

Learning from Parents of Color in the Effort to Preserve Multicultural & Public Education

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Introduction

Now more than ever public education and multicultural education face daunting challenges. From federal efforts to privatize public education through vouchers, school take-overs, and charters, to the manner in which high-stakes testing has marginalized multicultural education in the curriculum and pedagogy of our nation's schools, and to the increased normalization of bigotry in daily interactions in classrooms and schools—educational justice is deeply threatened. Coalitions of educators, parents, and students that reach across lines of race, class, and immigration status are needed to push back in this challenging time.

The stories of parents of color who stepped up to take leadership in the Opt-Out Movement in New York State offer insight and direction for others facing these threats. The purpose of the movement was to refuse participation in the state's high stakes Common Core tests. The experiences of these parents demonstrate the challenges families of color face when they become active in efforts to resist policies and practices harmful to their children and other young people. At the same time their successes can inform collective efforts for change.

As two educators active in the New York State Opt-Out Movement, we heard the mantra many times that the Opt-Out Movement is for White people. Despite Arne Duncan's infamous statement characterizing the movement as a group of "White suburban moms," we knew and respected the involvement of parents of color and also understood the specific

obstacles faced by many of these families when refusing to have their children take the tests.

We foreground here a diverse group of parents of color whose children refused to take New York State's Common Core tests. Their experiences not only demonstrate courage but reveal a nuanced picture of how racism and classism impact test refusal. We hope their experiences will inform others who are working to build a multi-racial, cross-class coalition of parents and educators to bring down test-and-punish policies that have disproportionately and negatively affected communities of color, as well as to fight the other current challenges to multicultural education.

Crucial and Meaningful

Compared to a standards-based education, multicultural education is crucial for meaningful learning for diverse students. Christine Sleeter challenges the standards-based belief that the lack of student achievement is due to poor teaching rather than to the negative effects of institutional discrimination. Similarly, rather than treating students' cultural backgrounds as irrelevant and implementing a uniform curriculum as in a standards-based approach, multicultural educators use students' diversity as the basis for culturally relevant pedagogy (Sleeter, 2010).

Yet multicultural education is sidelined by high-stakes, standardized testing. Teachers who typically brought a multicultural perspective to their pedagogy and curriculum now often put it aside because that content and approach will not be reflected in the tests. Educators who previously would integrate social justice issues into their instruction or stop their teaching to respond to bias-related incidents often forgo these opportunities, given time pressures to prepare students for the standardized tests.

The negative effects of high-stakes testing on students of color, as well as on

low-income students, English language learners (ELL), and students with disabilities, are enumerated by many (Au, 2009, Nichols & Valenzuela, 2013; Thompson & Allen, 2012); Valenzuela & Maxcy, 2011). The highest concentration of high-stakes tests are in schools serving low-income students and students of color (FairTest, 2011). African American, Latinx, American Indian, and low income students are far more likely than others to be denied a diploma for not passing a test.

Seattle NAACP president Gerald Hankerson points to the legacy of racism embodied in these tests. "Using standardized tests to label black people and immigrants 'lesser' while systematically under-funding their schools has a long and ugly history in this country" (Hagopian, 2016). Challenging high-stakes testing is therefore a crucial vehicle to return multicultural education into our schools, to support students, particularly those who are marginalized, and to resist other current policies and practices that seek to privatize public education through vouchers and corporate-based charters.

Opting Out in New York

In 2016, over 200,000 parents chose to opt their children out of the New York State Common Core tests, which have proven to be particularly punitive for students of color and ELL students. This resistance resulted from cumulative movement-building over the previous five years when individuals and parent/educator organizations across the state educated parents about the harmful effects of these tests and their connections to the effort to privatize public education.

We interviewed six parents of color who were first-responders to the imposition of high-stakes tests in the state in 2013. Peter Nunez, Dao Tran, and Roxanne Scott were parents of children who attended New York City public schools. Justin Williams' and GiGi Guiliano's children were enrolled in

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Long Island districts and Carolyn Newman Sharkey's in the Hudson Valley. All became concerned about how new tests, brought into schools quickly, without explanations to parents, negatively affected their children's emotions, motivation, and feelings about school. Concern for their children, and further investigation about the testing program, soon brought them to critically understand the purposes of the tests, their effects on the education of children of color, and the corporate underpinnings of the testing program.

