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Mother knows best: female perspectives on standardized testing and opting out in New York City

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Mother Knows Best:
Female Perspectives on Standardized Testing and Opting Out in New York City

by
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This thesis has not only been the culmination of much my work at Vassar but has also acted as a reflective exercise that has allowed me to critically examine my personal relationship with testing and schools. If anything, this endeavor has helped me unpack my educational journey and recognize not only the difficulties I faced but also the insurmountable amount of privilege I was afforded. These realizations are the most personally valuable products of this process as I begin my next journey as educator with my beliefs strongly solidified in making my classroom a healthy and safe place for any student to explore and flourish.

An Introduction to High-Stakes Testing:
Policy and Personal Narrative

Neoliberal education reform has continued to alter American public schools by pushing for the privatization of children, teachers and the education sector while ushering in new national ideals for how schools should function and perform. Neoliberal education reform looks to create a system characterized by the principles set forth by a free market structure where achievement standards are increased, schools are privatized and students and families are given the opportunity to choose schools in order to gain the best education (Hursh, 2008, 62). These reforms and the emphasis policy has placed on high achievement and standardization comes as a response to consistent reports done by the Program for International Student Assessments (PISA) that students in the United State are being out performed by other countries in academic measures despite the disproportionate amount of funds the U.S. puts into its education system in comparison to higher performing counties (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2012). The governmental focus in regards to education then shifted in the 1980's with the publishing of *A Nation at Risk*, which called for a drastic overhaul in accountability to create high achieving, successful students (United States. National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983).

Newer policies like No Child Left Behind, signed into action by Former President George W. Bush in 2001 (NCLB), Race to the Top (RTTT), enacted by President Barack Obama in 2009 and the Common Core Standards, which were adopted by many states starting in 2013, are aimed at making schools and teachers accountable for student performance, preparing students to enter a competitive work force and creating equity within the education system for all students. This has been done through increased standardization, as depicted by the nation-wide learning

objectives for all public school students introduced by the Common Core Standards, more opportunities for school choice and monetary rewards or punishments that are contingent on performance (Department of Education, 2014). The overseeing governments employ standardized, high-stakes testing as one of its main measure in controlling curriculum in schools and monitoring the reproduction of desirable, intelligent students, which in the U.S. means students that are proficient in math, English language arts and science (Walker, 2014). These reforms, however, support the privatization of the field by working in conjunction with for-profit testing distributors and charter schools, undermining teachers by judging performance on exams, which are not relevant to what students are learning, and manufacturing students that are tested too young, held to standards too high and deprived of precious resources and time in order to fill in bubbles on a state test.

According to Firestone, Schorr and Monfils (2004, pp. 5), there are four factors that need to be realized in order for accountability to be successful in an assessment-dependent society, one in which we are currently living. These factors include consistent academic standards for all students, assessments created to critically and fairly measure the achievement of these standards, standards set in order to outline how students are to perform on these assessments and a punishment-reward system based on performance in order to create high levels of accountability for schools. In theory, these measures would provide educators and policy makers with unbiased data to scientifically examine schools and their productivity, increasing social efficiency on multiple tiers within the education sector (Au, 2009, 20-25). In practice, these measures fail to recognize the inconsistency of the participant pool, making the false assumption that American students are similar enough to provide unbiased data. This oversight by policy makers and the testing industry would seemingly invalidate any results produced from the exam data, yet

somehow, we have allowed the false claims of “scientifically managed education” (Au, 2009, 22) to infiltrate our image of education and influence much of the trajectory of a student’s academic career.

The culture of standardized testing has dampened the ability for students to think creatively and to take on academic risks and challenges. Standardized tests teach students that there is always a right or wrong answer and that success lies in knowing the correct answer. This type of teaching reinforces students to have fixed-mindsets, where they believe that intelligence is inborn and some people have it while others do not. Because standardized tests act as a way to track students or admit them into schools, the fixed mindset is then reinforced, creating a culture of students who are afraid to fail since failure, in this system, only leads to negative consequences. Carol Dweck’s work on growth mindsets, the opposite of a fixed set where students view challenges and effort as a pathway to intelligence and believe that individuals can express intelligence in multiple ways, has found that trial and error learning and inquiry-based curriculum, as well as praising effort instead of performance, leads to the creation of students who love learning and learn better (2010, 26-29). Standardized testing inhibits the fostering of growth mindsets in students, and, consequently, creates less capable students.

The rise of standardized testing in American schools has not only squandered away precious instructional time in schools, but they have also invaded the homes of families and the psyches of students. The rise of standards has increased the amount of work students are expected to do during the school year just to be prepared for exams. High school students, on average, spend seven to ten hours a week doing homework outside of school (US Department of Education, 2007). The increased amount of homework students are subjected to eats away at time spent with families and important, necessary self-care measures, such as getting a proper

amount of sleep. Studies have shown that students report that homework and extracurricular activities, as well social media usage, are the main reasons for curtailed sleep (Abeles, 2015, 24). Additionally, sleep is shown to be vital to happiness and performance in school in that students who sleep on average an hour less than their peers will perform up to two grade levels lower than the grade they are currently in (Abeles, 2015, 25).

The lack of sleep and extreme pressure students are under has also created an epidemic of stress-related illnesses that plague students. These conditions include ulcers, headaches, chronic pain, anxiety and depression (Abeles, 2015, 29-31). With the possibility of cultivating a culture full of sick and unhappy children, it is important to note that there is a distinct advantage that a positive mindset, referred to commonly as the “happiness advantage,” has on performance (Achor, 2012, 100). The brain is able to better handle and utilizes the positive benefits of stress and pressure when a person is happier but schools are not currently working towards exploiting this fact. The burden students are under to not only succeed but to constantly prove their achievement and intelligence has created a population of physically sick students at the cost performing well on exams that report very little about the actual intellectual capabilities of the students. High-stakes tests and the high level to which they are held in our society are an additional opportunity for students to lose sleep and spend energy worrying and some schools are not helping relieve this pressure by emphasizing the exams, even holding pep rallies to hype up the exams.

Despite the negative rhetoric regarding tests, the U.S. continues to weave tests into the fabric of American schools, fearing what will happen if we begin listening to the dissenters and finding better practices. Within the last three years, however, educators, administrators, parents and students have been responding to a drastic increase in standardized testing caused by RTTT

and the Common Core Standards by taking action and rejecting the standardized exams and the high-stakes culture surrounding education. Most notably, parents are opting their children out of these standardized exams and educators are publically denouncing the exams by supporting parents in opting out or not administering them. Large movements have taken place in New York City, Washington and Oregon, among other places, where communities are utilizing choice, a principle of neoliberal reform, to fight back against unfair tests and the unjust practices that come with preparing, administering, taking and interpreting the assessments (Hagopian, 2014). Though the motivation for beginning these movements come from varying sources and the outcomes have been varied; opting out of standardized exams seems to create a feeling autonomy, giving power and hope back to students and educators facing current reforms. Policymakers remain relatively pro-testing but have taken note of this movement. There have been attempts to squelch uproar by making minimal alterations to testing policies while still attempting to regain control of schools and communities through fear tactics and ambiguous consequences for those that dissent (Disare, 2016).

Standardized testing was an ever-present threat through my childhood and is something that continues to have power over many aspects of my life even as a 22-year-old college senior. As a K-12 student at the beginning of the 21st century, I attended public school in Prince George's County, Maryland, which borders Washington, D.C. and Northern Virginia and is well known for being one of the largest school districts in the country, being comprised mostly of minority populations and having high levels of poverty in comparison to other parts of the state (Prince George's County Public Schools, 2016). Growing up wedged between some of the best public education systems in the country while attending schools in Prince George's county

created a unique schooling experience characterized by high stakes testing and tracking, especially upon the implementation of NCLB.

I began being formally tested in first grade for the purpose of utilizing a tracking tool known as the Talented and Gifted program (TAG), which identified me as “gifted” student and informed my teachers about my ability to achieve. TAG testing persisted through elementary school along with additions of Scholastic Benchmark Testing and the Maryland State Assessments in English Language Arts and Math by third grade. Despite the retesting of TAG every few years, it was very rare, in my memory, that a student who was not identified as “gifted” upon their first test would be moved into that advanced track later in their academic career. I, however, have no memory of taking that exam or what type of information it asked me to produce but it is baffling to think how the social reproduction that has led to a significant amount of my academic success was contingent on an exam I took as a 6 year old, even though at the time, I was a struggling reader and speller.

My testing only increased through middle and high school. I tested into my high school’s Science and Technology Program, despite my limited interest in engineering and science, in order to avoid attending the high school that was within my borders as it was considered to be low performing. In reality, it was well known in my county that, despite there being an I.B. program at the border high school I should have attended, the only path to a decent college was to leave the small suburban town where I lived and to test into the high school I attended. The perpetuation of that path to success was long standing, as it was a known fact that the so called smart kids attended the Science and Technology program and everyone else attended the border schools since my dad and uncle attended public schools in Prince George’s County in the 1960s and 1970s. This notion continues on and is freely communicated to students as young as

elementary aged, as I've seen my ten-year-old cousin be subjected to expectations and stereotypes that suggest that is a path he needs to take in order to succeed. This perpetuation of school separation by intelligence is just further promoted by stereotype threats, which are the pressures that individuals feel to fulfill predetermined characteristics based on innate identities (Damour, 2009).

In high school, I took the Maryland High School Assessments, a series of four exams in Algebra, English, Government and Biology, which became compulsory for graduating Prince George's Public Schools in 2009. I took these exams between 2007 and 2010, passing each one easily but failing to see how the "HSAs [] help[] prepare students for the challenges and opportunities of the 21st Century" (Maryland High School Assessments, n.d.). If these exams were not passed, students were given the option to do a summer project in lieu of the exams but only as a last resort, after having to have failed the exams several times. I participated in countless AP classes and tests, enrolled in every honors and accelerated course I could and took the SAT and ACT multiple times, convinced my score would never be good enough. Test scores and grades remained huge tenants of how I measured myself worth and how I felt I stood up next to my peers up through the beginning of my college career.

