Episode transcription

Tracie Jarrard [00:00:08]
Hello and welcome to CICE: The Podcast, a student-led podcast out of Teachers College, Columbia University. As students of comparative and international education, we started this podcast to connect academic research in the field to the current events they inform and explain. My name is Tracie Jarrard. I'm a student in the International Educational Development program, and I will be your host for this episode.

Tracie Jarrard [00:00:44]
This scene is familiar to many of us on social media. It's a school board meeting. Parents are voicing concerns about their children's education and the school climate, one after the other. The atmosphere is tense and the debates are heated. Videos like this seem to be tweeted and retweeted every few weeks or so. Parents seem to be more involved in their children's education than ever, and it feels like everyone has an opinion about what should happen in schools and who should be allowed to make those decisions. Parent-led movements to change what is happening in schools have been seen across the country. Back in 2015, a parent-led movement started gaining momentum in response to state standardized testing. This was called the Opt Out Movement. Last spring, I had the opportunity to join two of my professors here at Teachers College on their research project on the current state of the Opt Out Movement. I was tasked with circulating their survey across social media platforms, and this led me to various Facebook groups in support of opting out of state testing. The comments and posts revealed diverse motivations for being involved in this movement. Some groups were passionate about supporting teachers and others strongly opposed to Common Core curriculum. I was fascinated that this movement appeared to bring together parents on both sides of the aisle. To better understand this movement, I sat down with Oren Pizmony-Levy and Nancy Green Saraisky to discuss the Opt Out Movement and their research on who is involved in this movement and why. Welcome to you both, Oren and Nancy.

Oren Pizmony-Levy [00:02:52]
Hello.

Nancy Green Saraisky [00:02:53]
Thanks for having us.

Tracie Jarrard [00:02:54]
So Oren and Nancy, before we talk about your research, can you briefly explain what is this

movement and how did you get involved in this line of research?

Nancy Green Saraisky [00:03:04]
Sure. Why don't I start? I would say that the Opt Out Movement refers to the refusal by parents and caregivers in the United States to have their students sit for annual federally mandated assessment - standardized assessments. And this really has its roots in the passage of No Child Left Behind in 2001, ratified or signed into law in 2002. And that legislation was really designed to focus on closing the achievement gap. And one of the mechanisms by which the federal government wanted to do that was to institute this requirement of annual standardized testing for students in grades three through eight and then once again in high school. And this was notable for a lot of reasons, not least of which because it marked a real scaling up of federal involvement in education. As you probably know, the U.S. has a notoriously decentralized system of education. And this requirement for federal testing really put the federal government into arenas that had been historically really controlled by state and local government. So it was certainly notable in that regard. And then if we fast forward again, just by way of background, to the 2010s and the early 20-teens, we had some other seismic, pretty seismic shifts in the U.S. education system that really led to the emergence of the Opt Out Movement. There was the development of the Common Core State Standards, which were a new set of educational standards and a series of standardized assessments to accompany those standards that states were really pushed to adopt quickly. And in the adoption of the standards, they were also adopting a new set of standardized assessments. And you started around early 2010s, 2012 to read and hear about backlash to the standards and the accompanying assessment. And somewhat famously, I think it was around 2013, then Secretary of Education Arne Duncan was quoted in The New York Times as saying, this nascent movement against standardized testing is really just a bunch of soccer moms who are mad that their students aren't really as smart as they think they are. And I'm paraphrasing with that. But that was the gist of his statement. This caused somewhat of an uproar in the education community and amongst the so-called soccer moms themselves. Then in the summer of 2015, The New York Times published a big article that called attention to the fact that in 2015, 20% of New York state students had not sat for these mandated exams. And so there was a real focus on these students who were opting out of tests, even though there was a requirement that at least 95% of students sit for these annual tests or states were at risk of losing federal funding. And Oren and I had each been following this in the news, and when we saw that headline in 2015, we thought, wow, there's really something here and it's something that we could shine sort of an academic lens on because it had been covered it in the mainstream media but to our knowledge, no one had really taken a deep look at who was opting out. Why were they doing it? And was it, in fact soccer moms or was there something more nuanced and

interesting going on?