Parents of color have been very active in these efforts, but receive little credit, reflecting a nation-wide pattern. Ceresta Smith, a high school teacher, parent of a child who opted out, activist in Miami's opt-out movement, and leader in Opt-Out United, points out, "As with everything else in America, your white population is going to get the most attention." She argues that black and brown voices are silenced to make it look like it's only white soccer moms who are engaged in the movement (Quilian, C. 2016). The voices of the parents we present here help break that silence.

First Steps

Many parents first became aware that something was different when they noticed signs of distress in their children. Anxiety, reluctance to go to school, and an increased focus on test prep were the first signs that something was different about the 2013 New York State Common Core tests and the state's overall approach to assessment across all grades.¹

Peter noticed that his son was eating and sleeping less, complaining of neck pains, and feeling very anxious about school. When Peter talked to the teacher he discovered they were doing test prep all day. "When is actual learning going on?" he asked. When given a typical paragraph that could be on the test he discovered it was way above grade level. He said, "This is cognitively impossible. You're expecting a child to produce something that is not at his thinking level yet." The teacher said she agreed, it wasn't her decision and she needed to do it.

Although Dao's daughter was enrolled in a K-5 school in New York City, it was also affected by high-stakes testing due to new requirements that standardized assessment be used to measure teacher performance, even for educators of very young children. Dao found the test too abstract for little ones just learning to count. When a few parents looked into it they decided it was harmful to give these

tests and unfair to judge teachers. They talked about not having their kids take it, but decided it would be better if they could say as a whole school, "let's not take it!"

These parents were aided in their decision to opt out by obtaining relevant information about resisting the testing, networking with other parents, and findings the courage of their convictions, often in the face of tremendous obstacles. Peter was alone in his school with no support. "We were overwhelmed and we experienced fear because we were intimidated. We were called several times by the principal and her staff who tried to talk us out of opting-out." In Peter's case the school administration knew he planned to opt his child out, but gave his child the test anyway.

Change the Stakes, a multi-racial New York City parent group, was a source of information for Roseanne and Peter. Roseanne read about test refusal on their website. "As I read it I was elated and said, 'Yes, yes!' I never looked back." Roseanne also realized that prepping for and administering the tests took funds from other activities she wanted for her son, so her decision was clear. When Peter attended a Change the Stakes meeting, "The doors just opened. I met other parents, I saw the children, heard the stories. It wasn't just us, but other kids were suffering in other ways."

After doing research Justin had the confidence to have his children opt out, even though it was very early in the test refusal movement. "I know that what's most important in life is not numbers and letters on a piece of paper saying who I'm supposed to be. I don't believe that. Being able to treat people like a human being, to have relationships with people, that's most important. So I'm not afraid of what's going to be on my transcript, my grades or my children's grades."

GiGi had been gathering information and connecting with other parents since Common Core was introduced. Later she was able to model the assertiveness that is sometimes necessary when working with school personnel. Her district was a "sit and stare"² district at the time. She felt having her 10-year old son sit for 90 minutes was abusive so she decided to take her child out. When the principal told her that she couldn't do this, GiGi reiterated her intention. "I'm telling you in advance, so you can make the arrangements so that I can get my child out. I'm trying to be nice. Do you want me to run and get News 12 to come and then I'll get my son out that way?" The principal looked at her and said, "Ok, Mrs. Guiliano." GiGi commented that

feeling empowered was crucial in making the decision. "Two years ago I would have said, 'OK, I guess I can't take him out.' Having the knowledge is key."

Parents talked with their children about resisting the testing and opting out by explaining that the tests weren't fair and they didn't want them to take them. Carol and GiGi helped their children put their actions in a broader social justice perspective. Carol explained to her children that she didn't want to be part of this system of tests. "I explained that they are warriors fighting for change, fighting for everyone. My oldest son in particular felt like he was a patriot." GiGi recollected, "We went through the Rosa Parks story and had a serious history lesson in civil disobedience. I quoted Martin Luther King about society having an obligation to resist unjust laws. I told them this is a perfect example. They really understood the whole picture. I get the chills just thinking about it."

Challenges of Race, Class, and Immigration Status

Race, class, and immigration status affected parents in multiple ways in dealing with high-stakes testing. After New York's Opt-Out Movement's success with test refusal, the hashtag #OptOutSoWhite appeared on social media, initiated by organized groups and individuals opposed to it. They claimed that opt-out is based in white privilege, fueled by teachers unions and those wishing to escape accountability. While the number of students of color opting-out has been fewer than white students, accounts from these parents highlight the challenges faced by parents of color who refuse.