The effects of high-stakes testing influenced my life both in and out of school. As a young child, I was a self-proclaimed perfectionist and my desire to overachieve made me insecure, competitive and incredibly anxious. The thought of taking any formal assessment caused me to panic, feel physically ill, become clammy and weak and, most of the time, cry for an unreasonable amount of time in preparation. I grew superstitious, participating in very specific rituals before exams including waking up to three hours before having to be at school, eating a very specific breakfast, having a good luck charm on my person, and having my parents

very deliberately wish me good luck before dropping me off for school that day. These rituals developed in elementary school and I felt compelled to continue performing them as a high school senior completing my final AP exam. I can recall very few memories of actually taking these exams but I vividly remember my mother trying to calm me down prior leaving for school on an exam day or panicking to find a charm bracelet I would wear whenever I tested. These habits evolved with me as I got older and I became more apt at hiding my anxiety in public but, in private, I was struggling to keep myself calm enough to sit for the tests.

I fostered poor health habits in order to maintain academic and extra curricular success through most of high school and college. I deprived myself of sleep, priding myself on sleeping only a handful of hours a night and coming to school the next day with my work completed and almost bragging about how poorly I was taking care of myself in order to finish my work. This all backfired on me when I developed a chronic headache condition accompanied with anxiety and depression my junior year of high school, which led me to stay home for a majority of both my junior and senior years of high school and withdraw from the spring semester of my freshman year of college. Ironically, while I was struggling medically, I continued to overload myself, taking AP and other challenging courses. I insisted on holding myself to the same standard as my peers who were in school, receiving professional instruction from teachers, though I was at home, attempting to teach myself physics and calculus.

My friendships throughout my K-12 schooling were tense and relatively unsupportive as all of my friends were as high strung regarding our achievements, academic and extracurricular, as I was. While we had similar interests, my friends and I were hypercritical of one another and ourselves and were constantly trying to outdo each other. I feared asking questions or seeking out help in order to keep up the appearance that I was incredibly intelligent, though my lack of

understanding lead to late nights and frustration, trying to make sense of material that could have simply been illuminated to me in class or by a peer. I feel as though the high-stakes testing environment and the expectations to be high achieving fostered these negative feelings and behaviors, solidifying my personal fixed-mindset (Dweck, 2010, 26-29). Though I was always considered a high achieving student, I never really understood how to exist in a supportive, educational environment and therefore, never truly thrived. It wasn't until college, where I pushed myself to be vocal in class and came to terms with not always knowing the correct answer, as well as the fact that there doesn't necessarily have to be a right answer, that I felt supported in my learning, as opposed to being supported in my achievement.

The true inspiration for choosing to write about high-stakes testing and opting out came from my experience doing fieldwork at my former elementary school following my freshman year of college. I was working in a third grade classroom during the entire month of May. While I was there, the students were working on several long-term projects for science, social studies and math while continuing with their normal class schedule where they rotated to different third grade teachers throughout the day for various subjects. However, during a couple of days in the middle of the month, the students were administered a benchmark test mandated by the county. I was not able to stay in the room as I was not a proctor but the exam took the entirety of the morning class period, leaving only three hours in the afternoon to complete lunch, recess and the rest of their subjects. Many of the students were in distress because of the test and had a difficult time adjusting to the testing schedule, which made the testing days unproductive. I later found out that the amount of time the students were actually answering questions was only 17 minutes. I was originally frustrated that the testing interrupted the students' ability to focus on their projects, which they had been working quite diligently on prior to the testing, but I was

absolutely infuriated by the amount of time that was truly wasted in order to collect less than a half hour worth of work. I couldn't fathom how a student could accurately display a year's worth of lessons in 17 minutes or what the state would do with that data.

After this incident, I began thinking about the purpose of these standardized tests in schools, considering whether the tests had any benefits that outweighed the costs to the students, teachers and schools. I also began thinking about how the adults in these students' lives were reacting to the prevalence of testing in these children's lives. I spoke with my own parents to gain some insight. My parents have always been incredibly supportive but they have always had very high expectations of my siblings and me, always asserting it was because they knew how much we were capable of. Additionally, my parents encouraged my siblings and me to strive for success in order to have the ability to eventually choose careers we enjoyed, which was something neither of them were truly afforded. However, my behavior was not abnormal to my parents as my feelings and actions surrounding testing were similar to so many other students in the community. In hindsight, my parents felt they didn't know much about the testing at the time or were even aware of when I was being tested. Therefore they figured my reactions to tests were a personality quirk that had several benefits like extreme focus and drive. They eventually realized how dangerous stress could be when doctors linked my stress to my headache condition and how many of my anxieties surrounding performance in school fostered dangerous habits and damaged my self-worth and my ability to create a positive motivational force to guide my actions.

Though my parents were not well informed about stress and testing when I was in school, they have been able to utilize this new information while parenting my sister through the rest of her high school experience. My parents have seen a shift in rhetoric as the standards have

increased in the last few years. My parents feel as though there is significant vocal backlash from educators, parents and students against the testing of Maryland students. They have heard particularly negative feedback regarding the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) tests, which test third through high school aged students and were created to align with Common Core Curriculum (Maryland State Department of Education, n.d.), recalling specifically how my sister, a high school junior, reported many of her peers crying during the exam due to its difficulty. As my sister is beginning the college application process, my parents and my sister are more attuned to negative health problems caused by tests and the lack of accuracy these tests have in reporting actual intelligence. While my sister still took the exams, she is leaning towards many schools that are SAT/ACT optional, opting out of being misrepresented by her scores.

I became fascinated specifically with the opt out movement out of pure disbelief. Even as a college student, I couldn't believe that students, parents and educators had the ability to stand up to these irrelevant, time wasting exams that severely marred my own self image and my ability to feel comfortable in a school environment. Resisting testing was never something I thought was a possibility as the importance of performing well on exams was prevalent in all facets of my schooling. I never even considered SAT/ACT optional colleges, like my sister is, out of a contrived fear of somehow being at disadvantage without those scores. These experiences and trains of thought have led me to want to examine how communities are standing up to standardized tests, the methods they using and how the actions of other's in their community has affected their thinking and actions regarding testing. I focused on individuals in the New York City area, given that New York has had consistently high opt-out rates but New York City has the lowest participation rate in dissenting (Harris, 2015). More specifically, I have

looked at individuals that reflect many of my own identities as a woman, an educator and a caregiver, to see how their feelings about testing have resulted in public protest and internal struggles as they attempted to address the issue of testing while considering all of the nuances that are involved with working with and caring for children. Women, specifically mothers, are the individuals most likely to witness the effects of standardized testing inside and outside of schools. For appropriate, well informed testing reform to occur in this country, the experiences and knowledge of mothers involved in schools, like those who are active in the opt out movement or as educators, should be taken into the highest consideration. These women should be viewed as experts regarding the holistic impact of standardized testing and their input in the reformation of current practices would ensure that the best interests of students and school communities are met.

Literature Review

Though high-stakes testing is just one tenant of neoliberal public school reform, tests have worked to undermine teachers, students and school communities throughout history by continuing the false narrative that education is an equalizing factor. This argument has existed in U.S. culture through the segregation and social reproduction of individuals based on class and race during the 1800's and much of the 1900's, the eugenics movement and the more current neoliberal school reforms. Regardless of when those movements occurred, they all believed that standardized exams of some kind were the only way to evaluate students objectively, looking for a specific type of success defined by the creators of the policies and exams. Despite many of those movements blatantly looking for a way to uphold white, middle class superiority, the tests were regarded as being a measure that would even the playing field for individuals, regardless of racial make up or socioeconomic status. This rhetoric supports the inequitable concept of the American Dream, where, because one is in America, they automatically have all of the resources and opportunities they need to succeed if they work hard enough. That is by no means the reality of the situation for many individuals, especially those who do not look or live like those whom manufacture these beliefs.

High-stakes tests, as they function today, are an attempt to bolster accountability at every level of the school community. Tests are regarded as a fair measure of performance since they are the same across the country. Tests are supposed to provide schools and the government with vital information about how well students are learning key concepts in class, which should be used to improve performance standards and assist schools in areas they are struggling. Tests also utilize instructional time to teach students how to tests and to superficially cover information that

is not necessarily pertinent to what students are learning in class, tying teachers' hands, limiting what and how they can actually teach if they want their class to be prepared to take the tests.

Modern standardized, high-stakes tests lack the ability to differentiate for cultural and social biases that exist on the test, failing to recognize the diversity of identities and intelligences students and teachers innately possess, catering to a very specific type of student who achieves in a particular way. These tests satisfy the terms of the Campbell Law, which states that “the more any quantitative social indicator is used for social decision-making, the more subject it will be to corruption pressures and the more apt it will be to distort and corrupt the social processes it was intended to monitor” (Nichols & Berliner, 2010, 26-27). Scores have been used to inform the allocation of funds, berate educators and label children in a way that stigmatizes them and leaves them vulnerable to the expectations that stem from those stereotypes. Test scores have rarely been used for the development of better, more developmentally appropriate tests or creating better pedagogical ways to address the individual achievement of each student and finding ways to best help those students learn. Additionally, current reforms broadcast a disjointed message as to whether schools truly want students to succeed or if they want students to constantly struggle while teachers and schools are scrutinized and publicly shamed through the utilization of test-based review and ranking, suggesting that test performance is sound measure of a teacher or school's pedagogical practices and philosophy (Porter, 2015).

On average, students will take upwards of 117 standardized tests in their K-12 career, spending approximately 25 hours on tests each year. These numbers vary between districts since local government have the ability to pile on additional standardized exams that students must take each year (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2015). Additionally, results of standardized tests consistently mirror wealth and race trends in districts where poorer

communities with higher levels of students of color coming out on the bottom (Kohn, 2001, 349), making a strong case against the argument that tests are an equalizer as they are a poorly cloaked method of social reproduction (Hagopian, 2014, pp. 82-83). Communities of students, parents and educators have taken notice of the harmful and discriminatory nature of these exams and have begun exercising their right to refuse these exams by refusing to partake in the exams, an action that is supported by the revised Every Student Succeeds Act, passed in 2015 by president Obama (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.) and to ask for changes regarding the nature of student and school assessment.