Tracie Jarrard [00:07:00]
Oren, how about you? What led you to want to shed that academic lens on this movement?

Oren Pizmony-Levy [00:07:07]
I would say that I came to this project with my interest on the intersection between social movements and education. Trained in sociology, I've been always fascinated by how collective action happens, why we see it happening. And specifically, I've been looking over the years on the emergence of movements like the international testing movement or environmental and sustainability education or LGBT issues in education. And here all of a sudden I saw a movement that really comes out of nowhere. I didn't see the roots of where it's coming from. I was fascinated by the sheer size. Just imagine 20% of New York state students not taking an exam that is federally mandated. Just imagine how much organization needs to happen in order for something like that to happen.

Tracie Jarrard [00:08:06]
So after you conducted this first round of research, what did your findings reveal? Who was involved in this movement and what were their motivations?

Oren Pizmony-Levy [00:08:15]
So before we talk about the findings, I think it's really important just to share with the audience what was the research design here because we were really trying to understand the movement. So how do you do that? We started with a couple of very informal interviews with leaders in the movement. We were able to identify them by looking at Facebook posts or other social media and Nancy and I met with them for phone calls. Back then, it wasn't over Zoom, and we heard a lot of interesting stories about how this movement came about. We heard stories about specific reasons or motivations. We heard stories about framing, how different actors frame the movement. And so from that conversation, we moved into the next stage where we had masters students working with us, looking at the media, four different newspapers, to really look at the narratives that are in the media, who's been interviewed, et cetera. We then started crafting a protocol for a survey. And then in the spring of 2016, we launched the first national survey, using a lot of social media channels to disseminate the link and that was fun because we were able to see, as we were collecting the data, we saw some patterns about the movement. I'll give you an example. Diane Ravitch, the professor, a colleague from NYU, and a leader in this movement, shared the link on her blog post and on her social media and I remember calling Nancy and saying, Nancy, we had 200, we had 300, we had 400, 800 responses within a couple of days. It was

super interesting to see the dynamic of data collection, and what can we learn about that from that movement? In addition to that survey, we did another project with a masters student, Ben Kaufman from Teachers College, where we looked at public opinion on this phenomenon, how the public understand this phenomenon. And I'm inviting the audience to go and check it out. Everything is available online, publicly available, so people can really read and engage with our work. Then came the election of 2016. We published our report, got a lot of attention, and we decided to repeat it in 2018 to see whether the election of Donald Trump and the appointment of Secretary of Education DeVos, whether that had any impact on the movement. So we repeated the survey again in 2018, and then we decided that we're going to take a break. We wrote some papers. We made presentations and conferences. And came 2020, where we were thinking maybe to do another follow up to see what is up with the movement. And then came the global pandemic. And we decided that since schools are not asked to do testing, there is no reason to do research on the Opt Out Movement, and there is no reason to bother people with our research. And we took some time off and we decided to do it again in 2021, when it seems like the request for schools and states to test students came back. And that's how we decided to renew the survey in 2021. To the best of my knowledge, Nancy and I are not planning another survey anytime soon.

Tracie Jarrard [00:11:33]
Oren you gave a great overview of how you conducted this research. And Nancy, could you just share a bit more about who these survey respondents are? What are the demographics of those who are involved in the Opt Out Movement?

Nancy Green Saraisky [00:11:47]
So what we found is that about 86% of our respondents are women. Approximately 90% of our respondents identify as white. And in terms of educational attainment, most of our respondents have bachelor degree or higher. So we are talking about highly educated white women as a huge portion of this movement. Many of our respondents, about 80%, identified as parents. But I also want to note there that that means almost a fifth of our respondents were not parents, which we think speaks to something, at least in the early years of the movement, about how broadly based the movement actually was that we had, you know, 20% of people identify as Opt Out activists were people that did not have kids in the school system. And so arguably, were not directly affected by the testing requirements.