Structural racism and classism in school demographics and approaches to education affect parents' ability to have the *choice* to opt-out. Roseanne's son attended a New York City school with predominantly low-income, black students that is co-located³ with a progressively-oriented, integrated, mixed-class school. Roseanne commented, "There's a divide of the population between both public schools, you can definitely tell—bright as daylight." Forty-five percent of students attending the more progressive school are economically disadvantaged, compared to ninety-five percent in Roseanne's school. Roseanne noted the marked difference between the two schools regarding access to information about test refusal. The more progressive school allows open forums where teachers and the principal educate parents and it's the parent's choice to refuse.

As a result of this unequal access to information, the parents in Roseanne's school lacked understanding of facts about the state testing. She observes, "Parents are too busy with life—they are just glad to have their kids in school and that's it." School communication with parents comes from the PTA which is run by the principal and focuses on supporting the tests. The principal will say, "Come to the meeting and we'll help you understand the test, and you can help your child learn test-taking strategies." This has negatively impacted Roseanne's ability to inform and organize parents. While about 70% of the students opted-out in the progressive school, her son was the only student to refuse the tests in his school.

Since her daughter experienced two different school environments, Dao also noted differences in test refusal and student/parent empowerment dependent upon the number of students of color and their class background. Dao's daughter started pre-kindergarten in the South Bronx. There, three- and four-year olds got a heavy dose of test preparation, did homework, and didn't have recess. "The idea was that what these kids needed was rigor and discipline, but what I think they needed was play, joy, creativity and nurturing."

Dao observed a very different approach in wealthier neighborhoods. In the more racially- and class-integrated public school her daughter transferred into there was an emphasis on the whole child and culturally-relevant learning. Parents were more willing to fight the tests because it might undermine this school culture. "There's some sense in a school with a concentration of children of color that, 'they're gonna turn out to need discipline, so we're gonna start early.'" Such schools are more authoritarian and make it very hard for parents to see that there are educational alternatives and that high-stakes test-taking is something they could make a choice about.

Peter perceived the high-stakes testing agenda as a direct assault, not only on children of color, but on teachers of color as well. He was an educator affected by a lawsuit against the New York City board of education which ultimately determined that a test he was required to take to renew his certification was discriminatory against black and Latinxs. "They're using the test to oppress a group of people, and since I was a part of that group I started to understand the bigger picture. The majority of people widely affected by standardized testing are people who don't have resources to get extra help." Peter believes that high-stakes

testing for children and teachers are interrelated and meant to harm low-income people and communities of color.

As parents gained courage to opt-out and developed a raised consciousness about the implications of the tests not only for children but for public education, they were motivated to organize other parents. They met challenges as well as experienced successes.

Dao, GiGi, Carolyn, and Justin, children of immigrants, understood how language, class, and culture can hinder immigrant parents' involvement in test refusal. Some immigrants work long hours at low-paying jobs without time to be involved in school issues. Justin noted that parents in many of the families in his district have jobs that precluded them from taking off from work because if they don't go to work they don't get paid. Going to school, whether to meet teachers or to engage in protest, was generally out of the question.

The language barrier also often impedes communication, understanding, and potential advocacy. When GiGi's parents from Puerto Rico moved here they felt out of place, in the minority, and didn't want to attract attention to themselves. "They learned how to be quiet, go with the flow, and not buck the system." Dao pointed to other cultural factors relating to the appeal of testing if it's presented as an opportunity for mobility. "Coming from my own experience of refugee immigrant parents, if something is being put forward to you as 'this will help your child get ahead' it's very difficult to break through that."

Dao highlights institutional factors as well that inhibit opting-out. Many urban school districts comprised of communities of color are under mayoral control. Abolishing mayoral control would free up more administrators to encourage test resistance as some superintendents have done in locally-controlled, suburban school districts. In New York City she saw so much fear among administrators which kept them from encouraging parents "to go for it!"

Seeing the Bigger Picture and Building a Movement

The more parents learned about high-stakes testing and became increasingly involved, the more they saw a bigger picture which not only included educational alternatives for their children but political and social alternatives for public education and our society. GiGi engaged with educators to help them broaden their perspectives about testing. "When I spoke to his teacher

and told her that my son was refusing, she looked at me and said, 'But he was my 4!' (the top scoring level on the New York State test.) I said, 'Listen to yourself. Does that make sense to you that you are using my child to get a good score? You should rethink that... there's a bigger picture going on here.'" She was committed to fighting others' political agendas on behalf of the children. "Governor Cuomo's goal is to break the teachers' union and to privatize education and the children are the collateral damage.⁴ They can't get back their education. He's not using my kid as a political pawn!"