Though time has passed, the historical basis for standardized tests in the United States mirrors the current climate of testing. Frequent, high-stakes testing combines the country's need to be a global contender while maintaining social reproduction among its citizens, ensuring that its citizens that do not fit the mainstream American image come out on the bottom. The curriculum that accompanies high-stakes tests seriously harms the creative capabilities and health of the country's children. The evidence of physical and emotional damage caused by high-stakes tests, as well as the negative influence these tests have on what is being taught in schools and the methods used, has provided enough motivation for individuals to start fighting back against these practices, primarily through the opt-out movement.

A Historical Examination of High Stakes Testing

Standards and the tests used to assess those standards have been utilized in the United States as a gatekeeper to good education since as early as the late 18th century (Reese, 2013, pp. 17-20). Early accounts of standardized exams in the Northeastern region of the country took the form of school exhibitions where students would change their school routine in order to

memorize facts to recite to their communities. For students in poorer communities who were quite frequently students of color, these public oral exams were a plea for the funding of their schools (Reese, 2013, pp. 19-20). Testing continued to proliferate classrooms and influence teaching methods, leading to the popularization of didactic teaching, as it was the most effective way to prepare students for exams. Even during the late 1800s, negative responses to testing were expressed by educators. These responses can be illuminated by a commentator for the *California Teacher* who said, “teaching can never rise higher than the examination” (Reese, 2013, pp. 204).

High-stakes testing was later used to maintain the creation of social classes in response to the eugenics movement of the early 1900s, which aimed to elevate the white, wealthy males above all other classes of people. Psychologist Alfred Binet developed IQ testing in France in the early 1900s. Binet originally intended for the tests to be used to identify where “children may need more help in their intellectual development” by looking at their intelligence in comparison to “chronological age” (Au, 2009, 35). The U.S. commandeered Binet’s test and used it as a way to bolster the eugenics movement, an effort that looked to stratify society into intelligence classes by making gross generalizations about the genetic nature of intelligence. These classes reflected the dominance of white, affluent men in American society. In 1917, Robert Yerkes and Carl Brigham analyzed data received from a pool of I.Q. scores from the U.S. army (Sacks, 1999, pp. 27-28). This data was grossly misinterpreted to generalize the inborn intelligence of racial and ethnic groups, providing results that supported xenophobic tendencies (Au, 2009, 37).

The I.Q. test was reformatted in 1926 into what is now the Standardized Aptitude Test (SAT), (Frontline, n.d.), which continues to show the same trends of favoring those with the most power in the American society (Sacks, 1999, pp. 32). The SAT is an aptitude test that

measures “college readiness” in high school students, looking at ability in math, English, and, prior to this academic year, writing (CollegeBoard, 2016). These scores added an increased need for meritocracy to gain access to higher education in addition to quantifying a student’s intelligence, a factor schools utilize to boast their status. The SAT was one of the measures that enforced “scientifically managed education,” a process introduced by John Bobbitt in during the early 1900’s that aimed to add order and consistency to the evaluation process but using statistical data to analyze school performance (Au, 2009, 20-21).

After the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960’s, intelligence testing was still skewed towards white students, making the equality the movement strived for not fully attainable (Hursh, 2008, pp. 59-60). These types of educational gatekeepers, which are not only catered towards specific class but also has monetary value, are additional sources of stress for modern students, further skewing access to high education in the favor of a particular class of students (Abeles, 2015, 131-132). In 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson passed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), a bill that intended to combat the War of Poverty through a greater access to education for all children facilitated by the allocation of federal funding for contingent on performance, not just property tax (Educationpost, n.d.). Additionally, state governments were responsible for gifting the funds as opposed to the federal government, giving the local government a larger role in the education of their students. This policy was renewed multiple times, most recently as NCLB in 2001 and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015 (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

Moving forward, standardized testing and school reform had another shift in the 1980s under the Reagan administration and the release of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983 (United States. National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). The recession the country was

experiencing in addition to the call for higher standards and change to the education sector led to the beginning of many of the current neoliberal reforms schools are now facing. *A Nation at Risk* emphasized equality and creating schools that would allow all students to achieve “regardless of race or class or economic status” (United States. National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). These document also called for a reutilization of standardized tests, using them to evaluate school and educator quality, not dissimilar to the way tests began being misused as “a single standard by which to judge and compare the output of each school” (U.S. Congress, Office of Technology Assessment, 1992) in the early 1900s. These reforms were developed by business and government leaders with little to no educational backgrounds and focused on creating a market-based education system where families had choice, leading to a more competitive environment (Hursh, 2008, pp. 60-66). A hyper focus was put on literacy and mathematic performance, which began the visible decline in attention to other areas of studies, specifically those that were based in creative thinking. The irony of the situation can be seen in the current revamping of Chinese schools, which consistently outperform American schools, and how China is attempting to inject their schools with “flexible and creative” policies to hone innovation and ingenuity while America is tightening on the reigns on standards (Abeles, 2015, 108-109).

The concentration on choice and competitiveness are factors that influenced the induction of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2001 by Former President George W. Bush as a renewal of ESEA. In support of this plan, Bush said the following,

NCLB is an important way to make sure America remains competitive in the 21st century.

We’re living in a global world. See, the education system must compete with education

systems in China and India. If we fail to give our students the skills necessary to compete in the world in the 21st century, the jobs will go elsewhere. (Hursh, 2008, pp. 51).

Bush's plan focused on four key principles in the hopes to raise the competitive power of American children. These principles included increased accountability for students and teachers, more local control of the education sector, school choice and the implementation of better pedagogical methods (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). These facets of NCLB translated into judging schools based on their ability to make adequate yearly progress (AYP), which is measured through students' ability to meet predetermined educational standards on standardized tests (Abernathy, 2007, pp. 5). Failure to make AYP resulted in funding changes, a public announcement that the school was failing and the option for students to transfer to a non-failing school (Abernathy, 2007, pp. 8). While funding increases for professional development and supplemental education programs for students under NCLB, schools are still forced to put their efforts into raising test scores, regardless of the fairness of the test or if the tests are on par with what is being taught or expected of students. One of the goals of NCLB was to achieve 100% proficiency by the 2014 school year. However, early trends of the reforms' progress showed that achieving basic levels of academic achievement were challenging, inciting that the standards were not appropriate (Abernathy, 2007, pp. 14).

NCLB has a provision known as the 95% rule, which states that schools can be punished if less than 95% of students do not participate in the state testing. Though this rule was originally enacted in order to prevent the discrimination of particular groups of students by suggesting those students miss test days in order to raise overall school performance, it is now just another threat to those who choose to opt out regardless of the fact that it seems to be a bluff by the

Department of Education for there has been no retaliation against school funding to date (Abernathy, 2007, pp. 6). The standards were also too expansive and numerous for teachers to cover all of the material in time for students to take the exams, making the tests and standards unrealistic.

Following NCLB, President Barack Obama made his own efforts to overhaul schools by signing in Race to the Top in 2009. RTTT completely captures the competitive neoliberal ideal as it requires schools to earn the money they need to function by performing adequately in various sectors of education. Schools adopted higher standards, goals aimed at college readiness through increased Advanced Placement programs and alternative public schooling choices like charter schools. The Common Core Standards introduced a national set of academic expectations for students all over the country in 2013. With the induction of those standards, many states chose to follow these standards despite many arguments that they are not only detrimental to the development of young children but not realistically attainable for the current state of schools (Hagopian, 2014, pp. 86-90). Teacher evaluation increased as well, and was contingent on the successfulness of their students on standardized tests despite testing being irrelevant to what was being taught classrooms (Hagopian, 2014, pp. 44). Despite the incentivizing nature of RTTT and the idealized Common Core Standards, the reform has been largely unsuccessful due to the under resourced nature of many schools in conjunction with the overly ambitious nature of the standards adopted by schools (Weiss, 2013).

In December of 2015, President Obama signed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), a bill that amends ESEA and NCLB, which was the last version of ESEA. This bill continues to have a similar focus as the last iterations of the law as it attempts to increase the quality of education and the academic progress students make at school regardless of their geographic

location or class, race, and gender identities. In comparison to NCLB, this version of the law supports localized standards and assessments as well as a more specified, state driven process for distributing funds to struggling schools. This bill allows for more flexibility for states to assess their schools but still emphasizes the need to measure students in a meticulously planned, standardized way (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). However, exams like the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) tests have become more widely utilized by many states despite the lack of proof that the tests accurately measure student achievement in schools or that schools can appropriately prepare students for these tests (I Am An Educator, 2015).

In New York City, students are subjected, by the state, to exams in English Language Arts and mathematics every year from third through eighth grades in order to check competency in meeting the new Common Core Standards. Students also take science tests in fourth and eighth grades to assess the fulfillment of science Common Core Standards. Students as young as Kindergarten are eligible for tests, which assess achievement, tracking them into gifted programs. High school students in the city can take the Specialized High School Admissions Test (SHSAT) in order to be placed in specific high school programs (New York City Department of Education, 2016). High school students, in order to graduate must complete five or nine exams in various subjects, receiving a score of 65 or higher, to receive either a Regents Diploma or an Advanced Regents Diploma, respectively (New York City Department of Education, n.d.).

These tests are said to be “an evaluation of student mastery of content and skills in various courses of study, serve as a tool for measuring the degree to which students are on track to graduate high school college- and career-ready, and help shape future instruction” (New York

City Department of Education, 2015). Scores are also utilized by some schools for admissions purposes, though standardized scores cannot be the only factor that is looked at. Scores have also been used in the past to evaluate teachers and their schools. Similarly to testing at the turn of 20th century, these tests serve multiple functions, and due to their highly specific content and testing methodology that must be taught to students in order for them to succeed, tests hold an incredible amount of power in the lives of students and educators.