Tracie Jarrard [00:12:52]
Did you find that people's motivation to participate in the Opt Out Movement was associated with political party affiliation?

Nancy Green Saraisky [00:13:01]
We found that between 50 and 60% of our respondents identified as politically liberal. About 30% of them identified as middle of the road. And between 15% to 17%, depending on the research cycle, identified as conservative. Those numbers were slightly different when we asked respondents to identify their political party affiliation. We had between 47 and 50% of respondents identifying as Democrats, so slightly fewer said they were Democrats than said they were politically liberal. And we had a higher than percentage of respondents saying that they were independents. Around 32%, 33% of respondents identified as independent. And only 12-- about 13% to 15% of respondents said that they were Republican.

Tracie Jarrard [00:13:59]
What did the responses from these people reveal? What was this movement really about?

Nancy Green Saraisky [00:14:05]
So their responses suggest that overall this movement is not directly about students, and it's not actually about kids' performance, and it's much more about politics around education. So when we asked respondents to identify the main reasons they were participating in the Opt Out Movement and related Opt Out activities, about 35% said they oppose the use of standardized tests to evaluate teachers. So the most common answer actually had to do with teachers and not students. Then about 32%, 33% of our respondents said standardized test force teachers to teach to the test, and that's what I'm most opposed to. Other popular answers were the opposition to the growing role of corporations in schools, so the corporatization or privatization of schooling, and also that standardized tests take away too much instruction. About 25% to 30% of respondents identified that. So that was sort of the top four reasons that participants gave for participating. And I will say that particularly in the earlier cycles of the research, that opposition to the Common Core was named as also a very prominent reason for participating in the movement. I will also say that reasons for participation varied along various dimensions, right? And one very interesting dimension is along political ideology. We found that while both political liberals and conservatives were participating in the movement, they were doing so for very different reasons. So our liberal respondents, their reasons for participating were really around the protection of teachers, the anti-corporatization, and the anti-testing reasons that I just walked through. Conservative respondents, however, were participating in the movement as a protest against federal overreach into what they saw as authority that should have been vested only with the states, right? So we saw along these political ideology dimension and amongst others, a

real difference in why people were coming to the movement.

Oren Pizmony-Levy [00:16:37]
Let me just offer one comment about what Nancy just shared. You might ask yourself why the demographics are important. And, theoretically, from a research perspective, the demographics are really important because they say something about the resources that the movement has. The social base of the movement says something about what kind of resources they bring with them, the activists, and what kind of resources the movement is able to mobilize. And it also says something about privilege and optics of the movement. How does this movement look like to other people? Another thing to think about is that it's not the first time that we see a movement that brings together conservatives and liberals, or two sides of the aisle, so to speak. This phenomenon is known in the literature as the strange bad fellows that brings together different groups or organizations from different segments of society that come together to collaborate on one specific issue. In this case, it's the actual behavior of opting out. But as Nancy said, they are coming from very different reasons.

Tracie Jarrard [00:17:44]
Nancy, you mentioned some parents said they opt out because they are opposed to the involvement of corporations in the education system. Could you explain why standardized testing is related to the privatization of schools?

Nancy Green Saraisky [00:17:58]
Sure. So particularly in our 2016 survey cycle, when the Common Core State Standards and their accompanying assessments have been recently introduced to schools and facing a lot of backlash, we had many respondents identify this as their point of opposition in the Opt Out Movement. One of the things our survey did was allow for not only --- battery of multiple-choice items, but we gave respondents space to respond to open-ended questions and we asked them, is there anything else you want to tell us? And to follow up just methodologically on an earlier point that made, it was amazing. It was stunning how much people had to say in the open-ended text. That, of course, speaks to the amount of time and the amount of passion that respondents to this survey were bringing to these issues. But let me share at least one quote, just one quote, that we got from one of our respondents, which I think is indicative of the kinds of comments people were making in response to this question of what they were opposed to in terms of corporatization of public education.