Having taught for 15 years, Justin knew that public education was under assault and urged people to go on the offensive. "Teach for America is allowed to exist. We would never have Lawyers for American or Doctors for America. We would never have people practice law or medicine after five weeks of training."

Ultimately these parents wanted to fight for good schools for all children. Dao wants schools to be places of community, joy, learning, and caring. "A big part for me is having curriculum that is relevant and is historically accurate. We have so many problems in our society, and to me the most compelling reason to go to school and get an education is so you can address some of those things."

Despite the many challenges they faced, parents developed a variety of approaches to organize against the tests. Peter had the benefit of getting support from, and then contributing to, Change the Stakes. When his son was unfairly retained a grade because of test scores and couldn't get support elsewhere, Change the Stakes negotiated a meeting for Peter with high level administrators and provided relevant data for his case. The decision about his child was ultimately reversed. In turn Peter contributed to organizing efforts of Change the Stakes by telling his story with other parents who opted-out on its powerful video, *Refuse the Tests*.⁵

Justin helped people connect local social justice issues to school testing. His school district was one of five towns on Long Island with a high concentration of black and brown residents and which experienced discriminatory policing practices. He pointed out the connections between those practices and harmful testing policies, both hurting communities of color. He wrote an on-line letter supporting opt-out and spoke against the tests before the Board of Education. Local parents then felt more empowered to begin their own journey towards test refusal.

Dao's experience with a multiracial group of parents at their children's elementary school provides compelling ideas for effective organizing for the opt-out and anti-privatization movements. Assuring to have Spanish-speaking parents involved, they talked one-on-one with parents and also held PTA meetings, supported by the principal. They reached out to parents at pick-up and drop-off because some families don't want to come into school. "My focus was on finding the most active people who said, 'I don't want my kid to take the test,' then I said to them, 'Ok, if you don't want that for yours, let's make sure that other people who don't have that information or that sense get what they need so they can be just as strong about it.' It was great! We found that people trust other parents."

Dao noticed that it helped when they got into the nitty-gritty of the tests with parents. "We'd pass around the test and ask, 'Is this really fair?'" She'd show why she thought they were detrimental for kids to take them. One Latino father said in a public discussion, "I remember taking tests and they were horrible! I had such stress associated with them. And you're right! Why would I make my child do this?"

This parent-organizing effort was hugely successful with the vast majority of parents opting their children out. Dao recollected, "We didn't expect to have as much of an impact as it did. It taught me a lot about organizing and not limiting things to, 'Oh well, it will just be a small number of us.' Once we got going it took me by surprise. But it was great!"

Carol generated an idea for cross-district communication and support. She was disgusted by the Regent Chairperson's proposal to exempt high-achieving schools in New York from the tests. Carol responded, "No, you're not going to divide us!" She wanted to be an ally to parents of color in New York City. Believing that the charters are providing a "fast food education," she was concerned about how families of color were being manipulated by corporate charter school operators who appealed to families with promises of educational opportunity for their children but were using them for their own benefit. She joined the New York City Opt-Out Facebook Group with the goal of helping New York City parents understand charter operators' real motives.

These parents looked to the future with goals for educational and social transformation. Dao asserted, "We're not planning to take the tests, ever! If you're wealthy and connected you'll send your child to a private school and by default, you opt-out.

What we're fighting for is to make that the default is for everyone." She points to the power of parents' courage to resist in one school becoming an inspiration then for others. A parent in a school in her same neighborhood saw what Dao's school did, giving her the idea to start a test refusal effort which also had amazing success. Another important connection for Dao is with Black Lives Matters. She asks parents, "Why are we pouring all this money into test development, grading, and administration when the things that prove to really improve kids' lives are things like social services and housing? That's what makes it hard for kids to learn. What about this obsession with getting them ready for careers. But if there are no careers to be had, don't we need to address that?"

Justin also encouraged others to make broader connections between opting-out and other movements for social justice since, he believes, it's the struggle against the 1% that connects the Opt-Out Movement, Black Lives Matter, and the Occupy Movement. He urged people to communicate across such movements and to join forces.