Opting Out and Testing Resistance

The initiative to opt out of high-stakes testing has been gaining ground during the last three years after the implementation of the Common Core Standards in 2013. Opting out allows parents to prevent their children from testing by sending a letter into school stating that their child will not test or simply keeping them at home. Educators and administrators can also participate in opt out by not administering tests. Parents, students and educators have taken notice of how classrooms are influenced by the standardized exams, including curriculum geared towards the exams, increased homework for test preparation and the class time taken up in order to administer the tests. The physical and emotional toll of testing has become a growing problem as more students are experiencing stress related illness at the hands of such high standards (Abeles, 2015, 29-31).

Opting out of testing has garnered a large community of supporters as well as several negative responses. While many individuals have expressed a dislike of the current high-stakes tests, there are many individuals who feel that the tests are a positive influence and that it is damaging to all students when some do not participate. The argument has been made that the opt out movement has been lead primarily by white, middle or upper class parents and therefore, the

scores that are left for the state to look at do not represent that demographic (Ujifusa, 2015). Because of this, the government is unable to get a full picture of the state of education in the community, though even with the tests, they are still only seeing a piece of the puzzle.

While many individuals who participate in opt out, specifically in New York City, are located in neighborhoods that have lower populations of minorities, such as District 15 in Brooklyn, the opt out movement is not solely cultivated by just the white middle class (Harris, 2015). Opt out has occurred in all of the five boroughs, with schools like Castle Bridge Elementary in Washington Heights. In 2013, Castle Bridge Elementary successfully resisted the state testing of their kindergarten through second grade population by putting up a united front composed of educators and parents. These adults advocated for students by pointing out the irrelevance of the testing to the actual learning that is taking place in the classroom as well as the developmental hazard posed by testing children so young (Monahan, 2013). Additionally, Jamaal Bowman, a Black middle school principle from the Bronx, insists that the lack of minority involvement lies in the limited amount of knowledge parents possess about their options and the movement. Bowman works to educate families about the nature of the tests and how they influence the quality of the education their children are receiving due to the poor pedagogical practices that teachers are forced to use in order to teach to the test.

Additionally, individuals have voiced the opinion that the tests are just a necessary part of being a student and regardless of how the test impacts a student educationally, physically or emotionally, it is the student's job to take them. It is argued that without the data collected about the tests, the test writers and policy makers won't know how best to fix them (Rivera, 2015). This argument suggests that students should be utilizing their time and resources to help fix a test that is supposed to measure their own achievement, a job that should belong to test writers and

policy makers. This argument fails to see the importance of time in schools and the importance of each student's educational experience since they are willing to use current students as testing guinea pigs.

Within the last three years in New York State, the percentage of students opting out grew from ranging from five to fifty percent of students in a handful of counties in 2013 to a majority of counties opting out between five to fifty percent. A handful of counties had testing participation as low as fifty percent of the student body (Harris, 2015). In total, approximately 200,000 New York State third through eighth grade students, a sizable 20 percent of students in that age bracket, opted of their exams (Harris, 2015). During the 2014-2015 school year, approximately 220,000 students opted out across the state rates averaged 20 percent while the number of students rose from 360 the previous year to 7,900 students in New York City (NYCOPTOUT, 2016). With the increased rates of opt out in New York came progress towards fixing the assessments. The NYC opt out movement demanded numerous measures to lower the stakes for students and teachers. They asked for a reduction in testing time, both in preparation and the actual time students spend taking the exam, and for the removal of Chancellor Tisch. They also requested for an untying of teacher evaluation and exam scores, brought upon by the passing of Governor Cuomo's Education Transformation Act in 2015 which bases 50 percent of teacher evaluation on the scores of their students on standardized tests (NYCOPTOUT, 2016). The opt out movement is also looking to increase transparency between the Department of Education and the schools and families (NYS Allies for Public Education, 2015). Following the opt out, Chancellor Tisch stepped down and was replaced with Betty Rosa, who has admitted to siding with the opt out movement and finding alternative ways to assess students (Disare, 2016).

Resistance of standardized tests seems to stem from various forms of motivation but in most cases, acts of resistance are done with the full knowledge that consequences are imminent. Opting out takes many forms, from refusing to administer exams, to formally opting out of the tests or just happening to stay home from school on testing days. Opting out in Washington followed similar patterns as students, parents and teachers banded together in order to protect the precious time and resources taken up by standardized testing. Garfield High School opted out of administering the Measure of Academic Progress to its students in 2013 by gaining unanimous support from faculty, the parents association and the student body. Another important factor as recounted by many of those involved in the efforts was the outpouring of support from other educators and communities that understood the importance of what opting out of the test means. That feeling of support seems to be an integral component of successfully resisting these various testing reforms in the face of unclear repercussions (Hagopian, 2014).

In New York City, students, parents and educators are more knowledgeable about the effects of standardized testing and their options to resist the tests. However, New York City has one of the lowest opt out rates in New York State, hovering at around 1.4% (Harris, 2015). Opting out seemingly allows for parents, educators and students to employ their right to participatory democracy where citizens are “actively working together to shape public institutions and policies, rather than merely being voting members of [] society” (Stitzlein, 2015, 56-57). However, disinters have been met with a lack of clarity about the future implications for opting out will mean for their children, students or themselves. Many former policies, like AYP and the 95% participation rule, have been weakened and not enforced as steadfast as they were originally intended to, though they still seemingly problematic in their now vague reiterations (Center for American Progress, 2014). Educators, specifically have been threatened by higher

ups who say that discussing opinions regarding testing and encouraging students and parents to opt out is in violation of an educator's ability to discuss political opinions (Taylor, 2016). School chancellor Carmen Fariña claims that discussions around testing are highly skewed towards opting out, making these conversations politicized and thus, requiring disciplinary action for teachers who engage in this type of behavior. However, other educational leaders, like Betty A. Rosa, asserts she would opt her own children out, highlighting the further political nature of this debate as well as the overwhelming opinion against the tests.

The conversation surrounding opt out, like Fariña asserts, is highly political and sways towards anti-testing. However, there is another issue that is discussed in regards to testing-wellness. Mental health has been drastically effected by the increase of high standards and high-stakes testing. The increase in testing has caused for schools to have to cut time from other subjects and recess. Homework has increased in order for teachers to attempt to cover all of the material and prepare students for tests, which takes away from family time or extracurricular activities, where students grow socially. Children are also encouraged to change their mindsets and to look for "extrinsic motivation...rely[ing] heavily on 'if, then rewards'" (Abeles, 2015, 102-103). Students are losing the ability to socialize, thus stunting the development of executive function and making it more challenging to cope with the stress they are under. The tests, in a way, have overhauled every aspect of student's lives.

The individuals in society that have the most complete picture of how students and schools are being effected by tests are women, specifically mothers. As of the 2011-2012 school year, women made up approximately 76% of the teachers in the United States (US Department of Education, 2015). Additionally, in regards to parental participation, studies have found that mothers that comprise two family households (without a stepparent), participate in their

children's education are at a higher rate than any other type of parent, biological or not. Additionally, looking at all parental participation across family types, mothers statistically participate at a greater rate than fathers (US Department of Education, 2001). Mothers have a unique incite into not only the work their children are doing in schools but also the work they are bringing home and the juggling of family, social and wellness obligations. Parents have the ability to act as advocates for their children, which includes the ability to opt them out of practices that they deem harmful, and the opportunity to be a check in the system by reviewing the material that students are being asked to learn and to bring perspective to the situation. This unique expertise that mothers, who are more closely tied to their children's education, bring to the conversation are thorough and important. They are just lacking a medium through which to be heard.

Methodology

Due to the recent growth of the opt out movement in 2013 and the rise in publicity following the larger resistance movements in Oregon and Washington, most research on of the topic of opting out is a combination of first-hand accounts of resisters and statistics gathered by school boards with the intention of tracking trends of participation so as to assess schools and educators. The research, as it currently stands, lacks a complete picture of high-stakes testing in schools as the data, in the majority, fails to look critically and closely at personal motivations and the nuances that individuals need to consider when choosing to resist testing in the way the opt out movement advocates for. While there seems to be a general consensus regarding the negative nature of the tests, that is only part of the issue families and educators face.

In regards to creating a more holistic pool of information regarding opting out and testing resistance, I chose to employ qualitative interviews in an attempt to gain a more comprehensive picture of how individuals are engaging with standardized tests and why they choose to take action in the way that they do. Yin (as cited in Tellis, 1997, 5) discusses four utilizations for case-study style research, particularly interviews. As related to my study, Yin discusses some of the purposes of interview-based research as “explain[ing] complex causal links in real-life interventions [and] describe[ing] the real-life context in which the intervention has occurred.” Another key component, outlined by Yin (as cited in Tellis, 1997, 6), that is important when conducting this type of research, especially when considering the polarizing nature of the topic, is the unbiased nature of both the questions and the interviewer and the skills of being a “good listener” in order to obtain an honest interview.

In order to gain the well-rounded perspective on the topic that I would like to, I began my search for individuals to participate in structured interviews focusing on personal narrative and

opinions. Jesse Hagopian's book, *More Than a Score* (2014) is one of the only sources that focuses specifically on opting out and resisting testing published at this time. The essays in Hagopian's book discuss not only how people have chosen to opt out but also why they opted out and what lead them to that choice. However, most of the narratives in the book show a very anti-test, pro-opt out mindset. This format has influenced how I plan to perform my study in order to get the fullest understanding of testing resistance and how it influences a community. I also hoped to diversify the participant pool in order to broaden the range of opinions and interpretations of opting out I could collect.

