is difficult for so many children, have teachers and educators used their knowledge to make practice as interesting and as much fun as possible? Due to the high percentage of children who discontinue within the first three months of piano study, a need for further investigation of this problem is suggested.

Much has been said in recent periodicals, to encourage piano teachers to help make arrangements with the public school teachers, for their piano students to perform at school. Besides playing little pieces for their classmates, accompaniments can be arranged by the piano teacher, through the use of simple chords. It is evident that this practice is not prevalent in Missoula.

Although 59.1% of the parents were satisfied with the teacher and her methods, there is need for further in-

vestigation in the relationship between parent and teacher. Many a dissatisfied parent is a confused parent. If the teacher would take time to discuss the child, his problems, the teacher's method and ideas, more parent co-operation would be the result.

Loss of interest was near the top of the list of reasons for discontinuance of study. This has a bearing on the problem of practice, but also is a problem for the parent. Parents must be made to realize that home training is an essential factor in forming habit patterns.

A few children discontinued piano study in order to study another instrument. There is no problem with this minority group, since they are still enjoying a musical experience.

Poor mental ability is not evident among the beginning piano students who discontinued study, and parents' occupation had little, if any bearing on the problem.

APPENDIX A

STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE

To be filled out by students who have taken piano lessons at
any time.

NAME: _____ AGE: _____

ADDRESS: _____ PHONE: _____

GRADE: _____ HOW LONG HAVE YOU STUDIED PIANO? _____

ARE YOU STILL STUDYING PIANO? YES _____ NO _____

APPENDIX B

PARENT QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Do you own a piano?
2. Did your child enjoy his experience at the piano? If not, why not?
3. Was practicing a problem for the child or home?
4. Was it the parent's idea to start lessons, or child's?
5. Was finding a piano teacher in Missoula a problem?
6. Were you satisfied with the teacher, his methods, etc.?
7. Did the child ever make use of the piano (play for his room at school, church or recitals)?
8. Were lessons too expensive? Would you care to say what you think a fair rate for a lesson would be?
9. Would child like to continue with piano lessons? Would parent agree to this?
10. Is child taking some other instrument?
11. Any other information as to why child quit?
12. Parent's occupation?

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