Tracie Jarrard [00:19:17]

So here Nancy is sharing a quote from one of the survey responses. She shares the following quote: "I feel that textbook companies such as Pearson are promoting the importance of such tests and test prep materials in their best interests, not those of children."

Nancy Green Saraisky [00:19:36]
This was a very typical sentiment when we asked our respondents to elaborate further on this idea of opposition to corporatization in schools, that they felt that these reforms and the sort of assessment regime they were protesting was just an angle through which, or a backdoor way through which, corporations could get a foot into public schools.

Tracie Jarrard [00:20:03]
You have both mentioned so many interesting things from your first round of research, and we will be sure to share the links to those papers in the show notes. You recently conducted another round of research last spring in 2021. What did you find in this recent survey cycle, and did it follow similar patterns to previous cycles?

Oren Pizmony-Levy [00:20:22]
We found some similar patterns in terms of demographics. The movement still attracts many women and educated white respondents. We found quite stability in terms of the political ideology of the activists, but we focused the study more on the role of the pandemic and to really try to understand how a global pandemic that has implications to schools, right? The closing of schools, or the moving to online instruction versus hybrid or in-person. How all of that really affected the activists, and we were really interested in this issue. So we found a couple of interesting findings. We found that majority of the respondents view the pandemic as a significant crisis. Okay, that's not a very unique finding because many liberals in the country view the pandemic as a significant crisis and the movement has a lot of liberal respondents. And we found that 40% of them reporting that pandemic affected the household income. So while seeing that perceptions of the severity of the pandemic, we were surprised to find that only 23% said that the pandemic affected their activism around Opt Out. Only 23%. One out of four. And when we read the comments, the open-ended comments, about why or how it affected, we found a mixed bag of positive impacts and negative impact. So negative impact, for example, respondents said that feeling overwhelmed with the pandemic, they didn't have enough time to pay attention to activism around this movement, which totally makes sense. But on the other hand, we found that respondents said, oh, given the pandemic, the closure of schools, the online learning, it just didn't make sense for activists that the school is going to require students to come and take a test. Given what's going on, it just-- it was absurd. So that in a

way mobilized many people to join the movement and be active. So we are still in the process of figuring out who was more affected than others, to see if there is any demographic difference there. That's something we will report in the next podcast with you. One of the things that we are curious about is the fact that only 17% of the respondents said that they learned about the movement over the past few years. What does this mean? This is an indication, we believe, that the movement might lose momentum, at that point in 2021, in terms of mobilizing new audiences and new members. And if we think about the future of the movement, that's something we need to take into account. How the pandemic might shape the future of the movement.

Tracie Jarrard [00:23:26]
That makes a lot of sense. The pandemic has changed the face of different movements we see around the world. Given this slowing momentum in the Opt Out Movement, will parental involvement shift to other movements related to education? What do you think is the future of the Opt Out Movement?

Oren Pizmony-Levy [00:23:42]
So I'm only a sociologist, I'm not a futurist, so I'll be very careful with what I'm saying. But we have enough indications that the infrastructure, the organizational infrastructure of the movement, is decreasing. For example, the Facebook groups or the social media channels are inactive. Our amazing research assistants that work with us had to really try to contact people operating the Facebook groups in order to publicize the link to the survey and there was no answer. So that makes us believe that maybe the infrastructure is really shrinking. And I wonder-- we wonder whether there will be enough power for the national organizations to mobilize everybody again this year or the year after. So it's really hard to predict the future. But we have a couple of indicators that suggest that the momentum is going down.

Tracie Jarrard [00:24:39]
I think it's also important to consider this movement in a world where we see other parent-led movements. And I'm curious, do you think there is a link between this Opt Out Movement and other movements, like the conversations we see around the country on Critical Race Theory or the 'Don't Say Gay' Bill in Florida? Is there a common theme among these movements in which parents are so heavily involved?