I chose to geographically focus my participant pool on the New York City area. Part of my reasoning for conducting research in New York City was the access I had to the area given my proximity to New York City from Poughkeepsie, New York and the connections I had to individuals in New York City via internships and Vassar professors. More importantly, New York State has been a leader in opting out across the country, having upwards of 200,000 students forgo taking high-stakes test in 2015, which computes out to approximately 20 percent of public school students. Despite this, New York City is ranked as have one of the lowest opt out participation rates in the state, averaging around 7,900 students, or approximately 1.8 percent of students in the city (NYS Allies for Public Education, 2015). New York City Governor Cuomo's neoliberal school reforms emphasized an increase in school choice and the usage of test scores to allocate funds and to evaluate teachers, which is now defunct practice (NYCOPTOUT, n.d.). The consequences for opting out seemed to be more detrimental in New York City; schools vary from block to block and the access to good education could lie in taking a high-stakes test, making the choice to resist testing more complicated.

I sought out participants who were at the time active, or had previously been active, in the schools as a parent, educator or community member. I define active as any sort of engagement with the schools or board of education as active participation, including but limited to being a student in New York City schools, a parent of child in New York City schools or attending any meetings or gatherings surrounding issues in New York City schools. I specifically gathered data from adults over the age of 18 in order to standardize my pool of participants in some way and to get a perspective of testing from individuals who were not directly subjected to the tests at the time of participation.

Recruitment for a possible four to ten individuals started in October 2015 and continued until February of 2016. I reached out to various possible participants through list serves that included various educators and parents in the New York City area. I also contacted individuals that I knew personally who worked in education in New York City via email using the same short passage describing myself, the overview of my thesis, a description of ideal participants and contact information (see Appendix A). Most individuals who were interested corresponded with me via email and I set up interviews at the participant's convenience. I was in correspondence with a total of six individuals and completed four full interviews.

Additionally, methodological limitation was a factor that significantly shaped the trajectory and focus of my thesis; the only individuals to contact me regarding my postings and emails were women between the ages of 40 and 60 who identified as mothers. Many of these women were also educators in the classical sense of the profession as well as involved in educational advocacy. This resulting participant pool points to an interesting trend in educational involvement and activism, while also illuminating the limited reach my list serve and personal contacts had. Since many of my personal contacts were individuals who I had met through

various educational programs, it makes sense that the responses I received were also from educators. As mentioned earlier, women make up a huge portion of educators in the United States and mothers, specifically are the most active participants in multiple types of family structure regarding a child's education.

Because the participant pool depicts the gendered skew of the involvement of individuals in schools, I was limited in the information I could obtain as an entire gender was excluded from participating. This pool also does not reflect anyone involved in schools that would classify as non-binary and not cis-gendered. I utilized this limitation in order to further focus the topic of test resistance and motivation by looking at the unique perspective that mothers have on shaping educational trajectories and how they interact with schools and their policies. Despite being a group that is so integral to operation of schools, there was not a significant amount of research specifically focused on the involvement of mothers in the opt out movement. Through this limitation, I was therefore able to find a unique angle to explore the topic of opting out.

The homogenous nature of my participant pool caused for a slight methodological shift in that I was able to focus the conversations in my interviews to reflect the specific group I was speaking with. This influenced the creation of my codes, defined by Saldaña (1989, 3) as “a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based...data,” that I would use to analyze my data and with which I would create many of my interview questions around. Because of the nature of my participants, I created questions that would speak to womanhood and motherhood in order to determine if those codes would be consistent across all participants. I additionally focused on themes in wellness, expertise and/or experience in education, empathy and political engagement when creating questions and interpreting data.

Interviews were primarily conducted via phone calls though Skype/FaceTime and survey style interviews were also available. Interviews were conducted in January and February of 2016. Three out of four of the women participated in phone interviews, which were recorded with consent using GarageBand on an Apple computer. One woman happened to be out of the country while I was conducting interviews but responded to the list of research questions (see Appendix B) via email. The women who were available for vocal interviews preferred phone interviews, with no one opting for a Skype/FaceTime interview. Phone interviews took between 40 minutes to an hour to conduct, including introductions and debriefing. The phone interviews were conducted in such a way that survey questions acted as the backbone for collecting information but tangents that illuminate the participant's individual perspective on the topic were welcomed and expanded upon with follow up questions. The questions acted as a jumping off point for further conversation in order to get a full grasp on the involvement of these women in opt out movement and the opinions they had about testing. I also provided each interviewee with the definition I was using to describe *testing resistance*, which I defined as *any act that removes power or importance from the standardized tests or deemphasizes the importance the scores received on standardized tests*.

The individual who was interviewed via email was sent the same interview questions that I used to structure my phone interviews. She responded very thoroughly to each question in a document and emailed me her responses. While she provided me with a significant amount of information, I was not able to further elaborate on points she made during her interview and as a result, collected less data from her overall. That is apparent in the analysis of the information. In some ways, this interview was the clearest and easiest to analyze but it is missing a large elaborative piece the other interviews had. Additionally, as the only participant not involved in

education or with a child still in K-12 schools, it would have beneficial to have had this interview verbally.

Interviewees provided written consent to have their interviews recorded through the use of voice recording software and transcribed for research purposes or review in the case of the participant who answered questions via email. Consent forms (see Appendix C) were scanned and collected via email and participants were informed that the information collected, including recordings, will not be kept following the completion of the study. The names of each participant has been changed but other demographic information, such as age and geographic location within New York City were unchanged as they were important contextual details that were valuable for research purposes.

I examined testing trends in the areas where the participants lived in order to look for correlations with statistical data collected by the city and state and the narratives that my participants shared. The data I looked at to corroborate information given in the interviews included testing participation, school choice options, and rates of high school graduation and college entrance, as well as other factors that came up during the interviews. I also did further research regarding the schools these women mentioned in order to gain a better understanding of the experiences the women were sharing with me. The personal narratives I collected adds to the multitude of reasons as to why and how people resist testing as well as provide counter-narratives by focusing on real stories influenced by how ingrained standards and assessments are in the current educational framework in the United States. This methodological approach allowed for opting out and standardized testing to be discussed in a nuanced way, where the intricacies of testing and the diverse implications they have for these women, their families and their communities could be discussed and brought into the larger discourse.

Limitations

As mentioned throughout the larger part of the Methodology, I encountered several limitations during this study that caused me to readjust my methods, ultimately leading to a less comprehensive pool of data to analyze. One of the main limitations I dealt with was the lack of racial, class and gender diversity in the participants I could speak with regarding this topic. I was limited by my contacts in New York City, in that they were mostly middle class women involved in education. The list serves I used were resources my education professor, a woman and educator, had access to. Because this is how I chose to recruit participants for my study, I found that women with an investment in education, as educators or mothers, were the overwhelming majority of those who had the time and desire to speak with me. To combat this limitation in the future, I would utilize Parent Teacher Association and Testing Taskforce contact information to reach out to a variety of schools throughout the city as well as attempt to recruit participants in person, as that tends to expedite the process of conducting data by removing the need to plan interviews for a later date.

An additional limitation I came across was the act of performing my interviews via email or over the phone. The interview I sent over email collected significantly less information than the other interviews I conducted over the phone. Because I wasn't able to ask for elaboration on certain points she made, something I would have more easily had to opportunity to do over the phone, I had less information to analyze. This was a significant downfall since this woman was the only participant who did not have a child in New York City schools at the time of the interview and the only participant who was professionally involved in the education sector. While I gathered a significant amount of information from my phone interviews, there is an advantage to having conversations that are based around personal experiences face-to-face,

whether that is in person or via Skype or FaceTime, in order to interpret facial expressions and vocal pauses (Viaggio, 1997,248). In future studies, it would be beneficial to conduct these interviews in person, which would not only potentially increase the participation of a variety of individuals but would also allow for a more natural conversation about the subject to occur, where the participant feels comfortable sharing personal details about their experiences and opinions.

Interview Analysis

The attitudes regarding high-stakes testing in New York City seem to range from disappointment, fear and confusion to anger and frustration. In interviews, participants expressed a myriad of personal narratives, statistical information and political reporting, justifying their feelings towards high stakes testing and, for some, the work they were doing to actively resist the tests. Though specific reasons these women gave for taking action were comprehensive and ingrained in anecdotes, the general umbrella of motivations seemed to stem from the core understanding that the tests, as they currently exist, were not helpful for educating students and illuminating teachers and schools as to how to better educate students. In short, the individuals I interviewed all had an idea of what proper, good education looked like and knew that the current climate of high stakes and the tests that accompanied that were not what they pictured.

In each interview I conducted, I attempted to determine the participant's feelings regarding the utilization of tests as an educational tool and the current high-stakes testing that takes place in New York City Schools as well parse out some of the motivations these individuals had for opting out of or resisting testing. Additionally, interviewees were asked to share any demographic information they were comfortable revealing in order to find if any of their personal identities influenced their opinions or actions about testing. This information was examined to find trends among the participants and the motivating factors behind their opinions and activism.

The women that are described below spoke passionately and openly about their personal experiences with high-stakes testing and how these tests impacted their lives as well as their families and their communities. They all discuss the drastic shift in how they remember tests

from when they were students and how those tests in no way resemble the tests their children and other students are currently subjected to. Each woman had a slightly varied response to what they would like to see in the future in regards to testing and accountability and while they all do not necessarily agree with the opt out movement, they all concur that something needs to happen and change needs to happen.

Interview Synopses

Tara

Tara is a 58-year-old artist and mother of a college-aged student, living in Chelsea with her husband. She recounted being tested in school while growing up but “the curriculum was not geared towards the test” and she found that the tests did not contradict the classroom environment. Even in regards to her own child, Tara and her husband chose schools with the goal of finding an environment where “[her child’s] natural curiosity was encouraged and stimulated” These schools also happened to administer minimal testing. Tara believes that high stakes tests, such as the SAT, are not accurate in presenting a holistic picture of student and therefore, are not accurate measures of student success. She finds that these tests do not measure or depict what a child could “accomplish academically, professionally or socially.”