Conclusion

These parents of color were on the front line of the Opt-Out Movement, acting as "first responders" to the test-and-punish policies heralded by the Common Core exams in New York State. Their stories highlight the importance of empowerment that grows from gathering relevant information, enlisting support, and having the courage to challenge hurtful educational policies. They illustrate how much harder it is for parents in low-income schools in communities of color even to have a choice to refuse the tests, let alone the difficulty of organizing other parents to do so. Despite the challenges, parents did successfully opt their children out and, through their actions, empowered others to do the same.

Roseanne, Peter, Carol, Dao, Justin, and GiGi provided valuable insights that will help to build multi-racial, cross-class coalitions of parents and educators to strengthen the Opt-Out Movement and the broader movement to challenge vouchers, corporate charter schools, and the privatization of public education in general. Creating a core group of parents in a school or forming an organization like Change the Stakes in a region can be crucial in providing a source of support and information. Involving parents whose children could do well on the tests promotes the clear

message that these tests are harmful to all young people and public education in general. Organizations' outreach through websites and social media can draw people in, especially if offered in the languages of the parents being recruited. Face-to-face meetings in community settings like libraries where parents can talk together, look over copies of the tests, and discuss their problems are very important.

Called for are new approaches for encouraging parents in schools that have strong opt-out initiatives to reach out to parents in schools with institutional constraints to test refusal based on structural racism and classism. Whether working to develop collaboration in very different co-located schools, for example, or building suburban-urban information sharing and support networks, creative initiatives are needed.

Efforts to illustrate the connections between the racist ideologies and corporate power central to the high-stakes testing agenda and other manifestations of social inequality locally and nationally are critical. Highlighting connections between the liberatory agendas of the Opt-Out Movement, Black Lives Matter, immigrant rights, and other movements for social justice can energize multiracial coalitions to reclaim public/multicultural education in the context of fighting for broader social change.

In the four years since the Opt Out Movement began to gain steam in New York, increasing numbers of parents have made the decision to opt their children out. In 2015, draconian state laws made high stakes testing even more detrimental for communities of color and communities in poverty through threats of school take-overs and closure based on test scores.⁶ However, while the stakes are now higher for communities of color, more and more parents and educators of color are challenging the hashtag #OptOutSoWhite.

In March 2016, a diverse coalition of parents from Change the Stakes, New York City Opt Out, and New York State Allies for Public Education held a press conference on the steps of City Hall to speak out against the unequal access to opt-out information and unsubstantiated threats experienced by low-income communities. And in 2016, Dr. Betty Rosa became the first Latina to hold the position of Chancellor of the Board of Regents, famously using her first press conference as Chancellor to state, "If I was a parent and I was not on the Board of Regents, I would opt out at this time."⁷

While the media has failed to present parents of color as the face of the Opt-Out Movement, their voices cannot be silenced. The stories of parents like Roseanne, Carol, Peter, Dao, Justin, and GiGi remind us that people wanting to join together to save multicultural and public education must all continue the work of building diverse coalitions, breaking down barriers, and encouraging each other to stand up.

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Notes

¹ The New York State tests in grades 3-8 spanned six days (three for English language arts, three for math) and up to 9 hours, or 18 hours for students with extended time. This surpasses the SATs in length.

² The term "sit and stare" refers to a deterrent practice in which a school may force students opting-out to sit in the classroom during test administration with no access to books, academic work, or any other way to pass the time.

³ Co-location refers to the practice of housing two entirely separate schools within the same building. This is typical in New York City.

⁴ Governor Andrew Cuomo was re-elected in 2014 with substantial support from pro-charter hedge funds. He was a vocal supporter of an increased focus on test scores in state accountabil-

ity regulations and the evaluations of teachers and principals despite significant opposition from parents.

⁵ Change the Stakes' *Refuse the Tests* can be viewed on YouTube

⁶ In 2015, Governor Cuomo signed into law the Education Transformation Act. Under this law, state test scores must be used to close under-performing schools or turn them over to private management. The act also requires that fifty percent of teacher evaluations be comprised of state test scores.

⁷ The strength of the New York State Opt-Out Movement was evident when 20% of parents statewide opted their children out of the tests in the spring of 2016 and 2017, making it difficult for the State Department of Education to use the tests for policy decisions. In the summer of 2017 the State Department of Education cut back the number of hours that students would be tested. While the tests are still based on flawed standards and used to punish rather than support students, this is a victory for the Opt-Out Movement whose work will continue into the future.

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