Nancy Green Saraisky [00:25:02]
I would venture a guess on that. I mean, certainly from a research perspective, we can only say we don't know because we haven't looked at parents in other movements and who they

are and why they're participating. I think what we can say is that what we saw in the Opt Out Movement was the identification of citizen participat-- citizen activists as parents. In other words, when respondents to our surveys were asked to identify themselves, they weren't participating as taxpayers, they weren't participating as educated professionals, they were participating as parents. And I think we can say, certainly in education, but perhaps with regard to other education issues or in other venues, that that identification is going to be a driving force, certainly insofar as contentious issues in the political spirit involved kids. And so it's hard to say whether there's a link between the Opt Out Movement and other movements per se, but I think it's pretty clear that parents have a strong voice and have strong opinions about these issues insofar as their kids are concerned.

Oren Pizmony-Levy [00:26:27]
I agree with Nancy that we don't know enough. We are recording this in spring 2022. The backlash against Critical Race Theory, LGBT families and educators is a recent foreigner. We see that over the past half a year or a year. So we don't know enough. But we do see one theme that goes across the movement, and it's the demand by parents to opt in. They want to be at the-- in the room where it happens, as Hamilton said in the musical. They want to be involved, they want to be heard, and they don't want to leave all the education decision to the government or to experts. I think that's something that we are entering a new era, and I hope that education scholars will pay attention to this conservative movement on the one hand and also to this new mindset of parents on the other hand. I think that's something that was intensified actually in the pandemic, where parents had a lot of responsibility to educate their kids and they engage more through the online or hybrid teaching. But I think there is another line of questions that we have around the movement that we need to pay attention. For example, the question that Nancy and I are really interested in is what do these activists do beyond opting out? Opting out is one way to affect change, and we're really curious about other modes of civic behavior or civic activism. For example, do they contact politicians? If so, at what level? If so, who is doing this kind of work? Which kind of subgroups in the Opt Out are taking this activism to the next level? So that's one of the questions we have. Another question that we are hoping to delve into with this new data we collected in 2021 is also views of solutions. Okay, so we framed the problem, but what is the solution moving forward? Are we really-- are the activists really interested in just abolishing every type of assessment, or are they having willingness to compromise somehow? And if so, what does the compromise look like? Are we looking on going back 20 years ago to more sample-based assessments, like NAEP or PISA? Or are we looking at moving away from any kind of standardized assessment and leaving it to school? That's one of the questions we are asking. And the third one is something really interesting that we found in 2016 and onward, is that these parents are not just throwing every test away. It

seems like they are still supporting of tests related to maintaining privilege in the education system, like tests related to AP courses or SAT or other kind of high-stake tests that will help kids moving on in the education sector. So we are really interested in this puzzle, on what makes them oppose one type of test but not other type of test. And we hope that other colleagues will join us in this effort to really use this movement as a window to look at many other issues in education.

Nancy Green Saraisky [00:30:05]
The other thing I would say just to sort of bring it back to where we started, is that these mandates for federal testing were really part of an effort to close achievement gaps as a way to find out how kids are actually doing. And I think our research leaves us with the question that we started with, which is that if testing is a route to that, how do you get there? And so, you know, it's very interesting that this reform to increase federal participation in education through assessment led to such backlash and we're still grappling with the same issues around the achievement gap that we started with. The whole enterprise, really, there's a lot of work still to be done.

Tracie Jarrard [00:31:08]
Well, Oren, Nancy, thank you both so much for joining us today at CICE: The Podcast. You've given us a look back at how this movement started and who was involved. And you've also brought us into the present day and shared how the pandemic has changed this movement. We look forward to reading the final results of your recent research, and we will be sure to link that for everyone when it's ready. Thank you both again.

Oren Pizmony-Levy [00:31:30]
Thank you so much, Tracie.

Nancy Green Saraisky [00:31:32]
Thanks, Tracie. Thanks for having us.

Tracie Jarrard [00:31:37]
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