In addition to her own experience with testing, Tara touched on the drastic changes in testing and school climate between when her child was in school to current students and how a particular experience was powerful in shaping her opinion on this matter. She recounted hearing of a friend’s child, starting Kindergarten in the Bronx. The friend’s child was a happy, curious preschool student and eager to start Kindergarten. However once starting school, the child was

quickly inundated with homework and had limited time outside of the classroom to move, explore and play, key development needs and instinctual desires of young children. The stress of school weighed so heavily on the child that they became physically ill, “throw[ing] up and cry[ing]” everyday before school. This response not only scared the child’s parents, as stress related illnesses have only more recently started plaguing the youngest members of our society, but also frightened the school as they learned the outcome of trying to implement such high expectations.

Tara found this to be striking in comparison to her own child’s schooling experience, where her child “was taught to love learning” in comparison to the current environment, which she attributed to “the stress of testing.” This stress includes the actual tests and the test centric curriculum and methods that schools use to keep up with the high standards and guidelines put in place by the government to create more competitive students. Tara also recalled viewing a documentary about the stress related to large amounts of homework and signed a petition to curb the amount of work being assigned to high school students. Her consciousness around the topic of stress-inducing practices seems to be in line with her peers, as she claimed that the general feeling amongst New York parents she has encountered has been that “testing environment[s] take[] away from creative, critical thinking-based learning.”

Tara discussed how her identity as a “mother, New Yorker [and] artist” has influenced her feelings about high-stakes testing. Her and her husband’s aforementioned goal for their own child’s education also appears to have informed their feelings on the matter. Tara and her husband both seem to have a clear image of what education should be and therefore, have been able to take action in order to find that type of education for their child. She and her husband believe education should be creative and exploratory, including multiple disciplines and

opportunities. She described the testing system as a “moral issue” and that the current system makes it so students “feel they need to conform to a norm that may not suit them,” which is in opposition of her educational philosophy.

Being more removed from the current schooling climate in New York City, Tara still had hope for the current opt out movement. She hopes “testing disappears and that accountability gets an upgrade.” She cited the competitive nature of the tests and how, specifically in New York City, the tests not only bring stress into the classrooms, but also to the admissions process because of school choice and how schools use scores as a standardized measure for admissions, even though these measures fail to capture the student’s full intellectual ability. She hopes opt out can be part of the process of stepping away from standardized testing, especially since, in her experience, those who have opted out have not faced the consequences that schools and the Department of Education have set forth.

Grace

Grace is 44-year-old mother of school-aged children, living in Brooklyn. Her children attend PS 321 in District 15, a highly acclaimed school district that encompasses Park Slope, Carroll Gardens and many other affluent neighborhoods. Grace has a career in news but spends a significant portion of her time advocating for opt out. As a child, she recalled taking the Iowa tests, where all she knew about the testing was that she “had to have her pencils sharpened and that it had to be number 2.” There was no extensive test prep, focus on the exams or a significant amount of class time devoted to administering the test. She asserted that the tests had evolved from when she was a child, increasing in length and developmental inappropriateness, which is one of the many reasons she is passionate about opt out.

At PS 321, the parents have created a political action group, which they call their testing task force. The purpose of this task force is not to tell parents to opt their children out of testing, but to provide complete and consistent information regarding the tests to parents and students. Grace said that at PS 321, the teachers and principal provide minimal support for opting out but do not prevent the action from taking place. According to Grace, this testing task force led to a “36 percent opt out rate” at PS 321 when just a year prior, there was virtually no opting out. This task force has also organized to opt out of field testing, exams given at the very end of the school year to provide information to craft new test questions for the following year.

Grace discussed the “soccer mom” stereotype of those that are leading this movement. Though she asserted that the movement at PS 321 is very much parent-lead, she felt that it was her upbringing, where both of her parents were elementary educators, and her interest in political causes and social justice as parts of her identity that have truly informed her thinking on testing. Additionally, her children happened to become testing age when the movement started gaining ground, which caused her to be more involved. The more she learned, the more motivated she became to continue the immense amount of unpaid work and time she puts towards the cause.

Education and information dispersal are key components of the work that Grace does for the movement. The testing task force at PS 321 inundate their parents with information regarding the tests, including having a parent in each classroom responsible for disseminating information to parents. Additionally, the group holds town hall forums at public libraries around the city and takes requests from schools in other areas to speak at Parent Teacher Association meetings and other gatherings.

An important aspect of opting out, according to Grace, is keeping involved and being collaborative with communities outside of her own in New York City. She recognizes that her

school is incredibly privileged in that the tests, which are a strong indicator of socioeconomic status, are not a huge threat to her school and the results of the test are not likely to cause any problems. However, it is the schools that are swamped with test prep and poor teacher evaluations due to testing that need the support from other schools. Grace illuminated this point in discussing removing oneself entirely from schools that test as a form of resistance. “When you remove yourself from the boiling pot, you don’t know how hot the water is anymore,” she said, in regards to schools that have high opt out numbers that are not aware of the current testing conditions. Grace finds it incredibly important to stay informed and aware in order to help the movement progress and for the continuous dispersal of information regarding the true nature of the tests.

Grace expressed several frustrations regarding the movement, many of which stem from issues of communication and transparency. Working in media, the media coverage of the movement and counteractions from the Department of Education are sources of irritation for Grace as she finds it all to be very misleading. In response to opt out, the Department of Education has retorted with several concessions to put the tests in a better light, such as ~~the~~ removing the timed component of the exams, removing questions from the exam and allowing principals to review results in limited capacity. These responses are reported in the news but lack context, which is what Grace works to try and provide. For example, the removal of time limits might sound as though the tests are being more mindful of how long the tests are and allowing students to have just as much time as they need but the lack of time deadlines could, in reality, make tests longer or cause students to work endlessly on sections out of the fear of not having checked their work enough or in the hopes of eventually finding an answer.

An additional frustration for Grace is the lack of progress from the movement. She has found that fear and intimidation have been utilized by the Department of Education to silence principals and teachers regarding the topic. However, the threats being made have not been made public and therefore, parents are not able to rally around the school. Additionally, Grace compared these threats to a child asking for dessert in that when a parent says “you aren’t going to get dessert... [they] don’t want the child to not have dessert, [they] just want them to behave,” These threats, like the 95 percent participation rule that threatened schools with low testing participation with being defunded or closed, are ways to scare schools and their administration into falling back into line. “It would be political suicide “ to follow through with many of the threats, like defunding schools serving low income students or closing a beloved, high achieving school because of opting out numbers.

Grace’s work towards this cause does not mean she is entirely against testing, just the current high-stakes nature of the exams, combined with the bureaucracy of the testing industry and the uselessness of the tests for assisting in creating a better educational environment for students and teachers. Grace admitted that portfolio-based assessment would be great but if tests were “educator created, developmental appropriate” and transparent, she would be much happier and ultimately hopes that that is a direction that the opt out movement will take testing policy towards. In short, she “wants a test that doesn’t make [her] teachers send a school wide email saying that they are devastated by [the test.]” In order for this to happen, Grace believes an important next step for the movement, at least in her school, is to garner support from teachers and principals to present a more united front to the Department of Education.

Nicole

Nicole is a former middle and high school teacher, current co-director of an organization assisting first-generation college students and the mother of school-aged children, one of which has special needs. Her family resides in Brooklyn and her children attend school in District 15. One of which attends the Brooklyn New School, “a progressive elementary school” and one of the public schools with the highest opt out rates in New York City. Her husband is a public school principal and she formerly taught at schools in the New York Performance Standards Consortium, which includes schools that oppose high-stakes testing and do not take the Regents. She also possesses a PhD. in Urban Education from the CUNY graduate center.

Nicole feels that her position on testing has been strongly formed by her identities as an educator, which she has identified as since she was in her early 20s, and as a mother. “What [she] knew as a professional and what [she] was seeing as parent” gave her the “clarity” to see how the tests were manifesting themselves in schools and how they were affecting students. Her initial reason for organizing was a tax-break that Governor Cuomo was going to allow to expire, which would decrease funding for schools and raise class sizes. This incensed Nicole and she began organizing a protest to fight back.

Nicole’s background as an educator and her knowledge of what good education looks like has informed her actions in both becoming involved in the movement and how she strategically chose to continue participating in the movement. Nicole’s involvement in changing educational policy comes from an understanding that the current system, including high-stakes testing, does not reflect good education. Even though “tests worked for [her and] that it is tempting to believe that they tell you something about who deserves the best, that’s not true [and she] had to unlearn that.” Nicole has a strong sense of the inequalities these types of tests impose

on all students, especially on English Language Learners and Special Needs students, but also has experience with project-based assessment. She asserted that as a country, “we know what good education is, the people who have money are buying that education,” but we “lack the political will to invest that in all children.”

As a parent, Nicole has been able to see the education system through yet another lens and this different viewpoint has been an additional motivator for her to continue working to combat high stakes testing. She was moved by seeing her own daughter’s interest and enjoyment in school decline in first and second grades and the fact that “school was crushing her interest in learning was horrifying.” She felt her daughter wasn’t getting an “authentic education,” where learning involved “interacting with the world” and chose to move her daughter to another school. When it came to testing, she considered all aspects of her daughter’s experience to decide what action to take. Nicole stressed the importance that the Department of Education places on testing for school admission and placement and how the outcomes of students who do not test are uncertain still. That uncertainty and the traumatic nature of having her daughter be the only person to opt out and alienated because of that lead Nicole to opt her daughter into taking the 3rd grade exams. The resistance Nicole took against the test, however, was refusing to look at the scores or inform her daughter of her score, essentially refusing to give the test “any power” in their lives or allow the tests to cause her daughter any negative, psychological effects.

Interestingly, however, Nicole asserted that if her son, who has special needs, had been her oldest child, “her son would have radicalized [her]” to opt him out of the tests because the tests would have been “horrific” and “devastating” to him. She recounts these reasons for why many began opting out, as parents with special needs students lead the way and have “emboldened” other parents. She continues to opt her children out of testing and her daughter is

now in a grade six through twelve school and does not have to test again until it is time for her to potentially take the SAT. She hopes to “protect [her children from the tests] then help them deal with them” when they have no choice but to participate.

Contradicting Grace and the experiences she had at her particular school, Nicole has found that the supportiveness of teachers and the principal at her school has propelled the movement forward. There seems to be an emphasis on community, where teachers have the protection of the principal and parents have the support and confidence in their school to not worry about their children being ostracized by opting out. The effect that making waves has on interpersonal relationships in schools has real implications for families and is another factor Nicole stressed as being important when deciding what to do about high-stakes testing. “Teachers have a tremendous amount of power over [students and parents and students] need to feel like [students] are going to be liked and taken care of” when they are sent off to school each day. With the principal’s support for opt out, Nicole felt protected and noticed that, among other schools, opt out tends to be higher in schools where that support is present.

Nicole had similar uncertainty to the other women when it comes to how she thought the movement would progress in the future. She feels that “movements [like this] are easily bought off” by policy makers but is proud of how problematic opting out is for these policymakers as it creates political change. Nicole feels as though New York State is “back peddling as fast as they can in small ways because they don’t want a big movement” which is halting true progress. However, she is happy with the rhetoric change around the opting out in that “the question was why I should opt out and now, it’s why should I take these tests,” suggesting that the movement has, in the very least, educated communities about the tests and more people are seeing its negative impact on schools and students.

Rebecca

Rebecca is a 52 year old, white woman who is native to New York City, where she attended public school while a student. She holds a graduate degree from the Harvard School of Education in English Language and Literature. She began her career in publishing and entered education as a high school English teacher in Massachusetts and later, as an independent education consulting, doing work in the field of college accessibility and middle school improvement efforts, though she is currently taking time now to write. She has two children in different middle schools in Brooklyn though they formerly attended the aforementioned Brooklyn New School for elementary school.

The greatest issue Rebecca has with the high stakes nature of testing is how the tests are being put to use. In contrast with some of the other women that were interviewed, Rebecca doesn't demonize the practice of testing or the creation of national standards. She feels that it is important for there to be a baseline expectation for students and educators to strive for and feels that testing is an appropriate way to gain a snapshot of learning progress. However, she was quick to make the distinction that testing now is "being used to evaluate teachers...[and] being used to allocate money as part of Race to the Top. [They] only serve to chip away at education in this country." More importantly, she stated that "[the tests are] not being used to influence, drive or inform instruction or give teachers information about their students in a timely manner." In this way, the tests are being used as "a carrot or a stick" depending upon how compliant schools are and how well they perform.

In addition to taking issue with the current usage of the tests by schools and the government, she also found that the skew of content to English Language Arts and Math to be troubling. While she recalled testing in English Language Arts and barely remembers taking a

Math exam, these exams were not a huge component of her educational experience, taking only a couple of days to complete and requiring minimal preparation, similar to the experiences many of the other woman had as children. Because testing has become such an important focus for students and teachers, the fact that only two subjects are tested means those two subjects become paramount and trump the teaching and funding of other subjects, like art, music and science. Rebecca views this as a huge disservice to students and education as a whole.

In comparison to the other women that were interviewed, Rebecca seemed to have the least positive view of the opt movement as an activist endeavor. Her feelings seem to stem from her opinion of testing as a potential positive teaching tool and her negative experiences with the opt out crusades that she experienced as a parent when her children were at the Brooklyn New School. Rebecca recounted the aggressiveness she perceived from the movement at Brooklyn New School, and how conversations regarding testing and opting out began to occupy spaces they shouldn't have in the schools. For example, Rebecca discussed the feeling that "if [she wasn't] with them, [she was] against them" in regards to how the parent and teachers involved in opt out made parents and students who continued to take the tests feel. She claims that most of the school gatherings she attended, whether that was a school play or a parents meeting, there was always an undertone of opting out and testing resistance brought to the event by supporting parents and teachers. Rebecca also described an instance where she heard that when a small group of students had opted to take the exams, they were subjected to testing on backless stools while outside of the school building, dissenting individuals were protesting loudly with megaphones. It appeared that in addition to being somewhat cruel to students choosing to comply with what the board of education was asking them to do, Rebecca resisted having testing influence her and her family's lives anymore than it already had to. It was very present in her

children's education and she felt it was incredibly inappropriate for the opt out movement to encroach on the few aspects of school where testing was not a factor.

Rebecca's identities as a mother, an educator and as a person who does not like being hyper-political (in that she does not like to protest) have allowed her to consider the nuances in the current high-stakes testing culture. She described the issue with testing as involving a gray area, where there are both positive and negative aspects of testing and also, of the opt out movement, but neither are perfect solutions or attempts to undermine education and learning. Rebecca discussed the pressure the movement has had in making parents and students feel bad for choosing to opt into testing, but in reality, the decision to dissent from a heavily ingrained institution is a choice that requires a significant amount of thought and consideration as the effects that choosing to test vary between individuals.

Rebecca has chosen to opt her children out of some of their testing but has opted them into taking the exams in some instances as well. Her children are very different in that her son is "very academic" and tests quite well while her daughter experiences testing anxiety. Rebecca considers many factors when deciding whether to have her children test, like many of the women I spoke to who are all looking to make decisions based on what will be best for their children. While she disagrees with the stress put on the tests and how developmentally inappropriate the tests are, she recognizes how much potential power the scores will have for her children. In regards to having her children opt out, she opted them out around the testing grades that middle schools supposedly look at to determine entry. Though middle schools around Rebecca have asserted that they do not look at these scores any longer, she "didn't trust what [she] was being told."

Additionally, Rebecca felt that, for her daughter, taking the exams during the years that are not looked at for school admissions would be beneficial as practice. Because testing causes so much turmoil for her daughter and, for now, the tests will continue to be an important part of her education, having exposure and an opportunity to take the tests without the added pressure of having the scores be an integral gatekeeper to her next step in education would be helpful. Rebecca chose to detach some of the importance placed on these tests for her daughter by having conversations about the tests and removing the power placed on these tests by schools.

In the future, Rebecca hopes that a middle ground can be achieved for both the tests and the opt out movement. She described educational policy and climate as “a pendulum that swings all the way to one side and then all the way to the other [side]” and currently, the pendulum has swung all the way to the opposite side with opt out as a radical response to neoliberal education policies like NCLB and Race to the Top. She hopes that equitable tests can be created and utilized to inform teachers, parents and students about progress and shortcomings in order to be a useful tool for better educating students. She also hopes that the pressure and stress schools and students are under to perform so well on these exams is loosened so other subjects can be more thoroughly explored in schools. As for the opt out movement, Rebecca would like opt out to begin considering the gray areas of testing when asking for change and hopefully, move in a direction of working for a change in the types of tests and the importance placed on those tests in schools without having to demonize testing as whole.

Implications

Trends Among a Sample of NYC Mothers Regarding Testing

The four participants that I interviewed were very similar in regards to many of their identities. All of the participants self-identified as women and mothers. Most of the women also self-identified as being white and New Yorkers. All of the participants have or have had children in schools in either Manhattan or Brooklyn during the last 20 years. The participants varied in professions, their additional involvement in schools, either as educators or activists, and the choices they made as to whether or not they should opt their own children out of high-stakes tests. However, all of the interviewed individuals spoke passionately about what they felt education shouldn't look like and what they idealized schools could be. None of their accounts discussed high-stakes testing in a positive light, though some disclosed that testing, if utilized appropriately, could be a useful educational tool. These women were all disappointed in the hyper-specific concentrations within education, like the intense focus on English, math and science, and were saddened by the strain current policies put on students, families, teachers and schools.

A striking trend in the participants of this study was the fact that all of the individuals that responded to the list serve or reached out via other contacts were women and mothers. This speaks greatly to involvement of mothers in their children's lives as well as the prominent role that women play in schools as they make up a large proportion of the workforce in schools. Education is a field that is so heavily influenced by women as well as a prominent institution that mothers hold incredible stake in given that their children spend an enormous amount of time and

energy in schools. These intersections between gender, motherhood and education provide support as to why women would be the most outspoken regarding the topic of testing.

In general, it seemed as though motivations to resist high-stakes testing, as it currently exists, regardless of other identities, were contingent on two factors. One of the factors was the schooling experience of the interviewee and if she had experienced or was able to imagine a better schooling environment. These women attended elementary school during the 1960s and 1970s, prior to the publishing of a *Nation at Risk* and the beginning of the neoliberal school reform movement that began in the 1980s. When they were being tested, it was for brief periods of time and teachers and parents were able to use scores to look at student progress over time and among their children's peers. All of these women have successful careers and are incredibly intelligent and well spoken but they were not subjected to the current high-stakes nature of testing, making it counterintuitive to believe that these tests will help their own children as well as students who come from various other backgrounds.

The other factor that was present in all of these women was the ability they had to sympathize with the students, most commonly because of their roles as parents. While many of these women identified as activists, educators and former students, they all considered motherhood to be a determining factor in how they viewed high-stakes testing and education in general. Though many of the women acknowledged privileges they had as educated white women, particularly in respect to the opportunities they had to be so involved in activism regarding their children's education, they all expressed a universal care for all students because of their own motherhood. They not only spoke about how the tests affected their own children but they acknowledged how damaging the tests were to students of color or of low socio-economic status. More than sympathetic, these women were emphatic and their opinions and

actions regarding testing were much broader than the options that would be best for themselves or their families.

These two factors seemed uniform across all four interviewees along with a universal belief among the women that the current high-stakes exams are not sound or complete measures of learning, but instead depicted socioeconomic status in that students with low scores were frequently also of a lower socio-economic class. Additionally, the women thought that the tests were being utilized inappropriately regardless of the interviewee's opinion regarding the use of testing as a learning measure. They recognized that the tests are narrow minded and that students' ability and value is much more than how they perform on a handful of days on developmentally inappropriate exams that look at only two or three subjects. These women have an understanding of all of the things students have to offer the world and how the extreme standardization and high-stakes nature of testing does not express how uniquely intelligent students are and does not allow for those differences to be explored and developed in schools.

These women all also partook in the opt out movement in some way, participating through various degrees of involvement and in different capacities. They each thought that the current tests and their usage were not positive influences on education and took action by finding a way for their children to not be subjected to high-stake tests, whether that was in just one grade or for a majority of their schooling experience. Some of them expanded their action to reach out to entire communities while others have focused on the issue within their schools and families. Regardless of the way these women have chosen to pursue testing resistance, they have made an impact in how high-stakes testing is viewed. They have imparted the knowledge that these tests are not an accurate definition of self worth, intelligence or ability to someone and helped remove the power the tests have by assisting their own children, or other students and parents from

finding a way to abstain from the tests. Change comes from the vocalization and mobilization of individuals with a similar goal and these women have enacted change in their families and communities, strengthening the voice in New York City for testing reform.

Recommendations

The information I collected through interviews with four women from New York City illuminated how distinctly nuanced and challenging it is to help a child navigate through the current educational climate. These women used their backgrounds as former students and mothers, in addition to three of the women utilizing their expertise as educators, to discuss the difficulties associated with high-stakes tests, the ways they are resisting testing, their thoughts on opting out as a political movement and, most importantly, their ideas for creating a better system to educate students.

Each woman highlighted instances of seeing the very visceral reactions of students when they were faced with tests. These women have also witnessed the immense stress students are under, seeing students cry, panic and fall ill because of the pressure they feel. They found these reactions to be despicable on the part of the policies and practices that were causing the children so much stress. Many of the women imagined a future where assessments were more developmentally appropriate and varied in content and types of aptitude and intelligence measures in order to more fully assess multiple aspects of students. They want assessments that are aligned with the student's developmental ability and in line with what students are being taught in the classroom, allowing teachers to not only have more freedom to teach but also, have parents and teachers utilize the scores on the exams in a way that benefits education and progress.

The Center for American Progress (2016) reports that nearly half of parents think their children are over tested but at the same time, three fourths of these parents believe that assessments are integral to schools and the ability for schools to make sure students are performing how they need to. This notion goes against the idea that testing as an institution needs to be removed entirely. Because it is so ingrained into schools, it seems like it would be very difficult to do away with completely so in order to make improvements upon the way students are assisted, a better test needs to be made while society begins to think more broadly about how students should be assessed.

As humans, we like to know what the end goal of a certain situation is in order to motivate us to continue working. These goals inform our priorities and our actions. In schools, that goal is academic success as defined by the scores on various high-stakes tests and the benefits that high scores afford individuals, like better schooling options. Because of this, high-stakes tests tend to shape the cannon in schools, influencing what is taught, how it is taught and what to expect of different students (Sleeter, 2005, 69). This view of curriculum development does not allow for teachers to find the best ways to educate their individual students, leading to a poorer quality of education. If tests continue to be the main sources of assessment in schools, then the tests need to reflect reasonable, achievable standards, take into account the communities and classrooms the students are a part of, and they need to be utilized in a way that informs the community in a helpful way to assist the bettering of the educational environment. In order to gain a more accurate picture of students across the country, school districts could utilize culturally relevant assessments, which are measures of knowledge that come from “the experiences, point of view and language of the students whose learning is being assessed” (Sleeter, 2005, 72). By adjusting tests to align with the cultural and social capital (Bourdieu,

1986) of students, policymakers would be able to see the academic strengths and weakness of students, not just the lack of cultural information they possess or lack.

Students need to be given the opportunity to develop a growth mindset with the appreciation for multiple intelligences in school. Students should be allowed to learn through trial and error, as failure is a wonderful teacher (Dweck, 2010, 26-29). The immense pressure that students have to always be correct is furthered by test preparation, which teaches students that all questions have a correct answer and that tests must be tricked or hacked through insider information like knowing when to use the proper buzz work or when guessing on a question would harm your score more than answering the question with the potential of being incorrect. These practices are in direct opposition of the development of a growth mindset. Reformed assessments should work to deemphasize this right and wrong dyad that is at the very core of the current high-stakes tests and allow students to express their strengths in a variety of ways in order for policymakers and educators to have an accurate representation of a student's ability.

As mentioned previously, the passing of ESEA following the indoctrination of NCLB allowed for state governments to decide how they wanted to assess their students. While many states continued to utilize tests, Nebraska and Maine, for a period of time, attempted to implement project-based assessments (FairTest, n.d.). Project-based or performance assessments look to “assess[] student learning through a variety of means” including but not limited to “classroom observation, projects, portfolios, performance exams and essays” (Sleeter, 2005, 71). These types of assessments allow for students to showcase their ability in a variety of ways, which acknowledges that there are different learning styles and abilities of students. Nebraska developed the School-based, Teacher-led Assessment and Reporting System (STARS), which allowed districts to create tests for their particular students in core subjects as well as collect

portfolios on students to assess their work in school. This type of assessment allowed for districts to create appropriate measures to gauge student progress on as well as provide multiple opportunities for students to demonstrate their abilities. Studies have found that students who partook in these types of assessments were gradually increasing their performance in subjects while teachers were gaining a better sense of how to utilize the data from assessments to assist each student in the learning process (Dappen & Isernhagen, 2005).

The opt out movement has been making progress in getting their demands met. Following the 2014-2015 school year opt out effort, policymakers have reduced the test time and have removed the time limit from the test (NYCOPTOUT, 2016). Whether these amendments are positive for education is yet to be seen but the movement has created change. Parents, teachers and educations should continue making demands and taking action until the way students are assessed is fair and is not at the cost of good, holistic education. This movement should continue to publicly demand short tests, more transparency regarding the test, the material on the tests, when the tests are going to be administered and how those scores should be used, and the untying of tests scores as primary measure to admit students to schools, evaluate teachers or allocate funds. This type of public outcry has and will continue to inspire changes in policy as well as the way society thinks about testing.

A vital part of opting out, which the women I interviewed illuminated, is the important role parental and communal attitudes play in how children interpret testing. Parents and the surrounding community have the power to shape the attitudes of students and provide them with the needed guidance to put the high-stakes culture they are facing at school into perspective. By prioritizing healthy habits, like getting an appropriate amount of sleep, and socializing, the adults in the lives of students have the ability to remove the power that the stress of school has on them.

Parents and communities should be vocal about the negative health and developmental implications brought upon the overbearingness of test preparation, homework and competitive academic environments and should support students in their physical and mental wellbeing (Abeles, 2015, 225-228). By removing the importance that high-stakes tests and performance standards hold in our society, more students might be able to begin authentically learning, honing unique academic and life skills and overall, be happier and healthier individuals.

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Appendix A

Recruitment Information

Below is the posting that was sent out to list serves and to other contacts for recruitment purposes.

“My name is Kelsey Karpman and I am a senior Educational Studies and Psychology major at Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, NY. For my senior thesis, I am exploring the implications of the movement of opting out of high stakes testing in New York City elementary and middle schools. I am looking for educators, policy makers, activists, community members and parents who have themselves participated directly in opting out or have experienced the effects of opting out to interview regarding the topic. As opting out is a relatively new movement, these interviews would be vital to building a body of literature on the subject and would constitute a large portion of my thesis research. If you are interested in being interviewed or would like more information, please contact me at kekarpman@vassar.edu.”

Appendix B

Interview Questions

The questions were utilized during interviews and were created using previous educational research in order to assist in finding trends between identities such as womanhood or motherhood and educational activism and opposition to testing. Questions were used a guide to organize the interviews. Interviews did not necessarily cover each question and information gathered was not limited to just the listed questions.

- Please provide any background information about yourself (that you are comfortable sharing). (ex. age, gender, race etc)
- What is your involvement in the education system?
- Where are you/were you located in New York City? Describe the schools and climate around education and testing.
- Describe your involvement the community or schools? Were you/Are you a parent? Educator? Activist? Former student? Policy maker?
- What is your past experience with standardized testing (your own personal experience or that of a child, family member or friend?)
- What do you think the pros and cons to standardized testing are for students? Teachers? The community?
- How do you react to standardized testing? Do you actively resist it? If so, how? If not, why?
- What has influenced your feelings towards standardized testing?

- Where would you like to see the opt out movement go in the future?
- Which, if any, of your identities (ex. as a woman, a mom, a New Yorker etc) influences your activism in regards to this issue?
- Do you notice any trends on who chooses to participate in opt out? (ex. particular neighborhoods, teachers or administration vs. parents etc)
- What are your hopes for the future of standardized testing and school accountability? How do you think the current opt out movement will influence students in the current school system over time?
- Any other comments?

Appendix C

Consent Form

This is a sample consent form sent to participants prior to being interviewed. Participants emailed scanned signed copies of the form to me and I kept hard copies through the analysis process of my research. The consent form was modeled from the recommended Vassar College Institutional Review Board consent form.

VASSAR COLLEGE
Institutional Review Board

Audio/Video Recording Release Form

Research title: Female Influence of the Opting Out Movement

Primary Investigator: Maria Hantzopoulos

Student Researcher- Kelsey Karpman

This project aims to look at the recent surge in opting out of standardized tests by examining the motivations and effects the movement has on the communities within and around schools. This project has a specific focus on women and how that identity influences the decisions that are made regarding testing and schooling. The majority of the research for this project relies on personal interviews with people from the New York City area who have experienced some effect of the increase of standardized testing in schools and the movement away from testing.

As part of this project, I will be making audio or video recordings of you during your participation in the research. Please indicate whether you are willing to permit to these audio/video recordings by putting your initials next to the usage listed below, and signing the form at the end. This choice is completely up to you. I will only use the audio/videotapes in ways that you agree to. In any use of the tapes, you will not be identified by name.

_____ The audio/video recordings can be studied by the research team for use in the research project.

I have read the above descriptions and give my consent for the use of the audio/video recordings of me as indicated by my initials above. (You must be at least 18 years old to sign this form for yourself or your child).

Printed Name _____

Address _____

Signature _____ Date _____